

**“It Just Happened”: How Motherwork is Learned and Experienced by Canadian Stepmothers in an Online Support Group**

“It Just Happened”: How Motherwork is Learned and Experienced by Canadian Stepmothers in an Online Support Group, a thesis submitted to the Nova Scotia Inter-University Doctoral Administrative Committee and the Mount Saint Vincent University Graduate Studies Committee in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies

Halifax, Nova Scotia

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## Abstract

This doctoral dissertation study explores the ways in which Canadian stepmothers learn and experience “motherwork” through the negotiation of their role and their participation in an online support group. Life history interviews informed by literature around adult learning, motherwork, and stepmothering pointed to several sites and processes of learning and the factors impacting this learning which is explored as a digital community of practice. The public and private negotiation of motherwork as informed by traditional gender roles, and the Western ideology of mothering has a significant impact on role negotiation for stepmothers – women who are involved in the care of children not biologically their own. The goals of this study are to explore the experience of stepmothering from an adult learning perspective, to question and challenge the impact of traditional gender roles and mothering ideology for diverse families, and to explore the role of modern technologies (online support groups in particular) on the negotiation of traditional caring roles for stepmothers in Canada. This study expands the literature around adult learning, motherwork, stepmothering, and digital communities of practice.

*Keywords:* stepmother, motherwork, adult learning, gender, communities of practice.

*DEDICATION*

*To stepmothers, particularly those who took the time to share their experiences, their learning,  
their journeys, and their hopes with me.*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Many adult women in Canada and around the world claim the title of stepmother. Taking on this role is a significant learning experience, and while some may claim that this learning “just happens” naturally, I explore the active, dialogical, and reflective learning that these women engage in as they negotiate their role. Specifically, in this thesis I explore the ways in which Canadian stepmothers learn and experience “motherwork” through their role as stepmother and their participation in an online support group. For the purpose of this research, motherwork is defined as “the work of basic human care that contributes to the reproduction, nurture, and sustenance of children within households” (Barg, 2001, p. 5). From a Canadian perspective, recent decades have seen significant changes in norms related to both marriage and family formation in Canada, reflected in increased rates of divorce and remarriage (Milan, 2011). Another area of significant change has been the development and rapid growth of digital technologies. Social and cultural practices such as communication and learning have been significantly shaped by the ubiquitous nature of these tools (Shirky, 2008). These two seemingly separate topics are brought together in this research study focusing on the informal learning of stepmothers.

The main problem addressed in this dissertation, is that of the invisible labor and learning of stepmothers as they navigate their role in a non-traditional family. The unpaid caregiving work of women is invisible in Western society which is governed by capitalist and neoliberal values and systems. This unpaid caring labor takes on an additional layer of complexity for stepmothers who are performing this work for children who are not their own – often when the biological mother is still present in the children’s lives. The process of learning and negotiating this role of “stepmother” is rarely identified in learning contexts, and therefore, supports for

these women and their families in a formalized way are significantly lacking in society. An understanding of this role can inform spaces to foster learning and support for the increasing number of non-nuclear families in society.

Canada has roughly half a million stepfamilies (Vezina, 2011), and the numbers continue to grow. However, there is little to no stepfamily education in our schools, communities, or even therapy programs (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004), and little academic research that explores the learning of stepmothers. Digital tools such as websites, blogs, and social media applications have become learning tools intertwined with formal, non-formal, and informal learning occurring across the lifespan, and embedded in sociocultural practice throughout much of the world (Shirky, 2008). These fairly accessible tools have become sites of learning for some Canadian stepmothers, reflecting the characteristics of a digital community of practice (Wenger, 2014). In these spaces, ideas are shared and knowledge is shaped through participation. This research explores that learning along with other informal and experiential learning spaces that show the social construction of knowledge and identity.

This dissertation involves data collected through in-depth interviews, a review of relevant literature around adult education, motherwork, and stepfamily dynamics, and an analysis that explains digital communities of practice, informal and experiential learning. The motherwork literature emerges from feminist theory, which informs both this research and my personal ontological and epistemological standpoint. The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of how stepmothers learn their way into this complex caring role that differs from that of a mother in a nuclear family. With that information, I make recommendations around educational programming that supports all members of a stepfamily, and draws light to issues and challenges stepmothers face so they may know they are not alone.

This research contributes to feminist discourses of mothering and motherwork by expanding the existing body of knowledge to include the stepmother perspective, and it questions the social systems that reproduce and reinforce women's place in the role of caregiver. In addition, this research also questions the gendered perceptions of women's role as stepmothers, in a way that devalues their identities and relationships as well as their labour, as informed by Gouthro's (2005) exploration of learning in the homeplace. Gouthro (2017) refers to Jarvis' (2011) definition of learning as a "journey – a common metaphor – and the longer we travel on the way, the more we learn about it" (p. 47). She notes the importance of the lived experience, and believes that "the capacity of students to understand, negotiate and frame new meaning is always connected to their own biographies" (Gouthro, 2017, p. 47). We are situated learning individuals, and our past knowledge and experiences influence meaning-making.

### **Context/Background**

In the Western world over the past several decades, little has changed more than our sociocultural norms around marriage and family formation, where norms reflect general values and beliefs in a particular culture, and regulate behaviours associated with various roles (Turner, 1978). Dohrenwend (1959) as cited in Gibbs (1965), offers a "a generic definition [of the term "norm"]": 'A social norm is a rule which, over a period of time, provides binding on the overt behavior of each individual in an aggregate of two or more individuals...' (p. 587). These "norms" not only guide our behaviour, but shape what we expect in any given situation. For example, in Western society, we are socialized to believe that families reflecting nuclear (or first-time family) dynamics are normative, while other diverse family forms are not. This is in spite of the fact that in the United States, "[f]or every two weddings celebrated in a given year, a divorce becomes final. And within five years of divorcing, 89 percent of men and 79 percent of women

walk down the aisle again” (Wisdom & Green, 2002, p.1). Although Canada has a slightly lower divorce rate – fluctuating between 35 and 42 percent over the past twenty years (Milan, 2011) – there are still significant rates of divorce, as is the pattern in many other countries in the world. The valuing of nuclear families as normative may be slowly changing to reflect these diverse family structures, however, stepmothers are primarily navigating their role within a society that values nuclear families as most typical, or normative.

In a society where divorce rates continue to be high, the dissolution of marriages, particularly when partners are fairly young in age, and high rates of re-partnering, leads to the formation of stepfamilies and the practice of stepcoupling – the development and maintenance of a marriage where children are already involved. In a stepcouple situation, there is less time for the couple to solidify their initial bond, as they (along with the children) become a type of “instant family” without a shared history, but often with challenges around custody, access, finances, ex-husbands and wives, and different approaches to parenting. Katz (2010), a stepmother, discusses the complex reasons for stepfamily problems:

One contributing factor is that many of us are just not prepared for this role and have no idea how demanding the job can be... For many of us, affection for our new partners makes us turn a blind eye to potential problems down the road. We simply hope that our love will get us through... conventional wisdom suggests that time will help ‘blend’ family members into a cohesive unit. (p.1-2)

Stepmothers may question: Where do I fit into this new family? How often are the children going to be here? How can I bond with the children? What if I don’t like them? How much of our joint

income is going to the other household? These are hard questions to answer and hard topics to discuss with a partner as they involve his children, his ex-spouse, his money, and his parenting. Nevertheless, these problems are consistent among stepmothers (Newcomb Marine & Korf, 2013; Katz, 2010; Papernow, 2013), and many are seeking group support and opportunities to talk to and learn from others.

One space for this group support and learning is through participation in social media. Social media are a group of Internet-based applications building on Web 2.0 that allow user-generated content and that are used to share and discuss information. While the internet was originally developed as a space that could be used to disseminate information widely, Web 2.0 is “a second generation, or more personalized, communicative form of the World Wide Web that emphasizes active participation, connectivity, collaboration and sharing of knowledge and ideas among users” (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007, p.665). As part of this group of tools, Facebook is a social networking site where participants have uniquely identifiable profiles, where they can make public their connections to others, and, perhaps most importantly, where they can produce, consume and interact with user-generated content that is accessed by the participant’s connections (Ellison & boyd, 2013). Although these sites may be critiqued for their heavy connections to consumer society due to advertisements and marketing used to fund these “free spaces”, they still provide space for participants to express diverse perspectives, to engage in informal learning, and to participate in group discussions at a national or international level, regardless of the users’ geographic location. While online learning is not typically considered as a space for supporting highly emotive topics such as parenting and family dynamics, people often find support and community in these informal online spaces created through social media.

Adult educators have increasingly focused on social media as a site for learning, and on these digital tools as being used to facilitate learning. Social media tools are more than just Twitter and Facebook, but also include wiki software, blogs, webpage tools, sharing tools like Flickr and YouTube, and office tools like Google Apps. In a study of the use of social media in formal educational settings, Chen and Bryer (2012) found that these tools were primarily used to facilitate discussions and collaborative exercises. However, they also found that faculty expressed concerns over privacy and the quality of student-teacher relationships when using these tools. Lockyer and Patterson (2008) found that using social network sites in formal education resulted in positive learning outcomes for students, but that there were also important considerations such as professional vs. personal roles for faculty if they were to also engage in discussions using these tools. It appears that these tools certainly offer more interconnected ways of learning for students, but not without challenges or considerations for faculty.

In a discussion of social media as a way to integrate formal and informal learning, Dabbagh and Kitsantas (2011) note that while these tools have become integral to the university and college experience for many students, educational institutions remain primarily dependent on traditional learning systems and platforms for online education. With these traditional tools, the control is in the hands of the institution and the instructors, leaving less space for learners to express choice over their connections and educational activities. Dabbagh and Kitsantas discuss Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) as educational platforms that enable individuals to have greater control in their learning. PLEs are comprised of tools and services that learners can use to organize various learning content online, which is crucial as “learners should not be considered as passive information consumers; rather, they are active co-producers of content” (Dabbagh &

Kitsantas, p.1). Tools like these can be interpreted both as a technology and a self-directed pedagogical approach, integrating formal and informal learning (McGloughlin & Lee, 2010).

Selwyn (2007) believes social media is increasingly key to informal learning for people across various age groups, both at home and in the community, and presents a literature review to this point. Social media as an informal learning tool is a focus of this study, exploring the learning of stepmothers through a lens of motherwork. Motherwork is a socially constructed term that describes the activities and labour behind the caring and nurturing of children (Barg, 2001; Hart, 1992). There is a body of feminist literature that explores the ways that motherwork and mothering ideologies are learned. While this literature acknowledges diverse perspectives and practices of motherwork by factors of race, class, sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, and ability, one perspective consistently glossed over is that of the stepmother. This perspective is important to consider, as many women in this role participate in various levels of motherwork, but under very different circumstances and with different challenges to that of a biological mother.

Learning and navigating the labour associated with motherwork can occur informally, through engagement with family and community, as well as with various media. While traditional media are a powerful source of information around gender, family roles and expectations (Hayes, 2000), contemporary media outlets (such as social media) may provide a participatory space to learn and/or challenge these discourses. Learning through media engagement in this way can be a forum for public pedagogy, “spaces sites, and languages of education and learning that exist outside of the walls of the institution of schools” (Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010, p.1). Social media as a site for public pedagogy can be interpreted in numerous ways (Reid, 2010). Under the influence of neoliberal ideology, Giroux (2005) sees

public pedagogy used to further instill values of competition and self-interest for individual gain, and certainly social media are used for marketing, public relations, and gathering personal information by government and corporations. However, Giroux (2005) also calls for public spaces that foster critical thinking and empowerment as social agents, something that social media can be used to facilitate. These tools complicate the distinction between private and public, informal and formal. As Reid (2010) says, “the emergence of social media alters the cultural conceptions of public and private spaces in a manner that destabilizes the conventions that have allowed us to consider a ‘public pedagogy’ separated from formal schooling and other sites of learning” (p.195).

While these digital tools can complicate what we see as “sites of learning”, they are nevertheless ubiquitous in society, and can be used to bring previously private experiences into the public forum. They can be used to connect stepmothers across a vast country; to provide a space of learning, support, and relationship building. According to Newcomb Marine & Korf (2013), it is so important we understand newer family dynamics and support stepfamilies because “[o]ur family situations aren’t just some temporary pit stop on our way back to normality. This *is* the New Normal” (p.7). I believe this is reflective of the slow, but continued change in societal norms that are beginning to include more diverse family structures. With a divorce rate for second marriages higher than for first marriages – approximately 60-70% (Katz, 2010) – there is a clear need for support as we step, blend, and shift into the families of the future.

### **Choosing the Research Topic**

I came to this research topic primarily for personal reasons. My partner is divorced with two children, currently ages nine and eleven. As our relationship progressed, I found myself on a very steep learning curve – helping to care for two children who are not biologically mine, dealing with the issues that arise when someone is divorced and co-parenting, figuring out my role and setting boundaries, and being influenced by societal expectations of women as caregivers. It was all very overwhelming. I was invited to join a closed, private Facebook group for Canadian stepmothers, called *Canadian Stepping Stones*, and was shocked not only by the amount of people participating, but the frequency and depth of their conversations.

In this space, I could see women were engaging in valuable forms of informal learning around their role, family expectations, and the work of caring for children. As a woman and as a feminist, I found myself reflecting on the ways in which women who are stepmothers have been depicted in society and in the media, and how this connects with feminist theories around women as caregivers, mothering, and informal learning. This research topic builds on my previous research on the experience of academic mothers learning to negotiate the challenges of obtaining tenure while also engaged in mothering younger children (Careless, 2012), and on my writing around the practice of “mommy blogging” (Careless, 2016). A common thread in all of my work has been the focus on gendered experiences of learning for women, and this study is no exception to that theme.

I have found a lack of formal education and support for stepfamilies in Canada, and so decided to explore the informal learning of stepmothers, with a particular focus on learning through membership in a digital community of practice. This connects to my interest in lifelong learning using new technologies such as social media (Careless, 2015), and it is my aim that the research be used to inform possible education programming for stepfamilies, develop a feminist

analysis of motherwork learning for stepmothers, and build on discourse of informal learning using technology. This research could also inform professional education in a variety of fields – teachers and educators, social workers, lawyers, health care professionals, and family services.

In terms of the development of my research trajectory and interests, my focus on women's experiences began in my Master's degree, with research focused on the experience of women academics who are also mothers of young children. I was interested in the ways they perceived the challenges and supports available to them as academic mothers, juggling these two demanding roles. From there, I expanded my focus to include the ways that digital technologies can make public women's learning experiences. I wrote about Mommy Blogs as digital communities of practice, and the use of social media to foster critical discourses. I have always been focused on informal and experiential learning as important ways of making meaning from lived experience, and on the ways that women's knowledge has historically been Othered by systems such as patriarchy and capitalism. This research focus, in addition to changes in my personal life, then led to my exploration of the lived experience of stepmothers.

### **The Group**

In contrast to websites that allow users to access information already generated (Web 1.0), Web 2.0 refers to technology that has moved beyond this static one-way access, allowing users to collaboratively generate knowledge and participate in discussions using social media forums. Rather than the one-to-many broadcast model of information sharing seen in traditional media (such as television, radio, and newspapers), Web 2.0 represents a many-to-many network model of information sharing where individuals have a network of contacts and the power to produce, reproduce, adapt discourses. Not only is content user-generated in these technological

spheres, but conversations can occur at any time and in any location, transcending the space and time limitations of face-to-face conversation.

As part of the larger body of digital technology tools, social media have revolutionized communication in the past decade. According to Moran, Seaman and Tinti-Kane (2011):

The term *social media* is a hazy one. And no wonder – for the first time, the world faces a medium that is by its very nature noncentralized, meaning that in both form and content, it is user created, user controlled, flexible, democratic, and both very transparent and very not so. (p. 4, *emphasis in original*)

Social media are not significant because of the technology itself, but rather, for the socio-technical dynamics that have emerged through the engagement of its millions of users (Ellison & boyd, 2013).

As a social media site, Facebook is traditionally a space to publicize comments, ideas, and information. However, a closed and private Facebook group is one that will not appear in any search, and posts will not be seen outside of the group. This is the design of *Canadian Stepping Stones*, the group to which I belong as a stepmom in Canada, along with over five hundred other women across the country. New members can only be added by the group administrators who also have the power to remove members, to edit or delete comments, and to shut down the commenting feature on a post. The group was initially formed by one administrator in 2012, and at the time of writing, there are six administrators, reflecting the significant growth of the group since that time. This is the group I focus on for this research study, and all research participants are fellow members of this group.

The purpose of the *Stepping Stones* group is to provide a space of support for women in Canada who are stepmothers. In this group women share experiences, ask questions, provide information, and find solidarity in women who are all in relationships with men who are fathers. Their lives differ of course, but there are common experiences that bring them together and keep them in this group. There may be fifty posts per day, and one post may initiate a comment thread that involves dozens of responses. In one day, it is common to have everything from women posting pictures of their family outings, asking questions about court processes, venting about a frustrating experience in their family and seeking suggestions on how to move forward, and sharing articles about relationships, childcare, and stepfamily dynamics. There are lighthearted posts intended to build bonds amongst the women (i.e. “post a picture of something that makes you smile” or “what is one thing your partner does to support you every day?”), daily happy birthday messages, and members frequently reach out to others who are struggling (i.e. “thinking of you [name], how are you doing?”). The main group is reserved for stepfamily discussions, but there are also multiple sub-groups for discussions on everything from home décor and cooking to sex and favorite books.

There are other Facebook groups for stepmothers, some significantly larger, with members primarily in the United States. There are also groups for stepmothers that are religion-based, groups for stepmothers who cannot have their own biological children, and those with biological children. The Canadian context of the *Stepping Stones* group is important, as it began with one woman in Alberta in 2012, but now has members all across the country from British Columbia to Newfoundland. As a country, Canada spans 9.9 million square kilometers, touches three oceans, and has six time zones (Nations Encyclopedia, 2017). The country is vast and so is the membership in this group. The six administrators are also intentionally from various

locations across the country, so that at any given time during the day or night, there is likely at least one person “on call” should there be issues that need to be addressed in the group. Many of the women live in rural areas, and so both the anonymity and reach of the group are crucial. It should be noted that the group is both heteronormative (I have never seen conversations from a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer perspective) and predominantly made up of White women. While there are members who are French-speaking, the language of conversation in the group is English. For those involved however, this online space provides them an opportunity to connect and learn with others that would in the past not have existed. And while this online connection is so important to the women, members still seek physical contact when they can. There will be periodic “meet-ups” in various locations where density of members is higher, and these groups will always share photographs of their time together in the group. These in-person meetings enhance the learning that takes place through the digital community of practice, and reflects the increasing popularity of blended approaches to teaching and learning that utilize both technology and face-to-face teaching techniques.

Power is an important consideration here, as social media tends to be thought of as a space where people can (for the most part) post anything at any time. However, the nature of this group is that it is a space governed by administrators. These women are all members, and when the founder wanted to step back from this responsibility, she invited one of the members to step into this role. That person then recruited a team to help her manage the digital space. The administrators decide who will be admitted to the group (after members add people they know), and have the ability to remove members for violating the terms and agreements they enforce. They also have the ability to turn off the comments feature on a post if the discussion takes a negative turn, or delete a post completely. One of the rules of the group is no swearing, and if

someone violates this, an administrator will send them a direct message asking them to edit their post accordingly. This is an all-female space for learning and communication, monitored by other women. So while the group is a supportive and encouraging space for stepmothers, there are significant controls placed on members to engage in a certain way. This power is an important consideration in discussions of learning online, and will be addressed further.

### **Research Questions**

The questions guiding this research study are as follows: How do women who claim the identity of stepmother learn and experience “motherwork”? What part does technology play in this process? How do stepmothers who participate in a Facebook support group perceive the challenges and supports of stepfamily life? What role does gender play in assigning responsibility for caring work, from stepmothers’ perspectives?

### **Research Limitations**

To gather the perspective of research participants, I used in-depth interviews. These encounters require an element of trust, which is challenging to build in a short time (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Participants may not feel comfortable disclosing certain information, or the researcher may interpret the story differently than participants had intended. As the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, the researcher must be conscientious of building as much trust as possible with participants, as well as performing member checks to increase validity, which I did. The overarching goal of qualitative research is to contribute to broader educational discourse by providing a detailed analysis of a particular learning experience for a group of participants; rather than aiming for generalizability across the population (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). There were nine women interviewed for this study, and while the goal was to

look for themes in their experiences, it cannot be seen as a complete representation of all stepmothers across Canada. The participants were all actively involved in the same Facebook support group, and volunteered to participate in the study, so they all had some level of interest and investment in their role as stepmother.

A major challenge when designing research around tools of digital communication, such as Facebook, which plays a significant part in this study, is the rapid pace of change:

Scholars face a unique challenge in trying to investigate this rapidly moving phenomenon, as they struggle to understand people's practices while the very systems through which they are enacted shift. Even efforts to describe social network sites themselves are challenged by the ongoing evolution of the phenomenon. (Ellison & boyd, 2013, p.2)

When systems change, so do the practices. For example, in just the last couple of months there has been an increase in the number of Facebook "Live" videos used to share in the group. The majority of discourse is still print-based, but certainly this will continue to change with time. Scholarship in this area requires researchers to be mindful of the ways these forums change over time.

Another potential limitation for this research study is the expectation of shared meaning. While the Internet is a global phenomenon, we must keep in mind that this does not yield a shared understanding across cultural, historical, and social contexts (Markham, 2009). Also, because the majority of interviews were conducted using Skype or telephone due to geographic location, it can be difficult to create the same interview atmosphere and sense of rapport as those conducted in person.

## **Overview of Dissertation**

Chapter Two presents a review of the relevant literature and a discussion of the theoretical framework used in this research study. I explore both informal (Tough, 1979; Kolb, 1984; Marsick & Watkins, 1990) and experiential (Dewey, 1938; Boud, 2005; Michelson, 2015) adult learning theories, and literature around communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998, 2002; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002; Wenger, 2014). These theories are discussed as ways in which women learn to navigate their role of stepmother. I then discuss relevant literature around the framework of motherwork (Barg, 2001; Hart, 1992, 2002), and the various areas of literature that explore stepmothering (i.e. Pryor, 2008; Wisdom & Green, 2002; Martin, 2009). Chapter Three presents the methodology and methods section of the research study. I discuss a narrative life history approach (Dominice, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Taber, 2013) to qualitative research, and the processes of participant selection, data collection and analysis. In Chapter Four, the findings of this study are discussed. Primarily I focus on the sites and processes of learning for this group of Canadian stepmothers, and the factors that impact that learning, including the unique challenges of stepfamily life, and the social and cultural ideology of mothering. In Chapter Five I connect those findings to the relevant literature in several discussion threads: the public and private negotiation of motherwork, gender and mothering ideology, and engagement in communities of practice. Lastly, Chapter Six presents the implications for other fields, supports needed, advice for stepfamilies, and ends with the conclusion – connecting this research to implications for the field of adult education.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

In this section, I discuss the relevant literature and framework used to guide this research study. Within the field of adult education, I focus on both informal and experiential learning as the ways in which stepmothers learn to navigate their role. Informal learning refers to the daily, spontaneous learning that occurs in the home, the family, the community, the internet, and other settings outside of formal institutions. As there is a lack of formal education around stepfamily dynamics, stepmothers must learn informally and “by doing”, or experientially. Experiential learning considers the learner as socially and culturally contextualized, with their own experiences that inform meaning making. As a learning framework, I then discuss communities of practice and the learning that is fostered in these settings, particularly through legitimate peripheral participation. I also highlight the more recent literature on digital communities of practice, as it pertains to this research study. Motherwork literature is then discussed, as the labour and learning associated with raising children. This is the concept used to examine the learning of stepmothers, women who are in some capacity raising children not biologically their own. Lastly I review stepmothering literature from fields such as social work, psychology, literature, and family studies. This research study connects this type of knowledge to the field of adult education.

This study involved an expansive literature review to cover the appropriate research areas. In terms of the literature around informal learning, I have read broadly so that I may include both earlier theorists such as Tough and Knowles, who explore learning from a general, adult perspective, and those who include a feminist analysis on this type of learning, such as Hart and Barg. Including these various perspectives is important, as earlier or more traditional theories of learning reflect a particular set of norms that often tended to obscure the importance

of women's and minority's perspectives. More recent perspectives of adult learning have evolved to address issues pertaining to diversity, and to make way for multiple voices and ways of knowing.

To develop a thorough sense of the ways in which stepmothers are depicted in literature, I had to read widely, as there is a lack of literature from an adult learning perspective on the lives and roles of stepmothers. Reading the literature from across disciplines highlighted the impact of the "wicked" stepmother norm that is perpetuated in our myths and folklores. These norms shape the lived experience of women in this role, as the expectations are that they will be cold, jealous, evil, and mean to children. Despite the number of stepfamilies in society today, these norms are still dominant, just as the norms around women as caregivers and nurturers that push stepmothers into caring roles that may not fit their lives, simply because of their sex.

This broad overview of the relevant literature was necessary to build a layered, thorough framework through which to explore the lived experience and learning of stepmothers in an online support group. The literature review also creates the grounding for my analysis of findings, connecting my participant's experiences to the literature. I now move onto a review of the literature in the relevant areas.

### **Adult Learning**

Adult education became a recognized field of practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and educators recognized that the learning of adults should be considered differently from the learning of children. To Groen and Kawalilak (2014), adult education represents the formal structures, initiatives and activities designed to support the learning of adults. A seemingly simple concept, adult learning is complex and variously defined:

Yet the learning of adults is the one key theme that unites the otherwise widely disparate field of adult education. Whether in adult basic education, human resource development, or continuing professional education, practitioners share the common goal of facilitating adult learning. Rather than a single definition or description of adult learning, what we have is a colorful mosaic of theories, models, sets of principles, and explanations that combined, form the knowledge base of adult learning. (Merriam, 2005, p. 42)

Until the 1970s, adult learning theory in North America was shaped by philosophy and psychology, with constructivist and humanist influences. This has since expanded, and adult learning is seen as embedded in sociocultural, historical, and political contexts, having incorporated ideas from sociology, anthropology, critical theory, feminism, and environmental studies (Groen & Kawalilak, 2014).

One of the best known historical models of adult learning is that of Knowles' (1968) andragogy. Initially developed as a way to distinguish between adult learning and learning in childhood (or pedagogy), andragogy is based on assumptions of the adult learner: that they become increasingly self-directed with age, that they accumulate a wealth of experience on which to draw, that their readiness to learn increases with development, that adults are more problem-centered than subject-centered in their learning, that adults are internally motivated, and that they need to know why they are learning (Knowles, 1984). This term, andragogy, was used to clearly distinguish adult education from the practice of teaching or educating children (Merriam et al., 2007). Knowles revisited and revised his framework over the years, later

acknowledging that andragogy and pedagogy were less dichotomous opposites, and more indicative of a spectrum ranging from teacher-directed to student-directed learning. His belief that adults become self-directed in their learning can be used to draw attention to the ways in which stepmothers will independently seek information to help them navigate situations and experiences relevant to their lives.

