Constructing New Relationships: A Thematic Analysis of Stepmother and Stepchild

Co-Construction of Close and Enduring Bonds

by

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ABSTRACT

Constructing New Relationships: A Thematic Analysis of Stepmother and Stepchild Co-Construction of Close and Enduring Bonds

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Due to heightened rates of divorce and remarriage, blended families are increasing in prevalence. Yet, they remain poorly understood. Scholarship focusing on the stepmother-stepchild relationship within the blended family is especially scarce, as is research focusing on the underlying processes involved in the formation of stepmother-stepchild relationships. This study sought to explore close stepmother-stepchild relationships from the perspective of stepmothers. Thirteen stepmothers of stepchildren aged 8-16 years of age participated in semi-structured interviews and their responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings offer several contributions to the literature on blended families and stepmother-stepchild relationships. These include the ways in which stepmothers understand and experience "closeness" in their relationships with stepchildren, the bidirectional relational processes involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships, and how these relationships develop over time.

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Introduction

In Western cultures, nuclear families consisting of two biological parents and their children are commonly viewed as the "ideal" or normative family form (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Walsh, 1992). However, this view of families fails to consider and acknowledge the diverse array of family structures that currently exist and can thrive in our modern world (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Blended families are one such family form. Due to increasing rates of divorce and remarriage, "blended" or "step" families in which at least one of the partners in a committed relationship has a child or children from a prior relationship are rapidly becoming one of the most prevalent and normative family forms in North America (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Walsh, 1992). In Canada alone, blended families represent more than 12.6% of all two-parent families with children under the age of 25 (Statistics Canada, 2011b). This proportion of Canadian blended families includes both "simple" blended families compromised of biological or adopted children from only one of the partners (7.4%), as well as "complex" blended families in which both partners have children from a previous relationship, or where one or both partners have children from a previous relationship as well as biological children together (5.2%) (Statistics Canada, 2011b). Moreover, it is projected that 40.7% of married couples in Canada will experience divorce in their lifetimes (Statistics Canada, 2011a), and evidence suggests that the vast majority of divorced individuals will remarry, increasing the likelihood of blended family formation (Bray & Berger, 1993). In addition, the increasing number of children born outside of marriage, and couples choosing to forgo marriage and form common-law unions, also contribute to the number of blended families in existence. This increase in the prevalence of blended families has created a significant need for research seeking to understand this family form. Yet, blended families receive minimal attention from family researchers and educators, and less is currently known about blended families than any other family structure (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000).

Scholarship focusing on the stepmother-stepchild relationship within the blended family is especially scarce, because much of the existing literature has focused on the more common mother-stepfather blended family and the stepfather-stepchild relationship (Bray, 1994; Coleman et al., 2000; Whiting, Smith, Barnett, & Grafsky, 2007). Where

scholarship focusing on the stepmother-stepchild relationship does exist, it often emphasizes the difficulties experienced by stepmothers and stepchildren in what has been found to be one of the most complicated, challenging, and conflictual relationships within the blended family (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Lutz, 1983). Minimal research has focused on the underlying processes involved in the formation of stepmother-stepchild relationships, and scholarship highlighting the developmental processes and interactions that can lead to successful or positive stepmother-stepchild relationships is rare. While there is merit in understanding the challenges experienced by members in the stepmother-stepchild relationship, it is also important to examine the success stories of stepmothers and stepchildren who have been able to form positive, close, and enduring bonds; as well how these relationships develop over time.

<div align="center">**Review of Literature**</div>

Blended Families Under the Lens of the Deficit Model

A considerable body of literature has been built by applying the deficit-comparison model to blended families and steprelationships. In this approach, nuclear families and parent-child relationships are used as the standard against which blended families and stepparent-stepchild relationships are judged and found to be defective or "less than" (Gamache, 1997). For example, Bowerman and Irish (1962) compared a sample of children living with biological or stepparents and found that blended family homes were more likely than "normal" homes to be characterized by stress, ambivalence, and low cohesiveness. When compared with biological parents, stepparents have been found to be less emotionally invested, supportive, involved, and affectionate; and more disengaged, negative, jealous, and resentful towards stepchildren (Coleman et al., 2000; Gamache, 1997; O'Connor & Boag, 2010). Stepparent-stepchild relationships have also been found to be more conflictual, negative, and distant than nuclear parent-child relationships, especially during the initial periods of blended family formation (Bray & Berger, 1993; Coleman et al., 2000; Levin, 1997). In a critique of the existing literature surrounding blended families, Gamache (1997) found that steprelationships were often described as "less supportive", "more disengaged", "less positive", "more disruptive", "conflictual", and "less warm" compared to biological parent-child relationships.

Furthermore, compared to children in nuclear families, stepchildren have been found to exhibit poorer academic performance and more behaviour and emotional difficulties including aggression, conduct disorder, substance abuse, depression, and anxiety (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Portrie & Hill, 2005). However, research exists that disputes these findings. For example, Walsh (1992) found that, after several years together, blended families do not display more issues than nuclear families. Ganong and Coleman (1984) also found that, in general, stepchildren do not differ from children in nuclear families in regards to academic performance, behaviour difficulties, or peer relationships. Nevertheless, using a deficit model for viewing blended families is widespread in the literature and serves to portray these families and steprelationships as deviant or harmful to children.

Attempting to understand blended families using a deficit comparison model is problematic for several reasons. First, this approach assigns a greater value to the nuclear family model, using it as the "ideal" against which blended families and steprelationships are compared and found to be lacking (Gamache, 1997). Using this model to evaluate and describe steprelationships exerts a powerful influence on how knowledge about blended families is constructed, depicting steprelationships as inherently less functional than parent-child relationships in nuclear families (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Moreover, the model of the nuclear family is inappropriate for understanding the experiences and relational processes found within blended families, because these families are structurally distinct from nuclear families and steprelationships do not always take the traditional "parent-child" form (Crohn, 2006). For example, Crohn (2006) found considerable diversity in the nature of stepmother-stepchild relationships, with stepdaughters describing their stepmothers as "my father's wife", "a peer-like girlfriend", "an older friend", "a type of kin", or "like another mother". Furthermore, studies endorsing the deficit-comparison model often utilize measures such as the McMaster Family Assessment Device (FAD) to assess blended family functioning that have been developed and tested based on nuclear family assumptions and samples (Gamache, 1997). As a result, blended families and steprelationships must emulate the characteristics found in the nuclear family and parent-child relationship in order to achieve similar ratings and avoid negative labels (Gamache, 1997). As Gamache (1997)

argues, "to adhere to a different model puts the stepfamily at risk of being scored as 'less than'" (p. 43). Studies employing the deficit-comparison model for examining blended families and steprelationships fail to take into account the relational and structural characteristics that distinguish blended families from nuclear families. Nuclear families are not superior to blended families; they are simply different (Visher & Visher, 1985).

Although the use of the deficit-comparison model can aid in identifying the difficulties and challenging relational patterns blended families may experience, holding blended families to nuclear family standards can result in unrealistic expectations for blended family relationships and can lead to negative stereotypes held by the public and helping professionals. Research is needed that provides space for blended families to identify difficulties in their own terms and develop their own meanings of their relationships that are free from the prescriptions of what a "normal" or "ideal" family should look like, as well as research examining positive blended family outcomes and successful steprelationships.

Role and Relationship Ambiguity in Blended Families

A major theme throughout the blended family literature emphasizes the lack of clear norms or expectations that exist for blended family members, resulting in role ambiguity for stepparents and stepchildren who may be unsure of the expectations and responsibilities of their new positions in the blended family. When faced with role ambiguity, studies have found that stepparents and stepchildren often attempt to reenact the "ideal" nuclear family model, using previous experiences and expectations to guide their relationships with one another (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Bray & Berger, 1993; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990). This can result in considerable discomfort, dissatisfaction, and strain in the steprelationship when their expectations for closeness and what a "real" family should look like does not match their realities (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001; Visher & Visher, 1985).

When stepmothers join a blended family, they not only gain a partner or a spouse, they also gain a stepchild or stepchildren and the role of "stepmother". This is a role for which there are few societal guidelines or norms, resulting in role ambiguity for stepmothers who are uncertain about the expectations and responsibilities of their acquired position (Coleman, Ganong, & Cable, 1996). Indeed, there are a variety of roles

stepmothers may choose to adopt. Coleman, Ganong, and Weaver (2001) identified four types of stepparent roles. Some stepparents adopt a parental role, performing behaviours such as disciplining the child, assigning chores, or granting/denying permission to stepchildren. Others have been found to adopt the role of a friend, sharing activities with stepchildren and exhibiting affectionate and affinity-seeking behaviours. A combination of both the parental and friend role is described as the "quasi-kin" stepparent role. Finally, some stepparents have been found to adopt the role of a distant acquaintance, where they abstain from rule setting or discipline and display minimal affection towards stepchildren (Coleman et al., 2001). Thus, the number of roles available to stepmothers and the lack of societal norms and guidelines specifying which approach they can or should take can result in considerable role ambiguity.

The role ambiguity stepmothers experience is further intensified in the presence of two contradictory and pervasive cultural myths surrounding stepmothers: the myth of the wicked stepmother and the myth of instant love. The depiction of the "evil stepmother" in movies and fairytales such as Hansel and Gretel, Cinderella, and Snow White has resulted in cultural stereotypes and expectations that stepmothers will be cold, uncaring, distant, and cruel towards stepchildren (Dainton, 1993). Faced with this damaging stereotype of the "evil stepmother", stepmothers may experience heightened scrutiny or surveillance and considerable pressure to perform their role in a manner that disproves this myth (Dainton, 1993). Contrary to the myth of the evil stepmother, there also exists the "myth of instant love" in which stepmothers are expected to love their stepchildren immediately and successfully adopt a mothering role (Visher & Visher, 1978). When this does not occur, stepmothers may be left feeling guilty, frustrated, or disappointed (Visher & Visher, 1985). Faced with these contradictory myths, stepmothers may experience additional role ambiguity, resulting in feelings of uncertainty, insecurity, frustration, and stress (Coleman et al., 1996). They are not only expected to love their stepchildren right away and adopt the mothering role, but they are also cautioned against adopting a parental or disciplinary role, forcing them to carefully manage their involvement with stepchildren in order to avoid being perceived as overinvolved, harsh, or uncaring (Dainton, 1993). Thus, Whiting and colleagues (2007)

suggest that attaining role clarity and flexibility is crucial for the positive adjustment of stepmothers.

Researchers have found that, in addition to shaping and responding to the roles and behaviours that stepparents adopt, stepchildren also experience challenges and uncertainty in their own roles (Speer & Trees, 2007). Numerous studies have found that stepchildren often experience "divided loyalty", where the child feels torn between his or her biological parent and stepparent, worrying that expressing love or affection towards his or her stepparent will be perceived as disloyalty towards his or her biological parent (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Coleman & Ganong, 1997; Lutz, 1983). In this situation, stepchildren may experience confusion and uncertainty in regards to how they should behave towards their stepparent. This includes deciding how much affection to display towards stepparents and how to respond to stepparent discipline (Speer & Trees, 2007). Using data from retrospective interviews conducted with adult stepchildren, researchers have found that the divided loyalty stepchildren experience often results in a "dialectical struggle" whereby stepchildren desire closeness, open communication, and parental attention, warmth, and guidance from the stepparent; while simultaneously displaying distance, closedness, and resistance to stepparent authority (Afifi, 2003; Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Speer & Trees, 2007). Although this dialectical struggle can be confusing and difficult for stepchildren to cope with, it can also be challenging for the stepparent who may be receiving conflicting messages from the stepchild (Walsh, 1992). Minimal research exists that explores the ways in which stepchildren and stepmothers might conceptualize and approach their roles in the face of such ambiguity, or how they might overcome these challenges and attain role clarity.

In addition to role ambiguity, stepmothers and stepchildren may experience considerable *relationship* ambiguity. When stepmothers and stepchildren enter a blended family, they are relative strangers with no prior relationship, history, or established patterns of interaction. They have not had the opportunity to develop a history of interactions upon which they come to interpret the behaviours and meanings of the other and develop expectations that guide their present and future interactions with one another (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). As a result, stepmothers and stepchildren may experience feelings of strain and confusion when they are unable to anticipate one another's

behaviour or acquire an understanding of how they should respond or behave (Speer & Trees, 2007). As stepmothers and stepchildren develop a history of interactions over time and expectations for their relationship and one another, this relationship ambiguity will likely decrease. However, studies have found that blended family relationships develop following multiple trajectories (Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999), and not all steprelationships become closer over time. Minimal research has explored the ways in which stepchildren and stepmothers conceptualize and approach their relationships in the face of role and relationship ambiguity, or the processes involved in the development of relationship and role clarity. Further research is necessary to understand how stepmothers and stepchildren experience their relationships over time and develop feelings of connection and closeness.

Successful Stepmother-Stepchild Relationships

The development of a positive stepparent-stepchild relationship is an important task in blended families. Regardless of family structure, the development of stable, close relationships is associated with increased well-being and self-esteem for family members (Amato, 1987). Research has found that the majority of stepchildren are able to develop relatively positive relationships with their stepparents over time (Ferri, 1984). However, researchers are only beginning to identify the relational processes and factors that may contribute to the formation of successful stepparent-stepchild relationships.

The few studies that have examined positive blended family relationships have done so using data from qualitative interviews with self-described "successful" blended family members. The most successful steprelationships are found in families that are accepting and respectful of one another, use open communication, and are willing to redefine and negotiate family roles, norms, and boundaries (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Kelley, 1992; Michaels, 2006). Successful steprelationships have also been found to be more likely to develop when blended family members practice patience and hold realistic expectations for themselves and other family members; understanding that closeness is an aspect of relationships that takes time (Braithwaite et al., 2001). Furthermore, Ganong, Coleman, Fine, and Martin (1999) have found that it is important for *both* stepparents and stepchildren to put forth efforts toward connection-seeking and relationship maintenance and repair throughout the relationship. Finally, positive

stepparent-stepchild relationships have been found to be more likely to develop when stepparents plan how they will accept stepchildren into their lives and explain to their stepchildren that they do not intend to replace the biological mother or father (Michaels, 2006; Whiting et al., 2007).

In summary, although a large number of steprelationships may involve ambiguity and negative interactional patterns, many stepparents and stepchildren have been found to successfully negotiate roles and develop positive and close relationships over time. However, we currently know little about how these "successful" relationships develop over time – and what "successful" even means to these families—or the processes and interactions that facilitate the development of positive stepmother-stepchild relationships.

Gaps in the Literature

The majority of the literature investigating steprelationships is cross-sectional in design, examining blended families at one point in time – often focusing on the first two to four years of stepfamily formation (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 1998, 2001). What is missing is research on the experiences of established blended families and the changes that occur over time in the steprelationship. Blended families and steprelationships are not static entities; they are immersed in a continual process of development and change over time (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987). Research is needed that focuses on blended families who have been together for several years and who have had a chance to stabilize and establish well-functioning relationships.

Furthermore, almost all of the studies reviewed in the literature have examined blended families consisting of remarried adults, with the date of remarriage serving as the starting point for these families. This starting point does not reflect the diversity of blended family configurations in society. Increasing numbers of divorced or separated individuals choose not to remarry and instead form blended families through cohabitation (Coleman et al., 2000; Baxter et al., 1999). In addition, Braithwaite and colleagues (2001) found that many blended family members in their study reported that their families began before the start of cohabitation or remarriage. Thus, it is important that more researchers broaden their definitions of what constitutes a blended family, capturing the variety of structures that exist.

Scholarship that has examined the experiences of stepchildren has focused exclusively on adolescent samples (e.g., Bowerman & Irish, 1962) or on the retrospective accounts of adult stepchildren (e.g., Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Lambert, 2010; Speer & Trees, 2007). A focus on the experiences of adolescent stepchildren living in blended families may skew the perception of steprelationships in a negative light, because adolescence is often a period of significant instability, rebellion, and conflictual parent-child relationships, as well as increasing independence from the family (Lambert, 2010). Research has also shown that early adolescent children between the ages of nine to 15 years of age display less acceptance and more resistance to the introduction of a stepparent than older or younger children (Hetherington & Anderson, 1987). Therefore, it is possible that younger children may be more open to developing close relationships with stepparents.

Lastly, research is needed on the processes by which stepmothers and stepchildren actively participate in the construction and maintenance of close and positive relationships with one another, including how they overcome the unique challenges of steprelationships. Much of the research involving stepchildren focuses predominantly on their response, rather than their active contribution to the development of the stepparent role and the steprelationship (Speer & Trees, 2007). For example, Lambert (2010) asked stepchildren to rate how trustworthy or reliable they perceived their stepparents to be. Such studies adopt a narrow conceptualization of stepchildren as passive recipients of stepparent influence, overlooking the bidirectional nature of steprelationships (Kuczynski, 2003), whereby stepparents and stepchildren mutually influence and are influenced by one another. However, there is evidence that suggests that stepchildren shape and influence the roles stepparents adopt, and that stepchild responses to stepparents are critical in developing steprelationships (Coleman et al., 2000; Speer & Trees, 2007). Thus, there exists a need for research that highlights not only the contributions of stepmothers, but also stepchildren, to the development of their relationships in the blended family.

Theoretical Frameworks

This present study draws upon several theoretical frameworks. First, Hinde's (1979) theory of relationships informs my conceptualization of stepmother-stepchild

relationships, as it elaborates on the process through which relationships are constructed over time through an accumulation of interactions. Hinde's theory has been elaborated for parent-child relationships (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015; Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997). According to Hinde (1979), relationships are formed from a history of interactions between a dyad (such as between a stepparent and a stepchild). The members in the relationship perceive and interpret each other's behaviour in these interactions and over time create expectations for one another and the nature of their relationship. These expectations guide how members in a relationship will interact with one another in the present, as well as their ideas for the future of the relationship. An implication of Hinde's (1979) theory of relationships is that stepmothers do not have as much of a foundation for a relationship with children as, for example, biological mothers in an intact nuclear family. The stepmother-stepchild relationships form once stepmothers and stepchildren have had time to develop a history of interactions in which they respond to, shape, and interpret the behaviours of the other and begin to anticipate one another's behaviour from their understandings of what happened before (Hinde, 1979).

Second, Weingarten (1991) developed a theory of intimacy – a particular facet of parent-child relationships – that proposes a process similar to that of Hinde's (1979) theory of relationships. According to Weingarten (1991), intimacy is a product of repeated intimate interactions that occur over time in a relationship. Weingarten (1991) argues that, "intimate interaction occurs when people share or co-create meaning and are able to co-ordinate their actions to reflect their mutual meaning-making" (p. 294). Based upon this definition, an interaction may be considered intimate when the members of a relationship create or share meaning about an interaction, an idea, or a relationship and demonstrate that they understand one another through verbal communication or behaviour. This co-construction of meaning creates a way of moving forward in an interaction or the relationship that "fits" both the members. Weingarten's (1991) definition of intimacy is similar to Hinde's (1979) theory of relationships, as both theorists view specific interactions between individuals as the foundation for emerging relationships. What is of importance in Weingarten's definition of intimacy is the implication that members of a relationship can create intimate moments with one another and actively construct their relationship. For example, Oliphant and Kuczynski (2011)

and Harach and Kuczynski (2005) found that parents reported specific behaviours that they or their children contributed to the creation, prevention and repair of intimate interactions. When applied specifically to stepmother-stepchild relationships, Weingarten's (1991) theory suggests that a close steprelationship is something that can be created purposefully by both the stepmother and the stepchild.

The third and final theoretical framework that will be used to inform my research is Social Relational Theory (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). There are several tenets of this framework that will be applied to my conceptualization of stepmother-stepchild relationship formation. First, this approach draws from Hinde's (1979) theory of relationships, emphasizing dynamic relational processes whereby prior experience, past relational history, and anticipated futures influence relationship formation and outcomes. The parent-child relationship is viewed as a context for interaction whereby parents and children interact with and influence one another within the context of a long-term, close, interdependent relationship. Their actions in the present are believed to be influenced by the expectations they have created based upon their subjective experiences, history of interactions, as well as the anticipated future for the relationship (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). The parent-child relationship, when thought of as a context for interaction, has implications for stepparent-stepchild relationships. The meanings stepmothers and stepchildren hold and the behaviours they display towards one another may be impacted by their previous expectations or experiences, but may evolve as the dyad accumulates a history of interactions and develops an understanding of one another through these interactions, as well as a desire to maintain a close steprelationship in the future.

Social Relational Theory (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006) also emphasizes the bidirectional influence parents and children have on one another. Under this framework, parents and children are viewed as equal agents who have the capacity to initiate action and resist influence, as well as interpret and create meanings of their experiences (Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). When applied to steprelationships, stepmothers and stepchildren are seen to influence one another as they interpret or construct meanings from each other's behaviours and anticipate and accommodate or resist the views and behaviours of one another during interactions.

Research Questions and Objectives

The purpose of this research is to build upon the blended family literature and address the current gaps in knowledge outlined above, by exploring the subjective experiences and meanings of stepmothers who have been able to form close relationships with their stepchildren.

The major research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do stepmothers conceptualize the close stepmother-stepchild relationship?

