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To cite this article: Valerie R. Renegar & Kirsti K. Cole (2019): “Evil Is Part of the Territory”: Inventing the Stepmother in Self-Help Books, Women's Studies in Communication

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1660745

Published online: 17 Oct 2019.
“Evil Is Part of the Territory”: Inventing the Stepmother in Self-Help Books

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Abstract

The “wicked stepmother” is a popular cultural commonplace, but when women become stepmothers, many find themselves trapped by the cliche with few resources to navigate or resist it. In this article, we examine the rhetoric of self-help books, one of the few print genres aimed at stepmothers. We argue that these texts reify a particular identity by perpetuating cultural stereotypes, reinforcing negative connotations about stepmothers, and providing inadequate solutions to common issues that arise as a result. The books reinscribe the primacy of biological mothering and relegate stepmothers to a secondary status at the same time as they subject stepmothers to the contradictory expectations of intensive mothering. The privilege of motherhood is granted, deflected, and denied across these advice books. We seek to move beyond the negative expectations of this common parenting role and point to the inadequacies of the solutions offered in self-help books to expand and diversify the visibility of and possibilities for alternative familial configurations.

Keywords

Identity; intensive mothering rhetoric; privilege; self-help books; stepmothering

The “wicked stepmother,” found in such fairy tales as those of Cinderella and Snow White, is a popular cultural commonplace but hardly an aspirational role. Unfortunately, when women become stepmothers, many find themselves trapped by this characterization with few resources to navigate or resist it. It can feel like wickedness is just the way that it goes for women who marry a partner who already has children. According to recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau, more than fifty percent of the sixty million children under age thirteen live in households with a stepparent (Vespa, Lewis, and Kreider), so a more nuanced understanding of mothering culture should include more insight into stepmothers and their experiences. Although stepmothering relationships are increasingly prevalent in American society, few tools are available for stepmothers new to, or struggling with, this particular role. Self-help books are an important resource that some stepmothers seek out for advice about how to navigate stepmotherhood or to understand the expectations that come along with parenting stepchildren.

To explore the implications of how the stepmother identity is created and perpetuated, we analyze the top-selling self-help books aimed at stepmothers. As a genre, self-
help is especially salient in terms of identity because individuals consume self-help books to understand or change themselves (Coyle and Grodin 67), and the motivation for reading self-help books “seems to stem from the sense that there is not a sufficient or satisfying reservoir of knowledge available for significant aspects of life” (Simonds, Women and Self-Help 414). Each of the books that we analyze begins with the assumption that becoming a stepmother will lead to countless problems and heartache, and then offers solutions in the form of advice, words of wisdom from those who have been there, and tactics for handling issues as they arise.

There are several notable similarities among these stepmother self-help books. They tend to be written by white, cisgender, heterosexual, affluent women who have endured the transition from a successful single woman to stepmother. Although a wide range of women become stepmothers, these books construct stepmotherhood as a cohesive, fixed, and unchanging role and characterize the struggles of stepmotherhood as inevitable and unavoidable. We analyze the rhetoric employed in these books to describe who stepmothers are, what they will face, and what they should expect from the experience. We found three recurrent themes: the expectation of negative experiences, the persistence of the stereotype of the wicked stepmother, and the paramount importance of biological parents that necessitates a secondary status for stepmothers. We then analyze the range of solutions that these books offer stepmothers, such as embracing the stereotype of wicked stepmother, accepting secondary status, and having a baby of their own. We argue that these books perpetuate privilege by failing to acknowledge the position the authors occupy and assuming the similarly privileged status of their audience. We contribute to the scholarship on mothering and motherhood rhetorics by demonstrating how dominant social and scholarly discourses concerning mothering and stepmothering reinscribe the importance of biological parenting and intensive mothering. In shaping biological motherhood as the foundation upon which any other mothering role is built, women in any type of mothering relationship are constrained by contradictory ideologies of womanhood.

Theorizing (step)motherhood

Although rhetorical studies are engaged in robust theorizing about motherhood (Chodorow; Koerber; Peeples and DeLuca; Cooley and Stone; Yonker; Buchanan; O’Brien Hallstein), stepmothers are rarely mentioned (Christian; Cole and Renegar). One of the main foci of contemporary motherhood studies is intensive mothering. Intensive mothering is the idea that “no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7 to her children” (Douglas and Michaels 4). Intensive mothering underlies much of the dominant discourse about mothers. Identified as a concept remarkably adaptive to economic and societal shifts, intensive mothering can be a tool for controlling women by foregrounding motherhood as the primary concern of their existence (Demo 15). Obviously, this kind of mothering assumes that mothers have considerable means that they can draw on for financial support while they dedicate their energy to mothering. Intensive mothering, then, really can be enacted only by
those with high levels of privilege who then are in a position to perpetuate the idea that intensive mothering is the best kind of mothering.

Our work builds on Anne Demo’s discussion of intensive mothering. The implication of an adaptive concept of mothering that foregrounds biology both shapes discourse on and excludes stepmothers. As Wednesday Martin notes, the “stepmother reality,” the specific, shared experiences of women with stepchildren … has been largely ignored by feminists, sociologists, and even some of the very authors who write about stepmothers and stepmothering” (5). Communication scholarship in particular has tended to examine rhetoric concerned with reproductive, biological mothering. According to Lynn O’Brien Hallstein, “Communication scholars … have explored motherhood as a site of cultural and political struggle and as an important place to examine political, social, environmental, and/or reproductive justice” (1); however, her 2017 Women’s Studies in Communication special issue on mothering rhetorics focuses on the rhetorical topoi of motherhood and mothering from the framework of reproductive biology. Although this special issue includes articles that are not about biological mothering, the emphasis in the introduction privileges reproductive mothering (1–4).

Scholars who contribute definitions of mothering beyond biology include Sara Hayden, Andrea O’Reilly, and Natalie Fixmer-Oraiz. Their work on othermothering and the dominance of white, heteronormative culture in shaping the mothering experience points to the lack of critical information on diverse family structures. For these authors, making visible the norms of whiteness, heterosexuality, and economic status is key for scholarship on mothers of all kinds. According to Fixmer-Oraiz, mothering “remains the privilege of Whiteness, wealth, and heteronuclear family formation” (131). The books in our sample speak to a limited audience and suggest that only middle- to upper-class white Christian women in heterosexual pairings engage in stepmothering. This is typical of the self-help genre in general (Ebben 112). The books we analyze are written by middle- and upper-class white women, and the targeted audience is middle- and upper-class white women. They are an echo chamber. The visibility of these norms functions as a rhetorical strategy which may “have an impact but fail to shift normative discourse” (Morrissey and Kimball 49).

