

Stepmother Experiences and Emotional Construction

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Abstract

Background: The emotional construction of women who experience step motherhood is influenced by the habitus preserved in the cultural memory of society. It is known that stepmothers experience negative emotional states due to the issues they face in blended families. This study focuses on the emotions of women who have experienced being stepdaughters. The inadequacy of studies focusing solely on the feelings and thoughts of stepdaughters leads to insufficient solutions for blended family issues.

Aim: The aim of this study is to understand how the emotional construction of women who have experienced being stepdaughters is formed and to compare the emotions of stepdaughters with those of stepmothers. The study does not include stepmothers; information about the emotions of stepmothers was obtained from existing literature. Understanding the emotions of women who have experienced being stepdaughters will provide insights into their current and future behaviors. This data will contribute to practical solutions for problems in blended families.

Method: In-depth interviews were conducted with seven women who have experienced being stepdaughters; six are married with children, and one is single and childless. The data were analyzed using discourse analysis. When discourse, which is an expression of emotions and thoughts, is meticulously analyzed, it reveals the in-depth characteristics of the person we aim to understand. Therefore, the discourse analysis method was preferred in this research.

Findings: The study revealed the following emotional experiences in women who have experienced being stepdaughters:

- Emotional turmoil and isolation
- Jealousy and competition
- The ongoing impact of negative family Dynamics
- Feelings of gratitude from positive experiences with stepmothers, 5-Reciprocity of emotions between stepmothers and stepdaughters.

Conclusion: Implementing ongoing programs that deconstruct cultural constructs about step motherhood and step daughterhood for members of blended families will contribute to solving current and potential issues by fostering healthy relationships. The reciprocal emotions of stepmothers and stepdaughters highlight the necessity of family therapies.

Keywords: Blended family • Step motherhood • Step childhood • Emotional construction • Discourse analysis

Introduction

In recent decades, changes in family structures have added a new concept to the traditional notions of nuclear and extended families: the stepfamily [1-3]. It is estimated that 40%-50% of couples in their first marriages divorce, and over 25% of these remarriages involve children who become part of stepfamilies. The term "stepfamily" reflects the integration of a new parent through cohabitation or marriage, which is different from the traditional nuclear family structure. This new family type, constituting about 65% of family structures, typically involves heterosexual couples with children biologically related to both parents [4]. Thus, the double-nucleus family emerges as a subcategory of family structures, bringing new parenting roles beyond biological ties. There is a complexity caused by multidimensional problems in this new family type [5-8].

Two of the most significant actors in stepfamily issues are stepmothers and stepchildren [9,10]. Excluding Chinese culture, where stepmothers are depicted as "suffering angels", stepmothers are often blamed for family problems in stepfamilies [11,12]. This is partly due to the "evil stepmother" myth perpetuated by cultural habitus [8,13-19]. Although there are studies on the problems faced by stepmothers, the body of research is insufficient given the prevalence of stepfamilies [14,16,20-22].

According to existing literature, stepmothers' primary issue is not being integrated into the family and being excluded from fundamental family functions. Both stepmothers, who are integrated into a pre-existing structure and stepchildren see themselves as the primary members of the family [16,21]. The competition for affection and the distribution of resources are major issues in the family [12]. In this situation, stepmothers, who feel isolated and excluded, struggle to integrate with family members and experience intense negative emotions [4,12,14, 21,22].

Studies focusing on stepfamily relationships show significant communication difficulties between stepmothers and stepdaughters [10,23]. However, some studies indicate a mutually agreeable relationship between stepmothers and stepdaughters [24]. Contrary to the 'evil stepmother' myth, there are stepmothers who play a positive role in resolving conflicts between stepchildren and their biological fathers. Despite these positive traits, fears about the future of children in stepfamilies are often attributed to stepmothers [8]. Step motherhood, influenced by historical and cultural constructs, is a stigmatized and marginalized concept [2, 17-19,22]. However, there are women who emerge significantly harmed from the stepmother experience and argue that this cultural construct is justified. This study focuses on the emotions of women who have experienced being stepdaughters in this context. This allows us to compare the feelings of stepmothers, such as the agony of isolation guilt, shame, doubt, anger, frustration, regret, and low self-esteem with those of stepdaughters [2,4,21,22,25].