Knowles draws heavily on humanistic psychology in his work – the belief that humans have control over their destiny and are free to choose their path in life (Maslow, 1987) – and this has been critiqued by those who see learners (and, by extension, their learning) as embedded in sociohistorical, cultural, and political contexts. Theorists with a critical orientation critique Knowles' framework for assuming the learner to be neutral and apolitical (Sandlin, 2005). In this way, by ignoring difference in terms of gender, class, race, culture, experience, etc., andragogy may then serve to reproduce societal inequality and support the existing status quo (Merriam et al., 2007). Despite the many critiques, the andragogical focus on experience and self-directedness helps scholars and practitioners to understand the characteristics of adult learning experiences.

Writing at roughly the same time as Knowles, Tough (1979) ignited much of the discourse around adult learning as a self-directed process. The goal of self-directed learning for Knowles and Tough is that learners will be able to facilitate their own learning endeavors. However, other theorists such as Collins (1996) see this as promoting an instrumental and individual learning agenda, where the sociopolitical assumptions of learners are not considered (Merriam et al., 2007). In his critique of the conceptualization of self-directed learning, Collins believes emancipation must be the core focus, and that “participatory research methods should be used to foster democratic and open dialogue about self-directed learning, and ethical and political

concerns about self-directed learning should be a part of this dialogue” (Merriam, et al., 2007, p. 109). Brookfield (1993) also believes that there is a political dimension to self-directed learning. Burstow (1994) critiqued the early work of Knowles and Tough as reinforcing White male concerns and ways of knowing. According to Burstow, self-directedness as a learning concept ignores the social construction of learning, and that without critical consciousness, self-directed learning is simply a way to ensure the status quo remains unchanged. Despite some of the important critiques, I believe there is value in the concept of self-directed learning, to provide insights into situations such as a stepmom seeking information and support around her role. In cases like this, the self-directed desire to learn takes individuals to group contexts where learning is dialogic and informal, but intentional.

This informal, self-directed type of learning seems to be increasingly prevalent in much of society with widespread access to the Internet. While this tool initially reflected an instrumental approach to learning, with one-way accessing of information, the evolution of Web 2.0 technologies allow for two-way engagement between users, and active participation in online learning spaces where users can generate, share, and edit information. According to Marsick and Watkins (2001), “[a]s we work to bring adult education to the Web, studies exploring how people learn in these settings are needed” (p. 32). Where traditional adult education theories, such as those proposed by Knowles and Tough, focus primarily on the autonomous, self-directed nature of learners, feminist writers such as Burstow (1994) maintain the need for dialogue to foster critical and reflective forms of learning. Social media is one space to foster this type of dialogic engagement.

Jarvis (1987) has claimed that learning is both connected to the world and affected by it, therefore stressing the importance of social context in exploring learning. According to his

theory of learning, we encounter unfamiliar situations, and by engaging with others or perhaps just by chance we acquire the meaning of this unfamiliar situation or experience. This new meaning is practiced until it is taken for granted as understood (Merriam, et al., 2007). The learner comes to this unfamiliar situation as a social and cultural being with experience that is used in generating knowledge (Jarvis, 2000). Because the world around us is always changing, our learning relationship with the world is never static: “learning is the driving force of human change” (Jarvis, 2006, p.5). A woman who finds herself in the role of stepmother encounters this unfamiliar situation, or disjunction, and is challenged to use her experience to create new knowledge around this new situation.

A critical orientation to adult learning, rooted in Marxism, considers the structural factors impacting our lives as learners. Freire (1970) believed that without an understanding – and then questioning and challenging – of the societal structures of oppression, social change and liberation could not be achieved. Critical theory is firmly grounded in a political analysis, is intended to develop knowledge that will free people from oppression, and separates the researcher from the research (Brookfield, 2005). While Marxist theory and the work of the Frankfurt School focused primarily on a class analysis of society, critical theory has since expanded to include diverse perspectives and analyses.

A critical approach to feminist theory explores the intersectionality of factors impacting women’s experiences. Moving women from the margins to the center of social analysis is the goal of theorists in the field of critical feminism (Luke, 1992; Taber & Gouthro, 2006; Hart, 1992; Gouthro, 2002). So rather than seeing women’s learning as universal, critical feminism implies that issues of class and race are considered (Collins, 2002; hooks, 1984; Mojab, 2005; Ng, 1993), as well as sexual orientation (Hill, 1995; Grace, 2001; Tierney & Dilley, 1998). This

increasingly wide body of theory and research in adult learning show the “everyday” nature of learning that is lifelong and lifewide, which is important and relevant for my research for a couple of reasons. Firstly, focusing on women’s experiences as shaped by various factors can initiate conversation around diverse perspectives of mothering, parenting, relationships, and family. Secondly, the lifelong and lifewide nature of everyday learning highlights the importance of learning that takes place in family contexts, and may also happen through engagement in online communities of practice.

**Informal learning.** Adult learning can take place in formal, nonformal, and informal settings. The most prevalent form, informal learning, is defined as:

The spontaneous, unstructured learning that goes on daily in the home and neighborhood, behind the school and on the playing field, in the workplace, marketplace, library and museum, and through the various mass media. (Coombs, 1985, p. 92 as cited in Merriam et al., 2007, p. 35)

What distinguishes informal from formal or nonformal learning is the daily life context and independence of the learner from an institution or established curriculum. Learning from experience (the most basic definition or understanding of informal learning) has been discussed by key theorists such as Dewey (1938), Tough (1979; 1999), Kolb (1984), Marsick and Watkins (1990), and many more.

The everyday nature of informal learning has made it the focus of many studies and explorations. Tough (1979) showed the diversity of day-to-day learning needs ranging from spiritual growth to language learning. Like Knowles (1980), Schugurensky (2000) suggests that

informal learning can be self-directed in nature, in that it is conscious and intentional. Again, there are feminist critiques of both Tough and Knowles' work (Burstow, 1994), as they tend to focus on narrow definitions of learning as independent and explicit. Burstow and others make room for discourse around learning that values affect, creativity, caring, and intuition, and this learning often is informal. Informal learning could also be incidental (unintentional, but identified as learning after the experience) or tacit (that is, neither intentional nor conscious, but experiential and unplanned, occurring in interactions with others and the environment) (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Informal learning can occur individually or in groups (but is always situated in various contexts), and may be transformative (Schugurensky, 2000). Learning to parent – and therefore to stepparent – is an example of learning that primarily takes place in the informal realm.

**Experiential learning.** There are several models of experiential learning that explore the connection between experience and meaning-making. Just as learning to parent and/or stepparent primarily takes place in the informal realm, so does it occur through “doing”. Therefore, experiential learning is an important concept to explore the ways stepmothers learn to navigate this role. The philosophical origins of experiential learning date back to Dewey's (1938) work, *Experience and Education*. Here, he argued that the ultimate source of learning is experience, although not all experience leads to learning. According to Boud (2005), experiential learning is based in the philosophical idea that:

Learning must take account of the learner and what he or she brings with them from all earlier experience as these not only provide the foundation for dispositions, expectations and

motivations, but also establish the base of knowledge and expertise on which new knowledge must build. (p. 244)

Here again we see value placed on the learner as a contextualized individual, with a history, ideas, experiences, and motivations for learning.

Kolb (1984) developed an experiential learning cycle depicted in a four-step process beginning with concrete experience. Reflection and abstract conceptualization follow, leading to abstract experimentation, where the learner uses the new “knowledge” to guide decision-making and actions which thus lead to new experiences – and the cycle repeats. Drawing on the work of Dewey and cognitive psychologist Piaget, Kolb’s model of reflecting on one’s experience is “the one most often used in practice. The cyclical nature of the model allows for a process of continued change and growth” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 175). His theory of adults learning through a reflective process connecting experiences to those in the past, with potential to inform future reflection, is foundational to adult education.

Despite the scope and popularity of this learning theory, Kolb’s work has been critiqued for its linear, rational nature, and the fact that the learner is not seen as a social being. Fenwick (2003) sees Kolb’s learning cycle as problematic in that it perpetuates an individualist notion of learning. Michelson (2015) also reads Kolb’s learning cycle through a lens of critique of the autonomous, Enlightenment learner. She notes that while Kolb has claimed to build upon the foundational work of Dewey’s experiential learning theory, she argues that “Kolb uses Dewey in a misleading, if not intellectually dishonest fashion, and that his learning cycle represents a return to many of the classic strains in Western epistemology against which Dewey was writing” (p. 85). She argues that while Dewey’s view of experience implies interconnection of the self

with the body, others, and the world around them, Kolb's use of Dewey is also informed by cognitive psychology which sees the learner as independent of sociocultural context, and action as distinct from thought (Michelson, 2005). Michelson instead focuses on feminist theorists who claim Dewey as key to their work on experiential learning.

Feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 80s celebrated the "everyday" and the "relational" as categories through which meaning is constructed for women. Michelson (2015) identifies the practice of consciousness raising and the repudiation of male expertise as two features of the women's movement that foregrounded experience as a site of learning. Not only did women confront the traditional gendering of the body, but many issues important to the women's movement focused on the body. The awareness of the body as both a natural phenomenon and a cultural artifact is essential to many feminist scholars, as focusing solely on the feminine body as a site of learning, or focusing on the biological imperative to become mothers can promote an essentialist view of women – one of the debates that was evident early in the second wave of feminism. Theorists such as Collins (2002), hooks (1984), Mojab (2005) and Ng (1993) have challenged an essentialist approach to feminism, instead focusing on intersecting factors that impact learning. This focus on examining how social structures and beliefs impact upon behavior is important in building a rationale for this research study, as motherwork is learned in part through the everyday negotiation of identity and labor. However, this labor and learning are also shaped by patriarchal discourses that support a status quo of nuclear families and women as primarily responsible for childcare – discourses that are problematic in many ways, but in particular do not necessarily "fit" or address the issues involved in stepfamily life.

Hart (1998) who comes into this discussion more thoroughly in the section on motherwork, discusses her own experiential learning as a way to explore hierarchies of

difference and how they both enable and constrain experiential learning. She posits some crucial questions to ask when exploring learning from experience:

How does a person's social position and corresponding experiences influence her individual and collective identity? What is the person's sense of self? Whom can she consider an ally or an enemy, a member of her own community where she can tell her story, or part of a hostile outside group where she has to keep it under lock and key? Who will listen and who will not or does not want to? (p. 187)

Specifically, one must question and consider social location and how this determines experience, as reflection and learning do not exist in a vacuum. For example, for this research, one's culture may impact the way family and gender roles are perceived, and class will provide varying access to resources, education and support. To join an online support group, like the one I refer to in this study, requires access to Internet, a device (i.e. computer or SmartPhone), and a level of technological know-how that facilitates participation. Therefore, to a point, stepmothers who seek this kind of support must then have a certain level of education and socioeconomic status, as engaging in this type of learning is associated with a particular level of privilege. It goes without saying then, that there will be women who need support and cannot access it.

**Community of practice.** In addition to informal and experiential learning, participation in a community of practice is an important aspect of the learning explored in this research study. Communities of practice (CoP) is a learning theory that is rooted in social constructionism, and views learning and knowledge to be both social and cultural phenomena (Hill, 2005). Learning

occurs socially, in relationship with others. These informal groups are ubiquitous in society, and involve groups of people interacting and learning collectively to develop shared expertise and problem solve. As outlined by Hill (2005):

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) are credited with naming this concept that describes the sociocultural process by which newcomers learn to become full participants of communities engaged in expressing knowledge in practice and in which established members share knowledge while also gaining from new perspectives to deepen their experience. (p. 122)

Within a Community of Practice, members develop identities, share knowledge and provide support to others in relation to their membership in these communities, as they “share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2014, p. 1). In contrast to conventional European traditions of learning which identify learning as being stored in the individual’s mind (Hill, 2005), the concept of community of practice is rooted in social constructivism, where “learning and knowledge are understood to be cultural and social phenomena created in relationship with others within a social context” (Hill, 2005, p. 122). Learning cannot be reduced to a simple process of knowledge transmission, and is in fact a fundamentally social process and inherent dimension of everyday life (Wenger, 1998).

It is the learning aspect of a community of practice that takes precedence over the members’ geographic location (Johnson, 2001). Supporting fellow members, sharing and generating new knowledge is what distinguishes communities of practice from more general ideas of a “community”. Communities of practice typically evolve to address commonly shared

interests and problems, and tend to exist outside of formal educational organizations.

“Communities of practice are everywhere. They are a familiar experience, so familiar perhaps that it often escapes our attention. Yet when it is given a name and brought into focus, it becomes a perspective that can help us understand our world better” (Wenger, 2014, p. 3). The community itself generates and maintains knowledge which is then shared with new members to the community. With their input, and through their engagement, the body of knowledge is continuously shifting in nature.

There are three characteristics of a community of practice and various types of learning that occur through membership in these groups, and these are discussed below.

***The domain.*** One of the defining characteristics of a community of practice is the domain of knowledge, which is about creating “common ground and a sense of common identity” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27). As communities form around shared interests, the domain is what brings the members together (Byington, 2011). The closed Facebook support group that is the focus of this research gives women the opportunity to discuss a very significant experience that they have in common – stepfamily life and their role within it.

***The community.*** Where the domain refers to the identity and issues that bring the group together, the community is the actual membership who care about these issues and experiences. The community “creates the social fabric of learning” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 28). Membership is fluid, frequently shifting and changing, but based on a mutual respect and trust. It is the community that generates knowledge in relationship with each other and in a social context. In this study, the focus is on the community of stepmothers who are members of the *Canadian Stepping Stones* Facebook group, but they are also members of the larger community of stepmothers.

***The practice.*** Members develop a practice which encompasses “a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” (Wenger, 2014, p. 2). The practice is the socially defined way of engaging in the group, of actively participating and constructing identities in relation to the domain. The members develop the practice, reshape it, and share it with new members continuously. In this particular group of stepmothers, there are explicitly stated terms and acronyms that are used in conversation (i.e. DH means Dear Husband, and SS and SD are stepson and stepdaughter). This language of communication is common to each member, but has to be learned upon initially joining the group. A specific language or way of communicating is a key aspect of a community of practice.

***Shared histories of learning.*** Communities of practice can involve various types of learning. Gray (2004) discusses learning that occurs through sharing stories and discussing problems of members involved in an online workplace CoP: “[the members] also ‘learned by lurking’ and ‘picked up ideas’ even when they only read the online postings but did not contribute themselves. They also learned less explicit elements of their work such as acquiring the values, beliefs, and viewpoints of the practice” (Gray, 2004, n.p.). This is an example of the “shared histories of learning” (Wenger, 1998, p. 87), where participants learn the everyday practices of their role, and value the collective knowledge of the group. It is an everyday occurrence for a member in this Facebook group to post a situation or issue they are having within their stepfamily, and have at least a few other members commiserate that they have been in exactly the same situation. Through this discourse, the members share, compare, and work through possible solutions together.

***Legitimate peripheral participation.*** Social learning, and specifically situated learning, is a key feature inherent in communities of practice. Situated learning is characterized by what

Lave and Wenger (1991) call legitimate peripheral participation, which is the notion that the acquisition of knowledge and skills require “newcomers” (new members of the group) to move into full participation of the communities’ sociocultural practices. Learning is therefore not just necessary for membership in a community; rather, learning is an evolving form of membership in a community and a development of identity. Gray (2004) describes this learning practice as “the more experienced practitioners, through the social process of sharing stories and examples, help the newcomers to understand and learn various aspects of the practice” (n.p.). Legitimate peripheral participation addresses the notion that to master certain skills and knowledge requires newcomers to the community to move into full participation over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The meaning of knowledge is developed through the process of engaging in the sociocultural community itself.

In terms of active participation, Gray (2004) found that newcomers to an online workplace group spoke to the value of reading information and learning in the group, but were initially hesitant to post information due to their self-perceived inexperience. Therefore, through the process of engagement, through time and active participation, identities are shaped and strengthened. To these steps of time and active participation I would add that reflection and action are key. If stepmothers engage in the group, comment and share but do not actually reflect on their situation, it will be difficult to incorporate any of their learning to create change.

***Identity and meaning.*** Members of a community of practice explore questions of identity and “contribute to the construction of their own identity in relationship to the community of practice and reciprocally to the construction and development of the community of which they are a part” (Gray, 2004, n.p.). Participation in this sense is understood as “*meaningful* activity where meaning is developed through relationships and shared identities” (Handley, Sturdy,

Fincham & Clark, 2006, p. 651). Identity for a stepmother can be a confusing and complicated question. Very often, women take on the caring responsibilities for the stepchildren, and yet they do not have the same rights as a biological mother (Katz, 2010). Women's identities shift with their engagement in the community of practice. Initially they may see themselves as dating someone with children, then perhaps living with someone with children, and when the relationship comes to a certain point they may consider themselves to be stepmothers. How women claim this identity and negotiate meaning within that identity is a key part of engaging and learning in a community of practice.

In a society that increasingly focuses on the economy, globalization, and marketplace values, support for and understanding of family systems may continue to emerge in these informal spaces (such as social media). Adult education learning theories, such as communities of practice, can be used to explore these informal discourses and the ways in which technology is being used to expand them.

*Digital Communities of Practice.* A learning theory that has been applied to many spheres – from business and industry to education and the social sector – communities of practice are now being explored in connection to digital technology. Previously I have discussed the online practice of “Mommy blogs” as a digital community of practice (Careless, 2016), and this research study also views digital communities of practice as a way to interpret the everyday learning of parenting – but from the perspective of stepmothers. This expansion of communities of practice literature into the online world is crucial, as much of our engagement in Western society today takes place in these digital spaces. Cox (2005) states that “[i]ncreasingly such communities are seen as necessarily virtual, not unreasonably so if the object is to tie together disparate individuals... who will inevitably be geographically dispersed” (p.15). The participants

in this research study, who are all members of a Canadian Facebook support group, are located across this vast country – from Newfoundland to British Columbia.

The capacity to connect with others unbound by geography does not reduce the need for communities with common experiences, goals, and interests. According to Wenger (2014):

New technologies such as the Internet have extended the reach of our interactions beyond the geographical limitations of traditional communities, but the increase in flow of information does not obviate the need for community. In fact, it expands the possibilities for community and calls for new kinds of communities based on shared practice. (p.6)

Where we were once limited to engaging with, learning with, and finding support from those in our immediate location, we now have the capacity to foster relationships around the world, exposing ourselves to increasingly diverse perspectives and experiences.

**Power.** Communities of practice as a learning theory provides a way to explore the engagement of women in an online support group for stepmothers in Canada. However, there are considerations around power that are not always addressed in traditional communities of practice literature. In a review of four communities of practice applications, Cox (2005) found that power and conflict were minimally addressed or they were seen as existing between the generations of members. Particularly with digital communities of practice, we must consider power in terms of access – who has it and who does not – to these groups. Who belongs and who does not? Who decides who will be accepted? There are also important questions of time, literacy, and technological know-how required to participate in digital groups. Gray (2004) found that

members gave three distinct reasons for not participating in an online community of practice: “lack of familiarity with online technologies... lack of access to technology itself... and limited identification with the community itself” (n.p.). While the stepmom support group is “open to all”, members must have an Internet connection, computer or smart phone, a certain level of literacy skills, and knowledge of social media.

Another aspect of power in online groups are the moderators or administrators – sometimes those who initially started the group, sometimes individuals who have been asked to take on that role. The Facebook stepmom group currently has six administrators who accept new members and who monitor posts and engagement in terms of language and subject matter. While this may be a key aspect to the success of the group in terms of positivity and maintaining relationships, it is still a measure of control and power in the group. This aspect of the group was not discussed in the research interviews, but inevitably has an impact on member participation and engagement, and would be valuable information for future research.

### **Motherwork**

Building on both informal and experiential learning, Barg (2001) explores “motherwork” as subsistence learning in her doctoral dissertation. Developed in feminist literature as a reclaiming of women’s mothering work as work of value, she defines motherwork as:

The work of basic human care that contributes to the reproduction, nurture, and sustenance of children within households. It is subsistence work that, when done well, contributes to the quality of life for individuals, families and society. If this work is left undone, this can result in the loss of life or the quality of life,

which impacts negatively on individuals, families and society. (p. 5)

Barg bases her definition of motherwork on the work of Hart (1992), Shiva (1989) and Waring (1988), and draws upon Oakley's (1979) belief that motherwork is rigorous, requiring continuous decisions around nutrition, education, emotions, psychology, spirituality, and other realms of life. While men also engage in the work of caring for children, and indeed this has increased in previous decades (Nordenmark, 2015; Knop & Brewster, 2016), the focus of this study is motherwork as learned and experienced by stepmothers, and therefore women, so it is the motherwork of women that I will specifically focus on. Also, this labor has traditionally, and continues to be, predominantly carried out by women in our society governed by capitalism and patriarchy (Perna, 2005; van Emmerik, 2002; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Arrighi & Maume, 2000).

**In society.** Tracing the roots of motherwork back theoretically, Barg is informed by Hart, who is informed in part by German critical theorist, Jurgen Habermas. Hart's (1995) alternative concept of work – which considers the labour of raising children and educating them about power and injustice – is based on aspects of critical theory. Her feminist lens challenges the lack of attention to gendered aspects of learning and the devaluing of women's labour.

Habermas' theories touch on many concepts, particularly those of reason and democracy, which he felt were dealt with inadequately by the traditions of Marxism and earlier members of the Frankfurt School. Habermas felt that focusing on patterns of communication was necessary to reassert the importance of reason for sustaining democracy. According to Brookfield (2005), reason underscores Habermas' theory of communicative action which focuses on the assessment

of validity claims implicit in our speech acts. By proposing a model of communicative rationality in opposition to the domination of instrumental reason, Habermas focuses on rational beings coming to understanding and agreement through expressions based in communicative reason (Travers, 1990). Redefining rationality and defending modernity in the face of critique are the two central projects of Habermas' defense of reason, so that other forms of reason may emerge more suitable for the social nature of humans.

As we engage in communicative action, our assumptions and understandings of the world and how we communicate those understandings can be reproduced, questioned, and debated. Our taken-for-granted understanding of our everyday existence constitutes the lifeworld, a concept introduced by phenomenologists such as Schutz and Husserl, and expanded upon by Habermas. The lifeworld represents the spaces in which people interact in the everyday, sharing ideas and shaping their values and beliefs, while the system is made up the social/political/economic structures that coordinate the functions of everyday life through the media of power and money (Gouthro, 2009). Habermas was gravely concerned with the invasion of these systemic mechanisms into the lifeworld with the growing influence of capitalism (Brookfield, 2005). He takes up the "question of how the lifeworld – as the horizon within which communicative actions are 'always already' moving – is in turn limited and changed by the structural transformation of society as a whole" (Habermas, 1987, p. 119). The concept is made more challenging to conceptualize and research by its ever-present nature: "In a certain sense, the lifeworld to which participants in communication belong is always present, but only in such a way that it forms the background for an actual scene" (Habermas, 1987, p. 124). It is within this lifeworld that we find the homeplace, community, and civil society (Gouthro, 2009). It is within these spaces that motherwork is learned and practiced.

Hart (1992, 2002) and Barg (2001) classify motherwork as a form of subsistence work – work with a main purpose of creating and sustaining the conditions of life. Several feminists use this term to draw attention to the dual nature of this labor – on the one hand it is life-sustaining, while also being unrecognized and unpaid. While seemingly separate from the global economy, “subsistence work, subsistence production, or subsistence economies are an integral part of discussions of the development of capitalism” (Hart, 2002, p. 25). In fact, the strength of capitalism depends on the exploitation of this unpaid (or underpaid) labor. Mies and Shiva (1993) contend that subsistence work has become so damaged by the greed of capitalism, that it may be more accurately described as “survival work”, or the work of doing just what needs to be done for survival. This view of subsistence as survival removes the emotional and spiritual dimensions of this work.

Luxton, Rosenberg, and Arat-Koc (1990) explore the spurious distinction between the “private” nature of subsistence work and the “public” economy; claiming instead that the two are intimately linked. The continued devaluing of this labor in our market economy leads to the increased marginalization of women who do this work. Subsistence work becomes a:

Burden, an unwelcome chore to be ‘contracted out’ to those seen fit for this kind of work – to women, racially or ethnically marginalized people, and immigrants. It appears as the isolated work of mothers at home, often without sufficient material and social support, the work of nannies, the work of cleaning ladies, the work of domestics, the back-breaking work of farm workers.  
(Hart, 2002, p. 27)

Luxton et al. draw particular attention to this power differential *amongst* women, as the childcare and housework labor of some upper- and middle-class women is contracted out to marginalized domestic laborers who have little power and security. This is where we see motherwork entering the marketplace – as low-paid, unstable employment (Hart, 2002).

Hart (1992) defines motherwork as the care of any individual and notes that primarily this work is unpaid and carried out by women. The gendered nature of the term itself highlights the reality that throughout time this labor has primarily fallen to women, and with the direct implication on the economy, motherwork as “work” draws attention to its social and economic significance (DeVault, 1999). This fits with Hart’s analysis work in Western society governed by values of capitalism and patriarchy, where our cultural assumptions guide our beliefs around who is fit to do what kind of work (Hart, 1995).

Hart believes that a gender analysis of “work” is necessary to challenge the exploitation of women as “less skilled” (to varying degrees according to race, class, etc.) and still relegated to the private sphere of caring work. Marxist feminists typically focus on women’s experiences of and issues around work—how the institution of the family can be connected to capitalism. It was industrial capitalism that brought men from the original site of production (the household) to the factories and other public spaces of work (Tong, 1989). With this shift, “women, who for the most part did not initially enter the public workplace, were regarded as ‘nonproductive’ in contrast to ‘productive,’ wage-earning men” (Tong, 1989, p. 51). This Marxist analysis of labor power is based in the assumption that male workers have “non-working” wives (Hart, 2002). The ballooning greed of capitalism has, since that time, resulted in many, many women entering the public, paid workforce – albeit often for lower wages and less-skilled labor. As hooks (2000) points out though, “more money does not mean more freedom” (p. 53), and “as long as work in

the home remains a matter of private production and is the responsibility of women, they will simply carry a double work-load” (Tong, 1989, p. 53). Therefore, a gendered critical analysis of work is essential to questioning both our notions of labor and the predominant binary thinking of concepts such as mind/body and work/family (Hart, 1995).

