

SELF-CONCEPT AND ROLE PERFORMANCE:
AN EXPLORATION OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP IN
STEPMOTHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH JOINT CUSTODY

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By

JUDITH STOCK-SITKO

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DISSERTATION SIGNATURE APPROVAL PAGE

INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

We hereby approve the dissertation

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BY

JUDITH STOCK-SITKO

candidate for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Clinical Social Work.

Doctoral Committee

Ruth Bro
Chair

Ph.D.
title

6/5/84
date


signature

Dee Barlow
Committee member

Ph.D.
title

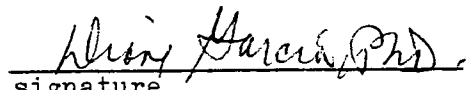
6/5/84
date


signature

Diane Garcia
External member

Ph.D.
title

6/5/84
date


signature

In memory of my parents,
Maurice and Esther Greenberg Zeitz,
who taught me to value education,
have confidence in my abilities,
and take pride in my accomplishments.

This study is dedicated to the
twelve stepmothers who
taught me so much.
Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the relationship between stepmothers' self-concepts and their role performance. The joint physical custody arrangement, due to the particularly ambiguous nature of the stepparenting role, was felt to be the most conducive situation from which to explore the research questions. Issues related to the benefits and pitfalls of joint physical custody were also explored, as were the coping strategies used by stepmothers to regain their equilibrium in ambiguous or stressful stepparenting situations.

The investigator reviewed the theoretical literature pertaining to ego psychology and role theory. Studies pertaining to the development and significance of self-concept as it related to the self-concept of stepmothers were also reviewed. The role performance of stepmothers was highlighted through a discussion of the literature pertaining to the ambiguities in the stepparenting role and to studies on marital power and roles in general. A historical perspective on custody trends was presented along with a review of the existing literature on joint physical custody.

An exploratory case study design was used, with written questionnaires and semi-structured interviews the data collection methods. An accidental (volunteer) sample consisted of twelve stepmothers whose husbands shared physical custody of their children with their former

wives. A qualitative method of analysis and interpretation of data was applied. Vignettes from the interviews were used to illustrate the investigator's analysis of the data.

Results showed that each stepmother had a style of relating to her husband and stepchildren separate from her actual involvement in parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren. Style of relating was most affected by the stepmother's self-concept as it influenced her expectations about her rights and responsibilities as a stepmother, her prior experiences, her parenting philosophy, and her conscious ambivalence regarding the manner in which she thought she should relate to her husband and stepchildren. The stepmother's involvement in parental role functions was most affected by the relationship between the biological parents, the stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother, and the stepmother's perception of her husband's support. The stepmother's high involvement in parental role functions was most likely to occur if a negative relationship existed between the biological parents and if the stepmother had a negative attitude toward the biological mother. In addition, a negative attitude toward the biological mother appeared to enhance the stepfamily's feeling of unity. Fluctuations in the stepmother's self-concept were most affected by her personality. Stepmothers who tended to describe themselves in the context of interpersonal issues also tended to experience intermittent but extreme fluctuations in self-concept as a result of interpersonal crises. Stepmothers who were more introspective in their descriptions of themselves tended to experience

brief but frequent fluctuations in self-concept due to their assessments of not having lived up to their expectations of themselves.

The findings illustrated the need for a clinical approach with stepfamilies that considers individual psychodynamics as well as interpersonal family dynamics. Further emphasis was on the need for clinical social workers to help stepfamilies achieve a feeling of family unity while striving for an appropriate working relationship between the parents and stepparents on behalf of the children. Suggestions for future research included the influence of the unconscious on self-concept and role performance and the need for the establishment of guidelines to help families choose the custody arrangement most appropriate to them.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing trend in the United States for parents to share legal and physical custody of their children following divorce. As of June, 1983, twenty-seven states had laws encouraging joint custody agreements, with similar laws pending in fourteen other states. It has been estimated that parents agreed to share their children's custody in approximately 5% of the 1.18 million divorces involving children in 1982. This means that each year, about 110,000 divorcing parents ($5\% \times 1.18 \text{ million divorces} \times 2 \text{ parents}$) decide to share legal, and sometimes physical, custody of their children (LA TIMES, June 10, 1983). This trend is growing as more and more parents choose this option, encouraged by the courts, their attorneys, and mental health clinicians (Derdeyn, 1978; Parley, 1979).

There are two main reasons for the preference of joint physical custody over sole custody (the latter arrangement referring to the situation in which the children live with their custodial parent and visit their non-custodial parent on either a pre-arranged or informal basis). The first is that the emotional development of children appears to be enhanced when they are able to maintain a close relationship with both of their biological parents following divorce, provided the parents have the ability to communicate with each other without placing the child in a position of conflicting loyalties (Abarbanel, 1979; Benedek & Benedek, 1979). The second reason is that joint physical custody allows

both parents to remain equally involved with their children and therefore decreases a sense of loss and helplessness that is especially painful for the non-custodial parent and the children (Ahrons, 1980; Greif, 1979; Roman & Haddad, 1978).

Understandably, the concern of professionals, both legal and clinical, is for the children and biological parents involved in custody decisions at the time of divorce. There is, however, another group of involved individuals who have remained virtually ignored -- the step-parents.

The United States Census Bureau statistics in 1970 estimated that 75% of all divorced parents remarry within three years (Maddox, 1975). These estimates suggest that each year approximately 82,000 divorced parents sharing custody of their children with their ex-spouses will remarry (75% x 110,000); thus the new spouses will become the step-parents of children whose custody is being shared by their two biological parents. While there are state laws and legal agreements between the biological parents governing their rights and responsibilities in sole and in joint custody situations, there are no laws or societal guidelines dictating the stepparent's rights or responsibilities in these same custody situations.

Stepparents are virtually excluded from the current reports on joint custody, which focus on biological parents and children. Studies of stepparents in sole custody situations, however, stress the high level of dissatisfaction they feel in response to the ambiguities of and lack of societal and familial support for the stepparenting role (Bernard, 1956; Fast & Cain, 1966; Goldstein, 1974; Maddox, 1975;

Jacobson, 1980). Role ambiguity has been partially blamed for the decreased self-esteem of stepparents. Also blamed are the experience of a failed marriage, the negative image of the stepparent as portrayed in mythology, fiction, and the media, and the disappointment in not being able to effect a smooth transition into the stepfamily (Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976; Sardanis-Zimmerman, 1977; Schulman, 1972). The self-concept of stepparents, as related to their personality development and the skills they bring to the stepfamily to help them cope with the ambiguities inherent in the nature of stepfamily relationships, is also important (Deutsch, 1945; Heilpern, 1943; Moss & Moss, 1975). It seems that the absence of socially accepted guidelines for the enactment of the stepparenting role affects the stepparent's self-concept and, concomitantly, the stepparent's self-concept affects his or her enactment of the stepparenting role (Sarbin, 1954; Satir, 1972; Waldron & Whittington, 1979). Though these issues are mentioned in the literature as important in understanding an individual's performance in the stepparenting role, this investigator has found no studies that examine the interaction of the stepparent's self-concept and role performance.

There is stress on the stepparent due to the absense of societal and familial guidelines for the stepparenting role. However, it would appear that the stepparent's role confusion would be exacerbated in a joint physical custody arrangement, where the legal mandate and the agreement between the biological parents is that, just as in their former marriage, they will make all the major decisions affecting their children together and will parent them an equal portion of time. The investigator believes that, due to the lack of external guidelines, the

stepparent's internal guidelines, as reflected in self-concept and coping techniques, may be the major factors affecting the stepparent's role performance. The joint physical custody arrangement may therefore provide the most conducive situation for examining the interaction between the stepparent's self-concept and role performance.

Purpose

A review of the literature on stepfamilies reveals a need, indeed a request, for a conceptual framework for understanding stepfamily functioning that would be useful both theoretically and clinically. In fact, a common theme in the literature is the enumeration of problems that arise when stepfamilies are compared to nuclear families. It is this investigator's opinion that, for a conceptual framework on stepfamilies to be useful, it must be inclusive of a wide range of phenomena pertinent to and descriptive of the uniqueness of stepfamilies, while at the same time linking the stepfamily experience to family life in general as well as to theories on individual psychodynamics.

Theoretical considerations of early development stress the relationship between psychological and interactional processes. The very fabric of human functioning is an intricately woven combination of intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences that cannot be separated in vivo. Of particular importance in the child's development is the early mother-child relationship and the influence of the mother's own psychodynamics on her mothering behavior. Since developmental theory focuses predominantly on the mother and stepfamily literature which speaks to psychological factors focuses predominantly on the stepmother, the

stepmother has been chosen as the focus of investigation in the present study. In light of the fact that the stepmother is an individual first, and a stepmother second, significant reasons exist for studies which examine the relationship between the individuality of stepmothers and their interactional experiences in their stepmother role.