2. How do stepmothers understand the processes involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships?

3. How do stepmothers understand the changes that have occurred in their steprelationships over time?

4. How do stepmothers initially conceptualize and prepare for their relationships with their stepchildren?

The primary aim of this project is to examine the development of close stepmother-stepchild relationships in blended families. In this endeavour, it is important to understand what being "close" means to stepmothers and stepchildren in their relationships. Thus, the first research question addressed in my study is, "How do stepmothers conceptualize the close stepmother-stepchild relationship?"

The second aim of this project is to explore the processes involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships. Although research has found that the majority of stepchildren are able to develop close relationships with their stepparents over time (Ferri, 1984), there have been few studies that seek to uncover the interactional processes that may contribute to the development of close stepmother-stepchild relationships. Based upon the implications of Weingarten's (1991) theory that suggests that close steprelationships can be created purposefully by both the stepmother and the stepchild, this study seeks to understand how stepmothers and stepchildren actively contribute to their relationships and attempt to construct and maintain close bonds over time. The second research question addressed in my study asks, "How do stepmothers understand the processes involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships?"

The third aim of this study is to understand how stepmothers experience their relationships with their stepchildren over time. Through this endeavour, I seek to examine the meanings stepmothers ascribe to their relationships, the behaviours they have displayed towards one another over the course of their relationship, as well as how their subjective meanings and interactions may have changed over time as they have accumulated a history of interactions and developed an understanding of one another (Hinde, 1979; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). By asking stepmothers about how their experiences and thoughts about their steprelationships have changed over time, I will be able to highlight the dynamic nature of steprelationships and the continual process of co-creation and change over time (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987). Accordingly, the third research question addressed in this study asks, "How do stepmothers understand the changes that have occurred in their steprelationships over time?"

This study had an additional research question that is mentioned here, but was beyond the scope of this thesis to be included in the analysis presented. The fourth aim of this study is to examine how stepmothers understand and approach their relationships with their stepchildren in their earliest stages. The blended family literature has highlighted the lack of clear norms and guidelines for steprelationships and the difficulties that role and relationship ambiguity can generate for stepmothers and stepchildren. However, minimal research has focused on the goals and expectations stepmothers and stepchildren carry with them into their relationships in the absence of role clarity, or how they might prepare for and negotiate their acquired roles. This study seeks to explore the goals, expectations, and understandings stepmothers hold prior to entering their relationships with their stepchildren and in their earliest stages, as well as the ways in which they might approach their acquired roles. The fourth research question in this study asks, "How do stepmothers initially conceptualize and prepare for their relationships with their stepchildren?"

Methods

Participants

There were several eligibility requirements for participation in this study. In order to focus on more established blended families who have had the time to stabilize and develop close relationships, the families participating in this study were required to have

been together for four years or more. This length of time was chosen based on evidence indicating that blended families often take three to five years to build solidarity and "make or break" by the fourth year (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998). This also implies that there is something ongoing in the blended family relationships and a sense of commitment that has kept them together for so long. In addition, some researchers have discovered that stepfamilies have been found to start before the date of marriage or cohabitation, and that some never marry (Braithwaite et al., 2001). In Canada, only half (49.9%) of blended families are married couples (Statistics Canada, 2011b). For this reason, blended families with various marital statuses and living arrangements were eligible to participate in this study. Furthermore, adult stepmothers over the age of 18, who had at least one stepchild between eight and 16 years of age were recruited to participate in this study. Finally, because the study's intended purpose was to examine the interactional processes that contribute to the formation of close or positive stepmother-stepchild relationships, only stepmothers who self-identified as having a close or positive relationship with their stepchild were eligible to participate in this study. Because the meanings and understandings of what "close" means may look different to different people, "positive" was also used as a qualifier for these relationships. This criterion allowed for "not close", but "positive" steprelationships and relationships that may be in flux to be included in the study.

A total of thirteen stepmothers participated in this study. All of the stepmothers were recruited from within Canada, except one stepmother who was recruited from the United States. The thirteen stepmothers who took part in the semi-structured interviews ranged from 27 to 46 years of age, with a mean age of 35.54. The ages of the focal children discussed during the interviews ranged from eight to 16 years, with a mean age of 10.77. Five of the focal stepchildren were male, and eight were female. In cases where stepmothers had more than one stepchild within the age range specified for the study, stepmothers were given the option to choose which stepchild they felt especially close to and would like to discuss during the interviews. For those stepmothers who could not decide, the older stepchild was selected for the focus on the interview. All of the stepmothers I interviewed for this study self-identified their ethnic background as White/European, except for one stepmother who self-identified as Latin American. All

thirteen of the focal stepchildren discussed in the study were of White/European background. The education levels of the stepmothers I interviewed were quite high. Four of the stepmothers had completed some college/university, seven had completed college/university, and two had completed some graduate education. The majority of the sample (11 stepmothers) was married. Their marriages ranged between 1.5 and 15 years, with an average length of 4.41 years. Two of the stepmothers were in common-law unions ranging between six and seven years, with an average length of 6.5 years. The total length of time in which these blended families had been together ranged between 4 and 15 years, with an average length of 7.5 years.

The stepmothers who participated in this study represented diverse blended family structures. They came from "simple" blended families with children only from the biological father and none together (two families), "complex" blended families with children from both the biological father and the stepmother but none together (four families), "complex" blended families with children from the biological father and one or more together (six families), and "complex" blended families with children from both the stepmother and biological father, as well as children together (one family). Additionally, five of these stepmothers were residential stepmothers (i.e., living in the child's primary residence), five were non-residential stepmothers, and three had 50/50 custody arrangements. Please see Table 1 for an overview of participant characteristics.

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics*

Stepmother Pseudonym	Focal Stepchild Pseudonym	Age of Focal Stepchild	Sex of Focal Stepchild	Length of Steprelationship	Other Stepchildren	Biological Children
Julie	Stella	12	F	11 years	19yo Stepdaughter 22yo Stepdaughter	2 daughters from previous relationship
Sandra	Jason	16	M	15 years	18yo Stepson	Son with bio father
Irene	Laura	8	F	7 years	N/A	2 daughters with bio father
Candice	Darren	9	M	8 years	7yo Stepdaughter	Daughter with bio father
Michelle	Sophie	8	F	5.5 years	N/A	Son with bio father
Naomi	Noah	12	M	6 years	10yo stepdaughter	Son & daughter with bio father
Debbie	Audrey	8	F	7 years	N/A	Son with bio father
Margaret	Peter	8	M	6.5 years	6yo stepdaughter	Daughter with bio father
Jane	Nathan	16	M	10 years	19yo stepson	N/A
Angela	Emma	9	F	5 years	N/A	Son with bio father
Janet	Emary	15	F	4 years	Adult stepson (age not specified)	Son from previous relationship
Sarah	Ruth	8	F	5.5 years	N/A	N/A
Rachel	Stephanie	11	F	7 years	N/A	N/A

Procedure

Recruitment began following the approval of the institutional ethics review board at the University of Guelph (see Appendix A for certificate of approval). I posted recruitment flyers (Appendix B) around the University of Guelph campus and in community settings such as grocery stores, community centres, and on the volunteer

page of Kijiji. The study information (Appendix B, C & D) was also shared in children's mental health centres in Guelph, as well as in blended family centres and support groups around Canada. However, the vast majority of the sample was recruited through postings in online stepmother support groups and snowball sampling, where stepmothers who had participated in the study shared the study information with other stepmothers they were acquainted with. Upon contacting me to participate, I arranged telephone calls with the stepmothers to explain the study, check eligibility criteria, and schedule the interviews. Prior to our scheduled interviews, the stepmothers were sent a brief overview of the main topics covered in the interviews (Appendix E) as a way to provoke thinking about their relationships and the ideas that would be discussed. Stepmothers were also emailed the study consent forms (Appendix F). The interviews took place between October 2014 and May 2015. The majority of the interviews took place over the phone (nine interviews). Two of the thirteen interviews took place in person, one at the participant's home and the other on the university campus. Two of the interviews were completed over Skype. There was minimal perceivable difference in quality between the in-person interviews and those conducted over the telephone or Skype. The thoughts and experiences stepmothers shared contained similar amounts of depth and detail.

Prior to beginning each interview, I provided the participants with a letter of information and consent (Appendix F) detailing the purpose of the study, their rights and responsibilities as participants, the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study, and information regarding the storage and reporting of data. I assured them that the data collected from the interviews would be held in confidence and reported in a way that would protect their anonymity. Participants were also reminded at this time that they were free to choose not to participate and to refrain from answering any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Upon answering any questions they had about the study, the participants were then asked to sign the consent form and permission to record the interview was sought and obtained. For the interviews that were completed over the phone or Skype, stepmothers emailed their signed and witnessed consent forms to me prior to the interview. Upon receiving consent from the participants and answering any questions they may have had, participants were asked to complete the demographic questionnaire that asked for information about themselves and their stepchildren,

including the length of time their blended families had been together (see Appendix G). For those interviews that were not face-to-face, I read the questions aloud and filled in the answers for stepmothers under their direction. I then engaged the participants in interviews following the semi-structured interview script, where stepmothers were asked to discuss their present relationship with their stepchild, including current instances of closeness, barriers to closeness, ways they are able to repair the relationship, as well as their perceptions of stepchild influence on the relationship. Stepmothers were then asked to discuss the earliest stages of their relationships with their stepchildren, including their initial expectations for the relationship and their role as stepmothers, as well as ways they might have prepared for their acquired roles. They were then asked to discuss instances of closeness with their stepchildren in the past. Finally, stepmothers were asked to discuss their perceptions of the steprelationship and how it has changed over time, as well as any strategies they currently have to ensure they will have a close relationship with their stepchild in the future (see Appendix H).

During the interviews, I used open-ended questions as often as possible with limited prompts to allow participants to share the thoughts and experiences they felt were most important, and to ensure that they had a sense of power and control over the interview process. Closed-ended questions were used primarily when seeking clarification or to confirm my understandings of the ideas and experiences participants shared. For example, "So it seems like, for the most part, to me, and I don't know if I'm right in saying this, but the barriers for closeness (with her stepsons) are usually when they're not with you?" On the occasions that I may have posed a leading question, I noticed that the participants were very willing to correct me and clarify their ideas. Although I referred to the interview guide while conducting the interviews, the topics or ideas I pursued were often those that the participants raised themselves throughout the conversation. I gave my undivided attention to the stepmothers I interviewed and listened intently to every answer they gave in order to plan follow-up questions. These questions were often prefaced with utterances such as "So when you say…" or, "You talked a bit about…" in order to acknowledge the participant's role in introducing the issue or experience and her authority over the direction of the interview. I also tried to be sensitive to both the positive and negative feelings that would emerge in their stories, and

acknowledge their feelings. For example, "I can imagine that must have been very difficult for you" or "That sounds wonderful!" I ended each interview with two closing questions, asking if there was anything they would like to add about their experiences that was not already addressed, as well as if there was any advice or words of wisdom they would like to share with other stepmothers or stepmothers-to-be who are embarking on this journey. I did this in order to provide space for participants to share any additional information they found to be important and to illuminate issues or topics related to their experience of stepmotherhood that I may have overlooked. Following the interview, each participant was given or mailed a $10 gift card of their choosing for Giant Tiger or Tim Horton's. Upon completion of each interview, I wrote detailed notes about the experience and the particular aspects of the interviews that stood out for me.

The interviews ranged in duration from approximately 65 minutes to two hours and 30 minutes in length. The majority of these interviews were between an hour and an hour and a half. However, several of these interviews stretched beyond the two-hour mark. All of the interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed verbatim.

Epistemological Stance

In performing this research, I adopted an interpretivist view, rejecting the existence of universals or "objective truths" and instead embracing the view that all experiences are subjective and can only be understood by examining the meanings individuals create through their social interactions (Gellner, 1985). Guided by this epistemological position, I sought to better understand the lived experiences of stepmothers who have been able to form self-described "close" or "positive" relationships with their stepchildren by allowing them to describe their experiences and relationships in their own terms (Weber, 1991), beyond the confines of the nuclear family model. However, I also acknowledge that the experience of close stepmother-stepchild relationships can never be fully understood, and that multiple realities of these relationships exist. Thus, the meanings that stepmothers create regarding their steprelationships and experiences of stepmotherhood and are not assumed to represent absolute truths of an objective reality that exists in the natural world. Their realities are subjective and interpreted through my own lens and understandings. Moreover, relationships are dynamic and are shaped by socio-historical contexts, prior experiences

and expectations, and actions of individuals, as well as other actors involved in the relationship and in the family. Thus, I assume that close stepmother-stepchild relationships are a dynamic and ever-changing phenomenon that can never be fully understood.

Furthermore, I accept that I have influenced the outcome of this study throughout the research process. Due to my involvement in the creation of the study, the research questions and the interview scripts, my influence throughout the interviews through the co-construction of participant responses, and my analysis and interpretation of the responses of my participants, it is impossible to remove or deny my influence on the results of this study. In particular, my own identity as a stepmother and this disclosure to my research participants has undoubtedly influenced the interviews, which I will discuss further below.

Reflections on the Interviews and My Positioning as a Stepmother and a Researcher

Throughout the duration of this study, I tried to remain aware of my own influence on the results of this study both in the design of the study and interview script, as well as during my contact with participants. I attempted to acknowledge and understand the ways in which my personal experiences, preconceived notions and assumptions, and prior knowledge of the blended family literature shaped my understandings, while also attending to novel information or ideas and experiences that participants shared that differed from my own (Daly, 2007). Under the understanding that I, as a researcher, was eliciting "a version of participants' reality" (Daly, 2007, p. 34), I wrote reflexive notes throughout the research process, in an attempt to document my own behaviour, responses, insights, and assumptions, and to reflect on the ways in which these might have influenced my understandings and shaped analysis (Daly, 2007). These reflections are discussed below.

I myself am a stepmother. I have been a part of a "simple" blended family for almost four years, and I identify as a stepmother to my fiancé's 7-year-old daughter, with whom I have a positive and special relationship. I also have a stepmother, who has been in my life for over 15 years, and with whom I have a very close relationship and am thankful for every day. These relationships and experiences underlie my motivation to embark on this study, as well as influence my interpretations of the literature, the

research questions I have proposed, and my interpretations of the stories these stepmothers have shared with me.

Throughout the duration of this study, I grappled with my own identity as a member of the group that I am studying, and whether or not I should disclose this to my participants. During the recruitment stage of this research project, I made a conscious decision, through discussion with my advisor, that I would disclose my identity as a stepmother. While speaking to stepmothers over the phone in the recruitment stage, they often asked me why I was interested in this research and whether or not I was also a stepmother. Faced with the decision to withhold or disclose this information, I chose to disclose. I made this decision for several reasons. First, I believed that if I was to expect open and honest disclosures from the stepmothers I interviewed, I would need to do the same in return. Second, I believed that sharing this information with the stepmothers I spoke to would aid in building rapport and trust, as marginalized groups such as stepmothers are often wary of outsiders. This reasoning is supported by research, as self-disclosure on the part of the researcher has been found to promote trust and equality in the relationship between researchers and participants, fostering rapport and improving the quality of data collected, particularly when participants are members from a marginalized or underrepresented group (Hayman, Wilker, Jackson, & Halcomb, 2012; Heliker, 2007).

I believe that my self-disclosure and shared identity as a stepmother was an asset to this research. I believe that the trust and intimacy that I established with these women by disclosing my identity as a stepmother increased the likelihood that these stepmothers felt comfortable sharing their experiences openly and honestly. Throughout the interviews, there were many instances of shared laughter and humour, which I argue highlights the rapport, as well as the comfort and ease that existed in the relationship between my participants and me. The stepmothers I spoke to were also extremely candid about their thoughts, feelings, and the difficulties they had encountered in their blended families. These aspects, as well as the length of the interviews, lead me to believe that the stepmothers I spoke to were at ease throughout the interviews and in speaking to me. In fact, after several of the interviews, I was told by stepmothers that they felt comfortable speaking to me and sharing the more difficult aspects and feelings within

their steprelationships. They said that this was because they knew that as a fellow stepmother, I had some understanding of their experiences and would not judge them. In many instances, my conversations with these stepmothers continued beyond the end of the interview for up to half-an-hour, and one stepmother even asked me to join her online support group in the future. It is for these reasons that I believe my self-disclosure was an asset to the research. It not only allowed me to build connection and rapport with my participants, but also resulted in high quality and rich data collection.

That being said, I attempted to maintain a balance between my self-disclosures and my role as a researcher. This balance was difficult because there were many instances throughout the interviews when I felt like I could not share as freely and as openly as either the stepmothers I spoke to or I myself may have desired. Several of the stepmothers I spoke to stated that they would have liked to learn more about me and my experiences, but I was wary of how much I should disclose. While I have also encountered many of the same experiences and feelings as the stepmothers I spoke to, and many times felt compelled to share my experiences or say, "Me too!" I tried to refrain from doing so in an attempt to maintain the integrity of the interview and avoid interjecting my own meanings onto their experiences. There were some instances in which I did disclose my thoughts and experiences with the stepmothers I spoke to; however, I tried to keep these disclosures to a minimum, and not to overstep boundaries. Instances where I did share details of my own life and steprelationship were primarily in response to direct questions from stepmothers, or as a way to validate their feelings and build rapport; to demonstrate that I understood their feelings and did not come from a place of judgment. Often during moments of sadness during the interviews when difficult memories and feelings were shared, I would let the stepmothers know that I could relate to and understand their feelings. In most cases, they would not ask me to go further, but when asked, I would share details about my own experience and then direct the interview back to them and their experiences. I chose to do so, based on evidence that mutual story sharing can deepen understanding and validation within interviews, as well as convey empathy and caring on behalf of the researcher (Heliker, 2007). In reviewing the transcripts, I carefully attended to the instances in which I disclosed personal stories or information to the stepmothers I spoke to, my reasons for sharing, and how it may have

influenced the interview. Interestingly, I found that the most open and in-depth interviews were those in which I also self-disclosed. In the few cases where stepmothers did not elicit disclosures from me and I did not share, participant responses were less in-depth and, at times, seemed more guarded.

The dynamics of the interviews and the ideas and experiences that the stepmothers I spoke to shared were undoubtedly shaped by my presence and the questions I asked of them, as well as my decision to disclose my identity as a stepmother and details about my own life. On the one hand, I believe my presence and identity as a stepmother helped build rapport and trust with my participants, and allowed them to feel comfortable sharing their experiences and feelings openly and honestly. Knowing that I was able to understand and shared in some of their experiences and understandings perhaps made it easier for the stepmothers I spoke with to share difficult aspects of their relationships and their feelings towards their stepchildren that they may have felt wary sharing with others outside of the "step" world. Moreover, I feel that my relationship as a fellow stepmother may have lessened my power status as a researcher and resulted in a more balanced distribution of power between the participants and me, as has been suggested in the literature (e.g., Heliker, 2007). On the other hand, my identity as a stepmother and my disclosures undoubtedly influenced the direction of the interviews and the amount stepmothers shared, which may not have been the case otherwise. My own experiences and understandings may have also impacted the ideas that I followed up on or probed deeper into. For example, my own experiences may have resulted in heightened sensitivities to issues of triadic conflict and loyalty issues, as well as the dyadic processes that contribute to close stepmother-stepchild relationships. My influence on the data collected and the results of this study cannot be denied. However, being a stepmother myself is perhaps not a bias, but instead provides me with a unique insight into these relationships and an ability to forge a connection with these stepmothers that elicits rich and in-depth responses.

Analyses

The interviews were transcribed verbatim, including all forms of verbal and non-verbal communication such as sighs or laughter. Trained research assistants transcribed 10 of the interviews, and I transcribed the remaining three. In order to ensure their

accuracy, I reviewed the transcripts while listening to the audio recordings of the interviews. Throughout this process, I made notes about my impressions of the interviews as well as the ideas and patterns of meaning that piqued my interest. The data gathered through the interviews were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify the patterns of meaning that the participants ascribe to their experiences of stepmotherhood and their relationships with their stepchildren. The method for identifying and interpreting themes was guided by thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), using the qualitative data analysis software program MAXQDA in order to facilitate the categorization and organization of the data. In conducting this analysis, as opposed to using a data-driven or inductive approach where codes and themes are linked to the data and not necessarily related to the specific research questions or theoretical frameworks of interest, I used a theory-driven approach, organizing codes and themes through the lens of my research questions, sensitizing theories, and my knowledge of the blended family literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The sensitizing concepts were Hinde's (1979) theory of relationships, Weingarten's (1991) theory of intimacy, as well as Social Relational Theory (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). Although sensitizing theories informed my interpretations of the data, I also looked for patterns of meaning that did not relate to the theoretical frameworks I chose to employ or the preconceived notions or assumptions I may have held. I began by reading over the transcribed interviews several times to become acquainted with the data and develop initial ideas about possible themes. I then read over the transcripts carefully, coding ideas and pieces of data I found to be relevant across the entire data set. I then grouped similar codes capturing distinct patterns of meaning into potential themes. This resulted in many initial themes. I then looked for connections between these initial themes to identify larger overarching themes and reduce redundancy. I refined my themes by examining the coded segments within them in order to ensure the codes cohered with one another. I organized my final themes using a concept mapping software program. I then re-read the entire data set in order to ensure that my thematic map was representative of the data set in its entirety. In order to limit the scope of this thesis, my fourth research question regarding preparation for the beginning of the steprelationship will not be included and will be reserved for future publications.