Privilege is granted, denied, and deflected across the advice books targeting stepmothers. If privilege is “deployed, conferred, and maintained through the ‘maps’ and ‘codebooks’ of mothering” (Demo 12), stepmothers are caught in the same contradictory markers of privilege surrounding biological mothers. Demo argues that “the negotiations of economic, cultural, social, and emotional capital, as well as the rhetorical frames used to facilitate the transfer of privilege, will become only more critical in the interdisciplinary study of motherhood and consumption” (14). The role of the white, cisgender, heterosexual woman who has money to purchase goods and services is the identity created for stepmothers in these texts. We use Demo’s critical frame to continue the attention to motherhood and consumption because the intended audience is women privileged in these ways, but the commodification of mothering is differentially available for stepmothers in these advice books.
Stepmothers and the role of self-help books

Self-help books are especially important in understanding how the role of stepmother is figured and perpetuated by dominant cultural ideology because such books are read almost exclusively by women who have recently become or are about to become stepmothers and have questions or concerns about the role. They not only allow us insight into the identity formation of stepmothers but also give insight into the ways in which the commodification of motherhood implicates both biological and nonbiological parenting by women. Self-help books enable audiences “to understand how other people commonly experience a particular problem” (Grodin 412). There is a long tradition of communication scholarship looking at the self-help genre that critiques self-help books for the implication that the feminine is fundamentally unhealthy (Ehrenreich and English). Wendy Simonds argues that readers see the genre of self-help existing primarily for women (“All Consuming Selves” 14); however, Susan Faludi notes that self-help books reinforce the issues addressed as subjective—as problems for individual women to solve (337). Scott Cherry reinforces Faludi’s critique of individualism, arguing that self-help removes the social context of issues addressed (338). Maureen Ebben argues that “self-help advice fails to dismantle repressive social structures and instead fosters a mode of femininity which will not threaten the patriarchal order” (118). She understands self-help authors’ use of “catch words and advice” to “appear to be liberating, [but] they are rooted in a legacy of older, repressive discursive modes against which women have been struggling for decades” (112). Instead of self-help books helping readers, they create a codependency: “readers have become reliant on the self-help book for the satisfaction of their needs” (Cherry 338). For Simonds, it is not just discursive modes against which women struggle but also that self-help “reflects and reinforces American cultural ideology about gender, sexuality, identity, and consumption” (Women and Self-Help 15).

If self-help books hold up a mirror to dominant American cultural ideology, then a wicked, evil stepmother is likely the image that those looking at stepmothers see reflected. This perpetuation of the evil stepmother stereotype serves to reinforce the primacy of biological mothering. For communication scholars and rhetoricians, it is imperative to understand how self-help books function in the matrices of economic, cultural, social, and emotional capital to which Demo points. An analysis of self-help books can reveal how these kinds of books create identity, reinforce privilege, and define subjectivity.

The readers of these books are actively seeking information about what their new identity entails and advice for how to manage its challenges; instead, they find their identities being created and reinforced. Self-help books for stepmothers use universalizing, homogeneous language to speak to an audience of single or newly married women without children, who are financially independent, gainfully employed, and white. They prescribe one view of the alternative nuclear family and proscribe the behavior, conflict, and dashed expectations that are inevitable for stepmothers. This kind of universal absolutism does not allow for any other version of motherhood or family to emerge. These books do not acknowledge privilege or consider women who have biological children before becoming stepparents, lesbian couples, or women who have had an easy, positive transition to parenting. These books construct the identity of stepmother in only one way: one whose signifying practices have not, and seemingly cannot be, changed.
The books that we analyze are featured on the best-selling list of self-help books aimed at stepmothers according to Amazon.com sales. There are eight books on this list: three traditional self-help books, three that function like self-help styled devotionals with numbered and/or daily tips for survival, and two that are a combination of self-help and memoir. The traditional self-help books are Sally Bjornsen’s (2005) *The Single-Girl’s Guide to Marrying a Man, His Kids, and His Ex-Wife*, Jacqueline Fletcher’s (2009) *A Career Girl’s Guide to Becoming a Stepmom: Expert Advice from Other Stepmoms on How to Juggle Your Job, Your Marriage, and Your New Stepkids*, and Kathi Lipp and Carol Boley’s (2015) *But I’m NOT a Wicked Stepmother! Secrets of Successful Blended Families*. Each of these books is described as having a funny, honest, and no-nonsense approach to the “living nightmare” (Lipp and Boley, cover copy) of being a stepmother. These books share a light and approachable tone, are pitched as being written by stepmothers for stepmothers, and include references to interviews with a range of stepmothers across the United States.

Ron Deal and Laura Petherbridge’s (2009) *The Smart Stepmom: Practical Steps to Help You Thrive* is the first of three daily devotional/tips books. Heavily laden with Christian Bible verses and prayer prompts, each chapter ends with a series of discussion questions after a list of quotes from stepmothers about how they feel in certain family situations. Laura Petherbridge followed this book in 2014 with *101 Tips for the Smart Stepmom: Expert Advice from One Stepmom to Another*. Each tip is accompanied by a short paragraph, arranged by topic, to aid stepmothers in “navigating drama” (cover copy). *The Happy Stepmother: Stay Sane, Empower Yourself, Thrive in Your New Family* (2010) by Rachelle Katz is billed as ten steps to a fulfilling new life. Each of the steps is aimed at providing stepmothers with concrete advice as well as reflections from seasoned stepmothers.

The final two books that we analyzed are a combination of self-help and memoir. Wednesday Martin’s *Stepmonster: A New Look at Why Real Stepmothers Think, Feel, and Act the Way We Do* (2015) and Marianne Lile’s *Stepmother: A Memoir* (2016) provide stories to illustrate “step-dilemmas” (Martin, cover copy) and navigate stepfamily complexities. While these books include some useful information, each book dwells on the problems and issues that the authors encountered in their experiences as stepmothers.

Each of these books follows a familiar problem/solution self-help format. We argue that the ways these books characterize the experience of stepmothers, along with the inadequate solutions they offer, perpetuate a cultural narrative that extends the cultural privilege of biological parents, as well as white, heterosexual, Christian, wealthy women, and reduce stepmothers and stepmothering to an inferior status fraught with conflict and tension. Women who consult these books are taught that they cannot escape a highly conflicted family dynamic and are offered little advice or expertise for redefining the relationships in blended families in positive or empowering ways. In the analysis that follows, we explore each of the recurrent themes we discovered in terms of the reality it creates and the ways that it reinscribes the privilege of biological motherhood.

**Terrible, wicked, and inferior: Defining the problem**

The format of self-help books—where problems are diagnosed and discussed, and then solutions are offered—lends itself to casting the identity of stepmothers as problematic. These
books describe the transition from a single person without children to stepmother as a negative experience marked by outdated stereotypes and a required deference to biological mothers. In short, readers are informed that the first years of stepmotherhood will be awful, that their stepchildren will be resentful, and that the larger culture will judge them harshly for daring to intrude in the traditional family structure. These descriptions serve to reproduce dominant ideological systems and serve to reinforce the secondary status of stepmothers.

Nobody wants (to be) a stepmother

There are numerous descriptions of what individual women will undoubtedly experience as a stepmother in all of the books we analyzed. The sense of inevitability in these descriptions, rich with second-person references to the homogenous “you” of the audience, is laden with negative expectations and a tell-it-like-it-is tone. The authors construct their experiences, or the experiences of those they have interviewed, as inevitable and absolute. For example, Fletcher draws on her experience and then extrapolates it to all of her readers: “I’m not going to lie. This will be one of the most difficult things you will ever do. There are times when you’re going to feel the darkness of absolute hopelessness descend upon you. And you’re going to cry your eyes out” (10). Fletcher interviewed stepmothers to include perspectives beyond her own. However, the message of “absolute hopelessness” persists. Fletcher illuminates the stepmother role in the family as marginal: “The slow-drip water torture of daily reminders that you are a bit outside the family unit…. Get used to those small reminders because they don’t go away” (162).