Hart suggests that only large-scale structural support for child rearing work will serve to challenge this “family orientation” that penalizes women workers. I believe this situation is further complicated for families who do not resemble the norm of the traditional, nuclear family. These “different” families are not adequately recognized by social, political, legal, and economic structures, and so challenging this “family orientation” of father as breadwinner and mother as caregiver is particularly important. Challenging these norms (of what a family looks like) may also make room for more diverse parenting roles. Waring (1988) has a broader definition of motherwork that is less about literal childcare labour, and includes the care, protection, and preservation of humans and nature. She believes that this work is done by women because it is necessary – it needs to be done – with less focus on the patriarchal, capitalist determination of work.

Eichler (2008) proposes a new definition of household work that integrates the various dimensions of carework and housework, making clear the relationship between the two. “Within sociology, motherwork is dealt with primarily under two different headings: carework and housework” (p. 9), but Eichler believes that many aspects of carework, motherwork, and housework remain invisible in this depiction. Housework is limited in its focus (typically represented as a list of activities), and carework is something done throughout life, not simply for children. Her research leads to the following definition of household work: “Household work consists of the sum of all physical, mental, emotional and spiritual tasks that are performed for

one's own or someone else's household and that maintain the daily life of those for whom one has responsibility" (p. 15). Therefore, Eichler sees motherwork as conceptualized within this definition, and includes the aspects of work that are often forgotten (i.e. spiritual, emotional work, and care of various individuals).

Motherwork is not considered "real work" in the context of our current market economy – a reality that perpetuates the marginalization of women through the devaluing of their work. Hart (2002) is particularly concerned with the "Othering" of mothers who live in poverty: "When motherwork relies on the bad dependency – on the state – instead of on the good dependency – on an income-earning husband or boyfriend – this work becomes highly visible" (p. 24). Women in this position are critiqued and judged for performing this work without support that is represented by the dominant notion of the private nuclear family.

**In adult education.** In addition to an analysis of work, motherwork is also explored from a learning context. Barg's (2001) dissertation looks at motherwork as subsistence learning, and this research study primarily aims to understand the learning of motherwork for stepmothers. As previously discussed, there are several theorists who utilize Habermasian theory or provide a feminist critique of his work (Fraser, 1995; Hart, 1992; Gouthro, 2002, 2005). Gouthro (2005) believes that Habermas' theory is useful for exploring the increasing impact of the system on the lifeworld, but lacks an analysis of gendered relations within these contexts. Through her critical and feminist framework, Gouthro focuses on learning within the homeplace (a key aspect of the lifeworld). Difficult to define, the meaning of homeplace varies based on lived experience and background: "The homeplace may fit into a larger socio-cultural context than an individual residence, inclusive of community, neighbours, and larger cultural setting" (Gouthro, 2005, p. 9). Culture, religion, ethnicity, class, race, and ability can also impact on the way homeplace is

perceived for individuals. According to Gouthro, studying this concept reveals gendered differences in learning, work, and labour, expanding the discourse of adult learning to include questions of where learning takes place and who has access to formal learning contexts.

Daniels (2010) also explores learning within the homeplace in her study of mature women returning to vocational education programs. She found that women entering into these formal learning contexts were faced with the invisibility of their everyday lives and lived experience. She states: “Just as women’s everyday sits outside of what is acknowledged as learning, so education sits outside the everyday for many women, in practice as well as in conceptualization” (p. 79). The women could be wives and mothers, or learners, but they found it a challenge to be both at the same time. Daniels suggests a “substantial reappraisal of how women undertake their homeplace roles as well as highlighting the need for other skills acquisition” (p. 88) in order to contextualize education as part of the broader life experience. This shows the further separation of policy-driven formal education from everyday informal lifelong learning.

Adult education discourses are shaped by neoliberalism and embedded within broader systems of globalization and capitalism. According to Gouthro (2009), “critical and feminist educators challenge neoliberal values by questioning the emphasis on (a) individualism, (b) competition, and (c) the influence of the marketplace in shaping learning contexts” (p. 158). Individualism does not consider social and cultural factors that impact those learners in terms of past experience and access – factors such as gender, race, and class. The influence of the marketplace in education leads to increased competition for qualifications and jobs, and “inequalities linked to factors such as gender or social class that impact upon one’s ability to compete are rendered as ‘private’ problems rather than ‘public’ concerns to be taken up at a

structural level” (Gouthro, 2009, p. 159). Placing responsibility on individuals for their educational choices allows the status quo to remain unchallenged.

Hart (1992, 1997) also challenges narrowly-defined contexts of learning, arguing that subsistence labour (such as motherwork) expands learning discourses beyond marketplace needs and values. Hart, like Gouthro, saw the value of a Habermasian analysis of the impact of the system on the lifeworld, and the reconceptualization of notions of work and learning. Barg (2000) utilizes arts-based methodology and a transformative learning perspective to explore motherwork as subsistence learning. She believes that the “day-to-day subjective experience of learning and transformation of women must still be heard” (Barg, 2004, p. 29), but cautions that this experience must be interpreted within the context of social structures and factors of race and class, in addition to gender.

Barg’s (2004) findings highlight the contributions of motherwork in both the homeplace and greater society. Because the contemporary discourse of parenting implies that individual families (and more typically, mothers) are solely responsible for this work, women “learn” their way into this role that creates a “double burden of work for many women, as they struggle to provide primary care for children and to support their families financially” (p. 38). She believes that adult educators must pay more attention to this learning for women, and advocate for policies that not only legitimize this learning and labor, but also contribute to an understanding of how this learning contributes to families and society in general (Barg, 2004).

While there is a body of research exploring motherwork as the undervalued labor of women, this concept has not been explored from the perspective of stepmothers – women who are caring for children that are not biologically their own. Unlike teachers, day care workers, or

nurses, this work is not done as paid employment, rather it is as a result of varying family structures. Using Barg's (2001) definition of motherwork as "the work of basic human care that contributes to the reproduction, nurture, and sustenance of children within households" (p. 5), this research expands the literature on motherwork, adding a perspective that has not yet been heard. In addition, this research makes two other unique contributions: to add an adult education lens to the experience of stepmothering, which has traditionally been explored from either psychology or family studies frameworks; and connecting motherwork literature to a digital communities of practice framework to explore the ways stepmothers use an online social media support group to navigate their role.

### **Stepmother Literature**

Literature around stepfamilies can be found in various areas, from history to family studies, psychology to social work and counselling. Pryor (2008)'s collected work of stepfamily literature identifies this wide area of research, as well as the need to collate the findings:

Although much has been learned about stepfamilies during the past several decades, this information is scattered across journals and books from multiple disciplines. Demographers have focused on counting the number of stepfamilies and documenting trends in their formation. Sociologists have asked questions about how stepfamily life varies by social class and other structural variables. Family psychologists have examined the multiple sources of stress that often emerge in stepfamily relationships. Child psychologists have studied the implications of stepfamily life for the children's

development, adjustment, and well-being. Clinicians and counselors have focused on interventions to facilitate the adjustment of stepfamily members. And law scholars have grappled with the legal ambiguities that stepfamilies generate, such as stepparents' financial obligations to stepchildren and whether divorced stepparents should have visitation rights. (xi-xii)

The literature focusing on stepmothers in particular carries the predominant topics of role identity, psychological health and well-being, and relationships with other family members.

While these topics represent essential questions to be explored, there is a significant gap in this literature and that mentioned by Pryor (2008), which could build a more holistic picture of the stepmother experience. That gap addresses the question of learning, exploring the experience of stepmothering from an adult learning perspective. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the learning and experience of stepmothers as they navigate motherwork, a more traditional term that has been used in academic literature for decades. Focusing on how these women learn to negotiate motherwork through engagement in an online support group brings a contemporary lens to this question, as technology becomes further entrenched in our daily practices in society.

Literature around stepmothers and the stepmothering experience can be found in the areas of popular psychology and popular culture. Whether the approach is to bring stepfamily research to a wider audience (Wisdom & Green, 2002; Martin, 2009; Thoele, 2003), or to provide tips and suggestions for living a more “successful” stepfamily life (Newcomb Marine & Korf, 2013; Katz, 2010; Fletcher, 2007), the focus in most of these texts is the experience of stepmothering, the challenges, and advice for stepmothers.

In addition to the popular culture and psychology literature, a thorough exploration of the academic literature identified research around stepmothers in journals such as: *Family Relations*, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, *Journal of Family Issues*, *Marriage & Family Review*, *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*, *Social Work*, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, *The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, *Psychological Reports*, *Journal of Family Studies*, *Journal of Family History*, and the *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. As is clear, much of the academic literature around stepmothering comes from studies of family and psychology. What follows is an overview of the existing literature around stepmothering, according to common themes: history, myth, and folklore; kinship models/family systems; role and identity; psychology, counselling and mental health; gender and mothering; adolescent perspectives; and online support.

**History, myth, and folklore.** Much of our preconceived notions around “stepmothers” comes from historical tales, myth and folklore. Cinderella, Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel are all treated cruelly by their “wicked stepmothers” with behavior ranging from cold and abusive, to blatant attempts at murder. These women display selfish desire for their husbands’ affection and finances, jealous contempt for his children, and a diabolical capacity to deceive those around her. De Wit (1985) believes that biological mothers and stepmothers play symbolic and opposing roles in myths and fairy tales, with mother characters representing the Heavenly mother or universal feminine principle, and stepmother characters representing hardship and demands placed on children as they mature through life. In fact, Tucker (2000) points out that in some fairy tales, the stepmother character was originally written as a neglectful mother, but was

changed as their behavior was seen as unpalatable for a biological mother, but more acceptable for a stepmother. According to Claxton-Oldfield (2000), this stepparent wickedness myth continues to be perpetuated in popular literature and contemporary film in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, shaping the way stepparents are viewed in society. These depictions run deep in our social and cultural ideologies.

Dainton (1993) believes that in addition to the evil or “wicked” stepmother myth, there is another cross-cultural and trans-historical myth associated with stepmotherhood – the myth of instant love, which is based on cultural standards of mothering. The fact that a loving relationship between stepmother and stepchild takes time to nurture, if that is the goal, goes against the idea of a mother figure experiencing instant, all-consuming love for her children. Therefore, this serves as further unnecessary fodder for the characterization of stepmothers.

There have been feminist readings of these fairy tales which explore the patriarchal undertones of the prescribed cultural norms. In an older publication, Rowe (1979) discusses the transfer from fairy tales into cultural expectations the values of passivity, dependence, and self-sacrifice that are typically central in these stories’ female characters. Just as young girls learn that stepmothers are wicked people out to harm little children, they learn that to be like the fair princesses, they must be gentle, vulnerable, and subordinate. This is not only desirable, it is inescapable (Rowe, 1979). More recently, Williams (2010) discusses the wicked stepmother depictions of traditional fairy tales, and compares them to Robert Coover’s postmodern novella, *Stepmother* – a retelling of the traditional tales. The stepmother in this tale is a caring but pragmatic woman whose goal it is to save her stepdaughter from the royal prison, and she succeeds at her own expense. Coover challenges the traditional characterizations and structure of

fairy tales, showing that narrative patterns can be broken, and that heroines are not bound to the paths walked by their foremothers (Williams, 2010).

The wicked stepmother ideology is also prevalent in ancient Roman literature (Gray-Fow, 1988; Noy, 1991), but often with a slightly different focus for her greed – paternal inheritance. Often this involves a murder plot where stepmother is the instigator and stepson is the victim. Murder and money add another layer of “wickedness” to these cultural depictions. Watson (1995) connects the creation of these stereotypes to overarching systems of misogyny and prejudice against women. “The image of the stepmother frequently encountered in the ancient texts is... an encapsulation of the negative traits assigned to females in general by a misogynistic tradition which flourished in Greece and Rome and is by no means extinct” (p. 2). Therefore, to challenge the ideals of the domestic goddess mother and the wicked, jealous stepmother, we must consider these deeper power imbalances in society.

From an American perspective, Hemenway (1999) explores Middle-class stepmothers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, focusing on class and role identity for women. The ideal 19<sup>th</sup> century family was defined in terms of the well-being of its relationships, particularly between the mother and her children. Middle and upper-class families lived according to rigid narratives of femininity, motherhood, and domesticity, and when that role was no longer filled by the mother (due to death most likely), the patriarch had to seek a replacement. So the stepmother was then both necessary to the functioning of the family and to the fathers’ identity as head of the household, but also threatening to the families’ social and relational stability. She could not win. Stepmothers represented a disconnect in the narrative of domestic motherhood, as she would have tried to fill the shoes of the deceased mother while being essentially a stranger to the children. However, by trying to “fill this gap”, the stepmother was contributing to the cultural

narrative of motherhood as central for family and community stability. This lengthy quote from Hemenway's (1999) paper highlights the near impossible situation these women found themselves in:

However they asserted their maternal authority in the home, stepmothers engaged in an ongoing negotiation of familial relationships and social expectations. Many stepfamily relationships were complicated by the fact that nineteenth-century motherhood ideals often stood in stark contrast to the realities of stepmotherhood. The feminine domestic ideal in nineteenth-century America required women to maintain domestic harmony and to preserve the home as a sanctuary – and stepfamilies were often forced to contend with complex issues and dynamics that popularize that unity. Moreover, the ideal of domesticity itself affected the ways in which stepmothers and stepchildren interacted. Taught to idealize their dead mothers, stepchildren were then introduced to new mother figures who often complicated that ideal. How women confronted the intersections between family relationships and domestic ideals help us to understand more fully both social attitudes toward step-motherhood, and the ways in which middle- and upper-class women dealt with the inherent ambiguities of a domestic narrative which, while restrictive, also often served as their only source of social power. (p. 84)

What is most interesting about this, is that in many ways the situation for stepmothers is similar today, two centuries later. Perhaps the blatant prescription of roles for women has lessened, but many stepmothers continue to enter into families that have been disrupted by separation, divorce, or death, and assume the task of “fixing what seems to be broken”. Whether this is culturally prescribed or internally motivated or both, the pressure for stepmothers to restore domestic order and bliss for her partner and stepchildren is still very much a complicating factor in this lived experience (Papernow, 2013).

**Kinship models/family systems.** The literature in this area overlaps with other topics in stepfamily research, so for organizational purposes I have grouped the literature under three sub-headings: family structure, coping, and relationships.

*Family structure.* Cultural depictions of “family” can have significant impact on how stepmothers identify their role in a stepfamily, experience conflict, and form relationships with the other family members. As Planitz & Feeney (2009) point out, the negative stereotypes surrounding stepfamilies are strong in society, even amongst stepfamily members themselves, and therefore have an impact on newly formed families. On the contrary, normative beliefs of marriage, parenting, and family are abundant in contemporary media and cultural standards, and serve to reinforce a nuclear family ideology (Coleman & Ganong, 1997). Despite the growing number of stepfamilies around the world, Western society still interprets family structures outside of the nuclear family as somehow deviant.

Church’s (1999; 2004) groundbreaking work on stepmothers explored their notion of kinship – “how we decide to whom we are related” (2004, p. 133) – as impacting their identity as a stepmother, relationships with the members of their immediate family, and how they perceive

conflict in their stepfamily. She notes that in our society (she writes from a Western perspective) the primary criteria for kinship are blood and residence – so we are family if we are biologically related and/or share a residence (Church). This may be a point of confusion or contention for stepmothers who are not blood relatives to their stepchildren but may live with them on a part or full-time basis, and as Church notes: “Few stepfamilies can squeeze comfortably into a nuclear box” (p. 133). Through her interviews with stepmothers, Church identified five models of kinship: the Nuclear model, the Extended model, the Couple model, the Biological model, and the No Family model, which were shaped by considerations such as personal need, experience in their families of origin, and the expectations of others. These women were often still negotiating their place and space in these families, and even when they had it was not necessarily a permanent stop (Church). Becoming aware of these experiences and identity negotiations can help expand the discourse of “family” in society, so that stepmothers are not continuing to conform to the – less and less common – ideal.

Erera-Weatherley (1996) had previously explored stepparenting styles, and the factors that were associated with their adoption (i.e. behavior of stepchildren, spouse, and the nonresidential parent). The styles identified in this study were: the biological parent, the “super good” stepmother, the detached, the uncertain, and the friendship style. As with Church’s findings, these styles were not always permanent, as women continued to negotiate their role. For Svare, Jay, & Mason (2004), the adoption of different approaches to stepparenting always involved filling a perceived gap in the family which was created by divorce. So in addition to the many tasks of family life, stepmothers are also charged with the responsibility of “fixing” the family dynamic.

**Coping.** Stepfamilies will encounter context-specific stressors and challenges that do not impact first-time families, and add to the strain on family members. First-time families are those “that precede a stepfamily” (Papernow, 2013, p. 12), so typically refer to biological parents and their children. Custody issues, financial obligations, dynamics with ex-spouses, and court appearances are just a few of the stressors that are common to stepfamilies (Katz, 2010; Papernow, 2013). Family stress models have been explored with first time families – where there has not been divorce, separation, or death of a partner – but stepfamilies have been neglected in this research. Schramm and Adler-Baeder (2012) examine the role of economic pressure and stepfamily stressors, along with the resulting impact on feelings of positivity, negativity, and on marital quality. Perhaps unsurprisingly, stepfamily stressors for women have a direct inverse effect on all three measures. In a study of coping strategies employed by stepmothers to help handle some of these challenges, Whiting, Smith, Bamett, and Grafsky (2007) found that positive communication with family members, positive attitudes and attributes, perception of positive marital quality, and strong informal supports had a significant impact on the coping ability of stepmothers. Coping is likely a personal experience and takes on diverse forms depending on the situation.

**Relationships.** A stepfamily is formed because of one relationship – one biological parent and another adult (with their own children or not). In a heterosexual stepmother situation, this new family is formed through her relationship with a man who has children. Duberman (1973) focuses on two relationship dyads in their research – between stepparent and stepchild, and among stepsiblings. In first discussing stepparent-stepchild relationships, Duberman finds that stepfathers often report easier relationships with stepchildren than stepmothers. One reason for this may be the previously discussed myth and folklore around the wicked stepmother

(Duberman). While gender was not determined to be a factor in stepparent-stepchild relationships, stepmothers had more successful relationships with stepchildren under the age of thirteen, where age made no difference for stepfathers. Church (2004) found that the stepmothers she spoke with assessed the quality of their relationship with their stepchildren “in response to their stepchildren’s reactions to them” (p. 80). Often times, stepmothers will take this relationship very slowly so as not to overstep the children’s boundaries (Church). It often seems to be a very delicate balance.

For stepsiblings, relations were better when children lived in the same house, and when the remarried couple had a child together. Importantly, it was found that the better the relations between stepsiblings, the better the family integration as a whole (Duberman). Contrary to these findings, Clingempeel, Brand, and Levoli (1984) found that stepmothers self-reported lower scores of “love” and higher scores of “detachment” dimensions in terms of their relationships with stepdaughters. Further to this, in 1987, Brand and Clingempeel published findings that showed higher marital quality was associated with more positive stepmother-stepson relationships, and stepfathers had more positive attitudes toward stepchildren of both sexes and reported a higher quality of marital relationships. Perhaps this is connected to the gendered expectations of women to spend more time with their (step)children, and for their primary role in childrearing and domestic labour.

**Role and identity.** Underlying all discussion and research around stepmothers is the theme of role or identity development:

Uncertainty about how to act dogs nearly every stepmother, but particularly the nonresidential ones. Experts even have a special

term for their confusion about how they should be with their stepkids: 'role ambiguity.' Think of yourself as another parent. Think of yourself as a friend. Think of yourself more like an aunt. The advice goes on and on. It's no wonder stepmothers don't know how to act or who to be. (Martin, 2009, p. 27)

This finding was foreshadowed thirty years ago when Ambert (1986) explored the experience of stepmothers based on qualitative and quantitative data gathered from 109 stepparents. Focusing on the issue of residency as a factor impacting the stepmother role, Ambert found that the experience for stepmothers was more positive with live-in children than children who visited the home (nonresidential stepmothers). Perhaps this enabled women to establish a more consistent role within the home and among family members, as opposed to feeling like an "occasional" stepparent.

On the topic of the mothering role but from a South African perspective, Price (1987) found that childless stepmothers (CSMs) had a more difficult time navigating their parenting role than those stepmothers who had biological children of their own. While this is consistent with the literature cited in Price's work, the actual factors impacting this experience are not made clear. More recently, DeSio (2008) explored the differences among CSMs and stepmothers with children, focusing on role salience or strain and its impact on marital and psychological well-being. They found that parental status may have an important impact on role satisfaction. CSMs reported higher occupational salience and lower role ambiguity as stepmothers, but also indicated lower life satisfaction, lower marital satisfaction, lower role salience for parenting, and higher exclusion from their partners' relationships with their children. "Though stepfamilies have become commonplace in today's society, it remains critical to maintain an accurate awareness of

the roles of all stepfamily members in order to promote healthy and happy families” (DeSio, 2008, p. 84).

Role definition is an important determinant of how well individuals will adjust to living in a stepfamily (Fine, 1996). According to Orchard & Solberg (1999), there are four main factors underlying role development for stepmothers: functional inclusion, parental love, household responsibility, and mother replacement. The stepmothers in my study expected to be included in the stepfamily, however, they did not expect to have primary responsibility for household duties and childcare. They did not expect to replace the biological mother, nor did they expect a parental-like love relationship with their stepchildren. Vinick and Lanspery (2000) explored stepmother-stepchild relationships longitudinally. They found that over time, stepmothers often fulfilled the role of “carpenter” – someone who repairs damaged intergenerational relationships.

Underlying much of this role strain for stepmothers is the dominant cultural story of the stepmother – that of a “self-serving, pernicious woman”. This is in direct contrast to the normative story of the ideal, nuclear family. According to Jones (2004):

Our nuclear-based family culture has been the dominant paradigm for life over many generations in U.S. society. Like most enduring stories this has served a useful purpose. It has advanced and supported the norms of parental responsibility and instilled a sense of family cohesion and identity. But, as with other privileged institutions that maintain the status quo, it has tended to marginalize other family forms. (p. 235)

Jones explores the ways in which concepts from narrative therapy can be utilized in supporting stepfamily members by creating more authentic stories of new family values. These new family values would respect kinship based on affection and moral responsibility as opposed to simply biology. “As individuals, this requires self-examination of our own beliefs, biases, and values, and a willingness to move beyond the restriction of our own cultural and family experiences” (Jones, 2004, p. 235). This is clear in Doodson and Morley’s (2006) findings that women with a biological definition of “family” found adaptation to stepfamily life much more difficult. So it is important that future research focuses on challenging both normative family and wicked stepmother ideologies. Church (2000) found that feelings of jealousy were evident among stepmothers when they felt like outsiders – a common experience (Newcomb Marine & Korf, 2013; Papernow, 2013; Katz, 2010) – and was a response to feeling powerless in their own home. Jealousy led to feeling “wicked”, and women felt further silenced by the sense that they were fulfilling this stereotype. Part of the dialogue in the *Canadian Stepping Stones* group, then, is to discuss these challenges and feelings, and to renegotiate a sense of stepmother identity that is more positive.

**Psychology, counseling, and mental health.** Morrison and Thompson-Guppy (1985) summarize the commonly experienced challenges for stepmothers as the stepmother syndrome, and find that women in this position who seek mental health support present a clinical picture similar to depression. With symptoms like feelings of anxiety, rejection, guilt, and exhaustion, this early study draws a connection between the stereotype of the stepmother as a woman who experiences these complex feelings, and clinical mental health problems. Nielsen (1999) also looks at the connection between the stepmother experience and mental health and well-being. Nielsen believes that four key factors influence stepmother stress: attitudes about mothering in

society, the personalities and attitudes of biological mothers and stepmothers, the fathers' attitude and his relationship with the biological mother, and the gender and mental health of stepchildren. The cultural and social prescriptions of mothering and motherhood may play a significant role in the increased stress stepmothers report as opposed to stepfathers (Nielsen). And most recently, Henry and McCue (2009) look specifically at the two themes of control and psychological well-being in the stepmother experience. They found that a perceived lack of control over parenting practices and finances were most significant in shaping feelings of powerlessness and anger that manifest in clinical depression. This points directly to the need for this kind of research – that which explores these issues, supports women in these situations, and draws attention to the challenges for women who take on this role of stepmother.

When compared to biological mothers, stepmothers display significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety (Doodson, 2009; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011; Murray, 2011; Borden, 2003; Hobart, 1991; Johnson et al., 2008). According to Doodson (2009), these feelings predominantly related to the presence of the biological mother, the stepchildren, and difficulties with the stepmom role in general. In addition, stepmothers report lower levels of social support from family and friends, and engage in more maladaptive coping mechanisms than biological mothers. The factors predicting the adaptability of stepmoms to their role were marital satisfaction, and length of relationship in years. This research overwhelmingly points to the need for stepfamily interventions – such as education, counselling, and social supports – to foster more functional stepfamily units and support its members. In a later study, Doodson and Davies (2014) expand the comparison of mental health indicators to include four distinct stepmother roles: residential, nonresidential, and those in both simple and complex stepfamilies. Residential stepmothers are those who live fulltime with stepchildren, while nonresidential stepmothers have visiting

stepchildren. Those living in simple stepfamilies include only children from one adult, while complex stepfamilies include children from both adults and/or children as a result of the remarriage. Compared to the mental health of biological mothers, full-time complex and part-time simple stepmothers report significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety. Having a long-term partner helps buffer these mental health issues for biological mothers, but this is not the case for stepmothers. This makes sense, as stepmothers are not in that complex position outside of life with their partner.

With these obvious reports of mental health concerns for stepmothers and other stepfamily members, there are important implications for those in the counselling profession (Miller & Soper, 1982). Howell (1998) believes the challenge for those helping professionals is to identify and appreciate familial qualities of stepfamilies, and to facilitate communication and negotiation amongst stepfamily members to prevent and combat issues of well-being. Jones (2003) feels that social workers can play a key role in supporting stepfamilies by fostering family values that honor kinship not only based on biology, but on responsibility, care, and affection. Almost thirty years ago, Visher and Visher (1978) explored the complexities of stepfamily life, and the role that caring professionals can play in supporting them:

When society as a whole, and members of the helping professions in particular, are able to understand and support stepparents in their struggle to cope with complicated and emotionally-charged stepfamily situations, stepparents will be better able to use their strengths, and more new families may successfully reconstitute and blend. (p. 261)

This could have been written in 2016, for its relevance to the need to support stepfamilies. However, it is unclear how many support professionals have had training in stepfamily dynamics since the publication of the original piece. Without that training, as the quote states, families cannot be truly supported. It is my hope that further research will continue to show this importance.