Results

Although the interviews with stepmothers revealed uniqueness in terms of family structures, dynamics, and histories, the stepmothers' narratives also contained common themes. Three major questions addressed in these analyses concern *how stepmothers conceptualize the close stepmother-stepchild relationship*, their *understandings of the relational processes involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships*, and their *perceptions of the changes that have occurred in their relationships over time*. In many of the themes, it was clear that stepmothers perceived that they derived their meanings from the initiations and reciprocations of their stepchildren. This bidirectionality will be illustrated by stepmothers' reports of their stepchildren's contributions to their experiences when describing the themes. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of the participants in the reporting of the results.

How Stepmothers Conceptualize the Close Stepmother-Stepchild Relationship

Because the meaning of "close" is subjective and open to interpretation, my goal was to allow stepmothers to define and describe for themselves what being "close" with their stepchildren means to them. Four major themes captured the ways in which the stepmothers understand close stepmother-stepchild relationships: *the presence of authentic parental love and connection, perceived mattering, trust and confiding, and intimate interactions*. Please see Table 2 for an overview of these findings. It is important to note, however, that although all of the stepmothers described their relationships with their stepchildren as "close" or "positive" in general, they also acknowledged that they did not always feel close in their relationships with their stepchild. These stepmothers spoke of the fluidity of their relationships and reported that, like in any relationship, their relationships with their stepchildren are "not always close"; they have their "ups and downs" and can be difficult, conflictual, or "challenging" at times. However, this variability in closeness did not take away from their bond or the overall sense that they have close relationships with their stepchildren.

Table 2. *Overview of How Stepmothers Conceptualize the Close Stepmother-Stepchild Relationship*

Themes	Sub-themes
The presence of authentic parental love and connection	• Stepchild contributions to achieving a filial bond • Sensitivity to threats to a true mother identity • Acceptance that their steprelationships will never be truly authentic • Resignation to a friendly relationship
Perceived mattering *Trust and confiding* *Intimate interactions*	

The presence of authentic parental love and connection. The majority of the stepmothers described their relationships with their stepchildren as authentic parent-child relationships. The term "authentic" is used to denote the theme expressed by all stepmothers who placed the greatest significance on experiences where the steprelationship approached or matched social constructions of a "natural" biological mother-child relationship. This theme was apparent when stepmothers emphasized ideas that would presumably be taken for granted by a biological mother describing her relationship with her child. Thus, participants described their stepchildren as *their* children, and themselves as *mothers* to them and not merely *step*mothers. To these stepmothers, the love and connection they felt towards their stepchildren, as well as the relationships they shared is comparable to that found in a biological mother-child relationship. For example, Rachel described her relationship with her 11-year-old stepdaughter as, "like a normal mother-daughter relationship." Michelle also expressed similar feelings about her relationship with her 8-year-old stepdaughter, describing it as, "*close* to a typical mother-daughter relationship." Throughout the interviews, stepmothers often compared their relationships with their stepchildren to biological mother-child relationships and described feeling the same love, compassion, obligation, concern, and attachment towards their stepchildren as a biological parent. For example, in describing her feelings towards her 8-year-old stepson, Margaret said that she felt:

> Just like love, or—compassion and worry and like all the other like, parenting like—Yah, like I worry about him, and you know, you miss him when he's gone. Like, he went to his mom's for part of the March break so, there's just a noticeable absence…like, part of me is missing.

Naomi expressed similar feelings towards her 12-year-old stepson, stating that she felt a "deep emotional connection" to him. For those stepmothers who also had biological children of their own, they often compared their relationships with their stepchildren to those they share with their biological children and expressed feeling the same amount of love and connection towards their stepchildren as they felt towards their biological children. For example, in speaking about her 15-year-old stepdaughter, Janet said, "I love her as much as I love my son." Irene expressed similar sentiments, stating that she looks at her 8-year-old stepdaughter as "an equal" to her biological children, and that, like her relationship and the love she shares with her biological children, her relationship with her stepdaughter, "feels just as natural." Michelle also discussed how she does not consider the relationship she shares with her eight-year-old stepdaughter to be any different than a biological mother-daughter relationship. Michelle stated, "I always say my daughter, I never say my stepdaughter because I don't consider her any different to me then…"

Beyond the maternal feelings stepmothers described feeling towards their stepchildren, they also spoke of the maternal role they performed in their households as "Mom" or "Mommy" and described providing similar levels of care for their stepchildren as biological mothers would, such as cooking, cleaning, and meeting their stepchildren's physical needs, as well as meeting their stepchildren's emotional needs by providing comfort and guidance, and playing with their stepchildren. Performing these motherly duties amplified these stepmothers' feelings that they are mothers to their stepchildren. As Candice explained:

> Well, I was catching boogers and, you know, helpin' with toilets and this and that and I—honestly, you *do* feel like a mommy. You do! Like with—with that kind of thing. Or at the very least, you know, an aunty like I said. But definitely more than dad's fiancé. You know?...Like yeah, I'm more than an accessory. I was the primary caretaker.

Rachel also described feeling like a mother to her 11-year-old stepdaughter in this way. Speaking as though she was talking to her stepdaughter, she said, "I know you're never going to call me mom or—or—or feel the same as you do your own mom, but in every respect, I'm your mom. I'm here to look after you, care for you, love you in the same way."

Throughout the interviews it was evident that stepmothers not only felt like mothers to their stepchildren, but also that achieving this authentic parent-child bond was important to stepmothers' feelings of closeness with their stepchildren. These stepmothers described feeling close to their stepchildren when they felt as though their stepchildren were their own and that they had a mother-child bond, as opposed to "something in-between". For example, Julie, a stepmother to a 12-year-old stepdaughter, described feeling close to her stepdaughter during moments of physical affection such as hugging. When I asked her what it is about these moments that made her feel close to her stepdaughter, she said:

> Umm, because then I feel like she's *mine*. Like you know, she's one of *my* children—just the same as anybody else. So, we treat each other more like mother-daughter than as if there's something in-between. Which it's not—it doesn't seem to be that way anymore.

Similarly, Jane, a stepmother to 16 and 19-year-old stepsons, talked about when her 16-year-old stepson was younger and would hold her hand to cross the street or sit on her lap. When I asked Jane what it was about these moments that made her feel close to her stepson, she stated, "It just made it feel like a natural parent-kid relationship." I asked another stepmother, Janet, what made her feel close about a shopping trip she had had with her stepdaughter, and she said, "It was almost one of those, 'Okay, I actually am mom.'" Another stepmother, Candice, stated, "I love it when they feel like they're our kids," and later discussed feeling closest to her 7-year-old stepdaughter and 9-year-old stepson when she was performing the primary caretaker duties and her blended family, "felt like a tiny little family for a little minute." For these stepmothers, achieving an authentic parent-child bond with their stepchildren and feeling as though their relationship met the definition of what a "natural" parent-child relationship should look and feel like was "very, very important" to their feelings of closeness and something they both desired and strived for. Rachel expressed this idea when she discussed performing behaviours such as tucking her stepdaughter in and getting her ready for school in the morning to, "be close in a normal sense, not just close as like a buddy-buddy."

Several of the stepmothers also challenged the idea that a stepmother should perform the role of a "friend" or a "benevolent aunt" to their stepchildren. Naomi stated that, "that did not feel right to me, at all," and Rachel said that it was not what she

wanted, "For myself or for my family." Rachel said:

> I always knew in my mind, I didn't—I never wanted to be that woman that—the typical stepmom who, "You know what? I'm just going to be the fun aunt, or—or that friend. I'm just going to be your friend". Cause, I don't really believe in that. [Laughs]…Because you're—you—because you're taking on a role. And I knew this going in before I even accepted like, living with him and being part of this whole relationship. Like on that level. I knew I would be more than that, because I *do* think stepmoms are more than that. You're with the children fifty percent of the time, like you're going to be dealing with everything, right?

When I asked Rachel why it was important for her to feel a mother-daughter relationship with her stepdaughter as opposed to otherwise, she said:

> Um, because I think uh—because I think you get like a true—it's a true relationship in that way, because I'm not just a friend. Because, I mean, I'm with her fifty percent of the time, so you know, all of the tears that she has when she's here, all of the hurt, all of the sickness, all of the everything. In that aspect, I'm very much a mother…Right? So—so, to have a normal sort of mother-daughter relationship in that way, that is very important because you're not just a friend. You're not just that friend coming here to take care of her for a moment.

Michelle also disclosed the significance of achieving an authentic mother-child bond with her stepdaughter. While discussing her journey as a stepmother and her mother-child relationship with her stepdaughter she said, "I mean, yeah, it's—it's definitely not easy, but I think it's *definitely* worth it in every sense of –in *every* sense, especially if you can have that relationship with a child".

       Stepchild contributions to achieving a filial bond. Within their discussions of the importance of achieving or feeling an authentic parent-child bond with their stepchildren to feel close, stepmothers also acknowledged the role their stepchildren had in making this possible. Stepmothers described feeling close to their stepchildren when their stepchildren expressed, through verbal and non-verbal behaviours, that they view their stepmothers as parental figures or mothers; they acknowledge the parent-child relationship.

       One of the most common ways in which stepmothers described receiving acknowledgment from their stepchildren that they have an authentic parent-child relationship was when their stepchildren referred to them as "Mommy" or "Mom". These moments were noticeable and significant. For example, Julie described times when her stepdaughter would call her "Mom", saying, "She'll even say--[Laughs] what did she

used to say to her dad? 'Dad, we could survive if you went away, but not if mom—if [Julie] does."…And then she'll call me mom, right?" Sarah also explained the significance of hearing her 8-year-old stepdaughter refer to her as "Momma", stating:

> When I tend to see [Ruth's] feeling very close, she calls me, "Momma" instead of "Mom"…Like, "I think it's good, Momma," and, you know—I mean, it's those times when you're like, you know what? I'm not just taking care of a child. I'm actually bonded to this child. Because, it's that intangible feeling of, "I'm doing a good job 'cause this one feels loved."

For Sarah, hearing her stepdaughter call her "Momma" was a meaningful act she interpreted as an indication of the close bond they share.

Many stepmothers also disclosed very vivid memories of the first time their stepchildren called them mom. For example, Irene said:

> Through her whole life, I was always just [Irene] to her and she always called me [Irene], and I wasn't referred to her as her stepmom … Until one day she introduced me to a friend, and she said, "This is my other *mom*"…So, it – I don't know, to me like, that was a – a bonding moment. [Laughs]

Margaret also told the story of when her stepson first started calling her mom, and described how he had asked her if he could call her mom one night after she tucked him in to bed. Margaret stated, "So, it was like that moment really stands out for me as feeling – I felt really close to him in that moment." Michelle also discussed how she felt after her stepdaughter first began calling her "Mommy", and said, "I mean, that's how I felt to her, um, so for her to sort of validate that was kind of—kind of cool." For these stepmothers, hearing their stepchildren call them mom validated their maternal feelings towards their stepchildren and signaled to them that their stepchildren also viewed them in this way: as a maternal figure. Receiving this validation and acknowledgement in turn helped them feel close to their stepchildren.

Another way in which stepmothers described receiving acknowledgement of their mother-child relationship from their stepchildren was when their stepchildren sought them out for comfort or to have their needs met as much or more than with their biological fathers. For example, Naomi said that she knew her 12-year-old stepson viewed her as a parent because, "He asks me for help with homework, he asks me for advice on stuff, umm, you know, working out his schedule, or asking me questions about the—about the schedule. He never—he always kind of treated his dad and I as—as

parents." Irene also described how, in the past, her stepdaughter would always seek out her biological father for needs or to ask questions. Eventually, her stepdaughter also began to seek her out and the biological father was no longer the "go-to person." When I asked Irene how this made her feel, she said, "Pretty good…Well, I—I felt more like an equal parent at that point." Angela also discussed how her 9-year-old stepdaughter recently began asking for her instead of her biological father to go into her room at night and comfort her when she couldn't sleep. She stated, "So I went in there and sang to her and rubbed her back and it was just very pretty sweet and I think—I think she's been looking at me more of, like a mother figure than a, umm, friend." In these instances, these stepmothers drew meaning from their stepchildren's behaviour and interpreted these acts as indication that their stepchildren viewed them as parental figures capable of providing comfort and meeting their needs.

A final example of how stepmothers described receiving validation for their maternal role or mother-child relationship with their stepchildren was when their stepchildren celebrated them on Mother's Day. Rachel discussed feeling very close to her stepchildren this past Mother's Day. She said, "Um, just this past Mother's Day, you know, it was - I actually - it was like a whole Mother's Day for *me*…Right? Like they did all of the things for—that they would do for their own mother, with *me*." Angela also described feeling close to her stepdaughter when she celebrated her on Mother's Day and how meaningful this was to her:

> And she umm disappeared to her room and she came back out and she had this really actually beautiful—I saved it of course—umm, handmade card that said, "Happy Mother's Day" and it was, umm, really, really, really pretty. She really took a lot of time and the fact that she celebrated me on Mother's Day like, was awesome.

Angela reported that having her stepdaughter celebrate her on Mother's Day was an acknowledgement that her stepdaughter viewed her as a mother and that, "it was confirmation like this is—this is right. Finally, this feels right."

These moments stood out for these stepmothers as evidence that their stepchildren viewed them as mothers or parental figures and validated their feelings, as well as their hopes for the relationship. Such moments of validation contributed to their feelings of closeness with their stepchildren.

Sensitivity to threats to a true mother identity. Throughout the interviews, it was evident that stepmothers displayed heightened sensitivity to any perceived diminishment or threat to their identities as mothers. In contrast to feeling close to their stepchildren when they felt as though they had achieved an authentic mother-child bond, stepmothers described experiencing barriers to closeness and within their steprelationships when their identities as "real" mothers or true parents were questioned, threatened, or undermined by other individuals such as their stepchildren, family members, and other parents or individuals.

Several of the stepmothers described feeling insecure and uncertain of their relationships with their stepchildren when their stepchildren displayed a perceived preference for their biological mothers or a strong connection with their biological mothers. Occasions when stepchildren mentioned their relationships with their biological mothers reminded stepmothers that they were not merely secondary mother figures, but also that their connection to their stepchildren would never compare to the biological mother-child relationship, threatening their understandings that their relationships were authentic mother-child relationships. For example, in discussing the relationship between her teenage stepsons and their biological mother, Jane stated, "Obviously there is a bond there, right? But to see it sometimes so strong, it makes me feel insecure and doubt my place." Seeing this strong mother-child bond between her stepsons and their biological mother, Jane said that she was reminded, "Oh, right! I'm not actually the parent." Margaret also expressed feeling insecure and less close to her stepson when he displayed positivity towards his biological mother and talked about the great times he had at her house. When I asked Margaret why this hindered her feelings of closeness, she said, "Umm, I guess because he's expressing closeness with the other maternal figure…Like, maybe even a preference." For these stepmothers, it was difficult to feel as though they would never be primary or that their stepchildren were closer to their biological mothers. As Naomi said:

> Well you pour your heart and soul into them, into the relationship. And I've poured my heart and soul. And if you want to be specific, my heart and soul into [Noah], and kind of at the end of the day, the important people in his life are his mom and his dad.

Stepmothers also acknowledged the ways in which their stepchildren challenged their maternal identities or roles and created barriers for closeness. Specifically, stepmothers described occasions when their stepchildren stopped calling them "mom", referred to them by their first names and not as "mom", or repeated the dreaded phrases, "you're not my mom" or "you're not my *real* mom." For example, Debbie reported that she felt as though something was missing in her relationship with her 8-year-old stepdaughter and that she was not perceived as a true parent to her stepdaughter because her stepdaughter would say, "I have a real mom, and then I have my other mom." Margaret described how her stepson referred to her as "mom" in the beginning of their relationship when his biological mother was uninvolved, but stopped doing so when his biological mother re-entered his life. When I asked Margaret how this made her feel, she said, "I think it just makes it—it makes it hard to like, really grasp your true identity because it's something that's sort of, not a constant thing," and also, "And um, I guess it was sort of when that got taken away, that like, I felt um, like maybe I—I wasn't who I thought I was I guess, or part of my identity had been taken away." Hearing from their stepchildren that they were not "real" mothers or not receiving acknowledgement for their maternal role made it difficult for these stepmothers to feel secure in their roles and their understandings of their steprelationships as authentic mother-child relationships.

Stepmothers also described experiencing frustration when they were excluded from participating in the lives of their stepchildren outside of their homes, such as by attending doctors' appointments and school events. For example, Rachel described the biological mother of her stepchildren being adamant that she was not to take them to the doctor and that only she, as their biological mother, or their biological father should do so. Rachel said, "So, it's just little things like that that kind of put a standstill in that. And uh, you know, so kind of it—it kind of holds me in place if like I'm kind of—I don't really have a say at that point." Another example was not being included in parent-teacher interviews. Naomi said:

> I mean, even right down to – you know, I go to every parent-teacher interview. Nobody talks to me…[Laughs] Right?...Uh, I sit there and like nobody makes eye—makes really eye contact with me very much. You know?...So I interject often and I like, I probably have a reputation of being like, "What the hell is she here for anyway?" you know, kind of thing. But umm -- but yeah, I—I do think I

didn't realize how powerful all of the outside forces were going to be…That's what I didn't realize.

A further perceived threat to the identity of these woman as mothers was also felt when other individuals such as family members, acquaintances, or friends reminded them that their stepchildren were not actually theirs and that they were not "real" mothers. For example, several of the stepmothers described receiving comments from others that they should not have a say in decisions or even care, because they are not their stepchild's parent. Jane described experiencing this and hearing, "What do you care? You're not the mom," and said, "it's like, you *live* there. You're living with them. You can't just be part of the furniture. [Laughs]". Julie also described hearing similar comments from people and said, "I don't like someone to make it look like it's nothing when it really is something." Margaret also described having her role diminished by other mothers. She said:

> Um, but then, it was—wasn't until after I had my daughter that I realized they never viewed me as a real parent because they made comments like, "Happy first *real* Mother's Day," or, "How does it feel *real* mom?" So, to me it was—it was hurtful and it felt like, "Does that discredit adoptive parents as well?" Like, how is a stepparent any different than an adoptive parent or a biological parent?"

Margaret described the way these comments made her feel, stating, "I wasn't feeling like I was really fulfilling any kind of role in anybody's eyes…Like that I didn't really exist, or that 'Oh, you're not his real mom.'" Margaret went on to say that she resented the value given to the biological parent over the stepmother and explained, "because I feel like the measure of a good parent is—isn't about their title, it's about, how they raise their children." Hearing from others that they were not real parents or should not have a say in the lives or their stepchildren diminished these stepmothers' identities as mothers and made it difficult for them to feel as though they had achieved an authentic mother-child bond with their stepchildren.

A final threat to the mothering roles and identities of these stepmothers occurred when family members critiqued their parenting practices and pointed out errors or when they were "overreacting" as parents. For example, Sarah recounted a story about her sister telling her to "ease off" when she was disciplining her stepdaughter and said, "my sister doesn't have kids. She certainly doesn't have stepkids…Like, if you're the one in the trenches—you know, I don't need people telling me in public and embarrassing me,

you know, 'cause I'm apparently overreacting as a parent." Sarah also described experiencing criticism of her parenting from her husband's mother, and stated, "[Michael's] mom, was involved a lot with [Ruth] at—when [Michael] was single parenting…And, you know, that's great for [Ruth] and stuff, but she doesn't really know how to step back and let me parent." Sarah described receiving criticism from her husband's mother about her parenting abilities and when she would discipline her stepdaughter and said that she felt like, "there's a certain amount of thought behind, 'Well, you haven't parented before, so how in the world could you possibly know what you are doing?'"

Although these stepmothers expressed a desire for an authentic parental bond with their stepchildren and described feeling close to their stepchildren when this was achieved, barriers to fulfilling a mothering role and reminders that they were not true parents were extremely hurtful and limited their ability to view themselves as authentic mothers or parents.

Acceptance that their steprelationships will never be truly authentic. Although stepmothers desired or asserted an authentic parental identity, it was apparent that this was a fragile vision of the relationship. Many stepmothers acknowledged that their steprelationships were not truly mother-child, and, for many of the stepmothers, there existed an acceptance that their steprelationship would never be truly authentic. For example, Michelle said, "Even though I see myself as her mom, and I know she sees me as her mom, she—deep down inside, she knows like, I'm not her mom". Several stepmothers also discussed the awkwardness of not really being mother-daughter or mother-son. For example, Angela said:

> It's kind of weird being a stepmom and not actually being their actual mom. There are so many awkward moments…You'll be out at a restaurant and somebody will be like, "Mom can [Emma]—or this—can your little girl have a dessert?"…And it's awkward! It's like, do I say—do I just go with it or do I say, "I'm the stepmom?"

Angela went on to say, "I think we've just kind of had to get over the awkwardness of [Pause] not really being mother and daughter."