Petherbridge concurs that “[i]t’s not uncommon for a stepmom to feel outside the family circle. It’s as if she is standing in the front yard, peering through the window as her husband and kids laugh and play a game together. They are the family. She is the outcast” (24). Martin sees it this way: “Stepmothers become the bad guys in the family system quickly. In pointing out problems, we become the problem. We come to seem shrill, rigid, and intolerant almost overnight … and are quickly villainized by everyone in the household, including ourselves” (22–23). In the world constructed by these books, stepmothers will undoubtedly experience a range of negative feelings including isolation and self-recrimination.

In addition to feelings of isolation, stepmother self-help books also warn readers that they should expect hurt feelings and be prepared to suffer repeatedly. Bjornsen indicates that even those rare women who have “painlessly slipped into the role have had their feelings hurt along the way. It goes with the territory” (9). She continues with this observation:

[Y]ou should be prepared to have your heart broken about, well, hmmm, let’s say every few minutes. But rest assured, as with an inevitable bad hair day, you’ll get used to it. Eventually you’ll grow calluses on your delicate heart, and things that used to make you drown in tears will roll right off you like a distasteful joke. (50)

Bjornsen follows this prophecy with a hope and an admonition: “I wish for all the new steppmothers out there that it didn’t have to be this way, but it is, so you might as well just buck up and get used to it!” (50).

Lipp and Boley acknowledge their prescience: “Yet even without meeting you, we think we know a few things about you” (7). They proceed with a list that emphasizes
both inevitable negative feelings and the outsider status of the stepmother role that they characterize as unwanted and unexpected. They ultimately characterize their audience as exhausted, confused and angry, lonely and frustrated, guilty and depressed, and discouraged and disillusioned (7). All in all, stepmothering is constructed as a singularly negative emotional endeavor. Martin concludes, “Nobody wants a stepmother … and nobody wants to be a stepmother either” (19).

To compound the ways in which stepmothers should expect to feel isolated, experience hurt feelings, and take on a role that no one would relish, stepmothers are also constructed in self-help books as last-place finishers in a competition with the biological mother. Bjornsen includes a story about her friend Ava who is told by her stepdaughter at a family dinner, “Ava, you’re nice and stuff, but you’re nobody’s mother!” (39). Bjornsen follows: “She may as well have said ‘You’re an ugly slut and a nobody.’ Ava was devastated” (39). The transition from not-mother to slut speaks to the larger cultural suspicion of women who are seen as trying to take the place of biological mothers. For these authors, and the women in the stepmother role, not being a biological mother carries significant sociocultural implications. Petherbridge urges her readers to “accept that stepfamilies are founded on loss” (22). She argues that stepmothers have to “accept this truth” that a loss by death, divorce, or a broken relationship is going to create unique problems for a stepfamily (22). By foregrounding loss and unhappiness, Petherbridge relegates stepmothers to whatever scraps of happiness can be salvaged from the loss that preceded them. Bjornsen echoes this sentiment and helps stepmothers locate their place in the family when she explains in the “Sassy Stepmother Straight Scoop”:

> In those instances where the biological mother is present, you will always be the outcast, the thorn in your stepchildren’s side. They remember the days when their parents shared Christmas, birthdays, and baseball games together. Deep in their hearts they want to push the rewind button and go back to the way it was when their parents were married and you were off being sassy and single. (62)

These examples, and others like them, occur throughout the self-help books we sampled. The authors address their audience as a homogenous group who will inevitably share the same experiences with their stepchildren and spouse, who will experience the same negative emotions, and who will have an isolated and secondary role in their family. The universal and inevitable descriptions used in these books limit stepmothers to one kind of woman who will necessarily have the kind of experiences they describe.

### Trapped in a (fractured) fairy tale

The consistent presence of the “wicked stepmother” trope is notable in all of these texts, because this stereotype shapes the cultural understanding of stepmothers. The authors are aware of the destructive nature of this stereotype but nonetheless embrace it in their descriptions of the stepmother experience. The books suggest that women who become stepparents are subject to this label, often in a laughing or joking tone. Fletcher provides this insight:

> [T]he fact that the myth of the wicked stepmother still informs most people’s views of stepmotherhood is pretty distressing—especially considering there are more than 15 million of us in the United States. That’s a lot of women who are rowing upstream to
overcome a negative stereotype perpetuated by stories of horrible stepmothers who torture their stepchildren. (206)

So, stepmothers are aware that the majority of characterizations of this role are negative. Similarly, Bjornsen explains, “The fact that there are no high-profile stepmother role models in the media doesn’t help when you’re trying to form your new identity as a wife and a pseudo mother. And the conflict with the bio-mom in the few [media portrayals] that exist is only eased with death” (43). In other words, popular culture leaves women expecting conflict but providing little in the way of models for navigating it.

Katz presents historical data to illustrate the omnipresence of the idea of the evil stepmother. She reviews the first use of stepmother, attributed to Euripides 2,400 years ago, and touches on Cinderella and Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs as representative of the fairy and folk tales that reinforce stepmothers as “the bad guys” (37–38). These self-help books, then, reinforce the long-standing cultural belief that stepmothers are unwelcome by noting the stereotype but failing to provide any viable alternatives.

It is clear that “evil stepmother” continues to thrive as a cultural stereotype. These books use the presence of this stereotype to prepare stepmothers for the negative treatment that is bound to be inflicted by stepchildren, biological parents, and the larger culture. Fletcher cites research from Kim Leon and Erin Angst indicating that seventy-three percent of stepfamilies were portrayed in a negative light (207). Katz notes that in “movies from 1990 to 2003 with stepmothers as characters ... none portrayed stepmothers in a positive light. In fact, over one-third of the stepmothers were shown as ‘murderous or abusive,’ and even more were portrayed as ‘money-grubbing or unwanted’” (38). Martin explains, “In our gossip, movies, myths, and collective cultural history, the stepmother emerges in various guises—gold digger, death dealer, witch, bitch—over and over again” (39). She later concludes that “[t]he wicked stepmother, it seems, like the incest taboo and the fear of snakes, is a cultural universal, easily recognized and justifiably loathed” (39). The authors of these self-help books seem to have a keen understanding of the problematic nature of the overarching stereotype of the evil stepmother that is thoroughly negative. Fletcher summarizes the issue of the lack of alternative role models: “Several studies have found that one reason stepmotherhood is so difficult is the ambiguity of the role. With no set cultural description of a stepmother besides the ever-popular wicked archetype, it’s hard to find our place” (38). Interestingly, though the authors of these texts are acutely aware of the damage done by the wicked archetype, they do nothing to counter the identity construction.