**Gender and mothering.** While all of the literature around stepmothering relates to gender and mothering as women negotiate their parenting role amidst social and cultural expectations of women and mothers, the following research speaks specifically to the impact of gender and mothering ideology for stepmothers. Gosselin and Rousseau (2012) interviewed stepmothers around their experiences from a phenomenological perspective. They found a significant difference in the way stepmothers experienced typical challenges and stressors based on their gender typing – androgynous or feminine. These measures were determined by the participants self-reported characteristics using the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1974). This measure “identifies the level of identification that individuals have regarding masculine and/or feminine personality traits and stereotyped sex roles” (Gosselin & Rousseau, 2012, p. 115). While androgynous stepmothers identified a personal resilience that helped them cope with stress, feminine stepmothers described feeling rejected and victimized in the face of these similar stresses. Gosselin and Rousseau also found a difference in how stepmothers defined their role, as androgynous stepmothers reported focusing equally on their stepparent role and on their career and life outside the home. Feminine stepmothers on the other hand, focused primarily on the quality of their relationships to define success. Dividing stepmothers into these two loosely-defined categories of feminine and androgynous may not accurately determine the differences in their approaches, or account for other factors impacting the ways that stepmothers handle stress.

Levin (1997) focuses on gender as a way to explore the role of stepparents. Despite the fact that both women and men remarry, it is only stepmothers who contend with the “evil” or “wicked” stereotype. Levin states that “most research uses gender as an explanation of why relationships can be difficult, but not as a starting point for understanding” (p. 178), so Levin moves away from speculating about causes and over to an exploration of meaning. Her participants reconstructed social and cultural norms around family and gender “naturally”, in that they did not have explicit discussions around who would fill what roles in the home. Levin states that: “In this way femininity and masculinity are reproduced right through new ideologies about relationships” (p. 182). In these new relationships with different family dynamics, gender often plays out in “traditional” ways where the woman takes primary responsibility for childcare. This is interesting when we consider the ideology of modern masculinity and femininity dictating that women and men have choices in their lives and the same possibilities exist for both sexes. If traditional gender roles are followed, this is a matter of coincidence, rather than socially and culturally prescribed behaviors (Levin). Part of this prescribed behavior is that “women are socialized to see the world from another persons’ perspective, while men use themselves as the basis” (p. 188). Feminist pedagogy addresses this same dynamic from a knowledge perspective – that historically, the knowledge of men has been valued as “normative”, while women’s knowledge is seen as “Other”.

One of Levin’s (1997) central findings in her research with stepparents is that for women, the role is more or less the same, regardless of their position as biological mother or stepmother. The title “step” suggests distance, while the female role suggests primary caregiving, so many stepmothers experience the dilemma of striking a balance between the two. Because this dilemma does not show up for males who are also stepfathers, it would appear that the mothering

ideology is a dominant one in Western culture. Weaver and Coleman (2005) also found that a central concept tying together the experiences of stepmothers was the ideology of motherhood. From a Chilean perspective, Perez and Torrens (2009) explore the prescriptive nature of the ideology of motherhood, and how it impacts the experience and role of stepmothers. Social and cultural norms do not only inform behavior in Western society, but on a global scale.

An emerging area of research is around the experience of stepparents from an LGBTQ perspective. Much more work needs to be done in this area, as identified by Lorah (2006-2007), but her initial findings identified struggles for stepmothers in lesbian relationships similar to those in heterosexual relationships – lack of couple time, ambiguous and unclear roles. There is room for more research that brings diverse stepmother perspectives to the fore.

**Adolescent perspectives.** There is a body of literature that explores stepfamily dynamics from the perspective of adolescents and/or young adults. Crohn (2006a, 2006b) focused on the relationship between daughters and stepmothers as compared to that of daughters and biological mothers. Crohn identified five roles that stepmothers fill, according to her interviews, that range from “Like Another Mother” to more peer-like roles such as “Older Friend” and “Peer-Like Girlfriend”, and then more distant roles such as “Type of Kin” and “My Father’s Wife”. Crohn identifies two distinct and unique positive characteristics of the daughter/stepmother relationship: mentorship and the self-disclosure of personal secrets. These characteristics imply a friendship with an older woman, but Crohn also found that extended family members such as half-siblings, stepsiblings, and stepgrandparents play an important and positive role in supporting daughter/stepmother relationships. King (2007) found that biological fathers play a key role in maintaining relationships.

Research around adolescent perspectives of stepfamilies has been done for quite some time. In 1983, Lutz found that adolescents identified issues of divided loyalties and discipline as the most stressful aspects of stepfamily life. In 1986, Fine discussed the importance of exposure to stepfamilies as lessening stereotypical beliefs of the role of stepmothers. Fluit and Paradise (1991) found that young adults perceived mothers more positively than stepmothers, and fathers more positively than stepfathers, which is perhaps not wholly surprising. However, Claxton-Oldfield (1992) found that for the most part, stepfathers are not seen less positively than biological fathers, with the exception of situations of discipline. When stepfathers discipline stepchildren, their behavior is seen as less justified than when biological fathers discipline. For the stepmother role, Pruett, Calsyn and Jensen (1993) also found varying responses from children. While children did perceive less relationship quality, less support, and more conflict with their stepmother, they did not perceive more overall family conflict in their family life with a stepmother. Four significant predictors of relationship quality between stepmothers and adolescent stepchildren, according to Quick, Newman and McKenry (1996), are: the adolescents' perception of the family's ability to acquire social support, as well as to reframe family problems, the frequency of agreement between the biological father and stepmother in terms of how to raise children, and the stepmother's satisfaction with her remarriage. These qualities speak to an overall contentment in the stepfamily – an ease of relationships and stability in the home.

**Online support.** There is not a great deal of literature to be found around the use of online support groups by stepmothers, but as my study looks at women's learning in part through participation in an online support group, I felt it was important to add what I could find. Christian (2005) found that stepmothers in an online group challenged the stigma of their role by

creating a binary that depicts the biological mother as “wicked” and the stepmother as “good”. Craig and Johnson (2011) explored online social support for stepmothers as used to discuss relationship-based issues. And extending that, Craig, Harvey-Knowles and Johnson (2012) found that childless stepmothers in particular relied on these digital spaces of support to discuss issues in their romantic partnership. The authors stressed the importance of relationships with other stepmothers for coping with stress associated with this role.

**Conclusion.** The literature around stepparenting, and stepmothers in particular, is found in a variety of fields – from psychology and mental health to family formation and literature. There are clearly challenges associated with navigating the role of stepmother, and some of the mitigating factors are: the ideology of motherhood, social and cultural norms around gender and family, and the complex and very personal relationships that make up a “family”. In her foundational text, *Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel, and Act the Way We Do*, Martin (2009) calls for researchers to cast a wider net of theory, in the hopes that a more robust exploration of the stepmothering experience may help to support these women in their role:

For the past thirty years, we have turned to psychologists for help with stepfamily matters. But stepmothering problems are far more than purely emotional or psychological, as the best psychotherapists are well aware. Anthropology, sociology, evolutionary biology, and feminist literary and cultural theory might help us just as much in our quest to understand why having stepchildren can be so difficult. Understanding the history of stepmothering might also help us see that, quite often, the

problems we encounter feel bigger than us because they are. In some cases, our stepmothering dilemmas have actually preceded us by thousands of years, and there is likely tremendous relief in this knowledge. (p. 7-8)

I feel there is much to be gained from exploring stepmothering from an adult education perspective, and that is one of the goals for this research study.

### Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods

#### Qualitative Research

In qualitative research, the methodology refers to the research design used to plan the collection, analysis, and interpretation of information. It is a “theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed” (Harding, 1987, p. 3). Qualitative research is concerned with meaning, experience, and interpretation, rather than the cause and effect or description of quantitative research. The design of the research must be carefully chosen to reflect the questions and information the researcher is seeking, while considering the “knower” who is the focus of the research study (Harding, 1987). In a study of minority ethnic students returning to higher education, Bowl (2001) highlights key methodological concerns such as the research being positioned alongside the participants rather than aiming for objective distance, and looking to explore experience rather than aim for generalizability. Influenced by feminist methodologies, Bowl enabled participants to “speak directly and to reflect on their own experience” (p. 143). According to Harding (1987), there are three features important in distinguishing a feminist methodology: that the research start with women’s experiences as the focus of analysis, that the research be designed for women (i.e. social phenomena important to women are explored), and that the researcher be located in the same critical plane as the participants so as not to be an invisible voice of authority in the research. My proposed research study is interpretive in design, focusing on exploring the ways that women – in this case, stepmothers – learn and make sense of their experiences. Like Harding proposes, this study begins with women’s experiences, is intended to serve women, and as the researcher I am connected to participants as a fellow stepmother and member of this online support group. The following section explains in greater

detail the interpretive design of this study, the methodological approach, and methods including participant selection, data collection, analysis and reporting.

### **Interpretive Design**

This study employs an interpretivist perspective which, according to Merriam (2009), is used to “describe, understand, interpret” (p.11) phenomena. Interpretivist epistemological perspectives infer that reality (ontological perspective) is contextual and that there are multiple truths (Merriam, 2009). While this orientation does not specifically imply an intent of change (as in the critical paradigm), I believe the understanding of experience is an important first step to informing future reform. As Schram (2003) states: “If and when you do commit to function as an advocate or to investigate possibilities for change in a situation, then you begin to connect your inquiry to a critical paradigm” (p.34). So the goal of this research is to describe, understand and interpret the learning of Canadian stepmothers, particularly through their participation in a Facebook support group. This knowledge may inform needed education and support for stepfamilies, and contribute to literature that challenges the dominant ideologies of family, mothering, and stepparenting.

### **Narrative Life History**

Life history research is used often in adult educational research. More than just retelling personal experience, life history or narrative research (the terms are often used interchangeably (Merriam, 2009)) involves individuals constructing the “full meaning of life through particular as well as universal social and cultural resources” (Dominice, 2005, p. 372). With roots in multiple disciplines, this narrative life history approach is used as a way to understand adult development and engage in qualitative research methodology, and calls for a “contextual, interpretive,

constructivist approach to teaching and learning” (Dominice, 2005, p. 421). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) speak to the ways that people experience the world as the heart of narrative analysis, and ideological perspectives are used to interpret narratives – in this case, perspectives rooted in adult education and feminist theories of motherwork.

Moss and Pittaway (2013) use narrative life history research to “move beyond telling stories, in an effort to challenge taken for granted assumptions about individual assumptions” (p. 1008). Similarly, my aim in this research study is to explore the experiences of stepmothers as embedded in assumptions around mothering and family life. Likewise, Taber (2013) utilizes this methodology to connect the viewpoint of participants to broader social and cultural contexts. This approach assists researchers in their “in-depth exploration of an individual life-in-context [that] brings us that much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in communities” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 11 as cited in Taber, 2013, p. 17). Participants are recognized as socially and culturally situated, as meaning making individuals.

In a biographical approach to narrative life history analysis, the data (in this case interviews) are explored in terms of the influence of factors such as gender, family of origin, life experiences, and relationships (Denzin, 1989), searching for common themes (Polkinghorne, 1995). The questions guiding the interviews for this research study were designed to explore these factors, and the ways in which they may have impacted the women’s role negotiation as stepmothers. In addition to asking women how they learn to navigate this role, I also asked them about challenges and supports they perceive, the role of gender in their parenting labour, and supports they believe should be in place for stepmothers and stepfamilies.

## **Research Methods**

In this section, I review the participant selection, data collection, data analysis, ways in which information from this study will be reported, and ethical considerations.

**Participant selection.** The nine participants in this study are all members of a closed, private Facebook support group for Canadian stepmothers. Initially, I had anticipated recruiting between ten and twelve participants. As a fellow member, I received approval from the group administrators to seek participation from the group, and posted a brief description of the study on the Facebook page. Ten women offered to participate, but before we could schedule an interview date, one of the women changed her mind, so I ended up with nine participants. Because they were the only women to respond to my call, I decided to accept the nine participants and proceed with my research as that was an adequate sample size for an unfunded doctoral research study. Participants have been stepmothers for varying lengths of time. Some have their own biological children, and others do not. Some were raised with stepparents themselves and some were not (see Table below). This was intentional in order to explore the potential differences in their learning needs and experiences. While diversity in this context was sought, I acknowledge that this research is not neutral, and participants' lives are shaped by sociocultural, economic, educational, and political contexts (Fontana & Frey, 2005). It is of note that all but one participant who responded to my invitation to participate are White, and all are living in heterosexual relationships. I believe that further diversity of the group would have been beneficial to obtain more diverse perspectives, but I accepted those participants who offered to take part.

I had an existing relationship with the participants at the time of the interviews, as we are all members of the *Canadian Stepping Stones* Facebook group, but I had not met any of them in person prior to the interviews. I posted a formal call for participation within the group, rather

than approaching individuals directly, to avoid anyone feeling obligated to take part. Our connection in the group made the interviews slightly less formal, perhaps, although I still carefully reviewed the measures of confidentiality I was taking, and used an interview schedule (Appendix A) to guide the conversation.

Table 1

*Overview of Participants*

Length of time as a stepmother	Between 2-12 years (average 6 years)
Stepmothers who are also biological mothers	2 participants have children from a previous relationship  3 participants have children together  3 participants have no biological children  1 participant is expecting her first biological child
Age of stepchildren	Between 4-30 years old (average 13 years)
Families of origin	6 participants are from blended families

	3 participants are from first-time families
Custody situation	<p>4 participants have 50/50 custody</p> <p>3 participants have shared custody (less than 50% of the time)</p> <p>1 participant has sole custody of stepchildren</p> <p>1 participant has adult stepchildren</p>

**Interviews as data collection.** Data was collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Merriam, 2009) with nine participants, each lasting between one and two hours. This style is intended to humanize the interview and reduce the power imbalance of the interview process (Foley & Valenzuela, 2008). Interviews give the researcher a window into the meaning created by individuals from their everyday activities and have the benefit of yielding data fairly quickly (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). A semi-structured and open-ended approach is important to ensure that participants are not answering leading questions, but feel free to raise issues that are important to them, relative to the research topic (Merriam, 2009).

Because this life history research focuses on human values and experiences, I acknowledge the social, cultural, and political dimensions of participants’ lives. As Bathmaker (2010) says, “Life stories may be a starting point, the initial exploration of a life as lived, but life

history grounds these stories of personal experience in their wider social and historical context, and pays attention to social relations of power” (p. 2-3). Bathmaker sees the power of narrative life histories in their ability to question dominant narratives in society that do not match the lived experience of participants. So through interviews, participants spoke of their lived experience as stepmothers, and that lived experience presents a story that contrasts with the “wicked stepmother” narrative in society. Going beyond the telling of stories to question these taken-for-granted assumptions is an important aspect of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connell, 2000).

There are limitations to interviewing as a method of gathering information. Participants may be uncomfortable or uncertain about sharing particular information without a level of trust that can be hard to achieve with short-term contact. Language and meaning may differ between individuals, and as the researcher I attempted as much clarity as possible with my questions.

Two interviews took place in person as the participants lived close to me geographically; the rest took place via Skype or telephone. Relying on technology to conduct interviews introduces the potential for errors or complications, but was necessary to include participants from across Canada. Also, because participants have self-identified as using digital tools often in their day-to-day lives, they were comfortable using technology for our interviews. All participants are referred to using pseudonyms, and any identifying factors (i.e. names of family members, cities of residence, etc.) have been removed. An interview schedule allowed me to discuss important topics and questions, while allowing for flexibility to explore emerging ideas. I started the interviews with more descriptive, basic questions with the goal of putting participants at ease with the interview process, and to “lay the foundation for questions that access the interviewee’s perceptions, opinions, values, emotions, and so on” (Merriam, 2009, p.103). Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder so that I could give participants my full

attention, and be aware of body language and other non-verbal language cues. To further involve participants in the research study and for their protection, I provided participants with a copy of their transcribed interview to review and edit prior to publishing any of the findings.

**Analysis.** Information from participant interviews was interpreted through a lens of motherwork, which is learned informally and experientially. This learning is embedded in public and private negotiations of labor, relationships, and identities. I used a thematic method of analysis, and more specifically, the constant comparative method of moving from one transcript to another to generate themes (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001; Boeije, 2002). In narrative life history research around student identity in adult online education, Moss and Pittaway (2013) analyzed data looking for threads, themes, and issues both within and across the participant experiences. I engaged in a similar analysis practice, looking for patterns of gendered roles and expectations, particularly around caring work and parenting (i.e. motherwork). I looked for the spaces and places of learning to navigate their role, as identified by participants themselves. Key to this analysis is focusing on the individual experience as embedded in social, cultural, political, and historical contexts.

Tisdell (1995) identified two streams of feminist pedagogy: the gender model and the liberatory model. The gender model focuses on women's experience as nurturers primarily, where the liberatory model focuses on systems of oppression. This is a simplistic explanation, but Tisdell (1995) sees value in both of these streams. As Barg (2004) states: "If we examine the experience and learning of individuals, without analyzing the social systems of oppression that have contributed to people's experience, then we are not contributing to any substantive change in society" (p. 14). Individuals do not learn in a vacuum, so this is key to exploring women's experiences and informing change.

Social media represents contemporary and expanding sites of knowledge formation, and learning through participation in a digital community of practice is another key feature of this study and an important area of data analysis. Lastly, informal and experiential learning refers to analysis of the “how” these women learn. Without stepfamily education available widely in Canada, I looked at the learning that happens “by doing” and in discourse using social media, with the belief that this may inform a more formalized education program and supports for stepfamilies.

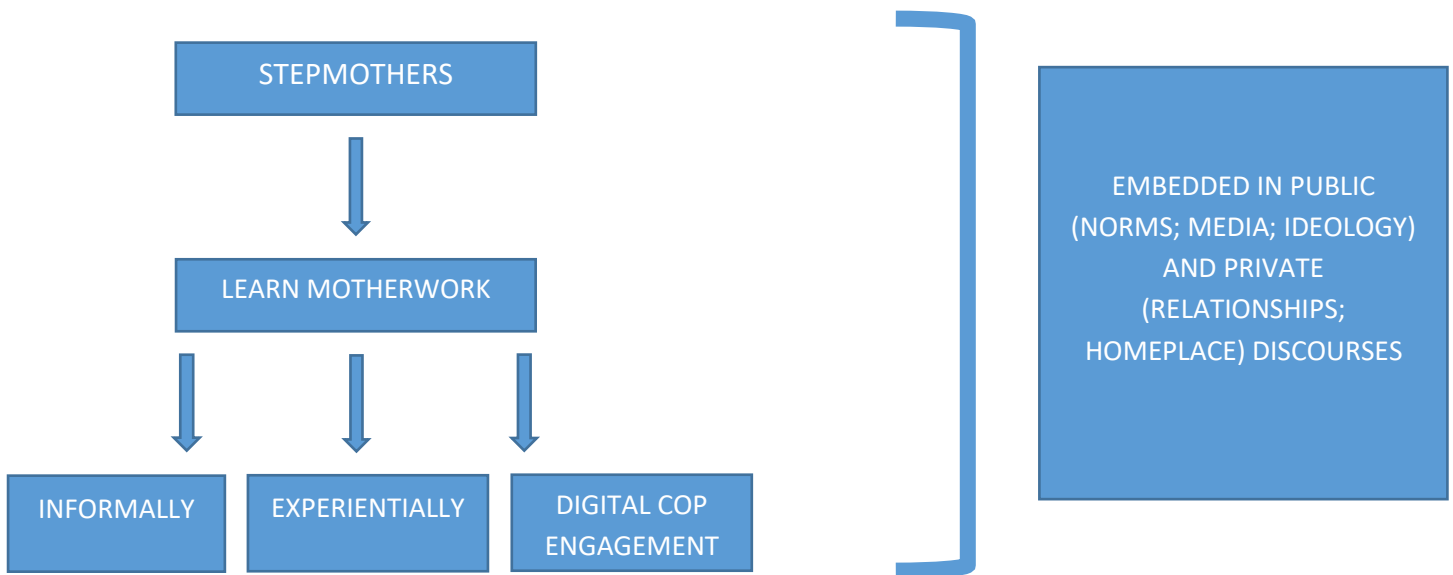


Figure 1. Diagram of Analysis

**Reporting.** Knowledge from this research study will be disseminated in traditional ways through academic journals, book chapters, and conference proceedings, in addition to this doctoral dissertation. In keeping with the topic of the study, I will also share information from the research using social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and my own graduate student

website. Because I plan to share information from this study in various forums, member checks – where transcripts were sent to participants for their initial feedback and corrections where needed – were an important part of the process.

**Ethical Considerations.** Qualitative research involving human participation requires consideration of ethical issues. Participants in this study were thoroughly informed of the research plan and design, and made aware of the opportunity to withdraw their participation at any time. This was documented in an informed consent document, a copy of which was given to participants. Informed consent refers to the following criteria:

- (a) the researcher informs participants as fully as possible about the study's purpose and audience, (b) participants are provided with enough information so that they understand what their agreement to participate entails, (c) participants give that consent willingly (and indicate so with their signature), and (d) participants understand that they may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice or penalty. (Schram, 2003, p.105)

The first stages of contacting and recruiting participants is about disclosure and building a sense of trust, balancing access and trust with the obligation to handle the data responsibly (Schram, 2003). Participants trust the researcher with their personal knowledge and perspectives, and as the researcher I worked to anticipate the responsibility of managing that information throughout the stages of research.

In qualitative research, ethical issues arise around the relationship between researcher and participants, and confidentiality. Qualitative research is not carried out by the objective researcher-at-a-distance; rather, this type of research implies a connection between researcher

and participants, and working together to explore lived experience and meaning making. Strauss (1987) discussed the role of subjectivity in research, primarily the researcher's background, experiences, and technical knowledge:

These experiential data should not be ignored because of the usual canons governing research (which regard personal experience and data as likely to bias the research), for these canons lead to the squashing of valuable experiential data. We say, rather, 'mine your experiences, there is potential gold there!' (p.11) (as cited in Maxwell, 2013, p.45)

The researcher is the primary instrument of data collection, interpretation, and analysis, and therefore is not distinct from the process or participants (Merriam, 2009).

As the researcher, I am very much connected to this topic and the particular group of women. Not only am I a stepmother, but I am a fellow member of this online support group and have my own experiences as a learner within it. Narrative research, by design, is ethically complex, as data comes from individual experiences and stories. Because of the impact the researcher's interpretation may have on participant's lives, "the researcher's analysis should be presented, not as a privileged account, but as conditioned by a certain perspective that should be made as explicit as possible" (Smythe & Murray, 2000, p. 333). Even with this explicit naming of perspective and intent, ethical issues in narrative research are not black and white, but rather, "are best rendered in shades of gray" (Smythe & Murray, 2000, p. 334). Throughout the research process I reflected on my own assumptions as related to the stepmothering experience, as well as my role as researcher (Hewitt, 2007), but ultimately I was the one to ask the questions, gather the data, analyze the narratives, and report the findings. By making my perspective and experience

clear to participants and readers, being reflexive throughout the research, and giving participants the opportunity to review their transcripts, the goal is not to eliminate my bias, but rather to be clear about my place in the research so that readers can engage with the findings accordingly.

For the purpose of this research study, I reviewed the informed consent documents with each participant and gave them a copy for their records; reviewed transcripts carefully and removed any identifying factors; used pseudonyms for participants; and when participants reviewed their transcripts I provided them the opportunity to ask questions or remove responses that they were no longer comfortable with. Also, I was clear that participants could contact me directly, my doctoral supervisor, and/or the research office with questions or concerns at any time throughout the research process. These measures were clearly outlined in the CORE ethics tutorial I took as part of the research requirements at Mount Saint Vincent University. Additionally, my research proposal was submitted to and passed by the University Research Ethics Board.

Another ethical consideration for this research study was my role as researcher and as a member in the group as a Canadian stepmother. Had I not been a member, I would not have known of this group in the first place, but my membership influences my perspective on its importance. As previously stated, I approached the administrators of the group to ask if I may post a call for participation. I used the data collected through the interviews with participants, but could not use, interpret, analyze, or comment on any of the posts in the general group thread. The administrators prioritize the privacy and safety of the group members, and as a member myself, I know the importance of these guidelines. To ensure the protection of the group, I focused on the learning and experience of women as members of the group, rather than the workings of the group itself.

### Chapter 4: Women's Words

In this section, I present the findings and analysis of the research study in an interwoven fashion, for several reasons. Life history research, which is about participants telling the “stories” of their lives as connected to the focus of the research, tends to be written in a more fluid, conversational style. I was also greatly informed by Barg’s (2001) dissertation on motherwork as subsistence learning, and her dissertation was also written in a fluid style that connects the participants’ voices to the literature. Lastly, I have been mentored to write in this way by more established academics who also engage in life history research where the explanation of learning is linked with an ongoing reflective analysis and connections to related literature. In this chapter, *Women’s Words*, I draw on multiple quotes from the participants to present the bulk of my findings, and I tie in the research questions guiding this study to highlight the ways in which they were addressed.

Initially, I had not specifically identified the motherwork focus of this research, but had instead claimed a focus on the ways in which stepmothers learn and navigate their role more generally. However, after the interviews were conducted and I began the analysis stage, I saw that these women defined their role in terms of the definition of motherwork. All stepmothers may not share this same sense of role, but the women who were gracious enough to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings with me defined their role as a stepmother in relation to their labor connected to childcare (which included various relationships and work around the home).

Barg (2001) demonstrated a growing discourse on motherwork challenging traditional views of motherhood. She claims, however, a dearth of literature centered on learning within motherwork from a qualitative research standpoint. Like Barg (2001), this study brings an adult

learning standpoint to the experience of motherwork – exploring the sites and processes of learning this work, particularly learning that is informal and experiential. The unique contribution of this research is to explore the learning of motherwork and the way it is negotiated for women who are not biological mothers, but stepmothers.

The following section focuses on the words of the participants – their learning and experiences. I identified three ways in which these women learn to navigate their role of motherwork: through participation in a digital CoP (the online support group); informally (through engagement with first families and informal research); and experientially (by doing and through “trial and error”). I also identified four main factors that impact this learning: one’s ideas/values of what it means to be a stepmother (or family member generally); the challenges associated with stepparenting (there are several commonly experienced bumps in the road); the biological mother of the stepchild(ren) (this is such a significantly-named challenge for the women that I felt it needed to be looked at individually); and mothering ideology and identity (whether the stepmother is a biological mother or not, the way she perceives herself as a mother (or not), and the tensions between different types of mothering). These are all explored in depth. Let us first explore the sites and processes of learning.

### **Sites/Processes of Learning**

In this section, I use the participant’s experiences to address the first research question, “How do women who claim the identity of stepmother learn and experience ‘motherwork’?” Women identified learning experientially, through their lived experience, informally through their first families and research, and to a degree through their participation in the online support group. Each of these sections will now be explored in-depth, using the women’s words.