Focusing on the emotions of women who have experienced being stepdaughters is important because our actions are influenced by our emotions [26]. In this sense, focusing on emotions provides data on the nature of social actors' behaviors. This data will guide practical solutions to problems arising in stepfamilies.

The cultural construction of emotions: Emotions, central to human life, are constructed in the everyday routines of social life. The situations we encounter in daily life affect how we feel about those situations and prompt

us to act [26]. Whenever we perceive something we like or dislike, find appealing or repulsive, a sphere of emotion emerges. This emotion reveals the value of the perceived object to us [27]. Thus, our liking or disliking of objects depends not on their intrinsic qualities but on the harm or benefit they convey to us [28]. While this harm or benefit is felt by the body, it is evaluated by the mind. These evaluations are communicated to those we interact with in daily life, thereby constructing emotions and orientations socially. For example, fearing a bear is a learned emotion [29]. The historically ingrained relationships between stepmothers and stepchildren are also constructed through learned emotions. Enhancing family relationships to the best possible level is achievable through reconstruction based on new learnings.

Participants: A total of seven women participated in semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The participants, aged between 24 and 58, include six married women with children and one single, childless woman. Two participants are academics, two are university graduates and employed, and three are high school graduates.

Interviews: Participants were interviewed twice at different times. In the preliminary interview, participants were informed about the research. Preliminary interviews lasted an average of fifteen minutes. A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was prepared by a researcher specialized in qualitative research [30]. The interviews were conducted by the researcher. The interview guide included the following two themes and related questions:

- What were your experiences with your stepmother?
- What were your emotions during the period you lived with your stepmother?

The interviews were conducted via Zoom with participants living outside of Izmir and face-to-face with those living in Izmir, averaging forty minutes each. Recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher. The data were meticulously examined, categorized into explanatory repertoires based on themes and sub-themes, and analyzed using discourse analysis.

Literature Review

The study employed in-depth interview techniques, which involve learning about a person's knowledge, emotions, thoughts, and experiences through a conversation with them [31]. The data collected were analyzed using discourse analysis. Discourse, as a representation of emotions and thoughts, reveals the internal characteristics of the individual when carefully analyzed. Thus, discourse analysis was chosen for this research.

Ethic

The researcher was unable to obtain an Ethics Committee Report due to being expelled from the university in 2016 for political reasons. Interview recordings were listened to only by the researcher. Written transcripts of the interviews are securely stored in a database. Quotations do not include identifiers that could reveal the participants' identities.

Discourse analysis

According to Dilthey, what we do and say are expressions of our feelings and thoughts [32]. In many practices we encounter or engage in daily life, there are discursive appearances. In other words, the discourses underpinning our conversations define the type of speaking person [33]. The sociologist's task is to understand and analyze the discourse that emerges in multiple expressions. Bauman states that "Meaning is what is meant" [34]. The essence of understanding is to relive another's experience in my consciousness within the context of their expressions [32]. The analytical foci of discourse analysis include explanatory repertoires, subject positions, and ideological dilemmas [35]. Explanatory repertoires are themes repeated by the same individuals. The person creating the

explanatory repertoires is the constructor of subject positions [35]. Conversations that emerge with indecisive and contradictory statements indicate ideological dilemmas.

Discursive Analysis

Accumulated negative memories and emotions in the step-mother experience

The step-mother experience contains characteristics that validate negative aspects in cultural memory. Thus, a step-mother typically embodies and reflects predominantly negative qualities.

Envy of success is intrinsic to the step-mother: Upon entering university, G-I encountered the reality of having a step-mother. Despite now being an academician with two children, G-I expressed that they have not been able to overcome the psychological trauma brought about by the step-mother experience.

