Review

Where Is the Research about Stepmothers? A Scoping Review

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Abstract: Developments in remarriage and divorce have led to an influx of research on stepfamilies. However, previous studies show that the experiences of stepmothers are underreported. Therefore, a scoping review of the currently available academic literature (2012–2022) on stepmother experiences was conducted to identify the way forward for future research. A final sample of 11 articles indicate that stepmother research is mainly WEIRD and qualitative. Stepmothers reportedly experience ambivalent emotions which they often deal with silently, whilst navigating ambiguous stepmother roles with possibly limited support or acknowledgement under the wicked stepmother stereotype. Counselling and research are encouraged to assist this forgotten member of the stepfamily. Gaps in research and further research opportunities are identified.

Keywords: blended family; remarriage; stepmothers; stepparents; stepfamily

1. Introduction

Divorce and marriage mirror societal changes and can influence a society's health, happiness and socioeconomic status [1]. Currently, a proportion of divorced people cohabitate or remarry [2], and globally there has been an increase in children born outside of marriage and raised by cohabiting or non-cohabiting parents [3]. Increases in remarriage can be seen in countries such as Iran [4] and China, where divorce has been normalized by society [5,6]. In Western countries, such as America, there are 10.5 million live-in stepchildren staying with stepfamilies [7]. Traditionally, a stepfamily is formed when a biological parent marries a person who is not the biological parent of their child [8,9]. Whereas cohabitation or living arrangements similar to stepfamilies instead of remarriage is referred to as the formation of a non-legal stepfamily [10]. The frequency of these non-legal stepfamily formations is often difficult to measure as households are surveyed as single or cohabiting [11]. Nonetheless, new roles and family structures through co-parenting, where either parents or stepparents can fulfil parental responsibilities, are created [12]. Due to societal changes, child custody agreements have changed over the years where mothers do not automatically gain full custody of their children due to courts' increased flexibility, fathers' uptake in childcare and more women joining the workforce [13,14]. In the past, the maternal preference rule was applied by the courts as it was assumed that the mother was the primary caregiver. Continued research, especially in the field of attachment theory, challenged this notion and courts had to revise this rule [15]. Therefore, research on stepfamilies should be more inclusive of new family formations such as those formed from the dissolution of a cohabitation agreement, same-sex couples or families in different custody agreements [10].

Behavioral expectations and roles of stepparents are unclear [16]. According to Cohen, 2015 [17] "the informal rules and customs are being figured out as we go" between members of a stepfamily (p. 376). Despite parenting roles being less actively engaged in by stepparents compared to biological parents [18], stepparents play an integral role in family functioning and their relationship with their stepchildren can determine the survival of a remarriage [18,19]. A 20-year longitudinal study by Hetherington (2003) showed that the relationships between members of a blended family could influence the well-being of

family members, protection against the adverse effects of divorce and the well-being and marriages of the generations that follow. According to [18], the cause of stepfamily formation (e.g., death of a spouse), as well as the quality of the stepcouple's relationship, can determine the quality of stepparent–child relationships [20]. Biological fathers often select partners to fulfil the role of care provider to their children [5]. It can therefore be difficult for stepmothers to resist the mothering role under the limited involvement expected of them from other members of the blended family [21]. Studies on stepmothers have reported experiences of powerlessness [22], more stress than their stepfather counterparts, higher rates of depression and anxiety than biological mothers [23], family conflict due to cultural expectations [24] and growing pains in adjusting to their new roles [25]. Despite these experiences, research in father–stepmother households remains scant [18,23]. This is due to earlier research that focused on the mother–stepfather homes, where children typically resided [10]. However, as family structures and custody agreements have changed over time, a review of the current research on the experiences of stepmothers is merited.

Previous reviews by Coleman et al., 1990 [26] and Coleman et al., 2000 [27] focused on remarriage and stepfamilies in general. They found that most published research explored stepchildren experiences and used problem-oriented approaches in comparing first families to stepfamilies. Nielsen, 1999 [28] narratively reviewed the factors that cause stress in stepmothers, especially compared to those experienced by stepfathers. The review indicated that the following factors promoted stepmother stress: society's view of motherhood, the biological mother's circumstances, personality and attitudes; the father's relationship with the birth mother and his attitudes toward childrearing and lastly, the stepchildren's mental health and gender. Nielsen, 1999 [28] concluded that more should be undertaken to assist and understand stepmothers, considering that 13 million women in the United States of America were fulfilling this role at the time. Gates et al., 2019 [22] stated that the biological mother's interference and control in the lives of the father and newly established household are a crucial source of heightened stepmother anxiety. van Eeden-Moorefield and Pasley, 2012 [10] further reported that many stepmothers chose befriending or mentoring stepchildren and acted as a relationship liaison for the father–child relationship [29]. Lastly, van Eeden-Moorefield and Pasley, 2012 [10] listed that stepmothers experienced role confusion, mainly due to the wicked stepmother stereotype [30]. The current research confirms that stepmothers are still overshadowed by this negative cultural narrative [21]. Many women who join blended families have little resources to guide them in their mothering role [31].