**Digital community of practice (“I’m not alone”).** As part of the Web 2.0 group of tools, Facebook is a social network site where participants have uniquely identifiable profiles, they can make public their connections to be viewed by others, and, perhaps most importantly, they can produce, consume and interact with user-generated content that is accessed by the participant’s connections (Ellison & boyd, 2013). These spaces provide opportunities for voices that otherwise may not be heard; for opportunities to engage in informal learning in group formats, despite their geographic location. Users of social media and those who engage in other Web 2.0 tools such as wikis and blogs can live in different countries with different time zones and still connect, which is one of the main advantages of the virtual setting.

The use of technology in the form of social networks has expanded immensely the available reach of communities of practice, so that members can participate, share knowledge, and provide support from anywhere with just a connection to the Internet. All participants in this study spoke to their learning as connected to the Facebook support group, where the website itself is not the community, but the relationships that develop and are fostered through its use are. As Lave and Wenger (1991) stated: “learning is an integral part of generative social practice in the lived-in world” (p. 35). Through engagement, women navigate the challenges and experiences of being a stepmother.

One of the defining characteristics of a community of practice is the domain of knowledge, which is about creating “common ground and a sense of common identity” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 27). As communities form around shared interests, the domain is what brings the members together (Byington, 2011). This Facebook support group gives women the opportunity to discuss a very significant experience that they have in common – stepfamily life and their role within it. Lucy spoke about this group as being a space where she “fits in”:

My biggest issue as a stepmom in my day-to-day life, removing the mom from the situation, is that I don't really feel like I belong with anyone anymore. My friends are either these Supermoms who are always doing things with their kids, or they're... my friends who don't have families and are still partying every weekend, they have extra money to spend, and they're basically us without kids. So I struggle because I don't necessarily fit in with either of those groups... So the group has kind of given me that, somewhere I fit in.

Where the domain refers to the issues to be explored within the group, the community is the actual membership who care about these issues and experiences (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). Membership is fluid, frequently shifting and changing, but based on a mutual respect and trust. When I questioned Emily about her preference for an online group vs an in-person group:

I definitely prefer having it online. Not only having three hundred people as opposed to four, but three hundred different experiences, three hundred situations, three hundred viewpoints, as opposed to four people. And the thing is that everyone in the stepmom group, they only know as much about my relationship as I tell them.

Heather agreed with this, and valued the aspect of anonymity the group provided:

I think part of the group is that there is a little bit of anonymity. So if I'm talking to someone in Calgary, the chances that they know the people I am talking about are very small. So I can sort of feel

free to vent without the consequences of it getting back to either their mom or my husband. And that's good, because when you're talking to people in the community you don't always know who knows who.

Katz (2010) emphasizes the importance of peer support in the stepmothering experience. She specifically identifies online chat rooms as a modern version of in-person groups, noting that they may be more effective in some ways – they enable larger groups and provide that sense of anonymity valued by the women in this study.

A third aspect of a community of practice is the “practice”. Members develop a shared practice which encompasses “a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” (Wenger, 2014, p. 2). It is the socially defined way of engaging in the group, of actively participating and constructing identities in relation to the domain. In this Facebook support group, there is a language of participation that defines them as members, a collection of resources for the members, and even terms and conditions that each member must agree to and that mainly focus on respect and positivity: “No drama allowed... We try to find ways to support each other and do it in a positive way. Because continually bashing and being negative just perpetuates more negative. You go nowhere” (Leah). The members feel that this focus on respect is key to maintaining a positive and safe space for the members.

Part of participating in this community of practice is asking questions and seeking advice from other members. The legal and financial implications of divorce and remarriage and co-parenting are complex, and this is often a topic of conversation among the women. Heather indicates these early complexities: “In the beginning it was definitely more of a learning space to

try and wrap my head around court challenges and what to expect there, and child support and how all that worked”. The women also share information and articles with the rest of the members as a way of addressing questions and problems – a practice made much easier by the tools of the Internet (“click to share!”). This gives members not only access to information, but also highlights the research that women have done on stepfamily living – for example, formal documents around child support and divorce across Canada. All of this information is accessible to those that are interested, but this group provides a sort of online resource centre complete with feedback from those who have been personally impacted by various policies and regulations. The women are great resources for each other and, in situations that can seem overwhelming, they can provide a filter to narrow the massive amounts of information available online.

Within this digital community of practice, as previously discussed, learning occurs through legitimate peripheral participation. Lave and Wenger (1991) state:

Legitimate peripheral participation is not itself an educational form, much less a pedagogical strategy or a teaching technique. It is an analytical viewpoint on learning, a way of understanding learning... Indeed, this viewpoint makes a fundamental distinction between learning and intentional instruction. (p. 40)

The women learn from and with one another in this space, building an understanding of what it means to be a stepmother. Women primarily begin their participation by observing the other posts, reading what others say and getting a sense of the tone of conversation. Their participation typically grows over time as they begin telling their own story and/or asking questions of the group. Each person’s experience is added to the body of knowledge, shaping and redefining it,

and that body of knowledge is there for new members to engage with. This is the definition of legitimate peripheral participation. Heather notes the importance of this learning space for her:

That was a big thing, because you know in the beginning we're dating, and then we're moving in together but not really sharing finances, and so when finances were becoming more shared and we were looking at buying a house together and things were becoming more entwined, I thought, Okay maybe I need to know how this works. Can they go after my income? How does this work?

Lave and Wenger (1991) focused on this shift from the individual learner in an educational context, to learning as participation in the social world as social and cultural practice. By living and engaging in the world, learning is seen as social practice rather than cognitive ability.

The learning framework of legitimate peripheral participation provides the opportunity to explore situated learning theory alongside those about the production and reproduction of social order (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This learning is about navigating the world around the learner, in a social context. So rather than "discovering" knowledge, learners make meaning and understanding in participation. When asked about her experience participating in the Facebook support group, Connie stated: "Now that I've joined the group... I have learned more about my role and about where my stepkids are coming from". Knowledge and understanding are co-constructed with and among fellow participants in the group. This support and learning came to Connie at a time when support was greatly needed:

[My] stepfamily essentially disowned me, and it caused stress with my husband. A few months later I was invited to this group, and I was like, 'Oh man I wish I had you guys five or six months ago when stuff was hitting the fan'. So it helped me to know that other women were dealing with a lot of the same things that I was. That for me was gold. It was so nice to know I wasn't alone and that other women were feeling the same and that those women were there to support you. I really didn't know who else I could talk to about it.

Church (2004) found that many stepmothers she spoke with did not initially know other stepmothers, but actively sought them out and found great comfort in commiserating with others in the same situation. These thoughts are echoed by Emily:

I realize, Okay I'm not alone. My feelings aren't out in left field. I'm not crazy for feeling this way. Without that group, I probably wouldn't have been able to move on from that feeling. I probably would have been stuck wondering, Will this ever go away? Because I wouldn't have anyone to talk about it with.

The sense of community and support were essential to the women as they navigated the challenges and feelings of becoming part of a stepfamily.

In a discussion of behaviour in online groups, Sun, Rau and Ma (2014) identified lurkers as those members on the periphery who do not participate, but benefit from the knowledge and information in the group. In this group of stepmothers, it seems common to increase participation

over time, as members move from newcomers to old-timers. So again, rather than strictly learning, the focus is on the participation and identity of people in a community. Emily spoke of moving from a newcomer who mainly observed in the group, to a more active member who developed the knowledge and confidence to help others: “I guess the best way I could explain it is that I went from someone who would sit back and watch, to someone who could, not give advice, but help someone else in the same situation. Like I feel like I have a confidence in it now”. Her understanding of the practice of stepmothering is shaped by, and she in turn shapes, the social and cultural understanding of stepmothering within the community.

In a world that is socially constituted, there are both “objective forms and systems of activity, on the one hand, and agents’ subjective and intersubjective understandings of them, on the other” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 51) that mutually define the world as it is experienced. For many stepmothers, a major challenge is having the court system involved in daily life and having to negotiate this complex system. Very few nuclear or first-time families have to consider court rulings and the cost of lawyers in their family time. Susie speaks to the value of the group in navigating these challenges: “It was really helpful to hear people’s stories of how things went in court and how they handled that and what kind of judges they had. I learned a lot about our legal system and how dads work into it”. So the objective systems and agents’ understandings of these systems are what together reproduce a socially constituted world.

The complexities and challenges of stepfamily life not only indicate a need for support, but also highlight the sensitive nature of conversations that stepmothers need to have. Where a woman may confide in her husband about many things, discussing her frustration with his parenting or children is not quite so easy or productive in a relationship: “Stepmothers often feel their partners are unaware of, or insensitive to, their struggles” (Church, 2004, p. 98). While

stepmothers may initially expect that her and her partner will represent a united front for their new family, some feel disappointed by a partner's coalition with his children and continued connection to the children's mother. Every family handles these situations differently, but the feeling of disappointment for stepmothers is commonly reported (Church, 2004). Lucy spoke of the group as an outlet that helped her protect her marriage:

I participate in other groups too... and I don't think I would still be in my marriage if it weren't for them. Not because I don't love my husband, but... I'm not necessarily going to vent everything to my husband because he doesn't need to hear that his kid is driving me crazy. That doesn't help my marriage, so just having a group of friends I can vent to has really helped.

This support was also identified by Leah when I asked her what it means to have this group:

Without sounding cliché, it's everything... They're indispensable... They're a huge asset. Especially because it's hard to talk to your husband about his child. He doesn't understand – he loves that kid!... So where do you go? You have to have somewhere to vent.

Groups such as this one can provide a community of understanding and meaning, space for discourse around stepfamily dynamics, allow for diverse perspectives to be represented, and provide much-needed support to stepmothers as they navigate this role. This addresses the second research question guiding this study: “What part does technology play in this [learning] process?” Technology gives these women a space to, together, navigate this challenging

experience. I would like to end this section with a quote from Sarah on the group as a valued support for her as a stepmother:

Q: So what does it mean then for you to have a group like this, in terms of learning and support?

A: It has been the biggest sounding board for me. There would be times I would just be sitting here stressing out over court or whatever, and my chest hurts because I'm just anxiety and stress and I'm going to cry. And I'll just go and post something, and... the fact that I'm able to get it out in a place that is safe, is everything to me. It's everything... And nobody judges us, because we've all been there.

While the participants' words can be typed and presented on a screen or on paper, words cannot convey the emotion behind their words. The relief, the validation, and the safety that this group brings to participants cannot be understated.

In the next section I discuss the other processes of learning for these Canadian stepmothers: informal and experiential learning.

### **Informal learning.**

*First families* ("That's how my Mom did it"). Where first-time families are those that have not experienced divorce or separation, first families are those that we grow up with. Whether participants came from nuclear families or blended families, they frequently spoke of their parents and/or stepparents as sources of learning in terms of their role as stepmothers.

Informal learning through daily interaction with others is ubiquitous and deeply embedded in individuals, as noted by Hrimech (2005): “Language, hunting skills, and new songs have been learned and transmitted from generation to generation in informal or intuitive ways such as observation, imitation and teaching by parents and peers” (p. 310). This is learning in its most basic form, and this cultural reproduction and socialization happen in communication (Brookfield, 2005). Habermas’ concept of the lifeworld is reflected in these understandings of the world around us and the way we communicate these understandings with others. Our experiences in the lifeworld are informed by our social and cultural values, religion, class, and expectations around gender.

Emily talks about her learning housework responsibilities by watching her mother: “I was raised in a household with two parents who worked long hours, and when it came down to things, my mom would get off night shift... and she would clean the whole house. I guess that’s natural to me”. As you will see throughout these findings, the women often refer to things “happening naturally”, and my intent is to further define these actions and behaviors as learned informally and experientially.

Jenna spoke about her mother as a current learning resource and support for her as she navigates the complications of stepfamily living:

My biological mother was my biggest resource. What the hell do I do? There would be many nights I’d call my mom in tears, just so frustrated, just feeling like I didn’t have control in my own house. I don’t have control about what goes on in my own home. There’d be many nights I’d call my mom and say, I love him but I can’t do

this. I can't have this child controlling my house. I can't have her mother controlling my house, because she'll still do that.

This was not necessarily learning around how to parent; rather, seeking guidance from her mother in the face of role challenges. This is an element of informal learning.

Sarah approached her own stepfamily with the goal of treating her stepchildren and biological child equally. This was informed by her experience as a stepchild, with both a stepmother and stepfather, and different feelings toward these relationships:

We don't want them to feel segregated. And that was my big thing, because growing up in a stepfamily with two stepsisters, I felt like there was me and my sister as a family, and my two [step]sisters. And I call them my sisters because we grew up very close, but my stepdad always treated them differently and I hated it.

Her stepmother, however, had a very different impact on Sarah:

I actually call my stepmom 'mom'. As a stepmom, I kind of take how she was, as a mom, and put that into my relationship with my stepkids. The way she was a stepmom is how I want to be as a stepmom, because she was nurturing, she was loving, she was fun, she never did any of the discipline or told us to do anything, but she loved us like her own kids, and that's why I call her mom. She's always been a mom to me.

Interestingly, Sarah connects to the nurturing and caring aspects of mothering, but not the discipline or delegation of tasks that come along with parenting. In her mind, the best way to be a stepmom is to be loving and kind, but not set any expectations or discipline.

One participant, Leah, told a complex story of the cycle of parenting and stepparenting. Abandoned by her father as a child, Leah grew into an adult whose stepson was abandoned by his mother. Being raised by a single mother, who did remarry, further informed her ideas of a mother's role and a father's role in a family:

For a very long time, I actually called my stepdad Uncle Peter, because I was told, this is Mommy's boyfriend, and you call him Uncle. He's not your dad and he has no role in your upbringing. So even though he lived in our house, he had absolutely no authority as a parental figure. And I think that actually was very detrimental to me, because I have a really hard time looking at my husband as an authority figure, because to me the household composition is that the mother makes the rules... But it's odd because after I became a stepmother, I realized that even though there wasn't the authority placed in the role of my stepfather, he still took us with him everywhere, and he worked and his money went into our household, and he always had us with him. So I realized how much he actually did, and I was like, Wow. I had a totally new outlook on him and on how difficult it is. I would never, ever tell anyone to raise someone else's child. I honestly wouldn't.

When I asked Leah why she pushed her stepson's mother to visit with him, she spoke to her feelings on being abandoned by her father:

Well, I had to, because I grew up with a biological father who couldn't care less about me and didn't want anything to do with me. So I know how it feels, and that's why I had to push her to come and see him in some capacity. Because no matter what, no matter what I can do for him, no matter I can give him, I'm not her. And the person who made you rejecting you is the worst thing on earth.

Clearly these foundational relationships have significant impact on Leah's perspective of stepparenting and parenting roles.

This learning, of the social and cultural practice of parenting – whether it is biological parenting or stepparenting – is informally and experientially learned as part of the fabric of the lifeworld. While the lifeworld plays a role in the transmission of culturally ingrained assumptions (Brookfield, 2005), this research suggests that the learning that occurs in the lifeworld (or the world of everyday experiences) may shift and change along with the social structures in society. So our understanding of the role of women as mothers and as stepmothers may shift over time, and the learning in the lifeworld is integral to that shifting knowledge.

**Research (“Google it”).** When women in this research study spoke of how they “learned” how to be a stepmother, in addition to following parental examples, most participants talked about searching for and reading information – primarily online. This also speaks to the second research question, “What role does technology play in this [learning] process?”, as

women use the Internet to seek comfort and support in the form of information. In her research with stepmothers, Church (2004) found that “self-help books and articles are most valuable when they act as a kind of mirror, reflecting back the stepmother’s experience. It can be a relief for stepmothers to discover that their trials are not unique” (p. 281). Mclean (2014) also found that adults used self-help books as pedagogical resources in the areas of health, relationships, and work. He found a gendered aspect to this learning, as women were more likely to seek advice on topic such as relationships, where men were more interested in career- and business-oriented topics such as finance. His participants reported significant learning and change in their own self-understanding (Mclean, 2014). Traditional media such as television, magazines, books, and radio represent a “one-to-many” form of popular culture discourse, where one message dictated by individuals in power is presented to a large audience. Connie specifically spoke to reading Elizabeth Church’s book, *Understanding Stepmothers: Women Share Their Struggles, Successes, and Insights*. In an exploration of childhood and parenting discourses in popular culture, Luke (1996) discusses the power and meaning behind various sites of discourse such as magazines, schools, and talk shows: “These sites, texts, and social relations are the public forum in which specialized, disciplinary knowledges are transformed into public pedagogies and commonsense knowledges of everyday life” (p.167). Popular culture as a site of knowledge production teaches individuals how to see themselves and others as related to the world around them. Most participants spoke of reading and research online, using websites and search forums.

Web 2.0 is “a second generation, or more personalized, communicative form of the World Wide Web that emphasizes active participation, connectivity, collaboration and sharing of knowledge and ideas among users” (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007, p.665), giving us the ability for “many-to-many” discourses, where user-generated content can be shared, adapted, and

responded to by others. This advancement in technology presents an interesting shift in educational research:

The innovation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has provided ordinary people with unprecedented opportunities to take on the ruling educational power structure and pedagogy. The uncontested monopoly of knowledge and the institutionalization of education can now be challenged by new media technologies, which make possible decentralized and interactive communication and a participatory model of culture and democracy, with multiple voices and an expanded flow of information, thus creating a new field for the conjuncture of education and democracy. In particular, dialogical two-way communication and collective ‘many-to-many’ communication has been widely implemented with the emergence of the Internet and social networking sites. (Kellner & Kim, 2009, p.2-3)

The traditional relationship between the producers and consumers of knowledge has been challenged by these technologies. Individuals can search for information online that has been published and posted by others – not “experts” who would have previously been the source of information in traditional media – but everyday people who now have the capacity to make visible their own experiences. This dialogical learning space emerges as different perspectives and ways of making meaning are shared within these groups.

Prior to joining the online support group, Emily researched stepfamily information using other online sites: “I would even go into Google and... see if others were asking the same questions, or if there were blogs associated with what I was talking about... I’ve typed a million things into Google”. Blogs are written by other individuals as a way of making private experiences public (Careless, 2016). Heather also read information online, but pointed out the challenge of navigating the amount of information representing different viewpoints: “Like any parenting information that’s out there, there are sort of many different camps of right and wrong and conflicting ideas”. This is the sometimes overwhelming result of making it possible for anyone with access to a computer and the Internet to publish their thoughts.

Specifically speaking to the stepmothering experience, Connie felt that online research gave her names and labels to put to her experiences:

When I’m doing research... it helps me to understand the role better. It helps tie everything together, and it’s like, ‘Oh that explains it.’ So I’m not the only one dealing with insider vs. outsider stuff. It helps me. All the feelings that I’ve had, the frustrations I’ve had, now I can see that it’s a real thing with a name.

Knowing one is not alone is sometimes a very powerful source of support. Sarah spoke of engaging in similar research that helped her to navigate her role:

Oh I read any article I could think of, searched every Facebook site I could find, looked up anything about psychology, like how my role affects them growing up, how I need to be to make sure they

don't turn into bad kids... you name it, I probably read it... At that point I was having a little bit of anxiety of making sure I helped raise the kids properly.

When asked if she still engaged in this kind of research, Sarah responded:

I'm still very involved in it. Because it's an everyday thing for us. It never goes away. So to just stop learning or stop reading about different dynamics... I mean, I wouldn't stop. I couldn't... To keep learning is my smartest option. I can't just shut the book or turn off my computer and think I know it all.

Just as stepmothering identity appears to change over time, there are questions that continue to arise and research that needs to be done, particularly around the gendered aspects of the lived experience that have yet to be fully explored and articulated.

**Experiential learning.** This section explores the learning that happens through experience. Dewey's (1938) experiential learning theory has elements of constructivism and pragmatism to explore how we construct our experiences and aim to create a more just and beautiful society through experimentation. Many of the women I spoke to in this research used the words in the above title – “it just happened” – to refer to their engagement in varying aspects of motherwork (i.e. childcare and housework). As demonstrated below, women often referred to gradually taking on this role (or in some cases immediately), typically without explicit discussions as to who would do this work and what it would involve. Following the interviews, I found this exact term – “it just happened” – in Levin's (1997) work around stepparent roles in terms of gender. Levin used these words to depict the reconstruction of social and cultural norms

around family and gender, through participation in family life – even stepfamily life where roles do not reflect traditional nuclear family dynamics. The behavior of each person in the marriage (in this case heterosexual stepfamily relationships) maintains the idea of what it means to be a woman and man in this context, and how identities are navigated. “In this way femininity and masculinity are reproduced right through new ideologies about relationships” (p. 182).

To explore this reproduction of norms through the words of my participants, I have divided this section into two subsections: the trial-and-error learning that women engage in to navigate their role as a stepmother; and the learning of motherwork as connected to gender roles and expectations.

*Trial-and-error stepparenting (“Flying by the seat of my pants”)*. According to Dewey (1938), “every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience” (p. 46). Tuana (2001) proposes an experiential learning theory, informed by feminism, that acknowledges the relationship between the body, discursive structures, and the material world. Learning through experience involves a nuanced consideration of these contexts which in turn shape experience. When the participants spoke of their learning to navigate the role of “stepmom”, they often spoke of “trial-and-error” or “flying by the seat of my pants” which refers to learning by doing or learning through experience.

Emily learned to watch her stepdaughter for cues as to the progression of their relationship:

In the beginning it was all [my husband] and I was more of a friend. I was dad’s girlfriend and her friend. And then as time went

on she started becoming more comfortable, and I basically followed her cues. Whenever we watched movies she started wanting to sit beside me, so she guided everywhere we would go, what steps we would take.

And when asked how her role has changed over time, Emily said:

I went from someone who would sit back and watch, to someone who could... help someone else in the same situation. Like I feel like I have a confidence in it now... Everything is slowly falling into place. It's come a long way from what it was.

Over time and with experience, Emily became more confident in her role. This occurred in combination with both discussions with her husband and membership in the online support group, reflecting Michelson's (2015) analysis of experiential learning. Michelson states that Dewey's experiential learning theory claims that knowledge is never individual, but is entwined with the intentions of others. The "integration of thought and action and of mind and world" (Michelson, 2015, p. 91) in Dewey's theory of experiential learning describes meaning as existing not simply within a person's head, but in public understandings of the world in which people are all actors. Dewey's theory is also aligned with feminist thinking that challenges epistemological individualism – where knowledge is based on individual experience and meaning.

Heather also spoke of following the cues of her stepchildren in terms of how she would navigate her role as stepmother:

I was willing to be very engaged at that point, so it wasn't me saying, That's not my job and I don't want to do that. It was more about was this okay from [the children's] perspective?... So it was a lot of following their lead in terms of showing me what they were comfortable with... Beyond that though, I think it just kind of evolved organically. Or bumped along organically.

Relying on her teaching experience helped, but overall Heather's learning "was a lot of trial and error and watching what my husband was doing". She spoke of the challenge of developing a parenting style when "they come sort of preformed already, [and] you don't get the training wheels of them being babies and knowing they'll forget". Levin (1997) spoke of three behaviour patterns found in stepfamilies, as a way of navigating family dynamics. Those who reconstruct attempt to recreate a nuclear family structure where the stepmother is a "substitute mother"; those who choose to wait-and-see go slow and learn from experience to become more of a friend or other adult influence in the children's lives; and those who innovate work to create a family dynamic that is new, believing the nuclear family is the anti-model, and stepmothers in this pattern typically fill the role of an "aunt-type figure". It appears that Heather's original intention was to recreate a nuclear family model, and even stated that in the beginning she was "okay with the kids calling me 'mom'". However, over time, it seems that her approach shifted to a "wait-and-see" approach where she developed her own identity and role in her family, learning through her years of experience:

In the beginning I was very naïve and didn't know what I was doing or know about the challenges coming. You always hear people say that, 'Well you knew what you were getting into. You

knew he had kids.’ Well, yeah I knew he had kids but I had no idea this is what that meant, at all!... So [I have] more awareness of what that means. And in some ways it makes things easier because I have a better idea of what to expect and I have more realistic expectations.

As her role developed, she became more focused on advocacy for the contributions of stepmothers. Speaking about how her development in the stepmother role changed her behaviour, Heather said: “I have paid their bills, fixed their clothes, done their laundry, made their meals, and all of those things... So yes, there’s a bit of that teenage indignation that, you know, I deserve my recognition for this”.

While Levin identified the three behavioural patterns of stepfamilies, she noted that these are by no means exclusive categories of behaviour. Over time, approaches may shift depending on family dynamics, living situations, age of children, etc. Jenna initially saw herself as a kind of friend to her stepdaughter: “It really just happened naturally. Because we had hung out together so much before, the two and three of us, she naturally just kind of took to me”, but as time passed she struggled with wanting to be more of a parental and disciplinarian influence: “It’s more of a struggle not to want to take control now, as compared to when she was three or four. When you see that things aren’t going the way they should, it’s harder to step back and not take control”. Unlike the more stable roles of biological mother and father, the shifting, changing roles of stepparent can create shifts for the entire family.

As opposed to Jenna’s changing role from friend to stronger parental figure, Susie talked of learning over time to step back:

I've learned to just go with the flow and not set the bar too high for myself in my role as a stepmom. It took some time for me to figure it out, but I don't have to try to earn the love of my stepkids, I just need to be myself, be authentic, and be good role model.

While Lucy did not necessarily learn over time to step back, but rather, learned that it was okay to have her own relationship with her stepchildren – a relationship that was not the same as her husband's or the children's mother:

I've learned that it's okay for me to have my own relationship with the kids. It doesn't have to be exactly the relationship that my husband has with them... Just the understanding that that is okay and it doesn't have to look the same has really helped me to feel more confident in my role.

Like other participants, Lucy learned “by the seat of my pants. And at the beginning I did take the lead a lot from the kids”. There are no guidelines for this role, no textbook for this learning. This learning from experience is situated in and shaped by social and cultural norms, class, race, and of course, gender.

***Motherwork as informed by gender (“It just happened”)***. In part, this section speaks to the fourth guiding question of this research study: “What role does gender play in assigning responsibility for caring work, from stepmothers' perspectives?”, as gender is intimately linked to the responsibility of caring work for women. The influence of gender on household tasks and childcare is reported often in feminist and sociological literature (Oechsle & Geissler, 2003; Brown & Booth, 2002; Frisco & Williams, 2003). As previously stated,

motherwork spans not only the direct care of children, but also includes the labor associated with raising children – housework, pick-ups and drop-offs, grocery shopping, doctors’ visits, etc.

(Barg, 2001; Eichler, 2008). Connie speaks to the division of labour in her home:

Q: Did you guys talk about division of labour, like when you move in how are you going to divvy up the tasks?

A: Not really. It just kind of happened... Of course, after this many years together I’m taking on more of the “lady stuff” and he’s doing his “man stuff”, but whatever.

Connie’s husband had been single for several years, and she noticed during their courtship that he was competent in caring for his home. Interestingly though, over time, she has gradually taken on more of the “lady stuff”, the term she used to refer to the housework.