'I'm at university but something happened. My dad got remarried and I wanted to buy a computer. Dad said 'I can't buy it.' Just as this conversation happened, it was my first semester at school. Just as I was about to leave home for school, my dad bought Feyza (step-mother) a gift, a cellphone (Her voice chokes with emotion.). This meant a lot to me, I was upset, I couldn't hide it. I didn't say anything, there's stuff given in school. I bought a second-hand computer with my scholarship, paying 150 liras in installments. After that, she started with these envy things towards me. Why, I don't understand, we've had these envy issues a lot' (G-I).

The feeling of envy emerging in the social actor's experience is reciprocal. The newly introduced step-mother prioritizes her needs over those of the children by the father. However, in the absence of the step-mother, the financial capital of the father was solely directed towards his children. This unequal treatment emerging in a newly established order where the parties do not yet know each other has saddened the social actor and caused feelings of jealousy. For a university student, a computer, an indispensable need, did not seem more urgent or important than the gift his father wanted to give to his new wife, and the fact that the primary need was not addressed by the father caused feelings of neglect and exclusion in the social actor. The participant purchased the computer needed with a scholarship and feels high self-respect. After expressing his own experience with the first-person pronoun, the social actor turning to the third person plural (We lived through these envy events a lot.) indicates that the problem of envy also covers the other siblings.

G-I's statements built the subject position of the father who puts the stepmother's needs above the needs of his children, and in contrast, constructed the subject position of the suffering child feeling marginalized.

Envy in the step-family emerges in issues the parties do not possess and actually reflects anger.

'I said to my aunt, 'Aunt, why does this woman envy me, why does she do to me what she didn't do to my sister and brother?' My aunt said, 'My girl, your sister got married and left,' she said, 'what your sister's child can reach can be reached by her child. Your brother isn't like that. You're in a place where her child can't reach.' she said. 'That's why she does it.' she said.' (G-1). According to the social actor, the behaviors and level of envy of the stepmother towards other stepchildren are not the same. The interpretation of this behavior by a family member (aunt) signals the reason for unequal treatment. The step-family established by the union of both parents' children is a complex structure. In these relational networks, negative feelings can arise when the individual achievements of stepchildren from

different parents are compared. According to G-I's aunt, the social actor's success (university education) is defined as a summit that the step-sibling cannot reach and marked as the cause of jealousy. In this example, what the social actor is deprived of is money and fatherly attention, while what the stepmother is deprived of is her child's high achievement. In the speech text, the subject position of the stepmother who envies the achievements of the stepdaughter has been constructed, while directly opposite of it is the subject position of the stepchild who arouses feelings of jealousy in the stepmother with her achievements.

There are other reasons for feeling marginalized by the stepmother. 'She made a few pillows for me, I said, 'You wouldn't put these pillows under the cat,' and so on. Wherever there is the most ordinary thing... That's it, there's a bed linen set, nothing else. She prepared such a shoddy cloth. I saw that, I was like 'I went to the bottom of the ground with my in-laws.' I said, 'What am I doing, mom is not my mother.' What should I say?' (G-I)

The tension between the participant and her stepmother has never ended. The social actor codes the marriage process as the time she feels her motherlessness most intensely and describes the dowries made by the stepmother with pejorative expressions reflected in her tone of voice and facial expressions. According to G-I, the negative attitude towards the dowry preparation is a concrete manifestation of the stepmother's feelings towards her. The participant felt low self-respect in the face of the significant others (Berger and Luckmann, 2008) (mother-in-law) who would start a new marriage and justified this negative attitude towards new family members as a normal extension of motherlessness ('What am I, mom is not my mother.'). In the social actor's statements, the subject position of the stepmother who disregards her stepdaughter's dowry has been constructed, and opposite this construction is the subject position of the stepchild who justifies her loneliness and helplessness in the marriage process with mother lessens.

