

**THE EXPERIENCES OF STEPMOTHERS OF
NON-RESIDENTIAL STEPCHILDREN**

by

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DECLARATION

I declare that *The Experiences of Stepmothers of Non-residential Stepchildren* is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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GLOSSARY

Nuclear family

A nuclear family is defined as a family in which both adults are the biological parents of the children in the family (Bradley, 2005).

Stepfamily

The term *stepfamily* is used in this study to refer to families which consist of couples (engaged to be married, or married) and the child or children of the male partner/husband who were born from a previous relationship/marriage (Bradley, 2005).

Stepmother

In this study, the stepmother is defined as an adult woman whose partner/husband has a child or children from a previous relationship (Bradley, 2005).

Primary household/residence

The term *primary household/residence* refers to the household in which the child or children spend most of their time. In this study, the children primarily reside with their respective biological mothers.

Non-residential stepchildren

The term *non-residential stepchildren* in this study refers to the status of the children in the context of their stepfamily households. The child or children visit their father and stepmother as per contact arrangements and reside primarily with their biological mothers.

Contact

In this study, contact refers to the arranged time the children spend with their biological father and stepmother (Children's Act, 38 of 2005).

ABSTRACT

This study explored the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren, using a phenomenological approach and qualitative exploratory design. Participants were recruited in the Gauteng area through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the information. The findings of this study indicate the following: the participants, in their role as stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren, experienced various challenges that were very stressful, especially during the early stages of stepfamily formation. The lack of acknowledgement of the stepmothers' dedication to their stepchildren, as well as conflicting rules concerning how to care for the children, caused distress for the participants. Support from their partners, as well as improved stepfamily relationships over time, were acknowledged as contributing factors to the participants' continued commitment to their stepfamilies. Further research on stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren is recommended.

Keywords: Family systems theory; nuclear family; divorce; post-divorce contact; remarriage; stepfamily; stepmother; primary household/residence; non-residential stepchildren.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Stepfamilies represent one of the fastest growing types of families in Western society in modern times due to the increasing number of divorces (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Dupuis, 2010). Research indicates that the adjustment to remarriage and stepfamily life is complex and that stepfamilies are faced with numerous challenges (Carr, 2012; Sayre, McCollum, & Spring, 2010; Visher & Visher, 2003). In addition to many challenges, Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) and Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) explain that stepfamilies struggle to adjust to stepfamily life due to a lack of guidelines and norms available to these families. As a result of the many challenges stepfamilies face, the divorce rate is higher for remarried couples than for first-marriage couples (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). The researcher is of the opinion that stepfamilies need adequate professional support to prevent the breakdown of another family that could result in multiple losses for the adults and the children involved.

According to Statistics South Africa (2012) the average age of divorced men at the time of divorce was found to be 42 years, whereas the average age of divorced women at the time of divorce was found to be 38 years. Each divorce affects an average of one to two minor children (Statistics South Africa, 2012). It can be deduced from this information that people are relatively young, in the prime of their lives, and usually have minor children when they get divorced. According to Coleman et al. (2000), up to 75% of divorcees enter into another relationship and then remarry. Based on the information that around 75% of divorcees will remarry, it can be assumed that the minor children from the previous nuclear family will become part of a newly formed stepfamily in which there will be either a stepmother or a stepfather.

A stepfamily is the sociological term for the joining of two adults via marriage, cohabitation, or civil partnership, where one or both partners have children from a previous relationship (Henry & McCue, 2009). Stepfamilies come in many forms and can be simple or complex (Papernow, 2013). In simple stepfamilies, only one adult brings children into the stepfamily (Papernow, 2013). However, in complex stepfamilies, both adults bring children into the stepfamily (Papernow, 2013). Stepfamilies include children who reside in the household on a full-time basis, a part-time basis, or both (Papernow, 2013).

According to the South African Divorce Act 70 of 1979, before a divorce is granted, the court must be satisfied that the care and contact issues of the minor children involved have been addressed in the best interests of the minor children. In the event that parents do not agree on joint physical residency of the children post-divorce, the implication is that the children will primarily reside with one parent and have contact with the other parent. Kelly (2007) states that it is generally accepted that parents adopt a post-divorce living arrangement in which the children primarily reside with their biological mother and visit their father some weekends and during school holidays (as cited in De Wit, 2013). When the father repartners and/or remarries, a stepfamily is formed and the father's new partner will become a stepmother of non-residential stepchildren.

According to Doodson (2009), 82% of stepmothers in the United Kingdom and 80% of stepmothers in the United States of America have non-residential stepchildren. In the researcher's search for information on this topic, she could not find any equivalent information regarding stepmothers in the South African context. Furthermore, the researcher found that the majority of the literature available on stepmothers focuses primarily on residential stepmothers. The researcher was astounded by the lack of research pertaining to stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren, especially in the South African context. The researcher felt that by conducting this study, she would be able to address the

gap in the existing body of knowledge in the South African context with regard to the lived experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren.

The researcher's interest in the role and experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren was aroused during her exposure to the psycho-legal environment at the Office of the Family Advocate in Pretoria during her training as a Clinical Psychologist at the University of South Africa. Among other issues, the researcher was exposed to post-divorce disputes regarding primary residency and/or contact pertaining to minor children. It was the researcher's observation that the stepmother of non-residential stepchildren appeared to play an important role in the functioning of the stepfamily, but whose opinions were often not heard because she was not a party involved in the court application.

The researcher's observations at the Office at the Family Advocate, as well as the principles of family systems theory described by Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004), who emphasise the family as a system in which all family members play an important role in the functioning of the family and where each member of the family influences and is influenced by the other members of the family, together with the limited existing literature, stimulated the researcher's interest to study the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren.

1.2 The Aim of the Study

This study aims to describe the lived experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren because there is little information available in the existing literature. In this study, five South African women are given a voice through the opportunity to share their experiences by writing about these experiences in their own words. The women's unique narratives contain information describing the complexities of their roles as stepmothers, the challenges associated with their roles, as well as their

positive experiences as stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren. A further aim of this study is to generate information that may be helpful for professionals, such as psychologists or social workers, who work with and offer support to stepfamilies and specifically stepmothers.

1.3 The Research Question

The research question, which emerged from the aim of the study, is the following:
What are the lived experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren?

1.4 The Design of the Study

A qualitative design with a phenomenological paradigm was chosen for this study to produce a rich description of the unique and authentic lived experiences of five South African women in their roles as stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren. Thematic analysis, as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Suter (2006), was chosen as a method of analysing the information obtained from the participants. This method was used to organise the information into recurring patterns and themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a useful method to use when examining an under-researched topic, because of its ability to provide rich descriptions of people's lived experiences. After careful analysis, the participants' experiences are discussed against the backdrop of the literature reviewed in this study and are integrated with family systems theory where appropriate.

1.5 Chapter Outline

In Chapter 2, *Theory and Literature Review*, family systems theory is explicated, as this theory forms the epistemology of this study and serves as the lens through which the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren can be studied. Thereafter, the relevant literature is reviewed and discussed, namely the family types (consisting of nuclear families, families in the process of separation and/or divorce, and stepfamilies). A

review of the literature pertaining to the development of the stepmother's developmental model follows next and the chapter concludes with the literature reviewed on stepmothers in general, as well as stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren in particular.

Chapter 3, *Research Design and Method*, contains a discussion of the research process. The paradigm, epistemology and the method used to gather data in this study is presented. This is followed by an outline of the analysis procedure and interpretation process used in this study.

In Chapter 4, *Research Findings*, the participants are introduced and concise descriptions of their unique stepfamily contexts are provided. This chapter focuses on the themes and subthemes that emerged from the narratives of the stepmothers pertaining to their lived experiences of being stepmothers to non-residential stepchildren.

Chapter 5, *Discussion and Recommendations*, contains the themes presented in Chapter 4, where links between the identified themes and the literature as well as theory is presented. The strengths and limitations of this study are then outlined. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Theory and Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This study focuses on the experiences of five stepmothers who were either married to, or engaged to, men who had minor children from a previous relationship. The children lived primarily with their mothers but visited their fathers regularly. In recent years, research on stepfamilies has mirrored the increase in the number of stepfamilies present in society. According to Doodson (2009), 82% of stepmothers in the United Kingdom and 80% of stepmothers in the United States of America have non-residential stepchildren. Yet, recent contributions to this research field continue to focus on stepfamilies and stepmothers who have residential stepchildren, while little attention is given to stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren (Coleman & Ganong, 2002; Katz, 2010; Stewart, 2007; Sweeney, 2010). Consequently, the understanding of the experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren remains unclear because inconclusive findings have been presented (Doodson, 2009; Sweeney, 2010).

Statistics pertaining to stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren in the South African context could not be found to compare with international statistics on stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren. Furthermore, recent research pertaining to the experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren within the South African context could also not be found.

Coleman and Ganong (2002) found that couples with stepchildren, regardless of their residential or non-residential status, are far more likely to divorce than couples who do not have stepchildren. The high divorce rate found in remarried families may be attributed to the fact that stepfamilies experience unique stressors and conflicts that are associated with living in a stepfamily (Beaudry, Boisvert, Simard, Parent, & Blais, 2004; Cherlin, 1978; Coleman & Ganong, 2002). Cherlin (1978) explains that stepfamilies,

unlike traditional nuclear families, do not have universal and accepted norms or templates that guide their behaviour. It is therefore important to understand the experiences of stepmothers because they are key role-players in the development, growth, and maintenance of new stepfamilies. Furthermore, a better understanding of stepmothers' experiences may be important for professionals who work with stepfamilies because it would enable such professionals to provide more effective support and guidance to stepfamilies.

This chapter contains a discussion of family systems theory, which forms the theoretical underpinning of this study. The relevant literature on the processes of separation, divorce, remarriage, and stepfamily formation is reviewed. In addition, research pertaining to stepmothers is also reviewed.

2.2 A Systemic Framework

The researcher is interested in gaining a better understanding of the experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren. According to the principles of family systems theory, a family member's experiences cannot be viewed in isolation because the relational context in which he or she functions would be omitted (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). According to the principles of systems theory, which is concerned with wholes, "a precise part-by-part analysis is viewed as too reductionistic and inferential to be of much explanatory value. Instead, argue opponents of linear thinking, parts are better understood by the functions they serve in the whole" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2013, p. 22). It would thus be beneficial to examine the stepmother in relation to her stepfamily context because she constantly influences and is influenced by her context. By applying the principles of family systems theory as the theoretical basis of this study, the researcher can explore and understand stepmothers' experiences in the context of their stepfamilies, their unique relationships and family dynamics, and the larger context in which

stepfamilies function. In the next section, a brief introduction to general systems theory and family systems theory are presented. It is important to clarify the foundational contributions of general systems theory itself to gain a fuller understanding of family systems theory (Watson, 2012). Thereafter, the core ideas relevant to understanding and exploring relational and family system dynamics are explained, which may be useful for understanding stepmothers' experiences within the stepfamily context.

2.2.1 General Systems Theory

According to Watson (2012), systems theory is an interdisciplinary field of study that has its roots in biology. The goal of systems theory is to understand the behaviour of complex systems, with specific reference to the manner in which components of a particular system interact to affect the behaviour of the system in nonlinear ways (Watson, 2012). Ludwig von Bertalanffy introduced general systems theory in the late 1920s (Watson, 2012). Von Bertalanffy was not satisfied with the way in which linear cause-and-effect theories explained growth and change in living organisms (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). He believed that change occurs because of the interactions between the parts of an organism (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011).

Von Bertalanffy argued that it was too reductionistic to understand the whole organism by breaking it up into its individual parts. He thus introduced general systems theory, which changed the reductionistic way of examining systems (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). His theory attempted to promulgate a comprehensive theoretical model that would be relevant to all living systems (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Von Bertalanffy suggested that the system, as a mechanism of change, should be examined as a whole, instead of breaking it up into its individual parts (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Furthermore, Von Bertalanffy argued that the focus of systems theory research should be on the relationships and interactions within the system

itself, as well as the relationships and interactions of the system with other external systems (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011).

Von Bertalanffy's (1968) basic assumption was that "the whole is more than the sum of its parts" (p. 18). Von Bertalanffy's original conception of systems theory focused on organisation. He suggested that systems theory is a method of organising the interactions between the individual parts of a larger organism (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Systems theory was employed as a meta-theory and was applied to various contexts that included psychology, psychiatry, sociology, and social work (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). The differences between the various fields that adopted these theoretical principles lie in the additional theories that each field uses to explain the interactions within a system (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011).

2.2.2 Family Systems Theory

Following on the ideas of Von Bertalanffy, Gregory Bateson made a unique contribution to the development of family systems theory (Carr, 2012). Bateson is regarded as one of the most influential contributors involved in the formation of family systems theory and the history of family therapy (Carr, 2012). Bateson formed the Palo Alto Group (their initial focus was on communication patterns in families), which marked the beginning of a shift from content to pattern and process in the treatment of couples and families (Carr, 2012; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). The Palo Alto Group made many conceptual contributions in the development of family therapy. Three specific concepts were particularly influential – the double bind theory of schizophrenia, communication as a multilevel process, and the use of systems theory and cybernetics as a framework for describing the family's organisation and internal processes (Carr, 2012).

Family systems theory focuses on understanding the interactions between people in a family and the interactions between a family and their context (Watson, 2012). From a

family systems theory perspective, an individual's functioning is seen as primarily determined by their position in the family system rather than by intrapsychic factors (Watson, 2012). According to Watson (2012), each individual in the family system is subject to the pushes and pulls of the system, including competing emotional demands, role definitions and expectations, boundary and hierarchy issues, coalitions and collusions, loyalty conflicts, family and institutional culture and belief systems, double binds, projective identifications, and systemic anxiety. In addition, self-correcting and self-reinforcing feedback loops in a system can either facilitate or hinder pathology or health, breakdown or resilience. (p. 184)

Family systems theory identifies the family unit as an emotional network of interconnected relationships that are best understood from a trans-generational perspective (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). In addition, this outlook expresses the idea that neither people nor their problems exist in a vacuum (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Human problems and experiences are seen as interpersonal and not intrapersonal, and solutions therefore aim to address relationships between people (Carr, 2012). Family systems theory further postulates that all behaviour is enacted in a social relational context to ensure that a person's basic needs regarding order, security, belonging, and identity are met (Almagor, 2011; Minuchin, 1974). Professionals who work from a systemic perspective concern themselves with understanding *what* occurs and *how* it occurs, rather than *why* it occurs (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Thus, professionals who work from a systems theory perspective are more interested in the *process* of what they are observing in the interactions of a particular couple or family than the *content* of those interactions (Dallos & Draper, 2010; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

Researchers and family therapists developed a new language to use within the systems thinking field, including concepts specifically used by family therapists (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Family therapists found these system concepts useful in describing and conceptualising a family's interactive processes (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). In the next section, the key concepts of family systems theory are presented to explain the stepfamily system, its relational processes, and its patterns and rules.

2.2.2.1 Subsystems. A subsystem is an important concept in the family systems framework (Dupuis, 2010). Each individual in a family is a subsystem (Dupuis, 2010). The husband-wife dyad, mother-child dyad, father-child dyad, and child-child dyad(s) are all examples of subsystems in the family (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The larger family system consists of various smaller subsystems that differentiate themselves into smaller units or subsystems, namely the spousal subsystem, the parental subsystem, and the sibling subsystem (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Minuchin, 1974). Each family member can belong to several subsystems simultaneously and can enter into different complementary relationships with the other members (Dupuis, 2010). For a family to be functional, these subsystems have to be organised in terms of a hierarchy and have to form appropriate boundaries between themselves (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Particular functions and duties are assigned to each subsystem to carry out within the larger family system (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

2.2.2.1.a) The spousal subsystem. A new spousal subsystem begins to form when two adults decide to form a bond with the purpose of forming a new family (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The partners need to separate from their families of origin – they thereby lose some of their individuality in the process, but, at the same time, they gain a new sense of belonging in the new spousal subsystem (Kerr, Hoshino, Sutherland, Parashak, & McCarley, 2008). Becvar and Becvar (2006) describe the processes involved in the

formation of a spousal system as the following: “accommodation, which implies adjustment, and negotiation of roles between spouses” (p. 171). Each of the new partners brings his or her own set of values that must be reconciled over time to make a common life possible (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Kerr et al., 2008; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). According to Becvar and Becvar (2006), a person who remains enmeshed in their family of origin, will find it difficult to accommodate and negotiate their new roles in relation to their partner.

One of the most important tasks of the spousal subsystem is to create appropriate boundaries that in turn create a private space to protect the couple from the intrusion of in-laws, children, other family members, and friends (Kerr et al., 2008; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). This private space may further allow the members of a couple to meet each other’s psychological needs and to receive mutual support, comfort, and encouragement from each other (Kerr et al., 2008). Minuchin and Fishman (1981) emphasise the fact that the viability of an entire family structure depends on the quality and adequacy of the spousal subsystem found therein.

The rules of a spousal subsystem also need to be flexible enough to allow its members to bring their experiences concerning extra-familial transactions into the spousal subsystem and to allow these experiences to be incorporated therein (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Minuchin and Fishman (1981) explain that if the rules are too rigid and if the members cannot incorporate extra-familial experiences into the spousal subsystem, the subsystem will be at risk of becoming weakened and undermined. Ultimately, the spousal subsystem may become an unavailable source of growth and development for its members. If these conditions continue for long enough, the partners may decide to deconstruct the subsystem (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

Furthermore, children in a family perceive the spousal subsystem as an example of how partners should relate to each other under different circumstances, including how to express affection and how to deal with conflict. The children's observations with regard to the spousal subsystem will later become part of their values and expectations as they encounter the outside world (Kerr et al., 2008; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

2.2.2.1.b) *The parental subsystem.* The birth of a child transforms the spousal subsystem into a parental subsystem (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). The evolution of the parental subsystem is linked to the degree of successful development of the partners' negotiation and accommodation skills related to the spousal subsystem (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Partners may need to negotiate certain issues such as their different opinions regarding the discipline of their children. The presence of a child or children creates additional demands for complementarity in order for family functions to be performed successfully (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Becvar and Becvar (2006) emphasise the importance of the continued existence of the spousal subsystem as an entity that is separate to the newly formed parental subsystem. It is of great importance that parents spend time alone with each other to nurture and grow their relationship without the issues and functions of child-rearing interfering (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

The parental subsystem is responsible for developing adequate child-rearing practices and for socialising the children (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The parental subsystem can vary in its composition – it may include extended family members or stepparents, and even a sibling or siblings who are told to look after and discipline their sibling(s) (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Traditionally, childcare is considered a feminine activity. Thus, the stepmother is expected to fulfil a traditional gender role in caring for her stepchildren (Graham, Graham, & Hawker, 2011; Marks, Chun Bun, & McHale, 2009; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Childhood development is affected by what children learn

from the parental subsystem (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). For example, they learn about what to expect from people with greater resources and strength than their own. They also learn about whether to think of authority as rational or arbitrary, whether their needs will be supported, and what the most effective ways of communicating their needs in their family system are (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Furthermore, children learn about gender-appropriate behaviours as well as which behaviours are rewarded and which are discouraged in the family through the model of the parental subsystem (Marks et al., 2009).

As the children grow older, their needs change. The parental subsystem must thus change as well to continue to meet the children's needs (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). As the capacity of the children increase and they become more independent, they should be given more opportunities to make their own decisions, and they should be assigned additional responsibilities (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). According to Minuchin and Fishman (1981), while the parental subsystem is responsible for caring for, protecting, and socialising the children, the adults in the subsystem also have rights. The members of the parental subsystem have the right to make decisions to ensure the survival of the family system. Such decisions include where the family lives, where the children go to school, and which roles and functions the children fulfil within the family system (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Lastly, the members of the parental subsystem have the right to protect their privacy (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

2.2.2.1.c) The sibling subsystem. According to Minuchin and Fishman (1981), “[s]iblings form a child's first peer group” (p. 19). The sibling subsystem provides a context in which children can learn various things from one another, including how to enjoy one another's company, how to support one another, how to share, and how to resolve conflict (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Furthermore, members of the sibling

subsystem need to develop their own transactional patterns of negotiating, co-operating, and competing with one another (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). These patterns become significant when the children move into extra-familial peer groups, the school environment, and, later, the work environment (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). According to the principles of family systems theory, the abovementioned three subsystems form a continuous, dynamic relationship and mutually influence one another (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

2.2.2.2 The suprasystem. Every system forms part of a larger system that consists of smaller subsystems. This larger system is referred to as the suprasystem (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). As described in the previous section, family systems theory defines three subsystems that are present in the family system, namely the spousal subsystem, the parental subsystem, and the sibling subsystem (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). These subsystems coexist and simultaneously form part of a larger suprasystem (Feller, 2011; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). In addition to these three subsystems, the suprasystem of a stepfamily consists of the external environment (including the biological mother of the stepchildren, the extended family, the school, the workplace, the church, and the community) that directly influences the stepfamily (Feller, 2011). Family systems theory states that the subsystems should be clearly differentiated by using appropriate boundaries (Becvar & Becvar, 2009).

2.2.2.3 Boundaries. The concept of boundaries is important in a systems theory framework, particularly with regard to the conceptualisation of the family system (Dupuis, 2010). According to Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011), “[e]ach system is a unit of wholeness with a distinct property or structural limitation that delineates it from other systems, a property Von Bertalanffy termed the system’s boundary” (p. 8). Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) define a boundary as the following: “an invisible line of demarcation

that separates an individual, a subsystem, or a system from outside surroundings. Boundaries further help define the individual autonomy of a subsystem's separate members as well helping to differentiate subsystems from one another" (p. 85). Boundaries give a system its definition and therefore make a system unique (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). Family systems theory describes boundaries by dividing them into three categories, namely clear, rigid, and diffuse boundaries. These types of boundaries are explained in the next section.

2.2.2.3.a) Clear boundaries. According to Becvar and Becvar (2006), subsystems should be defined by clear boundaries. Although clear boundaries are firm, they are also flexible and permeable (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Becvar and Becvar (2006) explain the following: "the theory suggests an ideal balance between support, nurture and inclusion on the one hand, and freedom to experiment, individuate and be one's own person on the other hand" (p. 174). Furthermore, clear and permeable boundaries allow for increased communication between subsystems, and increased communication between subsystems in turn leads to the successful occurrence of accommodation and negotiation (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). This process then facilitates change in the family and in turn maintains the stability of the family (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

2.2.2.3.b) Rigid boundaries. The term *rigid boundaries* refers to relationships between family members that become disengaged, implying that the family members become isolated from each other in the family system, as well as from the suprasystem of the family (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Disengaged members of a family are fairly autonomous and segregated, which may cause the family to become dysfunctional if the segregation is carried out to the extreme (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Rigid boundaries do not allow for accommodation and negotiation to take place in the family (Becvar & Becvar,

2006). Members in families with rigid boundaries often have to rely on systems outside of the family for desired nurturance and support (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

2.2.2.3.c) Diffuse boundaries. Diffuse boundaries are completely opposite to rigid boundaries. In the case of a family with diffuse boundaries, the family is characterised by enmeshed relationships (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Becvar and Becvar (2006) describe enmeshed relationships as the following: “everybody is into everybody else’s business and there is an extreme of hovering and providing support even when it is not needed. The parents are too accessible and the necessary distinctions between subsystems are missing” (p. 175). When there are diffuse boundaries in a family, too much accommodation and negotiation takes place, which results in a loss of independence, autonomy, and experimentation for both the parents and the children (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). The boundaries pertaining to stepfamilies are discussed later in this chapter.

2.2.2.4 Open and closed systems. Von Bertalanffy (1968) differentiates between two types of systems, namely open systems and closed systems. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) explain that open and closed systems refer to the degree of a system’s interaction with and accessibility to the outside environment. An open system with permeable boundaries exchanges energy with its environment, while a closed system with rigid boundaries does not allow energy to flow into or out of the system and becomes isolated from the environment (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). The growth of a system depends on the openness of the system, which is a critical factor for effective system functioning and even survival. Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011) note that there are times when a system closes to protect itself. They explain that during these times, the system exports more energy (system outputs) than it imports (system inputs).

The more open a family system, the more adaptable and accessible it is to change (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Such a system tends to thrive and not just survive.

Furthermore, an open system tends to be open to new experiences and is able to change or reject interactive patterns that are no longer useful (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). This kind of family system tends towards achieving maximum order and is able to alter its patterns in response to new information that may lead to changes in the family's rules and established responses that are inappropriate to the new situation (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). As a result of exchanges beyond its boundaries, an open family system increases its chance of becoming more highly organised and develops resources to repair minor or temporary breakdowns in efficiency (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

However, if a family system becomes too open, if too much information is allowed into the system, and if too many people become involved in the family, instability and chaos may develop (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Minuchin & Nichols, 1993). For example, in the context of stepfamilies, if the system is too open and the children's biological mother has too much access to the system, it may cause difficulties for the newly formed couple and may possibly threaten the survival of the stepfamily (Minuchin & Nichols, 1993).

Closed systems, in comparison to open systems, lack energy exchanges, which decreases their competence in dealing with stress (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Limited or non-existent contact with others outside the family system may lead to fearful, confused, and ineffective responses in times of stress and crisis (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Such closed systems run the risk of gradually regressing and deteriorating because of insufficient input. Thus, they are prone to eventual disorganisation and disorder, particularly if such systems are faced with prolonged periods of stress (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Closed systems thus fail to make enabling adaptations (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Nichols & Everett, 1986).

Since the livelihood of a system depends on the flow of energy and because outputs rely on fresh inputs, excessive exports of energy can lead to disorder or entropy in the system (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). Conversely, when a system imports more energy than it exports, it is referred to as negentropy, which refers to a state of system growth (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). Well-functioning families maintain the system by developing a balance between openness and closedness. Furthermore, they are tuned to the outside world so that appropriate change and adaptation can take place, while they also resist changes that threaten the survival of the system (Dallos & Draper, 2010; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012).

2.2.2.5 Feedback processes. Feedback refers to the process that regulates the circular flow of information between a system and its environment (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). Watson (2012) describes a feedback loop as “a systemic process in which one’s behaviour is influenced by the system’s reaction to one’s behaviour” (p. 185). For example, if A is kind to B because of B’s warmth, then B responds warmly to A because of A’s kindness. The behaviours of A and B reinforce each other. Thus, a reinforcing feedback loop encourages more of the same behaviours, forming a circular mechanism (Watson, 2012).

Information that is fed back into the system may be negative or positive (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Sterman (1994) explains that negative feedback loops (or deviation correcting feedback) refer to adjustments that have to be made to maintain the status quo or homeostasis of a system. In contrast, positive feedback loops (or deviation amplifying feedback) are patterns of interaction that facilitate change or movement towards either the growth of a system (Sterman, 1994). The functions of a positive feedback loop are to acknowledge changes within a system and to show that these changes have been accepted by the system (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Positive feedback

loops indicate that the system's rules, structures, values, patterns, and norms are reset, allowing variations to occur within the system that lead to increased levels of adaptability, growth, and creativity (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

Although the words *negative* and *positive* are used within systems theory, these terms are not meant to characterise communication as “good” or “bad”. No value is implied by the use of these labels (Dallos & Draper, 2010; Sterman, 1994). Systems survive by constantly balancing their tendencies towards stability and change to result in a dynamic equilibrium between these processes (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

2.2.2.6 Morphostasis and morphogenesis. The concepts *morphostasis* and *morphogenesis* refer to the specific processes that ensure the stability of a system and that enable change in a system (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). These concepts are closely linked to the feedback processes described above (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Morphostasis refers to a system's tendency towards stability in a context of change, which is accomplished through negative feedback processes (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Morphogenesis refers to system-enhancing behaviours that arise through positive feedback processes that enable growth and change to take place in a system in order to maintain stability and functionality (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). These changes are achieved through feedback loop cycles (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). A healthy, functional system is able to maintain a balance between the processes of morphostasis and morphogenesis, whereas extremes in either process would result in a dysfunctional system (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). For example, a system will tolerate change when change is required, but it will resist change when the system's existence and functioning is threatened.

During the formation of a stepfamily, the family members need to adjust to various changes in order to become functional as a family system. It is therefore important to understand feedback loops in the context of the formation of the stepfamily. For example,

in the context of a newly formed stepfamily, the stepmother entering the father-child system requires change in the system (the father-child) and temporarily destabilises the system. If the family (the father-child) can acknowledge the changes required with regard to rules, roles and patterns, and modify its structure to accommodate the stepmother as a family member, positive feedback processes are in action. In contrast, if the family (the father-child) is inflexible and resist the required changes, the stepmother is not accepted as a family member and negative feedback processes are in action.

2.2.2.7 Equilibrium and homeostasis. Minuchin and Fishman (1981) explain that the family is not a static entity, but rather it is in a process of continuous change. Keeney (1984) states that systems are organised through a process of change. A system's ability to adapt to its environment through changes that occur in its structure leads to states of equilibrium and homeostasis. These two concepts relate to different types of balance (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). According to Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011), "[e]quilibrium is the sense of being in balance" (p. 9). When a system is in balance, small amounts of variability in movement can disrupt the balance. According to Hecker and Wetchler (2003), the automatic tendency of a system to maintain its balance or equilibrium is called homeostasis.

The family is a dynamic system that uses feedback processes to exchange information with the outside world and to maintain its internal stability (Hecker & Wetchler, 2003). Although the result is a steady state, the process is not static – there is a constant fluctuation between equilibrating and disequilibrating forces, which generates stability (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Therefore, a family system's ability to maintain its stability depends on the system's ability to process the information that is continuously imported and exported.