Three themes in the literature are illustrative of the need for a conceptual framework on stepparent functioning that includes psychological and interpersonal factors. The first theme, as represented by Benedek (1959), Moss & Moss (1975), Deutsch (1945) and Heilpern (1943), is the importance of the stepmother's psychological makeup as the guiding force in her performance of the stepmother role. The second theme in the literature, and by far the one most represented, is the effects that stepfamily adjustment problems have on the stepparent's self-esteem (Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976; Shulman, 1972; Maddox, 1975; Noble & Noble, 1977; Visher & Visher, 1978, 1979). A few authors such as Bernard (1956) and Waldron & Whittington (1979) represent the third theme, which stresses the mutual influence of psychological, interpersonal and sociological factors involved in stepparents' experiences and role performance.

In summary, a conceptual framework is needed related to stepfamily functioning that would be useful both theoretically and clinically. Toward the goal of developing such a framework, the basic purpose of the present study is to investigate and describe the relationship between certain psychological, interactional and sociological factors related to stepmothers' role performance and to offer the findings as one building block toward a conceptual framework on understanding stepfamily

functioning.

Statement of the Central Clinical Research Questions

Major question

What is the relationship between self-concept and role performance for stepmothers in a joint physical custody situation?

Sub-questions

1. How does the stepmother's self-concept affect her role performance?

For the purpose of answering this question, three aspects of the stepmother's self-concept will be explored -- her expectations of herself as a mother and stepmother before her marriage, her feelings about herself in a variety of roles other than the stepmother role, and her beliefs about how her self-concept affects her expectations of herself and her role performance.

2. How does the stepmother's role performance affect her self-concept?

The two aspects of role performance to be explored in this study are the stepmother's perceptions of her autonomy and authority in her role, as sanctioned by her husband, and her relationship to her stepchildren. Regarding the stepmother's self-concept as affected by her role performance, the two aspects to be explored are how the stepmother feels about herself as a result of her role performance and how she copes with changes in her self-concept.

3. What coping techniques are utilized by stepmothers to regain their equilibrium in ambiguous or stressful stepparenting situations?

4. What do stepmothers perceive to be the issues, benefits and pitfalls raised by the joint physical custody situation?

These questions reflect two basic assumptions, both of which are grounded in the theoretical frameworks of ego psychology and role theory. The first assumption is that an individual's functioning in any given relationship is based on the interaction between psychological and interpersonal factors. The psychological factor chosen for exploration in this study is the stepmother's conscious self-concept, which includes her expectations of herself as a parent and stepparent, as these are believed to represent a pervasive sense of self that stepmothers bring to all interpersonal situations, including the stepmother role. The interpersonal factors to be explored are the stepmother's assessment of her performance in her role, her perceptions of the degree of her autonomy and authority in her role, her husband's support for the enactment of her role, and her assessment of her relationship with her stepchildren.

The second assumption underlying the research questions is that stepfamily adjustment problems are endemic to the stepfamily structure itself, and all stepmothers can therefore expect to experience disequilibrium in situations that arouse strong feelings such as anger, frustration, jealousy and rejection. As a response to disequilibrium, stepmothers must develop some form of coping techniques to help them deal with the situation and with their feelings.

Significance of the Study

During the last decade, this investigator has become aware of the

increasing numbers of divorced and remarried families among her client population. A professional interest in stepfamilies was responsible for an initial review of the literature pertaining to stepfamily life. The exploration revealed gaps in the literature in some important areas related to stepfamily functioning. Specifically, several studies mentioned the decrease in stepparents' self-esteem due to stepfamily problems, but there appeared to be inadequate investigation into the influence of stepparents' psychodynamics on their expectations, experiences and role performance. As a clinician, the investigator had always used an approach with stepfamilies that combined exploration of individual psychodynamics along with exploration of interpersonal family relationships and roles. In light of the gap in the literature, the interaction of the stepmother's self-concept and her performance in the stepmother role appeared to warrant investigation for its theoretical merit as well as its clinical relevance.

How will this study contribute to general knowledge and social work practice?

Most of the literature on stepfamilies stresses the influence of stepfamily problems on the self-esteem of stepparents. There does not appear to have been adequate investigation into the influence of stepparents' psychological make-up on their adjustment in the stepfamily. An exploration of the relationship between the stepmother's self-concept, expectations and role performance may help to illuminate the relationship between personal and interpersonal variables in the stepmothers' experiences in the stepfamily. The Social Work profession has

traditionally conceptualized the client as possessing unique psychological characteristics, while functioning within a particular familial and social milieu. An investigation such as the one proposed would support the basic Social Work philosophy.

In addition, it is hoped that an awareness of the interaction of stepparents' individual and interpersonal dynamics will enhance the clinician's ability to treat stepparents and stepfamilies experiencing dissatisfaction or disruption and perhaps help to lower the high rate of divorce and family breakup among stepfamilies.

Finally, joint physical custody as a child custody option has received some attention in legal and clinical journals in recent years. In all cases, the focus of attention is on the emotional needs of the children and biological parents following divorce, and consideration of stepparents or stepfamily issues is virtually non-existent. While this study is not an investigation of the joint physical custody arrangement per se, it reflects the investigator's attempt to include this form of custody in studies of stepfamily functioning.

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will be presented from the psychodynamic developmental theoretical framework of ego psychology, particularly object relations, as exemplified by the writings of Hartmann, Jacobson, Anna Freud and Kernberg. Developmental issues related to stepparents, and particularly to the stepmothering role, will be discussed. Aspects of role theory will be included to highlight the interrelationship between self and role.

The underlying point of view of this investigator is that, although stepfamily issues create stress for the stepmother, and indeed for each member of the stepfamily, the stepmother's developmental experiences and pervading self-concept provide the mental, emotional and behavioral structure within which she adjusts to stepfamily life and performs her stepmother role. After reviewing the literature, this investigator believes that there has been inadequate attention paid to the psychodynamic life of the stepmother as it influences her expectations of herself and her performance of the stepmother role. Ego psychology and role theory, two frameworks which stress the interrelationship between psychodynamic and interpersonal factors, will be used in this study as the theoretical bases for the exploration of the relationship between self-concept and role performance for stepmothers in a joint physical custody situation.

This chapter will be organized in the following manner. As this

study seeks to explore the relationship between the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance, the notion of interaction between self and environment is a crucial one. This chapter will begin with a discussion of Hartmann's theories regarding the reciprocal relationship between the organism and its environment beginning at birth.

An important area to be explored in this study is the stepmother's beliefs about how her self-concept influences her expectations of herself and her performance of the stepmother role. As background for this exploration, a presentation of Jacobson's theories as related to the stability of self-concept will follow.

A sub-question of this study is related to the coping techniques utilized by stepmothers to regain their equilibrium in ambiguous or stressful stepparenting situations. The theories of Anna Freud will be discussed as they pertain to ego defense mechanisms and the maintenance of self-concept.

One aspect of self-concept to be explored in the study is the stepmother's expectations of herself as a mother and stepmother. This investigator believes that expectations of the self in parental roles reflect the stepmother's early relationship to her own mother. Kernberg's theories on the process of internalization of object relations, particularly the identification with parental roles, will be discussed as compatible with the investigator's belief.

Finally, aspects of role theory will be presented from the work of Theodore Sarbin (1954) to highlight the relationship between the stepmother's self-concept and role performance, as role theory stresses the interaction of self and role.

Interaction Between Self and Environment

This investigator disagrees with the statement made by our country's sixteenth president that "...all men are created equal." Indeed, from birth, infants display their unique genetic endowments in a variety of physical, intellectual and emotional areas. Physical attractiveness, degree of interest in environmental stimulation, and frequency of crying are examples of differences in infants to which any nursery observer can attest. Hartmann's (1954) concept of the development of the ego as a "...reciprocal relationship between the organism and its environment" (p.24), including genetic, biological and environmental factors, is the first concept crucial to this study.