This archetype, like other language that determines the collective understanding of stepmothers, is tinged with the same sense of inevitability. For example, Bjornsen relays, “There will be days, weeks, and months in your early days of stepmotherhood when you feel so wicked that you won’t recognize yourself. Rest assured that these evil thoughts are absolutely normal” (16). The books convey that how others will perceive a stepmother is inevitable. Katz attempts to prepare stepmothers for what they will encounter: “Unrealistic expectation 1: I will be recognized as kind and compassionate rather than as the ‘wicked stepmother.’ A more realistic expectation: I know that society stigmatizes stepmothers, and I will strive to counteract the stereotype of the ‘wicked stepmother’” (37). Katz suggests that this negativity constrains stepmothers:
Unlike mothers or other wives, we’re especially hesitant to express our frustrations. Many of us feel we have to tread lightly, since we perceive our role in the family as fragile. We often fear that if we speak up, the entire family will perceive us as “wicked,” or that we might be rejected and ostracized. (27)

Even the titles of some the self-help books from this study—namely, But I’m not a Wicked Stepmother! and Stepmonster—point to the ubiquity of the stereotype.

Fairy tales, and other narratives like them, have also provided an important blueprint about the nature of marriage and romantic love. Stepmother self-help texts draw on a fairy-tale sense of romance and marriage but then quickly advise their readers to abandon those ideas. Marrying a man with children, they argue, is the ultimate disruption of the fairy-tale narrative. Lile’s memoir begins with fairy-tale language “Once upon a time, a long time ago, a handsome man asked a lovely lady to be his wife. They were married on a fair fall evening beneath the star and the heavens” (1). Lile then disrupts this idyllic description: “Whoops! Stop! Freeze frame! I forgot to mention one thing: the lovely lady was now a stepmother,” thus kicking off her account of how her fairy tale was fractured. Fletcher recounts her feelings about her marriage: “Cinderella’s man didn’t have any kids; why does mine? The fall of the fantasy” (19). She goes on to extrapolate this experience for the entirety of her audience:

Once upon a time there was a man who fell in love and married a woman who wasn’t you. They bought their first home together. They got their first pet together. Then they had their first baby together and life was good. But then it wasn’t good anymore and they got divorced. Then came along number two. Yes, that’s you. But number two just doesn’t sound or feel so good. (26)

The fairy tale, in other words, is for a different kind of woman, one who is the first to marry a particular man. The stepmother must resign herself to a secondary status.

Bjornsen notes that the fairy-tale blueprint does even more damage than just creating an evil identity for stepmothers: “We women have been cursed. Ever since the invention of the fairy tale we have been brainwashed to think that wavy long hair, a tiny waist, and eternal romance was our God-given right” (182). Martin indicates that since the 1800s there have been “nearly 350 versions of the Cinderella story alone” in countries across the globe. “Like the character of the wicked stepmother and the stories she drives, stepmother history tends to recur repeating itself in endless loops” in modern culture (39). Further, these fairy tales pit the stepmother against the mother. “While nothing prepares you for the role of a successful stepmother, there are plenty of messages in the media and in fairy tales that will tutor you in the skills of becoming a bitter enemy to the ex-wife” (Bjornsen 85). Stepmother self-help books, then, simultaneously use and deploy the language of fairy tales in the form of the evil stepmother while also reminding the audience that fairy-tale romances and marriages are beyond the reach of those becoming stepmothers.

**You will never be a “real mother”**

We have examined how these books serve to rhetorically construct the identity of stepmothers by laying out a series of expectations and fairy-tale stereotypes. We now turn to an examination of the expectations these books create in regard to the larger culture.
Much like the characteristics we have already revealed, the descriptions and advice that fall under the heading of society and culture are presented as inevitable and negative. Stepmothers need to prepare themselves, Fletcher argues, because “[t]he daily onslaught of rejections can whittle away at even the most emotionally secure woman” (195). In the world of these self-help books, there are no communities that accept or appreciate stepmothers. As biological parents are held up over and over again as the “true” or “real” parents, stepmothers tend to find themselves relegated to secondary status. One of the most common refrains across these books is that a stepmother should consider the biological mother’s position in the family and to afford her care, consideration, and respect. Fletcher reminds stepmothers that “your husband once loved her enough to marry her and have children with her. She has redeeming qualities” (235). Bjornsen weighs in:

And the bio-mom, the woman your husband slept with before you? Phew! You’ve married her, too. She can show up at the most surprising moments and you are expected to take the backseat and be cordial, regardless of whether she treats you like the live-in nanny or the town slut. (15)

One of the threads that runs across all of the books in our sample is the idea that the children must be the highest priority in a stepmother’s new family, which stems from the logic of intensive mothering. Prioritizing children functions as an example of how self-help books for stepmothers reinforce intensive mothering standards by entrenching the idea that children are central to a family and the reproductive function of biological mothers as the most important kind of mother. Authors frame this priority as a rude awakening. Bjornsen received this advice before her wedding: “Dawling [sic], prepare yourself. Because, no matter what, when you marry a man with children, his kids will always come first” (9). Fletcher includes a similar sentiment from a father’s perspective: “The first time I met my wife, I told her that my kids come first, and if you can’t accept that, there is no reason that you and I should be dating because my children will always come first” (259). Bjornsen frames this as the inevitable reality for those stepmothers who have chosen caring husbands: “As a result, a divorced man who is a conscientious father will often put his kids before you. It doesn’t mean he loves you any less than he does his children. The sooner you grasp this lesson, the easier your life will be” (12). Stepmothers, then, are once again limited to a second-place role in their families.

Further, these books tell stepmothers to expect the judgment of others in regard to their status. Katz explains that “our culture does not recognize the love, kindness and compassion we give to our stepchildren” (x). She goes on to note that “society perceives us as one step removed from the family, second best, or unfairly stepping into someone else’s shoes. Without knowing it, others tend to assume that we are hostile and cruel to our stepchildren” (x–xi). She points to the scapegoating function that stepmothers serve, taking the blame for anything that goes wrong in the family (xi). These self-help books warn women that they will encounter overt hostility and mistrust in regard to their role as stepmothers but will be responsible for the health of the relationship even as they are encouraged to make children the center of their new family.

While stepmothers are assumed to be “second best” (Katz xi), these books continually reinforce the primacy and importance of biological mothers and place biological mothers in competition with stepmothers. Stepmothers, it seems, cannot be discussed or
understood without a sense of what they are not and whom they replace—namely, “real mothers.” Fletcher notes that stepmothers are doomed to a sense of loneliness as a result of not having biological children: “In stepfamilies, when emotionally loaded things like this happen, the family splits down biological lines. Since I don’t have children of my own, I don’t have my own family to comfort me, so I am left out, while my husband takes solace from the love of his children” (166). Katz indicates that as a stepmother, women will be judged as responsible for their partner’s divorce: “We stepmothers are frequently perceived as ‘home wreckers,’ who deserve any misery that comes our way. This widespread societal belief affirms that we stepmothers are responsible for the failure of our partner’s prior marriage” (xi). Stepmothers, then, are in the precarious situation of being judged negatively and unfairly, while also being marked as not deserving of sympathy.