Analysis of jealousy and clash of anger: In G-II's experience, we observe jealousy based on success, similar to what we saw in G-I's example. 'I was a very successful child. Jealousy... She would constantly envy me. Her own children didn't study, aren't studying, but at home, for example, my father would go to parent-teacher meetings (talking about me) with pride. I was always a person in the family that everyone was proud of; she would always envy that. 'Look, she bought this for her daughter that for her daughter, did this...' She was always complaining (to my father). I remember she cursed, I apologize so much, I'm 42 years old and I... (Couldn't understand) 'May you fall into double-door marriages?' I haven't heard such a curse, but I heard it from that woman (laughs). Maybe she meant 'May you get divorced!' For example, when she sent her child away and I was alone in the room with my brother, she would eavesdrop, asking what they were talking about. I remember Ferdi's head from her, my stepmother's. You don't forget these things. As a child, you don't know, you put your head against the door and look through the glass. I would ask, 'Why did you come?' 'My mom sent you to listen to me,' she would say'. (G-II). In G-II's experience, jealousy is one-sided, but the tense relationship between the stepmother and the stepchild is mutual. From the social actor's statements, it is understood that family members cannot integrate into the mixed life of the step-family. The terms she uses when talking about the stepmother (woman) and step-sibling (her own child) indicate the absolute distance and tension between the participant and others. G-II, who is a source of pride for her father in an unhappy family environment, is a source of tension for the stepmother. The financial expenditures on the stepchild and high self-esteem based on success seem to be fundamental reasons for tension for the stepmother experiencing an unhappy marriage under inadequate economic conditions.

The common emotion emerging in such an environment is anger. The stepmother's words involving psychological violence ('May you fall into double-door marriages!') cannot be considered independent of anger. The participant, who still experiences the traumatic effects of the treatment she received, is also angry with her stepmother. The stepmother's use of her child from her new marriage for malicious purposes (eavesdropping) could be related to low self-esteem and educational level. The social actor's attitude toward her step-sibling from the stepmother is fluctuating; while there is a sympathetic attitude and a sense of pity towards the sibling instrumentalized in a bad act ('As a child, you don't know.')., there is an increasing sense of anger towards the stepmother. The use of the second-person plural pronoun ('You don't forget these things.'). when describing her experiences with her stepmother generalizes the devastation caused by the behaviors faced, while returning to the first-person singular with a definite statement in her own experience ('I never forget.').

In the social actor's statements, the subject position of the stepmother who uses her child for malicious purposes has been constructed, and opposite this construction is the subject position of the step-siblings who endure bad behaviors and injustices from the stepmother.

Being the neglected child in a new family means emotional torment: It is known that in blended families, stepchildren are subjected to emotional and physical violence from both stepmothers and biological fathers [9]. This situation is a cause of trauma in stepchildren who experience different forms of abuse. G-III, raised by her grandmother after her parents' divorce, has been subjected to constant psychological abuse from her biological father and stepmother, and she expresses that she has not been able to overcome intense emotional trauma over the years. 'I never liked my father, never trusted him either. Well, he got married too, had children. Three children, their own lives... When I went to visit them, my stepbrother would say things like, 'Look, Dad bought me chocolate, didn't buy any for you, haha...' He would say things like that to me. And the stepmother, well... what can I say about her? My dad didn't buy things for me because he was afraid of her or anything like that. No one can intimidate anyone, if he wanted to, he could do it. She's not around all the time. He's just like that. (She wrinkles her face.) I never liked my dad or my stepmother.' (G-III) G-III, deprived of parental love throughout her life, has not been able to escape the violence of this lovelessness. It is evident that the participant, raised by her grandmother after her parents' new marriages, did not find a place in the newly established homes and did not feel belonging there ("Their own lives..."). Describing her stepbrother's attitude with a voice and facial expression full of sorrow, the social actor points to her own father as the source of the mistreatment she has suffered. In studies on relationships between step-parents and step-siblings in blended families, it is seen that the welfare state aims to protect the human rights of children [33-35]. In G-III's experience, we see that as a child who has been emotionally battered in every way, she did not receive the support provided by the welfare state. G-III justifies the behavior of her stepmother due to the malicious attitudes of her biological father (What can she do about it?). The intensity of emotional trauma has turned the social actor's emotional world upside down and led to a loss of trust ('I've never trusted anyone in my life, not even my spouse...'). The participant tries to repair this emotional damage in her reciprocal love relationship with her children ('I've devoted myself to my children, they are everything to me...'). Based on the text of the conversation, it can be said that the damage in women who have been emotionally abused by both biological and step-parents is heavier compared to others. In the social actor's statements, the subject position of the neglected child by both biological and step-family members who is not loved and whose rights are not protected has been constructed. Opposite this construction is the subject position of the woman who does not love her biological and step-family and trusts no one in life.