Experiences of parenting can be impacted by intrapsychic factors within the parent themselves. One such factor that plays an important mediating role in the parenting experience is the parent's attachment representation [15]. Similarly, attachment histories of stepmothers also color the experiences with their stepchildren. Ceglian et al., 2000 [32] investigated the role that attachment played in the "wicked stepmother" spiral and found that stepmothers with secure and anxious attachments more frequently reported negative experiences in the stepmother role. Those with a more anxious attachment tended to feel that they were investing more in the relationships with their stepchildren than they were receiving back. They also experienced more unappreciation, resentment and anger about the situation, compared to stepmothers with secure attachments. It was also noted that stepmothers with both secure and anxious attachment had the desire to be loved and therefore tried to avoid the label of the wicked stepmother and in turn they did not allow themselves to feel the resentment or to treat their stepchildren unfairly. The stepmothers often negated their own feelings to keep the family happy. Stepmothers in this study who had more avoidant attachment styles felt lower levels of inadequacy and insecurity compared to those with anxious attachments, but they had higher levels of resentment and were more prone to unfairly treat their stepchildren.

Renegar et al., 2019 [31] reviewed the advice given to stepmothers from navigating their new roles by using data from self-help books. Their study showed that stepmothers are often portrayed as secondary to biological mothers whilst still being expected to perform

intensive mothering to their stepchildren. These self-help books depicted stepmothers as tricksters who deceive themselves and others into believing they are "real" mothers, often exposed in family dynamics to be untrue, leading to negative stepmother experiences [31]. Stepmother experiences are portrayed as making peace with being "lesser-than caregivers" who are still required to perform mothering and place their stepchildren's needs above their own ([31], p. 529). Renegar et al., 2019 [31] call on scholars to contribute to the research on stepmothering in how it is defined, characterized and aimed at specific groups (white, heterosexual, Christian and affluent women). The currently available literature does not meet the needs of the stepmother audience. It highlights the lack of information and inadequacies of available resources to assist this (growing) population of parents [31]. Another study published in 2019 reported being the first to explore the stepmother experiences with co-parenting in joint custody families [22]. Gates et al., 2019 [22] concluded that stepmothers experience difficulty in the mother–father–stepmother relationship, internal stepmother role struggles and perceive the mother as powerful and themselves as powerless. This study also encouraged further research into the perceptions and experiences of stepmothers.

A preliminary search on the databases of Google Scholar, Scopus and ScienceDirect using the terms "stepmother AND review" on the 30th of December 2021 delivered no systematic or scoping reviews that focus on stepmother experiences specifically. MEDLINE and Pubmed also showed no current or existing scoping reviews on the subject of stepmother experiences as part of their stepfamily. Previous similar reviews, as noted above, have focused on non-scholarly data sources [31], are outdated (see [26,27]) or focus on other aspects of stepparenting or stepfamily life. Thus, this scoping review aims to assess the extent of the academic literature on stepmother experiences as part of their blended families. To this end, the research question was: What academic research is available on stepmother experiences as part of blended families?

Specifically, the current study aimed to create an overview of reported stepmother experiences, identify the population characteristics, examine how research is conducted and finally identify gaps in the current research and possible future research opportunities. Stepfamily research studies and results change over time [10,27]. An overview of stepmother experiences is merited considering the changes in custody agreements [13,14,33], family structural changes [3], the reported negative experiences of stepmothers [22] and calls for more research on stepmothers from previous studies [10,22,31]. Currently, the available research is also said to focus on primarily WEIRD (White, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) samples [31]. An overview of studies' samples can provide insight into sample composition and indicate future research needs for different samples. Lastly, this study will answer the call for more research on stepmothers.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

