

Nearly one third of American children live in a stepfamily. Despite such ubiquity, we know precious little about how stepfamilies form, cohere, interact, and identify. That the stepfamily identities are socially unverified and often stigmatized is the major reason for the frequency of problems in stepfamilies. In this paper, which is a part of a larger ongoing study of the discursive construction of the stepmother identity, I examine the confessional discourse of Internet sites that have proliferated as troubled stepmothers seek out counsel in their difficult new role. Such discourses reveal the self- and other-positioning of individuals as they assume the stepparental role.

Through the methodological approach derived from discourse analysis (Schiffrin 1994), conversation analysis (Schegloff and Thompson 1996), and positioning theory (Harré and Langenhove 1999), I look into discursive patterns that indicate the influence of the stereotypical discourse on stepfamily, and the stepmother's position in it. I find that the stepmother's discourse is imbued by the societally pre-constructed definitions of the stepfamily. First, the stepfamily is invariably compared to the nuclear family (to the detriment of the former). Dominant social norms suggest certain points of view while discouraging others, further weakening those in roles of already lesser power – such as the stepmother. The customary perspective on the family that influences our thinking leads us to assume that stepparental roles are, or should aspire to be, parental-like (Gamache 1997). Such bias encourages misinterpretation of the stepmother and causes stepmothers to feel inadequate for not being able to be "real mothers".

Second, the stigma attached to the stepfamily, and especially to the stepmother, is perpetuated by language. Labels used to describe stepfamily ("non-natural family", "recycled family", "second-time around") and its members ("stepmonster") are imbued with stigma. Postmodern sensitivities instruct us that language is not neutral but rather carries social judgment and can obscure critical issues for less powerful groups (Gergen 1990). Language serves as the transmitter for myths and stereotypes that are carried into family communication, having a negative impact on self-perceptions and on a stepmother's identity. Consequently, an identity crisis impedes potential success in a stepfamily's integration and its members' positive self-identification.

Through the analysis of language used in the confessional discourse of stepmothers at Internet sites (for instance, [www.saafamilies.org](http://www.saafamilies.org), [www.secondwivescafe.com](http://www.secondwivescafe.com), [www.stepfamilyschool.com](http://www.stepfamilyschool.com)), I follow the path of the construction and negotiation of the stepmother's identity. The study contributes a new multimodal discursive approach to the construction of social identity, and incorporates linguistic positioning into the analysis of narrative discourse.

#### References:

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