Step-mother needs understanding

G-IV, who was abandoned by her mother along with her three siblings at the age of four, and her father remarried when she was ten. At that time, her stepmother was only sixteen years old, and in the eyes of the participant, she needed education and understanding.

'It was a time when she also needed education. My dad tried to educate both her and us. It must have been very difficult for my dad. I am grateful to my stepmother, but there is only gratitude, not love. She washed, cooked, that's it... We are city dwellers, we were in Ankara at that time. My mom (step) came from the village and was uneducated. We had a circle of friends, I quit high school and started working, and I have work friends. We go to cafes and bars. My stepmother is not at all in favor, but my dad says 'Let them go.' He gets involved a lot. I also struggled a lot with her in that regard.' (G-IV). In G-IV's experience, the young age of her stepmother legitimized her mistakes and the damage on the stepchildren. It was challenging for all members of the new family when a sixteen-year-old stepmother entered a household with three children. However, the father was equipped to handle this difficult task. The stepmother, both culturally (coming from a village) and in terms of education, needed understanding in the urban and blended family environment. From the social actor's statements, it is understood that social and intellectual differences in the family lead to significant problems, but these problems have been somewhat overcome. The key role in the blended family lies with the father. The father, who tries to understand and develop attitudes towards his new wife and children based on their needs, appears to have protected his children and wife from major traumatic effects. In the social actor's statements, the subject position of the stepmother who needs understanding due to her youth and lack of education has been constructed. Alongside this construction is the subject position of the stepchild who understands and evaluates her stepmother within her own conditions.

Step-mother leaves no emotional scars

The relationship between stepmother and stepchild can be an experience that does not leave emotional damage, depending on the stepmother's behavior. 'I loved that woman, yes, she treated me well, she was caring. Sometimes I wet myself as a child. I don't remember her ever getting mad, she had embraced me like a sister. So, I didn't experience any exclusion, wound, or bad words. The woman's demeanor certainly had an impact on this, she could also be like a friend, I don't know. She was a person who made a temporary place in my life.' (G-V). In G-V's experience, there are positive effects of the stepmother. The experiences with the stepmother being loving and understanding, showing tolerance in situations that could have provoked anger (like wetting myself sometimes), have positively influenced the social actor. There is mutual acceptance and embrace in the relationship between stepmother and stepchild. Despite occasionally visiting her stepfamily, G-V did not experience emotional harm, and her distant reference to her stepmother (the woman) and the limitation of the stepfamily's influence over time are related to her father divorcing that spouse as well. Within the time frame of the stepfamily's existence, familial relationships were positive. In the social actor's statements, the subject position of the stepmother who treats her stepdaughter with love and tolerance has been constructed. Alongside this construction is the subject position of the stepchild who loves and accepts her stepmother.

Disappointing step-mother

The disappointment arising from the newly established home not being as warm and embracing as expected is a common emotional state often felt by stepmothers in their new lives [21,25]. The failure of the stepmother to meet expectations also creates disappointment in stepchildren. 'She came home, the wedding happened (Grandma was also at home.). I was going to

school, took the comb and went to her side running (laughs). She's going to comb my hair... As a mother, I see her, I want to see her. At that moment, she didn't comb my hair like that... I felt something. Oh my, I said, 'What's happening? This wasn't what I expected...' Actually, I realized she wasn't the person I had imagined. I thought she would be warm, affectionate, kind-hearted, caring... But I saw she wasn't like that. There's another thing. Because my father was very fond of me... You know, pressure from the stepmother, torment, torture, violence... I never experienced such things, but there was always unhappiness in our home, always unrest, there was an unhappy couple. My father didn't want it, we felt that.' (G-VII).