Biological mothers are framed as a cohesive group hostile to those that threaten their position in a family. These books warn stepmothers that because they are not biological mothers, they will be on the outside of mother culture. Bjornsen explains:

If you haven’t discovered [the “mommy club”] yet, you will. It’s an exclusive society, a sorority of sorts, that you will encounter in your first few months and years of stepmotherhood. Sadly, you will not be invited unless you biologically spawn, carry, and give birth to a child of your own (vaginal or cesarean delivery will do). (34)

She continues that stepmothers will never be able to be part of mom groups because “the unspoken law among the Mommy club members is that bio-moms, whatever the case, reign. It’s a girl thing. I think on some level, happily married women are threatened by stepmothers because it absolutely breaks their heart to contemplate handing their children off to another woman” (37).

In addition to the assumption that stepmothers are not biological mothers themselves when they enter their new relationship, this privileging of the biological—whether in terms of reproduction or in terms of their fear of stepmothers—is wrapped up, for these authors, in one holiday: Mother’s Day. While there are many ways that American society reminds stepmothers of their secondary status, Mother’s Day is cited as one of the most challenging for stepmothers. Because this is a day that biological mothers are celebrated, it often serves as a reminder that a stepmother is not a mother (Bjornsen 136; Fletcher 214). Lile explains that

the problem with the whole day is the theme of acknowledgement—a sign showing that somebody has been seen or heard by somebody else. That is tough for stepmothers … and when you add the guilt factor of whether acknowledging your stepmom means you might not be acknowledging your mom fully, it becomes a little hairy. (49)

According to these books, stepmothers will be viewed as wicked, as homewreckers, as mother replacers, and/or as child stealers, and the lack of a day to celebrate their contributions to a family seems just. With a sense of the limitations that are created as a necessary part of the stepmother identity by these self-help books, we now turn to the solutions that they propose for the women who read them.
Endure, adapt, or reproduce: Inadequate solutions

The rhetoric of these self-help books teaches stepmothers that they will suffer negative feelings, unfair treatment, and evil stereotypes. The self-help genre, however, aims to solve these problems by offering advice. For example, these books indicate that being aware of the inevitable negative feelings stepmothers will experience is important. Implied within this idea is that if a stepmother is aware that she will encounter negativity, she can better prepare herself to endure it. These books encourage stepmothers to recognize that in marrying a man with children, they should have full knowledge that they will have a secondary role in the family and will be expected to make the children their primary concern. Other solutions in these books include treating family issues as similar to problems at work and employing similar conflict resolution strategies, reframing or renaming the situations they encounter, having faith in a higher power to guide the stepmother experience, and swallowing negative feelings in favor of feeling sympathy and showing deference for the biological parents and the feelings of the children. Although each of these books addresses problems that stepmothers face, the solutions they provide are inadequate. After all, the solutions cannot improve stepmothers’ negative experiences if those experiences are inevitable.

Suck it up, buttercup

One of the most commonly cited solutions for stepmothers is that they must get over their feelings and/or lower their expectations for a positive stepmother experience because all stepmothers should know what they are getting into when they marry someone with children. Repeatedly, the emphasis is placed on moving past conflict by coming to the realization that joining a family with children will be fraught with tension, sadness, conflict, and difficulty. The books have little to say about how the stepmother relationship can be improved; instead, they chastise the reader for not knowing in advance how negative and limiting stepmotherhood would be. This admonition for stepmothers to “get over” their inescapable negative feelings pairs the language of inevitability with the inadequate solution of ignoring or suppressing individual feelings. Further, these books couch the negativity that they predict as an informed choice made by stepmothers. Fletcher recounts,

> When I’m feeling sorry for myself, I sometimes think negative thoughts… . “So why do I have to deal with somebody else’s decision [to have children]? It’s not fair!” And where do those thoughts lead? Nowhere. I knew what I was getting myself into when I married my husband. (242)

Even though these books are aimed at single women or new stepmothers, they nonetheless suggest women should all enter marriage with a full understanding of what it will be like to be a stepmother. These books, then, serve to remind women that because they chose to marry a man with children, they must also endure the hardships of stepmotherhood.

This choice to become a stepmother is repeated across the books and is continually used as a reason that stepmothers should accept negative treatment or secondary status. Much like the neoliberalism of intensive mothering, this emphasis on individual choice places the responsibility to improve stepmother relationships firmly on the backs of
stepmothers. Lipp and Boley acknowledge that some parts of the stepmother role might not be clear at the outset:

So, my friend, welcome to the club. Other adults may not understand. You may feel a constant mix of pain and guilt, and every once in a while, a teaspoon of hope gets thrown in. I know you signed up for the role of stepmom, but I’m guessing you truly had no idea what you were getting into. (4)

Fletcher discusses her meetings in premarital counseling when the topic of the stepchildren came up: “She [the counselor] reminded him (and me) that I was an adult and had made the decision to be with him fully aware he was bringing three lovely children to the relationship. It was my choice” (62). Bjornsen suggests that stepchildren change the tenor of a marriage: “Even though I knew what I was getting into, I imagined our first year of marriage to be much more romantic” (188). Although these books suppose that all stepmothers were making a fully informed choice, Katz asks survey participants, “If you knew what your life would be like as a stepmother, would you get involved with your partner again? For many … the answer was an unequivocal no” (4).

The solution of “get over it” is inadequate because it does not provide any means by which to improve or reframe the relationship. Instead, stepmothers are expected to adjust their position or resign themselves to a negative situation that they should have anticipated. The result is that stepmothers may feel trapped in marriages they helped to build because, presumably, they should have anticipated struggle even if they had no prior experience with marriage or children.

**Embrace being wicked**

In addition to perpetuating the belief that stepmothers should have known what their relationship would entail, these books propose solutions that offer new ways to describe or name their role in the family. Some of these books encourage embracing the negative cultural stereotypes that surround stepmothers. Fletcher shares, “I view myself as really more of a friend. Now they call me ‘step-monster’ lovingly” (301). Bjornsen echoes this recasting of negative terms with her stepchildren: “‘You are the best evil stepmother in the universe!’ Music to my ears. My charming stepsons have given new meaning to the title ‘evil stepmother,’ their personal brand of endearment” (14). She goes on to imagine that when she dies one day

[t]hey will shed tears over my grave while blubbering through a heartfelt eulogy that read “she was a kind and loving evil stepmother.” An oxymoron? Not really. Evilness goes with the territory of stepmotherhood, … except you feel more wicked and vulnerable when you’re thinking bad thoughts about someone else’s kids. (14)

Throughout her book, Bjornsen attempts to help stepmothers find comfort in terms of evil rather than developing new ways of thinking about the stepmother relationship. For example, she refers to her wicked stepmother persona as her “Evil Twin”: “Not entirely bad,” the Evil Twin exists to “fend off the enemy when you’re feeling threatened or scared” (32). Bjornsen refers to her Evil Twin as “an aggressive Girl Scout selling boxes of rage” (32)—rage used to protect her from the inevitable pain of stepmothering.