A scoping review design was followed to search available evidence, identify the boundaries or concepts that underpin research and identify new research opportunities [34]. This design is growing in popularity and can map evidence through presenting the characteristics, volumes and nature of available articles [35,36]. Thus, scoping reviews are indicated for studies that aim to identify the types and breadth of research available on a topic, analyze knowledge gaps and examine how research is conducted [37], concurring with the aim of this study. The Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Manual for evidence synthesis through scoping review methodology and the Systematic Reviews and Meta-analyses extension for scoping review (PRISMA-ScR) (Figure 1) was applied. The philosophical underpinning of this study was pragmatism to create shared meaning and action by using the review method as the best method to address the research question to solve a practical, real-world problem, namely mapping research on stepmother experiences [38]. Thus, this paradigm allowed the reviewers to effectively answer the research question by producing the appropriate consequences of inquiry, namely a review of the literature [39].
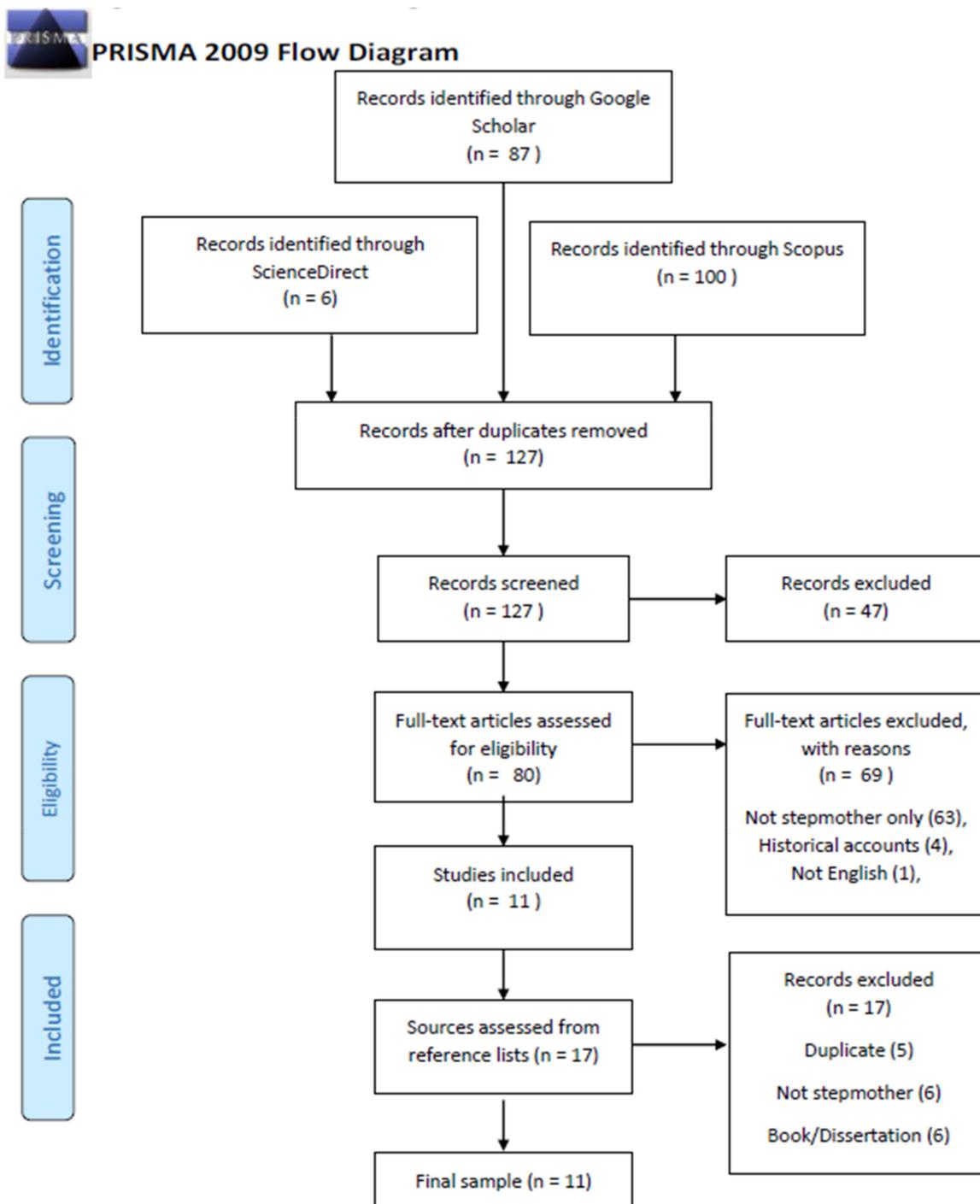
PRISMA 2009 Flow Diagram

Figure 1. Prisma 2009 Flow Diagram.

2.2. Sampling

The following bibliographic databases were searched for relevant articles: ScienceDirect, Google Scholar and Scopus. Zotero [40] was used to log relevant articles for full-text analysis against the inclusion criteria. Search terms included keywords associated with stepmothering and blended families, e.g., "stepmother" OR "stepmom" OR "blended family" OR "joint parenting" OR "co-parenting" OR "stepfamily". The PRISMA-ScR flow diagram visually presents the selection of articles [41]. A sample of 193 studies was collected through database screening, duplicates were removed and title and abstract screening was conducted which resulted in 80 articles for full-text screening. A final sample of

11 articles was included for data analysis. The included article reference lists were checked for additional studies [35]; however, the only articles relevant to the study aim were duplicates of the included sample.