2.2.2.8 Recursion. The idea of circular causality is based on the premise that causes of behaviour in a system cannot be located in an individual member (Watson, 2012). In addition, circular causality is considered a function of recursive feedback loops that operate in a system (Watson, 2012). Typical linearity is explained as A causes B and B causes C (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Watson, 2012). In contrast to linear causality, Watson (2012) explains that “circular causality refers to the understanding that A’s impact on B is affected by B’s impact on A” (p. 189). Thus, A and B affect each other in a circular manner.

Systems thinkers are interested in the circular processes that take place between family members, rather than linear cause-and-effect processes (Dallos & Draper, 2010). The focus of family systems theory shifts from searching for a plausible cause or looking for a source of difficulty in a system to what is happening between the family members involved in the interaction and the way in which they are mutually influenced in a circular communication process (Dallos & Draper, 2010; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). This process suggests that every member in the system has a role in causing and maintaining the problems that the system may experience (Watson, 2012). When a system functions adequately, it is presumed that the level of communication between its members is satisfactory (Haley, 1976). According to Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011), “[c]ommunication and information constitute an input into a system, a process occurring within the system, and an output in interactions with other systems. Communication regulates and either stabilises or disrupts a system” (p. 7).

2.2.2.9 Communication and information processing. Communication and information processing are crucial and essential processes in family systems theory (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). Communication is thus of great importance to healthy family functioning (Afifi, 2003). Functional families have

clear, complete, and congruent communication between their members, as well as clear rules and roles that govern family processes (Afifi, 2003; Satir, 1972). In contrast, the communication between members of dysfunctional families is indirect, unclear, vague, distorted, dishonest, and incomplete (Afifi, 2003; Satir, 1972). These families do not have a nurturing environment because they do not know how to communicate clearly. Satir (1972) explains that dysfunctional families with unclear, vague communication skills experience increased levels of vulnerability in times of stress and that they do not have sufficient resources to deal with environmental and developmental change effectively.

Becvar and Becvar (2006) explain that whether one discusses behaviour, boundaries, change, closedness, energy, entropy, feedback, input, openness, output, perception, relationships, stability, structure, or wholeness, reference is made to the manner in which systems communicate and process information. Becvar and Becvar (2006) suggest that three principles form the foundation of this concept:

- Principle 1: One cannot not behave.
- Principle 2: One cannot not communicate.
- Principle 3: The meaning of a given behaviour is not the true meaning of the behaviour. It is, however, the personal truth for the person who has given it a particular meaning.

With reference to the abovementioned principles, Watzlawick et al. (1967) argue that “behavior has no opposite. There is no such thing as nonbehavior, or to put it even more simply: one cannot *not* behave” (p. 29). Watzlawick et al. (1967) continue to explain that if all behaviour in an interactional situation is considered a form of communication, people cannot *not* communicate. Thus, everything a person does and says is considered a form of communication because even when they are doing nothing or saying nothing at all,

their behaviour is sending a message to others (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Becvar and Becvar (2006) explain that communication occurs in three modes, namely the verbal or digital mode, the nonverbal mode, and the context. The combination of the nonverbal mode and the context is called the analogue (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). The verbal or digital mode refers to the spoken word or to the report aspect of a message (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). However, the verbal or digital mode is only one part of a message and is the least powerful factor in defining how a message is received (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

When communication takes place between two people in a relationship, verbal or digital language becomes almost meaningless (Watzlawick et al., 1967). The explicit content of a message must be qualified by the nonverbal and context modes that accompany the verbal language (Watzlawick et al., 1967). The nonverbal mode is the command aspect of a message (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). It involves voice tone, inflection, gestures, and facial expressions, and it informs one of how a message is to be received (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). It is also the relationship-defining mode of communication in that it defines the message sender's intent (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). The context further modifies the meaning of a message. Timing, location, the people who are present, and each person's thoughts are the elements of the context of a message (Afifi, 2003; Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Watzlawick et al., 1967). Thus, the context defines how members of a system relate to one another (Afifi, 2003; Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Watzlawick et al., 1967).

In addition to Watzlawick et al. (1967)'s contribution pertaining to communication in families as discussed above, Satir (1967) adds the following: "one cannot *not* metacommunicate" (p. 82). According to Rasheed, Marley, and Rasheed (2011),

metacommunication refers to the “message about the message” (p. 144). The sender’s attitude, feelings, and intentions are conveyed through metacommunication. Rasheed et al. (2011) explain that “there should be congruence between the communication and the metacommunication, so that there are no conflicting messages” (p. 144). Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011) explain that congruence and incongruence refer to the extent to which a message and the message about the message agree. If communication is incongruent, the receiver may become confused and anxious (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). Metacommunication also punctuates and often reveals the real and possible hidden messages to the receiver (Rasheed et al., 2011). Lastly, the function of metacommunication is to ensure that the receiver accurately perceives the sender’s intended message, regardless of whether the message is congruent or incongruent, functional or dysfunctional (Rasheed et al., 2011).

Communication is very important in stepfamilies because effective communication in stepfamilies has been associated with the development of more effective ways of solving problems, higher levels of relationship satisfaction, and clearer boundary management (Afifi, 2003; Gosselin, 2010). In their study regarding the difficulties that couples experience in stepfamilies, Beaudry et al. (2004) found that the communication skills of partners in a relationship have a significant impact on their long-term relationship satisfaction. These authors further found that the kind of or the extent of the difficulties faced was not as important for partners as their communication skills when it came to predicting relationship satisfaction for both men and women (Beaudry et al., 2004).

2.2.2.10 The double bind situation. According to Gibney (2006), the double bind is defined as a situation in which a person is caught in a communicational matrix wherein messages contradict each other but the contradictions cannot be communicated and the person cannot leave the interaction. In simple terms, the person is forced to make a

decision between two options – both of which have negative outcomes. In addition, the person cannot abstain from making a decision.

Bateson and his colleagues (cited in Dallos & Draper, 2010) highlight the importance of communication within the family through their research on the factors contributing to schizophrenia. Bateson and his colleagues found that family members continuously attempt to make sense of what is happening in the family through their interactions with one another (Dallos & Draper, 2010). According to Dallos and Draper (2010), family members in healthy, functional families may use metacommunicational phrases such as “What do you mean?”, “You do not seem happy about that”, and “I am not happy about this” (p. 33). However, in families where a double bind occurs, such metacommunication is not allowed because it is seen to provoke anxiety in family members (Dallos & Draper, 2010).

According to Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011), a double bind often occurs in dysfunctional families. A double bind refers to the uncomfortable situation in which an individual is placed where no matter which decision he or she may make, there is no successful outcome. In other words, the individual finds himself or herself in a no-win situation due to the expectations or instructions put forward to him or her by others (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011).

2.2.2.11 Rules, roles, and patterns. Family rules refer to the behaviours outlined as acceptable and unacceptable in a family (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Carr, 2012). Family roles refer to the expected behaviours that are allocated to family members (Carr, 2012; Hecker & Wetchler, 2003; Rasheed et al., 2011). Family rules and roles influence various areas of family functioning, such as family routines and rituals, school and career choices, rules related to handling emotional content, family myths and secrets, and the various family subsystems’ expected behaviours (Rasheed et al., 2011). According to Anderson

and Sabatelli (2011), “[r]ules may be overt or covert. Overt rules are explicit and openly stated. Covert rules are implicit, meaning everyone knows the rules although no one has explicitly stated them” (p. 10).

The rules and roles of a healthy, functional family are clear and flexible (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Furthermore, they adapt to the environment and respond adequately to change (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). In contrast, the rules and roles of a dysfunctional family are rigid, autocratically developed, and inflexible (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Due to the nature of the rules and roles present in a dysfunctional family, the family is likely to respond inadequately to the environment and to change (Rasheed et al., 2011). Satir (as cited in Rasheed et al., 2011) is of the opinion that rules that restrict a family member’s freedom of expression not only lead him or her to have lower levels of self-esteem, but the family as a unit also develops impaired functioning.

Members of a family who live together for any amount of time develop preferred patterns for negotiating and arranging their lives around one another to maximise harmony and predictability (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Even during a family crisis or during times of severe conflict between family members, families typically resist change and are likely to engage in corrective manoeuvres to re-establish the family’s usual interactive patterns (Dallos & Draper, 2010; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) are of the opinion that regardless of the format of a family (nuclear or remarried), all families should work to promote positive relationships among their members, they should attend to the personal needs of each member, and they should be prepared to cope with developmental or maturational changes and unplanned or unexpected crises (such as divorce, sudden illness, or death). In addition, Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) state that it is in the best interests of family members to organise themselves in a way that will allow them to cope with the day-to-day problems

of living. More specifically and importantly, every family should develop its own styles or strategies to cope with both internal and external stressors (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Hecker & Wetchler, 2003).

Another pattern that forms over time in families is the formation of shared rituals and traditions. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) explain that shared family rituals, such as holiday celebrations, christenings, confirmations, bar mitzvahs, graduations, weddings, and funerals, are part of the ongoing family interactional patterns that help to ensure the family's identity and continuity. Rituals are symbolic actions that help families to adapt to change rather than struggle against it (Eaker & Walters, 2002; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). At the same time, these rituals and symbolic actions reaffirm the group's unity when dealing with a life transition (Eaker & Walters, 2002; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Furthermore, rituals anchor family members to their family's past by providing them with a sense of family history and rootedness, while at the same time implying future family interactions (Eaker & Walters, 2002; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

2.2.2.12 Triangulation. Murray Bowen developed the concept of triangles most fully (Watson, 2012). A key step in the development of family systems theory was to shift the focus of the theory from the study of individuals and pairs to the study of triads or three-person interactions (Dallos & Draper, 2010). When stress increases in a relationship between two people, one or both members of this dyad might involve a third person in an attempt to reduce the stress related to the dyad. The third person's function is either to be the mutual focus of concern or to form an alliance with one of the members of the dyad (Watson, 2012). Triangles in a family system can be either useful or problematic (Watson, 2012). An example of a useful triangle is a couple seeking marital therapy. The therapist becomes the third person whose function is to relieve stress (Watson, 2012). In contrast, a triangle in a family can become problematic when the family members enable avoidance

by keeping the conflict on one side of the triangle and by using one party as a scapegoat instead of distributing the conflict evenly across the system (Watson, 2012).

The key concepts pertaining to family systems theory have been described and discussed. It is necessary to investigate the development and formation of stepfamilies to gain an in-depth understanding of stepfamily systems. In the next section, the different types of families (namely, the nuclear family, separated and divorced families, and remarried and stepfamilies) are discussed. The developmental challenges related to each type of family are presented.

2.3 Family Types

A family is a living, ongoing entity consisting of subsystems that are organised as a whole, which is constantly subjected to demands for change (Friedman & Neuman Allen, 2011). Families are also considered to be subsystems of larger extended family systems, communities, and societies (Felker, Fromme, Arnaut, & Stoll, 2002). Families continuously change and develop, just as their social contexts do (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). When a family is observed over time, it becomes clear that change is the norm in such a unit (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Each member of a family is involved in a continuous, interactive, patterned relationship that extends over time and space with the other members (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Minuchin and Fishman (1981) refer to the interactions between family members in a system as transactions. With regard to the transactions between family members, Minuchin and Fishman (1981) define the family structure as the following:

... the invisible set of functional demands that organises the ways in which family members interact. A family is a system that operates through transactional patterns. Repeated transactions establish patterns of how, when, and with whom to relate, and these patterns underpin the system. (p. 51)

Family membership in these unique social systems is based on a combination of biological, legal, affection-related, geographic, and historical ties between the members (Carr, 2012). Entry into a family system happens through birth, adoption, fostering, long-term partnership, or marriage (Carr, 2012). The relationships between the members of a family system are deep and multilayered, and are based largely on a shared history, shared internalised perceptions of and assumptions about the world, and a shared sense of purpose (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012). Family members are tied to one another by powerful, durable, and reciprocal emotional attachments and loyalties that may fluctuate in their intensity (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012). The psychological distances between the family members may also change over time (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012). Although the intensity of these attachments may fluctuate, they will persist over the lifetime of a family (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012).

As described in the previous section, every family system is embedded in a suprasystem that consists of the community and society at large (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). The family is moulded by its existence at a particular place and time in history (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Furthermore, it is shaped by a multitude of interlocking phenomena, such as race, ethnicity, social class membership, life cycle stage, number of generations, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, the physical and mental health of its members, the members' level of educational attainment, financial security, and family values and belief systems (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). All these factors influence the system's development, beliefs, and standards of acceptable behaviour, as well as the degree of the system's flexibility to meet both normal developmental challenges and unanticipated crises (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; White & Klein, 2002). These factors also influence the system's adaptability and stability over time (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

2.3.1 The Nuclear Family

Bradley (2005) defines a nuclear family as “[o]ne in which the children are the biological children of both adult partners” (p. 9). McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto (2011) explain that the family life cycle stage of partnering, coupling, or first-time marriage is generally considered to be the beginning of or the formation of a new family. When two people join to form a new family, there are two major areas that require adjustment (McGoldrick et al., 2011). Firstly, the members of the couple have to adjust to living with each other (McGoldrick et al., 2011). Secondly, they have to adjust or realign their relationship in relation to their extended family, friends, and community (McGoldrick et al., 2011). When the couple has children, they will need to make space for the children, and they will also need to adjust their lifestyle to accommodate the children (McGoldrick et al., 2011). The traditional family life cycle incorporates the married couple (husband and wife) and one or more children into the nuclear family system (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2000).

The family developmental framework proposed by McGoldrick et al. (2011) considers the processes present in the multigenerational system as it moves forward over time. This framework was adjusted over the years, and the latest revision of this model on the stages of the nuclear family life cycle is presented in Table 2.1 below. It summarises the main developmental tasks that a family should complete at each stage of nuclear family development. The life cycle stages of the nuclear family as well as the emotional and transitional processes and tasks that need to be completed during the developmental progression of such a family are also summarised.

Table 2.1

McGoldrick et al.'s (2011, p. 16-17) stages of the nuclear family life cycle

Stage	Emotional Transition Processes	Tasks Essential for Developmental Progression
Leaving home	- Accepting emotional and financial responsibility for the self	- Differentiating self from family of origin and developing adult-to-adult relationship with parents - Developing intimate peer relationships - Beginning a career and moving towards financial independence - Establishing self in a community and society
Forming a couple	- Committing to a new system	- Selecting a partner and deciding to form a long-term relationship - Developing a way to live together based on reality rather than mutual projection - Realigning couple's relationships with families of origin and peers to include partners
Families with young children	- Accepting new members into the system	- Adjusting couple system to make space for children - Arranging child-rearing, financial, and housekeeping responsibilities within the couple - Realigning relationships with families of origin to include parenting and grandparenting roles - Realigning family relationships with community and society to accommodate new family structure
Families with adolescents	- Increasing the flexibility of family boundaries to accommodate adolescents' growing independence and grandparent's increasing constraints	- Adjusting parent-child relationships to allow adolescents more autonomy - Adjusting family relationships as couple takes on responsibility of caring for aging parents - Realigning family relationships with community and society to accommodate adolescents' increasing autonomy and grandparents' increasing constraints

(Table 2.1 continue on next page)

(Table 2.1 continued)

Stage	Emotional Transition Processes	Tasks Essential for Developmental Progression
Launching children and moving into midlife	- Accepting many exits from and entries into the family system	- Adjusting to living as a couple again - Addressing couple's midlife issues and possibilities of new interests and projects - Parents and grown children negotiating adult-to-adult relationships - Adjusting to include in-laws and grandchildren within the family circle - Dealing with disabilities and death of couple's aging parents
Families with parents in late middle age	- Accepting new generational roles	- Maintaining couple's functioning and interests, and exploring new family and social roles while coping with physiological decline - Adjusting to children taking a more central role in family maintenance - Making room for the wisdom and experience of the aging couple - Supporting the older generation to live as independently as possible within the constraints of aging - Realigning family relationships with community and society to accommodate new family structures and relationships

2.3.1.1 Developmental challenges for nuclear families

2.3.1.1.a) *Becoming an adult.* The primary task of becoming an adult is to leave home, but one should also stay connected to one's family of origin (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). In Western cultures, men have always been expected to work and to become self-sufficient, while young women of all social classes share the goal of finding meaning in work and becoming independent (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Rank (as cited in Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004) states that working class people usually marry earlier and often view marriage as a means of defining themselves as adults. The phase of young adulthood (18 to 40 years) can be classified as a period of adjustment to new patterns, new

social expectations, and new roles (for example, spousal and parenting roles) (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

2.3.1.1.b) Coupling. The next developmental challenge of young adulthood is to find and commit to a partner. Gersen (as cited in Minuchin & Fishman, 1981) calls this process “couple formation” (p. 23) and argues that a newly formed pair must move from independence to interdependence. Commitment to their marital relationship is the key for a couple to manage the transition of detaching from each of the families of origin to form a new and cohesive unit, namely the couple subsystem (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). The new couple subsystem has to negotiate the boundaries that govern the relationship of the newly formed unit in relation to the families of origin, friends, the workplace, and the community (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

The transition involved in becoming marital partners represents a significant milestone that requires a couple to make numerous adjustments (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). These adjustments include each person having to learn to reconcile their individual paradigms and expectations, and to develop a unique new way of processing information and dealing with affect as a couple, which implies that when a new couple unit is formed, each individual must become part of the new whole (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). During the process of reconciling the two individual paradigms, the couple subsystem develops new transactional patterns that then become familiar and ultimately the preferred or habitual ways of interacting (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Furthermore, during this developmental phase, it is crucial for a couple to learn how to resolve conflict, as conflict will inevitably occur when two people form a new unit (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). As time passes, the newly formed unit stabilises and becomes a balanced subsystem. The couple may then decide to expand their family by having children (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981).

2.3.1.1.c) *The arrival of children.* Before the arrival of children, the couple subsystem tends to be more loosely organised, which means that the partners' roles are more flexible and often interchangeable. The structure of a family without children allows for a wide variety of solutions to immediate problems (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Beyond making room for children in their life, the couple must both psychologically and physically define the allocation of duties and the division of labour pertaining to having children, such as who will be responsible for the following: shopping, collecting the children from school, preparing meals, washing the dishes, putting the children to bed, doing the laundry, and getting the children ready for school (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). A husband and wife's commitment to becoming parents represents the most significant transition in a family's life and changes the relatively simple roles of the two partners in the future (Carr, 2012; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Walsh, 2012).

According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004), a major task for new parents is integrating their new relationships with their child into their previously existing relationship with each other. If a couple is able to make this transition, they will then master tasks such as taking and sharing responsibilities, practising patience, setting limits, and tolerating restrictions on their free time and mobility (McGoldrick et al., 2011). New parents must juggle their schedules to find an acceptable balance between work and domestic responsibilities, especially if both parents are employed on a fulltime basis (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Kaslow, Smith, and Croft (as cited in Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004) emphasise the importance of a formerly childless couple's attempts to find new and innovative ways to maintain and nurture their relationship because they will have substantially less time and energy for private moments together after their child's birth.

2.3.1.1.d) Coping with adolescent children. When children reach adolescence, the family faces new organisational challenges pertaining to the children's autonomy and independence. Harway (1996) explains that this phase is concerned with the basic restructuring of the interactive processes between family members and that it is necessary to allow teenagers to have more independence during this stage. Adjustments to rules, limit setting, and role negotiations are necessary activities during this stage because adolescents seek increased levels of self-determination (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Adolescents start to depend less on their parents and move towards their peer culture group for guidance and support. Adolescents need to find balance on their own by developing an identity and beginning to establish autonomy from their family of origin (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

Rebellion is not uncommon because adolescents attempt to gain distance from parental rules, and it may manifest in the form of changes in attitude, dress code changes, drug use, curfew violations, gang behaviour, and unusual body piercings and tattoos (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). All of this is likely to occur at the same time as other changes that may take place in the system, such as the parents' midlife crises, during which one or both middle-aged parents may question their career choices and their marital choices, and the need to care for impaired, dependent grandparents (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

2.3.1.1.e) Children leaving home. Carter and McGoldrick (1999) describe this phase of the nuclear family life cycle as launching the children and moving on. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) explain that parents must come to accept their children's independent roles and eventual creation of their own families. It is an important developmental task for parents to create adult-to-adult relationships with their children at this stage (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). It is also important to expand the family to

include the spouses, children, and in-laws of married children (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

2.3.1.1.f) Reorganisation of generational roles. During this phase of the family life cycle, parents need to reassess their relationship with each other because their children no longer reside at home (McGoldrick et al., 2011). In the absence of the children, the couple sees a chance to reconnect and to strengthen their marital bond. Parents need to prepare for moving into the grandparent position, and, at the same time, they may still need to take care of their own needy and dependent ageing parents (McGoldrick et al., 2011). A major point of transition for middle-aged adults usually revolves around the death of their elderly parents (McGoldrick et al., 2011). As partners grow older, the loss of their friends and relatives, and the loss of a spouse in some cases are some of the problems of old age (McGoldrick et al., 2011). Other problems of old age include coping with increased dependence on one's children, handling changing relationships with one's grandchildren, possibly relinquishing one's power and status, coming to terms with one's own deteriorating health or illness, and accepting one's limitations and ultimate death (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Walsh, 2012). This phase marks the end of the nuclear family life cycle.

Due to the high rate of marriages that dissolve and end in divorce, it is necessary to consider the family life cycle stages that follow separation and divorce (Walsh, 2012). It is also important to consider the information regarding separated and divorced families in the context of this study because some members of a stepmother's newly formed stepfamily are members of separated or divorced families.

2.3.2 Families Who are in the Process of Separation and/or Divorce

A narrow and traditional definition of the nuclear family is no longer useful due to the increase in single parent families, separation, divorce, and remarriage (Walsh, 2012).

According to Cohen and Levite (2012), the relationship of a divorcing couple does not begin with the divorce but has its roots in the process of mate selection and marriage, the couple's reactions to the inevitable disappointments of married life, and their style of coping with unmet expectations. Many of the same marital behaviour patterns and conflict themes that arise during divorce can actually be seen early on in a marriage, especially during the period leading up to marital dissolution (Cohen & Levite, 2012).

From a systems perspective, separation and divorce represent a transition from a nuclear to a binuclear family (Ahrons, 1980). The process of separation and divorce adds another family life cycle stage to the stages mentioned above because the family regroups and tries to deal with the physical and emotional losses and changes caused by the divorce before they are able to re-establish a family system during their developmental journey (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Relationship changes must be addressed and a new set of developmental tasks must be dealt with before a family who are in the process of divorce can move forward. During this transition, the family has to adjust to the new boundaries, norms, and roles of the reshaped family, which is not an easy task to accomplish (Cohen & Levite, 2012).

Separation and divorce are further accompanied by life changes in social and economic status, child-rearing practices, and living arrangements to which both the adults and children in a family need to adapt (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). A primary challenge reported in the process of separation and divorce is the shift from a spousal and parental system to a parental system only (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). Emery (2004) emphasises the many losses that parents and children involved in a divorce may experience. Divorce is not only the end of a marriage, but it is also the end of a nuclear family unit.

Although a former couple may obtain a legal divorce, they should still continue to function together as a parental subsystem by sharing the caring responsibilities related to

their children (Dupuis, 2010; Katz 2010). Until children leave home and become independent, parents are expected to keep in touch with each other and to be mutually responsible for their children's wellbeing after a divorce. Ahrons and Rodgers (1987) refer to this arrangement as a binuclear family arrangement. This arrangement works best when the members of a former couple are caring and committed parents, are able to co-operate as parents, have relatively equal and consistent parenting skills, and are able to work together without continuous animosity (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987).

A family's transformation through separation and divorce can be conceptualised as a process involving a series of stages. McGoldrick et al.'s (2011) model of the family life cycle involving separation and divorce is presented in Table 2.2 below. This cycle elaborates on the model presented in Table 2.1. This model explains the stages in the family life cycle of a family going through separation and divorce. This model also outlines tasks to be completed during various stages of the separation and divorce process.

McGoldrick et al. (2011) suggest that failure to complete tasks at any one stage of the cycle may lead to adjustment difficulties in later stages of the transition process. Minuchin and Nichols (1993) suggest that “[p]erhaps it's no longer necessary to dwell on the fact that people who get divorced don't necessarily suffer from some character flaw or failure of nerve; they haven't necessarily failed at anything” (p. 200). However, the average person still thinks of divorce as the end of a family unit rather than as a particular stage in the family life cycle of some families during which these families need to take on a different form. Thus, divorce is not an ending but rather a transition (Minuchin & Nichols, 1993).

Table 2.2

McGoldrick et al.'s (2011, p. 320-321) model on the stages of the family life cycle involving separation and divorce

Phase	Stage	Emotional Transition Processes	Tasks Essential for Developmental Progression
Divorce	- Decision to divorce	- Accepting that the couple's problems are not resolvable	- Accepting one's own part in marital failure
	- Planning separation	- Supporting viable living arrangements for all family members following separation	- Co-operatively developing a plan for primary residence of the children, visitation, finances, and maintenance - Dealing with the extended family's response to planned separation
Divorce	- Separation and divorce	- Committing to co-operative co-parenting and joint financial support of the children - Beginning to break attachment to partners	- Mourning the loss of the intact nuclear family - Managing doubts about separation and becoming committed to divorce - Adjusting to the change in parent-child and parent-parent relationships - Staying connected to partner's extended families
	Post-divorce family	- Establishing primary residential and non-residential households	- Maintaining flexible arrangements about primary residency, access, and finances without detouring conflict through the children - Ensuring both parents maintain strong relationships with the children - Managing changed financial circumstances - Re-establishing peer relationships and a social network

In addition to Minuchin and Nichols' (1993) opinion that divorce is not an ending but rather a transition, Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) and Graham et al. (2011)

explain that although the nuclear family members no longer reside together as one unit, the divorce does not end the family, but it does end an unsatisfactory relationship. When either one of the former spouses remarries, another life cycle stage must be added during which new members are absorbed into the extended family system and new roles and relationships are defined (Carr, 2012; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). A discussion on the nature, developmental stages, and tasks of stepfamilies follows next.

2.3.3 Stepfamilies

As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, the high incidence of divorce in recent years has led to family structures that are changing, and, as a result, remarriage is a rising phenomenon within society (Dupuis, 2010). According to Statistics South Africa (2012), the number of divorces from civil marriages granted by 43 courts in 2010 in South Africa was 20 980. Of the 20 980 divorces that were granted, 11 475 cases involved minor children younger than 18 years of age (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Furthermore, of the 11 475 cases involving minor children (under the age of 18 years), 18 571 children were affected (Statistics South Africa, 2012).

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Coleman et al. (2000) are of the opinion that as much as 75% of divorcees will remarry and form stepfamilies. According to Coleman and Ganong (2004), stepfamilies are marked by the presence of children from a previous relationship. According to Graham, Graham, and Hawker (2011), although the term *family* implies the emphasis of unity and similarity, the members of a stepfamily experience their family in a very different way to nuclear families.

Remarriage generally refers to a marriage in which one or both partners were previously married (Sweeney, 2010). Kreider (as cited in Sweeney, 2010) reports that at least 60% of remarried couples in the early 2000s included one spouse who had never been previously married. Coleman et al. (2000) report that the divorce rate is higher for

remarried couples than for first-marriage couples, which is mainly due to the difficulties that stepfamilies may experience while adapting to stepfamily life. Adjustment to remarriage and stepfamily life may become even more complex if partners come from different cultural backgrounds or if they are in different individual life cycle stages (for example, when an older man with children marries a younger woman with no children) (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

Earlier research describes remarriage as an incomplete institution, which means that remarriage is made more stressful by the lack of stepfamily norms available to a couple with regard to daily life matters, such as disciplining stepchildren and establishing rules and boundaries regarding the ex-spouse (Cherlin, 1978; Coleman et al., 2000; Stewart, 2005). Engblom-Deglmann (2009) found that in the earlier literature regarding remarriage, support for remarried couples was limited because researchers thought that the norms applied to first marriages could be applied to remarriages. Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) explain that remarried couples experience difficulties with adjusting after remarriage. Furthermore, they state that there is often increased stress and conflict because newly formed stepfamilies tend to imitate the norms of nuclear family models. In earlier literature on the subject, researchers did not consider the fact that remarriages resulting from families with children could differ greatly from first marriages that did not result in children (Engblom-Deglmann, 2009).

The process of entering into a long-term relationship with or marrying an individual who was previously part of another nuclear family is structurally complex and includes numerous challenges, such as the presence of family members with different loyalties and different amounts of previously shared history, and the lack of an adjustment period without children (Carr, 2012; Sayre et al., 2010; Visher & Visher, 2003). Tracy (2000) describes this challenge in the following manner:

Newly remarried couples do not generally have a period of time where roles are worked out gradually through extended contact between partners before children are introduced into the union. Instead, many remarried couples with children find that they are thrust into a system where different sets of already established role relationships clash and must be renegotiated and where previously undefined step relationships must be dealt with immediately.

Remarried partners find that the need for parental agreement is greatest just when there is little opportunity for time spent alone together to establish shared values. (p. 96)

The period during which a remarried couple needs to solidify their relationship is a challenging time of reorganisation and includes special tasks that should be completed (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). These stages and tasks pertaining to remarriage are described in Table 2.3 below. The common variable with regard to the various stages of remarriage seems to be *change*. Furthermore, the formation of a new family identity that includes a sense of each system's own legitimacy as a family unit is also a common feature.

Part of the difficulty of the divorce and post-divorce stages arises from breaking with the past when a single parent or stepparent family emerges after the dissolution of a previous nuclear family unit (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Parents and children find themselves in a situation in which they have little or no prior experience, and yet they must work together to create a context that will meet both the individuals' and family's needs during this period of loss, disruption, and change (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). It is worthy to note that the model proposed by McGoldrick et al. (2011), which is presented in Table 2.3 below, views remarriage and its associated tasks from the perspective of the divorced partner.