In contrast with those who work within the confines of the stereotype, some stepmothers attempt to recast their role. Boley and Lipp provide four alternatives to the
“wicked stepmother” stereotype: fun stepmom, bossy stepmom, “whatever” stepmom, and “poor, pitiful me” stepmom (89). Katz explains that many stepmothers have the unrealistic expectation that “I will be recognized as kind and compassionate rather than as the ‘wicked stepmother.’ A more realistic expectation [would be]: I know that society stigmatizes stepmothers, and I will strive to counteract the stereotype of the ‘wicked stepmother’” (37). Bjornsen nods to the powerful cultural impact of stereotypes while recasting stepmothers in a new way: “The fact that there are no high-profile stepmother role models in the media doesn’t help when you’re trying to form your new identity as a wife and a pseudomother” (43). Bjornsen recommends, “You have to have a good sense of humor, a strong sense of self, and good inventory of fine wine to make it as a not-so-evil stepmother” (9).

Martin echoes this call to have a thicker skin because she “realized that, inevitably, the negative ways we are seen threaten to seep into, to inflect, to determine even, the way we see ourselves. Researchers have amply documented that becoming a stepmother has an impact on a woman’s self-esteem and not for the better” (37). Stepmothers, then, are constituted by the negative representations that circulate in our culture and are profoundly affected by them.

**Capitalize on your expertise**

Some of these books counsel their readers to return to areas of strength from their lives, like workplace competence or religious faith, as a foundation for navigating the challenges that stepmothering presents. Two of the books from our data set (The Smart Stepmom and 101 Tips for the Smart Stepmom) were published by Bethany House, a press with a Christian focus, while another (But I’m NOT a Wicked Stepmother!) is the product of the far-right Focus on the Family press. Not surprisingly, these books feature scriptural quotes and prayers for stepmothers and their families. They also draw on Christian scripture to describe situations that stepmothers encounter. Lipp and Boley’s first chapter is titled “God’s Plan for Stepmoms” and begins with a quote from Joshua 1:9: “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go” (11). The advice in this chapter is centered on leaning on faith when there are issues and to find role models in scripture. For example, Boley and Lipp recommend that “[w]hen we face challenges that threaten to overwhelm us, God gives us the strength to persevere… He gives us the formula for success” (17). This formula includes the following list:

1. Accept reality… Life is hard, full of trouble, pain, and sorrow… 3. Know that you are not alone… 5. Know God’s heart…. In other words, “Stepmother, don’t panic; stay focused on God and His Book of Instructions. You will need them.” (17–18)

In the text, each of these items is followed by a scriptural quotation from the book of Joshua. The advice given here, albeit couched in religious rhetoric, has many of the same characteristics of the secular advice that stepmothers should accept their role as our culture understands it and acknowledge individual agency in choosing the role but includes the added dimension that stepmothers should recognize that they are part of a larger plan. Much of this advice likely resonates with readers who share the religious traditions of these books.
The other books in our sample turn to different set of experiences, largely those from the workplace, to generate solutions to stepmother issues. Both Bjornsen and Fletcher address their books to financially independent, career-oriented women, while Lile reflects on her personal experience as a financially independent, successful woman. Martin has compiled extensive research from across a range of academic disciplines, but she frames the book through her experience. As an attractive white woman with a doctoral degree in comparative literature from Yale, it is clear that she, too, is financially mobile and has experienced career success. Bjornsen describes her life in a way that seeks identification with her audience:

I don’t know about you, but when I was single I was pretty darn careful about money. It wasn’t that I had a lot of it, but I had enough to buy a condo, splurge on an occasional vacation, buy a few frivolous and overpriced items at Needless Markup, and still put a little away for retirement. (159)

This privileged position results in advice that is grounded in financial and career success. Bjornsen’s book in particular includes a substantial section on setting money aside, sharing resources, as well as providing advice about planning family-friendly vacations, how to best celebrate holidays and birthdays, and when girlfriend spa days are required.

Fletcher comes from a similarly economically privileged position but draws on her experience in corporate America to devise solutions. For example, she quotes interviewee Darcy who “dealt with new stepmotherhood by using the skills she’d perfected as a human resources manager with her two stepchildren” (242). Darcy explains, “You have to find out what motivates each person and use that as a means to an end. Then you let them know your expectations so they can successfully meet them… . It works with direct reports and with kids” (quoted in Fletcher 242). Fletcher draws on her own experience as a middle-to-upper-class woman with a thriving career when she counsels, “You’re a talented woman. So why not remember the skills you have in your working world and use them at home? When you’ve got a problem at work, think about how you find a solution” (177–78). In addition to workplace experience, Fletcher also relies on a privileged economic position to navigate the challenges of stepparenting by shopping, having lunch, or going to a movie (179). She continues that “stepmoms often feel guilty about taking time out for themselves when the kids are around, but you’ll be a better stepmom if you keep doing things for yourself” (179). While this advice may resonate with some other privileged audiences, as a whole it is inadequate because it presupposes experiences and resources afforded to a select few. Further, the failure of the authors to acknowledge this difference in position helps constitute the identity of stepmothers as heterosexual women who were single and childless, with substantial individual wealth and thriving careers before they married a man with children.

**Bow down to biology**

While these books suggest strategies and solutions to help women navigate the challenges of stepmothering, they continually reinforce the primacy of biological parents. Bjornsen recommends that stepmothers try to imagine what it is like to be a biological mother who cannot be around her children all the time and to sympathize with the difficulty (82). This idea of the stepmother trying to imagine the situation from the mother’s perspective recurs across the books, reinscribing the primacy of biological mothers.
Lipp and Boley begin their chapter “Accepting Your Stepkid’s Mom” by explaining to the stepmother why the biological mother is at a disadvantage in the relationship with their children’s stepmother. Their explanation includes the idea that the stepmother reminds the mother “of a failing in her life … threatens her relationship with her kids … and enjoys some of the ‘perks’ that she no longer has” (100–101). In addition, the stepmother should be aware the new marriage can be difficult for the mother because “your husband is a different guy with you than he was with her … and has become a better dad since you got married” (103). Finally, the stepmother should know she is “moving in on [the mother’s] territory,” is “an unknown factor,” and that she “hurt their marriage.” The authors explain that the stepmother can often be blamed for the end of the previous marriage because “some of us didn’t take the right road when it came to being with our husbands” (Lipp and Boley 103–104). In discussing each of these points, Lipp and Boley encourage the stepmother to demonstrate grace and concern for the ex-wife and stepchildren who are grieving the loss of their family. Lipp and Boley then provide six complete pages of rules and tips for “accepting your husband’s ex,” beginning with a section titled Okay, She Doesn’t Like Me. Now What? (104). Their advice tells readers to remember “that God has given you everything that you need to respond in a grace-filled way” and “pray for her in a regular basis” (106). The onus is consistently on the stepmother to “strike some sort of deal to get along. To not rock the boat. To just keep everything calm” (107). This kind of advice is designed to accommodate the feelings and status of biological mothers and serves to excuse whatever behavior or feelings of jealousy they might exhibit. Urging stepmothers to empathize serves to perpetuate the culture of intensive mothering and leaves stepmothers with little recourse when they encounter problems with the biological mothers of their stepchildren.

While most of the books do not address themselves to biological mothers, Lipp and Boley are notable for explaining that biological mothers may be able to discern some ways that their children benefit from having a stepmother. These are all framed as benefits for the biological mother’s children and their father, with positive outcomes such as “she celebrates with my kids,” “she includes my kids in activities and traditions,” and “she encourages my kids to have a relationship with their dad” (109). The possessive pronoun my is especially telling since the biological mother reasserts her primacy at the same time she acknowledges that the stepmother “has surprised me and has done many things right” (109). So, while the advice for stepmothers is to accommodate the biological mother because she is a mother, biological mothers are urged to respect a new stepmother because her presence could benefit them. Again, the biological mother is at the center of the equation in a way that stepmothers never are.