Articles that were excluded were noted and reasons for their exclusion documented. The two researchers acted as reviewers to screen titles for inclusion [34]. Any disagreements between the two reviewers were discussed, recorded and a third reviewer was consulted to resolve differences. The review protocol was based on the JBI scoping review protocol, the PCC (Population, Concept and Context) eligibility criteria were applied when searching for studies. The population was stepmothers in legal or non-legal stepfamily structures (there was no restriction on demographic, location or custody agreement). The experiences of this population in their role as stepmothers was the concept under study, and the context was reasonably open, focusing broadly on blended families with no limitations on sample race or geographic location of the studies. Only academic peer-reviewed articles published in English during 2012–2022 were considered for inclusion. Time and language limitations are the most common limitations placed on scoping reviews [41].

2.3. Data Analysis

After the sample selection, and removal of duplicate studies, the reviewers analyzed the data using an extraction sheet [42]. This iterative datasheet was based on that identified by [35] and adapted for this current study's aim. The reviewers piloted the data extraction sheet and adapted it during the initial stage of article collection [35]. Any changes to the datasheet were documented throughout the analysis process. Descriptive qualitative content analysis was applied to the sampled articles to create categories through coding data and establishing frequency counts [34]. The priori framework or data extraction sheet was applied to chart findings from studies [43]. As per the scoping review design, the purpose was not to synthesize or appraise study findings but rather descriptively map findings to showcase the experiences of stepmothers [34]. Frequency counts were also added where appropriate; for example, to indicate sample characteristics (for example, how many sampled were WEIRD).

Four steps for content analysis in review studies were applied for data analysis [35,44,45]:

Step 1: Data collection as indicated under data collection section.

Step 2: Coding of collected data, will be conducted by following a coding scheme in accordance with the study objective.

Step 3: Analysis of codes, will consist of charting the information from the included studies and creating groupings or themes of these codes.

Step 4: Interpretation of codes, will be conducted by presenting a narrative and numerical account of stepmother experiences.

2.4. Research Procedure

The scoping review was conducted following the framework for scoping studies designed by Peters, 2017 [42], which is an extension of the framework created by Arksey and O'Malley, 2005 [35]. The following three steps were followed as the search strategy of this study. First, an initial search of two relevant databases was conducted to analyze the titles, abstracts and text in order to identify index terms that describe these articles. A second search was then undertaken utilizing the indexed terms and keywords across all the specified databases. Thirdly, the reviewers surveyed all included full-text articles' reference lists for possible relevant articles.

2.5. Rigor

Scoping review rigor was upheld by the following [46]: Firstly, the applicability of the review in answering the research question was assessed through the literature and applying the online tool https://whatreviewisrightforyou.knowledgetranslation.net/ (accessed on 1 January 2022) [47]. Secondly, the review was conducted by trained reviewers. Both reviewers have also read extensively on the chosen review method and research

framework [46]. Thirdly, the reviewers devised a clear and replicable methodology to execute (PRISMA-ScR and scoping review framework) and present their study (narratively, tables and graphs) to promote study quality. To assist in study selection, the reviewers have selected the JBI guidelines for scoping reviews and the presented data extraction sheet. Finally, the reviewers stayed true to the chosen review design and study by remaining aware and reporting its limitations (especially compared to systematic reviews) and upholding the aim.

3. Results

A final sample of 11 articles was analyzed to determine stepmothers' experiences as part of stepfamilies. All included articles utilized a qualitative research method with grounded theory and narrative designs as the most popularly applied research designs (e.g., [22,48]) (Table 1). Online communities, narratives and interviews were used to collect data from the stepmother population (Table 1).

Table 1. Methodology.

Authors	Design	Data Collection
[49]	Inductive approach	Messages posted to an online social support group
[50]	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	Semi-structured interview
[23]	-	Focus groups—interview questionnaire
[51]	Feminist family science approach	Interviews
[52]	Grounded theory	Semi-structured interviews
[21]	-	Online questionnaire
[12]	Narrative	Semi-structured interviews
[25]	Autoethnographic study	Personal narrative
[22]	Grounded theory	Semi-structured interviews
[53]	Synthetic narrative–discursive approach	Semi-structured face-to-face interviews and forum
[48]	Narrative approach	Writing a story