Table 2.3

McGoldrick et al.'s (2011, p. 321) stages and tasks of the family life cycle involving remarriage

Phase	Stage	Emotional Transition Processes	Tasks Essential for developmental Progression
Remarriage	- Entering a new relationship	- Recovering from emotional divorce and loss of first marriage	- Developing commitment to new marriage
	- Planning a new marriage and family	- Accepting concerns about forming a new family - Being patient about the time required to adjust to the complexity of the new family arrangements	- Planning to deal with children's loyalty conflicts involving natural and stepparents - Planning arrangements for continued co-operative financial and co-parental relationships with ex-partners within the context of new family relationships
	- Establishing a new family	- Breaking attachment to previous partners - Giving up the idea of the "intact family" and accepting a different family model	- Realigning family relationships to allow space for new members - Sharing memories and histories to allow for integration of all new members - Continuing co-operative financial and co-parental relationships with ex-partners within the context of the new relationship

Minuchin and Fishman (1981) state that a new family needs adequate time to integrate and establish familiarity. It is a myth to think that all the members of a remarried family will automatically form part of their new family unit in a similar way to that in which they formed part of the previous nuclear family (Becvar & Becvar, 2009).

Hetherington and Kelly (as cited in Sweeney, 2010) report that there is a period of elevated stress and destabilisation that lasts for between five and seven years after the formation of a stepfamily. Visher and Visher (2003) also state that this period of destabilisation lasts for

between five and seven years. Furthermore, Visher and Visher (2003) found that the integration process of a stepfamily takes between five and seven years on average. Sweeney (2010) explains that this period may be shorter for stepfamily systems that have younger stepchildren, but it is more complex for stepfamily systems in which half-sibling or step-sibling relationships exist. According to Engblom-Deglmann (2009), remarried families develop some norms over time that are mainly focused on issues such as parenting, the management of stepchildren, the formation of stepparent relationships, and the management of finances.

2.3.3.1 The new couple subsystem. Very little stepfamily research has focused on the new couple subsystem's ability to form successful relationships. Couples are left on their own to work out the challenges they face in this regard (Cherlin, 1978; Coleman & Ganong, 2004). Bradley (2005) emphasises the difficulties involved in conceptualising the subtlety of the constant negotiation and struggle that are woven into the fabric of daily stepfamily life. In biological nuclear families, a new couple may spend a considerable amount of time alone together to adjust to one another and to get to know one another's likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as to find ways of relating to one another (Bradley, 2005; Carr, 2012; Visher & Visher, 2003).

Only after this initial phase do partners usually choose to increase the size of their family by having children. As described earlier, even with these gradual changes, the birth of a child significantly alters family patterns by causing new adjustments that are necessary to accommodate the structural changes in the family. In contrast, a stepfamily consists of a new couple in addition to one or more children. All these parties have to negotiate and adjust to new roles and new relationships, while carrying their experiences from their former family systems with them at the same time (Visher & Visher, 1991, 2003).

A major concern for a new couple subsystem is the continuous, direct, or even subtle involvement of the ex-spouse (Papernow, 2013). The parental subsystem is then often composed of the ex-spouse and the new, remarried couple (Visher & Visher, 2003). The continuous involvement of an ex-spouse may cause further difficulties for a stepparent and their stepchildren with regard to forming relationships because of the children's conflicting loyalties to both their biological mother and their new stepmother (Dupuis, 2007).

It is difficult to prevent the past from intruding on the present and provoking feelings of anger and guilt (Katz, 2010). Visher and Visher (1991, 2003) warn that a new couple may go from being madly in love to constantly discussing and even arguing about several issues, such as what they perceive as a fair amount of child support or when and how to arrange the children's visits. The pleasant times together slip away and are replaced by frequent periods of anger and frustration (Visher & Visher, 1991, 2003). Although it is important for the couple to talk about these matters, it is crucial for them to nourish their relationship. It usually takes conscious effort to put aside matters associated with emotions of anger and hurt, and to turn to matters that emotionally enhance the newly formed couple's relationship instead (Katz, 2010; Papernow, 1984, 2013).

Various authors (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Dupuis, 2007; Katz, 2010) emphasise the fact that a stepfamily's functioning and wellbeing are directly linked to the quality of the marital relationship of the newly formed couple. This information suggests that whatever affects the couple subsystem will also directly affect the parental subsystem as well as the other subsystems and members of the stepfamily (Dupuis, 2010). Michaels (2006) established similar findings but emphasises that a strong bond between partners and a widespread acceptance of the new marriage by other family members and friends might be equally important for the wellbeing of a newly formed family. Family systems theory

also emphasises the importance of a strong couple subsystem and its ability to protect the children from further family loss (Katz, 2010). A functional couple subsystem also provides the children with a positive model for their own eventual marriage relationships (Katz, 2010).

Partners often need to arrange time alone with each other to help nourish their important relationship as a couple (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). It is therefore important for a couple to create boundaries that will protect the integrity and functionality of their spousal subsystem within the stepfamily (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Visher & Visher, 1991, 2003). The importance of boundaries in stepfamilies is discussed next.

2.3.3.2 Boundaries in stepfamilies. According to Walker and Messinger (as cited in Graham et al., 2011), the idea of family boundaries has been useful and influential when theorising about the relationships between stepfamily members. As described earlier in this chapter, the idea of family boundaries centres on who is included in and excluded from the family and certain subsystems (Becvar & Becvar, 2006). Furthermore, there are different degrees of flexibility and permeability regarding how these boundaries are constructed (Graham et al., 2011). As a result, boundaries that are maintained both reflect and reinforce family members' ideas and their sense of belonging. Boundaries do not exist independently from the family relationships they are used to characterise, but they are instead social constructions created through the words and actions of the family members involved (Graham et al., 2011).

Contrary to the clearly defined boundaries found in nuclear families, Walker and Messinger (as cited in Graham et al., 2011) found that the boundaries between stepfamilies and other systems are more permeable. The nuclear family is the dominant model of the family system in Western society, and it consists of parents and their children who live together as an independent unit without any “interference” from other family members

(Graham et al., 2011). This conceptualisation implies the presence of little flexibility in terms of who is considered an insider of the family unit and who is not (Graham et al., 2011). In this sense, the nuclear family has strong, clearly demarcated boundaries.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the nuclear family model is no longer dominant because of the changing family structures affected by separation and divorce. Not only does a newly formed stepfamily have to create new boundaries, but the new couple also needs to implement a boundary to protect their relationship from intrusion by an ex-spouse who may be able to enter the new family through the children's father (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). Dupuis (2007) explains that this intrusion may occur when the members of a previous couple have experienced a physical and legal divorce but not yet an emotional divorce. This means there is still an emotional connection between the ex-partners, which indicates the presence of a diffuse boundary between them (Dupuis, 2007). For example, when an individual still confides in their ex-partner, when they are jealous when their ex-partner dates someone new, or when they display anger, resentment, or envy towards their ex-partner, it is clear that diffuse boundaries exist (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Dupuis, 2007).

Diffuse boundaries between ex-partners can cause new partners to disengage from each other (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004; Dupuis, 2007). Minuchin and Nichols (1993) and Graham et al. (2011) emphasise that it is important for a new couple to form a clear boundary to protect themselves from external influences. In addition to its protective function, this kind of boundary provides the couple with a private space in which they can nurture their relationship, offer each other support, and strengthen the bond between them as a couple, between them and other subsystems in the family, as well as between them and external systems (Becvar & Becvar, 2006).

2.3.3.3 The pre-existing parent-child subsystem. Papernow (1987, 2013) states that the biological parent-child subsystem seems to become a sanctuary of some kind within the stepfamily system. However, in a nuclear family, this place of safety is primarily located within the spousal subsystem. According to Dupuis (2007), in a newly formed stepfamily, only the pre-existing parent-child subsystem is initially comfortable with interaction. For this reason, many divorced parents feel that it is a betrayal of the earlier parent-child bond to form a primary bond or relationship with a new partner (Visher & Visher, 1991). In contrast, the interaction between a new stepparent and their stepchildren may initially be uncomfortable because the new stepfamily members have not yet developed a sense of familiarity with one another, nor have they created a shared history to unite the family (Dupuis, 2007; Graham et al., 2011).

2.3.3.4 Stepparent-stepchild subsystem. The development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship is an important process because existing literature on the subject indicates that the survival of the couple and the stepfamily relies on the ability to establish workable relationships between the stepfamily members (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004). In other words, it might not be possible to create a happy remarriage without also creating workable relationships between all stepfamily members (Dupuis, 2010).

2.3.3.5 Competing subsystems. Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) report that competing subsystems create challenges within stepfamilies. Golish (as cited in Sweeney, 2010) found that both biological children and stepparents turn towards the children's biological parent for support, instead of communicating directly with each other. As a result, the biological parent experiences pressure from both the biological children and his or her new partner. Visher and Visher (2003) point out that stepchildren frequently win their biological parent's attention, which may lead the stepparent to resent the

stepchildren eventually. It may also lead to conflict within the couple subsystem. When competition persists between these subsystems, it may lead the stepchildren to see the stepparent as an intruder (Papernow, 1987, 2013).

2.3.3.6 The Stepfamily Cycle. Papernow first introduced the stepfamily cycle in 1984 (Papernow, 2013). In addition to McGoldrick et al.'s (2011) model on remarriage, the researcher deems Papernow's (2013) stepfamily cycle important because it considers all the members of a newly formed stepfamily and not only the marital partners. In the stepfamily cycle, Papernow (2013) describes the adjustments or tasks that should be completed successfully by all family members in order for them to create a functional unit. Papernow's (2013) proposed stepfamily cycle draws on Gestalt theory and family systems theory to illuminate the process by which boundaries (including individual, intergenerational, couple, and interfamilial boundaries) move from biological to stepfamily boundaries.

In addition, Papernow (1984) provides a developmental map that delineates the stages involved in forming nourishing, reliable relationships among stepfamily members and in developing a workable stepparent role. It further describes the impact of a stepfamily's history and structure on individual role development in the family and on the stepfamily system's development as a whole (Papernow, 2013). Over the past three decades, Papernow enriched and further developed this model. The stepfamily cycle refers to three main stages, namely the early stages, the middle stages, and the later stages. These stages are explored in more detail in the next section.

2.3.3.6.a) Early stages of stepfamily formation. There are three early stages of stepfamily formation. It is during these early stages that the new family will remain primarily divided along biological lines with most of the nourishment, agreement on rules and rituals, and spontaneous interpersonal connection happening within the biological

subsystem(s) (Papernow, 2013). The three early stages of stepfamily formation include the following: the fantasy stage, the immersion stage, and the awareness stage.

Fantasy stage: The invisible burden. During the fantasy stage, the adults who were involved in the divorce process yearn to heal the pain created by the divorce (Papernow, 1984). According to Papernow (2013), the fantasy of wanting to belong is rooted in human nature, and therefore most people enter new relationships with hopes of blissful connection. After more than three decades of working with stepfamilies, Papernow (2013) explains that stepcouples bring their own sets of thinking into their new relationships, with thoughts such as the following:

I will finally have the family I have been waiting for. My new partner and I love each other. He or she and the kids will love each other, too. The new stepparent will be a good parent to my children. The children will be grateful. The ex will fade into the background. (Part IV: Stepfamilies over time, Chapter 12, para. 4)

Immersion stage: Reality hits – “Something’s wrong here and it must be me. Or you. Or the kids” (Papernow, 2013, Part IV: Stepfamilies over time, Chapter 12, para. 6).

During the immersion stage, the reality of the stepfamily structure begins to make itself felt, particularly for the stepparent because they occupy an outsider position in relation to the intensely connected biological parent and child (or children) (Papernow, 1984). Papernow (1984) explains that stepparents experience the feelings of loneliness associated with their outsider position most intensely during this stage. As the stepparent starts to voice his or her struggles, it is natural for the biological parent to feel torn between his or her children and his or her new partner (Papernow, 2013). During this stage, adult family members often feel that something is not quite right, but they have great difficulty in determining what it is.

Stepparents often conclude that they must be at fault (Papernow, 1984). Katz (2010) explains that it is common for new stepparents to blame themselves for not joining the family successfully. Papernow (2013) found that families who begin the journey with a better understanding of stepfamily challenges spend less time going through the fantasy and immersion stages.

Awareness stage: Clarity and acceptance – “It’s not that something is wrong. It’s that we are a stepfamily!” (Papernow, 2013, Part IV: Stepfamilies over time, Chapter 12, para. 8).

Papernow (2013) explains that a shift takes place in the stepfamily during this stage in which they begin to experience clarity, compassion, and curiosity instead of experiencing confusion, anxiety, and shame. Although the challenges persist, the stepfamily is able to meet the challenges with more confidence (Papernow, 2013). During this stage, stepparents begin to recognise painful feelings and experience them more fully. Greater clarity about the power of the biological parent-child bond (and the biological parent and ex-spouse bond) enables stepparents to see patterns in their experiences and to feel less self-deprecating (Papernow, 2013). If stepparents are able to relinquish their fantasies of an instant family and if they are able to be clear about the impossibility of quickly shifting to an insider position, these insights will allow them to accomplish a crucial developmental task, which is getting to know the strangers they have joined (Papernow, 1984, 2013).

2.3.3.6.b) Middle stages: Reorganising the family. The middle stages of stepfamily formation are primarily concerned with reorganising the relationships between new family members (Papernow, 2013). The two middle stages of the stepfamily formation process are mobilisation and action. These stages are discussed next.

Mobilisation: Airing differences. Papernow (2013) explains that stepfamily members are more comfortable with one another and communicate about their differences more openly during this stage. Disagreements in successful stepfamilies are resolved quickly, and family members are able to return to being calm and to understanding the needs of the other members more fully (Papernow, 2013).

Action: Going forward together. During the action stage, a couple begins to negotiate new rules and roles that will determine how the stepfamily will function (Papernow, 1984). Successful stepfamilies are able to reach a middle ground that is based on understanding and respecting the needs of each member of the stepfamily (Papernow, 2013). Papernow (2013) emphasises flexibility, a willingness to learn, and the ability to have fun together as a family as key factors in building stepfamily relationships.

2.3.3.6.c) Later stages: Mature stepfamilies. The two later stages in the stepfamily formation process describe the new family as one in which the members have gained familiarity with one another and interactions have become more comfortable (Papernow, 2013). The relationships between the family members continue to strengthen, and the family members finally experience a sense of belonging and unity (Papernow, 2013). The last two stages of stepfamily formation are contact and resolution. These are discussed next.

Contact: Intimacy and authenticity in stepfamily relationships. During the contact stage, a couple forms a reliable sanctuary in which both partners can experience connectedness and mutual support (Minuchin & Nichols, 1993; Papernow, 2013). The relationship between the stepparent and the stepchildren has stabilised and the bond between stepparents and stepchildren strengthens over time (Papernow, 2013). Stepparents who demand instant love are likely to feel frustrated and rejected (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Katz, 2010). Relationships within stepfamilies that are allowed to

blossom slowly often lead to caring and loving bonds that last a lifetime (Visher & Visher, 2003).

Simultaneously, a stepparent's "outsiderness" (Papernow, 2013, Part IV: Stepfamilies over time, Chapter 12, para. 2) enables him or her to be less reactive than biological parents to sensitive topics, such as stepchildren's boyfriends or girlfriends, sexual practices, and career planning. This combination of caring and support allows the stepparent to become an intimate outsider to his or her stepchildren (Papernow, 2013). In some cases, the stepparent may provide a model that expands the child's choice of roles in life by offering a positive view of husband-wife relationships previously not experienced by the child (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Katz, 2010).

Resolution: Holding on and letting go – "We are definitely a We" (Papernow, 2013, Part IV: Stepfamilies over time, Chapter 12, para. 14). During this stage, stepfamilies exude a solid feeling of wholeness as a family. The new couple forges intimate, secure relationships (Papernow, 2013). Stepparent-stepchild relationships may range from deep and caring relationships to distant but civil relationships (Papernow, 2013). The presence of a solid middle ground throughout the family structure now offers many easy pathways to deal with collaboration around children, parenting, values, daily habits of living, and effective interactions with ex-spouses (Papernow, 2013). According to Hetherington, Henderson, and Reiss (as cited in Papernow, 2013), there is a sense of "ownness" (Part IV: Stepfamilies over time, Chapter 12, para. 5) during the resolution stage. By this term, Coleman and Ganong (2004) mean that parents love their children more than other people do. At the same time, children love their parents more than they love other adults, which implies that children's love for their biological parents will likely always be more than their love for their stepparent.

In nuclear families, each developmental phase has its own starting and finishing

points that are marked by the biological clock as well as by the child's or children's changing behaviours (Papernow, 2013). Papernow's (1984, 2013) stepfamily cycle may hopefully serve as a guide for stepfamily members and their interactions. Just as in nuclear family development, the stages of stepfamily development do not happen neatly and precisely – a family may move ahead in one area, but they may remain at a much earlier stage of development in another (Papernow, 2013).

The stepfamily cycle proposed by Papernow (2013) provides a larger framework within which stepfamily members can make sense of the challenges associated with remarried family life. Furthermore, Papernow's (2013) stepfamily cycle can guide professionals who work with stepfamilies by not only helping them to gain an understanding of the challenges stepfamilies face, but also by helping them to develop treatment plans for stepfamilies and members of stepfamilies (such as stepmothers) who may seek professional services. The literature on the subject suggests that stepmothers struggle the most to adjust to and to settle into stepfamily life when compared to the other stepfamily members (Bradley, 2005; Riness, 2013). In addition, stepmothers often report the highest amounts of stress, low self-esteem, and symptoms of depression than other stepfamily members (Bradley, 2005; Riness, 2013).

Based on the stepfamily cycle introduced by Papernow (1984), Bradley (2005) introduced a model for stepmothers to describe stepmothers' experiences pertaining to the developmental stages of stepmothering. As described in the previous section, Papernow's (2013) stepfamily cycle includes three main stages of stepfamily formation. Bradley (2005) reports that the stepmother's development happens in a similar progressive way and suggests a six-stage model that specifically focuses on the stepmother's experiences. Bradley (2005) identifies the following categories that are to be addressed in each stage: challenges, rewards, relevant themes, and milestones reached. Bradley's (2005) six-stage

model for stepmother development is presented next.

2.3.3.7 The stepmother’s developmental model. Stage 1 of the stepmother’s developmental model is presented in Table 2.4 below.

Table 2.4

Stage 1 – Not knowing and fantasy (Bradley, 2005, p. 78)

Stage 1: Not Knowing and Fantasy			
Challenges	Rewards	Major Themes	Milestones
- Assimilation and accommodation of new culture	- Joy and excitement of couple’s relationship	- “Blissful Ignorance” (p. 78) - Fantasy of idealised family - Role not talked about - Cautious beginnings - Familial concerns	- Beginning to embrace new relationships and family

Initially, a woman might be naïve with regard to the challenges and implications associated with the choice to become a stepmother. Bradley (2005) reports that “the initial stage of this model incorporates the experience of those early days and months where women talked unanimously about their not knowing what the role entailed or for what they were signing up” (p. 76). Some women have to deal with concerns from their family of origin regarding their choice to become a stepmother. Bradley’s (2005) model, which is similar to Papernow’s (1984) model, shows that family life is idealised by stepmothers because they experience “blissful ignorance” (p. 78) with regard to the challenges that accompany stepfamily life. Furthermore, stepmothers fantasise about creating a new, better, and healthier family.

During this stage, the couple mostly does not talk about the role that the stepmother should assume within the stepfamily (Bradley, 2005). Stepmothers then find themselves inactive in caring for their stepchildren during this stage and tend to take a back seat when it comes to caring for and disciplining their stepchildren (Bradley, 2005). During this

stage, a stepmother has to join the pre-existing family system, while the pre-existing system also has to change to accommodate the stepmother and to include her as a member of the new stepfamily (Bradley, 2005). Rewards associated with this stage are primarily excitement and happiness centred on the formation of the new couple (Bradley, 2005). Stepmothers quickly progress from Stage 1 to Stage 2. Stage 2 is when fantasy meets reality as the stepmothers step into their roles and start experiencing more stepfamily dynamics (Bradley, 2005). Stage 2 is presented in Table 2.5 below.

Table 2.5

Stage 2 – Fantasy meets reality (Bradley, 2005, p. 80)

Stage 2: Fantasy Meets Reality			
Challenges	Rewards	Major Themes	Milestones
-New responsibilities - Contention in ex-marital relationship	- Getting to know stepchildren - Part-time contact	- Sense of responsibility in role - Jumping into role - Role ambiguity - Challenges with biological mother	- Understanding stepfamily dynamics - Ability to begin to voice needs and concerns

During this stage, Bradley (2005) suggests that the challenges of stepfamily life start to emerge. Stepmothers thus need to face new challenges that they may never have encountered before. For stepmothers with younger stepchildren, responsibilities increase, and it is often expected of stepmothers to include caretaking chores, such as fetching the children from school, helping them with their homework, entertaining them, preparing meals for them, washing their laundry, cleaning up after them, and managing bedtime routines, as part of their responsibilities (Bradley, 2005). However, as a stepmother's responsibilities increase, there are no guidelines or models for a stepmother to follow to clarify these obligations and the process of meeting these expectations. Often a stepmother's partner may not be able to assist her emotionally during this stage because he

may still be recovering from the pain and hurt inflicted by the breakup of the nuclear family system (Bradley, 2005). It is also not unusual for the relationship between the stepmother and the biological mother to be difficult and filled with animosity during this stage (Bradley, 2005).

Bradley (2005) explains that a reward associated with this stage is the formation of a connection between the stepmother and stepchildren. Stepmothers are able to begin building a relationship with their stepchildren because stepmothers are not yet in a disciplinary position, allowing them to have fun with their new stepchildren. Another reward described by Bradley (2005) is the part-time contact arrangement that defines a parent’s relationship with their non-residential stepchildren. This arrangement leaves a couple with “child-free time” (Bradley, 2005, p. 79) to enjoy together when the children are not visiting the stepfamily. The couple can also use this time to build and strengthen their relationship (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Bradley, 2005). The milestones during this stage are for stepmothers to understand the reality of their place in the new stepfamily and for them to start articulating their thoughts and feelings regarding stepfamily challenges (Bradley, 2005). At this point, the stepmother progresses to Stage 3, which is recognition. Stage 3 is presented in Table 2.6 below.

Table 2.6

Stage 3 – Recognition (Bradley, 2005, p. 82)

Stage 3: Recognition			
Challenges	Rewards	Major Themes	Milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role ambiguity - Lack of control / role not valid - Stress in co-parental relationship - Conflict with biological mother 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Letting go of idealised fantasies - Commitment to stepfamily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Role strain - Parenting disagreements - Feeling undermined - Communication failures - Marital strain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moments of insight leading to empathy for others and self

		- Challenges with biological mother and her influence on daily life	
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This stage is similar to Papernow's (2013) middle stage of the Stepfamily Cycle during which family members start to recognise and speak about the challenges they experience. During the third stage identified by Bradley (2005), stepmothers tend to experience the strain associated with their role most acutely. Stepmothers also begin discussing things that they find unsuitable in their stepfamilies (Bradley, 2005).

Furthermore, they question their roles, and they wonder whether and when it is appropriate to co-parent their stepchildren (Bradley, 2005). Stepmothers often feel ambivalent during this stage, and disagreements regarding the children may arise between stepmothers and their partners (Bradley, 2005).

Bradley (2005) found that stepmothers often feel like "they do not count" (p. 81) during this stage and that their stepchildren often do not recognise them as parental figures. Problems with the stepchildren's biological mother may also arise during this stage, specifically when the stepmother becomes more active in her co-parenting role (Bradley, 2005). Stepmothers often feel that biological mothers undermine the process of stepfamily formation. According to Bradley (2005), a couple is also at risk of experiencing strain because of the partner's communication with his ex-spouse during this stage. The challenges accompanying this stage consist of the issues that the stepmothers in Bradley's (2005) study identified most commonly. Bradley (2005) explains the following:

In the *Recognition* Stage, women develop an understanding of the challenges and dynamics inherent to their role. They struggle with moments of profound hurt, rejection, confusion, and anger, and then, from within those times of deep struggle and conflict, moments of insight emerge. Women begin to discover what is helpful to them in difficult times; they strengthen their

empathic capacity for their stepchildren, their partners, themselves, and, in some cases, their stepchildren’s mother. (p. 82)

When stepmothers begin to have empathy with the other members of their stepfamily, a shift in cognition occurs (Bradley, 2005). At this point, stepmothers are ready to progress to Stage 4, which is mindfulness. This stage is shown in Table 2.7 below.

Table 2.7

Stage 4 – Mindfulness (Bradley, 2005, p. 85)

Stage 4: Mindfulness			
Challenges	Rewards	Major Themes	Milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Questioning self in role - Negotiating disagreements in co-parental relationship - Enduring but reduced challenges with biological mother 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moments of “feeling like a family” (p. 85) - Self-nurturance and care - Empathy for stepchildren and biological mother 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Questioning self in role - Self-care and self-empathy - Household routines - Empathy and respect for biological mother - Empathy for stepchildren - Longing and regret - Teamwork in the couple’s relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Developing a sense of security and autonomy in role as stepmother

During this fourth stage, stepmothers continue to become more involved with their stepfamilies and start to become mindful. Bradley (2005) refers to mindfulness as the process through which stepmothers learn to be attentive to their own feelings and needs, which allows them to meet their own needs more successfully. This process, in turn, enables stepmothers to meet the needs of their partners and stepchildren more effectively. An advantage of mindfulness is that stepmothers gain insight into what helps relieve tension and stress both for themselves and their stepfamilies (Bradley, 2005). Although the challenges of stepfamily life persist (for example, self-doubt about the role of stepmother, conflict within the co-parental relationship, or conflict with the stepchildren’s biological

mother), a stepmother’s reaction to these challenges begins to change. During this stage, stepmothers implement a household routine with their partners to help them face the challenges that accompany stepfamily life (Bradley, 2005).

Bradley (2005) explains that the rewards associated with this stage are that stepmothers settle into their role more fully and that their stepfamilies start to feel like a family. As the stepmother finds her space in her stepfamily, her empathy with her stepchildren and even their biological mother may increase (Bradley, 2005). The capacity to be mindful is beneficial for any family member because it allows him or her to develop effective responses to stress and change (Bradley, 2005). This fact is especially true for stepmothers and, in turn, for stepfamilies. A stepmother’s mindfulness and empathy with regard to her stepfamily members can also lead her to develop a greater sense of autonomy and security regarding her role of stepmother (Bradley, 2005). Furthermore, she may also feel like she belongs in her stepfamily (Bradley, 2005). This progression marks a shift to the next stage, namely Stage 5, which is acceptance. Stage 5 is shown in Table 2.8 below.

Table 2.8

Stage 5 – Acceptance (Bradley, 2005, p. 87)

Stage 5: Acceptance			
Challenges	Rewards	Major Themes	Milestones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limits of influence - Lack of control - Logistical complications 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Easing of tensions - Building family history - Acceptance of ongoing struggles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time helps - New baby 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Acceptance into role and of ongoing struggles of stepfamily life

As a stepfamily spends more time together, each stepfamily member shares their own experiences and creates their own memories that build a new history for the stepfamily (Bradley, 2005). A stepmother will increasingly feel more acceptance of her

role within the stepfamily through this process (Bradley, 2005). This acceptance includes the stepmother’s acceptance of the overall reality of her situation as well as of her stepchildren (Bradley, 2005). Despite experiencing ongoing stepfamily challenges, stepmothers also accept the fundamental realities of daily life, including the presence of the stepchildren’s biological mother, the limit of the biological mother’s influence, and the lack of control stepmothers may have over certain issues such as logistical arrangements (Bradley, 2005). These challenges may decrease over time but are often ongoing. Bradley (2005) explains that “[t]his stage is distinct as it marks a further development in a stepmother’s experience of, and response to, those stresses” (p. 86). A stepmother becomes more able to accept the realities woven into her stepfamily life by using mindfulness and empathy, which are skills acquired through her experience as a stepmother (Bradley, 2005). As a stepmother progresses through this stage, she will then enter the final stage of the model – Stage 6, which is integration. Stage 6 is represented in Table 2.9 below.

Table 2.9

Stage 6 – Integration (Bradley, 2005, p. 88)

Stage 6: Integration			
Challenges	Rewards	Major Themes	Milestones
- Separation - Children leaving home - Isolated incidents of stress e.g. logistics with children, disagreements with biological mother	- Integration into family - Perspective with experience - Seeing positive impact on children	- Time helps	- Stepmother is integrated into family and role

During the final stage of this model, a stepfamily’s daily life challenges become more like those associated with nuclear families. Stepchildren are older and learn to navigate their social environments independently (Bradley, 2005). Eventually, separation

happens when the stepchildren leave home as young adults. Usually, conflict with the biological mother that still lingers diminishes at this time (Bradley, 2005). Stressors and conflicts unique to stepfamily life remain, but they take place less often, and there is an overall decrease in tension for the stepmother as well as for the rest of the stepfamily members. A stepmother is finally integrated into her stepfamily, and she can uniquely position herself within the stepfamily at this time. The rewards associated with this stage are the unique perspectives gained by the stepmothers from their experiences, the ability to witness the impact they have had on their stepchildren's lives, and family life becoming simpler when stepchildren leave home (Bradley, 2005).

2.3.4 Stressors and Challenges of Being a Stepmother

In addition to the importance of the developmental model of the stepmother, it became apparent during the researcher's review of the existing literature on stepmothers that despite the rich information on stepfamilies that is available, less information is available about women sharing their experiences as stepmothers (Craig, Harvey-Knowles, & Johnson, 2012). The majority of the research published on stepfamilies focuses primarily on the effects of divorce on the children involved and their needs (Katz, 2010; Pérez & Tórrrens, 2009; Riness, 2013; Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976). Furthermore, research attention seems turned towards how non-residential fathers cope post-divorce, including the process of moving on with their lives and their involvement with their children after the divorce (Riness, 2013).