The privileged position of the biological mother is affirmed across these books. Katz, for example, asks stepmothers to put themselves in the shoes of the ex-wife and to empathize with them because divorce permanently disadvantages women economically (53–55). She also notes that “[b]alancing the demands of a job, home, child care, and a social life may be very stressful for divorced mothers” (55). Stepmothers are encouraged to anticipate this stress and accommodate her and the children in whatever ways they can manage. Petherbridge’s eighth tip is to “understand that the ex-wife is here to stay even if she’s gone” (26). Throughout her book, Petherbridge’s solution to navigating
stepfamily conflict is for the stepmother to realize her place: second to that of the biological mother: “I think stepmoms could benefit from asking themselves, ‘Who is this child’s mother?’ I totally understand how difficult it is when you give your heart, soul, and time to a child who isn’t your own” (52). She continues, “But often it’s necessary for a stepmom to take a step back and reflect, ‘Even though I have grown to love this child, he or she isn’t my child by my husband and his former wife’s child. This child already has a mother. And it is not me!’” (52). In other words, stepmothers need to fully accept that biological mothers are more important. While stepmothers need to attend to the needs of their stepchildren, they should do so with the understanding that their status is still secondary.

In addition to encouraging stepmothers to avoid thinking about their stepchildren as their own children, Petherbridge recommends that stepmothers make themselves as invisible as possible. She suggests:

Step aside: [as] a gift to your husband and his kids…. When my stepsons got married I decided the greatest gift I could give them was to stay on the sidelines…. The real question is will you love this child enough to give them a day without tension, stress, choosing sides, or thinking of how to please everyone else? (110–11)

Notably, Petherbridge sees the stepmother as the source of tension, stress, and so on, with no redeeming qualities. Fletcher also mentions a stepchild’s wedding to demonstrate the privileging of the biological mother as a solution. Reflecting on the advice given to one of her friends, she writes, “‘You’re the stepmother. Your job is to wear beige and smile’ Harsh! But the sentiments are right on. A stepmother’s place at a wedding is to ask her stepchildren what they want her to do and to take a back seat to Mom” (228).

These books serve to remind stepmothers that although their new role will result in negative treatment, wicked stereotypes, and the loss of economic independence, they will, in all likelihood, have a contentious relationship with the biological mother that will require them to develop empathy, compassion, and respect while expecting none of this in return.

**Join the club!**

Many of the books we analyzed offer a solution, however, to the second-class status of stepmothers in relation to biological mothers. The answer is for stepmothers to have a child of their own. Lile and her husband had a baby early in their marriage. She remembers it this way: “It was a good thing I was pregnant. It grounded me. Centered me” (54). She continues:

I loved being pregnant … [the pregnancy] was magic in the best sense of the word. I had a not-so-subtle secret. I had someone in my corner all day long. Someone in my corner when my stepdaughter still cried every night she stayed with us. Someone in my corner when my stepson was so polite it hurt. Someone to whisper to that this was all going to work out. (57)

Lile sees a biological child as a counter to the pain that her stepchildren inflict, while Bjorlsen lists “a few good reasons to have your own baby,” including “balancing the love” in a family, meaning that, after they have a child together, the
stepmother will finally have someone who loves her as much as the father’s children love him (207). Other reasons for having a baby include increasing the “blood status” of the stepmother, because now the family is held together by more than a marriage; instant siblings; a new caring role for the husband; “irrevocable membership to the Mommy Club, and a fresh perspective on the ex” (Bjornsen 209–16). Biological mothering is again centered as primary, as stepmothers are encouraged by these books to consider having children of their own as a counter to the experience of stepmothering.

Biological mothering is also pitted against the role of biological fathers in Bjornsen’s book. When it comes to the opinion of the father about increasing the size of the family, Bjornsen and some of the women whose experience she includes are dismissive. Bjornsen admits that fathers may not be enthusiastic about having more children after having lived through the hardship of divorce, custody agreements, and the financial hardship of single parenting:

But keep in mind, if you do decide to get knocked up, you will be well served to do so strategically … because not only will having a newborn rock your world, but it will also rock the worlds of your husband, his kids, his ex-wife, and her new husband if she has one. (206)

Bjornsen goes on to explain that if the husband is “not chomping at the bit to have more kids … [t]hat doesn’t mean he won’t agree to have one or two more; it just means that your sales job is going to be a little more challenging” (218). Bjornsen shares the perspective of her friend Jan:

If you wait for him to jump with joy at the idea [of children], you’ll be waiting for the rest of your life. If you really want a baby, then you should do it. He’ll come along. If he is a good father to his other kids, he’ll be a great father to this one, too. Trust me. (219)

Bjornsen reinforces the point by explaining, “Jan’s advice was sound. I have since heard from many stepmothers that their children were conceived while their husbands were dragging their feet (apparently it has no effect on sperm count). But once the pregnancy was a reality, the same lukewarm men became giddy with delight” (219). For Bjornsen, attaining the status of biological parent is a worthy goal even in the face of an unwilling partner. Bjornsen elevates the stepmother’s desire to have a child above the wishes of the father; she encourages sales tactics, strategizing, or becoming pregnant absent the father’s consent to achieve that aim. This type of “solution” smacks of manipulation and privileging the desire for biological motherhood above all else. While this route may help stepmothers join the sisterhood of biological mothers, it is not a recipe for a healthy marriage.

**Beyond biology: Reframing stepmotherhood**

In analyzing these self-help books for stepmothers, our primary goal was to explore a category of motherhood that is largely ignored in contemporary communication and rhetorical scholarship. As stepmothers ourselves, we have been frustrated by the limited identities that we are afforded by the institutions and social rules of our culture. Stepmothers encounter a unique constraint because of the dominance of biological privilege. Even the most loving, caring, and committed stepmothers are secondary to
biological mothers, even those of dubious quality. We seek to offer a perspective on mothering that moves beyond the biological and opens space for diverse discursive constructions of mothering and parenting.

We argue that these self-help books participate in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and expectations for stepmothers while doing little to alleviate these issues or suggest avenues for transcending the limitations of the current vocabulary of our culture. Our analysis reveals that self-help books allow for the outdated stereotype of the wicked stepmother to persist. These books characterize the stepmother experience as largely negative, with unavoidable trauma rooted in the secondary status of anyone other than a biological mother. When women seek out these books, their understanding of what it is to be a stepmother and expectations for the things they will likely experience is solidified.

As scholars, we are aware that texts provide important insight into how certain identity categories are defined and perpetuated. The identity created for stepmothers in these books replicates the privileged subject position of mothers as constructed by intensive mothering and serves to remind stepmothers that their role is secondary. These books naturalize particular problems as inevitable but then reinscribe those problems via the inadequate solutions that they pose to resolve them.