I found it very interesting that in my interviews, many women assumed that they would take on this role and did not question it; or felt that it came “naturally” to them to take on that work. According to Church (2004), this is not uncommon for stepfamilies: “Rarely do stepmothers and their partners discuss at the outset how the housework and child care will be divided. They seem to slip ‘naturally’ into their roles” (p. 110). Lucy’s thoughts:

Q: Do you think that gender played a role in how [jobs around the house] worked out?

A: Yes... I think things like laundry and the planning of the household just came more naturally to me than it did to him. I don’t know if it’s necessarily just gender. I grew up in a pretty

typical – I don't like using the word normal – family... I think our lifestyle is probably more like the lifestyle I grew up with.

On the question of labour in the home, Susie defined tasks along traditionally gendered expectations but, like Lucy, did not explicitly name this as connected to gender:

Q: So when you were talking about those initial boundaries and things, did you also talk about labor in the home?

A: Yeah, to some degree. Because I knew him a little bit before, I knew he wasn't the kind of guy to dump everything on his wife. He's very helpful and is a relatively tidy guy. Sometimes he needs a little bit of gentle reminding, but we're really compatible in that way. He helps out around the house and I don't need to ask him much. We take a bit of an inside/outside approach to the house in some ways, so he does the gardening and stuff and I do most of the laundry and more of the cooking. It's pretty equal, and we have had talks along the way about does this work for both of us, and I tell him regularly that I do appreciate him helping out.

While she feels the labour of the home is fairly equal, it is interesting to note that by identifying his contribution as "helping out", it suggests that ultimately this work is her responsibility and he is "helping" with the gardening and other chores. Church (2004) found that over time, stepmothers take on more and more of these responsibilities as their partners pull back. Sarah spoke of her husband as being a "hands-on dad", despite the fact that she now does the majority of the nurturing and caring work:

Q: Did you guys talk about the roles you would play in the house and do you think gender had any part in that?

A: Um, I don't think gender had an impact to start with. He's such a hands-on dad... But when it comes to, I guess we'll say the pink jobs like the cleaning and stuff, I usually step in for that. And of course, as a mother, I'm the one who remembers that the kids didn't brush their teeth and they should go and do that, whereas he's like, Whatever. They just don't think of that, right? So I think in the more nurturing way I have kind of taken over that aspect of our lives. And he's stepped back and let me, he's never said anything. We've never discussed it, it's just kind of progressed that I'm the one to do that more than him. But no, we've never talked about it. Now I'm thinking like, How did this happen?

I was intrigued by Sarah's use of the term "pink jobs" for domestic work, as I had not heard this term before. The gender implications are quite clear. Like Connie, Sarah talks of these patterns as emerging more strongly over time and without explicit discussion. These subtle gendered ideologies influence "what justifications for unequal sharing were accepted" (Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003, p. 207). If this is what is expected, this behavior is not seen as unjustified.

Heather reflected critically on her contributions to her stepfamily, and how gender played a role in this:

I think as a woman I probably reflect on these issues more and question, you know, did we just fall into gender roles or did we

just do what makes sense? In terms of me packing their lunches and doing laundry. Am I doing that because I'm a woman or because I'm just better at it? So I definitely think about it more than my husband who just goes along with things, and I think some of his expectations are a bit less examined in that way.

Asking these questions and examining these assumptions is the key to feminist research around labor. These discussions also illuminate the social production and reproduction of gender roles and expectations. Even when we are learning from experience, that experience is heavily embedded in social and cultural norms, class, religion, and relationships. Leah's childhood experience with a single mother impacted her values of labor in the home:

Q: So would you say that your husband and yourself had much conversation around the division of labour in the house?

A: Well, no there was never a discussion, because to me the woman does everything. Literally. And to him, the woman does everything. So it kind of happened. I just do everything.

Her husband has learned similar gender ideologies in his upbringing, and as Martin (2009) states: "Stepmothering does not happen in a vacuum, but rather within a force field of other relationships" (p. 34).

These informal and experiential sites and processes of learning reflect the ways that motherwork is negotiated by some stepmothers. Motherwork as a site of learning remains significantly overlooked in adult education (Hart, 1992; Barg, 2000), and has not previously been explored from a stepmothering perspective. This learning is an essential first step in creating

awareness around stepfamily dynamics and challenging the dominant mothering ideology that reflects invisible, devalued labour, and at the same time, requires a “mother” to be self-sacrificing and fully devoted to raising her children, or someone else’s.

Now I will explore what I found to be the four factors underlying and impacting this learning for stepmothers: their ideas and values of what family life would look like; the overall challenges of stepmothering; the biological mother; and mothering identity. These factors all represent the public and private negotiations of labour and roles that occur both within the privacy of the home, and through public exposure and engagement with social and cultural norms and expectations.

### **Factors Impacting Learning**

These factors impacting the learning experience for this group of Canadian stepmothers, address part of the third research question: “How do stepmothers who participate in a Facebook support group perceive the challenges and supports of stepfamily life?” These factors, contributing to the lived experience, present as challenges to the women as they navigate their role. It is noted that the challenges they identify are seen as the result of the individual people involved, as opposed to systems of oppression that govern our actions in society. Similarly, the women tackle these issues and challenges in an individualistic way. While they may discuss their problems with others, they are seeking an individual solution, informed by the individual experiences of others. Supports on a social level are significantly lacking, and the women do point to the need for these in the Supports Needed section (Chapter 5). Now I will discuss those impacting factors that shape women’s learning and experiences.

**Ideas and values of family life.** Many of the women I spoke with told me that they “had broken their rules” by marrying a man with children. Perhaps they anticipated the challenges that could arise in this situation, but changed their minds upon meeting their partner. Connie blew her rules “out of the water by falling in love” with her husband, but acknowledged that “he would not be the man that he is if not for those experiences [of divorce and fatherhood]. That brought him to where he is today, to being the man I love”. While not without challenges, Connie and her husband have worked hard to prioritize their marriage, but she will still say that “stepparenting is not for the faint of heart”. Traditional ideas of marriage and family leave stepmothers feeling further isolated, as the nuclear family image does not and will never adequately represent their family system.

Lucy, a childless stepmom (a contentious term, considering Lucy is with her stepchildren fifty percent of the time, but I will use it to describe women who do not have their own biological children as well), imagined a more distinct separation of her life with and then without children:

I think in the beginning I anticipated that things between the two houses would be a little less... I don't even know how to word it. I guess I thought things would be more divided in terms of, when we had the kids with us I would have a parenting role, and when we didn't have the kids we would just be a childfree couple. And that's not at all what our relationship looks like today.

Stepfamily life often involves blurry boundaries, hazy definitions, and uncertain roles.

Some participants had experience with stepfamilies prior to being a part of one, which informed their ideas of family life. Emily spoke of the rates of divorce and remarriage in military communities: “I was born and raised in a military town, and I currently live in a military town, and it destroys a lot of families. And so I’ve been around it”. Emily struggled with holding her “natural” parenting style back in favor of mimicking what her husband did because he is the biological father of her stepdaughter: “That was a really confusing time, trying to get a handle on that... [because] I’ve always found that in any situation, a dad handles certain things differently than a mom”. So her idea of family life is that a mother and father will have their own parenting style and role, but in her role as a stepmother she felt that she could not have her own style; rather, she had to copy her husband’s.

Some participants spoke of starting off with a strong role in the family, and the importance of having the children’s respect. I noticed that the women who had this perspective were stepmothers to especially young children, and several of them acknowledged that this approach would likely not be effective with older children. Sarah discussed her idea of what their family dynamic should be, with three young stepchildren:

I didn’t want to move in with him and tiptoe around the kids until I figure out our relationship. I said, ‘I don’t think that’s how I’m going to get respect’. I asked him to put me above them so that they know to respect me, instead of always catering to what they need and putting me below them. The dynamic, doing that, has worked out amazingly. Those kids are incredible, and they actually do respect me, sometimes more than their dad I think... I’m always the go-to.

Van Eeden-Moorefield and Pasley (2012) found that younger stepchildren adjust more easily to stepfamily life than older stepchildren, and early adolescence seems to be one of the most difficult times for a new family to form (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). In terms of the dynamic of creating a strong remarriage, Martin (2009) discusses one of the more common myths perpetuated by many “helpful” books for stepmothers – that the children will always come first:

The ideas that you should be second and should accept it, that his kids came first chronologically and so are first in his heart, and that his believing and acting on these ideas makes him a good person are powerful, deeply ingrained beliefs. But all of them can be fatal for the remarriage with children. They are even bad for the children, giving them an uncomfortable amount of power and focusing an undue amount of attention and pressure on them. (p. 78-79)

There certainly is not agreement across the board on this topic however, and Papernow (2013) believes that “prioritizing the adult stepcouple relationship over parent-child relationships pulls parents away from their children, resulting in an extremely challenging transition for kids” (p. 52). As you will see in the final section of the findings, where I present the advice and necessary supports identified by stepmothers in this study, most would agree with Martin’s assertion that a strong couple is necessary for a strong family. As one example, here is Leah’s view: “People say the kids come first. Well, the kids can’t come first. Marriage has to come first. And that doesn’t mean you don’t love your children or you don’t prioritize your children’s safety and health and happiness... But the marriage has to function properly for the family to function”.

The circumstances surrounding first families (families of origin) not only impacted the way women learn to engage in motherwork (as previously discussed), but also impact the way women perceive and anticipate family life. Sarah articulated her ideas of being in a stepfamily:

I never really thought about it. It almost just seems natural to me to walk in and be a stepmom, or take on a parenting role. I think that's because I came from a blended family and I could see what it was like, and all the things not to do as opposed to what should be done. So I knew I would be doing laundry and suppers and bath time and packing their lunches. I actually kind of looked forward to that, it was exciting in a way because I love kids, so it was like, a fun time every time they came to our house.

Sarah expected to be filling a mothering role, indicative of the labour defined by motherwork. As this was her experience as a child with a stepmother, it was expected. Also influenced by her upbringing, Leah's childhood both confirmed her role as a "mother who does everything" and challenged her perception of single mothers (as the biological mother gave up custody of Leah's stepson at the age of four):

I grew up in public housing, and there were mostly stay-at-home mothers. So my world was: The dad leaves and the mom keeps the kids. So I had never in my life met a woman who had given up her children. So now all of a sudden I've got this woman asking me to take her child but then never visiting with him, and I was like, 'what is going on?' I must be the only person in the world who is

having to deal with some psycho woman who doesn't want to deal with her kids. So it was really, really all new to me, because dads left. Moms don't leave.

Ideals of family life in combination with personal experience and sociocultural norms can create “unrealistic expectations about blending and being maternal” (Martin, 2009, p. 81), that impact the way a family group coheres. Perhaps an important and stark reminder from Martin (2009) that “[h]appily ever after and happiness all around are ideals – unlikely ones at that, even in traditional nuclear families” (p. 81).

**Challenges of stepparenting.** The challenges of stepfamily life are well documented in the literature. According to Papernow (2013), the five major challenges are defined as: insider/outsider positions are intense and stuck; children struggle with losses, loyalty binds, and too much change; parenting tasks polarize the adults; creating a new family culture; and ex-spouses are part of the family. For stepmothers specifically, Church (2004) identifies similar challenges: the image of the wicked stepmother; unrealistic initial expectations; the impossible ideal of motherhood; dealing with the ex; relationships with stepchildren; and unsupportive partners, awkward fathers. And again, Martin's (2009) challenges follow similar themes: the myth of the blended family; the myth of the maternal stepmother; difficult developmental stages; competition; and misinformation from the stepmothering industry. Despite the seriousness of these challenges, the pervasive labels of “stepmonster” and “evil” or “wicked” stepmother are effective gags that keep many women silent on their struggles (Church, 2004; Martin, 2009).

The women I spoke to for this research study identified several challenges to their stepfamily lives, all of which come down to the negotiation of role in some capacity. As the role

of stepmother is indicative (to varying degrees) of motherwork, the challenges primarily relate to how women navigate their involvement and place in the motherwork of their family. Connie felt that her education and years of service in social work gave her a strong sense of what stepfamily life would be like. On the contrary: “[I] was totally wrong... You can prepare yourself as much as you want for how a situation is going to play out, but you have no control over how the emotional stuff is going to spill over”. For her, “the typical insider vs. outsider stuff is hard. It was hard for me to deal with and was probably the biggest thing”. This sense of coming into an already formed family leaves many stepmothers feeling at a loose end. Feeling as though her friends who are not stepmothers “didn’t really understand; they didn’t really get it” (another common experience), Connie decided to just support her husband’s relationship with his grown children and take a step back:

I had said to him... ‘My job is to support you to have a relationship with your children, and they don’t want to have a relationship with me.’ I can’t be hurt like that every time I try, like I can’t keep getting the cold shoulder. It’s like, Thanks for the offer, but no thanks... And I still have that belief. It’s his relationship with his kids. They’ve made it clear over the twelve years we’ve been together that they don’t want to have a relationship with me, not really.

These situations are so difficult for stepmothers, in part, according to Martin (2009), due to gender:

We aspire to be the carpenters who put the dilapidated house of stepfamily dysfunction back in order, the ‘fixers’ who bring ‘ex-children’ back into the fold, the good guys who charm recalcitrant and resentful stepkids into Best Friends Forever... Experts tell us that a woman’s self-worth, and indeed her very sense of identity, are wrapped up in, even inextricable from, her success in relationships. (p. 83)

While being wary of essentialist views of women as relational, a great deal of literature explores women’s identities as negotiated in relation to those around them (Gilligan, 1982; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Laney, Hall, Anderson & Willingham, 2015).

The biggest challenge of stepfamily life as perceived by Emily, is the lack of defined role:

For the longest time I felt like a babysitter in [my stepdaughter’s] life. That’s the best way of saying it. You know when you were... there as a babysitter so you have a little bit of authority, but the parents haven’t left yet? That is how I felt for a long time. The only way I can describe it is that you have a bit of authority, but the parent is still there.

She felt this was compounded by the opinions of others, another challenge for her:

I get people who question me, Are you sure this is really what you want to do with your life? That one really bothers me a lot.  
Because like I look at them and I’m like, You don’t think I thought

of that before I made this decision? Before I made this commitment? You don't think I thought about what my life was going to be like? What I was going to sacrifice for myself, what [my husband] and I would sacrifice? Or what [my husband] was sacrificing by allowing me into his parenting time, into his relationship with [my stepdaughter]? Into allowing us to be a family as opposed to just being him and his daughter? There was a lot of thought that went into this; we didn't just jump into it. But people just assume that when someone has a kid you're automatically a family. No. There was a lot of pain, a lot of crying, and a lot of joy that went into this... And the people who think you had a child but you didn't have to do any of the work. That bothers me so much. They don't realize that no, I didn't carry her for nine months or have to deal with the baby stages, but now I have to deal with a child that has emotions and feelings and a mind of her own. I don't get to be there from the time she starts developing into who she is. I came in after that. She's already made up her mind about her life before she met me.

She is coming into this situation as an outsider – there is no other way – and like all others, she is trying to find her space, her place, her foothold. Lucy also identified the challenge of defining her role as a stepmother: “Where am I supposed to give? What are my expectations supposed to be? Are my expectations appropriate? Is what I'm giving appropriate? I just never really know”. Because Lucy and her husband have the children fifty percent of the time, she feels they are

often trying to fill two roles at the same time – trying to be both “a family” and a single couple with no kids: “We’re trying to be both and maybe that’s where we are failing... We try to squeeze in being a regular family, but then we also try to squeeze in being a couple without kids... We’re failing at both”.

Heather believes “the biggest challenges are still navigating roles, even eight years on, and trying to figure out who is going to do what and in what space”. To me, this is again reflective of the negotiation of motherwork – to what degree can and will stepmothers engage in this labour for children who are not biologically her own. More from Heather:

It was probably a couple of years into it, where the rose-coloured glasses had kind of come off a little bit, and I started to see how challenging it was... We kind of bumped up against [our expectations] when I decided to take a step back, and I decided to withdraw my finances and my time. Like if this isn’t going to be appreciated and I’m not going to be able to set some boundaries and rules in this house, then I’m going to be a roommate here for these kids... It was as though I wasn’t keeping up with some contract I had signed or something. And he was like, But it’s your responsibility to pay for these things, and I was like, Oh no it’s not. I didn’t have these children, I didn’t make those decisions. So for us that really drew out the different ideas we had around what it meant to be married, because... he felt that I had married him and his kids. And for me it was like, no, I married him. They are his kids and his family and they’re wonderful, but I married him. So

then we felt like maybe we both had to examine those ideas and expectations more critically... So now we're trying to move back to co-parenting but it was definitely a bit destabilizing to think that, if you're a real parent you don't get to do that.

Heather makes an interesting point at the end of this dialogue when she acknowledges biological parents are less able to take that "step back" from parenting. This highlights the role strain for stepmothers who perhaps want to be more involved, but are not receiving the recognition or support from their partners and do not know what else to do. As discussed by Church (2004):

Discipline is often a focus of contention. Some men do not want the stepmother to correct their children. If they take the responsibility for their children, this decision presents less of a problem. If, however, the stepmother is in charge of the household and her stepchildren but does not have any power, she is put in an impossible situation. (p. 101)

A common phrase that floats around the online support group is that stepmothers have "all of the responsibility and none of the rights", and women in this study seemed to identify with that experience. In Susie's words: "I've always said that my biggest challenge is that I don't have any say. So because we have drawn that hard line, it's sometimes hard for me when I have a differing opinion and I want to voice that". Along with this rights vs responsibilities theme are the perceptions of stepmothers that women face in their daily lives. According to Sarah:

Being a stepmom is a thankless job, it really is... And one of the biggest things that frustrates me is when... you're frustrated or

upset and people who don't understand this situation or have never been in this situation, say things like, 'Well you knew he had kids.' Okay. So does that mean he knew when he got married that he would get divorced? Does that mean when you got married that you knew that in five years' time you would be fighting about where you were living? You don't know what you're getting into. Yes I knew he had kids, but I did not know that this is what it would be like dealing with his ex or just the little things that come up. You don't know that. You can't predict the future.

High expectations and low levels of awareness and support make a challenging combination.

Heather also speaks to the unrealistic expectations on stepmothers:

I don't know where the expectations come from, but there doesn't seem to be the same kind of forgiveness for mistakes for stepmoms. If I have a crappy day, and I have a headache, and I snap at the kids, it's because I don't love them anymore. Or somehow I'm a bad person because I couldn't control that. But if the mom does that, she's having a bad day... So I think... it seems to come from the assumption of love. So if you're a biological parent, it's just assumed that you're coming from a place of love no matter what you do. Even if you screw up, there's that assumption of unconditional love that comes from that bond or status in society. And that assumption isn't there as a stepparent. So even if you've been in it for eight years and there are all kinds

of demonstrations to the contrary, if there is a mistake there are all kinds of questions as to your capacity as a parent, your feelings toward your stepkids and those things. So I think there's a different connotation to failure as a stepparent.

Heather was very aware and reflective of these societal expectations for stepmothers and, again, this can be connected back to the framework of motherwork.

Even when mothers' labour is considered invisible and not productive – according to values dictated by the marketplace – mothers are still mothers. They hold a position of status and respect in society that is not granted to stepmothers. I wholeheartedly agree with the assertions of Barg (2001) and Hart (1992) – that motherwork as a site of learning has not been paid enough attention in adult education theory and research, and that this labour must be considered as both valuable and the responsibility of society as a whole, and that dominant ideologies of mothering must be challenged and reframed for our changing society. In addition to that, I believe this discourse must be expanded to include the perspectives of mothers who do not fit into the nuclear, biological mold – whether they be adoptive or foster mothers, women with children in same-sex relationships, single mothers, guardians or other family members, and of course, stepmothers. With each varying perspective, we must also consider how motherwork is differently negotiated according to factors of class, race, religion, culture, ability, sexual orientation, etc.

**The biological mother.** As previously mentioned, the literature around stepmothering identifies the relationship with the biological mother as one of the main challenges of this role. However, I found that in my discussions with several stepmothers, and on reviewing the

literature, this challenge is often the most pervasive and contentious. You will not find a book written for stepmothers that does not deal significantly with this relationship (or lack thereof), and in fact there are books specifically written about this dynamic. *No One's the Bitch: A Ten-Step Plan for the Mother and Stepmother Relationship* was published by mother and stepmother duo Jennifer Newcomb Marine and Carol Marine (2009). Newcomb Marine later published *Skirts at War: Beyond Divorced Mom/Stepmom Conflict* with co-author Jenna Korf (2013), stepmom coach. Papernow (2013), Church (2004), and Martin (2009) write research-based books, all of which devote significant time to discussing the dynamic between mother/stepmother. According to Martin (2009):

The ex factor can have a profound impact on the remarried couple, especially when children are younger and visitation, child support, schooling, discipline, and other issues are on the table, 'linking' the divorced spouses in fundamental ways. (p. 156)

Interestingly, Martin identifies the highest levels of conflict in situations where the biological mother is "white, had a graduate education, and had a high household income" (p. 155). This may be explained by the notion that middle and upper-class white women are less likely to have a culture that privileges shared child-rearing duties with others. Martin also finds that white single mothers who are educated and have high incomes often take on a permissive parenting style consisting of lower levels of control. This can result in children with lower levels of accountability for their actions toward others, and in contrast, a stepmother who sets rules and boundaries may be perceived as "evil" or "wicked".

There is, of course, a wide spectrum of mother/stepmother relationships, ranging from friendly co-parents to toxic enemies. It is ideal for all involved, especially the children, if the adults can get along or at least be civil, but this is often a work in progress. To challenge the stigma associated with the stepmother role, Christian (2005) found that some women created a binary whereby they were good, and loving, and supportive stepmothers, while the biological mothers were wicked, and greedy, and challenging. Research in this area will hopefully result in individuals challenging the social and cultural norms of mothering and motherwork as the devalued and invisible work of women, rather than turning women against one another.

The participants in this research primarily identified challenges with the mother/stepmother relationship, but the dynamic ranged from mostly civil to tense with no contact. Connie's partner had been divorced for several years before his ex-wife passed away, and this mother/stepmother relationship was by far the most positive:

For the time she was still alive, she was really great. I didn't know how to have a relationship with this woman... But eventually, because the kids were getting older, they wanted their mom to be a part of Christmas and whatever, and my husband was invited, so as adults we kind of went to the house together to celebrate Christmas. And she was great. She bought my daughters Christmas gifts, birthday gifts, we told my daughters to call her Aunty Sue. When she was palliative at the hospital, we all went. My husband, myself and our two daughters all went to visit her.

While her relationship with the biological mother became more positive over time, and for the children, Connie struggled most with her relationship with her stepdaughter who had been a preteen at the time she met her husband. This is also a very common and challenging dynamic (Martin, 2009; Papernow, 2013).

Emily reported a very different experience with the biological mother:

Negative about stepparent life is definitely having to deal with the mother... having to deal with a very selfish person who, as long as the paycheck is coming in, she doesn't care about anything else. She looks at having children as a job, and it's extremely difficult because [my stepdaughter] is starting to understand that... [The mom] and I tried to do the whole co-parenting thing, but it didn't work because [she] refused to cooperate... So co-parenting ended pretty quickly.

Emily seemed to be representing that reverse dichotomy that Christian (2005) spoke of – where the biological mother is seen as the “wicked one”, and the stepmother stigma is somewhat alleviated. Of course this is only one side of the story (or relationship).

Lucy also talked about the challenge of having someone in your life that contributes little but stress:

The fact that I have someone in my life who does make my life difficult every single day is a huge challenge for me. Usually I would just say, ‘Well I’m not going to deal with you anymore’. But you have this relationship that is toxic and is very much a

relationship where I'm expected to give and there's nothing given back in return.

Lucy has set and maintained boundaries on their communication to help her handle this stressful relationship:

My own personal rule is that I won't speak to her about anything that is controversial or any decisions that need to be made. But if it's just a matter of communication about things that have already been decided upon, then I will speak to her. And that seems to work.

She notes the challenge of having to be somewhat connected to an individual who she may not otherwise engage with. Not only are these women connected, but as previously discussed they are often two sides of the mothering coin – engaging in sensitive, personal work with someone they may share little else in common.

Church (2004) states that while stepmothers often have little direct contact with biological mothers, this relationship is still often seen as “the most fraught and complex of all relationships in the stepfamily” (p. 57). This seemed apparent through my interviews. Heather spoke about her communication with the biological mom:

Q: So do you talk to the mom, or do you leave that to your partner?

A: Rarely. Very rarely. If we're at a social thing then I'll say hi, but beyond that most of the communication is between them.

Q: And that works for you?

A: Yes, yes.

Jenna had even less contact:

Q: Do you have contact with the mom?

A: Nope.

Q: Has it always been that way?

A: It's pretty much always been that way from day one. I think it's mostly jealousy issues. She seems to have a permanent issue with me, and as much as possible we've avoided being in the same room. I have no reason to talk to her... It would be nice if there was a relationship the whole way around, that we could have open paths of communication between the three of us, to make things work for the kid. But I don't think that's ever going to happen.

According to Church (2004), there are a number of obstacles to a neutral or friendly relationship between stepmothers and mothers: stepmothers rarely anticipate the active involvement of biological mothers in their lives; they rarely have the opportunity to truly get to know one another outside of conflict in the family; role challenges – “if she's the mom, what does that make me?”; competition and jealousy which are common in stepfamilies; when mothers abdicate responsibility; and notably, finances. While stepmothers may fully support the idea of her partner supporting his children (as they should), many stepmothers feel they are stuck with inequitable financial arrangements (Church, 2004). Where some challenges ease over time, financial strain is

one of the enduring hurdles that stepfamilies face. These are commonly-cited issues within the support group and any literature I have read on stepfamilies.

On a more positive note, these mother-stepmother relationships – like any other – often change over time. A few of the women I spoke to found a kind of satisfactory middle-ground relationship with the biological mother of their stepchildren. Not a friendship, but a sort of acceptance and civility with one another. Susie talks about how this relationship has changed over time:

We're a lot more open now. She's doing it, I think, for the kids. I know she doesn't have any kind of respect or like for me, but she talks to me. We all do things together now, like we all went to a hockey game last night, just our local hockey game. So she got tickets through work and gave them to us so we could all go with the kids. It's gotten better, but it's taken a long time to get to where we are.

Over time, it is certainly better for the children and the family in general if the adults can get along, and tension among adults is certainly felt by children. Part of the learning for stepmothers is how to negotiate a relationship towards civility, if possible. Sarah talks about this trickle-down effect of tension from the adult relationships to the children:

In the early years, when there was more conflict with their mom, it was really hard because they knew their mom didn't approve of them having any kind of positive relationship with me. They rejected me completely in her presence, which hurt. I did a lot of

research into why kids act this way, and I accepted it for what it was and stepped back a little. As things calmed down, it got easier, and they reached out more. It is definitely much easier to enjoy being a stepmom when there is less conflict between their mother and father!