Being free from stereotypes about step motherhood and getting to know the stepmother before marriage led the social actor to have expectations about stepmother roles. The stepmother constructed in the social actor's mind as 'like a mother' created distance between them when she did not behave according to the expected roles. However, later in the conversation, it becomes clear that the main reason for this distance was not the stepmother's attitude. The unequal treatment and exclusion seen in G-I, G-II, and G-III have been displayed against the stepmother in this picture. The issue Burns emphasizes in his experiences is evident in G-VII's narrative [25]. Previously established familial relationships have internally solidified, not accommodating newcomers, resulting in unhappiness in the newly formed home. The primary cause in this case may be the man marrying a woman he did not love under family pressure. Unhappiness and exclusion could be the main reasons for the stepmother's distance from her stepdaughter.

In the social actor's statements, the subject position of the stepmother who disappoints by not behaving like the ideal mother has been constructed. Alongside this construction is the subject position of the unhappy stepfamily where family members have not integrated.

Stepmother as a loyal friend and confidant

Research indicates that step-parents often support their step-children in various ways [24]. Our study also supports that the experience of a stepmother can have positive effects that bring meaning to the stepchild's life. The peace that arises in relationships where there is mutual love and harmony between stepmother and stepchild encompasses all family members.

She was my confidant, my companion in troubles, she covered for my father's shortcomings, she spoke to me with love and affection, and whenever I felt down, she always responded to my calls and kept me connected to the world. Her spiritual strength was very strong; when I was upset about something, feeling down, and called her, even if she was upset, angry, or in a bad mood, she would cheer me up with a smile and keep me connected to life. My sister never said 'This is your father's daughter,' she said, 'This is your sister.' 'Respect your sister, don't upset her when she comes...' She cooked what I desired, she knew how to sew and tried to sew models that I liked... There was never any jealousy between us. She secretly sewed clothes for my dowry and met my needs from my father. She really stretched her wings, gave me lessons that prepared me for life, even about marriage' (G-VI).

From the conversation, it is understood that the social actor lacks emotional satisfaction in their relationship with their father. After G-VI's parents divorced, they remarried, and the participant grew up in their grandmother and grandfather's home. Having stayed briefly in their parents' homes at intervals, the participant did not feel a sense of belonging to their stepfamilies. G-VI describes their relationship with their stepmother with emotional intensity, stating that this relationship unfolded in a unique format ('Our relationship 'corrected what was wrong in fairy tales,' I can say.'). The social actor also mentions that their relationship with their

siblings from their stepmother is similar, indicating the stepmother's influence in establishing harmony and sibling bonds among the children ("She never said 'This is your father's daughter,' she said, 'This is your sister.' 'Respect your sister, don't upset her when she comes..."). The behaviors of the stepmother in question are directly opposite to the existing cultural construction. The effort of G-VI's stepmother in preparing the dowry contrasts with G-I's experiences. Experienced during the same time periods, these two relationships illustrate different extensions of step motherhood. In the social actor's statements, the subject position of the stepmother who loves and protects her stepdaughter like her own child has been constructed.