Hartmann describes this reciprocal relationship as a fitting together of three interrelated factors - the child's genetic endowment, the environment, and the mother-child relationship. A harmonious interaction among these three factors allows for the development of adaptive functions which lead to the infant's capacity to act upon itself in response to physical and environmental stimuli, as well as the capacity to elicit responses from the environment. Hartmann assumes that these adaptive functions develop out of what he calls the "apparatuses of primary autonomy" (1958, p.12). These apparatuses, which in essence are potential ego functions existing from birth, are perception, intention, object comprehension, thinking, language, memory and motor development. They develop into ego functions as ego and id differentiate within a conflict-free sphere of interaction between the infant and mother. In other words, the infant is born into the world possessing innate

potentials for ego development. The context within which the infant's potentials are developed is both biological and interactional.

The infant's development of ego functions within an interactional sphere relates to Hartmann's concept of the "average expectable environment" (1958, p.13). This concept, which refers to the mother's ability to meet her infant's needs without undue conflict or intolerable frustration of the infant, is crucial, since variations in the interactions between mothers and infants regulate infants' internalizations of object relations. As the internalization of object relations proceeds, the individual achieves independence from the environment so that "...reactions which originally occurred in relation to the external world are increasingly displaced into the interior of the organism" (1958, p. 40). The Blancks summarize the process of internalization of object relations by stating:

The more independent an organism becomes, the greater its independence from the stimulation of the immediate environment. Adaptive capacity is also increased in man by the possibility to withdraw from the external world, to think, and to return to it with improved mastery (1974, p.30).

In other words, as the individual matures and reaches physical and psychological independence, her capacity to assess and adapt to her environment may be less dependent on external influences and more dependent on internal organization and maturity of ego functions. Utilizing Hartmann's theories, then, the stepmother's performance in the stepmother role would depend on a reciprocal relationship between environmental stimuli, in the form of the stepfamily interrelationships, and internal stimuli, in the form of the stepmother's ego functioning. In

this study, the stepmother's self-concept, her expectations of herself as a parent and stepparent, and the techniques she utilizes to cope with stressful stepparenting situations will be explored as the stepmother's conscious assessment of her ego functioning.

Stability of Self-Concept

Much of the literature on stepparents reports a lowering of their self-concept due to problems related to stepfamily living. This investigator believes that insufficient attention has been paid to stepparents' self-concepts as they may influence their performances in the stepparenting role. E. Jacobson defines self-concept as synonymous with identity, self-feelings, self-image and self-representations, all of which refer to "...the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious endopsychic representations of the bodily and mental self in the system ego" (1964, p. 19). E. Jacobson defines "representations" as mental images of self and object, plus the feelings and experiences associated with those images. Self-representations indicate an individual's "awareness of the self as a differentiated but organized entity which is separate and distinct from one's environment," with "the capacity to remain the same in the midst of change" (p. 23). She stresses that self-representations signify one's self-concept as experienced internally and do not necessarily concur with the way one appears to others.

E. Jacobson's theory of the development of the self-concept as arising out of the differentiation of self- and object-representations is built upon Hartmann's contributions. Jacobson concurs with Hartmann that, at birth, there is not yet differentiation of self- and object-representations nor of the aggressive and libidinal drives. The newborn

infant is unaware of the difference between self and object, and experiences psychophysiological sensations only within a fused self-object representation. This fused self-object representation, which develops under the impact of the relationship between mother and infant, is the origin of all subsequent self- and object-representations.

Within the context of a mother-infant relationship that is loving and nurturing, the infant gradually begins to differentiate between pleasurable, libidinally invested self-object representations, and unpleasurable, aggressively invested self-object representations. The former are considered the "good" or ideal self- and object-representations; the latter are considered the "bad" or punitive self- and object-representations.

The fused self-object representations, both ideal and punitive, differentiate further so that there is a gradual integration of good and bad object-representations into a more realistic whole object-representation and a concurrent integration of good and bad self-representations into a more realistic whole self-representation, signalling the start of object constancy. The ideal self- and object-representations become integrated into the ego ideal, which is incorporated into the superego in the form of self-perceptions, self-expectations and self-esteem. The punitive self- and object-representations, reflecting the internalization of parental demands and prohibitions, become integrated into the superego and take over the function of protecting the ego ideal.

E. Jacobson states that the superego is the regulator of the self-concept and self-esteem by virtue of its ability to rely on internalized standards, rather than on external success or failure, to control and

maintain a stable self-concept. "Only the identifications which originate in enduring emotional object investments" enable "the child to become aware of having a coherent self that has continuity and remains the same" (p. 68) no matter what the external situation.

Blanck and Blanck (1974) add:

The matter of self-esteem has interesting implications...because the degree of self-esteem is an important determinant in the degree to which rejection, failure...,and the like, all of which tend to impair self esteem, can be tolerated. The extent of impairment depends upon the regulatory capacity of the super-ego (p.68).

Concomitant with super-ego development is the development of a consistent defensive organization (see section on maintenance of self-concept) used to maintain the integrity of the ego and the self-representations.

E. Jacobson's theories can be used to help us understand an issue related to stepmothers, namely, the fluctuations in their self-concept, as described in the literature. It may be that those stepmothers who report changes in their self-concept due to adjustment problems in the stepfamily may be reacting to an intrapsychic demand - a punitive superego perhaps, or a negative self-concept, or an inability to maintain a positive stable self-concept irrespective of external success or failure. Perhaps the expectations of some stepmothers, arising out of their particular idealized images of self and object, may not accurately reflect reality, and as such may be subject to re-evaluation in the face of external events. It may be that those stepmothers with a stable, positive self-concept may adjust to or accept stepfamily problems without a concomitant decrease in their self-esteem. This issue

will be investigated through an exploration of stepmothers' beliefs about how their self-concepts and expectations affect their performance in the stepmother role.

Maintenance of Self-Concept

The concept of ego defense mechanisms, as described by Anna Freud (1966) is theoretically relevant to this study because of the connection between the unconscious use of mechanisms to defend the ego against unacceptable instinctual impulses and their associated affects and the stepmother's conscious use of coping techniques in situations which arouse feelings of anxiety, jealousy, rejection and anger.

A. Freud defines the term "defense" as "a general designation for all the techniques which the ego makes use of" in its "struggle against painful or unendurable ideas or affects" (p.42). She states that all "defensive methods are motivated by the three principal types of anxiety to which the ego is exposed - instinctual anxiety, objective anxiety, and anxiety of conscience." (p.69) Psychoanalytic investigation began with the conflicts between the id and the ego (instinctual anxiety) and proceeded on to the study of the conflicts between the ego and the superego (anxiety of conscience). It is the conflicts between the ego and the outside world (objective anxiety) that pertain to the present study.

According to A. Freud, the instinctual impulses of the id, in their perpetual seeking of gratification, are criticized and rejected by the ego, whose "purpose is to put the instincts permanently out of action by means of appropriate defensive measures, designed to secure its own

boundaries" (p.7). But the ego is in conflict not only with the instinctual impulses from the id but also with their associated affects. Love, longing, jealousy, pain, and mourning are affects which accompany sexual/libidinal impulses, while hatred, anger and rage are affects accompanying aggressive impulses.

An important phenomenon regarding ego defenses is their dissociation from the original conflict involving instinctual impulses and their associated affects and their development into permanent character traits. The ego, motivated by fear of the superego (anxiety of conscience), sets up an ideal standard which prohibits full gratification of both sexual/libidinal impulses and affects, as well as the expression of aggressive impulses and affects. Because of the punitive, judgmental nature of the superego, the intrusion into consciousness of unacceptable libidinal or aggressive impulses or affects produces anxiety, against which individuals defend themselves in characteristic ways.

The characteristic ways adopted by the ego to defend against anxiety reveal parallel methods for the avoidance of unpleasure from external as well as from internal sources. In this regard, A. Freud distinguishes between an inhibition and an ego restriction. An inhibition refers to the defense against acting on a prohibited instinctual impulse, in other words, "against the liberation of unpleasure through some internal danger" (p.101).

In ego restriction, disagreeable external impressions in the present are warded off, because they might result in the revival of similar impressions from the past. ...the difference between inhibition and ego restriction is that in the former the ego is defending itself against its own inner processes and in the latter against external stimuli (p.101).

The defensive measures used by the ego against internal dangers are repression, reaction formation, inhibition and intellectualization, while denial, ego restriction and alertness of the ego defend against external sources of danger or unpleasure.

A. Freud's theories are based upon her analytic work with patients, and in this context she describes the importance of the transference phenomena. She defines transference as:

all those impulses experienced by the patient in his relation with the analyst which are not newly created by the objective analytic situation but have their source in early - indeed, the very earliest - object relations and are now merely revived under the influence of the repetition compulsion (p.18).