Sarah's research took the form of informal online reading about children's behaviour and family dynamics. She found that children often experience loyalty binds in stepfamily situations, where they may interpret kindness or friendship with a stepmother to be hurtful towards their mother. Feeling as though they are disloyal to their mother if they form any kind of connection with a stepmother, children may reject her entirely. This is a very common dynamic (Church, 2004; Martin, 2009; Papernow, 2013).

As will be discussed next, these challenges are deeply connected to mothering identity. "Both mothers and stepmothers fear being marginalized or labeled as a 'bad mother'" (Papernow, 2013, p. 105), as identity and self-esteem are firmly connected to mothering for many women. This again speaks to the guiding question for this research study around gender and its role in assigning responsibility for various levels of carework. Positioning stepmom against mom as a parenting competition is certain to negatively impact the stepmother, who does not have the biological and historical connection to her stepchildren.

**Mothering identity.** The experiences, learning, and challenges for stepmothers interviewed for this research study can be brought back to motherwork and their mothering identity. How they fit into their family, the relationships they have, the labour that they perform, even the title that they hold – all of this is connected to mothering identity. And the pervasive

stereotype of the stepmother continues to pit this role against that of the biological mother. The beginning of the stepmother narrative in the fairy tale *Snow White* shows the Wicked Queen being told that Snow White is the fairest in all the land by the mirror. This ushers in a “theme that will preoccupy us for hundreds of years: the stepmother’s narcissism, which stands in stark contrast to our cultural ideal of maternal selflessness” (Martin, 2009, p. 46). This image has been updated however, and according to Martin, the modernized myth is the “equally unrealistic stereotype of what I have often thought of as the stepmartyr/stepmom” (p. 54). Martin describes this woman as a younger, cooler alternative to the biological mother – a friend to stepkids rather than a parental figure – and someone who is originally self-absorbed with no parenting experience, but who gradually throws herself into stepparenting with the view that the stepkids have only changed her life for the better. The Julia Roberts movie *Stepmom* comes to mind.

These dichotomous views of the wicked stepmother and the friend stepmartyr are equally unrealistic and damaging to women trying to negotiate their place in the stepfamily. In addition, some stepmothers are also biological mothers, and find themselves holding two different parenting roles, and the learning of these roles seems to differ significantly. According to Susie:

I don’t think I really had to learn to be a bio mom... It came naturally. I read a lot of books, blogs, magazines... for tips on specific situations with kids at the different stages they go through, but I think I was really well prepared for motherhood simply by having a generous helping of unconditional love right from the start. Learning to be a stepmom was certainly different. I had my experience as a biological mother to help me understand that kids will be kids, so that was probably a good start. I didn’t start out

with that unconditional love, though. I also did not have their unconditional love, which has always made me feel insecure. I struggle with the lack of control over most aspects of their lives. I get an opinion, but I don't get any decision-making rights. I don't feel like I really have enough input into how they're raised to be able to definitively say that I have a large impact on how they turn out. I have a good relationship with my stepkids, but there are a lot of barriers and challenges that come with being an "extra" in their lives. I don't have those same challenges with my biological children.

This lengthy quote highlights Levin's (1997) notion of mothering at a distance for stepmothers. How is one expected to engage in deeply personal caring work, while taking a step back?

It would appear that the individual situation of the stepmother plays a large role in how they determine their mothering identity. For example, if they are also a biological mother, they may initially take a "step back" in terms of parenting role for their stepchildren, although they may continue to struggle with lack of input into their stepchildren's lives, likely because they have such significant impact in their own children's lives. The previous quote shows Susie's struggle with lack of decision-making rights in her stepchildren's lives, and here she discusses the initial boundaries set by her and her husband to maintain that "step back" approach to their roles as stepparents:

Q: So can I ask what you mean by setting boundaries?

A: So in terms of who disciplines. What our roles are in each other's kids' lives. So his ex is 50/50 with his kids and my ex is 50/50 with my kids. So they both have a Mom and a Dad. There's no need to bring in another parent, and I never had any desire to be called mom by my stepkids or anything like that... So there was definitely a need for that 'yours' and 'mine' division early on and basically what I requested was that I didn't want to be a caregiver for your kids, I don't want to be a position of authority in their life.

Clearly this was a difficult tension for her to negotiate. Sarah was a stepmother first, and then had her own biological child. She spoke openly about the difference between these parenting roles, and how she consciously worked to keep that from any of the children:

Q: How has your learning as a stepmom compared to your learning to be a biological mom?

A: Um, I made sure, I don't treat them differently. I'm not going to lie, I love them differently, but I'm never going to say that to them. But I love them differently. With the kids, I'm a mom to them first, and I love them second, because that's just how the stepmom dynamic works... But when it comes to my daughter I love her first and then I have to stop and remember that I'm her mom too. Does that make sense?... My maternal instinct is way higher now... It's not a natural thing to treat them same, because they're my stepkids and I always want to parent them first before I

think of the maternal love part of our relationship. It's work to make sure that they see that I put them all on the same level and that there's no favoritism. It's work.

I feel this draws attention to the impact of dominant mothering ideologies. Women are reluctant to talk about the differences in these parenting roles, but the fact is, they *are* different.

Church (2004) found that in her many interviews, “about half the stepmothers I talked with believed that a good stepmother should be the same as a good mother... they drew on ideas of motherhood to form their ideal stepmother” (p. 39). Church found this puzzling in light of the women's insistence that they were not trying to replace the biological mother. She found that “trying to feel like a mother is double-edged for stepmothers: either they feel guilty for not loving their stepchildren as a mother, or if they can make this commitment, they discover its impossibility” (p. 50-51). Underlying this challenge is the notion that women are naturally maternal and love children. We cannot, however, turn love on and off like a light switch, and “for many, the ideal of the loving mother becomes a heavy and painful burden” (p. 56). Research like this may help to expand discourse on diverse parenting roles, and challenge the pervasive notion of mothering as an individualistic responsibility.

For stepmothers who do not have their own children, the mothering ideology is also a powerful influence, and my participants spoke about this role as providing an opportunity to “parent” in some capacity. According to Emily: “The benefits are that I am unable to have children, so I get to have a family... I have the best of both worlds”. Lucy echoed this: “The biggest benefit... for me is that I have a family. I have these two kids in my life who I love and they love me. They're my family and I wouldn't trade them for anything”. Heather took on a

strong parenting role initially, having had no biological children at the time. When I interviewed her, she was expecting her first baby. In her words:

After the first little bit I did take on a fairly strong parenting role, like I am the Mom in our house. And some of that was because at the time we hadn't decided if we were going to try and have children or not, so I thought at the time that these might be the only children I'm ever going to have and I want a chance at this.

However, this role changed for Heather as dynamics within her stepfamily changed:

Maybe about a year or so ago I did the 'taking a step back' thing. We were butting heads over parenting styles and those kinds of things, and so I felt like maybe he needed to just do his own thing with his kids for a while. And that's been hard because that was never either of our expectations for my role, and we had kind of built this family but things were getting more difficult.

Again, this stepping back is not typically associated with a mothering role, and caused emotional friction for Heather and her husband.

This negotiation of role even comes down to the title stepmothers use within their family. Perhaps in reaction to the stereotypical perception of stepmothers, Jenna was reluctant to associate herself with this title:

Q: Do you identify with that term, stepmom?

A: Yes, I guess in a roundabout way. We're not married yet... But I guess I do consider myself that, but I don't really think about it in terms of that. She is my stepdaughter. I've been around long enough, it's been four years. So it's been long enough, there's enough of a family dynamic to call it that. It's funny because I do and I don't.

Heather felt very strongly that her stepchildren were not going to refer to her by her name, as she felt this would indicate a friend-relationship:

It was a conscious thing in the sense that I didn't want them to call me by my name, because I wasn't taking a friend role here. And so parents get titles, and that's part of the respect, boundaries and relationship that you develop with children. So that's part of why I chose the nickname kind of name. And we talked about Bonus Mom and some of the other terms that are a positive reframing of it, but to me they all seemed to be Othering, and emphasizing the difference and the separateness.

I found this very interesting because it highlights the desire to be seen as "the same" as a mother, or at least to be perceived as having the same amount of control and influence in the children's lives. But as previously stated, these roles *are* different. And the lack of societal norms that reflect this, I believe, lead to conflict between mothers and stepmothers. Emily talked about receiving flack for posting questions in a different "mom group" on Facebook: "When it comes to online, there is a divide between moms and stepmoms". More than just online, this divide is

apparent everywhere, and it is important that we create space for diverse parenting roles so that women do not have to struggle with these conflicts. Leah, who has been “mom” to her stepson since her and her husband took full custody, still struggled with the biological mother/stepmother dynamic:

[My stepson] needs to understand that even when I’m mad at him I still love him. And it’s hard. I don’t have the patience with him that I have with my daughter. I don’t have that inherent love. For a long time I felt like I needed to force myself to have it, and it took me a long time to be okay with not feeling the same way... I don’t have the same feeling, and I think a lot of stepmoms struggle with that.

Church (2004) believes that it is vital for stepmothers to “expose and inspect” (p. 287) their negative feelings and emotions, and a consequence of not doing so is the escalation of negative feelings and interactions. I would like to add to this, that ignoring these experiences and feelings allows the status quo of mothering and stepmothering to continue unchecked and unchallenged. Attributing these feelings and experiences to the individual situation discounts the social and cultural norms that shape our behavior, something that will be further discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Understanding Women's Learning**

In this chapter, I focus more on the theoretical literature to provide deeper insights into the challenges that women face in learning to engage in a stepmothering role, noting both the benefits and limitations of participating in a digital community of practice to explore these issues. In this section, the findings will be connected to the literature around the public and private negotiation of motherwork, gender and mothering ideology, issues of role, identity, and labour, informal and experiential learning, engagement in a digital community of practice, power, and the implications for both adult education and other fields. Utilizing the work of Hart, Barg, and Gouthro, this discussion contributes to critical feminist explorations of motherwork learning in the homeplace – learning that is devalued in a society influenced by neoliberal and capitalist structures. Primarily, motherwork learning is informal and experiential, and I add to this a discussion of the impact and the limitations provided by digital communities of practice, such as a closed Facebook group, as an informal learning space for stepmothers.

### **Public and Private Negotiation of Motherwork**

Motherwork as subsistence labor is learned in both public and private contexts. Social and cultural norms that are influenced by economic and political systems shape discourses of mothering, and these discourses are all around us – in media, literature, advertising, “expert” advice, etc. In addition, women navigate motherwork privately through engagement with family members, and daily lived experience. While traditional critical theorists (such as Habermas) have often treated these spaces (public and private) as separate, some feminist theorists have challenged this dichotomy and stressed the interconnectedness of the terms.

Tong (1989) references the work of Eli Zaretsky who discusses the capitalist construction of the modern family – of women as reproducer and man as producer. Women’s liberation from oppression then, requires an end to capitalism.

Zaretsky argued that once the work of the wife is recognized as being as valuable as the work of her wage-earning husband, then men and women can work together to overcome the pernicious split that capitalism created between the private family and the public workplace. (Tong, 1989, p. 68)

Tong’s interpretation of Zaretsky’s work contributes to Marxist feminist discourse around women’s oppression. Where Marxist analyses consider class as the central category of oppression, socialist feminists – and particularly unified-systems theorists – believe that “capitalism is no more separate from patriarchy than the mind is from the body” (Tong, 1989, p. 175). In this orientation, capitalism and patriarchy are analyzed as a single unit of oppression in the lives of women.

When women in this research study spoke of learning motherwork (or to use the actual phrasing, “learning how to be a stepmother”), many identified learning experientially (“by doing” and in relationship with their family members) and through their experience in their own first families. This suggests a very personal, individual, and private form of learning, distinct from social, economic, and political influence. However, what seems to be negotiated “privately” within the home and personal relationships is heavily influenced by ideologies of parenting (mothering) embedded in economic, social, and political policies. “Feminists believe that the public/private dichotomy frequently keeps women’s issues, concerns and experiences hidden

from view, as ‘private’ areas are not subject to research investigation or policy development” (Gouthro, 2009, p. 162). These dichotomies (i.e. public/private) are thought to be the result of long-standing patriarchal rule (Barg, 2001), and serve to minimize and control women’s interests by positioning the male experience as the “norm”. In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir noted that women’s labor (particularly of childbearing and rearing) was deemed the work of the “other” – a dichotomy that has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These dichotomies have achieved more relevance in recent decades as global capitalism and values of neoliberalism continue to govern Western society.

As Barg (2001) has suggested, “one of the richest, but largely unexplored areas of learning for women, through everyday experience, is in the learning of motherwork. Yet, it is this very work (and consequently, the learning process that can be explored within it) that has been occluded and subordinated by patriarchal capitalistic society” (p. 34). Both Barg and Hart see the value in synthesizing feminist learning models that focus on individual learning with those that focus on a more critical, contextual approach to learning. In this way, subsistence learning can include both “personal agency and public effectiveness” (p. 34), highlighting the interconnectedness of these contexts.

### **Gender and Mothering Ideology**

The learning and experience of motherwork is entwined in gendered expectations, roles, and, of course, mothering ideology. The women in this study identified engaging in much more domestic labor than their husbands or partners and, in most cases, attributed this to “happening naturally” – seemingly expected and outside of their control. But in fact, this allocation of labour is learned: “Women and men, who are socialized within this society, then learn that ‘work’ in the

labour force is of value (economic and otherwise), while the ‘natural activity’ of motherwork is not” (Barg, 2001, p. 48). All of the women, with one exception, that I spoke with for this study were working outside the home in addition to their labor inside the home (the one exception was a woman on maternity leave and who is now engaging in paid work again). Paid work does not eliminate the oppression of women in society, although may further perpetuate the invisibility or “natural” nature of labour in the home. As I noted in previous research (Careless, 2011), despite the increased presence of women in the workforce, there is still gendered inequity when it comes to performing tasks in the home (Wolfinger et al., 2009; Correll et al., 2007; Jacobs & Winslow, 2004; Nordenmark & Nyman, 2003).

While the women in the group, and the participants specifically, will openly discuss the amount of household and childrearing labour they engage in, they do not take this up from a critical perspective, connecting it to systems of patriarchy and capitalism. The expectations around both household and childrearing labour are discussed in the group as somewhat “taken-for-granted” in terms of being assigned by gender – as women it is part of their role within a family, despite the makeup of that family. In addition to being taken-for-granted, the expectations around childcare and household labour are seen as privately negotiated within each household, rather than behaviour that is shaped by broader social and cultural norms, values, and systems. The tone of these conversations indicate that the participants are seeking individual support and validation, but do not indicate an interest in advocating for social change.

The findings of this research showed how deeply entrenched gender roles and expectations are in society. Most of the women I spoke with did not directly attribute their motherwork labor (i.e. childcare and housework) to their gender. Nor did they seem to question “why” they were taking on this role, but rather assumed it as part of what was “natural”. This

uncritical assumption of labour by gender allows the status quo ideologies to continue unexamined. What is perhaps a most interesting finding of this research is that women (this sample of stepmothers) appear to take on the traditional roles associated with the dominant mothering ideology of Western society – that of the all-encompassing, individualistic “supermom”. However, these women are not the biological mothers of the children for whom they care, and the mothering ideology does not “fit” their experiences. It appears that the biggest struggles for stepmothers are the role confusion as they struggle to find their place within their family dynamic, and being confronted with the harsh reality that they will likely be taking on the labor of motherwork that is “naturally” assigned to them as women, but will not be given the rights or benefits connected to the role of mother.

The “ideal” or normalized family structure in Western society today is based on that of a White, middle-class, heterosexual, nuclear family. In this structure, men are the primary breadwinners and women are primary caregivers. The actual number of families who represent this “ideal” family structure is very low (Barg, 2001; Eichler, 2008), however we still continue to use it as the norm of society to which all families are compared. Of course there has been backlash against this patriarchal ideology of the family (Barg, 2001), and as far back as 1988, Eichler noted the changing nature of families due to divorce and remarriage rates (as cited in Barg, 2001). Therefore, as the traditional image of the monolithic, nuclear family does not accurately describe modern family dynamics, neither does the dominant ideology of mothering accurately describe the experience of many stepmothers.

The monolithic family ideal and related ideology of mothering is, I believe, damaging to all women: “The perfect mother myth further creates an atmosphere within which women, as mothers, participate in the hegemonic practice of making the work of the mother invisible”

(Barg, 2001, p. 56). The individualistic perspective on mothering allows society to blame mothers for issues that develop with their children, ignoring broader contextual considerations. In addition, the continued perception of this labour as “natural” for women both further confines women to a lower status in a capitalist, patriarchal society, and creates tension for women who do not feel a supposed natural fit to motherhood.

Even biological mothers have to “learn” to mother, and while girls may be indoctrinated into this type of caring work through socialization, the primary labor of childcare can be done by anyone (outside of breastfeeding). It is not biology, but rather “society’s masculinist power structures that have rigidly defined these sexual divisions and have mandated child rearing as the work of women” (Barg, 2001, p. 66). Barg acknowledges that socialization and the biological potential to mother may give women a certain capacity to understand this work, but states that “this perspective does not mandate motherhood for women; instead, it identifies a need to learn what this work consists of, so it can be generalized to the greater society in a woman-centred, holistic and life valuing way, beyond the biological mother” (p. 70). Chodorow and Contratto (1992) believe that a more realistic view of mothers and mothering that focuses on their lived, subjective experience, may be helpful in challenging the individualistic, all-encompassing mothering ideology of Western society. This more realistic view must then be legitimized through social policy, where perhaps subsidized childcare would enable women to work outside the home should they choose to do so, fathers would be given parental leave to support new mothers, and more flexible employment options would give both mothers and fathers the right to work around family obligations without fear of repercussions, among other policies that support parents in raising families while also promoting a community approach to childcare. In addition to these policies, and in accordance with this research topic, much reform is also needed in

family and divorce legal policies and procedures to ensure both parents are given equal access to their children. However, that topic is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

In terms of reconceptualising parenting labour, Eichler (1997) believes redefining the term “family” will allow a redefinition of the experience of motherwork – increasingly important with our changing family structures. Eichler discusses the current family model of “individual responsibility”, which seems to reflect neoliberal values of competition and individualization in society. This further disadvantages women who are expected to provide care for their family, contribute financially to their family with work outside the home, and are typically paid less for this workplace labour. Barg goes further to suggest that this model disadvantages all women, particularly those living in poverty and holding minority status. To challenge this, Eichler proposes a “social responsibility model” for parenting which would acknowledge and value various family structures and minimize stratification based on sex alone. Enacted in social policy, this model would reduce the burden on mothers by valuing the work of other parental or familial figures, and generalizing the responsibility of motherwork to the broader society. Barg agrees that “we need a socially accepted vision of the family that rejects the patriarchal model, where men are seen as heads of the household, and financially responsible for the well-being of the women and children” (p. 62). I believe that challenging this traditional nuclear model and enacting a perspective of social responsibility for motherwork would not only liberate women from the heavy, sole responsibility of motherwork, but would also make room for and value diverse parenting perspectives such as those of fathers and stepparents.

Some theorists, such as hooks (1984), suggests that the study of mothers and motherhood further entrenches the separation of mothers and fathers, and she prefers to use the term “effective parenting” to describe the care of children – removing the “mother” from motherwork.

To her, we must value fatherhood as much as motherhood. However, according to Hart (1996), drawing attention to motherwork as the work that women do is necessary. Rather than take the “mother” out of this labour, we must redefine this labour as productive and of value in the home and in society. This is also the first step to challenging inequity in the marketplace (Barg, 2001). While I see great importance in valuing the childcare labor of fathers, and in fact I believe this directly relates to the experience of stepmothers, I feel that removing the woman from motherwork does not liberate them from capitalist society, but rather makes further invisible the labour that they engage in. If a child is born, it is the mother who carries, the mother who delivers, and the mother who breastfeeds. This is not only incredibly significant in the lives of women, but is labour that should not be attributed to a general “parent”. In addition to that, the fact that women’s labour has been appropriated by capitalist and patriarchal structures – while it must be challenged – does not change the fact that at this moment, women primarily engage in this work. And so, it must be considered as such.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, I believe that we can trace a line from the ideology of mothering in Western society today, to the direct experience and role confusion of stepmothers. There is an explicit connection, in that individualistic mothering leaves little room for stepmothering. It seems as though we parent the way we work – as individuals, in competition with others, and in a way that all-consuming to our identity. However, this is based on the dominant mothering ideology in Western society. There are other cultures and communities who ascribe to more of a community approach to family, and may experience significantly less tension between mothering roles.

There is another connection between mothering ideology and stepmothering experiences. This ideology of mothering reduces the importance of the father in children’s lives. While fathers

have increased their impact on day-to-day parenting in the past several decades, mothers are increasingly seen as solely responsible for the “proper” care of children. In situations of divorce, this often leads to mothers being awarded more custodial care of children (Martin, 2009), and even to parental alienation syndrome – “the systematic vilification by one parent of the other parent and brainwashing of the child, with the intent of alienating the child from the other parent” (CCRC, 2016, n.p.). These outcomes can have significant detrimental impact on children, and also on fathers. As Martin states:

Family court systems have yet to catch up to the new social reality of dads who want to parent on the frontlines. Until a sea change in our attitudes puts an end to custody bias, fathers will be in pain – and that will have an impact on how well they are able to function as husbands. (p. 109)

Therefore, stepmothers may struggle with supporting a partner who is psychologically distressed over the situation with his children, and may then be unsure of what role to fill with children who are present in the home under stressful circumstances. And so yet again the emotional labour of the home is placed squarely on the shoulders of women.

### **Identity, Relationships, and Labour**

In her critical feminist analysis of lifelong learning discourses, Gouthro (2009) troubles the boundaries of public and private to discuss the absence of the homeplace in these learning discourses. To highlight the interconnection of public and private spheres within the homeplace, Gouthro (2009) considers the lived experience of women in terms of identity, relationships, and labour. Within the context of the homeplace, identity is gendered “since women are usually

expected to prioritize their identities as wives/partners, and particularly as mothers, regardless of other aspects of their identity” (Gouthro, 2009, p. 164). This prioritization of motherhood does not align with the structural influence of neoliberalism that promotes a culture of individualism and competition. In my previous research on the lived experience of women who are both mothers and academics, the participants consistently felt they had to “hide” their identity as mothers in the context of work – that the demands of motherhood did not compliment the demands of the workplace. This led to feelings of pressure for the women:

[One] woman who started her family early in her career could not afford to take more than a few months off for fear of losing her part-time appointment and income: “I couldn’t afford to take maternity leave without pay... I couldn’t let go of a course because I wasn’t guaranteed that I’d have it again. They would hire somebody else... so I really had to do it”. Not only are women expected to return to work; they are being assessed for their level of productivity: “...people are going to be looking at your productivity. There’s a lot of pressure”. (Careless, 2011, p. 60)

The participants in my research felt their identities as mothers were not welcome or validated within the halls and walls of the academic institution.

In the stepmothering context, women do not simply enter into a relationship, but into an already formed family with its own unique history, rituals, and ways of being. Finding one’s identity – where they fit – in this family is hugely challenging for most stepmothers, and causes distinct insider/outsider feelings (Church, 2004, Papernow, 2013, Martin, 2009). In my research study, Connie spoke to this insider/outsider dynamic being a significant issue for her, and once

she was able to “name” the problem, it wasn’t quite so disruptive for her: “All the feelings that I’ve had, the frustrations I’ve had, now I can see that it’s a real thing with a name”. In every society, a woman with the identity of “mother” holds a certain kind of respect, an understanding for what she does, and a respect for the caring work she takes on. However, for most stepmothers, they may engage in the same type of labour, but lack the recognition and status of that position. In fact, cultural stories and fairy tales often result in stepmothers being seen in a negative light, regardless of this caring labour.

Exploring the significance of women’s relationships, as another aspect of the homeplace in Gouthro’s (2009) analysis, “helps to explain why feminist research emphasizes the importance of connectivity on women’s learning experiences” (p. 165). Gouthro’s study found that women learners typically do not put their interests first, and so interconnection is important in understanding their lived experience. Stepmoms face multiple complex relationship negotiations, and a lack of understanding and support for stepmothers means they often feel as though this is a solo project. In terms of the intimate partner relationship, those in first-time families have time to date, bond, and negotiate their relationship prior to having children. Stepmothers enter into a relationship – and a family – that is more complex, right from the beginning. She must figure out how to parent with a man who may have limited access to his children and/or be going through complex court proceedings. In my study, Lucy spoke of the challenge of defining her family based on these complex relationships. She felt that they were trying to be both a family and a childless couple at the same time, but were failing at both because they weren’t truly either. The relationships within the homeplace for a stepmother are often changing and complex.

One relationship that is perhaps most challenging for stepmoms is that between herself and the biological mother of her stepchildren. As noted previously, the cultural ideology of

mothering is demanding and competitive. The dynamics and boundaries between mother and stepmother are sensitive and complex, as both women are influenced by this mothering ideology. There is often strife in this relationship (Church, 2004), and it is one that stepmothers do not intentionally seek out, but rather comes as a result of their partnership. As well as the biological mother, stepmoms inherit relationships with their stepchildren. In my research study, Sarah talked about coming from a stepfamily herself, and how that helped her to define her role as a stepmom: “As a stepmom, I kind of take how [my stepmom] was, as a mom, and put that into my relationship with my stepkids”. So her relationship with her stepmother influenced her future relationship with her own stepchildren. There is often a great deal of pressure for stepmoms to love stepchildren as though they are their own biological kids (Martin, 2009), and so if this does not happen (and it is unlikely that it will for most), stepmothers yet again are made to feel wicked and unloving. This is discussed at length between participants in the *Canadian Stepping Stones* Facebook group.