Ironically, there is a limited amount of information available on stepmothers, as indicated above. However, it has been found that stepmothers may experience the most stress within the stepfamily (Bradley, 2005; DeSio, 2008; Riness, 2013). According to Pérez & Tórrrens (2009), stepmothers may experience more stress in comparison to the other members of the stepfamily because of the emphasis of the woman's role in building a

family in Western culture.

Durand and Barlow (2010) state that it is important to consider the stress levels that stepmothers report because continuous stress negatively affects one's general wellbeing. The stressors and challenges that stepmothers experience are presented in two sections to distinguish between the challenges stepmothers experience in general and the specific challenges experienced by stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren.

2.3.4.1 General stressors and challenges associated with the stepmother role.

The general stressors and challenges experienced by stepmothers include the following: social stigma, the myths of motherhood, unrealistic expectations, role ambiguity, the stepmother as the outsider, the stepmother's relationship with the stepchildren, and the stepmother's relationship with the stepchildren's biological mother.

2.3.4.1.a) Social stigma. Stereotypically, the media generally represents stepmothers as wicked, cruel, and distant women who are less loving and caring than biological mothers (Christian, 2005; Craig et al., 2012; Whiting, Smith, Barnett, & Graftsky, 2007). Furthermore, stepmothers are portrayed as jealous, mean, and greedy in popular stories such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, and *Sleeping Beauty* (Mignot, 2008). Although stepfamily life is becoming more common and socially acceptable, the stigma surrounding stepmothers remains evident (Mignot, 2008). This stigmatisation ultimately influences the way in which stepmothers interact with their stepchildren, as some stepmothers shy away from disciplining their stepchildren to avoid being seen as the wicked or cruel stepmother (Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

2.3.4.1.b) The myths of motherhood. Traditional myths of motherhood include the following ideas: motherhood as the feminine ideal, motherhood as being synonymous with reproduction (implying that the biological mother is the best and only keeper of her children), and the mother as having to fulfil a domestic role (implying that the mother

should be confined to the family home to care for her family and children while putting aside all her own needs and desires) (Pérez & Tórrrens, 2009; Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976). The literature suggests that stepmothers experience more difficulties than stepfathers do when a stepfamily is formed because of the idealisation of motherhood as well as the negative stepmother stereotypes that exist (Pérez & Tórrrens, 2009). Stepmothers may experience more difficulties than stepfathers may because stepmothers are perceived as fulfilling a typically female role, and, according to traditional beliefs, a woman's role is central in building a family (Pérez & Tórrrens, 2009). Hence, the same principle applies to building stepfamily relationships (Katz, 2010; Norwood, 1999). However, Coleman, Troilo and Jameson (2008) state that stepmothers (and often their partners) set expectations that are unrealistic and stressful.

2.3.4.1.c) Unrealistic expectations. The findings of a study regarding the role of stepmothers, which was conducted by Pérez and Tórrrens (2009), indicate the following:

Being a mother is a relevant project of life for women who are coupled with men who already have children. Although the roles of mother and stepmother are fulfilled in a parallel and different form, both of them are based on the ideal mythology of motherhood. (p. 215)

Based on the idealisation of motherhood, as described in the previous paragraph, Western society's cultural expectations are that stepmothers should embrace their stepfamily and the stepmother role immediately and that they should have affection for their stepchildren right away (Whiting et al., 2007). According to Miller (2008), a stepmother may be enthusiastic and may also be under the impression that she can have an instant bond (defined by feelings of love and affection) with her stepchildren. However, when these feelings do not happen spontaneously and when stepmothers experience difficulties in taking on a motherly role, it may lead them to develop feelings of

inadequacy and disappointment (Miller, 2008). In addition, stepmothers may feel that they are not meeting the expectations of their partners in this regard (Dickinson, 2013).

According to Craig (2008), “[t]he role of the stepmother is highly impacted by the presence of biological children” (p. 9). In some instances, stepmothers bring their biological children into a remarriage, and, in other cases, stepmothers enter a remarriage with no biological children of their own (Craig, 2008). It is important to remember that the stepmother role is unnatural, and it is thus unrealistic to expect stepmothers to act in the same way as a biological mother would, especially when stepmothers have no children of their own (Coleman et al., 2008; Hart, 2009). Hart (2009) explains that both mothering and stepmothering require psychological transformation in a woman. Both roles require a woman to develop the following capacities: to be engaged emotionally with a child, to feel and accept responsibility in meeting the child’s needs, to be invested in the child’s growth and development, and to see the child empathically (Hart, 2009). It is unrealistic and in fact impossible to expect a stepmother to relate to her stepchildren in the same way as the children’s biological mother would because stepmothers do not share genetics with their stepchildren, they do not bond with the children from the children’s births, and they do not have a very close relationship with the children because they have not known the children for a long time (Coleman et al., 2008; Papernow, 1984, 2013). Dickinson (2013) explains that these unrealistic expectations may cause stepmothers to feel stressed and overwhelmed. Furthermore, such expectations may negatively influence the development of the stepparent-stepchild relationship (Dickinson, 2013).

2.3.4.1.d) Role ambiguity. Craig et al. (2012) and DeSio (2008) found that stepmothers with no biological children of their own experience their role as more ambiguous than stepmothers who have their own children. Stepmothers with no children of their own are particularly challenged by simultaneously having to fulfil the role of both

wife and parent, and by having no “honeymoon phase” to ease into marital territory or to establish intimacy, friendship, and a shared desire to have a child with their partners (Hart, 2009). Unlike children who are adopted or who are in foster care, stepchildren cannot be told that they were chosen to be part of the family (Hart, 2009; Katz, 2010). Stepmothers with no children of their own often struggle with the absence of a romantic, childless, and anticipatory period that usually occurs prior to the arrival of biological children (Craig et al., 2012). Thus, these stepmothers are faced with the daunting task of having to develop an expanded identity that will enable them to perform parental functions (Dickinson, 2013; Papernow, 2013; Whiting et al., 2007).

Although stepmothers are viewed as fulfilling a pivotal mothering role in the stepfamily, many stepmothers report not knowing how to act and how to succeed in this role (Coleman & Ganong, 2004; Dickinson, 2013; Doodson, 2009; Gosselin, 2010). A lack of understanding of the stepmother role is problematic for stepmothers, and thus clarity about this role can be a crucial factor in their successful adjustment (Craig et al., 2012; Dickinson, 2013; Whiting et al., 2007). Nielsen (1999) and Katz (2010) argue that stepmothers are often too concerned with the needs of their stepchildren and therefore overlook their own needs. Nielsen (1999) states the following:

Ironically, the stepmother is less stressed and less disheartened when she eventually adopts the attitude: My main goal and my main focus is to build an intimate, fulfilling relationship with my husband and to take better care of my own needs, not to bond with or win the approval of my stepchildren. (p. 135)

2.3.4.1.e) *The stepmother as the outsider.* In addition to the uncertainty stepmothers experience, they experience feelings of insecurity when they try to fit into the new stepfamily without having the shared history that the other members of the stepfamily have (Whiting et al., 2007). A stepmother’s desire to have her role in the family recognised

and acknowledged seems to be important, and a lack of recognition and acknowledgement of this role causes stepmothers deep dissatisfaction (Doodson, 2009; Katz, 2010; Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976). Regardless of the stepfamily setup, most stepmothers experience feeling like an outsider at some stage (Craig et al., 2012; Katz, 2010; Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976; Sayre et al., 2010). Some stepmothers feel that they are responsible for caring for their stepchildren and for taking part in activities with their stepchildren when their stepchildren visit, which requires energy and hard work (Katz, 2010). However, they are then excluded from birthday celebrations or school functions (Katz, 2010).

Stepmothers often feel like they do not count as members of their stepfamilies (Bradley, 2005; Craig et al., 2012). According to Dickinson (2013), stepchildren often do not acknowledge the stepmother. Children usually want to spend as much time as possible with their father, but it is hurtful to a stepmother to feel excluded continuously (Dickinson, 2013). The findings of studies conducted by Craig et al. (2012), Doodson and Morley (2006), and Sayre et al. (2010) indicate that some stepmothers feel so excluded by the father-child subsystem that they feel like strangers in their own homes. Furthermore, these researchers found that such feelings contribute to sadness and symptoms of depression in stepmothers.

2.3.4.1.f) *The stepmother's relationship with the stepchildren.* It is almost inevitable that stepchildren will deny the stepmother's efforts in the beginning, which can be discouraging to the stepmother and can lead her to develop low levels of self-esteem (Katz, 2010; Papernow, 1984, 2013). Roosevelt and Lofas (1976) found that when a stepmother offers her interest and attention to her stepchildren and if her stepchildren then respond with coldness and indifference, she then begins to withdraw after a number of perceived failures. According to Halford, Nicholson and Sanders (2007), stepfamily

couples are at high risk of developing relationship problems because of negative communication or the stepparent's withdrawal.

Roosevelt and Lofas (1976) explain that a stepmother's image is not equal to that of a biological mother. Biological mothers' efforts are encouraged, but this is not true in the case of stepmothers (Coleman et al., 2008; Pérez & Tórrrens, 2009). The self-esteem of a stepmother, whose primary activity is taking care of the family, depends on her family's view of her (Katz, 2010). Yet, in nuclear families, the process of idealisation boosts the image of the biological mother (Dickinson, 2013; Pérez & Tórrrens, 2009). Not only are stepmothers not idealised, but they may also find themselves on the receiving end of the stepchildren's anger regarding whatever the biological mother did or did not do. In addition, stepchildren, without being aware of their behaviour, may feel that they have to punish their stepmother for taking their mother's place (Pérez & Tórrrens, 2009; Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976).

In a study conducted by Shapiro and Stewart (2011) on the stressors that stepmothers and biological mothers experience, it was found that a stepmother's perceptions of how her stepchildren perceive her could contribute to the development of symptoms of depression because stepmothers generally think that their stepchildren do not view them and the stepfamily in a positive light. Furthermore, Shapiro and Stewart (2011) found that stepmothers generally experience more parenting-related stress than biological mothers do. Further evidence suggests that a stepmother's anxiety is related to the uncertainty associated with the following: her role and responsibilities within the stepfamily, her relationships with and responsibilities towards the stepchildren, and her relationship with the children's biological mother (Doodson, 2009).

2.3.4.1.g) *The stepmother's relationship with the stepchildren's biological mother.* Stepmothers often report that they find the process of negotiating a relationship

with the stepchildren's biological mothers challenging (Bradley, 2005; Whiting et al., 2007). According to Bradley (2005), stepmothers do not anticipate the biological mother's ongoing involvement in the daily life of the stepfamily. Another challenge related to the stepmother's formation of a relationship with the stepchildren's biological mother is that the biological mother usually tends to be unsupportive and dismissive of the stepmother's role (Bradley, 2005; Dickinson, 2013). These factors are especially stressful and frustrating to a stepmother who feels that the biological mother's acceptance contributes to her feelings of success as a stepmother (Dickinson, 2013). An example of a biological mother being unsupportive is when she may make negative remarks about the stepmother and sometimes even about the children's father in the presence of the children (Dickinson, 2013). These comments can negatively affect the stepmother's relationship with her stepchildren, as children's perceptions of their stepmother are influenced by how their mother views the stepmother (Dickinson, 2013).

Further challenges that the stepmother may often experience are animosity between the ex-partners as well as animosity from the ex-partner towards the stepmother herself (Dickinson, 2013). Such animosity keeps a stepmother from forming a meaningful relationship with her stepchildren's biological mother (Dickinson, 2013). Bradley (2005) found that another challenge reported by stepmothers is related to the marital strain they experience due to conflict with the children's biological mothers. The marital strain reported by these stepmothers was caused specifically by their unhappiness with the ways in which their partners handled the children's biological mothers. The stepmothers in this study often felt that their partners were not firm enough with the biological mothers (Bradley, 2005).

2.3.4.1.h) Finances. Stepmothers often experience dissatisfaction with regard to finances (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). Similar to the situation in nuclear families, couples

in stepfamilies commonly argue about finances and may have wants and needs that exceed the family's resources (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). However, couples in stepfamilies tend to experience more financial challenges than first-marriage couples experience (Coleman & Ganong, 2004). In her study, Dickinson (2013) found that stepmothers reported financial difficulties due to financial obligations such as providing maintenance for their stepchildren. According to Howden (as cited in Henry & McCue, 2009), "stepfamilies exist in a legal and social structure in which the financial and emotional needs of the residential parent, the non-residential parent, and the stepchild typically dominate" (p. 186).

Dickinson (2013) also reported that the stepmothers were disappointed that they could not afford to have their own children as a result of the financial responsibilities that they had towards their partner's children. Such obligations may create tension and resentment within the couple subsystem, especially when the first family is an economic drain to the stepfamily (Falke & Larson, 2007). Feelings of having little or no control over parenting practices and other challenges, such as a lack of control over finances, can lead stepmothers to have lower levels of parenting satisfaction in addition to feelings of anger and depression (Dickinson, 2013). For stepmothers to increase their sense of satisfaction regarding their role, it is imperative for them to establish boundaries for themselves (Bradley, 2005; Dickinson, 2013; Doodson & Morley, 2006).

2.3.4.1.i) *The stepmother's boundaries and role.* The importance of boundaries between the couple subsystem and other subsystems in the family, as well as the importance of boundaries between the couple and external systems, was discussed earlier in this chapter. It is also important for stepmothers to establish their own boundaries to provide themselves with a private space in which they can meet their own needs (Dickinson, 2013; Doodson & Morley, 2006; Katz, 2010). In addition, it is important for

stepmothers to understand their own limits and to communicate these limits openly and clearly to their partners and stepchildren (Dickinson, 2013; Doodson & Morley, 2006; Katz, 2010).

It is crucial for a stepmother and her partner to define her role together, so that she knows what is expected of her and so that she can create boundaries accordingly (Doodson & Morley, 2006). Katz (2010) warns that stepmothers who do not have clear boundaries and who take on too much with regard to fulfilling the needs of the other stepfamily members may find themselves feeling anger and resentment towards their stepfamilies. These emotions may arise because of the dissatisfaction such stepmothers may feel with regard to their roles, which may ultimately threaten the survival of the stepfamily (Doodson & Morley, 2006; Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976).

2.3.4.1.j) The stepmother's support system.

Support from the partner. According to Roosevelt and Lofas (1976) and Bradley (2005), the most important form of support for a stepmother is the support she receives from her partner. If a stepmother does not have the support of her partner, her role becomes more complicated (Bradley, 2005; Craig et al., 2012). Bradley (2005) explains that partners can become defensive when stepmothers come to them with stepfamily challenges, especially earlier on in the relationship. A partner's reaction may lead to conflict, and, as a result, the stepmother becomes more stressed and distant, which ultimately affects the development of her relationship with her stepchildren (Bradley, 2005; Craig et al., 2012). Dickinson (2013) points out that a stepmother's ability to build a relationship with and to act as a co-parent to her stepchildren relies on the support she receives from her partner. Her partner may unfortunately fail to realise that his partner's success as a stepmother relates directly to his ability to communicate emotional support to her (Bradley, 2005; Craig et al., 2012; Katz, 2010).

In almost every instance where Roosevelt and Lofas (1976) have found a satisfied stepmother, they have also found a husband who understands, validates, and is simply there for his wife in her role of stepmother. Stepmothers have repeatedly expressed that what keeps them going through all their difficulties is their partners' love, recognition, and appreciation (Bradley, 2005; Katz, 2010). Dickinson (2013) explains that when a stepmother feels supported by her partner, it contributes positively to feelings of satisfaction in her relationship with her stepchildren. According to family systems theory, the principle of circularity illustrates this process between family members, as stepmothers' adaptability is predicted by their satisfaction with their spousal relationships (Bradley, 2005; Doodson, 2009). The higher their satisfaction with their partners, the better stepmothers will adjust to their roles.

Support from extended family, friends, and society. Doodson (2009) found that many women experience difficulties in adapting to their new role as a stepmother, and they thus display lower levels of psychosocial wellbeing than women in first families do. Stepmothers have lower perceived levels of social support and tend to employ less effective coping mechanisms than biological mothers do (Doodson, 2009). Michaels (as cited in Doodson, 2009) reports that stepmother-related studies have suggested a link between good social support and stepfamily success. Furthermore, Michaels (as cited in Doodson, 2009) states that a lack of support from extended family members and friends is significantly related to lower marital satisfaction and happiness. These findings suggest that stepmothers should be encouraged to seek support from their extended family members and friends to increase their psychological wellbeing (Doodson, 2009).

However, Bradley (2005) found that some stepmothers' families of origin do not approve of or support their decision to marry men who have children from a previous relationship because it is a huge commitment. Craig (2008) reports that stepmothers find it

hard to seek social support from their extended families, friends, and society in general because of the lack of understanding and empathy they receive from these groups of people. In some cases, stepmothers may even be judged by these groups of people (Craig, 2008). As a result, stepmothers may be hesitant to reach out to their families or friends for support (Dickinson, 2013).

2.3.4.2 Stressors and challenges for stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren. According to Doodson and Morley (2006), stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren “experience specific stressors and challenges that are associated with the part-time nature of their care for the children” (p. 125). These stressors and challenges are discussed next.

2.3.4.2.a) Co-parenting of the children. Doodson (2009) found that stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren experience frustration and stress in their co-parenting role with regard to coping with stepchildren who are being brought up in a different household and then trying to impose another set of rules and discipline when the children visit the stepfamily household. Bradley (2005) and Papernow (2006) found that the movement of children between households complicates the process of defining rules, roles, boundaries, and routines in the stepfamily household. Stepmothers specifically struggle with feeling a lack of control pertaining to their stepchildren’s behaviour, which is usually caused by the different sets of rules in the two households (Bradley, 2005). However, because of their children’s non-residential status, stepmothers often feel that they do not have enough time to develop a relationship with their stepchildren and to implement rules and roles during their stepchildren’s visits (Dickinson, 2013; Doodson & Morley, 2006). Furthermore, both stepparents and stepchildren can feel like the invaders or the invaded (Bradley, 2005).

Doodson and Morley (2006) found that stepmothers experience each of their stepchildren’s visits as an adjustment, and, at times, they find these visits inconvenient and

uncomfortable because they have to adjust their schedules to accommodate their stepchildren (Doodson & Morley, 2006). Papernow (2006) explains that the potential of misunderstandings occurring between stepfamily members is constantly heightened by factors such as the following: the limited time spent together as a family, the discontinuity of routine, and the different family histories of the family members. These factors imply that the interactions between stepfamily members do not happen spontaneously but need to be negotiated carefully, especially between the stepmother and her stepchildren (Papernow, 2006).

Popenoe (1994) and Riness (2013) believe that stepmothers find their co-parenting role more stressful and less satisfying than biological mothers do because of the uncertainty of the stepmother role and its associated obligations. Furthermore, Popenoe (1994) and Riness (2013) found that the intrinsic rewards associated with the stepmother role are fewer in comparison to those associated with biological motherhood, despite the fact that stepmothers are responsible for fulfilling the same responsibilities as biological mothers. In a study by Bradley (2005), part-time stepmothers reported that they were unsure of when it would be appropriate for them to step in and co-parent their stepchildren and when not. Stepmothers' views regarding child discipline often differ from those of their partners, which causes tension in the couple subsystem (Bradley, 2005). In addition, the interaction can be complicated further when a partner undermines a stepmother's authority in front of her stepchildren (Bradley, 2005).

Another frustration stepmothers report is that their partners avoid disciplining their children because they do not see them often and are thus afraid of upsetting their children or the children's biological mother (Henry & McCue, 2009). This lack of discipline from the father's side often means that the stepmother has to discipline the children, which in turn fuels the image of the mean and wicked stepmother.

2.3.4.2.b) Additional household responsibilities. Bradley (2005) further reports that stepmothers struggle with additional household chores when their stepchildren visit. Due to the stepchildren's non-residential status, they do not have any regular chores in the stepfamily home. Thus, while the father spends his time and energy on his children, the stepmother is left to take care of the daily chores on her own with little or no appreciation or recognition from the stepchildren (Bradley, 2005; Katz, 2010). Stepmothers do not want to ask for help because of the concern that they may be viewed as mean or wicked (Bradley, 2005).

2.3.4.2.c) Legal matters. Whiting et al. (2007) report that stepmothers generally aim to act in the best interests of their stepchildren. In Bradley's (2005) study, the stepmothers reported that even though they had put in a lot of effort for their stepchildren, other people (such as family or friends and the community) did not recognise them as real parents. In light of this information, Bradley (2005) explains that stepmothers feel that they have many parental obligations but no legal rights with regard to their stepchildren. The legal system does not consider stepfamily members' rights and responsibilities. As a result, stepparents are not permitted any legal authority as parental figures (Dupuis, 2010). Dupuis (2010) argues that society's laws are based on the nuclear family model and that legal boundaries thus prevent the stepparent from participating in basic child-rearing decisions in a child's life.

2.3.4.2.d) Logistical challenges. In their respective studies, Craig et al. (2012), Doodson and Morley (2006), and Henry and McCue (2009) found that stepmothers experience frustration regarding matters in which they have no say and matters that affect them directly, such as visitation schedules and other day-to-day logistical arrangements that affect the couple. These aspects leave many stepmothers feeling helpless in their

situations. Dickinson (2013) explains that the helplessness experienced by stepmothers may be connected to their stepchildren's non-residential status.

It is evident that the research regarding stepmothers indicates that stepmothers often report negative experiences in the sense that their roles as stepmothers are stressful, often ambiguous, and may cause symptoms of depression. However, a few researchers (Bradley, 2005; Graham et al., 2011; Riness, 2013) found that stepmothers also experience positive and rewarding moments. These positive experiences are discussed in the next section.

2.3.5 Stepmothers' Rewarding Moments

In their respective studies on stepmothers, Bradley (2005), Graham et al. (2011), and Riness (2013) found that although stepmothers report experiencing role-related stress and that their roles are ill-defined, they also report experiencing rewarding moments and moments of happiness that are fulfilling. Bradley (2005) and Doodson and Morley (2006) found that stepmothers experience joy in knowing that they contribute positively to the lives of their stepchildren. These researchers also found that such moments help stepmothers to feel more successful in their stepmother role. Bradley (2005) also found that stepmothers are able to fit into and experience feelings of belonging in their stepfamilies over time.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the relevant literature with specific reference to the nuclear family as a system, the processes of separation, divorce, remarriage, and stepfamily formation, the developmental stages regarding stepmothers, as well as the challenges that stepmothers experience. A better understanding of the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren was gained by using a systemic model. The systemic perspective also provided insight into stepmothers' experiences in relation to the

different members of the stepfamily and the larger system that includes the stepchildren's biological mother. The next chapter discusses the methodology employed in the execution of the present study.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Method

3.1 Introduction

The aim of social science research is to produce descriptions of the social world that in turn relate controllably to the social world being described (Silverman, 2013). Social researchers seek to describe the world by being curious about a phenomenon and then seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of the chosen phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Silverman, 2013). The type of study to be conducted depends on what researchers aim to attain through their study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2012; Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006). The researcher considered the three different types of social science research, namely exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory research (Terre Blanche et al., 2006), when deciding on what kind of study to conduct. Exploratory research aims to make preliminary investigations into relatively new and unexplored areas of research by employing an open, flexible and inductive research approach to gain new insights into unexplored phenomena (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Descriptive studies aim to describe a phenomenon accurately without providing causal explanations for the phenomenon (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). The aim of an explanatory study is to provide causal explanations for why a phenomenon occurs (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

Terre Blanche et al. (2006) are of the opinion that there is no general consensus regarding the three abovementioned ways in which social science research is divided. However, they believe that when planning a research design, the researcher has to make decisions regarding the predominant aim of the study because a study's aim will direct the type of research to be conducted (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

The aim of the current study is to produce a description of the unique and authentic experiences of women in their role as stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren in order to add information to the relatively limited body of knowledge pertaining to stepmothers of

non-residential stepchildren. Based on the exploratory aim of this study, a qualitative research design was selected. The motivation for this choice of research design is discussed in this chapter. Thereafter, the research process and methodology, research tools, as well as the process of analysis and interpretation are described. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations associated with this study.

3.2 Methodology

A research design serves as a strategic framework to guide the actions that follow the move from the research question to the implementation of the actual research (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Research in any science cannot proceed without such a framework, which consists of plans that guide how the conditions are arranged in the study to enable data collection and analysis (O'Brien, 1993; Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

3.2.1 Motivation for the use of a Qualitative Design

The researcher compared quantitative and qualitative frameworks, and then selected the qualitative research design as the most suitable framework for this study. The aim of comparing quantitative and qualitative frameworks is not to negate either framework, but rather to understand how these two approaches differ and to establish which approach would be the most appropriate to address the research question (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). It is important to understand the difference between these two approaches because the selection of a particular design has direct consequences on the manner in which research participants will be selected and how the data will be collected and analysed (Terre Blanche et al., 2006).

In using a quantitative approach, the researcher places emphasis on quantifying constructs (Creswell, 2012). This approach may be more appropriate if the research question is closed. A closed research question refers to a question that is answered through the selection of predetermined responses (Creswell, 2012). A closed research question

allows for properties of various phenomena to be measured with regard to their occurrence among a large number of people by using quantitative measurements, such as instruments with preset questions and responses (Babbie & Mouton, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The collected data is analysed by using statistical analysis, and the results are interpreted through a comparison with prior predictions and past research (Creswell, 2012).

Conversely, the emphasis of a qualitative approach is on describing and understanding human behaviour instead of explaining and/or predicting it (Applebaum, 2012; Babbie & Mouton, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The research question tends to be more open. Open research questions refer to questions which respondents are required to respond to in their own words (Creswell, 2012). The data is collected from a smaller number of people to obtain their views on a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2012; Jonker & Pennink, 2010). In the process of analysing the data, textual analysis is used to identify themes and to obtain rich descriptions of people's experiences within a particular context (Creswell, 2012).

Creswell (2012) states that "the choice of research between the two approaches is based on matching the approach to a research problem, fitting the approach to your audience, and relating the approach to your experiences" (p. 26). Due to the open-ended nature of the research question of the current study, the researcher decided to use a qualitative approach.

The researcher's choice of approach was motivated by the aim of the research, namely to gain an understanding of how each participant in this study experiences the same phenomenon of being a stepmother to non-residential stepchildren. The researcher therefore did not choose a quantitative approach because she felt that important details and

the richness of the stepmothers' experiences may be lost through the process of quantifying the participants' experiences as constructs.

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers are interested in how people make sense of their experiences in their world by understanding the meaning people attach to their experiences. According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006), the interpretive approach "relies on first-hand accounts" and "tries to describe what it sees in rich detail" (p. 274). Thus, qualitative research involves the interpretive study of collected materials, including case studies, life stories, personal experiences, reflections, interviews, observations, and visual texts (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). According to Terre Blanche et al. (2006),

The interpretive perspective involves taking people's subjective experiences seriously as the essence of what is real for them (ontology), making sense of people's experiences by interacting with them and listening carefully to what they tell us (epistemology), and making use of qualitative research techniques to collect and analyse information (methodology). (p. 274)

Terre Blanche et al. (2006) emphasise two key principles when conducting interpretive research, namely the importance of understanding a phenomenon in context and the researcher as the primary instrument through which the information in the study is collected and analysed. There was a need to study the participants in the contexts of their stepfamilies and in relation to their stepchildren because, according to Creswell (2012), it is not possible to separate what people report from the context in which they report it. The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren. Thus, the researcher chose the phenomenological paradigm as the theoretical paradigm informing this study.

3.2.2 The Phenomenological Paradigm

Paradigms can be described as general frameworks through which life can be viewed. These frameworks provide a set of assumptions about the nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Jonker & Pennink, 2010). Theoretical paradigms are central to the research design because they affect two very important aspects of the research, namely what will be studied and how it will be studied (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). A paradigm therefore acts as a lens that influences or shapes how reality is seen. The emphasis of the phenomenological paradigm is placed on human beings that are engaged in making sense of their environments (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). People are continuously engaged in the processes of interpreting, creating, and giving meaning to their experiences, as well as defining, justifying, and rationalising their actions (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). In the field of social sciences, the term *phenomenology* is used broadly to describe one way of studying people's feelings, perceptions, and lived experiences (Babbie & Mouton, 2010; Creswell, 2012; Silverman, 2013).

Phenomenology is based on the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Giorgi, 2009). Phenomenology can be defined as a philosophical approach to studying people's experiences of a particular situation or event, or of human nature in general (Applebaum, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The aim of phenomenological research is to describe a particular phenomenon as a lived experience in a descriptive manner (Davison, 2014; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). According to Giorgi (1997), lived experience refers to a person's immediate consciousness of their life events, prior to reflecting on and interpreting these events. Furthermore, it is the individual's lived experience that gives meaning to his or her perception of a phenomenon and that represents what is real or true in a person's life (Giorgi, 1997).

The researcher was motivated to choose the phenomenological paradigm because of her interest (as a researcher) in understanding what it would be like to be a stepmother to non-residential stepchildren. The researcher's aim regarding this study is therefore to understand the multiple participants' lived experiences of the same phenomenon, namely being a stepmother to non-residential stepchildren, as described by the participants themselves. Furthermore, the researcher wishes to locate the essence of each participant's experience in their written narratives, which is an approach advocated by Creswell (2007).

3.3 Data Collection

3.3.1 Sampling

A study population is defined as a large group of people from which a researcher wants to draw conclusions (Babbie, 2013). Due to the large size of the population of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren, as described in Chapter 2, the researcher selected an appropriate-sized sample from this population for the current study. Sampling in the interpretive paradigm is often purposeful and directed at particular inclusive criteria instead of being random (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). The researcher used the following criteria, proposed by Henn, Weinstein, and Foard (2009)¹, at the time of the sample selection:

- The stepmothers all personally experienced the research topic, in other words, they were all stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren.
- The stepmothers were willing to share their experiences of the research topic.
- The stepmothers were able to articulate their experiences and to provide the researcher with descriptions of their experiences.