Stepmothers also described times when they did not feel 100% like parents to their stepchildren due to the limitations of their role. One example of this was the limited

decision making capacity of a stepparent, as decisions regarding the child are ultimately up to the biological parents. Rachel described this limitation to her ability to feel like a true parent:

> Um, the harder aspects I think were, um, knowing what my limited role is. Like you have this idea, "I'm just going to be - I'm just going to carry on like a mom."…But at the same time, your - your role is limited as a mom, right? Because I can't just go ahead and decide things on my own like a mom would. I can't just go ahead and do things on my own of what I think is best, like a mom would. Right? So it was limiting in that sense.

This realization that they would never have authentic mother-child relationships with their stepchildren was also evident to these stepmothers because, "there is no biological tie" [Janet] and they did not have legal rights to their stepchildren. As a result, their stepchildren could be taken from them at any moment. For example, Janet said:

> I didn't chose to adopt this child…This is how—All of a sudden, it was, [Takes breath] –it was, here it is, you're completely, physically and emotionally responsible for this child's needs, um, but yet, if push came down to shove, she could be taken from me at any moment.

Although Janet described herself as her stepdaughter's "mom" and the relationship with her stepdaughter as "mother-daughter", the fact remained that she could lose her stepdaughter at any moment due to her non-existent parental rights.

Beyond these examples, a few of the stepmothers openly admitted that there was something "missing" in their relationships with their stepchildren and that they didn't entirely feel like their stepchildren were their own, articulating differences between their relationships with their stepchildren and their biological children. Naomi said:

> I think the whole notion of closeness is really important and it's—it's good and—and I think— Like I said, I characterize our relationship with [Noah] as close-- but it will never—it will never be what it is with my own son … I know that. I can tell that already. He's not even two, but I can tell that.

Debbie also articulated that she didn't feel 100% a parent to her stepdaughter. She stated that, even though she felt like a mom and worried about both her stepdaughter and biological son equally, it was a different relationship:

> It's a little bit strange, because when I—I started umm—when I got involved with my now husband, I thought, you know, whether your kid is biological or not, you—you end up feeling 100% mom and—and I can't say that I do. I feel—I feel that there is something different between my biological son and, [Audrey]…In the sense that—and I hate saying it, because I wish that, you know,

umm, I felt like she was 100% mine…But, I find it takes a little bit more work. There's some things that she—she'll do that'll irritate me or that I'll get frustrated with that with my son I put up with too much, you know?

Several stepmothers also described dealing with hurtful comments or misbehaviour from their stepchildren less kindly than they did with their biological children. As Angela stated:

Other than like, her saying things that might have hurt my feelings and I—I think that if it was my biological child that had said that, I think it might have rolled even easier. I don't know 'cause my son isn't old enough to say things like that yet … But it just doesn't roll off when it's not your biological child.

Debbie also described having more patience when dealing with her biological son as opposed her stepdaughter, saying:

It could be talking back…It could be not cleaning her room…Things that, you know, normal kids do that, with my son, I can be more patient with…But with her, umm, it doesn't take much for me to be like—to give her a time out or to give her a consequence or…

Due to the lack of biological ties and limited parental rights and freedoms inherent in steprelationships, as well as noted differences for some of these stepmothers between their relationships with their stepchildren and biological children, these stepmothers acknowledged and accepted that their relationships with their stepchildren would never be truly authentic.

Resignation to a friendly relationship. In contrast to the majority of stepmothers who described their relationships with their stepchildren as mother-child, a small number (four) of stepmothers described their relationships with their stepchildren as being closer to friendships. Whereas three of these stepmothers felt like parents and that they had mother-child relationships with their stepchildren in the past, their relationships with their stepchildren evolved into friendships as their stepchildren grew older. Interestingly, this change from "parent" to "friend" was specific to stepmothers who had early adolescent and adolescent stepsons. One of these stepmothers, Naomi, described her relationship with her 12-year-old stepson as "friendshippy" [sic] and said, "I think we're more buddies." Naomi reported that her relationship with her stepson had changed, "in the sense that I am more of a friend now—than a parent with him. And I used to be more of a parent." Sandra also said that when her 16 and 18-year-old stepsons were younger,

she felt like a parent to them, but now she felt like a "supportive observer". Sandra stated, "I'm more of a friend now. Um, yeah. Like I am—I am like the—the back up pitcher." Jane also explained that her relationship with her 16-year-old stepson resembled more of a friendship at that point, saying, "Because we're going to be friends, right? Just the age difference. I mean it's kind of impossible to be sort of a parent, in my opinion." For these stepmothers, their relationships with their stepsons evolved into friendships over time.

Debbie also described her relationship with her 8-year old stepdaughter as "not quite a parent." She said:

> So basically, in my heart, there's like that mom worry that's there all the time…And my umm—my hopes and dreams for her and, you know, my preoccupation with her are as equal as my biological son … But, when—like, when I'm in person with her, I feel more like, a cool aunt or um, maybe a big sister, or, you know, favourite babysitter, nanny.

She described her relationship with her stepdaughter, saying, "I don't know, there's like a bond between us that—that's kind of like friends but, she still sees me as an authority figure."

All of the stepmothers in this group who reported that their steprelationships resembled friendships more so than parent-child relationships expressed hoping for a mother-child relationship with their stepchildren at one point in time, and also stated that feeling an authentic mother-child bond with their stepchildren helped them feel close. However, they came to accept that this was not the reality of their steprelationships. Debbie said that this wasn't always easy for her, but stated, "Now I—I'm more, at peace with the relationship we have and I've worked on it, and I'm *really* happy with what we have." Sandra also said, "like I would never ever have thought that my word would be friend with them…Like, why would I be friends with them? I should be more in that parenting role which is a mixture of things, right? But a friend is a good thing. Yeah."

Throughout the interviews, stepmothers also discussed the emotional dangers of having high expectations for the steprelationship and subsequently feeling disappointed when it did not resemble what they had envisioned. They discussed the importance of accepting the relationship for what it was, as opposed to what they had hoped for. For example, Naomi said:

> I think people get into trouble [Sighs] umm, becoming too attached to an idea of a relationship, or an idea of themselves as a stepparent, or an idea of a blended family and the way it should be or whatever…I know I did for sure. Umm, and I think it can be…really dangerous emotionally…to hold yourself to such a high standard and to be really bonded [Laughs] with—with children.

Candice also expressed this view, saying, "Like, if you don't have a mother-child relationship with your stepkid, you feel like, bad for that. But, you don't have to!" Candice stated that:

> My expectations in the beginning were probably really, uh, really big ones. You know?...And that might not have been fair to myself to expect that it would be such a way. You know, there's a difference between being hopeful and being, you know, uhh—not setting yourself up for disappointment.

Naomi reported that she had had to learn to accept that the relationship with her stepson would never be parent-child. She said, "I thought for many years I could be an inner circle parent if I just tried hard enough," and that, "I think, in the first let's say four years—umm, I had *really* high hopes around being umm, something significantly more than what I was reading in the literature," in regards to recommendations that a stepparent should "be kind of like a kind aunt." However, Naomi discussed how she later came to realize that her relationship with her stepson was beyond her efforts alone and her control, and that it would never be what she wanted in terms of an authentic mother-son relationship. She said she was working on surrendering to the lack of control and the fact that she wouldn't be an inner circle parent, "Like, I will not be—there will not be a picture of me in their dorm rooms [Laughs] in university. I know I will not be, and that has to be—and I'm getting better at that being okay."

For these stepmothers, having relationships with their stepchildren that resemble friendships as opposed to parent-child relationships was not what they had envisioned or hoped for. However, they had learned to accept and embrace these relationships for what they were, as opposed to mourning what they might have been.

Perceived mattering. The concept of perceived mattering has been proposed and defined by Marshall (2001) as the "psychological tendency to evaluate the self as significant to specific other people" (p. 474). In regards to their steprelationships, stepmothers described attending to and assigning meaning to specific behaviours that their stepchildren displayed towards them as indicators of significance to their

stepchildren; the sense that they truly mattered to their stepchildren. This perceived mattering was one way that stepmothers described knowing that their steprelationship are close.

Throughout the interviews, stepmothers described feeling close to their stepchildren when their stepchildren would engage in self-initiated physical or verbal displays of affection towards them. These affectionate behaviours included verbal affirmations such as "I love you," as well as physical affection such as hugs and kisses. For example, Julie stated, "Umm, she's—lately she's been very huggy [sic]. Just comes in the door, 'I love you!' hugs me, you know, walks away." Sarah discussed receiving a card from her stepdaughter that stated how much she loved watching shows together and their time together, and that said, "You are so awesome. I love you." Candice also described how her stepson would text her randomly and say, "I love you," and Sarah discussed how her stepdaughter would leave her notes under her door that say, "I love you so much, mommy!" Angela also disclosed a similar moment when she felt especially close to her stepdaughter:

> She—I was cooking somethin' or doing something in the kitchen and she came up—she came into the kitchen and gave me this *huge* hug, like from the side, like the side hug…And she said, "You—you're the best stepmom in the world"…Yeah. I was like, "I love you—you're the sweetest thing ever".

These unsolicited displays of affection from their stepchildren provided these stepmothers with information that was interpreted as mattering to their stepchildren. In these moments, they felt loved by and significant to their stepchildren, which contributed to their feelings of closeness.

Stepmothers also described feeling close to their stepchildren when their stepchildren expressed care and concern for them. For example, Julie said that, "Like, she sees that I'm stressed out. She tries to fix it," and went on to say, "So she's umm— and especially lately I've also noticed, if I'm upset or feeling angry or something, she senses it and she'll just, come over and give me a hug or start doing the dishes, or—she's a bit of a pleaser." Candice also described her stepson's attention to her feelings, saying:

> So he'll come up and give you a random hug, and you know, if he's *ever* seen me upset…Umm, he'll come and he'll give you a *great big*, meaningful hug. You can just feel that he loves you when he hugs you.

Sarah also said that her stepdaughter regularly tried to convince her father to bring her breakfast in bed, stating, "She says, 'Mom needs to be taken care of. She's growing a human…Let's bring her breakfast.' [Laughs]. And, you know, just things like that, where she's lookin' out for…" Lastly, Jane reported a story about one Mother's Day where her two stepsons decided that one would stay with her and their biological father, and the other would go to their biological mother's house. Jane said, "It made me feel good that there was some, I don't know, sensitivity. That the both of them talked and they decided, 'Okay, we're going to be in both places.'" This sensitivity to their stepmothers' emotional or physical needs and the care and concern these stepchildren displayed towards their stepmothers was interpreted by these stepmothers as indicators that their stepchildren really do care for them and their well-being; that they matter.

Stepmothers also described this sense of mattering when their stepchildren would seek out their company. Janet said, "And even if we've been fighting, she still wants me to tuck her in." Sarah also expressed feeling close to her stepdaughter when her stepdaughter would seek out time with her. She said, "She'll kind of stake out that time as well—and that she values something that we do." Rachel described a game she would play with her stepdaughter at bedtime and that this made her feel close. When I asked her why, she said:

> Um, I think it was because she was –she looked so forward to it, and uh, so it was sort of that acceptance from her…You know, because now –now this is something that she's looking forward to and so—which means that it's - and it's - and it's with me. Right? So um, so I felt close to her in that way.

Feeling as though they were important enough for their stepchildren to seek them out and value their time together helped these stepmothers feel close. As Sandra stated:

> Like they've come, and they're obviously wanting to talk to *me*…Which, as a stepmom, you know, you don't really feel you have a place at times – and for them to search that out for me, that – yeah, that would be it.

Sandra went on to say, "And so they came and sought me out and it's – it felt awesome for – it soothed my heart. Because at that point I was feeling like, absolutely nothing."

A final way in which stepmothers described feeling and knowing they were close to their stepchildren was when their stepchildren would show a preference for them above their biological parents or other adult figures when in need of comfort, or simply for shared time and activities. For example, Debbie stated, "she picks me for everything.

Whereas before it was kind of, you know, 'Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,' all the time," and explained that this let her know that there was a connection with her stepdaughter:

> And she's—she's kind of like, "[Debbie]! [Debbie]! I want to show you something!"…"Come and see this!" And I don't see that with her father. And I—I find like—okay. Well, my son who's like bi—biologically obsessed with me because that's the phase that he's in … He loves his Mommy. And then I've got my stepdaughter who—who's acting the same way and there's nothing—there's nothing biologically making her do that … Like, I find that, it shows that there—there's a connection.

Angela also reported that her stepdaughter's preference for time with her let her know they were close. She said, "I just think I just know by her wanting to be with me a lot." Angela described how her stepdaughter would often choose to spend time with her over her father when given the choice, and said, "And I feel like that's—that like, solidifies it for me that she—that she and I are close…The fact that she wants to be with me."

This preference for the stepmother over other adults was also described during times of physical or emotional distress for the stepchildren. For example, Angela told a story about her stepdaughter asking for her for the first time when she couldn't sleep and was seeking comfort:

> Well, this was like three weeks ago. She came and knocked on our door and I was in our bathroom brushing my teeth and [Cameron] comes in there and he had this look on his face and he said, "She wants *you* to come in there and sing her a song?"…And I was like, "Oh my gosh, my heart just melted!" It made my, year almost…'Cause she had literally never asked for me.

Sarah also described the significance of her stepdaughter seeking her out for comfort or reassurance above other adults. She said, "And for me, it's gratifying that I've been significant enough in her life so that, um, I override the other adults in her life. [Laughs]." Sarah recounted an experience that stood out for her in this regard:

> Um, there was one last summer, where, we were camping, and grandma and grandpa came to visit for dinner or whatever, and, she fell in the playground and started crying. And—so grandma and [Michael] went to go get her, and, she wouldn't let anybody go touch her, until she got a hug from me first…And then anybody else could give her a hug. But, nothing was going to make it better unless I gave her a hug first…But, I think it's those kind of moments where you're like, "Huh, I really do matter!"…Like, you realize just how crucial you've become to them.

These stepmothers compared the attention their stepchildren paid to them with attention

to other individuals such as the biological father and described knowing that they mattered and were close to their stepchildren when there was a perceived preference for time spent with them over other significant figures.

This attention from stepchildren that communicates affection, care and concern, as well as preference for their stepmothers was important to stepmothers' feelings of closeness. These stepmothers drew meaning from these experiences and interpreted these behaviours from their stepchildren as an indication that they were significant; they truly mattered. These were not moments that stepmothers took for granted. They were moments they held on to.

Trust and confiding. Stepmothers also described feeling close to their stepchildren and knowing that they were close because they were able to talk about many things with their stepchildren and their stepchildren would seek them out to disclose details about their lives. These disclosures included day-to-day events, things that the stepchildren were excited about, their inner thoughts and feelings, as well as any issues that they may have been experiencing. For example, Rachel said that her stepdaughter, "comes and asks questions, you know, about certain things, about—tells me about what's happening in school and boys and all this stuff. So…And even just different things that she likes and wants." Naomi also expressed this with her stepson, saying:

> So he—he talks to me, *lots*. Which is—which I hope never changes…Because he—he does like he—he *really* does, he talks to me a lot. He comes into the house, he's pleasant, he's nice, he asks me how my day was, he tells me what he did today.

This self-disclosure from stepchildren, although at times seemingly mundane, was important to these stepmothers and served as an indication that they had close relationships with their stepchildren. As Rachel said:

> I feel especially close when she talks to me about like, personal things. And she did not that long ago. Um, and it was more about like—and it was silly girl talk, but those are the moments that I feel close is when, you know, she's telling me about, okay who likes who in her class and who doesn't like who and all of the drama around it… Because those are things—I mean oftentimes, kids don't want to tell their parents any of that, right? ... And um, so when she actually divulged all of that, I thought, "Oh okay. Like this is actually a moment."

These stepchildren did not have to share their lives with their stepmothers, and that they chose to do so was meaningful to these women. It let them know that their stepchildren

wanted to be known by them. As Jane described, these self-disclosures meant that her stepson was, "inviting me into his world," and, "That is the biggest thing."

Stepmothers also spoke about their stepchildren going to them with problems and seeking reassurance, and feeling close to their stepchildren in these moments, because it implied that their stepchildren were comfortable enough with them to be vulnerable and demonstrated the trust that had been earned by these stepmothers in their steprelationships. For example, Julie said, "Yes, it's comfort zone. She'll come home from school upset about something and throw herself into my arms, you know?" Debbie also described how her stepdaughter would seek her out for "reassurance" when she was experiencing anxiety, and that this was an example of the "trust and safety that has built up over time." Debbie reported that in these moments she felt close to her stepdaughter because, "She opens up to me. She trusts me, obviously…That's a big one. That she actually took a chance at some point to open up and trust me." For some of these women, it was especially meaningful that they were the first people their stepchildren would come to with issues. For example, Michelle said, "I really love the fact that, um, I'm the first person she goes to for things. Um, if she's having an issue, um, I'm the person like, the shoulder she can cry on sort of." Julie also shared that she knew she was close to her stepdaughter because, "I would be the first person probably she would come to if there was an issue." Seeking out their stepmothers, sometimes before others, to talk about issues or problems served as an indication to these women of the comfort and trust that had been established in their relationships with their stepchildren and that their steprelationships were close.

Many of the stepmothers also described feeling close to their stepchildren and knowing that their steprelationships were close because their stepchildren confided in them. For example, Irene stated, "she's able to confide in me in things that she wouldn't just confide in with anybody." Debbie echoed this sentiment, saying, "she tells me things that she doesn't tell other people". Debbie explained:

> She's constantly telling me about her friends at school and—and her teachers, and you know, I know all kinds of things that her—my husband doesn't know. And even sometimes I'll tell him and, and then he'll tell his ex and she'll be like, "Really? I didn't know that happened" … And there's really a lot of confidence. Like, she *really* confides in me a lot.

Sarah also reported that she felt close to her stepdaughter when she confided in her, saying, "Um, things like when I pick her up from school, she won't tell anybody else—not [Michael], not his other family, not grandma, not—anything about her day…But she always tells me about her day." Rachel expressed that this was the aspect she liked the most about her relationship with her stepdaughter, saying, "I think I probably like that aspect the most…Like we actually – like, she'll tell me everything. [Laughs]." For these stepmothers, having their stepchildren confide in them over others implied something special about these relationships, that there was a sense of trust and security that had been built between these stepmothers and their stepchildren that was unparalleled by any other relationship. The fact that their stepchildren trusted them with the intimate details of their lives was meaningful to these stepmothers and made them feel especially close in their relationships.

Intimate interactions. The final way in which stepmothers conceptualized the close stepmother-stepchild relationships was the presence of interactions that corresponded to Weingarten's (1991) conception of intimate interactions. These intimate interactions involved moments where stepmothers perceived that they and their stepchildren shared meaning about an experience or co-created new meanings that carried the relationship forward.

Many of the stepmothers described feeling close to their stepchildren during moments of mutual enjoyment and shared pleasure. For example, Margaret stated that she felt close to her stepson during a day at an indoor waterpark and said:

> I just felt like [Pause] proud to see how excited he was about the experience and just like having fun going down the slides with him and, you know, being scared or excited and just—I guess, just having a good time.

These were emotions that Margaret believed she and her stepson shared and communicated to one another through their mutual enjoyment of the day and their behaviours. Debbie also reported that she felt close to her stepdaughter due to their shared interests, ability to laugh together, and mutual enjoyment of activities such as painting. She stated:

> It's just like fate that we're so similar and we found each other. It's special and—and she's hilarious. Like, she's a –she makes me laugh all the time and it's nice—nice. You know, I'm doing something that I like, I see her like it just as much, and we're having a great time over it. It's just very, very special.

Julie also described how she and her stepdaughter were "both a little weird" and that they had weird imaginations and a lot of fun together. She said:

> Umm, she's—she's funny. She jokes around. She's uhh—my older two now like – I can be kind of immature. Now that the other two are getting older, "Mom, that's not funny. You're such a loser and whatever". Right? And she's just like "Oh, this is hilarious!" Or we'll just do something silly in the car. So I feel now—like right now, her and I have more of that bond than with the other two, because they're—they're just getting too serious.

In this example, Julie perceived that she and her stepdaughter had co-created an understanding of their relationship where they could be silly together, and coordinated their actions to reflect this understanding and participate in silliness with one another. A further example of an intimate interaction can be found in Janet's description of her shopping trip with her stepdaughter:

> [Emary] and I went and, you know, there was lots of hugs and touching. She picked out her knew volleyball shoes and took her stinky old ones off and um, you know, tried on different pairs of little volleyball shorts and socks and she got to be all goofy and girly and—and uh, I—I played along and let her do that. It was our shopping trip. It was our—you know, it was what it was. And that was one of those moments where she realized that—or she—we both realized that we actually maybe needed each other more than we recognized.

During this shopping trip, there were many examples of mutuality and shared meaning, both through reciprocal affectionate behaviours, as well as the coordination of "goofy and girly" actions. This interaction also involved the co-creation of meaning in regards to the mutual understanding that both Janet and her stepdaughter need one another and value their time together and their relationship.

Throughout the interviews, stepmothers also discussed intimate rituals that they shared in, repeated, and looked forward to with their stepchildren. For example, Irene reported:

> [Laura] really enjoys sushi, and it's a really – a required taste thing, to really like sushi … So that's something we kind of bond over…I think that—and I was the first one to actually ever introduce it with her. We have made it at home together, we've gone out together and eaten the sushi, and we've tried different kinds together. And that's a moment that – that's like, our special moment.