She states that the arousal of passionate emotions such as love, hate, jealousy and anxiety, which do not seem to be justified by the analytic situation, may be part of the patient's earliest object relations. A. Freud describes the interpretation of the transference phenomena as one technique designed to enable the patient to be aware of the intrusion of early object relations into present situations and relationships. She maintains that every interpersonal relationship includes transference phenomena and hence also includes the adoption of ego defenses for the avoidance of internal as well as external anxiety.

The therapeutic relationship is but one example of the external forces that threaten the ego's defensive posture. A. Freud states that any external situation which stimulates the passionate emotions, such as fear of loss of love objects, rejection, jealousy or rage, sets up a conflict for the ego, which then must defend itself if it is to preserve its existence.

Stepfamily relationships have the ability to tap into powerful emotions, some of which may be unacceptable to the stepmother. Stepmothers frequently report feelings of anxiety, anger and frustration as well as love and jealousy. Applying A. Freud's theory to the present study, it would appear that stepmothers would utilize characteristic ways to defend against anxiety and other powerful emotions stemming from stepfamily relationships. While the scope of the present study prohibits an exploration of unconscious ego defense mechanisms, the stepmother's conscious assessment of the coping techniques she utilizes on a daily basis and in times of greater stress may be a reflection of inner processes not available for exploration. Certainly, such coping techniques represent the unique way the stepmother has devised to integrate and manage both outer and inner stimuli.

Identification With Parental Roles

The importance of the contribution of Kernberg's theories to the present study is his description of three levels in the organization of the processes of internalization of object relations: introjection, identification and ego identity. Kernberg builds upon the theories of Hartmann in his discussion of the most primitive level, introjection. Through the primary autonomous apparatuses of perception and memory, independent psychic structures become linked with the earliest object relations, and the infant's perception of an interaction becomes fixated into one undifferentiated image made up of three components. The first component is the image of an object. The second component is the image of the self in interaction with the object. The third component is the

image of the affect state linking the object and the self under the influence of either the libidinal or the aggressive drive representative present at the time of the interaction. The importance of the process of introjection is that it represents the infant's beginning ability to link external perception with primitive affect states (1980).

Kernberg incorporates his theories into Jacobson's theories of the differentiation of self and object images. In the earliest introjections, self and object images are not yet differentiated from each other. Introjections taking place under the positive valence of libidinal instinctual gratification (loving mother-child interactions) become fused into the "good" internal object. Introjections taking place under the negative valence of aggressive drive derivatives (frustrating mother-child interactions) become fused into "bad" internal objects (1976). Kernberg states that the fusions of positive introjections have an essential function in the organization of autonomous ego functions, such as delay, flexibility, differentiation of stimuli and integration of experience and skill, all of which are necessary for further ego development.

The differentiation of self- from object-representations occurs approximately during the second year of life, when the identification process of internalization of object relations proceeds beyond the earliest introjections. Kernberg states that the identification process can occur only when perceptive and cognitive abilities allow the child to recognize the role aspects of interpersonal interactions. The concept of role implies the presence of a socially recognized function being carried out by the object or by the self and object in

interaction. For instance, the mother who dresses her daughter is both interacting with her and also performing the socially accepted role of mother. The components laid down in the memory traces of identifications are the image of the object enacting a role in interaction with the self, the image of the self as differentiated from the object and playing a complementary role, and the affective coloring of the interaction (1976). Therefore, identifications imply the internalization of roles in the form of the behavioral manifestations and associated affects of two reciprocal roles. The child learns her own roles as part of her self-image component of the identification and learns the mother's roles as part of the mother's object-image component. Kernberg states that the child may re-enact both roles at some point and may store the roles in the form of self and object images for later role enactment even years later (1976).

During the identification process the child begins to differentiate self-from object-representations. Initially, such differentiation links the good self-representation with the good object-representation and the bad self-representation with the bad object-representation. Eventually, however, there is an integration of good and bad self-representations into an integrated self-concept as well as an integration of good and bad object-representations into total object-representations, signalling the child's ability for object constancy. It is relevant at this point to emphasize the budding of the child's self-concept as developing out of her identification with the behaviors and affects associated with the role of mother. The parental role is the child's first introduction to the world of role expectations and role enactment, and the first role

with which the child identifies is the mother's role.

The existence of a stable self-concept manifests the child's advancement into the highest level of the processes of internalization of object relations - ego identity. Kernberg states, "Ego identity refers to the overall organization of identifications and introjections under the guiding principle of the synthetic function of the ego" (1976, p.32). This organization also has three components: a sense of continuity of the self as built upon the earlier internalization of self-images, a sense of consistency in objects dependent upon the internalization of object-images, and a sense of continuity in one's own interpersonal interactions as dependent upon the internalization of the affects associated with interpersonal interactions. In addition, it is to be expected that one would have a recognition of this consistency as well as environmental confirmation of this consistency.

Kernberg says that object relations are continuously internalized at higher, more differentiating, levels and are modified over the years under the influence of ego growth, coming closer to the external perceptions of the reality of significant objects. Ego identity continues to evolve by means of an ongoing reshaping of the experiences with external objects in light of internal object-representations. In other words, the self-concept is continuously reshaped as the internal world of self- and object-images interacts with real external events.

As the processes of internalization of object relations proceed, and the child develops an ego identity, the identification with parental roles plays a very important part. The individual's internal images of "mother," "father," and the parenting roles, as well as expectations of

the self in a parenting role, depend on the early relationships with his or her own parents, as well as on the internalization of object relations within the context of parenting and being parented. As related to the present study, it would appear that the stepmother would respond not only to the individuals in the stepfamily, and the stepfamily situation itself, but, more importantly, to conscious expectations of herself in the stepmother role, based in part on her intrapsychic images of "child," "mother," "father" and "parent." An important aspect of this study, then, will be to explore each stepmother's expectations of herself as a parent and stepparent and how she perceives her expectations to influence her performance in the stepmother role.

Interaction of Self and Role

The importance of role theory to the present study is its emphasis on the interaction between self and role. In fact, role theory regards all human behavior as the product of the interaction of self and role. Sarbin's (1954) description of the three basic units of role theory - position, role and self - correspond to the three levels of influence on stepparent functioning as described in the literature: the societal (position), the interpersonal (role) and the psychodynamic (self) (Fast & Cain, 1966). Sarbin defines position as a unit of society, a collection of rights, duties and obligations attached to a specific status (for example stepparent) and encompassing a system of behavioral and attitudinal expectations. Self is defined as the internal organization of qualities or dispositions that dictates how an individual will enact

a particular position within the confines of societal guidelines. Role is a dynamic concept and refers to the particular manner in which a given individual performs the obligations of a specific position.

Sarbin uses the term "role enactment" as synonymous with "role performance." He states that the individual's enactment of a role depends on three factors: 1) the existence of clearly defined societal expectations for the particular position; 2) the atmosphere in which the learning of role expectations took place; and 3) the existence of certain characteristics of the self. He lists these characteristics of the self as: a) self-awareness; b) the ability to maintain a stable self-concept during the enactment of ambiguous or conflictual roles; and c) the ability to empathize with others.

Regarding the need for clearly defined societal expectations for the effective enactment of a role, Sarbin says that "...a person cannot enact a role for which he lacks the necessary role expectations. These must be acquired through experience" (p.226). In fact, "The degree of adjustment to roles...varies directly with the clarity with which such roles are defined" (p.227). He goes on to say that role expectations lacking clear definition may lead to an ineffectual role performance, and ambiguous role expectations may lead to conflicts which may inhibit socially valid role enactments.

Along with the need for clearly defined societal role expectations, role performance also depends on the atmosphere in which the original learning of role expectations took place. The complementary roles of parent and child are the first experienced by the child and the first to be internalized. The nature of the affective relationship between the

parent and child is internalized along with the behavioral components of both roles. Thus, expectations of the role of mother are learned at a very early age and are dependent on the child's relationship with her own mother.

Sarbin defines the current organization of the self as "a cognitive structure that exercises a selective and directive effect on role perception and role enactment" (p.255). He describes three interrelated characteristics of the self as the major factors influencing how an individual performs a particular role. The first is self-awareness, or "consciousness of role enactment." Included in self-awareness are the processes of self-criticism, insight and the ability to modify or eliminate inappropriate behaviors in the service of effective role performance.

The second characteristic of the self is the ability to maintain a stable self-concept during the enactment of ambiguous or conflictual roles. This ability is especially important in situations of high stress or anxiety, when effective role performance hinges on the ability to act "as if an event threatening to the maintenance of the self-concept has not occurred... or were no longer frustrating" (p.236).