For the purposes of this study, the sample selected was a small group of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren. These stepmothers are not representative of

¹ The criteria have been adapted to suit the particular purpose and subject matter of the current study.

the larger population of stepmothers, but their experiences are legitimate and can stand on their own and in their own light. Babbie and Mouton (2010) and Henn et al. (2009) specify that the experiences of participants from unrepresentative samples should be legit and able to stand on their own. The sample for the current study was selected by using purposive sampling, which is also known as convenience sampling (Henn et al., 2009). This method involved inviting stepmothers to whom the researcher was referred by colleagues and friends to participate in the study. A small sample was purposefully selected in accordance with the phenomenological paradigm because the intent of the researcher was to gain an in-depth understanding of each participant's experience of the phenomenon under study.

The sample for this study consisted of five stepmothers who did not have any biological children of their own. However, they all had non-residential stepchildren and met the criteria proposed above by Henn et al. (2009). The researcher specifically chose women with no biological children of their own to participate in the study in an attempt to capture and define the unique experience of stepping into a stepmother role without having any prior experience as a mother and without this role having been influenced and/or distracted by other parental experiences. Stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren were chosen as participants with the intent to explore this commonly employed post-divorce living arrangement of stepfamilies as described by Kelly (2007). According to Kelly (2007), after a divorce, the children will primarily reside with the biological mother and will visit their biological father every other weekend and for half of all the school holidays. Despite the fact that this living arrangement is the most commonly employed universally, the researcher could not find information specific to such a post-divorce living arrangement in South Africa.

In this study, non-residential stepchildren are defined as stepchildren who do not primarily reside in the household of their father and stepmother (Henry & McCue, 2009).

In the South African context, the term *primary residency* is not clearly defined by the South African Children's Act 38 of 2005. However, primary residency implies the household in which the children spend most of their time. In this study, the primary residence of the stepchildren was with their biological mothers' as their primary caregivers. The fathers of these minor children all had contact with their children. According to the Children's Act 38 of 2005, "contact" (p. 12) in relation to a child means the following:

- maintaining a personal relationship with the child; and
- if the child lives with someone else:
 - communication with the child on a regular basis in person, including visiting the child, or being visited by the child; or
 - communication on a regular basis with the child in any other manner including through the post, by telephone or any other form of electronic communication.

At the time this study was conducted, the stepchildren of two of the participants in this study visited their fathers for two weekends per month and half of all the school holidays. The stepchildren of two other participants visited their fathers for two extended weekends (from Thursday to Sunday) per month and half of all the school holidays. One of the participants and her partner visited her partner's child once a month and the child visited them half of all the school holidays. The stepchildren of one of the stepfamilies also visited their father for one additional afternoon during the week.

All the stepmothers in this study, at the time of this study, were members of their stepfamilies and had acted in their role of stepmother for at least four years or longer.

3.3.2 Collection of Data

The primary sources of data in this study are personal documents that contain the written narratives of the participants' experiences of being stepmothers to non-residential stepchildren. A personal document is a written document in which participants (in this case, the stepmothers) can express themselves and through which the researcher comes to know the participants' views (in this case, the stepmothers' views) of the phenomenon under investigation (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). Written narratives are valuable sources of information in qualitative research because they provide the researcher with rich information that helps the researcher to understand central phenomena in their study (Creswell, 2012).

There are three types of personal documents, namely the autobiography, the diary, and the letter (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). The autobiography was selected as a data collection resource for this study because it contains the participants' information given from a first-hand perspective (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). Autobiographies can take various forms, namely comprehensive autobiography, topical autobiography, and edited autobiography (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). The comprehensive autobiography covers various main themes in an individual's life (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). The topical autobiography refers to a biography in which a topic is selected that the participants then construct their narratives around (Babbie & Mouton, 2010). The edited autobiography refers to an autobiography in which the researcher selects, monitors, and deletes items written by the participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2010).

The researcher's aim is to understand the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren within the phenomenological paradigm. Based on the aim of this study, the researcher chose the topical autobiography data collection method. The researcher requested the participants to write their autobiographies in the form of written

narratives containing their experiences on the topic of being stepmothers to non-residential stepchildren. The researcher purposefully chose this method to obtain information that would be in the participants' language and own words, as suggested by Creswell (2012). Creswell (2012) is of the opinion that this method of data collection is advantageous because written narratives are free from the influence or interpretation of the researcher. The researcher requested the participants to send their personal documents containing their written narratives to her via email. After the researcher received the participants' written narratives, she acknowledged receipt thereof and thanked them for sharing their narratives. The researcher followed up with the participants via email and offered them the opportunity to elaborate on experiences that were mentioned but not elaborated on. Some participants chose to elaborate on their experiences and some participants did not.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research refers to the procedure followed by the researcher to make sense of the text or images that are collected in order to find answers to the research question (Creswell, 2012). Suter (2006) describes data analysis as the process which reveals "patterns, coherent themes, meaningful categories, and new ideas and in general uncovers better understanding of a phenomenon or process" (p. 327). The data analysis process in this study is guided by the phenomenological method.

3.4.1 The Phenomenological Method

As described in the introduction, the researcher's aim is to more fully understand the experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren. The researcher chose the phenomenological method, which enables questions to be asked that have personal meaning for the participants, and, in return, to receive responses from the participants on their unique experiences in their own words (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Next, the researcher applied the thematic analysis technique proposed by Braun and Clarke

(2006) to analyse the data. This technique and its phases, proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), are described in the section below. As the researcher herself was the main instrument used in analysing the data obtained from the participants in this study, she made use of the bracketing method, which refers to putting aside one's own preconceptions about the phenomenon to decrease the potential influence of these on how the data is interpreted and presented (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

3.4.2 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a common method in qualitative studies that is used to identify, analyse, and report recurring patterns and themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Suter, 2006). Thematic analysis is used in the current study as an essentialist method, which means that the focus of the study falls on the reporting of experiences, meanings, and the way in which the participants perceive their reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method allowed the researcher to provide a rich description of the data set. From this rich description, the researcher could identify key themes that captured something which the researcher deemed important in relation to the research question, which is a process prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Braun and Clarke (2006) found that thematic analysis is a useful method with many advantages if one uses it to study an under-researched topic. Thematic analysis can be used to provide rich descriptions of human experiences. As described in Chapter 2, limited research is available on stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren, and thus this topic can be considered an under-researched area. The advantages of using thematic analysis in the present study are discussed below.

Thematic analysis was useful in providing the researcher with a means of presenting the reader with a rich summary of the key features of the originally large body of data. This method further highlighted similarities in the data set by identifying

prominent and/or recurring themes in the participants' narratives. Thematic analysis allowed the data set to be explored in a more in-depth manner and deductions about the data could also be made beyond the text. Lastly, this method allowed room for psychological and social interpretations of the data within a systemic context.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a disadvantage of thematic analysis is that it is a poorly demarcated method, implying that this method lacks clear and concise guidelines on how to apply it to data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) found that despite this disadvantage, the method is widely used in the social sciences. In the current study, the researcher bypassed this disadvantage by conducting a rigorous thematic analysis, which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), can still produce a very insightful analysis that answers the research question.

3.4.3 The Process of Thematic Analysis

The researcher followed the six-phase process of thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis process was not a linear process, but rather recursive, because the researcher moved back and forth through the phases as needed.

3.4.3.1 Phase 1: The researcher familiarising herself with the data. The researcher read and re-read the data set numerous times before commencing the process of coding. Braun and Clarke (2006) refer to the process of reading and re-reading data as immersion. It was vital for the researcher to be immersed in the data so that she could familiarise herself with the depth and breadth of the content of the data. The researcher learnt to read the data in an active way by paying attention to repetitions or patterns emerging in the data. This process was time-consuming. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that the time-consuming nature of the approach is an important reason why qualitative researchers select smaller samples.

3.4.3.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes. After the researcher familiarised herself with the data and identified ideas she found interesting, the process of the initial coding began. The researcher coded the data manually by using coloured pens and highlighters to identify patterns and repetitive ideas. Initial codes were ascribed to the identified ideas. The researcher followed the process described by Braun and Clarke (2006) by repeating Phases 1 and 2 until she felt confident that the data set as a whole had been reflected accurately.

3.4.3.3 Phase 3: Searching for themes. Once the researcher had coded the data, she started to sort the codes into initial themes by grouping matching codes together. The researcher used tables for visual representation while she sorted the different codes into themes. As this process continued, the researcher identified main themes with relevant subthemes under each main theme – a process described by Braun and Clarke (2006).

3.4.3.4 Phase 4: Reviewing themes. After the researcher identified the main themes and subthemes, she started to refine these themes. Some themes were merged together to form a coherent pattern, and although distinctions between the themes became apparent, they were not always mutually exclusive. This process is the first level of analysis in this phase, according to Braun and Clarke (2006). The second level of analysis then started as the researcher considered each main theme's validity in relation to the data set as a whole. The aim of the second level was to ensure that the thematic map of the main themes reflected the meanings in the data set as accurately as possible. At the end of this phase, the main themes became clear. Clarity regarding main themes includes how they fit together and what overall story they tell about the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.4.3.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes. Once the researcher had created a satisfactory thematic map of the data set, she started to define the themes further in order for them to be presented for analysis. Specific attention was given to identifying the

essence of each main theme. The researcher went back to the data set and selected extracts for each theme to demonstrate the crux of each theme. These extracts were then organised into a coherent order, along with narratives from the researcher, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The researcher compared the themes with the themes identified by her supervisor and a second coder before she started writing the report.

3.4.3.6 Phase 6: Producing the report. The writing of a report is the final phase of an analysis. In the report, the researcher focused on providing the reader with a detailed summary of the larger data set to tell a story about the data in a way that would convince the reader of both the merit and validity of her analysis. The researcher took great care to ensure that her report contained sufficient data extracts as examples that captured the essence of the demonstrated points. The researcher's aim was to produce a valid and reliable report that presented the findings of this study accurately. In the next section, the factors that promote the validity of this qualitative study are discussed.

3.5 Qualitative Research Validity

According to Shenton (2004), quantitative researchers often question the trustworthiness of qualitative research because qualitative research addresses the concepts of validity and reliability in a different way to quantitative research. However, researchers writing on research methods have illustrated that there are measures that qualitative researchers can use to address this issue (Shenton, 2004). One such researcher, Guba (as cited in Shenton, 2004), proposes four criteria that can be used to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research, namely credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.5.1 Credibility

In qualitative research, the term *credibility* refers to the degree to which the research findings are true and congruent with reality (Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011;

Shenton, 2004). Credibility is referred to as internal validity in quantitative research (Guion et al., 2011; Shenton, 2004). Credibility is an important factor in the process of establishing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. To enhance the credibility of this study, the researcher made the following provisions, as proposed by Shenton (2004):

- Peer scrutiny of the research project: The researcher welcomed her supervisor and the second coder to scrutinise the study. Both the supervisor and second coder then offered the researcher valuable feedback.
- Thick description of the phenomenon under scrutiny: The researcher has provided a detailed description of the stepmothers and their unique stepfamily contexts because this information is important in enhancing the credibility of the study by providing the reader with a picture of the actual situations that were under study. Shenton (2004) states that “without this insight, it is difficult for the reader of the final account to determine to which extent the overall findings ‘ring true’” (p. 69).
- Examination of previous research findings: The researcher related the findings of this study to the existing body of knowledge on stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren to assess if her findings were congruent with past research. Silverman (as cited in Shenton, 2004) regards this action as a key criterion in enhancing the credibility of a qualitative study.
- Data triangulation: Data triangulation was used in this study to increase the study’s credibility. Data triangulation refers to the use of multiple or different sources of information, including other researchers, participants, or community members (Guion et al., 2011). In this study, the researcher made use of data triangulation by comparing her identified themes with previous research on the topic. The researcher further compared her identified themes with those identified by her

supervisor and the second coder (they both used thematic analysis to analyse the data set).

3.5.2 Transferability

In qualitative research, the term *transferability* refers to the degree to which the research findings can be applied to different contexts (Shenton, 2004). Finlay (2006) explains that the goal of qualitative researchers is not to transfer their findings from a small sample to the wider population. Rather, their goal should be to show that their findings may have meaning and/or relevance if the findings were to be transferred to other similar populations or contexts (Finlay, 2006). As the researcher has been as honest and as objective as possible by describing the research process in detail and by following the rules of research carefully in this study, the findings of the study should be transferable to other similar populations or contexts in the manner described by Finlay (2006).

3.5.3 Dependability

In quantitative research, reliability refers to the ability to replicate the results of a study if the study were to be repeated in the same context by using the same participants and methods (Shenton, 2004). Instead of establishing whether the results of a study can be replicated, qualitative research uses dependability to recognise and account for contexts that differ from study to study (Shenton, 2004). To enhance the dependability of this qualitative study, the researcher reported the research process in as much detail as possible so that future researchers who wish to repeat the work may obtain similar findings. The researcher provides sufficient information about this study's participants and their unique contexts, as well as the data collection and analysis procedures used. These factors are described by Shenton (2004) in relation to the process of increasing the dependability of a study. The researcher also compared the findings of this study to previous qualitative

findings and found a high degree of correspondence, which further indicates a high level of dependability.

3.5.4 Confirmability

The term *confirmability* in qualitative research is comparable to the term *objectivity* in quantitative research. Shenton (2004) explains that the qualitative researcher should take steps to “help ensure as far as possible that the findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (p. 72). Shenton (2004) emphasises the role of triangulation in promoting the confirmability of a qualitative study. As described in 3.5.1, the researcher made use of triangulation in the current study to reduce the effect of investigator bias as described by Shenton (2004). The researcher further motivated why she favoured the methods used in this study, such as selecting a qualitative approach over the quantitative approach, which, according to Shenton (2004), further promotes the confirmability of a study.

According to Miles and Huberman (as cited in Shenton, 2004), a key criterion in promoting the confirmability of a study is the extent to which the researcher acknowledges his or her own predispositions. The findings of this study accurately address the research question. However, the participants also reported unanticipated information, which indicates that the researcher accurately reported on the experiences and ideas of the participants instead of her own aims and preferences. Thus, the researcher endeavoured to acknowledge any predispositions that she may have had and also tried to decrease the influence of these on the findings.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethics are the cornerstone for conducting effective and meaningful research (Drew, Hardman, & Hosp, 2008). Ethical considerations were particularly important in this qualitative research study because the main method of information collection was the use

of human interaction. It was the researcher's responsibility to protect the participants of the study, and she did so in line with the Ethical Code of the Health Professions Council of South Africa, as suggested by Terre Blanche et al. (2006). To ensure the ethical credibility of this study, the researcher submitted a proposal to the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa (UNISA) for approval prior to the commencement of the study. The ethical concerns in this qualitative research study centre on issues of informed consent, confidentiality, and the integrity and reflexivity of the researcher – issues discussed by Terre Blanche et al. (2006) pertaining to ethical considerations in qualitative research.

3.6.1 Informed Consent

The researcher created a consent form for the participants and included the following important information on the form, as suggested by Drew et al. (2008):

- the purpose of the study;
- what the research entails;
- the methods used in the study;
- what is expected from the participants during the study;
- the fact that participation is completely voluntary, anonymous, and without remuneration;
- the right of the participants to withdraw at any point during the study;
- the people who will have access to the information obtained from the participants;
- the steps to follow in the event of a participant encountering emotional harm as a result of their participation in the study; and
- the fact that the general findings of the study will be made available to the participants upon the completion of this study.

Due to the phenomenological nature of this study, the information obtained from the participants required them to revisit their experiences regarding the phenomenon under study, which is a process described by Creswell (2007). As participants are asked to share their past experiences in this kind of study, Creswell (2007) and Drew et al. (2008) point out that participants may be at risk of experiencing emotional discomfort in the form of psychological stress, embarrassment, or humiliation, as well as in the form of any other influences that could make the participants feel vulnerable by sharing their experiences. The most basic concern of any research study is that the participants should not be harmed by their participation in the study (Drew et al., 2008). The researcher remained aware of this concern throughout the process of conducting this study. The participants were requested to report any emotional discomfort they may have experienced as a result of participating in this study to the researcher or her supervisor. If any participant had reported emotional discomfort or harm, the researcher would have referred the particular participant to the UNISA Psychotherapy Clinic where psychological services are provided free of charge.

After all of the participants had read and understood the information given to them by the researcher, direct consent to participate in the study was obtained from each participant. The researcher provided all the participants with her contact details as well as with the contact details of her supervisor. The researcher assured the participants that she would be available to answer any questions related to the study for the duration of the study. After receiving the participants' narratives and after following up with each participant via email, the researcher thanked the participants for their time and their willingness to participate in this study. The researcher extended another invitation to the participants to report any discomfort they may have experienced as a result of participating in this study.

3.6.2 Confidentiality

The researcher considered several factors in order to protect the privacy of the participants and their families. These factors, as identified by Drew et al. (2008), included being sensitive to the data obtained from the participants, and the protecting the identity of the participants and their families. The researcher kept the identity of the participants and the information they provided strictly confidential at all times. The anonymity of the minor stepchildren was also respected. The stepchildren were not involved in the study at any point. Furthermore, their identities were kept confidential at all times. The researcher made use of fictitious names for the participants in the published data to further protect the identity of the participants. Only the researcher, her supervisor, and the second coder had access to the participants' written narratives.

3.6.3 Researcher Integrity and Reflexivity

The researcher strived to adhere to the high technical standards described by Mouton (2001) throughout the duration of the study by disclosing the theories, methods, and research design employed in this study as fully as possible. The researcher also endeavoured to adhere to these standards by reporting the findings fully and by not misrepresenting the findings in any way. Reflexivity refers to the researcher's process of continuous awareness and his or her reflection on his or her own biases, values, preconceptions, and assumptions about the phenomenon under study throughout the duration of the study (Creswell, 2012). As described earlier in this chapter, the researcher made use of data triangulation in the current study to prevent any misrepresentation of the findings. The data was triangulated with the researcher's supervisor and the second coder to reduce researcher bias.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, the researcher described the research design and method. The qualitative research design and phenomenological method used in this study were explained. These explanations were followed by descriptions of the data collection method and the data analysis technique. The researcher then discussed the trustworthiness of this qualitative study. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the ethical considerations associated with this study. The next chapter offers the research findings that are based on the participants' written narratives. The findings are presented in the form of a discussion of the main themes and subthemes that emerged from the data set.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This study focuses on the lived experiences of five stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren. According to the family systems perspective, a “system is greater than the sum of its parts” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008, p. 79). This notion suggests that a stepmother’s experiences cannot be understood in isolation – in other words, the individual components of a family system can never function independently of one another in the context of a family system (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). The researcher therefore recognises the stepfamily context to which these stepmothers belong. Due to the several years the participants have been part of their respective stepfamilies, the stepmothers are assumed to be experts in their field of experience in the context of being stepmothers to non-residential stepchildren.

This chapter presents the information obtained from the five participants. As described in Chapter 3, this study uses a qualitative research method. Thematic analysis has been used to organise the data carefully and accurately. This process has been achieved through reading and re-reading the data, and then organising it into major themes and subthemes. This chapter begins with concise background information about the research participants to provide the reader with each participant’s context. Thereafter, the major themes and subthemes are presented. Excerpts are cited verbatim from the participants’ written responses regarding their experiences to provide evidence of and to verify the themes and/or subthemes obtained from the participants’ written stories.

The researcher acknowledges that the themes may not necessarily be mutually exclusive and may therefore overlap and/or be interlinked. The researcher further acknowledges that these themes have been highlighted and interpreted through her own ‘lenses’ or understanding. Therefore, the researcher does not intend to present an ultimate

truth about the participants' realities. The researcher also acknowledges that the themes are not exhaustive in describing the lived experiences of these stepmothers.

4.1.1 Backgrounds of the Participants

All of the participants who took part in the study were women who were either engaged to or married to men who had minor children from a previous relationship. The stepmothers had no children of their own at the time of the stepfamily formation and at the time of the study. Furthermore, the stepchildren, at that time, lived primarily with their biological mothers, which implies that the participants' stepchildren were non-residential.

For reasons of confidentiality, the participants' background information and their contexts had to be discussed with great care to maintain the anonymity of the stepmothers involved in the study and that of their families. The participants were requested to choose pseudonyms, which they were then referred to throughout the study, namely Daisy, Violet, Rose, Lily, and Carnation.

4.1.1.1 Daisy. Daisy is in her mid-twenties. She met her fiancé six years ago. For the past three years, Daisy and her fiancé have been living together, and their plan is to get married in the near future. Her fiancé has two children, a boy and a girl, who are both in primary school. The children live primarily with their biological mother. They visit their father and Daisy every Wednesday afternoon. In addition, the children also visit Daisy and their father every second weekend and for half of all the school holidays. Although they have occasional differences, Daisy's fiancé and his ex-spouse have learnt to manage their difficulties for the sake of their children. Furthermore, the relationship between Daisy and her fiancé's ex-spouse is amicable.

4.1.1.2 Violet. Violet is in her early thirties. She met her husband ten years ago, and they have been married for six years. Violet's husband has two teenage daughters from his previous marriage. Her husband's children live with their biological mother. The

children spend every second weekend and half of all the school holidays with Violet and her husband. The relationship between Violet's husband and his ex-spouse is peaceful but distant because they keep interaction with each other to a bare minimum. Violet has no contact with her husband's ex-spouse.

4.1.1.3 Rose. Rose is in her mid-thirties. She met her husband eight years ago, and they have been married for one year. Rose's husband has three children from two previous relationships. The eldest daughter lives with her biological mother. This daughter initially visited her father and Rose every second weekend and for half of all the school holidays. During her teenage years this daughter distanced herself from Rose and her husband. Rose was introduced to her husband's eldest child shortly after Rose met her husband.

Rose's husband also has two younger daughters from another previous relationship. The twins were born shortly after Rose and her husband had started dating. From birth to the age of two, Rose and her husband were only allowed to visit the twins under the supervision of their biological mother. From the age of two years old, these younger children, who live primarily with their biological mother, have visited their father and Rose every second weekend and for half of all the school holidays. However, the contact arrangements with the two younger children changed six months ago. The children currently visit their father and Rose every second weekend for an extended weekend and for half of all the school holidays. Rose and her husband's relationship with his second ex-partner was initially volatile, but after a family crisis during which his second ex-partner experienced severe stress, the relationship between Rose, her husband, and his ex-partner has become more co-operative and mutually supportive.

4.1.1.4 Lily. Lily is in her early thirties. She met her husband four years ago, and they have been married for two years. Lily's husband has two children from his previous marriage. The children live with their biological mother. The children visit their father and

Lily every second weekend and for half of all the school holidays. The ex-spouse is hostile to Lily and her husband. Despite this animosity, Lily and her husband try to maintain a peaceful relationship with the ex-spouse for the sake of the children.

4.1.1.5 Carnation. Carnation is in her late thirties. She met her husband seven years ago, and they have been married for five years. Carnation’s husband has one child from his previous marriage – a daughter who lives with her biological mother. Due to the geographical distance, the child spends one weekend a month with her father and Carnation, as well as half of all the school holidays. The relationship between Carnation’s husband and his ex-spouse is hostile. Carnation has very little to no contact with her husband’s ex-spouse.

4.2 Themes

A summary of the identified major themes and subthemes is presented in Table 4.1 below for ease of reference.

Table 4.1

Summary of themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: A challenging role	Time-consuming role
	Disrupted routines
	The outsider
	Frustrations with the stepchildren’s biological mother
	Establishing relationships with stepchildren
Theme 2: A lack of acknowledgement	Financial demands
	Unappreciative biological mother
Theme 3: Conflicting family rules	Demanding, unappreciative stepchildren
	Conflicting rules and patterns between the primary and stepfamily households
Theme 4: Continued commitment	Conflicting opinions within the parental subsystem
	Supportive partners
	Improving relationships with stepchildren

The abovementioned themes and subthemes are discussed in detail in the next section.

4.2.1 Theme 1: A Challenging Role

The participants all reported unexpected challenges in their roles as stepmothers to non-residential stepchildren. Each participant commented on the demands and stressors that accompany the role of stepmother. The participants all expressed the opinion that, although they had been aware of the stepchildren and the associated responsibilities prior to becoming part of the family system, they had underestimated the demands that would be made and the extent to which these demands and responsibilities would affect their lives. The information obtained from the participants suggests that they have experienced challenges in several domains, especially during the early stages of stepfamily formation.

These challenges can be divided into five subthemes, namely the amount of time the stepmother role consumes, the disruption of routine, feelings of often being left out and of being an outsider in their own homes, frustration with the stepchildren's biological mothers, the process of establishing relationships with the stepchildren, and the financial demands placed on the families. These subthemes are discussed below.

4.2.1.1 Time-consuming role. All five participants reported experiencing the stepmother role as very time-consuming, particularly when their stepchildren visit. The participants described that the stepmother role is accompanied by certain responsibilities and duties that they consider not only challenging but also time-consuming. The participants commented on their experience that their stepchildren's visits have negatively affected the amount of personal time the participants have. Furthermore, time that the couple can spend together without the stepchildren being present is limited or lost during such visits. The extracts below from the participants' written records of their experiences

illustrate the participants' negative experiences regarding their personal time that is absorbed by the stepchildren and the stepmother role during their stepchildren's visits.

Daisy described her experience as follows: "I found I had stepped into a full on stepmom role and needed to cook for four and give up time with my partner." Daisy's comment illustrates how the presence of her stepchildren has affected her time, as she feels she has to dedicate the majority of her time to caring for them. From Daisy's description in this regard, it can be concluded that she feels robbed of the time she could have spent alone with her partner.

Violet also indicated that caring duties, such as cooking for and cleaning after her stepchildren, are time-consuming and cause her frustration because these duties fall solely on her. Violet highlighted the negativity of her experiences by referring to her time-consuming responsibilities and by questioning the reasonableness of these responsibilities being hers alone:

Wanneer het dit my werk geword om die kinders op Vrydae middag te gaan haal en heel middag alleen met hulle te sit terwyl my man 'n drankie drink saam sy vriende? Wanneer het dit my werk geword om hulle op en af te ry na partytjies en skool funksies? Wanneer het dit my verpligting geword om vrae te vra vir more se toets en die leerwerk te doen?

[When did it become my job to fetch the children on a Friday afternoon and entertain them alone while their dad is having a drink with his friends? And when did it become my job to drive up and down to take them to parties and school functions? And when did it become my responsibility to study for tomorrow's test with them and check whether they know the work?]

This extract illustrates the impact that Violet's duties have had on her personal time. Prior to being a part of a stepfamily, she was at liberty to spend her time on activities of her choice. To illustrate this point further, Violet commented, "*My man het gereeld gesê ek moet die meisies uitvat vir fliëk of inkopies om bietjie met hulle te bond*" ["My husband often said I should take the girls to the movies or shopping so that we can bond a bit"]. Her

husband's expectations led her frustration to escalate. Violet argued that she did not want to do these things with the children because they were not her friends, and spending time with her stepchildren was not how she would choose to spend her time. Violet stated, "*Ek wil eerder goed saam met hom (haar eggenoot) doen*" ["I would rather do things with him (her husband)"]. It can thus be said that Violet seems to prefer to spend her time going to the cinema and shopping with her husband because she sees him as her friend and companion. She does not seem to mind participating in these activities with the stepfamily as a whole, but she seems to prefer not to engage in them alone with her stepchildren and without her husband.

In addition to Violet's frustration regarding the time allocated to household chores and to the caring responsibilities regarding her stepchildren, she expressed some concern with regard to the impact of these caring responsibilities on her private time with her husband. Violet stated, "*Wanneer kan ons [Violet en haar man] 'n bietjie alleen met vakansie gaan, die kinders is altyd saam?*" ["When can we (Violet and her husband) go away on holiday alone together, the children are always with us?"].

Rose held the same opinion as the other participants. She felt strongly about the impact that the stepmother role has had on her personal time, particularly during her stepchildren's visits. Rose described the overwhelming task of having to care for very young children when she herself was quite young. She described the sacrifices she has had to make to take care of her stepchildren. Moreover, she felt that she has had to take care of someone else's family instead of spending time with her own family (such as her own parents and siblings). The following extract illustrates Rose's experience:

My trouble comes where I am sacrificing time with my family to raise somebody else's. I opened my arms and heart willingly to the children. Let me just state I was 27 at the time, giving up my weekends to look after children.

Rose's description of her experience is similar to Daisy's description. Rose also used the words "giving up my weekends", which implies that she feels as though she has had to sacrifice her time and energy to look after her stepchildren instead of engaging in activities of her choice.

Lily reported having a similar experience to Rose, Violet, and Daisy. She indicated that she felt challenged by the time-consuming duties attached to her role as a stepmother. Lily's responsibilities include preparing dinner and cleaning up afterwards by herself. It is Lily's experience that these duties are tiring and time-consuming. Lily reported the following:

He [her husband] may be staying up to help them [her stepchildren] with school work, which means I do all the supper preparations and cleaning up myself, and perhaps go to bed myself, allowing my husband to spend the time with his children.

Lily's comment indicates that she not only spends a lot of time on time-consuming chores, but she has also had to sacrifice valuable time with her husband. Lily added:

I have had to 'share' my husband with his children. This I do willingly and before I decided to marry him and I knew this was something I had to make peace with – as of course I want him to continue to be the great Dad that he is – and this is something I love about him, and I know I will experience with our own children. But of course as a newly-wed, I sometimes (selfishly) wish I could have him all to myself.

Although Lily displayed insight into her situation, this insight has not really softened her discomfort and frustration with regard to sacrificing her valuable time with her husband.