Sarah also described an intimate ritual she had with her stepdaughter:

> And, like when we're having kind of a rough day, I'll say, "Should we turn the

music on?" She's like, "Woohoo! Dance party!" You know? [Laughs]…And it's like, "We're insane." But, you know, it's one of those things we do, that—like, "Okay, we're going to take five minutes, and we're just gonna be crazy, and it will help us feel better."

These intimate rituals involved the co-ordination of action by both stepmothers and stepchildren that reflected their understandings of one another and of their relationship that carried the relationship forward and was perceived by stepmothers as a sign of closeness.

Relational Processes Contributing to Close Stepmother-Stepchild Relationships

Throughout the interviews, stepmothers identified a number of processes they believed were involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships. Multiple themes were captured to reflect these understandings that included dyadic processes involving bidirectional contributions from both stepmothers and stepchildren; triadic processes involving biological mothers, fathers, or half-siblings; processes internal to the stepmother such as patience, flexibility, and self-care; as well as external processes such as seeking out supports from helping professionals and online support groups.

In order to limit the scope of this analysis, and to adhere to the strengths-based approached I have proposed, only the dyadic processes involving positive contributions from stepmothers and stepchildren to their relationships will be explored in-depth, because these processes highlight the conscious strategies that stepmothers used to build and maintain the steprelationship. As was found in the previous section on stepmothers' perceptions of closeness in the steprelationship, it was apparent that stepmothers perceived that building and maintaining a new steprelationships was also a bidirectional process involving the contributions of both stepmother and stepchild. As Julie stated:

> You can keep trying, but if they don't reciprocate back, well then you can't really say you're necessarily in a close relationship if that person doesn't feel that. *You* may feel like you're close to them, but I mean, she might—she might not. Right? So, I think that in you know, with any relationship you just need to both try.

Four major themes captured the ways in which the stepmothers understood the reciprocal and bidirectional processes involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships: *communicating mattering, creating opportunities for intimacy, openness to and investment in the steprelationship, and following the*

stepchild's lead. These findings are depicted in Table 3 below.

Table 3. *Overview of Relational Processes Contributing to Close Stepmother-Stepchild Relationships*

Themes
Communicating mattering
Creating opportunities for intimacy
Openness to, and investment in, the steprelationship
Following the stepchild's lead

Communicating mattering. As described earlier, one of the ways that stepmothers identified that they felt close to their stepchildren was the perception that they mattered to their stepchildren. Thus, it was interesting that stepmothers identified that the active communication of mattering was emphasized as a strategy for constructing and maintaining close steprelationships. Stepmothers reported that both they and their stepchildren engaged in attentive behaviours towards one another that they understood as conveying that they are loved by, and important to, one another, and that these behaviours fostered their close bonds.

Stepmothers described communicating the significance of their stepchildren to them in multiple ways. For example, stepmothers reported engaging in affectionate behaviours with their stepchildren such as hugging, kissing, and cuddling. Another example of these affectionate behaviours was provided by Sandra who said, "as I walk by them I'll put my hand on their back…Like, just tiny touches and I do it often." Stepmothers also described providing verbal affirmations such as saying, "I love you," or complimenting their stepchildren in order to demonstrate to their stepchildren that they are loved by and matter to them. As Angela stated:

> I was like, "[Emma] what would I do without you? Life just would not be the same." And she smiled really big. But, it's things like that. Like if I tell her she's really pretty and smart, and funny, I feel like that kind of brings us closer cause it makes her happy and then she feel—I think it makes us both closer, if I even just say positive things to her about herself—and build her up sort of.

Many stepmothers also reported performing specific acts to demonstrate to their stepchildren that they were thinking of them and to make them feel important. For example, Naomi reported that she prepares her stepson's favourite meal every once in a while, and Julie stated, "Sometimes I'll put a little note in her lunch—something like that." Jane discussed how her stepson loves bacon and all things bacon related, so she

purchased a mug for him that said, "Make Bacon Not War", and Debbie redecorated her stepdaughter's room with a Monster High theme because her stepdaughter was a fan of this franchise. Debbie also described buying gifts for her stepdaughter such as clothes and books, and planning surprises for her stepdaughter such as having a bouquet of flowers delivered to her stepdaughter's classroom on her birthday to demonstrate, "I'm thinking of you." Stepmothers engaged in these thoughtful acts and surprises to demonstrate to their stepchildren that they noticed them, paid attention to their interests, and valued them. As Naomi stated:

> I got to know [Noah's] interests really quickly. Umm, and I—and I worked with those interests and I draw in those interests…You know? So like, I used to—he used to like to build things, so I got him building books from the library … Just little things like that where I feel like, umm, if there's opportunities—or I took opportunities often and still do, to show them that I know who they are as a per— I know who they are as a person…And I value those parts of them.

Stepmothers also expressed the importance of spending time with their stepchildren as a way to demonstrate to their stepchildren that they mattered. For example, Julie described setting aside time for her stepdaughter to make her "feel loved". She reported that she would often plan special dates for herself and her stepdaughter because, "it makes her feel special too, like she matters." Margaret also reported doing this with her stepson and, "just really making the time and like, trying to make him feel special through activities or one-on-one attention or, um, things like that." Michelle also said:

> Whereas with the toddler running around, he takes a lot of the ti – like, my attention and needs—and is much more needy than [Sophie] is. So, I think for her to just get that one-on-one time and feel like, "Ohh, someone's actually taking the time to just do something with me that *I* want to do" -- um, is really important.

Mattering was also communicated by displaying care and concern for their stepchildren and for their feelings. For example, Julie stated that she would show interest in her stepdaughter's well-being by asking, "How are you? How was your day? How are you truly feeling?" Stepmothers also demonstrated this care and concern for stepchildren by providing support and comfort for their stepchildren during times of distress. As Michelle said, "I think for me to be able to respond to her the way that I do, validates for her that I think that she's important to me and like, that we have a close relationship."

A final way in which stepmothers described communicating the importance of their

stepchildren was by treating them as equals to their biological children. Many of the stepmothers spoke at length about not wanting their stepchildren to feel excluded or that they are treated differently than their step or half siblings, and described experiencing guilt when they felt as though they were showing their biological children preferential treatment or behaving negatively towards their stepchildren. Julie stated, "I don't want her to feel like she's like, you know, like the Cinderella story. Where the other two are princesses and she's not. 'Cause she's a princess all in her own way." Debbie also said that she wanted her stepdaughter, "to feel like she's just as part of this family" as her biological son. Throughout the interviews, stepmothers reported engaging in self-policing and careful monitoring of their behaviours towards their stepchildren and biological children to ensure that their stepchildren felt loved and accepted by them. For example, Julie talked about including her stepdaughter in activities involving the other children to ensure that her stepdaughter felt as though she had an equally important spot in her life. She said, "I want her to feel like she's just as important to me as everybody else is…And it's not just her against the world kind of thing, right?" Irene also discussed the importance of making her stepdaughter feel included and displaying equal treatment, saying, "when I do things like, for the other girls, like when I go school—school shopping, or clothing shopping, she's—she's part of that…And just treating—just her being treated like the same as her sisters." Angela also reported that she was careful not to buy something for her biological son and not her stepdaughter and said:

> And we just don't go on a vacation without her, unless it's just the two of us. If it's just the two of us, then it's fine to leave her, you know? But if we're taking [Mark], we're always taking [Emma] because we don't want her to feel like left behind or replaced by [Mark] or anything like that.

Lastly, Janet reported that her wedding band had the birthstones of her stepdaughter, her stepson, and her biological son from a previous marriage built into it. She stated that this was done to ensure that, "they all understand that they are equally important."

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that, like stepmothers, stepchildren also contributed to the construction of close stepmother-stepchild relationships by engaging in spontaneous and unprovoked behaviours that stepmothers perceived as indications of their significance to their stepchildren, as was discussed above. These behaviours included self-initiated physical or verbal displays of affection towards their stepmothers

such as hugs and kisses, as well as verbal affirmations such as telling their stepmothers, "I love you." For these women, these acts were both validating and reassuring. For example, Jane reported that hearing, "We love you" from her stepsons provided her with reassurance that she mattered when she was feeling like an "outsider" in the family. These displays of affection also included verbal affirmations from stepchildren such as Debbie's stepdaughter who would say, "Did you know that you make the best ginger snaps in the world? Because no one else can make them like you!" Stepmothers interpreted these unsolicited displays of affection and positivity from stepchildren as a sign that they mattered to their stepchildren and contributed to their feelings of closeness.

Stepmothers also reported that their stepchildren communicated their significance when they displayed care and concern for their feelings and attempted to lift their spirits when they were feeling down, or when they engaged in behaviours that demonstrated to their stepmothers that they valued them and their relationships. For example, Angela said:

> I guess I was in a sad mood anyway and [Emma] was in the backseat and I asked if she ever wished that her mom and dad were still married…And she stopped like— she said like, 'No I wouldn't have an awesome stepmom!

Rachel also stated:

> Um, and you know, even in the way like she gives presents and stuff. Like she actually puts thought into it, you know, to things that *I* would want or *I* would like, not just, 'I'm getting a gift for this lady' kind of thing.

Stepmothers also described efforts from their stepchildren to communicate their significance after a period of conflict in an effort to repair the relationship. For example, Julie said that her stepdaughter:

> She'll uhh, she'll be upset, she'll be stubborn but then all of a sudden, she just throws herself. Big hug. "I'm sorry" or you know, whatever. Or she'll show it in actions. She'll go out and do something. "Can I help you? Is there anything I can help you with?" That kind of thing. She'll come snuggle. Then I know she's trying to like make up, right?

These examples demonstrate the effortful contributions these stepchildren made to the construction and maintenance of their steprelationships by engaging in behaviours towards their stepmothers that can be understood as indications that they care for and value their stepmothers, as well as the relationships they share.

Finally, stepmothers reported that their stepchildren communicated their significance by seeking their stepmothers out for companionship or comfort and demonstrating a preference for time spent with their stepmothers above other parental figures or adults, which was discussed at length in the *perceived mattering* subtheme.

Creating opportunities for intimacy. The most commonly reported dyadic process stepmothers identified as contributing to the construction and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships involved the purposeful creation of opportunities for mutual meaning making or intimacy by both themselves and their stepchildren.

Stepmothers said they intentionally set aside time to spend one-on-one with their stepchildren to "connect" and get to know one another, as well as to build their relationships. They described doing this throughout their relationships with their stepchildren, including the initial stages of relationship formation. For example, Margaret said, "I was just working part-time then and I joined a couple mom groups to kind of bond with him and meet other parents that had children in the same age bracket." Margaret said that she did this at the beginning of her relationship with her stepson to allow for "one-on-one time with him and get to know each other and, like *ease into it* I guess." Sarah also reported that at the beginning of her relationship with her stepdaughter, she would pick her stepdaughter up from daycare early and take her to the park, out for ice cream, or to get their nails done. She said:

> And it was just, doing life together. We—I'd pick her up and we'd, you know, go to the grocery store and get stuff for supper, and we'd just be talking and, "What should we make for supper?" and "I wonder what we could do with this vegetable?" and, you know, like those things.

Julie also described how she would make time for just her and her stepdaughter in the beginning of their relationship, saying, "I'd still try and have a little bit of something, just her and I. Sometimes just the car rides back because, I would do a lot of that sometimes. So we'd sing or we'd you know, do whatever." Naomi referred to this one-on-one time with her stepson as "making memories" and shared that "those memories are going to sustain the relationship later on." For these stepmothers, one-on-one time was a way to build mutual understanding, share mutually enjoyable moments, and co-create meaning regarding their relationships with one another.

Whether it was a date to go out for ice cream or lunch, a shopping excursion, seeing a movie, or going to the park, these were activities that stepmothers intentionally planned so that they could spend time with their stepchildren, connect, and mutually participate in the creation of meaningful and close relationships with one another. Julie expressed the importance of making this time for "daughter-mummy" dates, even after eleven years in her blended family:

> Umm, because I feel that's important to have--because that's *how* you really get to know each other still, is by—kids aren't always going to open up when the other kids are around…So, when you give them that alone time, I think it makes them feel special, you know, going forward kind of thing. And that's something we're working on right now in this house, is trying to fit in some one-on-one in our busy schedules for each other.

Making this time to connect and mutually construct their steprelationships also did not necessarily involve special outings. As Angela said, "sometimes I just go and sit in her room, and the two of us just talk."

Additionally, stepmothers discussed the importance of creating intimate rituals and traditions with their stepchildren that they believed sustained their steprelationships and established a way of relating to one another that carried the relationship forward. For example, Rachel said:

> Oh yeah, I um—well all of the little traditions that I established along the way, I think help. Um, like we have certain traditions at Christmas that we do, and we have like, for her birthday, things that we do that it's just her and I, and I'm hoping that those continue on, you know, for years to come.

Stepmothers also described creating opportunities for connection and mutual meaning making as a way to repair their relationships after their relationships had hit a rough patch or they felt less close to their stepchildren. For example, Julie said when her relationship with her stepdaughter was not as close, "I'll ask her, 'Let's go for a date just you and me.' We'll go out and do something together or it might even be just to Timmy's but we'll go just us and uhh, just kind reconnect." Debbie also stated that she had worked on:

> …being in the moment and spending those quality times just me and her, and sending my son off to daycare. Even though I'm off in the summer, send him for a day to daycare so I can spend the day with [Audrey] and just reconnect with her and get to know her better and, just establish a bond.

Michelle expressed how therapeutic she believed this alone time with her stepdaughter to be for their relationship, saying:

> I think that's the same with any sort of relationship, um, whether it be a marriage or friendship. Sometimes if you haven't connected with someone for a long time, just getting together and sort of doing nothing can be really therapeutic.

Especially after periods of conflict or disconnect, sharing one-on-one time created opportunities for these stepmothers and stepchildren to "bond", "reconnect", or co-create new understandings of one another and their relationships that allowed them to move forward in a constructive way.

Stepmothers also described taking the time to get to know their stepchildren's interests so that they could connect with their stepchildren at their own level of understanding or interests and demonstrate to their stepchildren that they know them. For example, Debbie reported that she would secretly try to listen to singers that her stepdaughter liked or become acquainted with her other interests so that she could start a conversation with her stepdaughter over them. Debbie explained:

> So, let's say she likes Monster High a lot right now. So when she's not here, I'll try to catch up on my Monster High trivia [Laughing] so that I can start a conversation with her…And I'll watch a few movies, or—she's really into Minecraft, so I've tried my best to play a little bit just to understand what it is so I can have some sort of rapport with her.

Jane also described taking this approach, stating, "every time I see something bacon related [Laughs], I tell him." Similarly, Janet discussed making an effort to get to know her stepdaughter's interests and engaging in activities her stepdaughter enjoyed. She explained that she had become a "shopper" because her stepdaughter enjoyed shopping, and that she "had to learn to sit down and watch Disney movies" and other children's shows. Janet described this as "acclimating with girl" and said, "I was prepared to take the—to make the effort to become part of that." For these stepmothers, getting to know their stepchildren's interests and engaging with them in this way communicated to their stepchildren that they are known to them, and facilitated the creation of shared meaning and relational intimacy.

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that stepmothers perceived that stepchildren were also actively involved in the creation of intimate interactions with them. Not only were these stepchildren receptive to their stepmother's efforts to create

intimate interaction by engaging with them and coordinating their actions to reflect this mutual meaning making, but they also made efforts to seek out and create intimate interactions with their stepmothers. For example, Angela described how her stepdaughter initiated an intimate interaction with her when Angela was learning how to fold cloth napkins:

> And so I got on YouTube and I watched a video and [Emma] was there and she, was doing something with her like painting, and she decided to come sit by me and watch this video…And so we learned how to fold napkins together and like, we did all six of them together and it was just really fun and like a bonding experience…

Margaret also reported that her stepson contributes to their relationship by, "asking to do stuff with him like crafts or activities or, like wanting to spend time together." Similarly, Jane said that her stepson, "comes and talks to me or sometimes I'm just lying in bed watching something and he just jumps in bed with me to watch the same thing and just talk about nothing really." Stepmothers also perceived that stepchildren sought them out and initiated opportunities for shared pleasure or meaning about an interaction or activity.

Stepmothers also reported that their stepchildren approached them with comments or ideas they knew their stepmothers would be interested in, thus attempting to interact with mothers at *their* level. Jane said that she enjoyed the fact that her stepson would come to her with such a comment because, "he's thinking that I might find it interesting." Naomi also reported that her stepson did this, saying:

> …he jokes with me, he tells me stories about things that have happened to him that he knows that I would connect with and vice versa, and I—we share laughs often. We kind of roll our eyes together at the other kids. [Laughs].

Examples of intimacy seeking behaviours from stepchildren also included engaging their stepmothers in activities they knew their stepmothers enjoyed. For example, Jane stated:

> …he's kind of sensitive as to what I'm into. Like, I like cooking and sometimes he comes to me and says, "Oh, I want to help"…Surprising but yeah. Or I'm just doing my stuff and he says, "Let's make cookies."

Debbie described how her stepdaughter would draw on the knowledge and understanding she had developed about her stepmother in order to create opportunities for intimacy:

> She's really, very artistic, and I am too. And her birthday was in February, so me and my husband—but more me—I bought her an easel with uhh—with full paints and a whole bunch of canvasses and stuff like that. So—so she's *super,* super

> excited. And then, she's like, "[Debbie] come and bring yours beside me so you can teach me how to paint things"…So we were painting side by side, and you know, I showed her how to make trees and it was a--for me, it was what I had always dreamt of because my son, I can't even get him to colour with me.

Sarah also reported that her stepdaughter would draw upon their shared meaning of the relationship and the intimacy that had already been established to initiate further intimate interactions:

> So we'll drive to school or whatever, and she's like, "Mom! Can you put on Fireball?"… Like [Laughs] –like, "Sure, whatever." And, she'll be like doing her little thing in the backseat, and then, we'll be at a light, and, I'll turn around and-- I can get my voice quite low at times. And so, I'll be like, "Fireball" [Says in deep voice] and she's *just* hysterical. She's like waiting for the next time the song does that, right?

Stepmothers also reported that their stepchildren initiated intimate interactions in an effort to repair the steprelationship after a period of conflict or disconnect. Julie said that her stepdaughter, "just comes up—like I said, she's very cuddly, very affectionate and umm, she'll just say, 'Can we go do something together?'" Sarah described how her stepdaughter also did this, saying, "when she's feeling disconnected, she often says, 'Can we go for a mommy-daughter date? I'd really like to go have some time with you.'"

Through this dyadic process, both stepmothers and stepchildren expressed an awareness of the importance of one-on-one time and intimate interactions for creating close relationships with one another. In an attempt to build close relationships with one another, as well as repair their relationships after periods of conflict or disconnect, both stepmothers and stepchildren sought out and initiated intimate interactions with one another. As was illustrated in the above examples, this process is reciprocal and bidirectional, because it involves both stepmother and stepchild initiation, responsiveness, and coordination of action in order to achieve intimate interactions that carry the relationship forward.

Openness to, and investment in, the steprelationship. The third dyadic process stepmothers identified as contributing to the construction and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships was openness to, and investment in, the steprelationship by both stepmothers and stepchildren. This process involved stepmothers and stepchildren accepting one another into their lives, being accessible and open to one another, and engaging in open communication and problem solving to repair

damage to their relationships.

Stepmothers emphasized that it was important that both they and their stepchildren accept one another and be open to the creation of their steprelationships. Many stepmothers described approaching their steprelationships by demonstrating that they were available and receptive to their stepchildren and their needs. For example, Julie said, "I just let her know I was here. Like, 'I know I'm not your mom sweetie, but just so you know, I am here for you." She explained, "She's in the house and something happened, a cut finger, whatever, you need a drink? Obviously I'm here. You want a hug? You get one or I'll give you one back, or I'll give you one just because." Julie expressed that her goal was to make her stepchildren, including her stepdaughter, feel comfortable with her and communicate that, "I am just another adult in their life that is there for them." Angela also described being open to her stepdaughter and receptive to her needs, stating, "I just try to be her friend and listen to her and umm, give her good advice and just try to be a wise person in her life." Janet said that she communicated to her stepdaughter that her job was, "to provide you with the safe place to land, so that you know, no matter where you are in life, you always have this safety net." This communication of openness and availability to their stepchildren was also something stepmothers reported expressing throughout their steprelationships in order to earn the trust of their stepchildren and exhibit their dependability. For example, Debbie talked about telling her stepdaughter, "I'm always going to be there for you…You can call me anytime and uhh, doesn't matter how old you are, or where you are, or what you're doing." Michelle also said that she told her stepdaughter, "If you're somewhere and you need to call me, you just need to tell whoever you're with to call me. Like you know my phone number, just call." She said she did this to reassure her stepdaughter that, "I'm always going to be here." Similarly, Sarah described how she had earned the trust of her stepdaughter:

> Um, one thing I really enforced with [Ruth]—especially because her mom would no show on her, randomly—was—she always asked, "Are you sure you'll be there?" And, um, if you asked [Ruth] now, what's the one thing you can count on [Sarah] for, she's like, "She never breaks a promise. Ever."…So, she knows if I said I'll be there, she doesn't start like, "So, you'll be there, right? You'll be there? You'll pick me up?" And she did in the beginning. But, now she knows, "I said I'll be there, I'll be there."