Table 2 presents the sample characteristics of the articles and shows that generally, stepmother samples included a mean size of 28 stepmothers who ranged in age from 21 to 73 years and were females from mostly Western countries. Despite various articles referring to the importance of stepfamily composition (i.e., time married, custody arrangements, biological children, etc.), only three articles collected sample information on all these influencing factors (see [23,25,52]). Sixty-three percent of studies indicated stepmother–father partnership duration, which ranged from 1–38 years of partnership. Seventy-two percent of the studies noted the custody arrangements of stepchildren, ranging from joint, full and limited visitations for fathers. However, the majority of stepmother samples saw their stepchildren regularly either through some or all stepchildren living with them full-time or in joint custody arrangements (e.g., [12,50,52]). A few studies had samples following other arrangements such as seeing stepchildren only a few days a month (e.g., [23]) or only on weekends (e.g., [12]). Some articles included stepmothers with an array of custody arrangements, whilst others only had stepmothers with specific custody arrangements (e.g., [22]).

Additional sample demographics such as sexual orientation were omitted in all but one article that identified stepmothers as heterosexual [22], whilst the remainder of articles all referred to partners as men, fathers and husbands. Western cultural views were seen as a cultural influence in sample experiences and were linked to behavioral expectations of stepmothers and were referred to in varying degrees as an essential factor in shaping stepmother experiences in nine of the studies (e.g., [50,52]).

The included articles showed cognizance of the lack of demographic information provided in their studies by listing the lack of data on the stepfamily composition; for example, the stepchild age or amount [49] as a study limitation. Furthermore, small sample size, generalizability [22], method [21] and limited sample diversity on socioeconomic

status, ethnicity or type of stepmother [12] were also identified as shortcomings of the studies. Lastly, bias was considered as a possible limitation. The researchers reflected on how they may have influenced the study as a stepmother themselves [22] or that only stepmothers who had specific experiences took part in the study [21]. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings from the current review.

Table 2. Sample characteristics.

Authors	Country	Sample Size	Age Range	Age Mean	Stepchild Amount	Years Partnered	Biological Children	Race
[49]	Online sample	25	-	-	-	-	0%	-
[50]	Canada	12	-	37.46	1.89 ***	12.13 **	91%	-
[23]	United Kingdom	12	30–69	40.3	1–4	2–31	60%	-
[51]	USA *	8	41–50	-	-	1–25	50%	White
[52]	USA	23	26–47	37	1–4	2–28	52%	95.5% Caucasian, 4.5% African America
[21]	New Zealand	134	21–57	37	1–6	-	44%	92% European, 11% Māori, 2% Pacific Islander, 2% Asian
[12]	Rio de Janeiro	16	28–43	36.7	1–5	2–14	68%	-
[25]	Australia	1	-	-	3	-	100%	-
[22]	Online sample	8	30–55	-	1–3	1–15	75%	White
[53]	Online sample/ not stated	13	-	-	-	-	-	-
[48]	Finland	58	23–73	41	-	1–38	85%	-

* Country: Country was not stated openly. ** Years partners: Only mean age was given. *** Stepchild amount: Only mean stepchild amount was given.

Research topics focused on stepmothers establishing their role and place in the family [48,50,52], co-parenting and stepchild experiences [12,22,25,51], communicating about their experience (Craig et al., 2012; Roper et al., 2020), feelings of anxiety [23] and coping with the wicked stepmother stereotype [21]. Table 3 shows stepmothers' experiences as reported in the findings of the included studies.

Table 3. Stepmother experiences.

Authors	Aim	Stepmother Experience
[49]	Childless stepmothers' discussions regarding their stepfamilies	• Coping through support from other stepmothers • Powerless in decision-making • Guilt in wanting father but not stepchildren • Lack of support
[50]	How gender-typing processes inform our understanding of the stepmother role construction process, and its link with stepfamily adjustment	• Challenges in partner communication, family acceptance, support, role validation, enforcing boundaries and territorial issues with biological mother • Androgynous types show more flexibility and see challenges as a test of resilience; feminine types felt victimized, dismissed and rejected as they try to establish a "biological" family • Stepmother's self-esteem and efficacy were influenced by personal relationships (feminine) and career aspects outside of the household (androgynous) • Feminine stepmothers adjusted better when able to create a traditional nuclear family • Past experiences influence stepmothers' identification with gender roles