Carnation also emphasised the challenges she has experienced in terms of the time she has spent caring for her stepchild and the valuable time with her husband that she has had to sacrifice during her stepchild's visits. Carnation commented: "When she [Carnation's stepdaughter] comes to visit, I fulfil the role of 'Stepmom' as best as I can

with the normal parental duties that are expected”. Carnation elaborated on this topic by adding the following:

When she [Carnation’s stepdaughter] visits, I have to deal with shared time and affections, which is an adjustment and something I have never had to do in a relationship. Putting a child in the middle of a relationship (although not intentional) does complicate things. I am used to my husband and [me] spending all our time together. I love her [the stepdaughter] dearly but I am grateful to have my husband back at the end of her stay!

It seems difficult for Carnation to spend time fulfilling parenting duties with regard to her stepdaughter, but it seems even more difficult for her to sacrifice her time with her husband.

4.2.1.2 Disrupted routines. Each couple usually has a unique household routine that suits their lifestyle and that they maintain in the absence of the children. From the time that the children arrive in the father’s household for a visit until the end of their stay, the couple’s routine is disrupted. With every visit, the couple has to adjust their routine to accommodate the children, and thus they have to follow a new household routine to include the children. Four of the participants commented on the fact that they have felt uncomfortable with the continuous challenges caused by the disruption of their household routines during their stepchildren’s visits.

Daisy indicated that she initially found it difficult to adjust to ‘instant children’ because she did not have children of her own. To complicate matters, her stepchildren not only visit her and her husband every second weekend and for half of all the school holidays, but they also visit one afternoon a week, which further disrupts Daisy’s and her fiancé’s routine. The following comment illustrates Daisy’s experience: “At first it was quite an adjustment to have children in my life that I wasn’t used to, especially on a day during the week.”

Violet felt frustrated with the disruption of her routine, particularly with regard to the disturbance of her and her husband's sleep routine and their lack of intimate time during the children's visits. This frustration is clear from the following comment:

Een van die kinders het by my man in die bed geslaap voordat ek daar was en moes nou plek maak vir my. Ek wou haar geheel en al uit die kamer hê, maar my man het toegelaat dat daar elke aand 'n matras in die kamer gedra word en voor die bed geslaap word. Dit was 'n groot probleem wanneer ons intiem wou wees. Wel, dit was vir my.

[One of the children used to sleep in the bed with my husband before I was there, and now she had to make room for me. I wanted her out of the bedroom altogether, but my husband would allow her to bring in a mattress and sleep in front of our bed every night. It was a big problem when we wanted to be intimate. Well, it was for me.]

It appeared to be very frustrating for Violet having to share her bedroom with her stepchild. This arrangement severely affected both her sleep routine and the couple's intimate time.

Lily reported that her stepchildren's visits have disrupted her and her husband's routine. She explained that the presence of the children altered her and her husband's choice of activities, especially when they were dating. The following comment describes Lily's experience:

Having children around when we were dating made for an interesting dynamic. When the children were with their mom we did typical dating things alone like going to dinner and movies, whereas with the children we had to do more child-friendly activities e.g. ice-skating and adventure golf.

Although Lily did not state explicitly that it was difficult for her to deal with the disruption of her routine, she alluded to the continuous effort that she had to make in altering her and her husband's choice of activities to include the children.

Carnation reported her discomfort pertaining to the disruption of her and her husband's routine as follows:

Things are definitely a challenge when she [Carnation's stepdaughter] comes to visit during the holidays. The first week is a huge adjustment with three different personalities living in one house for a short period of time. I know the time we have with her is only for a short period, which helps me get through the 2-3 weeks. It is a huge adjustment to have an instant kid for weekends or three weeks. She constantly wants something and her needs come first. When you are not used to it, it is exhausting.

Although Carnation explained that she drew strength and patience from the awareness that the disruption of her routine is temporary, she seemed to experience this disruption as exhausting and was relieved to return to her established routine after her stepdaughter's visits.

4.2.1.3 The outsider. The information obtained from the participants in this study indicates that stepmothers do not always feel part of the stepfamily unit. When the couple is alone, the stepmother considers herself an insider – a beloved partner and an important member of the husband-wife dyad. However, when the children visit the couple, the father and his children often become insiders of a close unit while the stepmother becomes an outsider. It appears challenging for stepmothers to shift constantly between the insider and outsider position because the outsider position often leaves them feeling excluded from the stepfamily system. Four of the participants reported experiencing a sense of being left out and even deliberately excluded from the family system during their stepchildren's visits. Furthermore, one of the participants reported feeling like an outsider in the context of the relationship between her husband and his ex-partner.

Violet illustrated her experience of feeling left out of the family system as follows:

My man het elke Vrydag middag vir elke kind 'n boksie sjokolade gekoop en op hulle bed neergesit voor hulle kom kuier vir die naweek. In my kop dink ek 'Nou wat van my, ek hou ook van sjokolade.' As ons gaan fliet is daar 'n kind aan elke hand en ek drentel maar agterna. As ons videos kyk by die huis is daar 'n kind aan elke sy en ek moet maar langs een van die kinders inskuif.

[Every Friday afternoon, before the girls came to visit for the weekend, my husband would buy them each a little box of chocolate and leave it on their beds for them. In the back of my mind, I wonder: 'What about me? I also like chocolate.' When we go to the cinema there's a child holding his hand on each side of him and I'm left trotting behind them. When we watch videos at home there's a child on each side of him on the couch and I have to slide in next to one of the children.]

Rose reported a similar experience with regard to feeling like an outsider.

However, she identified that she has felt like an outsider in two different contexts, namely that of her new family, and that of the relationship between her husband and his second ex-partner. Rose commented on her experience of feeling like an outsider in the context of her new family by saying: "It's hard to go to birthdays and there's a mommy and daddy dance. It's hard to work hard for them and to be the only one left out that wasn't thanked publicly." It appears to be painful for Rose to feel like an outsider, particularly at some of her stepchildren's functions. Just like her stepchildren's biological parents, she has also worked hard for her stepchildren, but only the biological father and mother are usually recognised for their efforts.

Rose's painful experience of feeling like an outsider in the context of the relationship between her husband and his ex-partner is illustrated in the following description:

We were together a few months before the children were born. I accompanied him [my husband] to the hospital and I have never felt so confused as that day. New lives were starting and it felt like mine was now ending. These children represented a relationship with his ex that I would never have. I was supposed to be sharing that with him and now I was witnessing him have it with her.

Lily reported that she felt like an outsider when her stepchild questioned her father's decision to get married again. Although Lily claimed that she did not take the comment personally, she acknowledged that it was painful to be disregarded by her

stepchild and to be reminded that she was an unimportant member of the stepfamily system. Regarding the prominence of the relationships in a stepfamily, Lily also admitted to how hard it is to know that the children will always long for their biological parents to be reunited. Regardless of a child's feelings towards his or her stepmother and regardless of how well they may get along, the stepmother is never a stepchild's first choice. In Lily's experience, it is painful to be the outsider to the original nuclear family, especially when her roles as a stepmother and as a member of the stepfamily are questioned. Lily described this difficult experience as follows:

One of the things she [Lily's stepchild] said to him [Lily's husband] was why did he have to get married again. I didn't take this personally as I don't think it's that she doesn't like ME, but I think it's the longing in her heart for her biological Mom and Dad to be together, to be married, and to not have had to live through the divorce. But obviously it made me feel heart-sore.

Carnation reported similar experiences to those described by Lily, as her stepchild, on a few occasions, wished for her biological mother and father to be reunited. Carnation experienced her stepchild's wish as hurtful, and thus Carnation occasionally felt excluded and disregarded as an important member of the stepfamily. Carnation described her experience as follows: "The fact that my stepdaughter could not be with both her parents was an issue in her life and she sometimes verbalised that she wished her mom and dad still lived together." Carnation added that her stepdaughter would occasionally ignore her presence. In addition, Carnation's stepdaughter had conversations with Carnation's husband and asked him questions about Carnation when Carnation was present and able to answer these questions herself. Carnation described her experience as follows: "She [Carnation's stepchild] always defers to her father and asks him questions about me when I am in the room to answer." Carnation seems to feel like an outsider on these occasions

because she is completely ignored and her stepchild often speaks of her as though she is not present.

4.2.1.4 Frustrations with the stepchildren's biological mother. The participants suggested that they initially underestimated the biological mothers' impact on their lives, despite the fact that the participants were aware of the children's biological mothers from the beginning of the participants' relationships with their partners. Three of the participants reported having negative experiences with their stepchildren's biological mothers in the following areas: the biological mother's attitude towards the stepmother and the manner in which the biological mother has treated the father of the children.

Rose reported that her younger two stepchildren's biological mother treats her with disrespect in the children's presence and that the biological mother has influenced the stepchildren negatively against Rose and her husband:

The ex and I, we often hit heads, she swears at me in front of the children, I refuse to go there. So she phones with all these abusive things to say about her and my husband before my time. She doesn't rock up to fetch the children for hours and stuffs us around with time and birthdays. We lend her money for parties and then she cancels and never pays us back. It is an ongoing struggle and then when we don't want to play anymore she tells the children saying we are not involved enough.

It is clear from Rose's description that this pattern constantly repeats itself, which has left Rose feeling frustrated and powerless.

Lily reported having a similar experience to that described by Rose. Lily has also experienced a negative attitude and animosity from the biological mother of her stepchildren – she reported that the children's biological mother said the following: “Just wait until your dad marries Lily and you will see that he has no more time for you.” The statement does not appear to be directed at Lily, but Lily explained that, at the time, she indirectly felt that the biological mother intended to communicate that Lily's marriage to

the children's father would not be a positive experience for the children. Furthermore, Lily reported feeling concerned that the biological mother's negative influence on the children would complicate Lily's attempts to establish a relationship with them:

Off course these were hard things for me to hear and I felt some apprehension – how would the children respond to me living in the same house and being married to their Dad (versus them just seeing me sporadically when we were dating)?

Lily reported that the children's mother continued to be negative and hostile towards Lily and her husband after they were married:

In the first two years of marriage she would SMS or email to speak to my husband and at times say things like – tell Lily that she's not the children's mother – or we will hear via the children that their mom is saying things like – when your dad has more children he won't have time for you anymore.

Lily's experience suggests that the children's biological mother tried to sabotage the formation of new relationships in the stepfamily system, which undermined Lily's role as a co-parent and stepmother. Although Lily did not directly state that she had been left feeling frustrated and helpless by the actions of the biological mother, this appears to be the case.

Carnation reported feeling very uncomfortable with the manner in which her stepchild's biological mother has treated the child's father (Carnation's husband):

I think the most frustrating thing for me in this relationship is having to deal with the ex. She is very short, rude and abrupt with my husband, which I really don't believe he is deserving of. It makes me very upset to see her treat him this way, he is the father of her child and respect should be present regardless of their background.

In addition to feeling frustrated by the way in which the biological mother has treated her husband, Carnation also commented that she has been frustrated by the inability of the child's biological mother to respect agreed-upon logistical arrangements pertaining to the stepchild. Carnation described her experience as follows: “The ex also somehow

seems to mess up our holiday plans. We would plan holidays after having confirmed with her and then she would change them at the last minute.”

In comparison to Lily’s, Rose’s, and Carnation’s experiences, Violet reported a somewhat different experience pertaining to her stepchildren’s biological mother, who reportedly does not display blatant negativity towards Violet or her husband. However, Violet’s stepchildren are not allowed to refer to Violet as their stepmother in the presence of their biological mother. Violet described her experience as follows:

Ek is baie gelukkig as dit kom by die eks vrou. Sy het my in tien jaar nog nie eendag gepla nie. Ons kuier nie bymekaar nie en ons praat glad nie met mekaar nie. Wanneer daar groot besluite geneem moet word oor die kinders, gaan praat my man met haar. En dit is ook al. Hulle bel mekaar nie elke dag nie en lewe regtig twee aparte lewens. Sy pla ons nie vir geld en al die ander dinge waaroor geskeide mense baklei nie. En so min as wat ek van haar weet en sien en hoor weet ek wel dat die kinders nie na my mag verwys as hulle ‘stiefma’ in haar geselskap nie.

[I am very lucky when it comes to the ex-wife. She has never bothered me in 10 years. We don’t visit each other and we don’t speak to each other at all. When big decisions have to be taken with regard to the children, my husband goes and talks to her. They don’t speak to each other every day, they really live two separate lives. She doesn’t bother us for money and all the other things divorced people fight about. And as little as I know about her or see and hear from her, I do know that the children are not allowed to refer to me as their ‘stepmother’ in her presence.]

From Violet’s description, it seems that the children’s biological mother completely denies Violet’s role as the stepmother of her children. However, besides this experience, Violet did not report other negative experiences pertaining to her stepchildren’s biological mother.

4.2.1.5 Establishing relationships with the stepchildren. The data indicate that it has been a challenging process for the participants to build relationships with their stepchildren. All five participants commented on this challenge and their negative

experiences regarding the process of building close, functional relationships with their stepchildren. Furthermore, the participants seem to have gone out of their way to reach out to their stepchildren and to establish relationships with them.

Daisy shared the strategies she employed in her deliberate attempt to build relationships with her stepchildren:

I believe that the fact that I was so accepting of his children and also willing to go the extra mile and love them as I would my own has definitely contributed to the success of our relationship as a couple.

However, Daisy acknowledged that it is not an easy process, saying: “It comes with many challenges though.”

Violet reported that she initially struggled to connect with her stepchildren. She said she kept quiet about her own feelings in an attempt to avoid conflict with her stepchildren and her husband, and to avoid being perceived as the “wicked stepmother”.

Violet described her experience as follows: “*Ek het nooit gepraat oor my gevoelens/irritasies nie. Ek wou nie gehad het hulle moes dink ek is 'n monster nie*” [“I never spoke about my feelings or the things that irritated me. I did not want them to think that I am a monster”]. Violet added:

Die tye wat ek wel alleen saam die kinders by die huis was het ek geen moeite gedoen om met hulle te praat nie. Ek was nie lelik nie, maar daar was nie lang gesprekke en storievertellery oor en weer nie.

[During the times I was home alone with the children, I made no effort to talk to them. I was not horrible, but there were no long conversations or sharing of stories.]

Violet acknowledged that she initially did not go out of her way to connect with and to establish relationships with her stepchildren. Violet explained that, instead of communicating her feelings directly to her stepchildren, she expected her husband to act as the middleman or intermediary between her and his children. Violet illustrated her experience as follows:

Ek sou gereeld as ek en my man alleen was 'n skimp gooi en sê: 'iemand het alweer nie die kaste afgevee nie', of: 'ek voel baie ongemaklik as hulle in my kamer inloop terwyl ek aantrek ens'. Met hierdie aanmerkings het ek verwag dat hy die kinders moes aanspreek om hulle te kry om dinge te doen soos ek dit wou hê. Min wetend het hy ook later lekker gatvol geraak vir my. Daar is geen ander beskrywing nie. Hy het telke male vir my gesê as die kinders iets doen wat my pla, moet ek direk met hulle praat. Hy het moeg geraak daarvoor om middelman te speel en altyd soos die mislukte pa te lyk wat heeldag loop en baklei en raas.

[When we were alone, I would regularly hint and say: 'Somebody did not wipe the counter again' or 'I feel very uncomfortable when they [the children] walk into my room when I am getting dressed'. With these comments, I expected him to speak to the children to get them to do things the way I wanted them to. Little did I know that he later became frustrated with me. He repeatedly told me to talk to the children directly when they did something that bothered me. He got tired of being the intermediary and looking like the miserable father who fights and reprimands all day.]

Violet's description shows how challenging she found this early phase of the relationship with her stepchildren. She did not want to be labelled a horrible stepmother, but she also did not know what she could have done differently. In contrast to Daisy's purposeful attempt to build relationships with her stepchildren, Violet did not initially go out of her way to reach out to her stepchildren and to build relationships with them, despite her desire to avoid conflict and a negative stepmother image. Violet's initial lack of effort to build relationships with her stepchildren not only led her to experience much frustration, but also an initially distant relationship between her and her stepchildren. Furthermore, Violet's husband became annoyed with Violet's apparently passive resistance to his children. Violet also held the unrealistic expectation that her husband would act as an intermediary between her and his children, which bothered him.

It appears that Violet suppressed her frustration for a long time. However, her frustration eventually forced her to take responsibility for her relationships with her

stepchildren, and to make a conscious effort to integrate with the children, to define her role as a stepmother, and to establish workable relationships with the children. Violet described her experience as follows:

Ek het besluit om myself reg te ruk. Ek het besluit ek is nou die vrou van die huis en my man het my al menigte kere toestemming gegee om my sê te sê as dinge nie reg is nie. Om takies uit te deel soos skottelgoed was en vat jou vuil glase kombuis toe. Dit was moeilik vir my, maar vir my eie emosionele gesondheid en die gesondheid van my huwelik moes ek nou sterk wees. Ek het op 'n mooi manier begin praat as iets pla. Ek het direk met die kinders gepraat. Nie lelik of ongeskik nie. Ek het 'n punt daarvan gemaak om uit te vra oor dinge om te probeer 'n gesprek aan die gang hou. Dit was die beste besluit wat ek kon neem.

[I decided to pull myself together. I decided that I was after all the woman of the house and my husband repeatedly gave me permission to speak up if something was wrong. To assign chores like washing the dishes and asking the children please to take the dirty glasses to the kitchen. It was difficult for me, but for my emotional wellbeing and the wellbeing of my marriage it was time for me to be strong. I began to speak to them in a nice way about it when something bothered me. I spoke to them directly. I was not horrid or rude. I made a special effort to ask them about various things and to keep a conversation going. That was the best decision that I could make.]

It seems as though this change in Violet's behaviour marked a significant turning point in the further development of the relationships between her and her stepchildren.

Violet's decision not only had a positively effect on her relationship with her stepchildren, but it also improved her relationship with her husband because she no longer expected him to act as an intermediary between her and the children.

Rose reported various challenges with regard to her establishing relationships with her stepchildren. However, despite the high levels of frustration she experienced, she has not given up on trying to build relationships with them. Rose described her experience as follows:

When I met my husband I was introduced to his eldest. And it was wonderful. This precious little thing sat on my lap and confided in me. We had movie nights and danced together at parties and did all sorts of things together. Being a young woman with no kids on my side, I decided that I was going into this relationship with a man who has children with a specific state of mind. Our house would be a stable one and I wanted the children to feel loved and comfortable and part of our lives completely. We all stand together. I do not want to replace their mother but I would like to be the adult they can call on whenever they need support or guidance.

Rose reported that her initial, positive experience with her eldest stepchild took an unpleasant turn when the child reached puberty and unexpectedly changed her attitude, causing Rose intense emotional pain and leaving her with a sense of rejection:

Then she [Rose's stepchild] hit puberty and all I can say is oh my. I really tried to do special things for her, to almost single her out to feel special. And it was always thrown back in my face. It got so bad that whenever she came to visit, she would refuse to respect me. Used to shout orders at me and ignore me when I ask for respect. She did this once and her dad overheard and there was a big ordeal and it resulted in her being dropped off at home. We had a gap year after that. She refused to see us. After an incident I called her biological mother and set up a meeting between everyone to sort this out. We did just that. She and her father sorted out their problems. From that day on we are now incredibly close and I am so proud of her, she has really blossomed into this beautiful young woman with a really beautiful and caring heart. In fact, she has a very, very special place in my heart.

Although Rose's efforts to reach out to her stepchild and to rekindle the relationship were successful at the time, it seems that their relationship has remained fragile and complicated. Their relationship took another negative turn about one year after they had reunited as a stepfamily. Rose's disappointment is clear from the following comment:

The eldest has changed completely, she does not visit anymore unless she requires money, she is demanding and mean all the time to my husband and I. I have had enough. I know her mother stokes the fire but surely at her age you should have a clue about what you personally

decide. I feel sad for my husband; all he wants is a relationship and therefore gives in to her demands, which is not helping. She does not accept me as part of the family, she says she does and has me in photos on Facebook in the family album, although when decisions are made she refuses to have me present or acknowledge that I have a say. She refuses to thank me for things I have done for her but always thanks her father.

Rose struggled to establish relationships with her two younger stepchildren from the time of their birth. Rose described her painful experience as follows:

So the children were born. We had to visit them under her [the biological mother's] supervision and I was not allowed to hold them at all. In fact, every time a child was handed to me it was snatched out my hands a few seconds later. In fact I was banned from her house in the beginning as I apparently upset her too much. The mother that is. After a couple of years, my husband decided that he wanted to take the children for weekends, a huge fight resulted and apparently she didn't trust me with her children. It insulted me hugely.

The children's biological mother seems to have caused Rose intense emotional discomfort at the time by making it difficult for Rose to connect with and to establish relationships with the children. Despite the biological mother's efforts to make things difficult for Rose, Rose chose to persevere, and she continued to reach out to her stepchildren to establish a relationship with them. The data suggest that her stepchildren's disrespectful behaviour has further challenged her attempts to establish a functional relationship with them. Rose's disappointment is illustrated by the following comment:

They [the stepchildren] have no manners, they scream, eat with their mouths open, break anything they touch. They cannot have a toy without breaking it, no respect of anyone or anything around them. The naughty corner is pretty much occupied at least four times a weekend. I woke up one morning, took them downstairs, put cartoons on while I made breakfast and one of the children said: 'Hey, where is my food.' I almost flipped. I walked over to her and asked her who she thought she was speaking to. And she said: 'To you.'

A positive change occurred in the relationship between Rose and her husband's second ex-partner after the ex-partner experienced a personal family crisis. Rose stepped in

to offer support and comfort to her stepchildren's biological mother during this time, which was a turning point in their relationship:

The mom made a change around. She had a personal crisis recently and I helped her get back on her feet and helped out with the children when she just couldn't face her day. Dynamics have changed between us now, we are mates, not like best mates, but we pull together when the children need us. Much better than being arch enemies.

The relationship between Rose and her husband's second ex-partner therefore changed and improved. As a result, there has also been a positive change in the relationship between Rose and her stepchildren. Rose commented: "I see a difference with the children as well now, they have become such obedient sweet little children and they have responsibilities at home i.e. keeping their room and toys in order and rewards for inspection times." It seems that the change in the biological mother's attitude towards Rose has led the children to change their attitude towards her too, leading them to treat her with more respect.

Carnation reported that she has often made an effort to travel with her husband to visit her stepchild, who resides in another province. Carnation illustrated her experience by making the following comment:

As my relationship grew with my husband, my stepdaughter soon began to realise that I was becoming part of her daddy's life, and I occasionally commuted with my husband to spend time with my stepdaughter and build a relationship with her.

Despite travelling with her husband to see her stepchild and to build a relationship with her stepchild, Carnation has been frustrated at not having regular telephonic contact with her stepchild between these visits. Carnation's disappointment is clear from the following comment: "It would upset me to think that we could have so much fun together – she would tell me that she loves me but when she is back with her mother, at times she refused to talk to me." It seems that the episodic visits have been challenging for Carnation because she mentioned the need to reconnect with her stepchild during each visit because

of the break in communication between these visits. Carnation did not state directly that she felt concerned about the possibility that her relationship with her stepchild would deteriorate without regular telephonic contact between their visits. However, the presence of such feelings can be concluded from the information available.

4.2.1.6 Financial demands. Two of the participants' responses suggest that stepfamily systems face additional financial demands when compared to nuclear families. Finances must stretch to maintain not just one household, but two – the biological parent/stepparent household and the household in which the children reside. These two participants emphasised that finances were challenging.

Rose conveyed her concerns as follows:

I have a problem with finances. I understand that things need to be covered however the child is spoilt. I battle when she demands something at three times the price when the same thing is available for much less and I can't spend money on my hair every six weeks because the little brat wants and wants and now my finances are affected because of her desires.

It appears that although Rose earns her own money, she has little or no say over how the money in the household is spent with regard to her stepchild. In addition to having very little say about how her financial contribution to her stepchild is spent, Rose's annoyance is compounded by the fact that she has had to forfeit spending her own money on personal care because her stepchild's demands have to be met prior to her own.

Carnation emphasised her frustration with regard to the additional financial responsibility that she and her husband have towards her stepchild. She described this challenge as follows:

Another challenge we have is finances. We pay 100% medical for my stepdaughter and it seems just as our medical aid runs out she gets sick. She's been on four sets of antibiotics and had tests done and we have to pay for it all. The ex just sends my husband messages asking him to pay more money.

Carnation reported another stressful circumstance, in addition to the financial responsibility for her stepchild:

Unfortunately for my husband, his child and her mom moved to another province. My husband only got to see his daughter once a month when he diligently flew to her to spend time with her on a weekend. My husband and his daughter would stay at a B&B and spend the weekend visiting family, going to the beach, the aquarium and having a wonderful, yet short lived 48 hours.

It seems that the financial implications of maintaining contact with the minor child are an ongoing challenge for the couple. Carnation and her husband have had to purchase air tickets, rent a car, pay for accommodation, and spend money on food and entertainment in order to have contact with the child. Carnation explained that she felt helpless and frustrated in this situation because, at the time, it did not seem to her that this financial responsibility would become any lighter in the near future.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Lack of Acknowledgement

A second common theme emerged from the data analysed, namely a general lack of acknowledgement of a stepmother's role by important people in different contexts. All five participants emphasised that although they invest significant time and effort in their respective stepchildren, they have all experienced a lack of acknowledgement from both the children's biological mothers and the stepchildren themselves.

4.2.2.1 The unappreciative biological mother. Three of the stepmothers felt that their efforts to take good care of their stepchildren are seldom appreciated or acknowledged by the children's biological mothers.

The biological mother of Violet's stepchildren does not allow the children to refer to Violet as their stepmother. Violet described her experience as follows: "*So min as wat ek van haar weet en sien en hoor weet ek wel dat die kinders nie na my mag verwys as hulle 'stiefma' in haar geselskap nie*" ["As little as I see or hear from hear from her (the

biological mother), I do know that the children are not allowed to refer to me as their ‘stepmother’ in her presence”]. It appears that the children’s biological mother ignores Violet as a stepmother. Furthermore, this biological mother does not appear to appreciate or respect the parental duties that Violet has fulfilled with regard to the children.

Rose reported that the younger two children’s biological mother has openly criticised Rose for her efforts to care for her stepchildren for several years. Rose also experienced a lack of appreciation for and acknowledgement of the hard work she has done in caring for her young stepchildren, although Rose has fulfilled a full parenting role since her stepchildren were toddlers:

I changed diapers, burped, fed, bathed and played. I wake up for them in the nights when they cried and sus [soothe] them back to sleep. And every Sunday we would take them home I would get a nasty SMS. Saying my kids are so tired, why don’t you let them sleep? Then the next thing is, my kids are so awake, what did you give them? My kids are not sick, they vomited because they miss me and don’t want to be with you. The best one ever was when I took them to a children’s party one day. I believe a child needs rules and routine, it makes them feel secure and comfortable. The girls know that before any sweets are eaten, a meal will be finished. As kiddie’s parties go, they were sent home [with] a party pack of sweets. I got an SMS saying what a terrible mother I am, all I do is feed them sweets to get in their favour.

Rose was quite young herself when her stepchildren were born. She has worked very hard to care for her stepchildren. Although she did not state directly that she feels helpless and frustrated because the children’s biological mother does not appreciate the hard work and the care she has provided to her stepchildren, she does seem to be affected by the situation. The biological mother’s attitude towards Rose only changed after the biological mother experienced a personal family crisis, as explained earlier in this chapter.

Carnation commented on her frustration regarding the biological mother’s lack of acknowledgement of Carnation as a stepmother as follows:

I was creating a memory photo album with my stepdaughter – with photos from her visits to us. My husband had a bunch of pictures of his ex that he gave to his daughter to give to her mom. The next time she came to visit, all the pictures of the ex were in the memory book we had created!

It appears that Carnation felt as though the biological mother, through her actions, indicated that Carnation's efforts were not welcome or appreciated. Carnation indicated feeling discouraged and frustrated. She seems to feel that it does not matter what she does or how well she does it, because her stepchild's biological mother will never appreciate her efforts.

4.2.2.2 Demanding, unappreciative stepchildren. Four participants reported that they found it difficult to adjust and respond to the demands of their stepchildren during visits. These four participants shared the negative experience of working hard for their stepchildren and investing time and effort in their stepfamilies, without receiving any rewards in the form of gratitude and acknowledgement from their stepchildren.

Violet reported feeling frustrated with her stepchildren because they do not respect the stepfamily's household rules: "*Hulle [die kinders] vee nie die kombuisblad af nadat hulle toebroodjies maak, pap, koffie, melk ens. gemors het nie, ek moet dit doen. Niemand help my met kos maak of met die skottelgoed na etes nie*" ["They (the stepchildren) do not clean the kitchen counter after they have made sandwiches or spilt cereal, coffee, milk, etc., I must do it. No one helps to prepare food or helps me to wash dishes after meals"]. Not only does Violet have to clean up after her stepchildren, but she also does not receive any appreciation for her efforts. Furthermore, Violet seems annoyed by the fact that no one else in the family offers to help her with the household chores, which leaves her feeling like a housekeeper or servant and not like a valued, respected member of the family.

Rose has had a similar experience to Violet, particularly with regard to her eldest stepchild. Rose has gone out of her way to do special things for this stepdaughter, but

when her stepdaughter became an adolescent, she rejected all Rose's efforts – she commented as follows:

Then she hit 14 and oh my... All I can say is oh my. I would buy her birthday presents and her dad would tell her the effort I put in and she would only thank him and completely ignore me. I really tried to do special things for her, to make her feel special. And it was always thrown back in my face. It is just incredibly hard to put all this effort in and be absolutely nobody.