Through these efforts, stepmothers demonstrated openness and availability to their stepchildren and their commitment to the steprelationships in an effort to earn the trust of their stepchildren.

Stepmothers also expressed the importance of their stepchildren being open to and accepting of them and their attempts to build the relationship. Many stepmothers reported that their stepchildren contributed to the creation of close steprelationships by accepting their stepmothers into their lives and not resisting these relationships or the new dynamics of the blended family. For example, Julie stated that her stepdaughter, "just tries to be a part of the family like everybody else. You know? She tries to have the same kind of attention. She'll—she just helps out a lot." Similarly, Irene said, "I think she contributes, by—by just accepting the way our family *works*…And not trying to, fight it, go against it." Throughout the interviews, many stepmothers expressed an appreciation for the easy-going nature of their stepchildren and their willingness to accept their stepmothers. Angela stated, "Like usually, she goes with the flow really well and I think that helps our family quite a bit too." Janet also said, "She's so calm and easy-going most of the time, and very um—for the most part, very cooperative." Rachel reported that her stepdaughter is, "a fun girl. She's um—she's very loving. Uh, she - I don't know. She's easy to be around, loves to talk, loves to chatter." Sandra also stated that, "it's just always good when we're together" and that, "the boys treat me well" and were "very respectful" towards her. Lastly, Naomi reported that her stepson contributed to their relationship because, "well he willingly lets me into his life. Right?" and that this was important to her.

In particular, stepmothers emphasized how important this acceptance from their stepchildren was during the initial stages of their steprelationships. Julie said, "She didn't despise me on the spot. She just—she liked me," and that her stepdaughter, "kind of went along with, whatever, anything." Michelle also expressed how helpful her stepdaughter's openness to her was at the start of their relationship, saying, "she was pretty comfortable with me right from the beginning, which was—which is nice." Michelle stated, "she just was engaged in whatever it was that we were doing." Naomi also described how her stepson was open to her from the start:

So, they had a really stable childhood and—and when I came around it—there

wasn't any baggage. So, [Noah] just kind of—he just kind of said, "Oh, here's another person in my life". And, you know, "Nice to meet you, and are you making Kraft Dinner for supper?" [Laughs]…You know? Like it's that kind of thing. And it's still that way. Like, he still comes in the house and says, "What are we—what are we eating," you know?

Naomi said that her stepchildren, "came right up to me like I was a strange and wonderful creature—kind of thing. And they were really very sweet. Like they were open hearts." Similarly, Candice said, "I remember the first time he fell asleep on me, you know? We—we had a lot of firsts like that, and he was very open to me too. *Very* open to me." When I asked Candice how this made her feel, she said, "Well it was reassuring!"

Beyond the acceptance, stepmothers also spoke at length about the importance of establishing open lines of communication with their stepchildren. Irene said that she tried, "to keep the lines of communication open" between her and her stepdaughter and Sarah stated that there was, "nothing off limits" for herself and her stepdaughter to talk about. Similarly, Michelle said:

I've always been really open with her about things as well, which I think also helps our relationship. So I don't try and sugar coat things -- um, if there's an issue like I try and explain it to her. Um, as best—obviously in terms that she's going to understand…But I think that that really helps because other people will just say, "I don't know," or "it doesn't matter," but I'll try and explain things to her which I think then makes things easier for her.

Open communication was also important for problem solving or repairing damage to their relationships. As Sarah stated, "if something comes up, it's easy to continue talking about the next thing because, we're always talking." Naomi also discussed how she and her stepson would communicate about issues in their relationship in order to "patch it up", and Candice shared that she and her stepson had had "many chats" where she would say, "Hey [Darren], I think you and I need to talk, you know, I don't feel good about where we're at." She said that her stepson enjoyed "talking things over" and that they were able to resolve any issues that arose in this way. Sarah reported that she and her stepdaughter would, "actually sit down at the kitchen table" with a piece of paper and write notes about, "what I understand from what we're talking about." Sarah gave this example:

But she sat down with me last night. Um, she had her sports last night, so she had

> dinner in the city with [Michael] and then came home with this list that [Michael] had talked to her about. So, she had five things she needed to work on in the relationship, and five things she'd like *me* to work on to improve the relationship…So, it's interesting 'cause she's like, "I really want you to spend more time reading with me, and, you know, I would like you to pick out my clothes so we don't have to argue about clothes in the morning."…You know? It's like, those are things I can do, for sure!

Open communication between stepmothers and stepchildren, and their willingness to discuss and work through issues contributed to the construction and maintenance of their close steprelationships. Through this process, both stepmothers and stepchildren expressed their mutual investment in the relationship, which would not have been possible had they not been willing to accept one another and allow entry into their hearts and minds.

Following the stepchild's lead. The fourth and final relational process stepmothers identified that supported the development of close relationships with their stepchildren has been termed "following the stepchild's lead." This theme indicated that stepmothers recognized their children's agency in determining the pace of development and nature of their steprelationships, and their own need to follow their stepchildren's lead by attending and responding to their stepchildren's cues. This theme not only reiterates that the development of relationships is a bidirectional and mutual process, but also that it is beyond the power of the stepparent to create a relationship in a unilateral way.

Most stepmothers expressed strong beliefs that their stepchildren should be the ones to dictate the nature of their relationships, the stepparents' role, as well as how close they could become. Many of these stepmothers discussed the importance of not pushing themselves or their expectations for the steprelationship on their children. For example, Julie described how she did not want her stepdaughter to feel "pushed into anything". Sandra expressed a similar view, saying that, "I never ever want to push myself on them." Irene also stated:

> I wanted it to be done at her pace. Everything was to be done—I – I didn't want to push her into anything, and, I mean she already had enough stresses you know, being part of a blended family and I wasn't going to push my expectations on her.

Irene explained her reasoning for this:

I think when you start pushing values and beliefs, and the way that you want things, I think that's where things can get messy…Because they might not be ready for something you're pushing for, and then if they push back, there's going to be a lot of friction there…And I think you're going to go back more than you are going to go – move forward.

Thus, rather than trying to dictate the direction and nature of their steprelationships, stepmothers described stepping back, letting their stepchildren set the tone for their relationships, and following their lead. Janet said, "for me with [Emary], it was always, 'Let [Emary] drive this train.'" Similarly, Irene said, "I let *her* decide what I—what I was and the role that I was going to take. And I kind of followed that role." Irene went on to say, "She was going to let me know how close she wanted me to be, or, how not close she wanted me to be." For some of these women, this was an approach that they developed over time after experiencing disappointment or frustration when their efforts to establish close relationships with their stepchildren were not reciprocated in the ways they had hoped. This was the case for Margaret, who wished for an authentic mother-child relationship with her stepson, but felt as though she had pushed too hard to make this a reality. She said, "I feel like probably in hindsight, I probably came out the gates too strong. Like, *trying* to be a mom and like, *wanting* to, just like fill that role and—and *create* like a little family." Coming to this realization, Margaret stated, "I just kind of took a step back and—and just kind of let things happen instead of like trying to make them happen." She explained:

So I think it's changed just in that like now, instead of me trying to assert what's going to happen on any—in any given situation, I kind of just let him take the lead…Like I let, you know, I —umm—like I sort of let him, decide how close we're gonna be or how—like I let him set that—that boundary I guess… And I kind of take cues from him. Like, rather than try to like give him kisses or hugs, because he's certainly not so into that--I just kind of like, I – you know, I let him take that lead and I let him establish how close he wants to be.

She went on to say:

Like, I guess at the end of the day you just have to, um, really figure out who the child is, and I think you do—you do have to have this like negotiation back and forth between like, being a parent but letting them sort of lead how much or little they want you to influence their upbringing too.

For many of these stepmothers, taking a step back and following the lead of their stepchildren helped improve the steprelationship. As Sandra stated, "When I stepped

back, our relationship got better because they came and sought me out instead of me going to them…It was huge. It was like night and day."

One of the ways in which stepmothers described following their stepchildren's lead was by allowing their stepchildren to decide for themselves what they would call their stepmothers; whether that meant calling them "mom", "stepmom", or simply referring to them by their first names. For example, although Sarah reported that her stepdaughter called her "mom", she said that she had always communicated to her, "You can call me whatever you feel comfortable with, as long as it's kind." Similarly, Margaret said, "there was never any like, 'You need to call me this.'…It was just, 'Whatever you're comfortable with.'" Debbie reported that her stepdaughter calls her "[Debbie]" and that she never tried to get her stepdaughter to call her "mom" because, "I don't feel like that's my place completely." These stepmothers allowed their stepchildren to determine their title, and accepted these choices.

Many of the stepmothers also emphasized the importance of not pushing their role as a parent or a mother on their stepchildren, and being careful not to threaten the primacy of their stepchild's biological mother. Angela reported that she was "not the type to overstep and try to be her mom." She stated that she had told her stepdaughter, "I'm never going to fill those shoes because I'll never be able to. She has a mom." Julie also took a similar approach and explained, "I just didn't want her to feel like I was trying to take over." These stepmothers reported stepping back and letting their stepchildren determine the role that they would take. For example, Irene said that, "I didn't really call myself a stepmom until she labeled me a stepmom."

In order to follow the lead of their stepchildren, it was apparent that these stepmothers closely monitored their stepchildren's behaviour and responses towards them, and used this information to inform their own behaviour within their steprelationships. Janet said, "I watch her, because—rather than always being hovering around her and over her. Um, she has to decide when she wants me to some degree." Margaret also stated:

> I think this is something that, you know, I struggle with even with my daughter. Like, there's certainly—there's times when you—you don't have the right approach…And you kind of learn through doing and through their negative reaction that, "Oh, that really wasn't the best way to handle that."

An example of a behaviour stepmothers reported learning to avoid based upon the reactions of their stepchildren was negativity towards or criticism of their stepchildren. As Julie stated:

> Umm, and she even said one time, like to my—my other daughter like, "I feel like [Julie] is targeting me. I feel like she—I'm getting in trouble". So, I actually took a long, hard look at that and yeah, she was kind of right. When I had to admit to myself, "You know what? Looking back. Yeah, you know what? I wasn't being nice to her, or that was a little too sharp, or I shouldn't take my bad mood on whatever." Umm, so over the years I would say – especially the last few years – I've managed to—or I think I've managed to overcome most of that and try to like, just bite my lip.

Naomi also described being careful not to disapprove of her stepson, saying, "I just have to let it go and just say, 'This is not my place to be disapproving of—of him, because it is damaging to our relationship'…'and our closeness.'" She said that, "it's not my place to change him, because working to change him only makes us, father away—and puts that relationship in jeopardy."

This effort to follow their stepchildren's lead became increasingly important with age, as these stepmothers described their stepchildren becoming more independent and less interested in time with them, as well as more resistant to their discipline as they emerged into middle childhood and adolescence. In response to their stepchildren's negative reactions and resistance to discipline from them, these stepmothers reported downplaying their authority in order to protect the health of the relationship. For example, Margaret expressed that a "disconnect" between herself and her stepson was created when she would discipline him. She said, "Like when—when the discipline or the punishment or the consequence is coming from me, I feel that it's not greeted as kindly as it would be coming from his actual mom or from his father." Margaret went on to say:

> And so it was especially different being a stepmom I think trying to do it because, there's already that *step* in the way, if you want to look at it that way. So I felt like it was easy for there to be resentment or resilience to um, me trying to, uh, assert like authority in situations or discipline or, um—because, it wasn't being done by someone else so I was doing it and then I think that created like, a disconnect between us. I think it did then and I think it does now.

As a result, Margaret stepped back and let her husband do the disciplining and outline expectations. This was a common approach many of these stepmothers employed,

especially as their stepchildren aged into adolescence and displayed more resistance to their authority. For example, Naomi said that she and her 12-year-old stepson, "have come into a new phase here, um, where [Noah] is older now and umm, less interested in kind of being bossed around by stepmum." Naomi reported that although she disciplined her stepson in the past:

> …that kind of negative getting after him kind of stuff has been really hard on our relationship. So I've—I've pretty much stopped that, or it's not that I've stopped it umm, but we're finding other ways to get [Noah] to do things around here, umm, that will, prevent me from having to ask him to do it.

Naomi noted that:

> I'm still an adult figure, and I'm still, umm, you know, someone he would come to for advice or [Laughs] wisdom or something, but—but—and I'm still someone as well that says, "Here are your clothes to put away," or "Would you mind putting your boots in the closet where they go?"…But for—but for the most part I am—I'm taking a backseat on—on the parenting with him, and I'm being more of a – kind of just another adult that lives in this house [Laughs].

Relational Evolution Over Time

While engaging in reflection upon the history of their steprelationships, every stepmother discussed how difficult their journey had been. Many of the stepmothers reported that being a stepmother "is a really hard road" and expressed that it was harder than they had ever anticipated. For example, Julie said, "It was definitely a lot harder than I thought it would be, to be a stepmom." Michelle also expressed how difficult it was to be a stepmother, saying, "It's the hardest ride you'll ever be on. It's not easy." Similarly, Naomi said, "I knew it would be hard. I had *n*o idea it would be this difficult." Many women discussed feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, sad, and alone at times, and described the multitude of challenges that accompany the role of a stepmother, including financial and legal stresses, conflict with the biological mother, loyalty issues, public scrutiny and stigma, and constant sacrifice and compromise. As Candice stated, "you *always* live in a compromise in a stepfamily. Nobody gets what they want—ever." Several of the stepmothers also disclosed that they may have gotten a divorce or backed out of their blended families had they truly known the realities of being a stepmother. For example, Angela told me, "I know I would have backed out if I had really known…If I had really known everything that I would experience and how sad it would make me…It really made me a sad person for long time." One of these stepmothers even

told me, "Run while you still can!" As is evident from these descriptions, becoming a stepmother is a very challenging role to take on, and should not be taken lightly. Naomi told me, "Of all the roles that I take on in my life, a teacher, a daughter, a partner, a mother, myself…my role as a stepmother is both the *most* challenging and the *least* rewarding."

In analyzing stepmothers' responses, it became evident that these stepmothers not only considered how their relationships had developed and transformed over time, but they also reflected upon the future of their steprelationships. This section will begin with a discussion of two themes that captured the ways in which these stepmothers understood the changes that had occurred in their relationships over time: *relational history and closeness developed over time,* and *steprelationships became less close over time*. It will conclude with a discussion of two themes that captured these stepmothers' ideas about the future of their steprelationships: *hopefulness for continued or increased closeness and significance,* and *uncertainty and worry about the future of the steprelationship*. An overview of these findings can be found in Table 4 below.

Table 4. *Overview of Relational Evolution Over Time*

Themes
Views on the Evolution of the Steprelationship Over Time
Relational history and closeness developed over time
Steprelationships become less close over time
Ideas about the Future of the Steprelationship
Hopefulness for continued or increased closeness and significance
Uncertainty and worry about the future of the steprelationship

Relational history and closeness developed over time. Most of the stepmothers in this study felt that their relationships with their stepchildren had grown closer over time and continued to progress as time went on. For example, Rachel reported that her relationship with her stepdaughter had "grown" and "matured", and that, "It's changed quite a bit. It's actually way closer *now* than it was back then." Julie also reported that she and her stepdaughter were "getting closer as time goes on." Many of these stepmothers also expressed feeling that their steprelationships became "more natural" over time. Janet said, "There's a more natural feel, without a doubt." Stepmothers reported that the awkwardness and uncertainty that once existed in their steprelationships also dissipated over time. Irene noted, "It's not as awkward. It's more of umm, a natural

relationship." She explained, "You know, you don't have to say it but you know how you have like that, unsaid kind of tension going on in the room?...There is not really any of that anymore." She went on to say that her relationship with her stepdaughter, "goes smoothly. Like smooth conversation and happiness…It's not like a bad blind date or anything."

Stepmothers also reported that it had taken time to feel like a family or like they had achieved authentic parent-child bonds with their stepchildren. Debbie stated:

> And I—she feels like she's definitely uhh, a part of my family. Whereas in the beginning, it was kind of, you know—I had to—I had to get used to my new role and a new member in my family, and now it's hard to imagine if it wasn't like that.

Julie described how her blended family felt like "family" now more than ever. Angela echoed this sentiment, saying, "we've never felt more like family than we do now." For these stepmothers, there was also recognition that achieving authentic parent-child relationships with their stepchildren took time. For example, Julie stated, "For her, me, it took time to grow as a—as a, relationship with mother-daughter type thing." This was not just in terms of the steprelationship, but also how stepmothers described feeling inside. Sarah reported that she "became the mom somewhere in this process" and that it happened over time. Though she could not pinpoint when exactly it happened, she said, "Like, somehow it transitioned from that special friend you go for sleepovers with, to, you know, I felt like her mom." This evolution of the steprelationship into a mother-child relationship was discussed by many of the stepmothers I spoke to. Debbie said, "You know, your biological child will grow in your—in your belly or in your uterus or whatever, but your stepchild grows in your heart."

In discussing the reasons for this increase in closeness over time and the "more natural" feel of their steprelationships, it was evident that the ambiguity that once existed in these steprelationships had faded, as stepmothers reported that they and their stepchildren had developed an understanding of one another from a history of accumulated interactions that guided their present interactions and responses to one another, which is consistent with Hinde's (1979) theory of relationships. As Jane said, "I think it's just being natural. Like, there is no novelty here, we've been together a long time." Janet also explained that her relationship with her stepdaughter had gotten closer because, "I think just because we know each other better." She went on to say, "You

know, it's more relaxed, it's more—I'm—I don't have to explain my humour as much." Sarah also described the influence that time and repeated interactions had had on her relationship with her stepdaughter, "because you build a bond that—we can have a one direction each conversation, and we've been together enough to know that—have had enough interaction historically for that to be, you know, enough." She also said, "we're starting to read each other a lot better, and it's a two-way street now, versus me knowing what's going on with her and not knowing how to deal with it. [Laughs]." Lastly, Julie noted:

> So, I just think, we –we're just close in the sense that we umm, we have a mutual respect for each other. I know who she is, she knows who I am. I know I'm important to her, she knows she's important to me. The love is mutual. Umm, I just feel that each time and as the years go by, we just get a little bit closer.

This understanding and comfort in their steprelationships differed greatly from their descriptions of the initial stages of the formation of the relationship. For example, Candice stated that in the beginning of her relationship with her stepdaughter, "there was [sic] all these little things I didn't know about her." Jane also explained that she was very scared in the beginning of her relationship with her stepson due to, "not knowing what to do, how to deal with him." Irene reported that this relational ambiguity also existed for her stepdaughter, saying, "she was a little bit withdrawn and shy, and, she wouldn't communicate with me, she would only, talk to her dad [Laughs]…So I was kind of like, non-existent." Janet also expressed that the absence of a relational history with her stepdaughter created barriers for closeness in the beginning of her steprelationship. She said, "Um, I think that's the biggest thing. It's just not having that—that history," and went on to say:

> And so, it's kinda like, watching a movie sometimes, but, you can only see a tenth of the screen, because there's no—like, often times I don't have context for things. Everything she does is brand new, which is true on every child, but, when you start with a baby or a little person and watch them grow up into a teenager, there's—there's context…And, I don't have that context. So, it makes it—I don't innately know what that little smirk is all about or, um, what that eye-roll means, or—like even if she's sick or something, I don't innately know just by lookin' at her that somethin's off. It's something—I have to deal with, an almost sixteen-year-old that I've only had, you know, since twelve, to put all those puzzle pieces in their right place.

However, Janet reported that, "as every month and year goes by, that history is built."

Naomi also expressed the importance of this history with her stepson, stating, "I think having the—that—the advantage of history…Umm, it does a lot to deepen my relationship with him."

Steprelationships became less close over time. Although the majority of the stepmothers in this study felt that their steprelationships had become closer over time, three described feeling less close to their stepchildren than they had before. Two of these three steprelationships were stepmother-stepson relationships. They explained their stepchildren had grown older and more independent, and therefore relied less on their stepmothers to meet their needs, as well as showed greater interest in spending time alone or with friends, as opposed to with their stepmothers. For example, Naomi stated that her relationship with her 12-year-old stepson had changed over time:

> Uhh, it's just—it's changed in the sense that he's growing up, and he is pulling away from his parents in general…Umm, and he pulled away from me first. Like I was the [Laughing] – I was the first to go. The first one he stopped kissing goodnight. Umm, you know, I was the first one that umm, he started to be more of a big boy with…Umm, and so, it has changed in that—in that way. Just, he used to be a little boy and now he's a big boy.

Margaret also echoed these sentiments, stating that her relationship with her 8-year-old stepson had also changed over time:

> Um, I think it's just changed over time but, in a way that, uh—as kids get older they don't need you in the same way…So, I think that some of the—the way that our closeness has changed is just the natural, um, like, independence that kids, um, they get and, you know, they don't come to you as often and, I think your role does change and it is always being re-negotiated based on their current needs.

Margaret went on to say, "And as they get older those needs change. They don't need you in the same way, and it—it maybe affects your closeness, I guess." Michelle also discussed feeling less needed by her 8-year-old stepdaughter. She stated:

> I mean, I think as we grow older and develop, we want to be more independent. So I think for her, she has the independence now so she doesn't need me for as much anymore. So that closeness – I might have felt more close because I needed to get her her drinks or I needed to get her her snacks or I needed to get her her breakfast. Whereas she can do all of those things now on her own, so I feel a little bit less—less needed.