Sarbin defines empathy as "the use of as if in social behavior" (p.238). By "taking the role of the other" through empathy, an individual can appreciate the defensive maneuvers of others and can depersonalize negative behaviors directed toward himself or herself and thereby maintain a stable self-concept.

Of paramount importance is the interrelationship of self and role. Sarbin states, "Although the foundation for the self is laid down early

in life, this does not mean that residues of experience resulting from adult role enactment have no effect on the self-organization" (p.249). He goes on to say, "The effect of prolonged role enactment on the self would be different for, say, the person fixated at the level of the primitive construed self, and the person whose central empirical self-structure was the social self" (p.249). In essence, Sarbin is saying that ego development influences the effects that role enactment may have on the individual. The circularity of the relationship between self and role is thus emphasized. Regarding this circularity, Sarbin says, "Personality is in considerable degree a matter of role behavior; even more, however, it is a matter of role perception and of self-perception in the light of the role" (p.250).

An example of the interrelationship of self and role can best be seen when the stable state is disrupted, as when there is a conflict between the self and an incongruent role. Sarbin refers to the work of Anna Freud in this regard.

To re-establish constancy the person behaves in ways which make for the least change... These constancy-maintaining behaviors have been conceptualized as ego-defense mechanisms... forms of behavior designed to maintain constancy of the self while at the same time allowing the fulfillment of role expectations (p.251).

Finally, through his own research, Sarbin found that individuals tended to choose a particular form of role enactment, which he considers a predisposition, a character trait and a quality of the self. He concludes that "valid predictions of the conduct of others must take into account aspects of ego structure as well as knowledge of competing systems of role expectations" (p.253).

In summary, the combination of role theory and ego psychology provides a framework for understanding the stepmother's predicament. In the absence of clear guidelines for the enactment of the stepmother role, stepmothers may rely on their identification with parental roles, as well as on certain characteristics of the self to guide them in their expectations and performance in the stepmother role. A stepmother's self-concept, whether positive or negative, would influence her performance. The stepmother's ability to empathize with others in the joint physical custody situation, her ability to utilize coping techniques to regain equilibrium, and her capacity for insight would support the stability of a positive self-concept.

Many authors stress the relationship between one's early development and later experience in parental roles (Blanck & Blanck, 1968; Strean, 1980). Hartmann's, Jacobson's, A. Freud's, Kernberg's and Sarbin's theories are particularly relevant to this study because of their stress on the nature of the parent-child relationship as the earliest and most important object relation and the one through which structuring of the ego occurs. Ego psychology, as a psychoanalytic developmental theory, synthesizes the various processes of ego structuring, and provides a framework for assessing the psychodynamic issues related to stepparent functioning missing in other clinical studies. Role theory provides added emphasis on the interrelationship of self and role. The theories of the above authors are used as a framework for exploring the interaction between the stepmother's self-concept and her performance in the stepmother role.

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is a growing body of literature related to the stepfamily experience. Some studies focus on the issues and needs of the children; others focus on the issues and needs of the parents, stepparents or stepfamily unit. Given the complexity of the structure and relationships of remarried families, no one study could hope to fully address all the issues pertaining to stepfamily life.

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the relationship between stepmothers' self-concepts and their role performance. Given the high degree of involvement of both biological parents in the joint physical custody arrangement and the absence of prescriptive guidelines for the stepmother role, the investigator believed that this custody arrangement would provide a situation conducive to examining the relationship between the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance. All the stepmothers included in the study's sample were therefore involved in a joint physical custody arrangement.

In order to provide background for the study and to acquaint the reader with the major issues, this chapter will present a review of the relevant literature pertaining to the central research question, "What is the relationship between self-concept and role performance for stepmothers in a joint physical custody situation?" The chapter will be divided into three major sections, each examining one component of the central research question. The three major sections are further divided

into sub-sections which represent the major themes in the literature as related to the three components of the central research question.

A. Self-Concept of Stepmothers

1. Development and Significance of Self-Concept
2. Influence of the Stepmother's Self-Concept on Her Role Performance
3. Effects of Stepfamily Problems on the Stepmother's Self-Concept

B. Role Performance

1. Ambiguity of the Stepparenting Role
2. Marital Power and Roles

C. Custody Considerations

1. Overview
2. Historical Perspective
3. Joint Physical Custody

Self-Concept of Stepmothers

Development and Significance of Self-Concept

In this study, the terms "self-concept" and "self-esteem" are used interchangeably, as they were by E. Jacobson (1964) in her definition of self-concept as synonymous with identity, self-feelings, self-image, self-esteem and self-representations, all of which refer to "...the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious endopsychic representations of the bodily and mental self in the system ego" (1964, p.19). Coopersmith's (1967) definition of self-esteem was similar to E. Jacobson's definition of self-concept. He defined self-esteem as "a

subjective feeling, which may be conscious or unconscious, yet is conveyed to others verbally and behaviorally in every interpersonal interaction." He further defined self-esteem as the subjective evaluation of approval or disapproval a person makes about herself and generally maintains, regardless of the situation in which she finds herself. He further stated that an individual's self-concept indicates the extent to which she believes herself to be capable, significant and worthy. As Rosenberg (1965) stated, "The self is inescapable, and it enters into each situation with a frequency shared by no other object" (p.7). Rosenberg further stated that interactional influences may have a powerful bearing upon self-evaluation. Thus, the relationship between self-concept and interpersonal experiences would appear to be one of mutual influence.

According to Coopersmith, the significance of self-concept and self-esteem is their relationship to personal satisfaction and effective functioning. A low self-concept implies self-rejection, self-dissatisfaction, self-contempt, and lack of respect for oneself. People with a low self-concept are preoccupied with their own insufficiencies and lack the confidence to reject the critical appraisals of others. They expect rejection and disrespect and may seek evidence of such reactions in their interpersonal relationships. They are therefore not emotionally equipped to deal with ambiguity, and often experience fearfulness and expectations of failure related to feelings of powerlessness in interpersonal interactions.

Coopersmith further stated that a positive self-concept reflects the feeling that one is good enough, in other words, worthy of respect.

It also reflects an awareness and acceptance of one's virtues and deficiencies and satisfaction with one's accomplishments and relationships. Consequently, people with a high level of self-esteem should have the ability to deal effectively with the anxieties aroused by conflict, ambiguity and failure because they are able to maintain a stable positive self-concept even while experiencing adversity or stress.

However, in a study done by Cohen (1959), Coopersmith's postulate was not found to hold true. Cohen studied the responses of two groups of subjects, one with high self-esteem and one with low self-esteem, to authority figures in structured and ambiguous situations. He found that the low self-esteem group perceived the authority figure as threatening in both the structured and the ambiguous situations. In the structured situation, the high self-esteem group did not perceive the authority figure as threatening. But in the ambiguous situation, the high self-esteem group felt even more threatened than did the low self-esteem group in the same situation. This finding seemed to be related to the former group's expectation of maintaining control and to the negative impact on self-esteem when control was not possible to the degree expected.

Rosenberg (1965) and Coopersmith (1967) both maintained that although there may be momentary, limited shifts in self-concept dependent on the role-defined situation, generally one's self-concept remains constant for years. As it is not known whether Cohen's subjects experienced a change in their self-concepts in general, his findings are insufficient to evaluate Rosenberg's and Coopersmith's theory of the

constancy of self-concept.

The writings of the above authors have implications for the present study. Stepmothers have reported a decrease in their self-esteem due to the problems of adjustment and role ambiguity inherent in the stepfamily situation (Maddox, 1975; Visher & Visher, 1978). According to the above three authors, even a positive self-concept could be negatively affected in role-defined situations marked by adversity and ambiguity or lack of structure. The role performance of stepmothers would, therefore, depend on the interaction of the stepmother's self-concept, her expectations of herself, and the degree of role clarity. The stepmother's self-concept could likewise be affected by her role performance in light of her expectations of herself and the degree of adversity or ambiguity associated with her stepmother role.

Influence of the Stepmother's Self-Concept on Her Role Performance

As proposed by Coopersmith (1967) and Rosenberg (1965), an individual's self-concept reflects her expectations of herself and her expectations of how others will treat her. Given the importance of their theory, it is surprising that relatively few studies address the self-concept of stepparents as an important variable in their performance of the stepparenting role. T. Benedek (1959) wrote about parenthood in general as a developmental phase. She stated that one's memories of early object relations plus drive experiences become stored in the memory as self- and object-representations. The origin of parental tendencies is in the oral phase of development. According to T. Benedek, the relationship between parent and child evolves relatively smoothly until the child reaches a developmental level at which the parent,

because of his or her own unresolved developmental conflict, is unable to respond to the child without reviving, reliving and projecting onto the child the identifications with his or her own parents.