The third aspect of learning in the homeplace in Gouthro’s (2009) analysis is labour. Consistently different by gender, “men usually work more hours outside of the home, and women work more inside the homeplace” (Gouthro, 2009, p. 166). My research on academic mothers also indicated that “even for married participants whose partners have fairly equal professional demands, most of the housework and childcare become primarily tasks for the women” (Careless, 2011, p. 59). This is particularly relevant to my current research study, as I am exploring the learning of stepmothers in relation to motherwork – the labour of raising children. Despite not being the biological parent, nor having yet developed a strong bond, many stepmoms find themselves taking on this child-rearing labour very early on in their stepfamily relationship (Claxton-Oldfield, 2000). You will recall Sarah’s comment that she steps in for the

“pink jobs” in the home, and that as a mother it is “on her mind” to engage in the physical care of her stepchildren. Where mothers may take on more of this caring labour in first-time families, this work is further complicated for stepmothers because they do not have the relationship of trust, love, and forgiveness with the children that a biological parent does (Papernow, 2013). So if children respond negatively to a stepmother attempting to instill rules and routine into their lives – and it is easy to see why they might be resistant to a stranger doing this – the stepmothers’ caring labour feels unappreciated. This causes tension in her relationships with her family, and further entrenches insider/outsider dynamics. When Heather, a participant in my study, decided to step back from her parenting responsibilities because of the tension between her and her stepchildren, she spoke of withdrawing financial support: “It was as though I wasn’t keeping up with some contract I had signed or something. And he was like, But it’s your responsibility to pay for these things, and I was like, Oh no it’s not. I didn’t have these children, I didn’t make those decisions”. While this concern with financial contribution is commonly talked of in the group, women seem less reluctant to withdraw their physical, unpaid labour of childcare. Perhaps this is seen as more inherently linked to the identity of women? Perhaps the informal learning of these social and cultural obligations are much stronger than those around financially supporting a family? Regardless, the consistent and unacknowledged labour of raising someone else’s children has a profound impact on a stepmother’s identity and relationships with others.

### **Informal and Experiential Learning**

Informally women in this study learned to navigate their role as stepmothers through reflection on their first family experience, and through informal research. The learning that occurs in interaction with others and our environment, such as how we are raised in our families and communities cannot be discounted as important and key to developing one’s framework of

social and cultural behaviours and expectations (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). This is especially important as the field of adult education continues to focus on values of competition, credentializing, and employment for the marketplace. Perhaps future generations will see a change in the way stepmothers are perceived, as the number of stepfamilies continue to rise. However, I believe that the dominant ideologies of parenting (particularly mothering) need to be challenged before we see real change. A significant source of learning these dominant ideologies is engagement in our first families, so these very early learning spaces may perpetuate the roles of mothers, fathers, stepmothers, and stepfathers.

Schugurensky (2000) talks about informal learning that is self-directed, conscious, and intentional. The women in my research study spoke of seeking help and support online by reading blogs, articles, and doing general searches for information. This intentional learning is in addition to their membership in a closed, private Facebook support group. Another interesting aspect of this informal online learning is the way in which previously “private” experiences are made public (i.e. through personal blogs, websites, and social media). As I discussed in my work around mommy blogs (Careless, 2016), the practice of blogging is private and public, and reframes our notion of identity construction within social practice (Hagenah, 2013). As a media of communication, blogs can respond to, shift, and disrupt assumptions of social interaction and public and private discourses. Seeking out information and support in this space is another crucial aspect of informal learning for stepmothers, who may see themselves in these “real” lived examples of stepmothers navigating their way through this experience.

Experientially, past experiences are key to one’s learning process, as these experiences provide a base of knowledge which will be built upon (Boud, 2005). The women in this research study relied on their past experiences in relationships and families to help them navigate their

role as stepmothers. All of their knowledge around parenting, family dynamics, child behaviour, partnership, and much more, serve as their base knowledge. Then through experiences, trial-and-error, and in relationship with others, new knowledge is added to this base.

Fenwick (2003) and Michelson (2015) interpret Kolb's learning cycle, which is an oft-used tool in adult education contexts. They both find it slightly problematic in that it perpetuates an individualist notion of learning, and ignores the social context of learning. Michelson (2015) in particular expands Dewey's interpretation of experiential learning as an interconnection with others, the body, and the world. This is very reflective of the experiential learning described by the participants in this study, as they negotiated their role within their family alongside the other family members, within their own personal expectations and ideas, and with consideration to social and cultural ideologies of parenting and stepparenting.

### **Digital Community of Practice Engagement**

The findings of this study suggest that participation in this group may facilitate a digital community of practice for stepmothers. A learning theory that has been applied to many spheres – from business and industry to education and the social sector – communities of practice are now being explored in connection to digital technology. Social learning, and specifically situated learning, is a key feature inherent in communities of practice. Situated learning is characterized by what Lave and Wenger (1991) call legitimate peripheral participation, which is the notion that the acquisition of knowledge and skills require “newcomers” (new members of the group) to move into full participation of the communities' sociocultural practices. Learning for the women in this support group is therefore not just necessary for membership in a community; rather, learning is an evolving form of membership in a community, and a development of

stepmothering identity. Through legitimate peripheral participation, members shape their own understandings through engagement, and in exchange their beliefs contribute to the shared fabric of knowledge in the group.

Members of a CoP also explore questions of identity, and “contribute to the construction of their own identity in relationship to the community of practice and reciprocally to the construction and development of the community of which they are a part” (Gray, 2004, n.p.). Participation in this sense is understood as “*meaningful* activity where meaning is developed through relationships and shared identities” (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham & Clark, 2006, p. 651). Identity for a stepmother can be a confusing and complicated question. Very often, women take on the caring responsibilities for the stepchildren, and yet they do not have the same rights as a biological mother (Katz, 2010). Questions of how women claim their parenting identity and negotiate meaning within that identity is a key part of engaging and learning in a community of practice. Stepmothering identity evolves over time as well, which reflects the need to stay connected to one’s community of practice. For example, if a woman is casually dating a man who has children, she likely does not yet consider herself a stepmother. When/if they move in together, her role may change and her parenting responsibilities may increase. The women in this study spoke of their learning to stepparent as a journey, not simply an identity that was developed and adopted quickly or easily. Therefore, a stepmothers’ role may shift and evolve significantly over time, and she will likely need to renegotiate the meaning of her role.

### **Power**

With both digital communities of practice and the use of social media platforms in general, we must consider issues around power and access. Cox (2005) found that power and

conflict were minimally addressed in community of practice literature. When the communities of practice are located online, this is a very important consideration with the recent emergence of online bullying and harassment. While Facebook and other social media sites are free tools, we must consider who has access to these groups and who does not. Participation requires an Internet connection, computer or Smart phone, and the technological know-how to engage. There are also questions of time and literacy that can impact participation.

While typically thought of as a very public platform, with users' posts accessible to their contacts, there is the option to create closed and private groups – such as the one these stepmothers belong to. Members can only be added to the group by designated administrators, the group cannot be found in a general Facebook search, and all posts are only visible to fellow members. This group has its own Terms and Conditions which all members must agree to upon entering the group, and violation of those Terms can result in immediate dismissal from the group. So this group (and others like it) seem to straddle both public and private contexts of social media, creating spaces where individuals can connect regardless of geography or any other factor (i.e. class, race, religion, culture). This group for Canadian stepmothers has over five hundred members, so while not exactly a “private” conversation, there are still safeguards to protect the women and their posts.

Another aspect of power in online groups are the moderators or administrators – sometimes those who initially started the group, sometimes individuals who have been asked to take on that role. The Facebook stepmom group currently has six administrators who accept new members, and monitor posts and engagement in terms of language and subject matter. While this may be a key aspect to the success of the group in terms of positivity and maintaining relationships, it is still a measure of control and power in the group. This aspect of the group was

not discussed in the research interviews, but inevitably has an impact on member participation and engagement, and would be an important point to explore for future research. These discussions of power and participation are important in any exploration of community of practice membership, whether online or in-person. In a society that increasingly focuses on the economy, globalization, and marketplace values, support for and understanding of family systems may continue to emerge in these informal spaces (such as social media).

Feminist theories and discourses explore questions of power, and often look at the ways in which social structures reproduce and support values of patriarchy. A key term in the women's movement and in feminist theories of learning is consciousness raising, meaning the technique of analysis in which "male dominance is concretely uncovered and analyzed through the collective speaking of women's experience, from the perspective of that experience" (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 520). Based on de Beauvoir's (1970) notion that "one is not born, one rather becomes a woman" (p. 249), MacKinnon states that gender is a learned quality "with qualities that vary independent of biology and an ideology that attributes them to nature" (p. 529). This is evidenced in the women's experiences when they take on caring labour for their stepchildren, seemingly "naturally"; when actually this behaviour is socially and culturally prescribed (i.e. When Sarah spoke about "taking on the pink jobs" in the home).

Although *Stepping Stones* is a group comprised solely of women who spend extensive time communicating with one another, the goal of the group is not consciousness raising, and indeed, the women do not engage in critical discussions connected to patriarchy and the impact of this system on their lived experience as stepmothers. While this group shows women that they are not alone in their experience of challenging stepfamily dynamics, power issues related to gender inequality are not taken up, or are seen as private problems to be solved by the individual

woman herself; rather than public, social issues informed by societal and cultural practices and systems.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

Adult education increasingly focuses on learning connected to the marketplace (i.e. for credentials, competition, and individualization), meeting the needs of a capitalist society, and on public spaces of learning such as institutions, to the neglect of learning that occurs in the private sphere (Gouthro, 2009). Informal, experiential, and subsistence learning is valued less and explored less often in adult education research. Hart's (1993) theory of motherwork learning combines experiential and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1978) with critical reflection and reflective action, therefore contributing to lifelong learning. The key, however, is the subsistence orientation that values the work of life. Other feminist theorists such as Belenky et al. (1986) and Gilligan (1982) believe that emotions embedded in lived experiences are key to learning, and Barg (2001) states that including more diverse learning contexts and focuses, such as subsistence learning, would create a richer, more inclusive discourse of adult education (Barg, 2001).

In her research study, Barg (2001) found support for the fact that motherwork learning is passed from parents to children through informal and experiential learning. My findings indicate that stepmothers learn motherwork in the same ways, although I added learning through technology and participation in a digital community of practice to add a contemporary focus on this learning. It is my intention that this research contributes to adult education literature around motherwork, to expand the discourses of learning beyond the narrow framework of formal education for participation in a global capitalist society. This type of society enforces a competitive, individualist formula of mothering to support the needs of said society. It is also my

aim that this research serve to challenge this formula of mothering as damaging not only to mothers, but to other parental figures. Then, and only then, may awareness be raised around the stepmothering experience and stepfamily dynamics. As the women in my study indicated, these questions and issues were not raised in any kind of formal learning context, but rather were learned informally and experientially. It is important that this learning and these experiences be addressed in formal settings and research as well. In the words of Barg (2001):

There remains a dearth of literature that centres on the lived experience and learning within motherwork from a qualitative experiential standpoint. Where literature does address motherwork from a learning perspective it is often from a theoretical perspective that is largely based on the author's own views and experiences. (p. 71)

Gouthro and Hart argue that this type of learning can also add communicative and cooperative processes to adult learning theories.

Another consideration for adult education is the way in which navigating “new” social situations through “new” learning platforms may change the way we view and use adult education. If a stepmother is feeling confused about her role, she does not take a formal course at a learning institution, but rather seeks support in the form of online groups and information using the informal learning site of the Internet. Perhaps these contemporary tools of engagement and knowledge sharing are being used to explore other social and cultural topics that are increasingly absent from formal discourses and institutions (i.e. health care, sexual orientation, feminist discourses, First Nations experiences, immigrant support, and much more).

In terms of digital communities of practice as a way of learning, there are important considerations around issues of power and control. There are administrators of the group and terms of engagement that members must abide by. Members feel that the success of the group is reliant on these terms, which keeps conflict to a minimum, and guides the discussions that take place; the questions that can be asked and answered. So if these tools are to be used in critical adult education, to raise consciousness and challenge the status quo, we must also consider these elements of control. However, there is no rule against questioning and/or challenging the dominant ideologies or mothering which directly impact the lived experience of stepmothers. Despite the lack of rules, these conversations do not seem to occur, in part because that is not the goal of the group, and in part because these conversations do not typically occur in daily conversations.

A clear limitation, then, of informal learning through a community of practice, whether in-person or online, is that if the group is intended to be a space for informal conversation and support, there will not be a deeper, critical level of learning that occurs. This is because discussions around the oppression of patriarchy and other systems do not typically happen in daily conversation. This is likely true for any community of practice (digital or otherwise), unless there is a particular political perspective and goal behind the formation of the group. As *Stepping Stones* was not formed as a political, activist group with a change-oriented agenda, it is not failing to meet its mandate, however, the conversations in the group are unlikely to lead to such significant change at a policy and practice level.

So how can we encourage these critical, reflective discussions online? How can we create space for these norms to be challenged? While a part of the solution may be to reconsider the control that administrators have within the group and on the conversations that ensue, the primary solution is to introduce a critical and feminist theoretical lens to this lived experience of stepmothering in adult education contexts. These discussions and understanding of the ways in which social and cultural norms related to stepparenting are perpetuated, can begin in educational contexts, and then move into the public sphere for broader discussion.

Neoliberalism has been critiqued for its focus on the individual and their responsibility to resolve their own problems, and a lack of attention to change at the societal level. Without a political focus in the group, the challenges stepmothers face will continue to be perceived as individual issues, and women will be seen as having sole responsibility for “fixing” these problems. In this way, the system that pushes a caring role on women who are not historically or biologically connected to the children, is allowed to continue, unchallenged. Critical discourse around these systems, such as patriarchy and capitalism, is essential then for two reasons: so that these systems can be critiqued for their impact on women’s lives (pushing them into a caring role), and so that these critical perspectives can move from an academic context to conversations in the broader public sphere.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research indicates a need to bring a critical and feminist adult learning perspective to an analysis of the stepmothering experience in order to foster a deeper analysis of the issues facing stepmothers and stepfamilies. If this analysis and awareness can be included in the education for professionals who are likely to work with stepfamilies, such as mental health professionals, social workers, educators, financial advisors, and lawyers, then an understanding of these deeper issues may weave its way into daily conversations – in-person or online in spaces such as the *Stepping Stones* group. Stepmothers themselves are aware of the need to educate relevant professionals, as the participants noted when I asked them about the supports needed for stepmothers and stepfamilies in society. Many of them spoke to the education system, in particular, as requiring information that would help teachers and administrators support stepfamilies more adequately. Here I present the supports the women in this study identified as important for fellow stepmothers, and then the advice they would offer to women about to enter into the same family situation.

### Stepfamily Support Needed

Connie sees the value in an informal support group as well as professional, specialized help:

I think that, especially early on in the process of being a stepmom, having someone to talk to is really important. So having a stepmom support group or a safe place where you can vent about your frustrations and have them normalized... But my firm belief is that ultimately there may be deeper issues going on, [so they]

might need to go in for counselling. The counselor that they see needs to be specifically trained in stepfamily dynamics, because a counsellor who only knows nuclear or first-time families does not know the incredible amount of dynamics that come into play for stepfamilies and stepmoms.

This is echoed by Sarah who sees the value of a group of women in similar situations:

Definitely get a group of ladies that are in the same situation as you, doesn't matter where they're from, to give you day-to-day advice of what they've dealt with. Because you don't want to feel alone in this, it's the worst feeling ever... To have workshops and stuff where you can go and get local support would be huge for people, because not everyone has access to the Internet. Or maybe they can't read very well, so they don't get the book *Divorce Poison* or something off the shelf. So to be able to go somewhere and have someone sit down and talk to them and help them, that would be huge. I would go!

Based on her own experiences, Emily sees the value of more awareness, particularly in the school system, of stepfamily dynamics:

I wish there was more awareness... And right now, [my husband] is supposed to receive a copy of [my stepdaughter's] report card from her teacher because [his ex] cannot be trusted to get it to him and so he doesn't receive it. He has to go to the school board who

goes to the principal who then goes to the teacher. Every year. To get a report card. I wish you could submit your court order to the school so teachers would know what the parents are entitled to... Teachers should be aware how to handle mixed family situations, but right now they don't know.

Heather adds to this a need for more advocacy and information in general around the complexities of stepfamily life:

More informational support around what these different types of custody are, what child support is all about and how it works, what is Section 7? Because no one seems to know how that one works. All of those kinds of things. And then the other thing would be either classic support groups or counsellors who have training or experience with stepfamilies. It's almost like a cultural competency kind of thing that needs to be developed. Because through various points, my husband and I have tried to see someone about these things which to me are very typical stepparenting issues and challenges. We go and they try to deal with it from a relationship perspective or a mental health perspective, and I'm like yes, but it's not really about that. So that, and then advocacy. Things like stuff you can take into the school and say, This is what you need to know about working with stepfamilies. Someone who can go in and advocate on behalf of

stepparents in places like doctors' offices and schools, and those places that you run into trouble.

Anne spoke similarly:

The thing I found lacking the most, was almost legal support. I think there should be more out there to help, like in the way of community programs that are sanctioned by the court, like you know how they have a Parenting After Separation program? I think they should have a Stepparenting After Separation program, because I think that part of the reason that stepparents and stepchildren have issues is because the court doesn't allow stepparents to have any kind of role legally in those children's lives. We're responsible for the health and well-being of these children when they're in our care, but we're not provided with any kind of... we need to have the court system recognize that we have a role legally in their lives. Because we do.

Susie talks about the need to stop vilifying stepmothers:

I would like to see the end of the 'evil stepmother' mindset. If society didn't brand us all as wicked, we might feel a little more secure in our role. It seems to me that a stepdad is considered a modern-day hero, while a stepmom is just seen as overstepping. Feeling valued and accepted goes a long way.

And Leah echoes that sentiment:

I think what would be more helpful would just be more of a general acceptance. The initial implication of the stepmother is, Oh you don't love that child and you're an evil stepmother who doesn't want them around, and you probably have them on their hands and knees scrubbing the floor. If society would not see us like that, and understand that we're not trying to take the place of the mother. We're not trying to replace her, but someone has to take care of this kid while he or she is here. Nobody would ever go up to an adoptive parent and say, Well you're not really their mother. You know? And essentially we do the same thing, the only difference is the legal adoption. Some stepmothers are only every other weekend, but during that time they're loving them, they're taking care of them, they're feeding them, they're clothing them, they're doing everything that a mother does.

The interesting assumption here is again that a stepmother's role is valid as long as it imitates that of a "real" mother.

The women also offered personal reflections and advice for other women contemplating entering into this role. Their advice, again, is given from an individual perspective, and refers to what *she* can do to improve her family situation and reduce the impact of stepfamily stressors. This further highlights the value of the online community of *Stepping Stones* as a space of support and informing self-help, but not as an advocacy space for consciousness raising and informing social structural change on a broader level. Here are their suggestions.

**Advice for Others**

Connie's advice around the unpredictability of human relationships:

Really think about what you're getting yourself into. But also know that you will never be able to fully prepare yourself for it. You can read hundreds of books but you will never be totally prepared for that. When you add the dynamics of people with feelings, it's a totally different ballgame. You can prepare for that accident – the airbags, the seatbelts, the winter chains on your tires – but you get into it and it's like, holy crap. Women can prepare themselves as much as they want, but you can never predict the dynamics, so make sure you have the support in place for you. That's my advice.

Emily's advice to a new stepmom:

I would tell them that how they are feeling right now – scared, lost, clueless, the feeling that you want to run – hang on a little longer, because you will see a light at the end of the tunnel. It won't be that hard forever. You may be missing out on a huge opportunity just because you're afraid of something new... It's almost like stepparenting is a taboo subject. Oh and I would also definitely tell a new stepparent not to focus on labels, because the moment we start caring too much about the label is the moment you stop focusing on what you're actually doing.

Heather's words of wisdom:

I would say be patient with yourself, be patient with your kids, be patient with your husband, and just try to let it evolve as it will naturally. Take some time to reflect for yourself and care for yourself, because you can get lost in it. You can get lost in all the, 'What did she say now?' 'Take her to court for this!' 'The kids didn't eat lunch at their mom's again!' You can get bogged down by the minutiae and the drama of it. So that would be the number one thing. Mostly be patient with yourself, because you're not going to get it perfect, maybe ever. And that's okay.

In Susie's words:

Let the kids set the pace when it comes to bonding. Every situation is different, so it's hard to come up with a one-size-fits-all suggestion. That's it, though. Don't push. Don't try too hard. Don't bend over backwards trying to earn their love. Be yourself. At the end of the day, they may not like you no matter what you do. Your marriage is your priority. You married your husband, not your stepkids. You still have an obligation to treat them with dignity and respect, but you do not have to try to impress them. Another piece of advice I'd give is to set clear boundaries and stick to them. Decide what you are and are not willing to do in your role as stepmom. If you don't want to be the disciplinarian, don't. Leave

that to dad. If you don't want to go to every soccer game and ballet concert, don't. That's within your rights. If the ex makes you uncomfortable and you want to avoid her, do so. Your mental health and wellbeing are important, and your discomfort will be noticeable. Take care of YOU. Everything else will fall into place as it should.

Similarly, Sarah says to focus on the marriage:

Focus on the kids and not just the situation with his ex. Do not make that your main source of your day. It can't be, because it will break you both... Your spouse comes first, but put the kids first and foremost above all the background noise in your life... We put our relationship first, and our lives with our kids first.

As does Jenna:

You have to have a strong foundation to work with. If you don't, it doesn't matter how many kids or what the situation is... You have to do as much together as a couple as a family, because it is a hard role to be in... It doesn't happen gradually, it's a built-in family. It's very different than walking into a relationship and then having children together.

Lucy also speaks to the different dynamic of a stepfamily:

My advice would be to not rush anything. I think we moved a bit quick at the time, and you have to really think about whether or not this is someone you could have a family with. And I know the minute I met my husband I wanted to move in with him and marry him, like you would in any other relationship, but this isn't just any other relationship.

Anne speaks of those dynamics too:

Sit down and ask all those questions that are milling around in your brain that you're not sure you should ask. Because there are things like, questions like, there are so many of them. If he's going to be resistant to you asking those questions, then that is a potential flag for your relationship because these are things that need to be talked about eventually. Also I would say don't have the assumption that things are going to be a certain way because every situation is different... I would say that it would be a really good idea for any new blended family to attend counselling, because counselling doesn't have to be reactive, it can be proactive.

And again I end with Leah. Her story was very impactful, and she had seemingly been through the most challenging of experiences – trying to encourage the biological mother to be involved in her son's life. This clearly impacts her and how she sees stepfamily life:

I know it's horrible, but I would tell her that unless that child's mother is dead or is willing to sign over her parental rights, don't

do it. It's not necessarily when they're small that it's difficult. It's as they get older... And it's very difficult, it really is. If you're not strong and you're not willing to be patient and you're not capable of letting things slide off your shoulder... don't get involved, because it's hard. It's a lot harder than raising your own child, and it's probably the hardest, most thankless thing you're ever going to do in your life... [But] if I had to go back and do it again I would. I honestly would. Because at the end of the day, no matter how much he frustrates me, he's my boy, and I know that he needs me.

It should be noted that this is the support and advice comes from women who are clearly invested in learning more about their role, and at times struggle with navigating their role. The participants in this study, as being part of a support group, clearly are interested in these discussions. While the number of women in this group continues to grow daily, there are certainly women who identify their role early on and experience no issues in maintaining that role. Regardless, it is important to acknowledge that these roles are heavily shaped by dominant discourses in society that depict mothers, fathers, and stepparents in certain ways.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Through this research study, I explored the ways in which Canadian stepmothers involved in an online support group learn to negotiate motherwork (i.e. the labour associated with caring for children). I found that women identified learning this labour primarily through their participation in a digital community of practice, and through informal and experiential learning – seemingly located in the private sphere. However, a critical and feminist lens

highlights the dual public and private nature of this learning, whereby roles in the family are deeply entrenched in ideologies of mothering and shaped by social, political, and economic policies in society. The women reported learning from their experience in their own first families, experientially “by doing” the labour itself, in relation to their partner and his style of parenting, through informal research (often online), and, lastly, through engagement in the online support group which represents a digital community of practice.

The learning that occurs through participation in a community of practice is heavily embedded in ideologies of gender and parenting, and is influenced by ideas and values of family life, challenges of stepfamily life, the relationship with the biological mother, and the development of one’s own mothering identity. While valuable, these online learning spaces may not provide a space of critical reflection or be used to challenge social systems that inform the lived experience of individuals, in this case, stepmothers. Women can connect, share, support one another, offer suggestions, vent personal frustrations, seek advice, and make lasting friendships with women going through similar experiences. Learning may occur in these spaces, but again it is not necessarily the goal, and the learning is not aimed at structural change. However, as a feminist educator, I see a need for social change that will support stepfamilies by challenging the dominant ideologies around mothering, fathering, and stepmothering in society.

I believe that in Western society at least, we parent like we work – in individualized, competitive contexts. This all-encompassing ideology of mothering is damaging for mothers (who shoulder responsibility for this labour, and blame for any negative behavior of the children) and for other parental figures (such as stepmothers) whose perspectives and experiences are rarely heard. When stepmothers try to fit into the dominant mothering mold set by society, they struggle, as it is not the right role for them. It is important then to challenge the normative

ideologies of mothering and of the traditional nuclear family – which does not at all reflect the dynamic of 21<sup>st</sup> century families – as we must also challenge the narrow focus of adult education on learning for production and participation in the marketplace. If we can move away from neoliberal, capitalist, patriarchal discourses of family and parenting, we can perhaps shift towards a model of social responsibility for childcare (Eichler, 2008) that promotes a community approach to parenting. As Eichler (2008) notes: “If the principles and practices of this work [motherwork] were generalized to the greater society, this could contribute to the sustenance of the earth and to more life-affirming practices for all” (p. 235).

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## Appendix A

### Interview Schedule

1. Can you start by telling me who is in your stepfamily and what are the ages of any children?
2. Do you live with your partner and your stepchildren (at least part-time)?
3. What is the custody situation for the children? How often do you have them? Has that changed at all since you became a family?
4. Is this the first time you have lived in a stepfamily? Including when you were a child?
5. When you were dating your current partner, did you talk about what might be involved in you becoming a stepmom?
6. What did you think would be involved in being a stepmom? What did that look like to you?
7. Did you and your partner talk about the division of labour in the home? Who was going to do what housework and who was responsible for the care of the children?
8. What would you say are the main benefits and challenges of being a stepmother?
9. How would you say you've learned to be a stepmom? Did you seek out support and/or information?
10. Did you or do you have friends who are stepmothers too?
11. What does it mean to you to have a group like this Stepping Stones group, in terms of learning and support?

12. Do you think it would be more beneficial to have a group like this, with hundreds of members spread across the country, or a few close friends who are stepmoms and live nearby?

13. Do you engage with your stepkids' mom, or do you leave that to your partner?

14. Are you still reading and learning about stepparenting now?

15. How has learning to be a stepmom compared to learning to be a biological mom? (If participant has children\*\*)

16. Has the experience of having your own child(ren) impacted your role as a stepmom? If so, how?

17. How is your life as a stepmom informed and shaped by the way you grew up in your first family?

18. What would you say is your main source of learning for stepfamily issues/questions?

19. How do you discuss stepfamily issues/questions with your partner?

20. What kinds of supports do you think would be important for stepmoms to have?

21. If you were to meet a new stepmom today, or a woman who was thinking of entering into a relationship with a man who has children, what would your advice be to her?