Although these stepmothers still expressed having a close or positive relationships with their stepchildren, they described feeling less close than they once

were due to the growing independence of their stepchildren and feeling less needed or desired.

Hopefulness for continued or increased closeness and significance. When asked about the future of their steprelationships, the stepmothers I spoke to expressed hopefulness, excitement, and optimism for the future of their relationships with their stepchildren. They expressed hope that they would continue to have close relationships with their stepchildren in the future, that their stepchildren would continue to keep in touch and visit, and that they would be seen as significant parental figures to their stepchildren and grandparents to their stepchildren's children one day. For some, this meant having their stepchildren visit and introduce them to their significant others, being a part of their wedding day or college graduation, and being the person their stepchildren would turn to if they were in need of advice or someone to talk to. Interestingly, the most confident stepmothers were residential stepmothers, or those for whom the biological mother was not involved or inconsistently involved.

Many of the stepmothers expressed a hope that they would remain or become significant parental figures in the lives of their stepchildren. For example, Rachel stated:

> Um, my hope is that I am just that—one of those integral people in her life…That I'm always in her life. Like even when I get old or, you know—that I am—that I am the um, the other *mother*. [Laughs].

Debbie expressed similar sentiments, saying, "I hope it will be like, you know, like a mom." Sarah also expressed hope that she would remain a priority and a parent in her stepdaughter's life. She stated:

> I—the biggest thing is, I hope that we stay connected in the way that we are…That it doesn't change significantly. That the loyalty binds aren't so crazy that, you know—I don't expect her to be an adult and needing to talk to me every day or anything…But, [Pause] that I stay as much of a priority as a parent in her life, as anybody else.

Janet looked forward to the future of her relationship with her 15-year-old stepdaughter. She said:

> So, I look forward to um, the phone calls home, um, from university or whatever, or those kinds of things. 'Cause I'm—I'm quite confident that we're going to have a really close relationship and she'll call—she'll call me just as much as she'll call her dad. And, she's gonna make me a grandma someday, and that's going to be awesome, and, you know, all that kind of good stuff.

This hope for a continuing parental role also included being someone that their stepchildren would come to lean on when in need help or advice. Debbie said:

> I hope that it will be like me and my mom. That she'll call me up once in a while and—she'll come and—and bring the kids over, or she'll—she'll call me if she needs advice, or if she needs some cash [Laughs].

She went on to say, "So, that's my hope, that, that's what it's going to be. That—you know, that she'll be calling me up with her boy troubles and all that. [Laughs]." Jane described having similar hopes for the future of her relationship with her teenage stepson, stating that she hoped that, "if he needs to talk to somebody about something—particularly things that I would know about, that he would tell me, or, I don't know, text me. [Laughs]." Margaret also expressed hoping for open communication and spoke about having the same hopes for her stepson as she does for her biological daughter, stating that she wanted "to be there to offer support and guidance" and that she hoped, "that they're willing and able to come to us with any problems or concerns and um—and just, you know, not be afraid to come to us."

Stepmothers also expressed hope that when their stepchildren entered adulthood, they would still be significant people in their lives and that they would still see them and share in traditions, significant life events, and time together as a family. For example, Jane reported hoping that her stepson, "comes, you know, for dinner. That he introduces us to his girlfriend. That we're there for the wedding and there's grandchildren and all of that." Similarly, Sarah said:

> It would be, you know, where she comes to visit me—well me and her dad…You know, when she's grown and gone, she comes and visits us and has dinner. When she's married and has kids, you know, she brings the kids by. There's Christmasses. Like all that –all that stuff like a regular family.

Sandra also expressed hope for family bonding and traditions in the future. She stated:

> So, as parents, I think you hope that they will want to be with you and—you know? Yeah. Yeah. So doing the traditions, the sleigh rides, the going to a movie, all the little things. We're in the same city so I hope it's like impromptu things that happen and I hope that they like bringing their girlfriends, whatever around.

Several stepmothers also spoke about further into the future and when their stepchildren would get married or have children of their own, and hoped that they would be just as much a part of that as the biological parents. For example, Debbie said, "I hope

that—that I'll be as much as a grandma to her kids as—as her dad and mom. I think I will be." Again, Janet was very confident, stating:

> We're gonna get her graduated, we're gonna get her married, and—and all those good things, and—and I'm gonna be the one that's gonna be—that's—I don't know. I get to be that—that mom. I get to be the mother of the bride, which I never thought I'd see, because I had a boy! [Laughs]

Finally, some stepmothers expressed a hope that one day their stepchildren would value all they had done for them and come to appreciate them. For example, Naomi said:

> Umm, I hope that he would, at some point, value me the way I value my stepmom…Which is to say, I appreciate that she is a loving partner to my dad…And I appreciate her perspective. And I ask for her advice…And I respect and like her as a person…You know, that's pretty much it. That's like awesome. If we could [Laughs]—if we could get there, you know, I think that would be great.

Naomi went on to say:

> He doesn't even need to love me really. I just [Laughs]— if he could like me [Laughing] sometime in the future or, even admit slightly that I might have been good for him… [Laughs]. Then I would be satisfied with that.

Similarly, Margaret expressed hope that one day her stepson would understand why she did all she has done and hoped that he would come to appreciate her. She said:

> I also guess I hope that um, that one—one day he will realize *why* I did everything the way I did it…And, maybe have a better understanding of where I was coming from. [Pause] Because sometimes I think that he doesn't understand why I do things.

Finally, Angela expressed optimistic dreams for the future of her relationship with her stepdaughter. She stated, "I just picture us being friends and really close and I feel like if I'm a good stepmother—she'll still call me the best stepmother in the world, whenever she's twenty, then I'll feel like a success."

Uncertainty and worry about the future of the steprelationship. Although stepmothers expressed hope and optimism for the future of their relationships with their stepchildren, their stories and descriptions also revealed an underlying worry and considerable uncertainty about the future of their steprelationships, and whether or not they would remain close or even continue to have relationships with their stepchildren in the years to come. For example, in thinking about the future, Jane said, "I still worry about, what is he going to be in the future? Is he going to disappear from our lives? Or

are we going to be close?"

Some stepmothers expressed worry that their stepchildren would disappear from their lives altogether in the future as they entered adulthood. There was worry that as their stepchildren grew older and entered teenage years or even adulthood that the relationship would change. As Debbie stated, "You know, she's a teenager, we'll give her a little bit more—more [Sighs] leeway, I guess. So that makes me nervous. That, that relationship won't be the same." Julie also expressed these concerns in her interview, stating:

> Sometimes I worry that, she'll just—when she hits 18, she'll just take off and I won't hear from her like the other one. And then other times, I'm like, "No, she'll be around". Like, "She'll still come to us for advice and this and that" because she does now…But it's just a worry that you're—you know, one of them is going to like, "Ahh, see ya!". [Laughs]."I'm an adult. I don't need you in my life".

For non-residential stepmothers, there was also fear that eventually their stepchildren would not want to come visit or spend time with them. As Debbie stated, "I'm nervous about her being far away and since she goes to school, her friends being over there, I'm nervous that eventually she'll not want to come here----because she won't want to leave her friends."

Some residential stepmothers also worried about their stepchildren eventually moving out of their home and moving in with their biological mother, and worried about the impact that this might have on their steprelationships. Margaret stated, "I mean obviously when he reaches a certain age he will be able to decide who he wants to live with…And, hoping that, um, obviously he chooses to stay with us." Sarah also said:

> I'm not specifically worried about not being primary in her life, but that the other factors around her will force her to squish me out…I mean, if it happens naturally where she goes to University or whatever and she's busy with her stuff, that's what you raise them to do…Right? But, [Sighs] –that, if she moves away at 12 or 13—that that's just going to all die, because between teenage angst and, mother influence, then, you never know how that's gonna play out.

> Several stepmothers also expressed concern for the future of their

steprelationships due to the possibility of their marriages dissolving and losing their stepchildren in that way. Julie stated, "What if something happens and she's close and then she's ripped away…Umm, there was always that fear for me too, is that, 'what if we don't last?" Debbie also expressed similar feelings and concern about the consequences

of losing her stepdaughter if her and her husband were ever to get a divorce. She stated:

> Like, it would be—it would be odd for her if I wasn't there at all, you know?
> Even if it was just to see her once or twice in a year…But, that would be
> *horrifying*. Like, not only because I don't want to divorce my husband [Laughs],
> but it would be—it would be terrible…I can't imagine. Because, you know, it's—
> it's like I said, they grow to be your child in your heart.

Finally, stepmothers also expressed a concern that they would no longer be important figures in the lives of their stepchildren due to the existing importance of other competing figures. Although Sarah expressed hope that she would remain "as much of a priority as a parent in her life, as anybody else," she stated, "It's not a guarantee." Sarah went on to say:

> But, in general with a parent, unless you have a major falling out, you're gonna be
> really connected to them their whole life….And, with blended families, I think,
> you don't have to have that falling out. There's just too many people to, um, be
> involved with, right?

Discussion

The findings in this study made several contributions to the literature on blended families and stepmother-stepchild relationships. These include the ways in which stepmothers understand and experience "closeness" in their relationships with stepchildren, the bidirectional relational processes involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships, and how these relationships develop over time. By focusing on the agency and actions of stepmothers and stepchildren, this study also provides insight into the strengths rather than the deficits of stepmother-stepchild relationships.

Previous research (e.g., Ganong et al., 1999; Speer & Trees, 2007) has explored how stepmothers and stepchildren contribute to the development of close relationships with one another. What is missing in the literature is an understanding of what being "close" to their stepchildren means to stepmothers. This study employed a unique approach by allowing stepmothers to define for themselves what "close" relationships with their stepchildren entail and mean to them. Although stepmothers acknowledged the fluidity of their relationships and that closeness was not always felt, the findings demonstrate that there are multiple ways in which stepmothers understand and experience close relationships with their stepchildren. These stepmothers understood

their steprelationships as close when they approached or match social constructions of a "natural" or "authentic" biological mother-child relationship, perceived that they mattered to their stepchildren, earned the trust and confidence of their stepchildren, and engaged in the mutual construction of relational intimacy. Several of the themes reflect ideas that have been previously found in the literature on biological parent-child relationships. Thus, Marshall and Lambert (2006) described how parents gained significance in interactions where they felt that they mattered. The themes of trust and stepchild confidence in approaching the stepmother when in need is reminiscent of the idea of attachment security (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1969). The theme of intimacy has been identified as an important but neglected domain of parent-child relationships (Harach & Kuczynski, 2005; Oliphant & Kuczynski, 2011) and corresponded to Weingarten's (1991) conception of intimacy as co-construction of meaning. The prevalence of these themes point to core aspects of steprelationships that are similar to biological parent-child relationships and which could be usefully studied in steprelationships. What will be emphasized in this discussion is the theme of feeling like an authentic parent as a condition of a sense of closeness in stepmother-stepchild relationships. The idea that stepmothers value moments when they feel like or are treated like a "real" parent does not appear in the literature on biological parent-child relationships. Perhaps because it is a status and identity that is taken for granted by biological mothers but must be an effortful goal and aspiration for stepmothers.

A novel finding in the current study was that stepmothers not only adopted a mother role with their stepchildren, but also emphasized the importance of achieving an authentic parental love and connection with their stepchildren for feeling close. Their stories also expressed active resistance to dominating discourses that suggest that stepmothers are not "real" or "true" parents to their stepchildren, and described their stepchildren as *their* children, and themselves as *mothers* to them and not merely *step*mothers. Although the literature has reflected upon the variety of roles stepmothers may adopt, such as the parental role, the friend role, a combination of the two, or the role of a distance acquaintance (e.g., Coleman et al., 2001; Crohn, 2006), there has been an absence of studies that seek to understand the importance of these roles to stepmothers. Many existing studies make reference to the "myth of instant love" where stepmothers

are expected to love their stepchildren immediately and successfully adopt the mothering role (Visher & Visher, 1978) and document the discomfort, frustration, and strain in the steprelationship that results from the failure to emulate nuclear mother-child relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Visher & Visher, 1985). However, the idea that stepmothers can and do achieve authentic mother-child relationships with their stepchildren, and the importance of this for their perceptions of closeness has not been adequately represented. Throughout the literature, a true parental stepmother-stepchild relationship is depicted as the exception to the rule. For example, of the 19 stepdaughters Crohn (2006) interviewed about their perceptions of their stepmother-stepchild relationships, only one participant described her relationship with her stepmother as, "Like Another Mother", with the majority of the participants describing their relationships as, "An Older Friend" or "A Type of Kin". In addition, Ahrons (1994) reported that only a third of stepchildren view their stepmothers as parental figures, and Fine et al.'s (1999) study of the stepparent role revealed that stepchildren found the role of a friend to be most appropriate and ideal for their stepparents. Other scholars have also found that stepmothers often avoid adopting an authentic parental role with their stepchildren, and instead prefer the role of a friend or a secondary mother figure (e.g., Orchard & Solberg, 1999; Perez & Jaramillo Torrens, 2009; Visher & Visher, 1978). Authors have also suggested that the mother role is generally only adopted by stepmothers and successful when the biological mother has died, or is not involved or minimally involved with the child (e.g., Crohn, 2006; Draughon, 1975), and Coleman et al. (2001) reported that stepparents' adoption of the role as friend produced the most positive steprelationships.

In contrast, stepmothers in this study reported feeling closest to their stepchildren when their relationships approached or emulated authentic mother-child relationships. This mother role was adopted by both residential and non-residential stepmothers even though strong, close, and positive biological mother-child relationships also existed, and they described not only feeling like "mothers" to their stepchildren, but also reported receiving acknowledgment and validation from their stepchildren that these feelings were reciprocated. An authentic parental relationship was often described by stepmothers as a tenuous and fragile idea; nevertheless, it contradicts the clinical literature and

general advice stepmothers receive that cautions them against adopting a parental role with their children.

Although stepmothers in this study did not expect to replace the biological mother, being mothers to their stepchildren was the preferred role. In addition, they expressed barriers to closeness and distress when their identities as "real" mothers were questioned, threatened, or undermined by other individuals such as their stepchildren, family members, or other parents or individuals, or when they were unable to fully perform a mothering role. Stepmothers who adopted the role of a "friend" did so only after they could not, for various reasons, achieve mother-child relationships with their stepchildren. Thus, the findings of this study suggest that stepmothers aspire to and may achieve "parental" relationships with their stepchildren, but recognize the considerable barriers to this particular view of what it is to be a stepmother.

The findings of this study also contribute significantly to the literature by highlighting the relational processes involved in the creation and maintenance of close stepmother-stepchild relationships. Stepmothers identified the reciprocal and bidirectional processes of communicating mattering, creating opportunities for intimacy, openness to and investment in the steprelationship, and following the stepchild's lead as being central in their steprelationships. These processes detailed the effortful initiations and reciprocations of both stepmothers and stepchildren that contributed to the construction, maintenance, and repair of their steprelationships. For example, consistent with Weingarten's (1991) theory of intimacy, stepmothers in this study identified feeling close to their stepchildren during intimate interactions when they engaged in shared meaning making or co-created meaning about an interaction or their relationships, and were able to coordinate their actions to reflect their mutual meaning making and understanding of one another. These intimate interactions included instances of mutual enjoyment and pleasure, as well as intimate rituals that they had established and would repeat. This co-construction of meaning created a way of moving forward in their interactions or in the relationships that suited them both. Stepmothers perceived the creation of intimate interactions as the foundation for their emerging relationships. Both stepmothers and stepchildren were involved in the active construction of their relationships through initiation and participation in the creation of intimacy with one

another, and stepmothers described the efforts they and their stepchildren made for creating opportunities for connection and intimacy as a way to repair their relationship with one another. These efforts include initiating conversations about the other's interests and communicating on an equal level, sharing interests and pleasurable activities, and being silly with one another. Especially after periods of conflict or disconnect, seeking out and sharing one-on-one time and mutually pleasurable activities created opportunities for stepmothers and stepchildren to "bond", "reconnect", or co-create new understandings of one another and their relationships that allowed them to move forward in a constructive way. Creating such moments required a willingness on the parts of stepmothers and stepchildren to be engaged with one another and receptive to receiving input and influence from one another in order to create and share meaning about an experience, idea, or their relationship. This process has also been identified in parent-child relationships. For example, Harach and Kuczynski (2005) found themes of maintaining intimacy and companionship in parents' reports of the behaviours that strengthen their relationships with 4 to 7-year old children, where parents described engaging in intimate interactions with their children such as sharing related interests, displaying affectionate behaviours, having fun together, communicating on an equal level, and making space for one-on-time. Similarly, Oliphant and Kuczynski (2011) found that parents purposefully planned one-on-one time with their children in order to co-create distinct patterns of interaction and intimate moments, and that children actively participated in the creation of close relationships by initiating intimate moments and responding receptively to parents' attempts to do the same. Connection-seeking strategies on the part of both the stepparent and stepchild have also been identified in the blended family literature as contributing to steprelationship formation and satisfaction (Ganong et al., 1999; Speer & Trees, 2007). Through these themes, it was evident that stepmothers perceived that it takes two to build close steprelationships, emphasizing the bidirectional influence stepmothers and stepchildren had on one another, which is consistent with Social Relational Theory, where both parents and children are viewed as equal agents who mutually influence their relationships in a bidirectional manner (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2014; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006).

Literature concerning the long-term functioning of stepfamilies is scarce (Michaels, 2005), as most research on blended families is cross-sectional in design, examining blended families at one point in time, and often focuses on the first two to four years of blended family formation (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 1998; 2001). The present study addresses a gap in the literature concerning the changes that occur in blended families and steprelationships over time. This study offers a significant contribution to the literature by focusing on blended families who have been together for several years – 7.5 years on average – and who have had a chance to stabilize and establish well-functioning relationships.

Consistent with Hinde's (1979) theory of relationships and the transactional model of parent-child relationships (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015) close stepmother-stepchild relationships were found to develop over time from a history of interactions in which both stepmothers and stepchildren contributed to their relationships and developed expectations for one another and the relationship that guided their future interactions. Stepmothers described how the meanings they held for their relationships and the behaviours their stepchildren displayed towards them changed as they accumulated a history of interactions and developed an understanding of one another through these interactions. They also hinted at the considerable relationship ambiguity that existed for both themselves and their stepchildren at the beginning of their relationships, and the feelings of uncertainty and strain that existed when they did not yet know or understand one another or how to behave towards or respond to one another. However, stepmothers described that, over time, the awkwardness and uncertainty that once existed in their relationships dissipated, and their relationships became closer, less effortful, and more "natural", and continued to progress as time went on and their relational histories were built. They had spent enough time with one another to achieve an understanding of one another and expectations for their relationship that guided their interactions (Hinde, 1979; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). That being said, researchers such as Baxter, Braithwaite, and Nicholson (1999) have found that not all steprelationships become closer over time; this was also reflected in this study, as three of the stepmothers felt less close to their stepchildren over time due the growing independence of their stepchildren, less opportunities for interaction, and feeling less needed. However, this is perhaps less a

characteristic unique to stepmother-stepchild relationships, and more so an example of typical child development, as adolescence is often a period of increasing independence from the family (Lambert, 2010). The narratives of these stepmothers also highlighted the ebb and flow of their relationships, and the continual process of creation and change over time as they and their stepchildren responded to, shaped, and interpreted the behaviours of one another through repeated interactions (Hinde, 1979).

Finally, the findings of this study provide insights into stepmothers' ideas about the future of their steprelationships, which are absent in the literature. Stepmothers' projections for the future of their steprelationships highlighted a mixture of hopefulness and optimism, as well as uncertainty and worry. Although these stepmothers had been able to form close relationships with their stepchildren and used these understandings to inform their ideas about the future course of the relationship, expressing hope and optimism that they would continue to have close relationships with their stepchildren in the future, they also expressed a significant amount of uncertainty. A central tenet of Social Relational Theory (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2014; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006) is that parent-child relationships involve a future dimension that is exhibited when parents act on the basis of long-term rather than immediate goals for their children. Lollis (2003) also proposes that this knowledge of a future relationship influences the interactions of parents and children, where they either exert efforts to protect the future of their relationships or take the relationship for granted. For biological parents and children, their relationships are non-voluntary, enduring, and guaranteed (Lollis & Kuczynski, 1997); however, this is not the case for steprelationships. Consistent with this idea of the future dimension of the relationship, stepmothers also described thinking of their futures and striving for ways to improve the long-term health and closeness of their steprelationships, stressing the importance of creating traditions and intimate rituals that would be carried forward into the future to sustain their relationships, as well as the importance of open communication and problem-solving in order to manage relational issues that may arise. They also used their current understandings of their close relationships to guide their ideas about the future, expressing hope that they would remain close in the future, that their stepchildren would continue to keep in touch and visit, and that they would be seen as significant parental figures to their stepchildren

equal to their biological parents. However, for these stepmothers, the future was not guaranteed, and this departs from understandings of the future orientation for biological parent-child relationships. Stepmothers are not permanent or legal mothers (Hart, 2009). Due to the voluntary nature of the steprelationship and non-existent parental rights and biological ties, the future of stepmother-stepchild relationships depend on both stepmothers and stepchildren choosing to remain involved with one another, as well as the marriage or spousal relationship holding the blended family together to continue. If the marriage was to dissolve, or stepmothers and stepchildren stopped trying, the relationships would cease to endure. This realization was captured by stepmothers in their stories, as they expressed considerable uncertainty and worry about the futures of their steprelationships, and whether or not they would remain close or even continue to have relationships with the stepchildren in the years to come. Thus, the future is not promised to stepmothers and stepchildren in their relationships, and though it may be desired, it cannot be ascertained.