Table 3. *Cont.*

Authors	Aim	Stepmother Experience
[23]	Experiences of stepmothers and factors related to their anxiety in the stepfamily	• Anxiety with regard to biological mother (powerlessness, jealousy, seeking approval and exclusion, different morals), stepchildren (conflicting morals, desire to be liked and acknowledged, questioning parental abilities) and stepmother role (lack of role models, control, definition and identity) • Negative coping strategies: withdrawal from stepchildren and no relationship with biological mother • Positive coping strategies: communicating with the spouse, understanding from other members' perspectives, control in own home and accepting existing relationships
[51]	Experience of stepmotherhood	• Isolated, unsupported, frustrated, acting as primary caregiver • Unprepared to become a stepmother • Rule enforcer • Rewarding experience
[52]	Transition to stepmotherhood experiences of women without children	• Stepmothers who desire to become mothers themselves are placed within the problematic situation of having to be lower-rung mothers in the stepfamily • Guilt that prevents them from acknowledging the sadness and grieving process of letting go of their images of what their family life would be like • Ambivalence in the loss of the imagined family and love for the new family • Extreme vigilance and turmoil in trying to present their experiences balanced: both positive and negative • Silent struggle in adjusting to the loss of imagined family
[21]	Stepmothers' experiences of the wicked stepmother stereotype	• Identify with stereotype when feeling negative toward stepmother role or stepchildren when unappreciated, unacknowledged and jealous, which led to guilt and shame • Permissive fathers placed disciplining children onto stepmothers and reinforced feelings of the wicked stepmother • Stigmatized and dismissed by others (e.g., courts) • Ambiguity in stepmother role • Stigmatized, undermined and devalued by biological mother
[12]	Stepmothers' perceptions about their relationship with their stepchildren	• Relationships with stepchildren were built cautiously and slowly not to invade relationship between father and child • Parents determine access and the relationship between stepmother and children • Cohabitation increases the stepmother's involvement in educating children • Ambivalence and required to be flexible and sensitivity to changing parental role
[25]	Sonia's experiences as a stepmother	• Fairy tale idea of the family caused conflict • Growing pains (role confusion, honest communication) of adjusting to new self-image as a stepmother
[22]	Stepmothers' co-parenting experiences with mothers in joint custody families	• Total lack of cooperative co-parent relationship with biological mother • A superficial low, conflict relationship was established between stepmother and the birth mother • Internal struggle and a lack of external support for stepmothers • Five-step process to adapt to stepfamily: honeymoon phase, the stepping back phase, the searching for the voice and role clarity phase, the acceptance phase and the focus on the relationship to the stepchildren phase

Authors	Aim	Stepmother Experience
[53]	Stepmother challenges and how they talk about their (male) partners	• Stepmothers construct men as hapless, helpless or hopeless to repair their position as a stepmother who has little control or choice of what happens in her life • Men are presented as in need of help and rescue from financial difficulties (counteracting gold digger or wicked stepmother stereotypes), failed fathers and hopeless in managing relationships • Acting to help the fathers may also allow women to make decisions for which they fear criticism and to establish themselves as the true love • Challenge to fulfil gendered roles yet still unappreciated by husbands and children
[48]	How stepmothers construct and negotiate their belonging in stepfamilies	• Threatened by biological mother • Belonging types were identified as: (a) weak sense of belonging was due to biological mother conflict and control over access to children, (b) dyadic stepmother–stepchild relationship was formed through emotional closeness between stepmother and child, and (c) spousal relationship as focal dyad and couple working as a team of which children were a part of • Ambivalence in relationships with stepchildren • Tried to combat the wicked stepmother myth

From the article findings, the following salient themes highlight stepmother experiences:

Role ambiguity: Studies reported on stepmothers' role ambiguity [21] and described their attempts and experiences in defining and negotiating their place in the family. Some of the factors that influenced role ambiguity were parental control by biological mothers and fathers [48], gender roles [53], personal and past experiences [25,50], support and acknowledgement [49]. An example of role ambiguity includes stepmothers reporting being placed in positions by fathers, children and their own expectations or upbringing to fulfil a gendered role (mother role) or perform parental or financial duties but receiving limited recognition and appreciation and, at times, rejection [21,48,53]. In addition to the difficulties stepmothers face in defining their role in the family, researchers also reported the types of belonging and processes followed by stepmothers to adjust to their position in the family [22,48]. Roper et al., 2020 [53] shine a light on how stepmothers identified their place in the family by constructing their partners as hapless and helpless, thus being in need of saving and their (stepmother) assistance. Finally, Cann-Milland and Southcott, 2018 [25] reported a positive experience of how a stepmother developed her self-identity. Their study shows a stepmother establishing her place in the stepfamily through adjusting her fairy tale family view, relinquishing control, considering the experiences of all family members in forming a blended family.

Feelings of ambivalence: Most studies referred to some form of ambivalence experienced by stepmothers in their role as stepmother [12], toward their husbands [50], adjusting to their new life [52] and in the relationship with their stepchildren [48]. For example, stepmothers experienced raising their stepchildren as rewarding and very challenging [51]; they felt ambivalent toward husbands when their contributions were not supported or acknowledged [50] and had conflicting emotions about wanting their husbands but not their children [49]. Sanner and Coleman, 2017 [52] add that stepmothers' adjustment to their role and life as stepmothers was mainly characterized by feelings of ambivalence in grieving for their own images of family life and feeling joy in their new stepfamily.