It has clearly been difficult and painful for Rose to be disregarded continuously, despite her efforts and the affection she has given to her stepchild. Rose added: “**Nothing will ever be good enough.**” Rose's use of bold print emphasises the intensity of her sense that her actions would never be good enough. Rose explained her feelings with regard to the above statement as follows:

It's hard to put in the effort and be disregarded. It's hard when she [the stepchild] hurts you intentionally and gets pleasure from doing so. It's hard when you actually just don't count. Good enough to do the work but not good enough for the result.

It appears as though Rose has reached a stage of despondency about her relationship with her eldest stepchild, because she feels that no matter how hard she tries, the child will not be grateful or appreciative of her efforts.

Rose also experienced a lack of acknowledgement for her co-parental role. Her negative experience and frustration in this regard is illustrated as follows:

I woke up one morning, took them downstairs, put cartoons on while I made breakfast and one of the girls said “Hey, where is my food?” I almost flipped. I walked over to her and I asked her who she thought she was speaking to. And she said to you. I explained that I would not be treated without respect and you do not speak to anyone like that.

Lily also indicated that it has been particularly challenging for her to fulfil a full parental role with regard to her stepchildren:

It is probably the tension between fulfilling the ‘mom’ role to them in many ways like shopping for them, cooking dinner, making their sandwiches, driving them around and

helping them with homework etc., yet not having the freedom to be all that a ‘mom’ typically is.

It appears that Lily feels that although she has fulfilled a parental role, she has not received the same rewards and acknowledgement, such as gratitude and respect, which she believes a mother would typically receive from her children.

Carnation reported having a similar experience to Lily, in that she feels that her efforts and dedication to fulfilling parental duties have not been appreciated or acknowledged by her stepchild. She commented as follows: “The reality is she is not my child. I try my best to give her what a mother would give her but sometimes feel the rewards are not the same as if she was my own child.”

4.2.3 Theme 3: Conflicting Family Rules and Patterns

Three participants indicated that their stepchildren tend to challenge the stepfamily system’s rules and patterns because these children also belong to another family system with different family rules and patterns. They reported difficulties in two particular contexts, namely rules and patterns in the primary household that conflict with those in the stepfamily household and conflicting opinions pertaining to the rules and patterns within the parental subsystem.

4.2.3.1 Conflicting rules and patterns between the primary and stepfamily households. Violet clashed with her stepchildren because they displayed behaviour that was allowed in their primary household, but that she found unacceptable in her household:

Sekere dinge wat hulle gedoen het het my net geweldig geirriteer. Hulle is dalk anders grootgemaak as wat ek was en so het hulle ook dan dinge anders gedoen as wat ek wou hê dit moes gedoen word. Verskoon my woord irritasie, maar dis presies hoe ek gevoel het. Want hoekom kan hulle nie dink soos ek nie? Dis al wat dit heelyd was, IRRITASIE.

[Certain things they did just irritated me terribly. Maybe it is because they are being raised differently from the way I was raised, and therefore they do things differently to the way I

want them to do them. Excuse the word irritation, but it is the way I feel. Why can't they think like I do? It is all it was at one stage, IRRITATION].

Violet experienced frustration because the children learnt behaviour in their primary household that was inconsistent with the behaviour that she found acceptable in the stepfamily household.

Rose commented on her experience pertaining to the younger two children's behaviour in their primary household versus the behaviour that she finds acceptable as follows:

They [the stepchildren] have no manners, they scream, eat with their mouths open, break anything they touch. They cannot have a toy without breaking it, no respect for anyone or anything around them. The naughty corner is pretty much occupied at least 4 times a weekend. Every weekend they visit it is a constant battle. I try and try to teach them manners, I try to teach them the alphabet, I try to teach them colours and shapes, however the next time they come it is totally forgotten already.

It is evident from Rose's experience that she is frustrated by the children's behaviour. It is also evident that she has attempted to teach the stepchildren the rules of the stepfamily household. However, the children spend most of their time in the primary household with their biological mother, so it is difficult for Rose to enforce another set of household rules and patterns.

Carnation also reported challenges with regard to household rules. Carnation's household rules differ greatly from the rules and patterns that apply in her stepchild's primary household. She described her experience as follows:

While she [stepchild] is with us, we give her chores to do and pocket money. We encourage her to eat healthy and she sleeps in her own bed, but we find that when she is with her mom, the discipline is lacking. It seems that the effort we put in with discipline is lost when she goes home.

Like Violet and Rose, Carnation and her husband have been confronted with the challenge of dealing with the conflict between the rules and patterns that apply in the child's primary household and those that apply in their home.

4.2.3.2 Conflicting opinions within the parental subsystem. In nuclear families, biological parents often have conflicting opinions pertaining to parenting styles and approaches to childcare activities and discipline. One of the challenges of successful parenting is to accommodate each other's views and to negotiate one set of household rules and discipline. Two of the participants commented on their discomfort pertaining to the conflicting opinions between them and their partners regarding discipline and the manner in which the children are raised. The information obtained from the two participants suggests that stepmothers experience frustration with regard to their views and opinions not carrying the same weight as the views of biological parents. The stepmothers also conveyed their unhappiness about their experience that their opinions were not always welcome, or considered valuable, regarding household discipline and rules. Daisy described her experience as follows:

I have my own ideas of how I would raise my child one day and so find myself trying to tell my partner how to raise his. Unfortunately he only does half of the raising of his children so there is little space for all of my ideas. There are many ways in which his children are brought up that I find myself completely disagreeing with. At the same time there are things that I would do exactly the same. We are planning on having our own child one day and I think we will do many things differently, but I hope they have a lot of the same moral fibres that his children have now and so there will be many things we do the same.

Some of Daisy's views pertaining to childrearing are evidently different to those held by the children's biological mother and father. Despite voicing her appreciation of some of the ways in which her partner raises his children, Daisy has some opinions that clearly differ from her partner's opinions on how the children are raised. These initial

conflicting opinions between Daisy and her partner pertaining to the upbringing of the children made it difficult for Daisy to accept that there is little room for her input.

Violet also experienced frustration caused by conflicting views and opinions between Violet and her partner regarding childcare activities. Violet described her experience as follows: “*Ons [ek en my man] het nooit regtig baklei nie, behalwe as dit by die kinders gekom het*” [“We [my husband and I] never really fought, except when it came to the children”]. Violet explains that the conflict between her and her husband was mostly about the children due to the lack of clear boundaries between Violet’s husband and his children. Violet illustrated her frustration with several examples:

Die jongste dogtertjie het by pappa in die bed geslaap voordat ek daar was en sy moes nou plek maak vir my. Ek wou haar geheel en al uit die kamer hê maar pappa het toegelaat dat daar elke aand ’n matras in die kamer gedra word en voor die bed geslaap word. Dit was ’n groot probleem wanneer ons intiem wou wees. Wel dit was vir my.

[The youngest daughter slept in the bed with [her] Daddy before I was there and she had to now make space for me. I wanted her out of the room completely but [her] Daddy allowed a mattress to be brought into the room every night and she slept in front of the bed. It was a big problem when we wanted to be intimate. Well it was for me.]

This example indicates Violet’s unhappiness and discomfort with her husband’s opinion that it is acceptable for the child to share the same room as Violet and her husband. It is clear that Violet felt that the couple’s privacy was intruded on and that her opinion in this regard was not heard. Violet also described her discomfort with regard to boundaries because she disagreed with her husband’s opinion in terms of showering routines. She provided another example:

Die dogter van 9 het saam pappa gestort vir ’n hele ruk nog in ons verhouding. Dit het my geïrreiteer. Die saam stort het opgehou nadat ek genoem het dat ek dink sy is nou oud genoeg om dit alleen te doen.

[The 9 year old daughter showered with [her] Daddy for a long time into the duration of our relationship. It irritated me. Their showering together stopped after I mentioned that I thought she was old enough to shower on her own.]

Violet further commented on her frustration pertaining to the children's behaviour that was acceptable to her husband but which Violet felt was inappropriate and described her experience as follows:

Die kinders het elke Desember vakansie saam pappa gaan kamp en so het hulle [pappa en kinders] in die gewoonte verval om almal uit een badkamer sakkie te leef. Met my eerste vakansie saam met hulle het dit my verskriklik geïrriteer. Net so voor die derde vakansie stel ek voor ons koop nuwe sakkies vir die kinders en ek was nie baie gewild nie want ek probeer dinge verander wat 'n instelling was voor my tyd.

[The children went camping every December holiday with [their] Daddy and they all (Daddy and the children) shared a toiletry bag. During my first holiday with them, it irritated me terribly. Just before the third holiday, I suggested we buy new toiletry bags for the children and I was not very popular because I tried to change things that were set before my time.]

Violet further expressed this frustration: “*Hoekom kan hulle [kinders] nie klop voor hulle die privaatheid van my kamer binne kom nie? Hoekom gebruik hulle [kinders] my handdoek. Heg hulle nie waarde aan privaatheid en higiëne nie?*”. [“Why can't they [the children] not knock before entering the privacy of my room? Why do they (the children) use my towel? Do they not value privacy and hygiene?”].

From Violet's next description it is clear that both Violet and her husband initially had conflicting opinions about how the other partner should behave towards the children:

Ek sou gereeld as ek en pappa alleen was 'n skimp gooi en sê: 'Iemand het alweer nie die kas afgevee nie' of 'Ek voel baie ongemaklik as hulle in my kamer inloop terwyl ek aantrek'. Met hierdie aanmerkings het ek verwag dat hy die kinders moes aanspreek om hulle te kry om dinge te doen soos ek dit wou hê. Min wetend het hy ook later lekker gatvol geraak vir my. Hy het telke male vir my gesê as die kinders iets doen wat my pla moet ek direk met hulle

praat. Hy het moeg geraak daarvan om middelman te speel en altyd soos die mislike pa te lyk wat heeldag loop en baklei en raas.

[When we were alone, I would regularly hint and say: ‘Somebody did not wipe the counter again’ or ‘I feel very uncomfortable when they [the children] walk into my room when I am getting dressed’. With these comments, I expected him to speak to the children to get them to do things the way I wanted them to. Little did I know that he later became frustrated with me. He repeatedly told me to talk to the children directly when they did something that bothered me. He got tired of being the intermediary and looking like the miserable father who fights and reprimands all day.]

Violet acknowledges that she initially expected her husband to reprimand the children for their behaviour that was not acceptable to her. However, her husband became frustrated because he did not agree with Violet’s opinion that he must be the one to reprimand the children for doing things Violet was not happy about. Violet further described that she was frustrated by her husband’s expectations regarding her having to take the children out and entertain them with the goal of strengthening the relationship between her and the children. At that time, she did not have the same goals with regard to bonding and spending time with the children. Violet described her experience as follows: *“Hy het gereeld gesê ek moet die kinders uit vat vir ’n fliek of inkopies om met hulle te bond. Ek wou niks weet van fliek en inkopies met die kinders nie”*. [“He often told me that I should take the children out for a movie or shopping to bond with them. I did not want to know anything about movies and shopping with the children”].

4.2.4 Theme 4: Continued Commitment

Although the participants strongly agreed that there are challenges in different domains regarding their roles as stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren, all five participants shared the opinion that their efforts, commitment to their stepfamilies, and attempts to build relationships with their stepchildren are worthwhile. They all highlighted one or both of the following key factors that have given them the strength to persevere and

to stay committed to their stepfamilies: the importance of the support received from their partners and their experience that stepfamily relationships improve over time.

4.2.4.1 Supportive partners. Three of the participants reported that they experience their relationships with their partners as healthy and very supportive. They indicated receiving ample support and acknowledgement from their partners with regard to their roles as stepmothers. They reported that despite the setbacks and challenges they have endured in their capacity as stepmothers, they have found comfort in and have drawn strength from their partners' support, appreciation, and commitment – all of which makes them feel as if their efforts and perseverance to stay committed to their stepfamilies are worthwhile.

Rose reported that her husband has supported her in her role as a stepmother and co-parent since the beginning of their relationship:

My husband always encouraged me to make decisions with regards to the children, he supports my decisions with them and we stand together in every decision, the kids see us as a unit, we do not allow them to play one up against the other. I do not have any other support.

Rose added: “My husband is worth it so much I would do it [stay committed to her stepfamily] a hundred times over.” From Rose's description regarding her relationship with her husband it can be concluded that the couple unit is a well functioning unit with clear communication, boundaries and mutual respect. Rose's experience further suggests that it is important to have a well functioning couple unit in place so that the children can see them as one unit. The importance of her husband's support is underlined by her comment that he is the only support she has and that his support is so valuable to her that she would go through it all again, despite all the painful challenges she has experienced as a stepmother.

Similar to the experience that Rose described, Lily reported that her husband is very supportive and attentive to her needs:

My husband and family are very supportive and understanding. I must say my husband is very sensitive to my needs, and he expresses his appreciation to me that I am accommodating, and when we have our time alone, he gives me his 100% attention. I must give credit to my husband and the amazing man and father that he is.

Similar to Rose and her husband's experience, Lily and her husband also seem to have a well functioning couple unit.

Carnation also commented on her husband's sensitivity to her needs as follows:

"My husband makes it all worth it, he appreciates my efforts and supports me a lot. He is sensitive to my needs." Carnation seems to feel that her husband's support and his appreciation of her efforts as a stepmother are the most important factors that have kept her motivated to stay committed to her stepfamily. It seems as though Rose, Lily and Carnation identify their husbands' support as the core of their strength, enabling them to face the challenges that are part of the stepmother role.

4.2.4.2 Changing relationships over time. Four of the participants indicated that their relationships with their stepchildren have improved and have become easier over time. They believe that relationships in stepfamilies require constant hard work and dedication, and that relationships may be more of a challenge in stepfamilies than in nuclear families.

Daisy has had very challenging experiences with one of her stepchildren, but fewer problems with the other child – the relationship has constantly fluctuated between closeness, hostility, and disrespect:

I am very blessed to have such a good relationship with both children now, and like most relationships you have to constantly work on it, but we all have a fundamental respect for each other which goes a long way.

Daisy's experience shows that she is of the opinion that stepfamily relationships can improve. However, she emphasised that it is important for all of the family members to work together to contribute to the strengthening of family relationships.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Violet indicated that her initial relationship with her stepchildren was distant and cold. However, once Violet made a conscious decision to change her approach towards her stepchildren, their relationships changed and improved: “*Vandag (ses jaar later) is ek trots om hulle my dogters te noem, my hart is vol blydschap elke keer as ek hulle sien en ek kan eerlik se ek is BAIE LIEF vir hulle*”. [Today (six years later) I am proud to call them my daughters, I am full of joy when I see them and I can honestly say that I love them VERY MUCH].

Violet’s experience, over a period of six years, particularly her conscious effort to work on her relationship with her stepchildren (as described earlier in this chapter), shows that she eventually experienced true affection towards her stepchildren. Furthermore, her relationship with her stepchildren has become meaningful to her, which has motivated her to become even closer to her stepchildren. Violet further described her experience regarding her relationship with her stepchildren as follows:

Die kinders noem my Mamma V, hulle bel my en kom gesels met my as iets pla. Ek word uitgenooi om te deel in Moeder – Dogter tee’s/funksies. Hulle is nie skaam vir my voor hulle vriende nie. Het die voorreg gehad om te deel in die een se matriekafskeid besluite verlede jaar. Ek hoor gereeld hoe hulle waardeer dat ek hulle Pa weer gelukkig gemaak het.

[The children call me Mommy V, they call me and come and talk to me when something bothers them. I get invited to mother-daughter teas/functions. They are not embarrassed by my presence in front of their friends. [I] had the privilege of being part of the decision-making with regard to the one’s matric farewell last year. I often hear how much they appreciate the fact that I made their father happy again.]

Violet became more kind, affectionate, and friendly towards her stepchildren over time. In turn, her stepchildren also responded with kindness and affection towards her.

Rose reported a similar experience to Daisy and Violet, namely that her relationship with her two younger stepchildren has improved over time. She described her

experience as follows: “How things have changed. They [the stepchildren] are comfortable and at ease with us”.

Rose’s experience shows that as time passes and as stepfamily members get time to know one another better over time, their relationships can improve. Furthermore, as time passes, it becomes easier and more comfortable for them to spend time together as a stepfamily.

In contrast to Rose’s experience with her two younger stepchildren, she had a mixed experience with her eldest stepchild. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Rose’s relationship with her eldest stepchild was initially warm and loving, but the relationship deteriorated over time. She illustrated her experience with the following comment: “The eldest has changed completely, she does not visit anymore unless she requires money, she is demanding and mean all the time to my husband and I”.

It is important to note that it is not only the relationship between Rose and her eldest stepchild that has deteriorated over time, but the relationship between the child and her father as well.

Lily also indicated that there had been a positive change in her stepfamily relationships over time:

All in all I love being married to my husband and I feel blessed to have the children in my life. As blended families go, I think we are a very peaceful, happy family unit. What I know we must continue to do is: provide a stable, loving, calm home. Being a blended family is certainly a journey – with its ups and downs and highs and lows. But, I don’t have any regrets in marrying my husband and would choose to do things the same way.

In the above extract, Lily mentions factors that have contributed to the success and improvement of her stepfamily relationships. These factors include the fact that Lily and her husband have created a stable, peaceful home for the children, and they have also provided the children with love and acceptance.

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter commenced with concise background information pertaining to the participants and their unique family contexts. The objective of this chapter was to present the information obtained from the participants by using thematic analysis to organise the information into major themes and subthemes. These themes have been identified and presented. Direct quotations from the participant's narratives have been selected to support the conclusions and findings and to illustrate the themes that were elicited from the data. In the next chapter, the themes presented in this chapter are discussed, and are integrated with the relevant theory and relevant findings of the literature review. Furthermore, recommendations for future research are made.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of stepmothers who have non-residential stepchildren. In this chapter, the core themes that emerged from the participants' written narratives are discussed in relation to the relevant literature and family systems theory. Subsequently, the findings, strengths, and limitations of the study are highlighted. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

5.2 Discussion of findings and links to literature and theory

5.2.1 A Challenging Role

The information obtained from the participants in this study indicates that all five participants experienced several adjustment challenges and stressors, particularly in the early stages of stepfamily formation. The challenges and stressors described by the participants in this study are consistent with the literature reviewed in this study. Hetherington and Kelly (as cited in Sweeney, 2010) found that after the formation of a stepfamily, there is a period of elevated stress and destabilisation that lasts for between five and seven years. Bradley (2005) and Papernow (2013) also found that the formation of a stepfamily is a challenging and complex process that happens over a long period of time rather than instantaneously. Research further indicates that remarriage is more stressful than first marriage because of the lack of norms guiding the everyday functioning of the stepfamily (Cherlin, 1978; Coleman et al., 2002; Stewart, 2005). The stepfamily cycle proposed by Papernow (2013) describes the early stages of stepfamily formation as the most challenging because of the lack of well-defined rules, roles, and boundaries. Tracy (2000) explains that in contrast to nuclear families, remarried couples do not have a period during which they can gradually negotiate the rules, roles, and boundaries of their families.

In nuclear families, this negotiation usually occurs during the time a couple spends together before the arrival of children. In addition to Hetherington and Kelly's findings, Coleman et al. (2008) and Hart (2009) highlight the fact that the stepmother role is unnatural.

Western society idealises motherhood, and thus stepmothers are culturally expected to embrace their stepfamily and stepmother role immediately (Whiting et al., 2007). According to these Western beliefs, stepmothers should also have affection for their stepchildren right away (Whiting et al., 2007). However, according to Coleman et al. (2008) and Papernow (1984, 2013), it is unrealistic to expect stepmothers to relate to their stepchildren as a biological mother would relate to her children, because stepmothers and their stepchildren lack shared genetics, a period of bonding since birth, and closeness. Furthermore, the length of the relationship between stepmothers and their stepchildren is usually shorter than that of biological mothers and their children. However, over time, the bond between a stepmother and her stepchildren can become a close and meaningful relationship (Bradley, 2005; Papernow, 2013).

Similar to Papernow's (2013) description of the early stages of stepfamily formation, Bradley (2005) describes the developmental stages of becoming a stepmother. Bradley (2005) found that stepmothers are challenged by having to join the pre-existing father-child system as well as by having to assimilate and accommodate the new family culture. The pre-existing father-child system also has to change to accommodate and include the stepmother as a member of the family. During the second stage, a stepmother is challenged by the ambiguity of her role and by not having clarity with regard to her new responsibilities (Bradley, 2005). In the third stage, a stepmother is challenged by the ambiguity of her co-parental role most intensely, because she does not know when it is appropriate for her to co-parent her stepchildren and when not (Bradley, 2005).

According to the principles of family systems theory, clearly defined rules and roles are necessary to ensure stability and to promote cohesiveness in a family (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). Numerous researchers (Carr, 2012; Hecker & Wetchler, 2003; Rasheed, et al., 2011) who work from a family systems theory perspective emphasise the importance of clear rules in stepfamilies to outline what is acceptable and unacceptable, as well as to indicate what is expected of each family member. According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004), members of a family who live together for any amount of time develop preferred patterns for negotiating and arranging their lives to maximise harmony and predictability. However, a stepfamily, during the early stages, has not spent enough time as a unit to enable its members to negotiate and agree on new rules, roles, and boundaries effectively (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

During the early stages of stepfamily formation as described by Papernow (2013) and the first three stages of the stepmother's development as described by Bradley (2005), the dominant rules and roles are still those of the pre-existing father-child system. It can be concluded that the formation of the stepfamily is a complex process, as all the family members have to accommodate change and adjust to their newly formed family.

The challenges experienced by the participants in this study such as the co-parenting role the stepmother has to adjust to, the time that is required to fulfil her role as stepmother, household routines that are disrupted by the stepchildren's visits, the stepmother's experience that she is an outsider with regards to the stepfamily, frustrations experienced with the stepchildren's biological mother, financial demands and the establishment of relationships with stepchildren correspond to similar challenges that were reported on by researchers such as Bradley (2005), Dickinson (2013), Doodson and Morley (2006), Dupuis (2007, 2010), Graham et al. (2011), Henry and McCue (2009),

Katz (2010), Papernow (1984, 2013), and Sayre et al. (2010). The challenges experienced by the participants in this study are discussed next.

5.2.1.1 A time-consuming role. The participants perceived the duties and responsibilities pertaining to the care of their stepchildren during their stepchildren's visits as very challenging. They made specific reference to the amount of time required to perform these extra household and caring duties that they were expected to perform. They also highlighted the loss of their personal time and the impact of their stepchildren's visits on their time alone with their partners. The participants' experiences pertaining to the time-consuming, additional household chores are consistent with Graham et al.'s (2011) findings. Graham et al. (2011) explain that due to gender division, stepmothers typically have more responsibilities than stepfathers have and are more involved in childcare and domestic duties.

As described in Chapter 2, Bradley (2005) and Katz (2010) also found that stepmothers struggle with additional household chores when their stepchildren visit. Bradley (2005) found that not only do stepmothers need to take on extra responsibilities and duties during their stepchildren's visits, but they also have to perform these duties on their own because the fathers of the stepchildren usually spend all their time with the children. In addition, the children often do not have clearly defined household chores because of their non-residential status.

The participants in this study experienced a lack of confidence in asking the other members of their family for help to alleviate their workloads. This finding is consistent with Katz's (2010) findings. According to Katz (2010), stepmothers often do not ask for help from the other members of the stepfamily, nor do they share their feelings because they are afraid of being perceived as wicked and of being rejected and ostracised. This finding, amongst others, emphasises the elements of a well-functioning family unit,

including having well-defined rules and roles for family members to follow and effective communication, as emphasised by family systems theory. It can be concluded that the stepmothers who participated in this study experienced difficulties in asking for help from other stepfamily members and in communicating their needs and feelings to the other stepfamily members because the newly formed families still lacked trust, clearly defined rules, roles, and communication patterns.

Katz (2010) is of the opinion that stepmothers experience a loss of personal time during their stepchildren's visits because of the added time-consuming caretaking responsibilities. The stepmothers in Katz's (2010) study were constantly tired and had less time to take care of themselves, which may have led them to develop feelings of anger and resentment towards their stepfamilies. Katz's (2010) findings were confirmed by the findings of this study. The participants in this study initially experienced a loss of their personal time during their stepchildren's visits. They would usually have spent this time on activities of their own choice. They also reported a negative impact with regard to all the additional duties and responsibilities, and they found these duties to be exhausting.

The participants indicated that the time which they and their partners spent performing childcare duties during the children's visits resulted in decreased time which they could spend together as a couple. This experience was negative for most of the participants. Katz (2010) describes that stepmothers commonly complain of a lack of time with their partners during their stepchildren's visits because their partners tend to focus their time and attention on the children, leaving little time for the couple to spend together alone. In describing the early stages of stepfamily formation, Papernow (2013) also found that biological parents in newly formed stepfamilies focus on the care of their children during visits. The participants found that their partners' focus on the children during visits led them to experience mixed feelings. On the one hand they appreciate their partners'

dedication to their children but on the other hand they experience the loss of time with their partners as negative.

It can be said that the lack of clearly defined boundaries, roles, rules, and patterns in the early stages of stepfamily formation, as described by Graham et al. (2011), contributed to the participants experiencing less time with their partners during the stepchildren's visits. This finding corresponds to a key family systems theory concept – the importance of clearly defined spousal subsystem boundaries. It also corresponds to the process of negotiating a balance between partner and parental responsibilities (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Kaslow et al. (as cited in Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004) highlight the fact that when a balance is not reached between the partner subsystem and the parental subsystem, some of the functions of the partner subsystem, such as the couple's private time, are compromised.

As described in Chapter 2, according to the principles of family systems theory, clear boundaries with regard to the spousal subsystem are important because the integrity of the family depends on the existence of a solid spousal subsystem (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Within the boundaries of the spousal subsystem, partners have the opportunity to fulfil each other's needs by being mutually supportive and by nurturing the partnership (Kerr et al., 2008; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Based on the information obtained from the participants in this study, the deduction can be made that during the early stages of stepfamily formation, the couple subsystem lacked clear boundaries to protect the subsystem from the children's intrusion during visits. This deduction offers a possible explanation with regards to the reason why the stepmothers experienced the loss of their time so negatively during their stepchildren's visits.

5.2.1.2 Disrupted routines. Based on the fact that non-residential stepchildren do not reside primarily with the stepfamily and that they only visit in intervals, stepmothers

are exposed to unique challenges. As described by Doodson and Morley (2006) and Henry and McCue (2009), stepmothers not only have to deal with children who are brought up in a different household that has its own set of rules and discipline, but they also have to deal with disruptions of their activities and household routines during every visit. The participants said that it was stressful to change their schedules and routines, as well as those of their partners, during each visit from the stepchildren. This finding was also reported by Doodson and Morley (2006). They found that stepmothers feel inconvenienced at times because they have to adjust their schedules to accommodate the presence and needs of their stepchildren during their stepchildren's visits. The adjustments that the stepmothers in this study had to make, as well as the findings reported by Doodson and Morley (2006), are in line with Minuchin and Nichols' (1993) findings. Minuchin and Nichols (1993) state that the participants in their study experienced problems and stress with the process of reorganising the family to accommodate the stepchildren and simultaneously having to maintain a boundary to protect the couple subsystem when the stepchildren visited.

As described in Chapter 2, Carr (2012), Hecker and Wetchler, (2003) and Rasheed et al. (2011) are researchers who adhere to the family systems theory perspective. They emphasise that it is important for family members to know what is expected of them and what behaviour is acceptable and unacceptable in the family. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) emphasise that it is important for families to negotiate family rules, roles, and boundaries to organise the family in such a way that will allow the development of a preferred pattern of functioning on a day-to-day basis. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) further explain that the development of this functional family pattern happens over time.

The participants in this study experienced the establishment of a functional family pattern as very challenging because of the non-residential status of their stepchildren. Not only were the participants confronted by having to negotiate functional family patterns together with other family members, which is a challenging process on its own, but the process of forming functional family patterns was also complicated by the limited and fragmented time that the children spent in the stepfamily household. The participants' narratives suggest that it takes a long period of time to form a cohesive, functional family unit. This finding is in line with the findings of Dickinson (2013) and Doodson and Morley (2006). Dickinson (2013) and Doodson and Morley (2006) found that stepfamilies with non-residential stepchildren do not have enough time to develop continuity with regard to household routines when the stepchildren visit. It can be deduced that the fragmented and limited time the children spend in the stepfamily household, results in a protracted process with regards to the negotiation of boundaries and the forming of stepfamily household rules and patterns. This protracted process is stressful and challenging.

5.2.1.3 The outsider. The participants in this study described feeling very left out of their stepfamilies during the early stages of stepfamily formation. They also reported that, at times, they felt like strangers in their own homes, which is a finding that corresponds to the findings reported by the stepmothers in the research conducted by Doodson and Morley (2006) and Sayre et al. (2010). The literature reviewed indicates that it is inevitable for stepmothers to feel like outsiders at some stage during the process of joining their new stepfamilies (Bradley, 2005; Dickinson, 2013; Katz, 2010; Sayre et al., 2010). As described earlier in this chapter, when children visit their father and stepmother, the father and his children want to focus their time and energy on one another, and it is not uncommon for the stepchildren to claim first priority with regard to their father (Bradley, 2005; Dickinson, 2013; Katz, 2010; Sayre et al., 2010). Dupuis (2007) explains that the

lack of genetic connection and shared history between a stepmother and her stepchildren leads to the father-child subsystem often excluding the stepmother and leaving the stepmother to feel like an outsider.