Limitations & Future Directions

Though the interviews with stepmothers yielded rich data and captured a number of themes that were crucial for answering the research questions, there were also several limitations to the study that must be acknowledged.

The first major limitation of the study involves the small and homogenous sample. Although these stepmothers were diverse in regards to their family situations, structures, and marital statuses, as well as the length of time they had been a part of their blended families, only 13 stepmothers participated in this study. Although these interviews were lengthy and yielded rich data, Morse (2000) suggests that at least 30 to 60 participants are needed to obtain the level of richness necessary for qualitative analysis when participants are not interviewed more than once. These stepmothers were also highly educated, heterosexual, and almost entirely (12 stepmothers) Caucasian. All of the focal stepchildren discussed in this study were also Caucasian. The similarities across these stepmothers' demographic characteristics as well as the small sample size may have thus limited the diversity of stepmothers' stories, thereby limiting the depth of my analysis and the transferability of the findings of this study. Though efforts were made in the recruitment process to diversify the sample, including advertising the study

across the university campus, in online communities, and through neighborhood associations and community agencies that work with diverse populations, the resulting participants were relatively homogeneous. Further efforts such as advertising in multicultural centers or in various venues accessed by ethnically and socio-culturally diverse populations may have been beneficial. In addition, all but one of these stepmothers entered their stepchildren's lives when they were infants, toddlers, or very young children. Only one stepmother entered her stepchild's life in early adolescence. Research has found that stepparents who enter their stepchildren's lives before the age of nine or after the age of 15 are met with less resistance (Hetherington & Anderson, 1987). Indeed, several of these stepmothers discussed the advantage they perceived for having entered their stepchildren's lives at earlier ages and their stepchildren not knowing life without them.

Thus, the steprelationships in this study may look different from those in which stepmothers entered the blended family during early adolescence. The extent to which these findings are transferable to other stepmothers and stepmother-stepchild relationships with different demographic characteristics is an important future research question. Future research in this area should study stepmother-stepchild relationships across diverse cultural and demographic contexts. In particular, researchers should also examine stepmother-stepchild relationships formed through same-sex unions, as almost half (49.7%) of same-sex couples with children in Canada are part of blended families, as opposed to 12.5% of heterosexual couples (Statistics Canada, 2012).

In addition, many of the stepmothers who participated in this study were recruited from online stepmother support groups. As members of such groups, these stepmothers have access to a community of stepmothers who are available to offer advice and resources to these stepmothers that aid in navigating the various challenges inherent in blended families and steprelationships. In fact, many of these stepmothers discussed the substantial positive impact these support groups had had on their lives, and the importance of these groups for navigating their roles and overcoming challenges. As a result, the steprelationships of these stepmothers may be at an advantage for creating positive relationships compared to stepmothers who have less access to social support. Recruiting stepmothers using other means may have increased the diversity of the

sample and the depth of my analysis, resulting in disparate findings and interpretations. Future research might consider investigating whether these differences exist, or look towards the inclusion of stepmothers with varying levels of support.

Another limitation of this study was in the inclusion of only stepmothers. The results of this study underscore the importance of stepchildren's participation in and contribution to steprelationships. However, these interviews did not include the perspectives of stepchildren, only stepmothers' perceptions of their stepchildren's contributions and behaviours within the relationships. The lack of corroborating evidence from stepchildren creates an important limitation on these findings. It is possible that stepmothers and stepchildren experience their relationships and closeness in different ways, and the relational processes stepmothers identify as contributing to the construction and maintenance of steprelationships may not align with those stepchildren find most meaningful. Thus, there is need to balance the stories and understandings of stepmothers with those of stepchildren, in order to highlight their shared and unique experiences of their relationships.

Furthermore, though the contributions from stepmothers and stepchildren were the primary focus of this study, there were also a number of individuals who were not included in the study that stepmothers identified as performing important roles in shaping the quality and development of their steprelationships. These family members include siblings, grandparents, the biological father, and especially the biological mother. Thus, future research investigating stepmother-stepchild relationships should also seek to include the perspectives and contributions of these other family members in order to achieve a more holistic and enriched understanding of how stepmother-stepchild relationships are fostered and created.

Finally, the relational perspective that was used in this study focused only on stepmother-stepchild relationships, and does not shed light on stepfather-stepchild relationships. A direction for future research is to examine stepfathers in a similar way to determine how their processes of constructing relationships may differ from or resemble those of stepmothers.

Implications & Conclusion

This study illustrated the usefulness of employing a relational perspective on stepmothers' relationships with their stepchildren. Essentially, becoming a stepmother is a process of deliberately constructing a new, enduring personal relationship with children who were initially strangers to them. The undertaking is a difficult one for, unlike biological mothers, stepmothers have had no prior history with the children who come along with the new family and must compete with relationships that have already been established for those children. The biological parent-child relationship is enduring, interdependent, and complex, having many different domains and functions including authority, attachment, and intimacy (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). There are no shortcuts for women who aspire to having a new personal relationship with a stepchild. The implication is that for stepmothers each of these domains of the relationships must be effortfully constructed by gradually accumulating a history of repeated interactions, which are the foundation of the relationship. A relational lens offers new insight into the processes by which stepmothers begin and continue to engage in forming and maintaining the steprelationship, as well as the crucial involvement of stepchildren as agents in the construction of close stepmother-stepchild relationships. Another advantage of a relational lens is to offer a complementary perspective to the deficit perspective that dominates the literature on stepparenting by highlighting the intentional and proactive actions of stepmothers and stepchildren in their relationships.

Finally, the findings of this study can guide future research as well as provide further information to helping professionals about how close stepmother-stepchild relationships develop and endure, in order to design more effective interventions and educational programs that will help other blended families adapt and thrive in this unique family form. Providing insight into the close and meaningful stepmother-stepchild relationships that can exist may also serve to defend the work of stepmothers and challenge some of the prevalent "evil stepmother" discourses that serve to demonize and marginalize stepmothers.

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Appendix A

RESEARCH ETHICS BOARDS
Certification of Ethical Acceptability of Research
Involving Human Participants

APPROVAL PERIOD:	July 28, 2014
EXPIRY DATE:	July 28, 2015
REB:	G
REB NUMBER:	14JL006
TYPE OF REVIEW:	Delegated Type 1
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Kuczynski, Leon (lkuczyns@uoguelph.ca)
DEPARTMENT:	Family Relations & Applied Nutrition
SPONSOR(S):	N/A
TITLE OF PROJECT:	Stepmoms & Stepchildren: Constructing New Relationships

The members of the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board have examined the protocol which describes the participation of the human participants in the above-named research project and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement, 2nd Edition.

The REB requires that researchers:
- Adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and **approved** by the REB.
- Receive approval from the REB for any **modifications** before they can be implemented.
- Report any **change in the source of funding.**
- Report **unexpected events or incidental findings** to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants, and the continuation of the protocol.
- Are responsible for **ascertaining and complying with all applicable legal and regulatory requirements** with respect to consent and the protection of privacy of participants in the jurisdiction of the research project.

The Principal Investigator must:
- Ensure that the ethical guidelines and approvals of facilities or institutions involved in the research are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.
- Submit a **Status Report** to the REB upon completion of the project. If the research is a multi-year project, a status report must be submitted annually prior to the expiry date. Failure to submit an annual status report will lead to your study being suspended and potentially terminated.

The approval for this protocol terminates on the **EXPIRY DATE**, or the term of your appointment or employment at the University of Guelph whichever comes first.

Signature: Date: July 28, 2014

L. Kuczynski
Chair, Research Ethic Board-General

Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

Dear Parent,

We would like to let you know about an interesting study about stepmother-stepchild relationships taking place at the University of Guelph. The researchers are currently seeking stepmother and stepchild volunteers to participate in this study.

The study is being carried out by Ayla Visser, a graduate student in the department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph. She is working under the supervision of Dr. Leon Kuczynski, who has conducted numerous studies on parent-child relationships.

For details about this study, please see the enclosed brochure. If you are interested in participating, please contact Ayla using the information provided.

Sincerely,

Appendix D

Recruitment Brochure

Researcher: Ayla Visser
Telephone: 519-824-4120 ext. 52757
Email: avisser@uoguelph.ca

Advisor: Leon Kuczynski, Ph.D.

Dear Parent,

I am a graduate student at the University of Guelph and I am looking for parent and child volunteers to participate in my study. Specifically, I am looking for stepmothers and stepchildren who have been a part of a blended family for four years or more, and who have a stepchild between the ages of 8 and 18. This study focuses on the development of close stepmother-stepchild relationships, so I am looking for parents who would describe their step-relationships as positive.

My study is about stepmother-stepchild relationships. I would like to learn about how stepmothers and stepchildren describe close relationships with one another, and how they understand and are involved in creating and maintaining close relationships with one another. I would also like to know about how stepmothers and stepchildren describe the changes that have occurred in their relationships over time. Past participants of similar studies run by Dr. Leon Kuczynski have enjoyed the experience of participating in this type of research, and many parents considered participation to be a learning experience.

As a participant in this study, you would be interviewed once for approximately 60-90 minutes, and your stepchild (if he or she is also participating) will be interviewed for approximately 30-40 minutes. The interviews would take place over the phone, Skype, at your home or at the university, depending on your preference. You will each receive a small thank you gift in appreciation for your time and appointments are available to suit your schedule. If you or your spouse/partner would be willing to participate in this research study, please email me at avisser@uoguelph.ca or call me at 519-824-4120 ext. 52757 and leave a message.

It is only through the participation of families that we can answer important research questions about parent-child relationships. Please consider getting involved!

Thank you,

Ayla Visser, M.Sc Candidate
Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition
University of Guelph

Appendix E

Overview of Interview Topics

You will be asked to talk about your stepchild and your relationship with him/her, including things you like, challenges, and anything you would change.

You will be asked to discuss recent times, as well as times in the beginning of your relationship with your stepchild that you felt close to him/her.

You will be asked to discuss anything that you have done in the past or currently do to feel close with your stepchild.

You will be asked to discuss some barriers to closeness and times when you do not feel so close to your stepchild, as well as things that help you feel close again.

You will be asked to discuss how your stepchild contributes to/impacts the relationship.

You will be asked to discuss how your relationship with your stepchild has changed over time.

Appendix F

Stepmoms & Stepchildren: Constructing New Relationships

Study Information & Consent to Participate in Research

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Ayla Visser from the Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition at the University of Guelph. The results from your participation will contribute to Ayla Visser's thesis requirement for a Master of Science degree.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose is to explore the experiences of stepmothers and stepchildren who have formed close relationships. Specifically, we are interested in understanding how stepmothers and stepchildren prepare for and create close relationships with one another. We are also interested in the changes that occur in stepmother-stepchild relationships over time.

PROCEDURES
You and your stepchild (if he or she is also participating) will be asked to meet separately with the researcher for a one-on-one interview. The interviews will take place either at your home or at a designated laboratory at the University of Guelph and will take about 60-90 minutes for parents and 30-45 minutes for children. During the interviews, you and your stepchild will be asked questions about family and your relationship with one another at the beginning of your relationship, up to the present, as well as some of your ideas about the future of your relationship. A sample question is: "Could you think of recent times when you have felt especially close to _____ and describe what these times were like?" The child interviews will also involve indicating on a graphic the people who are close to them. The interviews will be digitally recorded to make sure we don't miss what you say.

RISKS & BENEFITS
Some people may feel uncomfortable talking about their thoughts and feelings about relationships. However, many parents enjoy talking about positive aspects of their relationships. You may benefit by knowing that you are contributing to our understanding of close stepmother-stepchild relationships.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION
You will receive a choice of a $10 gift certificate to Giant Tiger or Tim Horton's for your participation. You will still receive this token of appreciation even if you or your stepchild do not answer all questions or decide to withdraw from the study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Every effort will be made to ensure confidentiality of any identifying information that is obtained for this study. Your confidentiality will be protected to the extent allowed by the law; limitations to confidentiality include information subpoenaed in court, mandatory reporting of child abuse or neglect, as well as imminent harm to yourself or others. Anything you say in the interview will not be shared with your stepchild.

All interview recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Pseudonyms will be used on the transcripts. All transcripts and study data will be kept in a locked cabinet or encrypted computer in a locked office. Your name will not be used in the completed study or any other document that may arise from the study.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
You can choose whether to be in this study or not. You can change your mind and stop being in the study at any time, or you can choose not to answer any questions you don't want to. You have the option of removing your data from the study, in which case any recordings of your interview will be erased and eliminated from future analysis. If you decide that you would like to have your data removed from this study, you can email the principal investigator (lkuczyns@uoguelph.ca) within two weeks of the interview.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS
This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study or your rights as a research participant, contact:

Sandy Auld, Director, Research Ethics; Phone 519-824-4120 x 56606; email: sauld@uoguelph.ca

Ayla Visser: Investigator   OR   Leon Kuczynski, PhD: Faculty Supervisor
Telephone: 519-824-4120,   Telephone: 519-824-4120, ext. 52421
ext. 52757   Email: lkuczyns@uoguelph.ca
Email: avisser@uoguelph.ca

POSSIBLE RESOURCES
There are many support services available to parents and children. The following contact information is included for your information:

Parent Help Line   Nobody's Perfect Parenting Program
Telephone: 1-888-603-9100   Telephone: 1-800-265-7293
Website: www.parentsinfo.sympatico.ca

Kids Help Phone   Couple and Family Therapy Centre
Telephone: 1-888-570-0181   University of Guelph
Website: www.kidshelphone.ca   Telephone: 519-824-4120 ext.56335

KIDS LINE – Wellington-Guelph   Family Counselling and Support
Telephone: 1-800-265-7293 ext. 3616   Services of Wellington-Guelph
Website: www.wdgpublichealth.ca   Telephone: 1-800-307-7078

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided for the "Stepmoms & Stepchildren: Constructing New Relationships" study as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____
Name of Participant (please print)

_____   _____
Signature of Participant   Date

SIGNATURE OF LEGAL GUARDIAN

I have read the information provided for the "Stepmoms & Stepchildren: Constructing New Relationships" study as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to allow my child to participate in this study.

_____
Name of Legal Guardian (please print)

_____   Date
Signature of Legal Guardian   Date

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

_____
Name of Witness (please print)

_____
Signature of Witness   Date

If you are interested in receiving a summary of the results of the study, please provide us with your email address: _____

Appendix G

Demographic Survey

How old are you? _____

How old is your stepchild (participating in the study)? _____

What is your gender? _____

What is your stepchild's gender? _____

Which of the following BEST describes your ethnic background? (circle one)

- Aboriginal/First Nations/Metis

- White/European

- Black/African/Caribbean

- Southeast Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, etc.)

- Arab (Saudi Arabian, Palestinian, Iraqi, etc.)

- South Asian (East Indian, Sri Lankan, etc.)

- Latin American (Costa Rican, Guatemalan, Brazilian, Columbian, etc.)

- West Asian (Iranian, Afghani, etc.)

- Other (please specify)

  _____

Which of the following BEST describes your stepchild's ethnic background? (circle one)

- Aboriginal/First Nations/Metis

- White/European

- Black/African/Caribbean

- Southeast Asian (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Filipino, etc.)

- Arab (Saudi Arabian, Palestinian, Iraqi, etc.)

- South Asian (East Indian, Sri Lankan, etc.)

- Latin American (Costa Rican, Guatemalan, Brazilian, Columbian, etc.)

- West Asian (Iranian, Afghani, etc.)

- Other (please specify)

  _____

Which of the following best describes your HIGHEST level of education?

- Some high school
- Completed high school
- Some college/university
- Completed college/university
- Some graduate education
- Completed graduate education

Which of the following BEST describes your marital status?

- Single, never married
- Common-law or co-habiting
- Married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated

Please indicate the length of your current marital status (e.g., 5 years):

_____

How many years has your blended family been together? _____

Appendix H

Stepmother Interview Script

As I mentioned earlier, I am trying to get a better understanding of stepmother-stepchild relationships by interviewing stepmothers and stepchildren about their relationships with one another. During this interview, we're going to talk about your family and specifically about your relationship with _____. The questions that I am going to ask will be about some of your experiences with _____ over the course of your relationship, your thoughts and behaviours towards forming a relationship with _____ from the time you first entered this relationship until the present, as well as your thoughts about the future. The interview should take between 1 and 1 ½ hours and I will be tape-recording it so that it can be transcribed at a later time. If there are any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, you do not have to answer them. We can stop the interview at any time should you wish to do so. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Present Relationship with Stepchild

1. To begin, can you describe your stepchild?
   - Probes: Can you tell me about her strengths? Any challenges?
   - Probes: Is there anything about her you really like? Anything you would like to change?

2. (Relationship with Stepchild) Now, I would like you to tell me about your relationship with _____. How would you describe your relationship with _____?
   - Probes: What do you like about your relationship with ____? What are some of the challenges? Is there anything you would want to change?
   - Probes: Would you describe your relationship with _____ as close? How do you know? How do you feel?

3. (Current Instances of Closeness) I am interested in hearing more about specific moments when you have felt especially close to _____. Could you think of recent times when you have felt especially close to _____ and describe what these times were like?

- Probes: What do these times or moments look like? Who initiated it? What did you do? What did _____ do?
- Probes: What was it about these times or moments that made you feel especially close? How do you know?

4. (Barriers to Closeness) Can you describe for me times when you do not feel so close to _____?
   - Probes: What do these times look like? Are there things you do? Your child does? Other barriers?

5. (Repairing the Relationship) Think of times when your relationship has hit a rough patch and you do not feel so close to _____, is there anything you do that helps you feel close again?
   - Probes: What kinds of things do you do? Is there anything that _____ does?

6. (Perceptions of Stepchild Influence) What does _____ do to contribute to having a close relationship with you?
   - Probes: What kinds of things does he/she do?

Beginning of the Relationship with Stepchild

Now I would like to talk about your relationship with _____ when you first met and were beginning to form a relationship. Then I will ask you to tell me about your relationship with _____ when you first thought of yourself as a stepmother or started to adopt the stepmother role.

7. (Expectations for Relationship) I would like you to think back to when _____ first came into your life (for instance, before you began living with your partner or joined the family). Did you have any thoughts or feelings about entering this relationship?
   - Probes: Was there a specific role you expected to play in your relationship with _____? Did you have any expectations for yourself in this relationship? What about for _____? How did you think he/she would be in this relationship?
   - Probes: What did you expect for the relationship? Did reality live up to your expectations?

8. (Expectations for Stepmother Role) Now, I would like you to think back to when you first knew you were going to be a stepmother, or started to think of yourself in this new role. Did you have any thoughts or feelings about entering this role?

- Probes: Was there a specific role you expected to play in your relationship with _____? Did you have any expectations for yourself in this relationship? What about for _____? Did you have any expectations for his/her new role?

- Probes: What did you expect for the relationship at this time? Did reality live up to your expectations?

9. (Preparation for Role) Did you do anything to prepare for your new role as a stepmother and to build your relationship with _____?

- If yes, what did you do to prepare for this role or the relationship?

- Probes: Did you have any sort of plan for forming this relationship? If yes, what was it?

- Probes: Did you seek out any information or advice from books, websites, or other educational material? Did you seek out any advice from others, such as friends or family members? Was any of this information helpful in preparing for this role?

- Probes: Is there anything else that we haven't talked about that you feel was helpful in preparing you for this role or your relationship with _____?

We have talked about your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours about entering this relationship with _____. Now I would like to talk more about your experiences of closeness with _____ during this time.

10. (Closeness in the Past) I would like you to think back to when you and _____ first began your relationship and you thought of yourself as a stepmother. I would like you to think about moments during this time that you felt close to _____.

- Probes: What did these moments look like? What happened? What did you do? What did _____ do?

11. (Contributions to Closeness in the Past) In the beginning of your relationship with _____, did you do anything in particular to feel close with _____?

- Probes: Did you have any approaches or ideas for doing this? Was there anything in particular that worked really well? What didn't work?

Perceptions of the Relationship Over Time

12. (Perceptions of Relationship Over Time) You've described some of your current and past experiences of closeness with _____. In terms of feeling close to _____, do you ever think about how your relationship has changed over time?

- Probes: Does your relationship with _____ look or feel different now compared to when you first entered the relationship as a stepmother? In what ways has your relationship changed over time?

Future Ideas about the Relationship with Stepchild

13. (Proactive Strategies) Is there anything that you currently do to try to ensure that you will have a close relationship with _____ in the future?

14. (Closing Question) We've come to the end of the interview but I would like to take the last few moments to ask whether there is anything else that you would like to talk about or add about your experience as a stepmother that we haven't already addressed?

15. Is there any advice or words of wisdom you would share with other stepmoms or stepmoms-to-be who are embarking on this journey?

Thank you very much for your time.

End of Interview