Emotional experiences: Stepmothers experienced isolation, frustration and a lack of support, acknowledgement and control as part of their blended family. The most salient negative experience was a lack of support and recognition from spouses, stepchildren,

biological mothers and social systems [22,49,51,53]. Stepmothers who felt supported and acknowledged as part of the family had an increased sense of belonging [48] and interpreted the adjustment to stepfamily life as positive [21]. Some stepmothers saw the experience as rewarding when appreciated and worth the sacrifices they made to become stepmothers [51,52]. However, as Doodson, 2014 [23] explains, when stepmothers experience an imbalance in cost and reward when unappreciated or unrecognized for their contributions to stepchildren, they experience increased anxiety and distress [53].

The wicked stepmother stereotype: Having negative feelings toward stepchildren or the stepfamily situation also leads to most stepmothers feeling guilty [21,49,50,52]. This guilt was linked to the wicked stepmother stereotype. Stepmothers saw their unloving feelings, feeling wicked after disciplining children, calling themselves stepmothers and being depicted as wicked stepmothers by some biological mothers as an embodiment of the wicked stepmother stereotype [21,48]. The presence of the wicked stepmother stereotype was also observed in the stepmothers' expression of their stepmother experience. When discussing their experiences, stepmothers were cautious of staying clear of negative stepmother stereotypes and constantly engaged in self-evaluation and attempts to be perfect mothers.

Moreover, Sanner and Coleman, 2017 [52] indicated that their stepmother participants were " . . . visibly distraught . . . " (p.1474) in trying to suitably communicate their experience as a stepmother in a balanced manner with positives and negatives. At the same time, those stepmothers who experienced open communication with partners reported joy in being able to express their feelings to their husbands regarding their stepchildren [48]. However, in line with the limited support, stepmothers in the included studies generally indicated that they were left to deal with negative stepmother experiences silently [23,51,52].

Coping strategies: Most studies added coping strategies employed by stepmothers in coping with negative stepmother experiences. These include the use of sharing experiences with other stepmothers, spouses, family, friends and counselors were highlighted. However, researchers warned against the overuse of some strategies, such as withdrawing physically or emotionally from stepchildren or the biological mother [23] and social support from stepmother forums [49]. These strategies provided short-term relief from negative experiences such as anxiety [23] and allowed them to freely express their emotions and reflect on their experience in relation to other stepmothers' experiences [49]. However, prolonged withdrawal and engagement in social support forums may reinforce negative patterns and avoid conflict resolution. More positive coping strategies in dealing with challenges in stepfamily life identified by Doodson, 2014 [23] and Cann-Milland and Southcott 2018 [25] were communicating with spouses, controlling their own household and understanding things from others' perspectives. Flexibility and willingness to adapt their own family images and behavior [52] along with the spousal relationship was also a key positive coping strategy in supporting stepmothers to deal with stepmother stressors [22]. Additionally, research showed how stepmothers coped with the wicked stepmother stereotype through humor, support, avoiding stepmother identity and proving they are not wicked [21].

Strategies for improved stepmother experiences: Authors also recommended various strategies for stepmothers and clinical practice based on their research for improving stepmother experiences. For example, studies suggest a couple (possibly with the help of a professional) reconstruct and define a stepparental role together for a stepmother to be confident in her role [23,49]. Building a slow relationship with stepchildren and following the lead of the father is suggested, especially with regard to enforcing rules [51] and educating children [12]. Seeking help for negative experiences from professionals and spouses, as suggested above, over engaging with stepmother forums, which should be used for short-term anxiety relief and reflection [23,49]. Society and stepmothers' views of sex roles should be considered in counselling, forming stepfamily expectations, stepmother well-being and adaptation [50]. Interventions for accepting the biological mother and her role in parenting is encouraged as a positive coping mechanism [23]. Riness and Sailor, 2015 [51] and Sanner and Coleman, 2017 [52] also add that creating awareness of the role,

experiences and rewards of stepparenting can decrease the wicked stepmother myth for both stepmothers and society and thus normalize the negative experiences of stepmothers.

Experiencing conflict and negative emotions for stepmothers within the bilateral stepchild relationship should also be normalized [21]. Thus, clear role expectations, normalizing stepmother experiences and a supportive family atmosphere may allow stepmothers more freedom to seek support and voice their difficulties.