Moss and Moss (1975) discussed the stepmother's relationship with her stepchildren in terms of a "surrogate mother-child relationship." Their point of view is that the absence of a historical tie with the stepchildren makes the stepmother feel like an outsider, and the lack of a close relationship with her stepchildren, plus her relating to the stepchildren's feelings of loss after their parents' divorce, causes the stepmother to relive her own past losses and separations. The authors stated that in order to negotiate a new relationship with stepchildren, the stepmother must mourn the loss of, and deal with her feelings toward, her own biological mother.

Two authors have addressed the issue of the competitiveness between stepmothers and stepchildren. Heilpern (1943) suggested that the negative behavior of stepmothers toward their stepchildren could be a transference of their rivalry with their own mothers. Deutsch (1945) discussed the disruption in the child's resolution of the oedipal conflict as a result of parental divorce and the projection onto the stepmother of the child's aggressive strivings, so as to protect the biological mother from the child's aggression. She stated that the stepmother will be successful in the stepparenting role if she can refrain from being caught up in the child's oedipal struggle, in other words, if she is "mature and free of competitive strivings with stepchildren for the love of the father/husband as a parental figure." (p.176)

These studies raise some important issues regarding the possible influence of the stepmother's self-concept on her role performance. Also important is the influence that the stepmother's role performance might have on the stability of her self-concept. Although the existence of such an interrelationship is alluded to, the nature of that interrelationship is not described in depth within the existing literature.

Effects of Stepfamily Problems on the Stepmother's Self-Concept

According to Cohen (1959), Rosenberg (1965) and Coopersmith (1967), self-concept can be negatively affected in ambiguous situations where there is a perception of unmet expectations or threats to the self-esteem. The majority of studies comprising the stepfamily literature would concur with the above statement. Such studies cite the fact that all stepfamilies begin with a loss - usually divorce - and the negative impact of divorce on self-esteem includes feelings of failure and rejection that are often brought into the remarriage unresolved. Messinger (1976) said, "the problems that burden remarriage frequently begin during separation and divorce" (p.195). This attitude is corroborated by Goode (1956), who did a field survey of the post-divorce adjustment problems of 425 mothers. He found that most women saw the adjustment process as traumatic. The divorced women interviewed by Goode's team of researchers described feelings of failure and inferiority due to the breakup of their marriages and to the continued influence of their ex-husbands' attitudes that persisted even into remarriage. Goldstein (1974) reported that many stepparents mistrust their ability to choose a second spouse and that the fear of a second failed marriage

continues long into the remarriage and may influence the stepparent's perceptions of the attitudes and behavior of the spouse and stepchildren. Roosevelt and Lofas (1976) enumerated many of the adjustment problems of stepmothers as pertaining to the husband's previous marriage. Particularly relevant is the ongoing relationship of the stepchildren, and perhaps the spouse, to the biological mother and her extended family. Stepmothers frequently reported feeling like outsiders, unimportant, unloved, unappreciated and taking a back seat to the needs of others in the stepfamily. Jealousy and anger were common feelings reported by stepmothers. In a joint physical custody arrangement, the biological parents maintain frequent contact, thus exacerbating the stepmother's feelings of being left out.

According to many authors, the negative image of stepmothers as "wicked," as portrayed in mythology, fiction, and the media, has added to stepmothers' negative self-images (Smith, 1949 & 1953; Schulman, 1972; Visher & Visher, 1978). Sardanis-Zimmerman (1977) wrote her doctoral dissertation on the stepmother's self-perception as influenced by mythological accounts of stepmothers. She found no significant differences in the self-concept and self-esteem of stepmothers as compared to natural mothers. In fact, the stepmothers in her sample scored higher in self-confidence than did the natural mothers. Sardanis-Zimmerman concluded that mythology did not affect stepmothers' self-concept or self-esteem, but she did find that stepmothers had a high incidence of jealousy of the relationship between their husbands and stepchildren and many inhibitions in feeling close to their stepchildren.

Some authors have found that the stepparent's self-concept is affected by the problems inherent in the process of merging two distinct families into one new family unit. Many stepparents strive to replicate the biological family within the stepfamily structure. The myth of "instant love", as described by Schulman (1972), illustrates the demand that stepmothers typically place upon themselves to knit together successfully all the members of the stepfamily into a cohesive, loving unit. The author stated that the self-esteem of stepmothers is lowered partly because they feel and act like "wicked stepmothers" in response to feeling unloved, exploited, misunderstood and mistreated. She believed that these feelings described by stepmothers are aroused by husbands who may be passive, weak and dependent and who don't support either their wives or children in their struggle to adjust to each other.

There is a variety of other reasons cited for the adjustment difficulties in the stepfamily. A pervasive feeling of divided loyalties on the part of the children has been described by writers who have studied the effects of divorce on the adjustment of children (Despert, 1953; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976; Gardiner, 1977). Duberman (1973) and Maddox (1975) have described the persistence of the child's loyalty conflicts into the remarriage, affecting the child's ability to form a relationship with the stepparent.

The lack of a shared history or values is the reason given by some authors for the difficulties that stepparents and stepchildren have in adjusting to each other. Wald (1981) included stepfamily vignettes in her study of the remarried family. The lack of a common ground on which

to relate is expressed by all stepfamilies as a major problem in the unification process. Noble & Noble (1977) emphasized that merging families bring different sets of standards and ways of doing things that must be integrated if compromise and adjustment are to proceed. Roosevelt & Lofas (1976) recommended that stepfamily members strive to appreciate the differences in their lifestyles as a way of providing an added richness to the new family unit.

The influence of the ex-spouse and in-laws is another major obstacle to stepfamily unification. Podolsky (1955) stated that the stepchild tends to idealize the departed or non-custodial parent and becomes resentful of and competitive with the stepparent for the attentions of the custodial parent. Schwartz (1968) emphasized the need to reorganize the entire family system, incorporating stepfamily members as well as both biological parents and their extended families. Ahrons (1980) recommended adopting the concept of the binuclear family, which she defined as a larger system composed of two subsystems and two households in cooperation and support of each other. Perkins (1978), however, did not believe that stepfamilies can ever attain homeostasis because of the frequent disruptions and contextual shifts which occur as an ongoing aspect of visitation. In a joint physical custody arrangement, these disruptions may impede the development of a feeling of unity within the stepfamily.

The problem cited most frequently as impeding the stepparent's successful adjustment is role ambiguity (Walker, Rogers & Messinger, 1977; Fast & Cain, 1966; Messinger, 1976; Visher & Visher, 1978). Some authors have emphasized the absence of well-defined, socially

accepted guidelines for the stepparent's role and the problems that result from role ambiguity (see Ambiguity of the Stepparenting Role). The pervasiveness of this problem is understandable in light of Cohen's (1959) findings that people with both high and low self-esteem are threatened in ambiguous situations. The possibility exists that even those stepparents who are aware that problems of adjustment are normal may still report that their self-concepts are negatively affected when they are unable to dispense with the problems as quickly and effectively as they expected.

Along with a lowering of self-concept, stepparents frequently report feelings of jealousy, anger and anxiety as reactions to the adjustment problems they experience. Goldstein (1974) and Maddox (1975) both stated that stepparents initially deny their resentful and hostile feelings at being the outsiders but feel compelled to deal with their feelings and dissatisfactions after the initial adjustment period passes. Sardanis-Zimmerman (1977) observed three phases in the stepmother's adjustment to her new role. In the first phase, the stepmother focuses on her initial positive feelings and her hopes for family unity and denies any negative feelings she may experience. In the second phase, the stepmother becomes consciously aware of her disappointment and resentment at unmet expectations and feels guilty because of the intrusion of negative feelings. In the third phase, a crisis ensues which forces the stepmother to reveal her negative feelings and dissatisfactions. Sardanis-Zimmerman believed that resolution of stepfamily problems cannot occur until the stepmother's negative feelings are recognized and accepted as an important issue for the entire family.

Roosevelt and Lofas (1976) found that stepmothers were best able to tolerate their own negative feelings as well as the negative feelings of their stepchildren when their husbands offered them emotional support for the stepmothering role.

The major theme running through the literature is the uniqueness of the stepfamily structure, the problems inherent in that structure, and the effects on the individual stepfamily members and on the stepfamily as a whole. Visser & Visser (1979) summarized this theme.