The role of stepmother is shaped by the rhetoric of fairy tales that fix the stepmother identity as wicked. Women who have become stepmothers are called to recognize themselves as wicked in each of these texts when the authors rehash and redeploy the evil stepmother stereotype. Further, stepmothers are cast as being in competition with biological mothers, fathers, and their stepchildren in the various scenarios laid out in the books. As such, our analysis demonstrates that the stepmother identity is fundamentally constructed through “opposition shared in common” (Burke 268). Stepmothers are united in the ways our culture, and these books, portray them as outsiders and lesser-than versions of biological mothers. The role that these books create for women is one of opposition to society, their husbands, their stepchildren, and their own self-perceptions.

Women in a stepmothering role are told repeatedly in these texts to expect to be treated poorly because of the nature of their role in the family. They are warned that competing for recognition or visibility in their communities will only be a negative experience because the figure of the stepmother can only be “evil” or “wicked” according to dominant social and discursive norms. Instead of focusing on or trying to address the negative cultural connotations about the stepmother, the authors of these books instead address what stepmothers will face and what they might survive within that fixed identity. Stepmothers are still subject to the tenets of intensive mothering in that the children and their feelings should be the primary concern. As such, the identity of stepmothers is defined by the ways that they are not biological mothers. Even as stepmothers are reminded that they are subordinate to biological parents, they are advised to elevate the needs of their stepchildren, respect the perspectives of the biological parents, and generally learn to accept a secondary role in their new families. What binds stepmothers together, then, is their shared experience of being perceived as lesser-than caregivers who are subject to the expectations of intensive mothering. For these stepmothers, this means they must put the needs of
their stepchildren above all else and recognize biology as the most important aspect of motherhood.

In the same way that the limitations of the stepmother role rely on and invoke the negativity perpetuated by the wicked stepmother stereotype, the solutions offered by these self-help books reify and reinforce negativity. Each of the “solutions” outlined in these books fails to solve the problems laid out for stepmothers; at best, they offer the stepmother solace in accepting their chosen role. Enforcing the idea that stepmothers should have known what they were getting into, and pairing that with a reliance on faith or job skills, means there is no way to move beyond the identity constituted in American culture for stepmothers. The most actionable solution offered to stepmothers is to have their own biological child, thereby joining the privileged “Mommy Club,” but this solution simply seeks to replace the status of stepmothers with the more laudable role of mother. There is very little discussion of what implications this shift would do to the relationship between the stepmother and her stepchildren or what new challenges might arise from blending stepchildren and biological children. Stepmothers’ relationships with their stepchildren is negated or undermined by the idea that biological motherhood is more authentic, more rewarding, or more important than their relationships. These books, then, privilege reproductive biology. Our research encourages scholars to think about the limitations that biological privilege has for our field. In these self-help books, and in the majority of work on mothering in rhetorical studies, women’s value within the family is premised on their biological reproductive ability regardless of their role in heteronormative family structures. Stepmothers, women who cannot or choose not to have children, or other roles embodied by women are all subordinate to the role of mother. By focusing on mothering primarily as a biological relationship, these self-help books and the work on mothering in rhetorical studies reinscribes the cultural expectations of biological mothering and makes it difficult for women or caregivers in a family to flourish. The lack of research about stepmothers and the biological privilege that runs throughout most of the work on mothering presents a unique rhetorical opportunity to think more deeply about how stepmothering is characterized and how motherhood is defined.

In addition to the focus on biological primacy, the commonalities of the authors (white, cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, professionally successful, affluent women) and their target audience is striking. This profound lack of intersectionality is notable because none of the authors acknowledges in any overt way the privilege of their position or the possibility that someone could have a different set of experiences, let alone that their audience might inhabit a different identity category. These self-help books reinforce the notion that stepmothers are white, heterosexual, affluent, and Christian. The audience for these books is assumed by the authors to share these same identity categories and to approach stepmothering in the same way that intensive mothering rhetorics would expect biological mothers to: as individuals making consumer choices and elevating their children above all other concerns.

But these books are quick to remind readers that stepmothers are not quite “real” mothers because of the secondary status of their marriage and the lack of biological connection with their children. Stepmothers can participate in the consumerism expected of biological mothers, but they can never fully inhabit the role of mother
unless they become biological mothers too. As such, the same rhetoric that excludes them from the conventions of intensive mothering invites them to participate in it. Stepmothers, then, are tricksters; they look and act like mothers, but they will eventually be discovered as poor copies of the real thing. As tricksters, they are responsible for deceiving themselves and others into believing that they are mothers—and thus deserve that mantle of wickedness.

Although these books attempt to address stepmothering in a positive way, this analysis reveals that these books reinforce the negative treatment that stepmothers encounter. Further, the challenges of stepmothering as discussed in these books are met with inadequate solutions that reinscribe negative connotations and generate negative expectations of stepmothers and stepmothering. Although stepmothering is a potentially enriching and valuable familial relationship, the self-help genre does not effectively meet the needs of its audience and may, in fact, hinder the development of authentic relationships. The authors of the books in this sample interviewed thousands of stepmothers, but little wisdom is shared. Instead, almost every aspect of the description of stepmothers’ experience and the advice provided is directly constituted through the stereotype of the wicked stepmother, and the audience invoked by the books is homogeneous. When this stereotype is paired with a lack of intersectional diversity, one of the largest publishing markets targeting stepmothers simply reinforces existing negative beliefs about the role and does nothing to create a new space for nonbiological mothering. Our analysis points to the unique rhetorical constraints stepmothers face as a result of our culture’s privileging of biological mothers in the context of intensive mothering. In other words, even the most privileged stepmothers can never be better than a biological mother at caring for children. In that context, to fit the script of a good mother, one must be a biological mother who is wealthy, white, and heterosexual.

Feminist communication scholars are in a unique position to both expand traditional understandings of mothering and to uncover the way that these books perpetuate an identity of inferiority within the context of intensive mothering. Women in our culture are constantly undermined and undervalued. Recognizing and revealing discourse that participates in this process of undercutting women highlights sites that are ripe for feminist intervention. In analyzing self-help discourse, one of the few genres that directly addresses stepmothers, we seek to move beyond the negative expectations of this common parenting role and point to the inadequacies of the solutions offered to expand and diversify the visibility of and possibilities for alternative familial configurations. These books did include some good, practical advice, such as establishing boundaries and setting house rules. However, these recommendations place the responsibility of improving stepmotherhood solely on the shoulders of the women who are subject to it, and they were often lost among the horror stories of negative treatment or overt privileging of biological parents.

As rhetoricians, we see that the language used to describe stepmothers and capture their experience also dooms them to failure, or at least a very bumpy ride, and we understand that new conceptions of this role must begin in the rhetoric that circulates about stepmothers. Further, we hope that, as this research seeks to expand mothering


rhetorics to include stepmothers more fully, other kinds of mothering relationships can emerge. Othermothers, or perhaps Otherparents of all sorts, are challenging the biological, reproductive definitions of motherhood in ways that may be valuable to a changing familial landscape. It is only when we can generate new cultural stereotypes for the roles individuals play in families and new kinds of rhetoric about them that the nature of the stepmother role can be expanded or transformed.

Acknowledgment

This research was partially funded by a generous grant from the Sam Taylor Fellowship.

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