4. Discussion

A limited amount of articles was found that solely focused on stepmother experiences. These articles also utilized a single research method. They mainly included white, heterosexual female samples from Western countries, concurring with current concerns in psychology of over-sampling from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) samples. The limited amount of research extends [10] finding that there is a need for more research attention on stepmother experiences. Studies in the current review also highlight the difficulties faced by stepmothers and further place emphasis on the need for more academic research to explore and attempt to clinically support or remedy these difficult experiences. Providing support to stepmothers is especially important as a lack of empathetic responses to stressors increases stress and depression and promotes the risk of remarriage divorce [54]. Moreover, strong stepfamily relationships have positive outcomes for the stepfamily [55]. Therefore, future research using different research methods as well as larger diverse samples in determining stepmother experiences are encouraged. Furthermore, despite some stepmothers reflecting on their past and current experiences, the currently available research on stepmother experiences lacks information collected over time, such as the stepchild/stepfamily research by Ganong and Coleman, 2017 [18] and Papernow, 2013 [56]. Gaining insight into the development of stepmother experiences and related behavior over time may provide different information for interventions and counselling.

Rickards and McLeod, 2016 [57] describe being a stepmother as a delicate dance between establishing a bond with stepchildren and defining their role in the family. The current research shows that this dance is at times difficult and rewarding with contrasting inter- and intrapersonal factors which is filled with ambiguity and ambivalence. This ambiguous stepmother role echoes the current research [16] and supports [17] in that stepfamilies are in a constant process of finding their role over time or as they go along [17]. Despite research that a friendship style is more successful in most stepparent-stepchild relationships [58], the current review shows that some stepmothers are often placed in gendered, caretaking and disciplining roles by fathers, children, society and themselves. This finding also contrasts views that biological parents always play a more active role in parenting [18].

Engaging with these roles without support, and acknowledgement, under stepchild or biological mother conflict had a negative effect on the stepmother's experiences. Moreover, the stepmother's well-being was influenced by increased family stress, anxiety, powerlessness and hypervigilance in communication, concurring with older research [59]. Thus, when a family separates and forms new partnerships, the difficulties associated with divorce are not confined to the original family or the biological mother's new marriage but extend to the father's new partner, which should be recognized by clinicians, birth parents and society. The role of a stepmother was controlled by internal factors such as the stepmother's upbringing and gender typing [50], and external factors such as biological parents' control, the extent to which stepmothers have access to and can establish a relationship with stepchildren and society's view of stepfamilies. Roper et al., 2020 [53] found that some internal and external factors placed stepmothers in an impossible position to manage their role in the family. The influence of social expectations from the female gender and the wicked stepmother stereotype also enhanced this difficult task, and changing these expectations may improve stepmother experiences in the future. For now, however, stepmothers coped with this role on their own by withdrawing, seeking social support from

others, accepting their limited control and trying to see things from others' perspectives. Adapting, being flexible, the spousal relationship and perceiving a higher reward-than-cost ratio for their contributions can lead to a positive, rewarding stepmother experience [51,52]. More research is therefore encouraged on what constitutes a favorable cost–reward ratio for stepmothers. Additionally, research where stepmothers can describe their positive experiences may provide other stepmothers time to reflect on aspects that are favorable in their own stepfamily.

Despite some consideration of stepmothers' upbringing and gender types, no research was conducted on stepmother attachment or personality type as influencing factors on their experiences. Research is therefore encouraged to investigate these internal factors that may play a role in stepmother experiences. Additionally, external factors such as custody arrangement, culture and societal views were not always considered in studies. These external factors may influence stepmother experiences as custody arrangements determine the amount of time stepmothers have to build relationships with stepchildren and culture or societal views may provide a predetermined set of behaviors for stepmothers.

All blended family members have different experiences, which may influence how they react and behave in the family structure [25]. The complexity of navigating life in a blended or stepfamily [60] for stepmothers is exhibited by the stepmother experiences and recommended strategies reported by articles in this review. However, stepmother experiences do not take place within a vacuum [49], and despite their attempts to improve their experience, other members of the family and society also influence stepmothers' experiences and, consequently, their well-being.

5. Conclusions

It can be concluded that the stepmother's role consists of role ambiguity and emotional ambivalence. Receiving little support and freedom to voice negative experiences reinforces the wicked stepmother narrative, which is detrimental to stepmothers' well-being and can withhold the positive and rewarding experience of being a stepmother. Overall, stepmothers require more acknowledgement for their role in the stepfamily, couples should spend time formulating a clear stepmother role and the stepmother voice should be unsilenced by abolishing the wicked stepmother narrative. Supporting stepmothers in their complex and variable familial role may serve as an added resource for stepfamilies. More research is therefore called for in addressing stepmother experiences regarding interventions, internal and external influencing factors, experiences over time and studies from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

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