It is indeed true that interpersonal situations similar to stepfamily patterns occur in intact American families. A mother-in-law may live in the home, there may be a weakening of the couple bond because a parent in the family has not sufficiently severed emotional ties to his or her family of origin, or strong alliances may exist between a parent and one of the children. In intact families highly disruptive manifestations of such patterns are the exception, whereas in stepfamilies disruption due to similar patterns is to be expected because of the nature of stepfamily structure. In other words, such disruptions in intact families suggest intrapsychic difficulties and are usually considered pathologic in character. In stepfamilies, on the other hand, such difficulties arise from external factors impinging on individual psychology and can usually be expected, given the present structural characteristics of American stepfamilies (p.224).

Visser and Visser seem to be saying that problems are inherent in the stepfamily and are not necessarily a sign of pathology. Their study emphasized the effects that stepfamily problems have on the stepparent's self-concept. However, in light of the fact that the present study focuses on the interaction between self-concept and role performance, it is pertinent to discuss those studies that emphasize the mutual influence of these two variables. Bernard (1956) spoke to both factors by

stating that some people, because of their psychological makeup, are incapable of happiness in human relationships, and for them marriage for neurotic reasons leads to ultimate dissatisfaction in marital/parental roles. She also stressed the reality of the problems of adjustment in remarriages and stepfamilies and implied the need to sort out the psychological factors from the sociological and interpersonal factors involved in stepfamily disruption. Waldron and Whittington (1979) discussed the mutual influence of psychological and relationship problems. They stated that all stepparents experience severe stress due in part to the ambiguous nature of step relationships. However, they recognized that some stepparents are prevented from dealing with family stress effectively due to the psychological problems they bring to the stepfamily.

However, even stepparents who do not otherwise have psychological problems report anxiety, jealousy, anger and lowered self-esteem as a result of stepfamily problems. The relationship of these feelings to the stepparent's initial expectations has been emphasized by several authors. Pfleger (1946) interviewed 27 stepmothers who came for treatment at a child guidance clinic. She found that 23 of them reported feelings of anxiety, insecurity and guilt. She concluded, however, that the adjustment of the stepmothers and their feelings about their situation were influenced by their fantasies and expectations of the stepmother role as well as by their emotional maturity. Along these same lines, Satir (1972) noted that many people expect their second marriages to make their lives better, and adjustment problems disappoint them and lead to lowered self-esteem. Mowatt (1972) found that

stepfathers who reported disappointment and disenchantment with their marriages were actually confronted with their own dependency wishes and unrealistic expectations.

Nadler (1977) did her doctoral dissertation on the psychological stress of the stepmother. She found that stepmothers in her sample experienced more anger, anxiety and depression than did the natural mothers, as well as more conflict regarding their stepparenting roles, which they experienced as confusing and ungratifying. The stepmothers also reported a decrease in their self-confidence and self-esteem and an increase in their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. Nadler concluded that the origins of stepmothers' psychological stress are failure to find support within the stepfamily or within society for their enactment of the stepmothering role, failure to find satisfaction of personal needs, and inability to sustain a positive self-image. However, Nadler also stated that the stepmother becomes depressed when she experiences disappointment in her expectations.

An understanding of the influence of the stepmother's self-concept and expectations on her role performance is central to the present study. The literature also emphasizes the influence of role performance on the stepmother's self-concept, particularly related to the degree to which the stepmother's expectations have or have not been met. The following section reviews the literature as it pertains to how the ambiguities in the stepmother's role impede her ability to meet her expectations of herself as a stepmother and how this might affect her self-concept.

Role Performance

Ambiguity of the Stepparenting Role

There is one overriding problem cited as responsible for the difficulties in the enactment of the stepparenting role, namely, its ambiguous nature due to the lack of well-defined, socially accepted guidelines. Visher and Visher (1978) emphasized the compounded effects of unreasonable expectations and lack of a societal framework. Without guidelines to follow, many stepparents become confused about the rights and responsibilities of stepparents as compared to the rights and responsibilities of biological parents. The authors stated that many stepparents expect to replicate the parental roles of a nuclear family, or perhaps to avoid parental roles altogether, but then may be confronted with differences in the expectations of spouse and stepchildren regarding their responsibilities in areas such as discipline and financial responsibility. Duberman (1974) concluded that stepfamilies make a conscious effort to be seen as "normal" families. But the majority of the literature reviewed stressed the inappropriateness of comparing stepfamilies to nuclear families and recognized the need for some conceptual framework to account for the stepfamily's unique structural and emotional issues.

Aldous (1974) stated that the basic problem for stepfamilies is that "normative prescriptions for parental and/or marital roles are largely absent. Interaction patterns have to be worked out through a fumbling process..." (p.233). Her concept of role making indicated a "process whereby behavioral experimentation on the part of individuals" becomes interaction patterns" (p.232). She defined a crisis as

"occurring when customary behaviors are no longer effective" and "the family is forced to improvise new role behaviors to handle the crisis" (p.234).

D. Jacobson (1980) concurred with the concept of stepfamily role formation as a series of crises. She said that even the execution of routine daily events and parental functions adds to a sense of insecurity and anxiety experienced by stepparents.

Fast and Cain (1966) analyzed the case records of fifty clinic stepfamilies and discussed their findings in the context of role theory. They concluded that the poorly articulated role of stepparents in the United States implies contradictory functions, in that the stepparent is at once expected to act as parent (by being responsible for stepchildren when they are in the stepparent's home), stepparent (by sharing the parenting role with the absent biological parent), and non-parent (because of the absence of legal ties to the stepchildren). The authors recognized that social norms make it inappropriate for stepparents to completely assume parental role responsibilities because of the need to share their role with the non-custodial biological parent. Their theory is that parental roles are learned and that biological parents have an opportunity to establish their respective roles during courtship, marriage and the early stages of parenthood. Stepparents, however, have no opportunity to learn and adjust to marital and parental roles or to gradually establish a generation barrier between themselves and their stepchildren. The authors further concluded that stepparents' uncertainty about appropriate role behavior may lead to an initial denial of problems, a hypersensitivity to not being seen as a parent figure, and a

temptation to focus on the stepchildren as the source of marital, parental, and family dissention.

Another problem related to the ambiguity in the stepparent role is the difficulties many stepparents report having in assuming the normal parental role functions with their stepchildren. Goldstein (1974) described "parental role freeze" (p.435) as the stepfather's inability to discipline his stepchildren and the stepmother's inability to nurture her stepchildren - functions stepparents perform easily with their own biological children. The author stated that the causes of role freeze are twofold: stepparents' feelings of competition with their counterparts, the biological parents of the same sex, and the lack of acceptance by stepchildren and/or spouse for their performance of parental functions. He also stated that the stepparent's expectations of his or her involvement in parenting functions may lead to disappointment or anger when the stepparent is not accepted in the role to the degree initially expected or hoped for.

The feeling of impermanence in stepfamily relationships due to the absence of a legal relationship was emphasized by Visser and Visser (1979) as being largely responsible for the inhibition of stepparents in performing certain parenting functions for their stepchildren. The authors compared stepfamily structure to foster homes, the similarity being the absence of the biological parent and the lack of a legal relationship between the parent and child. Ransom, Schlesinger & Derdeyn (1979), and Waldron & Whittington (1979) expressed the view stated in much of the literature that, in the absence of a legal or social definition of the stepparenting role, there is a necessity for

the spouse and stepchildren to offer sanction and acceptance of the stepparent in a parenting capacity in order for the stepparent to function effectively and satisfactorily. The issue of acceptance is ambiguous in itself, according to Messinger (1976), who thus recommended that the stepfamily adopt a concrete plan, spelling out everyone's roles, responsibilities and the division of labor.

The absence of legal ties and well-formed generational boundaries between stepparents and stepchildren has been the subject of many authors' concerns about the sexual conduct of stepparents and stepchildren. Goldstein (1974) said that a lowered incest taboo exists in stepfamilies and that some stepparents and stepchildren express increased hostility toward each other as a defense against sexual impulses. Messer (1969) referred to the "phaedra complex" as "the non-pathological stepparent-stepchild attraction." (p.213) He stated that the phenomenon of the "family romance," (p.215) defined as the child's flirtations with the opposite sexed parent as an important part of a child's social development, can be present in stepfamilies in an appropriate way. He recommended that parents and stepparents demonstrate concern about the lack of well-defined boundaries and roles by considering such options as legal adoption, sharing of responsibility for discipline, having the stepchildren call stepparents "mother" or "father," strengthening the marital bond, and allowing children to see the parents being affectionate with one another.

The ambiguities in the stepparenting role have been well documented in the literature in anecdotal accounts as well as research studies. The widespread recognition of the lack of guidelines for the

stepparenting role has brought a wave of advice-giving publications by professionals and stepparents alike. But the advice to stepparents in the literature is itself confusing, which would appear to reflect not only the ambiguousness of the stepparenting role but also the ambivalence of society about accepting the stepparent in a parenting capacity.