According to Minuchin and Fishman (1981), a newly formed stepfamily can be understood as a family that is going through a period of transition. The family is in the process of creating new patterns, forming new connections between its members, and building a history to tie the members together as a unit (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). Minuchin and Fishman (1981) state that a new stepfamily system needs time to integrate and to form a unique family unit of its own before all the members feel like they belong to the unit. However, this process takes time, and, as discussed in Chapter 2 in Table 2.3, McGoldrick et al. (2011) suggest that new family members should be patient about the amount of time required to adjust to the complexity of the new stepfamily's arrangements. Minuchin and Nichols (1993) state that the new ties (those between the father and stepmother, and those between the stepmother and stepchildren) do not replace old loyalties. Bradley (2005), Dickinson (2013), Katz (2010), and Sayre et al. (2010) found that stepchildren initially resist changes to the patterns that were established with their biological parents. Bradley (2005), Dickinson (2013), Katz (2010), and Sayre et al. (2010) explain that it is easier for children to accept the changes over time, especially if the children are part of the negotiation process.

Due to a lack of defined rules, roles, boundaries, clear communication and mutual trust in the earlier stages of stepfamily formation, it is almost inevitable that stepmothers will find themselves in a double bind situation. As much as a stepmother would like to be part of her new family and to air her views, she may fear that sharing her opinions may lead her partner to ostracise or reject her because he might disagree with or feel disappointed by her behaviour. A stepmother's opinion may also be resisted by the

stepchildren and their biological mother. Thus, if a stepmother speaks her mind, she may remain the outsider. However, should a stepmother keep her views and opinions to herself because she is afraid of being ostracised or rejected, she will remain frustrated and unhappy. In this situation, the homeostasis of the family will be maintained because the necessary changes will not occur, and the stepmother will remain the unhappy outsider. The participants' narratives suggest that as their stepfamilies grew and became healthier functioning families with clear, open communication, the stepmothers felt more confident in their ability to air their views and opinions, and they felt less anxious about being rejected or ostracised by their family members.

5.2.1.4 Frustrations with the stepchildren's biological mother. The participants in this study commented on the challenges they experienced pertaining to the stepchildren's biological mothers. The finding that a stepmother may experience challenges with regard to the biological mother is consistent with Bradley's (2005) findings. A major theme identified by Bradley (2005) in the second stage of the stepmother developmental model is the various challenges a stepmother may experience with regard to the children's biological mother. Whiting et al. (2007) state that a stepmother may commonly experience the negotiation of a relationship with the children's biological mother as stressful.

In addition to experiencing stress with regard to the negotiation of a relationship with the children's biological mothers, the participants in this study described that it was particularly difficult and frustrating for them to deal with the negative attitude and animosity of the biological mothers. Some participants also found it difficult to deal with the biological mothers' animosity towards the children's fathers. When the biological mothers criticised the stepmothers and the new couples, the participants experienced frustration and at times felt discouraged in their role as stepmothers. This finding is

consistent with Dickinson's (2013) findings in a study on stepparents. Dickinson (2013) also established that stepmothers experience immense frustration, especially when the biological mother says malicious things to the children about the stepmother and the new couple.

Most of the participants in this study foresaw that it would not be easy to enter relationships with men who already had children and an ex-spouse or ex-partner. However, they seemed to have underestimated just how difficult it would be. This finding is consistent with a study by Dupuis (2010) on blended families. Dupuis (2010) found that the continuous involvement of a biological mother in a stepfamily's life is a concern because the biological mother, together with the new couple, forms part of the parental subsystem. Thus, it is very important for the couple to have a well-defined couple subsystem with clear boundaries to protect them from the interference of the children's biological mother (Adler-Baeder & Higginbotham, 2004).

5.2.1.5 Establishing relationships with stepchildren. The information obtained from all five of the participants in this study indicates that the stepmothers experienced the process of establishing relationships with their stepchildren as challenging. Adler-Baeder and Higginbotham (2004) explain that remarried fathers often expect their new wives to step into the role of co-parent automatically and that their children will be enthusiastic and willing to interact and engage with their new stepmother. Four of the participants in this study described their efforts to reach out to and connect with their stepchildren. However, they reported that during the early stages of stepfamily formation, their efforts were not always welcome, and that their efforts were even denied or rejected. Miller (2008) reports similar findings. Miller (2008) states that stepmothers are enthusiastic and that they think they can form an instant bond with their stepchildren. However, when this does not

happen, it leads to feelings of inadequacy and disappointment for the stepmothers and often for their partners as well (Miller, 2008).

Similar experiences are also reported in research findings by Katz (2010) and Papernow (1984, 2013) who explain that it is not uncommon for stepchildren to deny a stepmother's efforts to connect with them initially. It is important to note, as described in Chapter 2, that Dupuis (2010) states that it is unrealistic for a stepmother and her partner to expect that she and her stepchildren will automatically join and be a family. Dupuis (2010) reasons that stepmothers and stepchildren are not able to form an instant bond because they are not connected by genetics or a shared history that will bind them together.

Furthermore, stepmothers and stepchildren need time to integrate with one another and to establish familiarity with one another. Furthermore, the children might resist the change that takes place in the new family because they want to maintain the patterns of the previous nuclear family (Bradley, 2005; Dickinson, 2013; Katz, 2010; Sayre et al., 2010).

Some of the participants in this study also experienced difficulties in the process of establishing relationships with their stepchildren because of the biological mothers' negative attitude and animosity that influenced the stepchildren's behaviour towards the stepmothers in a negative way. This finding was also established by Dickinson (2013). According to Dickinson (2013), stepchildren often view their stepmother through the eyes of their biological mother. Dupuis (2007) found that the continuous involvement of the children's biological mother may create difficulties in the relationship between the stepmother and her stepchildren because the children may experience loyalty issues.

5.2.1.6 Financial demands. Another challenge that was reported by two of the participants in this study was the financial implications of having stepchildren. The participants experienced their financial obligations towards the previous nuclear families as stressful and at times unfair. Dickinson (2013), Falke and Larson (2007), and Coleman

and Ganong (2004) also found similar results. They state that, in contrast to nuclear families that have no external financial obligations, new couples have additional, external financial obligations, such as paying maintenance for children, and sometimes other additional financial obligations that are not included in child maintenance and that can create conflict for the couple, such as paying for extramural activities or medical bills. It can be deduced that the discomfort that the participants experienced in this regard was related to the additional financial obligations that were not included in the fixed child maintenance payments. Due to the variable nature of these expenses, budgeting for these expenses and managing the costs are difficult for new couples.

5.2.2 A Lack of Acknowledgement

From the participants' narratives, it is clear that most of the participants experienced feeling disappointed and hurt during the early stages of stepfamily formation. These feelings seem to have arisen from their experiences that in spite of the stepmothers' hard work in caring for their stepfamilies, their efforts were not acknowledged or appreciated by the stepchildren's biological mothers and the stepchildren themselves.

5.2.2.1 Unappreciative biological mothers. Four of the participants in this study described feeling unappreciated by the stepchildren's biological mothers despite the hard work and effort they put into caring for their stepchildren. This finding corresponds to Pérez and Tórrrens' (2009) findings and Roosevelt and Lofas' (1976) findings regarding the myths of motherhood. Such myths include the belief that a biological mother is the best and only keeper of her children, which suggests that it is almost inevitable that a stepmother will remain unacknowledged for her efforts and in her role as stepmother by the children's biological mother (Pérez & Tórrrens, 2009). Bradley (2005) found that during the middle stages of the stepmother developmental model, it is not uncommon for a

stepmother to feel that her stepchildren's biological mother perceives her presence and efforts as invalid.

The participants' written narratives suggest that the myths of motherhood may have contributed to the challenges they experienced when joining their new families. This finding was also reported by Pérez and Tórrrens (2009). They highlight the traditional beliefs generally held in relation to motherhood that result in stepmothers experiencing more difficulties than stepfathers do when stepfamilies are formed. The lack of the biological mothers' acknowledgement and appreciation of the participants' efforts and new roles as co-parents left the participants feeling frustrated and despondent.

As described in Table 2.2, which represents McGoldrick et al.'s (2011) stages of the family life cycle involving separation and divorce, one of the tasks to be completed by separating or divorcing parents is to engage in co-operative co-parenting with regard to both the primary household and the non-residential household. It can be said that if a biological mother does not accept that the family roles and patterns have changed and that the stepmother is to be included as a co-parent in the parental subsystem with the children's biological father, the stepmother will experience animosity from the biological mother (Dickinson, 2013). This animosity may not only cause frustration for the stepmother, but it may also hamper her ability to build a relationship with her stepchildren (Dickinson, 2013).

5.2.2.2 Demanding, unappreciative stepchildren. Four participants reported that working hard for their stepchildren and receiving little or no gratitude from their stepchildren for their efforts often left them feeling disappointed and despondent. The participants felt that although they were regarded as "good enough" to do the work for their stepchildren, they were not regarded as good enough to be acknowledged and/or appreciated by their stepchildren. This finding corresponds to findings established in the

research conducted by Bradley (2005) and Katz (2010). They found that in the earlier stages of a stepmother's development, her role as a co-parent is often not acknowledged.

According to Popenoe (1994) and Riness (2013), stepmothers gain less intrinsic emotional rewards from carrying many of the same responsibilities as biological mothers. From the experiences of the participants in this study, it can be said that they initially experienced the same childcare responsibilities that biological mothers do in a very negative way. Their negative experiences could be attributed to the lack of genetics and shared history that bind individuals together as a family. In addition to working hard for their stepchildren without receiving much recognition, the stepmothers did not feel that they gained any rewards from their relationships with their stepchildren.

Despite the recurring negative responses to the hard work and efforts of the stepmothers with regard to their stepchildren, the stepmothers did not discontinue their efforts, nor did they withdraw from their stepchildren during visits. It can be deduced that there were reasons or perhaps reinforcing factors present that kept the stepmothers committed to their stepchildren and their stepfamilies. The information obtained in this study suggests that their partners' acknowledgement and appreciation of their efforts were key factors that encouraged the stepmothers to stay committed to their stepchildren, which will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

5.2.3 Conflicting Family Rules

As described by Bradley (2005) and Doodson (2009), the fact that stepchildren belong to two households presents unique challenges to all family members involved. As described in Chapter 2, Becvar and Becvar (2006) and Friedman and Neuman Allen (2011) state that family systems theory emphasises the importance of establishing communication between family members to clarify the rules and roles that govern the family's unique household. Afifi (2003) and Gosselin (2010) also stress the importance of effective

communication in stepfamilies because these authors, in their respective studies regarding communication in stepfamilies, found that clear communication between family members leads to clearer boundary management, more effective problem solving, and higher levels of relationship satisfaction between stepfamily members.

Papernow (2013) is also of the opinion that family members in well functioning families are able to communicate more openly about their differences. It is understood that when stepfamily members are able to communicate effectively, the family members may experience decreased levels of stress because the rules and boundaries in that household are likely to be defined clearly. Furthermore, all the members are likely to understand what is acceptable and unacceptable, as well as what is expected of each of them. In the early stages of stepfamily formation communication between family members is probably vague and unclear which implies that rules, roles and boundaries have not yet been negotiated and can lead to unmet expectations and conflicting family rules. The participants in this study described the challenges they experienced in the early stages of stepfamily formation in relation to the conflicting family rules of the two households, as well as the conflicting rules within the parental subsystem in the stepfamily household (consisting of the stepmother and the children's biological father).

5.2.3.1 Conflict between the primary and stepfamily households. Three participants experienced severe discomfort pertaining to the different and conflicting sets of rules between the stepfamily household and the stepchildren's primary household. The participants described experiencing frustration with regard to their stepchildren's behaviour that was learnt in the primary residence. The stepmothers found some of this behaviour unacceptable. This finding is consistent with the findings of Doodson (2009) and Graham et al. (2009). These researchers highlighted the fact that boundaries and rules are different in the stepfamily household and the primary household, which implies that the

behaviour allowed in the primary household is not necessarily allowed and appreciated in the stepfamily household, and vice versa. As stepchildren spend more of their time in the primary household, it is likely that the primary household's rules will be remembered more clearly and adhered to more strictly by the stepchildren than the stepfamily household's rules, even when the children visit their father and stepmother.

The information obtained in this study further suggests that the participants experienced frustration pertaining to the lack of their partners' enforcement of the stepfamily's rules and boundaries during the stepchildren's visits. This finding corresponds to Dickinson's (2013) findings. According to Dickinson (2013), fathers choose to spend as much of their time and energy with their children as possible during visits because the visits are usually short and therefore the reinforcement of the stepfamily's household rules are neglected by the fathers. The study's findings are also similar to Henry and McCue's (2009) findings, which state that due to the limited time fathers have with their children, they prefer not to reprimand their children because they are concerned that their children will be upset with them and that the children might not want to visit them again. The participants experienced their partners' reluctance to discipline the children as very frustrating because the participants did not want to have to enforce the discipline, rules, and boundaries continuously. The participants also did not want to be the only parental figures to discipline the children, as they were concerned about being perceived as wicked and mean stepmothers, which is a reason that was also identified by Henry and McCue (2009) regarding a stepmother's reluctance to discipline her stepchildren continuously.

The findings of this study suggest that the participants experienced difficulties in establishing their stepfamilies' rules, roles, and boundaries because of the long periods of time between the stepchildren's visits. It can be deduced that the participants in this study experienced the episodic visits of their stepchildren as too brief and fragmented to teach

and reinforce the stepfamily's rules, roles, and boundaries during the children's visits. This finding is similar to the findings reported by Dickinson (2013) and Doodson and Morley (2006). In relation to the above findings, Visher and Visher (2003) as mentioned before in this chapter state that the destabilisation period which occurs after the formation of a stepfamily can last for between five and seven years. It is understood that the stepchildren's fragmented visits and the time that lapses between the children's visits may be why the stepfamily structure takes between five and seven years to stabilise for stepfamilies with non-residential stepchildren.

5.2.3.2 Conflict within the parental subsystem. Another challenge described by two participants in this study was the discomfort they experienced with regard to their opinions and those of their partners pertaining to conflicting parenting styles (and caring for the children). This finding is similar to Bradley's (2005) findings. Bradley (2005) explains that during the third stage of the stepmother developmental model, it is not uncommon for stepmothers and their partners to experience tension within their relationship as a result of conflicting opinions regarding the disciplining of the stepchildren and the enforcement of the rules, roles, and boundaries in the stepfamily household. Graham et al. (2011) state that the presence of conflicting views and opinions within the parental subsystem may be the result of the union of two adults who come from different backgrounds with different rules and boundaries, which may have an effect on the behaviour that they find acceptable and unacceptable in the stepfamily household.

According to Bradley (2005), conflicting views and opinions between a stepmother and her partner arise in the early stages of stepfamily formation because of the rules, roles, and boundaries that have not yet been clearly defined in the newly formed family. As mentioned, two of the participants described their discomfort pertaining to the conflicting opinions between them and their partners with regard to the care of the children, the

children's respect (or lack thereof) for the couple's privacy, and the changes to certain rituals and patterns in the stepfamily household. The stepmothers' suggestions regarding the change of family rules, rituals and patterns of behaviour were not well received by their partners and the children. Their partners and the children initially resisted the changes to these specific domains of functioning and wanted to maintain the patterns of the previous nuclear family. Becvar and Becvar (2006), who adhere to family systems theory, refer to the family members' process of wanting to maintain old patterns as maintaining homeostasis and resisting change. Eventually, this particular participant's opinions were accepted, and the parental subsystem negotiated and agreed upon new rules and boundaries that resulted in the formation of new family patterns.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of effective and open communication between stepmothers and their partners, particularly during the middle stages of the stepfamily life cycle proposed by Papernow (2013). Papernow (2013) indicates that a couple collaborates and shares their views and opinions during the middle stages. They also begin to share a middle ground pertaining to a range of issues, including disciplining the children and agreeing on the rules and roles that are acceptable in the newly formed family (Papernow, 2013). From the participants' written narratives, it can be said that as time passes, the parental subsystem of a family negotiates new rules, roles, and boundaries that enable the stepfamily to establish its own unique and functional patterns.

5.2.4 Continued Commitment

All five of the participants emphasised the unique challenges they experienced with regard to their role as stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren. However, the findings of this study indicate that the participants described an improvement in the relationships between them and their stepchildren over time. The participants also indicated that they found the effort they invested building relationships with their stepchildren worthwhile.

This finding is in line with the stepfamily formation process described by Papernow (2013). All of the participants described factors and positive experiences that helped them to stay motivated and committed to their stepfamilies. These findings are consistent with the findings of Riness (2013). According to Riness (2013), stepmothers, in addition to reporting many challenges with regard to their role, report positive factors that keep them motivated and that encourage them to persevere. This finding also corresponds to Papernow's (2013) description of the later stages of mature stepfamilies in the stepfamily cycle.

Papernow (2013) describes that the bond between stepparents and their stepchildren continues to gain strength and warmth over time. Papernow (2013) further describes that the stepmother experiences a sense of belonging and unity in the stepfamily during the later stages of stepfamily formation. In addition to Papernow's (2013) findings, Visher and Visher (2003) are of the opinion that relationships in stepfamilies that are allowed to develop gradually often lead to caring and loving bonds that may last a lifetime. The participants emphasised the following key factors that contributed to their commitment to their stepfamilies: the continuous support of their partners and the experience that their relationships with their stepchildren improved over time.

5.2.4.1 Supportive partners. According to family systems theory, as described by Minuchin and Fishman (1981), the couple subsystem is the most important subsystem in the family because the survival of the family depends on the quality and adequacy of this structure. Minuchin and Fishman (1981) state that a newly formed couple is defined primarily by a love relationship before the couple enters the parenting stage. Regarding the formation of stepfamilies in which children are present from a previous relationship, Minuchin and Fishman (1981) emphasise the importance of creating a boundary to protect the couple's privacy and to give the couple time to strengthen their relationship. From the

participants' narratives, it can be concluded that the stepmothers and their partners managed to form solid couple subsystems and that the stepmothers' experiences of closeness and connectedness within the couple subsystem played a significant role in their adjustment to and functioning in their roles as stepmothers.

Roosevelt and Lofas (1976) found that most satisfied stepmothers have supportive and understanding partners who validate and acknowledge their stepmother role. The information obtained from the participants in this study suggests that the stepmothers' happiness depended on the quality of their relationship with their partners. Not only are the findings of this study regarding the value of a supportive partner similar to Roosevelt and Lofas' (1976) findings, but they are also consistent with the findings of Bradley (2005) and Doodson (2009). According to Bradley (2005) and Doodson (2009), a stepmother's happiness is closely linked to the relationship satisfaction she experiences with regard to her partner. Bradley (2005) emphasises that a partner's support plays a pivotal role in a stepmother's ability to build and maintain stepfamily relationships. This circular process between the family members can be described in family systems terms. A partner's support of a stepmother in turn leads to higher levels of relationship satisfaction experienced by the stepmother. Higher levels of relationship satisfaction in turn then lead to the stepmother being able to build and maintain functional stepfamily relationships with her stepchildren. The stepmother's efforts to build and maintain functional relationships with her stepchildren elicits continued support and appreciation from her partner.

The stepmother's developmental model proposed by Bradley (2005) indicates that the stepmother goes through a process of transformation and adjustment in her development as a stepmother. Furthermore, it was established that this process could be a very stressful experience. The stepmother thus needs ample support (Bradley, 2005). In addition to the finding of this study that a stepmother's partner is her main form of support,

research regarding stepmothers that was conducted by Katz (2010) indicates that stepmothers often have insufficient external support from family and friends to enable them to deal successfully with the challenges pertaining to their development as stepmothers. The implication thereof is that the stepmother may be even more reliant on her partner for support. Katz (2010) highlights the fact that it is important for a partner to be aware of the important role he plays in the stepmother's development because he is often her main source of support from which she draws strength to persevere during challenging times.

5.2.4.2 Improving relationships with stepchildren. The findings of this study indicate that all the participants initially experienced their relationships with their stepchildren as challenging. However, it was noted that the participants' relationships with their stepchildren improved over time. This finding is consistent with research done by Graham et al. (2011) who found that stepmothers describe feeling a degree of fondness and warmth towards their stepchildren in the later stages of stepfamily formation, despite the challenges and frustrations they may have experienced in the past. Papernow (2013) also states that in the later stages of stepfamily formation, stepmothers experience their stepfamilies in the following manner: "We are definitely a We" (Papernow, 2013, Part IV: Stepfamilies over time, Chapter 12, para. 14).

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) highlight the significant amount of time spent together as a family and state that it takes time for a family to establish and solidify rules, roles, and boundaries. From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that these stepfamilies were able to adjust to the changes required during the stepfamily formation process and were able to maintain the stability of a functional family unit.

As described in Chapter 2, Bradley (2005) reports that stepmothers begin to experience less stress in their role during the fifth and sixth stages of the stepmother

developmental model. The more time a family spends together, the more the rules, roles, and boundaries are clarified (Becvar & Becvar, 2006; Bradley, 2005). Furthermore, family members become more familiar and comfortable in their interactions with one another (Bradley, 2005). Bradley (2005) emphasises the fact that spending time together as a family is a key factor that leads to the final developmental stages in which a stepmother can begin to feel integrated into her stepfamily and can feel a sense of belonging.

According to Papernow (2013), as a family spends more time together, the reorganisation of relationships between family members becomes easier because of an increase in communication and the family members' ability to discuss their differences more freely. This finding is similar to the findings of Graham et al. (2011) and Papernow (2013) who explain that the relationships between stepmothers and stepchildren are not static. Relationships grow and develop over time and as children mature. As time passes, the relationships between stepmothers and their stepchildren stabilise and their bonds strengthen. The participants described feeling true affection for their stepchildren, which is a finding also indicated by Graham et al. (2011). According to Graham et al. (2011), stepmothers develop affection for their stepchildren and have the desire to see them do well. Another finding of Graham et al. (2011) that is confirmed by the experiences of the participants in this study is that stepmothers are concerned with their stepchildren's needs and consider themselves to be fulfilling a motherly role rather than a housekeeping or temporary guardian role as time progresses.

With the exception of one participant whose relationship with one of her three stepchildren deteriorated over time, all of the participants in this study experienced an improvement in their relationships with their stepchildren as time progressed. The one participant's stepchild distanced herself from the stepfamily over time, despite numerous efforts by the stepmother and the child's biological father to rekindle the relationship.

Despite the stepchild's choice to withdraw from her stepfamily, the stepmother felt that her efforts over the years with regard to her eldest stepchild had been worthwhile. The stepmother's development of insight and understanding regarding her role, which is a process described in the fifth and sixth stages of Bradley's (2005) stepmother developmental model, contributed to the participant forming strong and functional relationships with her other two stepchildren.

5.3 Summary of Findings

The aim of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren. In this study, rich information was obtained pertaining to the participants' experiences of being stepmothers to non-residential stepchildren. The findings of this study indicate that the participants experienced specific challenges and stressors in the early stages of stepfamily formation that are unique to stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren. The findings of this study also indicate that the stepmothers underestimated how challenging it would be to become stepmothers to non-residential stepchildren.

The challenges described by the participants in this study include the following: the stepmother role is time-consuming, the stepfamily household routines are continuously disrupted, there are many frustrations pertaining to the stepchildren's biological mother, it is difficult to establish relationships with stepchildren, and there are numerous financial demands. The findings of this study further indicate that the participants experienced a lack of acknowledgement regarding their roles from the stepchildren's biological mothers, as well as from the stepchildren themselves.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that the process of stepfamily formation, which includes the negotiation and establishment of rules, roles, boundaries, and family patterns, is complicated by the presence of two different sets of household

rules. It appears that the formation of a functional stepfamily happens over a long period of time because of the unique circumstances that challenge stepfamilies, such as fragmented visits from the stepchildren. From the findings in this study, it seems that reaching uniformity within the parental subsystem (in the stepfamily household) is a challenging process because the new couple has to negotiate a middle ground with regard to family rules and the manner in which to take care of the children. The participants experienced certain factors, such as their partners' ongoing support, a functional spousal system, and the fact that stepfamily relationships improve over time, as very important in that these factors contributed to the stepmothers' commitment to their stepfamilies and to their decisions to persevere through many challenges. Furthermore, it appears that the lack of information available to the stepfamilies in this study had an impact on the manner in which family members responded to stepfamily formation and the anticipation of challenges.

5.4 Strengths of the Study

This study gave stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren the opportunity to share their experiences and to tell their unique stories. The participants can be considered experts on the topic of being stepmothers to non-residential stepchildren because all of the participants had considerable experience in this regard. They had all been part of their stepfamilies for a number of years and were therefore able to provide rich authentic information with regards to their experiences as stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren as well as the process of stepfamily formation and the development of stepfamily relationships. Given the high incidence of divorce among remarried couples, as well as the limited amount of literature available on stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren, the research findings of this study contribute valuable insight and information to the body of knowledge on stepfamilies. This information may assist professionals, such

as psychologists and social workers, who work with stepmothers and stepfamilies to support these families more effectively in the future. In addition, the findings of this study may stimulate further research in the areas of the stepmother role, stepfamily formation, and the development of stepfamily relationships over time in stepfamilies with non-residential stepchildren.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

Although the findings of this study contribute valuable insight and information pertaining to the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren in the South African context, this study does have certain limitations. Due to the homogeneous nature of the participants being Caucasian women who all live in Gauteng, the small sample used in this study, and the specific inclusion criteria (as described in Chapter 3), the findings are not representative of all stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren. Therefore, the findings of this study are not necessarily representative of the diverse South African population groups. Stepmothers with their own biological children and/or stepmothers with non-residential stepchildren belonging to a different culture may possibly have different experiences.

Another limitation of this study is that only the stepmothers' experiences were explored and not the experiences of the fathers and the stepchildren. A more complete picture of the process of stepfamily formation and the development of stepfamily relationships can be obtained if all the members of the stepfamily are involved. Furthermore, although the researcher attempted to remain respectful and objective towards the worldviews of the participants, her views may have unintentionally had an influence on the findings and conclusions of this study. However, the researcher made use of data triangulation during the process of data analysis in an attempt to reduce researcher bias.

5.6 Recommendations

In terms of the potential for furthering this research, it may be helpful to include all the members of the stepfamily and other relevant extended family members such as the children's biological mothers in future research. The experiences of fathers, stepchildren, and biological mothers could provide valuable information on how these family members perceive the stepmother figure. Such information may also shed light on the stepfamily members' experiences of the roles each one plays in the stepfamily context. Such an approach could provide additional rich information with regard to how the stepfamily development process affects each stepfamily member in the system. It can be deduced from the findings of this study that stepmothers fulfil a co-parental role and that they also fulfil an important, core role in the survival and cohesion of the stepfamily. Professionals who work with stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren should bear in mind that the stepmother role is accompanied by various challenges and that these stepmothers do not have guidelines regarding the formation of a stepfamily. They should also take into consideration that the formation of stepfamilies with non-residential children is a gradual process that takes time.

5.7 Concluding Remarks

This study explored the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren. The findings of this study indicate that stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren experienced specific challenges that were more pronounced in the early stages of stepfamily formation. These challenges included: the stepmother role comes with various unique stressors and challenges, discomfort as result of a lack of acknowledgement of the role of the stepmother as well as conflicting family rules, roles, boundaries and patterns between the primary household and the non-residential household. From the findings in this study, it can be deduced that the establishment of new family rules, roles, boundaries

and patterns takes longer for stepfamilies of non-residential children due to the limited time available during the fragmented visits of the children to the stepfamily household. The findings of this study further indicated that factors such as the improvement of stepfamily relationships over time and the continuous support of the stepmothers' partners contributed to the stepmothers' commitment to their stepfamilies. The findings of this study may help professionals working with stepfamilies that are experiencing problems to support the stepfamily members more effectively, which could prevent the breakdown of another family system.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

LETTER OF CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH STUDY

INTRODUCTION

You have been invited to participate in a research study. This Letter of Consent serves to provide you with information regarding the research topic and will be discussed with you in greater detail by the researcher. Please read this document carefully and do not hesitate to ask the researcher any questions pertaining to the study.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study is to gain an understanding of the experiences of stepmothers of non-residential stepchildren.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Participants are free to withdraw their consent and discontinue their participation in the study at any time without prejudice.

PROCEDURES

Each participant will be requested to share their experiences pertaining to the abovementioned objectives of the study in the form of written narratives. The document can be emailed or faxed to the researcher to the details provided below. A follow up email/phone call will be sent/arranged to clarify any uncertainties the researcher may have. Pseudo names will be used for participants when findings are reported. The narratives will only be available to the researcher, her supervisor, and a second coder.

RISKS AND/OR DISCOMFORTS

In the event of discomfort, psychological or relational problems that may develop during or as a result of the participants' participation in this research study, please report these to the researcher. The participants will be referred to the UNISA psychotherapy clinic. The UNISA psychotherapy clinic offers psychotherapy sessions to members of the public free of charge.

BENEFITS

Participation in this study may be an enriching experience for the stepmother as she may learn something from other women who finds themselves in a similar situation.

INFORMED CONSENT

The participants are hereby informed of the purpose of this study that participation is voluntary; the procedure to be followed is clear; what happens if risks and/or discomforts are experienced as a result of participation in this study; as well as the possible benefits of participating in this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All research records of participation in the study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law and will not be voluntarily released or shared without your permission. Every effort will be made by researcher to protect the privacy and confidentiality of all participants.

COSTS OF THE STUDY

There is no cost to the participants who participate in this study.

COMPENSATION

Participants will not receive any compensation for taking part in this study.

SIGNATURES

If you have read this consent form, or had it read and explained to you and you understand the information and you voluntarily agree to have the screening tests, please sign your name or make your mark after reading the statements below:

- I hereby consent to the procedures as outlined in the Letter of Consent Form.
- I acknowledge that I have been informed by the researcher concerning the possible advantages and possible adverse effects which may result from my involvement in the abovementioned study.
- I acknowledge that I understand and accept that this study involves research and that a copy of this form will be made available to me on request.
- I agree that the study will be conducted under the supervision of Mrs Elmarie Visser.
- I acknowledge that I understand the contents of this form, including all the information regarding the procedures and purpose of the study.

.....
Participant name & surname

.....
Date

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