Complex negative emotions in stepchildren

Research indicates that stepchildren often experience complex emotional states independent of their stepmothers' attitudes and behaviors. 'But there's something like, I always felt like she was going to take my father away from me, you know... Like she was always going to take him away from me and I would be left completely alone. At that time, I always had this jealousy. Actually, when I remember those times, the feeling that surrounds me the most is a feeling of regret. I mean, after I got married, I understood some things, having constant unhappiness in a person's home is not something tolerable. I also feel regret sometimes because I caused some of those unhappiness.'(G-VII) G-VII, married and a mother of two children, began to question her behavior towards her stepmother after getting married and becoming a mother herself. Raised in her grandmother's home with her father's intense love and never experiencing maternal love, she initially felt jealousy, followed by feelings of regret. The metaphor of stealing in her statements refers to a childlike fear of losing her father and the impulse to protect him. The arrival of a new person in the home, expected to act like a mother even though she isn't, potentially disrupts the established relationship. The fear of losing her father converging with feelings of jealousy led to behaviors that undermined the possibility of happiness in the new family. The father, in an effort not to upset his daughter, neglected his new wife and their son, resulting in unequal treatment. After getting married and becoming a mother, G-VII recognized the destructive nature of her past behaviors and now grapples with feelings of guilt and regret. In G-VII's narrative, the construction of the stepchild subject position is shaped by regret over jealous behaviors in childhood. The other participant who expressed jealousy towards their stepmother is G-V. 'I used to feel a bit jealous because I think I loved my dad a lot back then. I wished for their separation, I prayed for it. I wanted my own mom and dad to be together. I wanted to see that family, my mom and dad together in our home... I had this wish. But I didn't harbor any resentment towards her. As I grew up, I understood the situation more; my mom's demeanor, her presence next to me affected me. I don't remember ever saying a negative sentence about not seeing my dad or not seeing that woman. I think it's about my mom's demeanor. It comforted me and deep down, I understood the situation. It's just a childish thing, I know and understand things, yet I still continue to wish for it, but not forcefully. Just like a dream, a dream that won't come true.' (G-V). In G-V's statements, despite not perceiving any negative attitude from her stepmother, there is a jealousy stemming from the desire to see her biological parents together. In her fantasy world fueled by the longing to be with her biological mother and father in a cohesive family, feelings of jealousy come to the surface. However, due to the healthy behavior of her biological mother, this emotion hasn't caused deep turmoil for the participant. The emotional and behavioral balance within her familial bonds has allowed the feeling of jealousy to remain a childish effect.

In the participant's statements, the construction of the subject position of a stepchild yearning to see her biological mother and father together is evident. Ultimately, it can be said that the emotional constructions

observed in stepmothers and stepchildren occur in parallel planes, with mutual or similar emotions emerging in reciprocal relationships.

Findings: This study was conducted to explore the emotional experiences of women in stepmother roles and to compare the emotions of stepdaughters with those of stepmothers. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven women, comprising six who were married with children and one who was unmarried and childless, all of whom had experienced being stepmothers. The data were analyzed using discourse analysis. The findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

Emotional confusion and isolation: Stepdaughters often feel isolated and marginalized within the family due to the presence of new stepmothers. This situation arises not only from the behaviors of stepmothers but also from the attention and affection fathers show towards their new spouses. Participants expressed experiencing negative emotions such as loneliness, guilt, shame, doubt, anger, and disappointment in their roles as stepchildren within blended family structures. For instance, one participant expressed feelings of disappointment and loneliness when her father gave a gift to her stepmother.

Jealousy and competition: Feelings of jealousy and competition are common between stepmothers and stepchildren. Stepchildren often envy the attention their fathers give to their new spouses and stepsiblings, leading to emotional conflicts. One participant mentioned that her stepmother envied her academic achievements and created an unhealthy environment by comparing her with other siblings.

Negative family dynamics: Negative relationship dynamics between stepmothers and stepchildren contribute to overall family unhappiness and discord. Some participants noted that their relationships with stepmothers exacerbated intra-family conflicts. According to participants, stepmothers often feel distant and prejudiced against by biological children and other family members.

Positive experiences and gratitude: Despite mostly negative experiences, some participants reported developing positive relationships with their stepmothers and expressed gratitude towards them. For example, one participant mentioned feeling safe and supported by her stepmother, who provided love and encouragement. This suggests that mutual acceptance between stepmothers and stepchildren can yield positive outcomes.

Comparison of emotions: The emotions of stepmothers and stepdaughters are interconnected and mutually influential.

Evaluation: The profound changes in family structure result in new dynamics that are supported by various theoretical foundations. Families, functioning as emotional units, undergo systematic changes with the addition of new members. The process of adapting to this new environment and new forms of relationships varies among individuals.

According to Mashile, Mudau, and Ncube, all members of blended families consider themselves essential to the family structure but feel sidelined by others [12]. This finding is supported by the research. Existing literature indicates that stepmothers often feel isolated and lonely upon entering an established family structure, finding their integration efforts thwarted [4,12,21,22,25]. The research also reveals similar emotional states among stepdaughters: they feel excluded and powerless after the arrival of a stepmother, which prompts feelings of loneliness and a motivation to distance themselves from home.

The study confirms previous findings in the literature that negative relationships with step-parents and the presence of step-siblings adversely affect young people's acceptance of the new family. Awareness of the problems in blended family structures reduces disappointment and pain among family members, facilitating healthier problem resolution, a finding supported by this study [2]. According to Landry, satisfaction and contentment in marriages with stepchildren are low, a finding corroborated by the research. One participant, recognizing her privileged position in the family, noted her stepmother's perpetual unhappiness. As a married woman with children, she now understands her stepmother's unhappiness and expresses remorse about it.

The study reveals that participants in blended family roles as stepchildren experience negative emotions such as loneliness, guilt, shame, doubt, anger, and disappointment. These findings suggest that the emotional states of stepdaughters parallel those of stepmothers [2,4,21,22,25]. According to the literature, stepmothers often struggle with feelings of not belonging and being unaccepted in their new families, a problem similarly experienced by stepdaughters in this study [16]. The tense relationship and intensity of negative emotions between stepmothers and stepdaughters stem from both parties vying for recognition as the family's core member. Additionally, marital competition between spouses and the distribution and use of financial resources within the family exacerbate this negative environment, a finding supported by the research [12]. Existing literature also suggests mutual solidarity between stepmothers and stepdaughters and their positive roles in relationships between stepchildren and their fathers [24]. This finding is corroborated by our study, where one of the seven participants reported establishing a relationship with her stepmother based on mutual love, respect, and solidarity.

Current literature indicates that stepdaughters whose lives are made difficult by stepmothers experience negative effects on their academic performance and may even drop out of school [9]. Conversely, our research reveals the opposite: two participants, marginalized due to their stepmothers' jealousy and lacking paternal support, were spurred to achieve success. These participants are currently academics who have achieved superior performance, attained economic prosperity, and established independent lives at an early age.

Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the significant role of societal cultural habitus in the emotional constructions of women experiencing stepmotherhood. In families undergoing systematic changes due to the addition of new members, emotional turmoil between stepmothers and stepchildren complicates intra-family harmony. In this context, the study's conclusions can be summarized as follows:

Cultural construction and stereotypes: Step motherhood is a concept marked by historical and cultural construction. Social stereotypes hinder the integration of stepmothers into families, leading to their isolation. Therefore, there is a need to reassess the cultural construction surrounding step motherhood.

Supportive programs and education: Implementing periodic programs that dismantle cultural constructions can assist in fostering healthy relationships in blended families. Therapeutic support programs tailored for stepmothers and stepchildren can be effective in resolving emotional conflicts.

Increasing awareness and consciousness: Initiatives aimed at increasing awareness and consciousness among family members can reduce emotional turmoil. Developing educational programs that strengthen relationships between stepmothers and stepchildren and alleviate negative emotions is crucial.

Intra-family communication: Strengthening intra-family communication can mitigate negative emotional states between stepmothers and stepchildren. Open and honest communication can help family members better understand and accept each other.

Limitations of the study

The study's primary limitation is the small sample size of participants. The similarity in educational backgrounds and cultural backgrounds among participants limited diverse perspectives on the subject. A broader sample including participants from diverse educational, cultural, and economic backgrounds could have provided more comprehensive and varied data.

Recommendations for future research:

- Conducting research with a diversified sample based on cultural differences, economic status, and educational levels will contribute to the field.
- Anticipating the influence of economic status on blended family dynamics. Focusing on dynamics in extremely wealthy and poor families will yield unique data.
- Investigating the effects of living in rural versus urban areas, and the socio-cultural values and environment's impact on blended families, is an original research area.

Author's contribution

Existing research predominantly focuses on the emotions and thoughts of stepdaughters, leaving a significant gap in literature. This study contributes by highlighting that women exposed to stepmother jealousy and bullying develop contrary responses and achieve superior success. Another contribution to the literature is revealing regret among stepdaughters who, contrary to the dominant paradigm, are cherished by their fathers and other family members, yet unjustly treated by their stepmothers.

Key Message

Every individual deserves a peaceful and happy life. A welfare state should implement more comprehensive measures for stepfamilies experiencing deprivation.

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