For example, Einstein (1979) cautioned stepparents against trying to be parents. She emphasized the continuation of relationships between both biological parents and their extended families and advised stepparents to be "teachers" rather than parents to their stepchildren. Maddox (1975) also stated that stepparents can "teach" stepchildren without assuming parental behavior. Noble and Noble (1977) stressed the importance of involving the absent parent and warn stepparents not to "take over." But their recommendations remain confusing, in that they advised stepparents to provide parenting functions for their stepchildren as needed, depending on the ages and the physical and emotional needs of their stepchildren. Other authors go so far as to give instructions to stepparents. Draughon (1975) developed a model for stepmothers to become either "primary mother," "other mother," or "friend," depending on the stepchild's psychological attachment to the biological mother. Stern (1978) advised stepfathers that the way to become integrated into the stepfamily and accepted as disciplinarian is to "creatively undermine" the mother's discipline of the child through a process she calls "friending."

Along with other advice-giving books is a new trend this investigator calls the "anyone can do it" variety. These books are usually written by stepparents themselves, describing their "success" stories

and advocating that "you can do it too" if you just follow their simple formula. While these books are more uplifting than the earlier "hell is in store for you" variety, they do not recognize the importance of individual psychodynamics and may therefore help to contribute to stepparents' feelings of being unappreciated as individuals.

Marital Power and Roles

The literature on marital power and roles offers some insights into the possible relationship between the ambiguous nature of the step-parenting role, stepparents' psychological makeup and stepparents' reported satisfaction with the stepparenting role. The overall theme of the literature in this area was summarized in Frank & Anderson's (1980) study on marital role ideals and perception of marital role behavior. According to the women they interviewed, marital and parental role strain rose to distressing levels when the women's ideals and expectations of themselves were incompatible with their perceptions of their actual role behavior.

Centers and Raven (1971), in their study of conjugal power structure, found that satisfaction was highest for spouses experiencing an egalitarian power structure, in other words, where husband and wife experienced comparable power in making decisions. The authors noticed a trend in remarriages for husbands to report having less decision making power than they perceived having in their first marriages. They also noted a continuation of the trend for husbands and wives to exert their influence in areas historically typical for their respective genders.

Scoresby (1976) discussed three relationship styles of marital

dyads as related to role performance and power-control. He found that the symmetrical style reflected a rigidity between the marital pair, with each partner vying for control. The complementary style reflected an instability in relationship style and role performance, with one partner being dominant and the other being submissive. Both styles were highly associated with dissatisfaction of the marital partners. The parallel style, which was the most egalitarian of the three, reflected a give-and-take flexibility and was closely associated with role performance satisfaction. Medeiros (1978) adapted Scorsby's study to stepparents as part of her doctoral dissertation and found that those stepparents who perceived themselves as having a parallel relationship with their spouses experienced more role satisfaction than stepparents who reported either the complementary or symmetrical relationship styles. She noted a link between relationship style and perception of family environment. She labeled "dysfunctional" those stepfamily couples who reported having either a symmetrical or complementary relationship style because these couples reported a higher degree of conflict and a lower degree of cohesiveness than did the parallel style couples. She concluded that "dysfunctionality is a consequence of relationship variables rather than of membership in a ... stepfamily group" (p.97). Medeiros' findings are pertinent to the present study. Her emphasis on the relationship style of stepfamily couples, as opposed to the problems of adjustment inherent in stepfamilies, as the major factor influencing stepparents' perceptions of the stepfamily environment underscores the need for more careful assessment of the interaction between psychodynamic and interpersonal factors and stepparents'

experiences.

Medeiros' findings were in line with the earlier theories of Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson (1967) and Lederer & Jackson (1968). These works emphasized the importance of a supportive, give and take, mutually confirming and enhancing relationship between spouses in order to effect a durable and workable marriage. Again, the importance was placed on the couple's ability to engage in the kind of relationship the authors deemed necessary for marital satisfaction and stability.

The interaction between marital power and role enactment and self-perception would appear to be a circular one according to the following study. Lundgren, Jergens and Gibson (1982) did a study of marital power, roles, and self appraisals and found that hierarchical power relations were associated with the perception of negative attitudes of the spouse toward the self and the individual's own less favorable evaluation of herself or himself. The authors assumed that the relationship may go in the other direction as well, so that positive perception of the self may lead to the pursuit of equality in decision making power and role enactment.

French and Raven (1959) did a study of the bases of social power and defined five types of power bases, three of which have particular relevance to the stepparenting role. Legitimate Power is related to the "right" to control decision making as accorded by cultural values, social hierarchy, and a legitimizing agent. Referent Power refers to the identification with another person and opting to give that person power in order to gain security in an ambiguous situation. Expert Power is based on a person's credibility as having superior knowledge and

skill. In stepfamilies, the biological parent has legitimate power and credibility by virtue of the legal mandate and the historical relationship with the children. In an attempt to enact an ambiguous role, the stepparent looks to the spouse for guidance, acceptance and security, hence the referent power of the biological parent.

Safilios-Rothschild (1970) raised an important methodological issue by questioning the validity of the survey method, which gauges the perceptions of respondents, versus the observation method, which is objectively based. She wondered whether the perceptions of respondents relate at all to observable behavior. Olson (1969) responded to the question raised by Safilios-Rothschild when he studied husband-wife couples utilizing both the self-report method as well as observations of the couple's decision making behavior. He found that husbands tended to overestimate their actual power, while wives tended to underestimate their actual power. The author found no significant differences in the ability of husbands and wives to predict which of them would actually exercise decision making power. Significantly, though, the research team observed that the person perceived as having the right to make a particular decision did actually make that decision. Olson's findings were consistent with those of French & Raven (1959) regarding the importance of one's perception of which spouse has the right to make a particular decision.

As relates to the present study, if biological parents have the legal and social right to make the decisions affecting their children, then stepparents' perceptions and expectations of their own rights and responsibilities regarding their stepparenting role may be an important

factor influencing their participation and experience in the stepparenting role.

In summary, the literature demonstrates the existence of ambiguity in the stepparenting role and the potential for the stepparent's self-concept to be affected. Some studies stress the importance of the stepparent's self-concept and expectations as they may affect the stepparent's performance of and experiences in the stepparenting role. The stepparent's ability to cope with the feelings aroused by stepfamily problems is also emphasized. The joint physical custody arrangement, due to the involvement of both biological parents and the particularly ambiguous nature of the stepparenting role, may be the most conducive situation for exploring the interaction between the stepparent's self-concept and role performance. The literature on joint custody would seem to support this assumption.

Custody Considerations

Overview

In a biological family, the parents share custody of their children, all of whom live in the same location, with the same siblings, day in and day out. The number of complex variables and arrangements related to stepfamily structure, however, is enormous. For instance, after divorce, one or both parents may remarry; one parent may be unavailable to the children or may visit irregularly; both parents may remain involved, and the stepchildren may go back and forth between two homes within a myriad of possible time frameworks; there may be step- or half-siblings in one or both homes. With remarriage divorce rates at

40% (Visher & Visher, 1979), the possibility exists for multiple divorces and remarriages, with even more complicated relationships and arrangements resulting.

Perhaps because of the variety of options open to stepfamilies, there is no obvious theme in the literature regarding the custody arrangements of stepchildren, though the theory appears to be that stepparents whose stepchildren live with them have more of an opportunity to work out the ambiguities in their roles and to establish themselves as a parental figure than do the stepparents whose stepchildren visit with them. Visher & Visher (1978) and Roosevelt & Lofas (1976) interviewed stepparents and found that stepparents with visiting stepchildren reported the most dissatisfaction with their roles.

This idea was confirmed by Nadler (1977) who, in her doctoral dissertation, did a study of the psychological stress of the stepmother and found that part-time stepmothers (those whose stepchildren did not live with them, but rather visited them) experienced the most conflict and dissatisfaction in their parenting role. These stepmothers often looked forward to the visit's end and the stepchildren's leaving as an opportunity to regain equilibrium. This finding is particularly relevant to the issue of joint physical custody and the stepparenting role. This investigator suspects that in a joint physical custody arrangement stepmothers feel the same confusion and lack of power as do stepmothers with visiting stepchildren; but, because they live with their stepchildren a great deal of the time, their frustration and dissatisfaction may pervade without opportunity for either adjustment or relief. This suspicion is untested, however, because joint physical custody is a

recent preference in custody decisions and the impact on stepfamilies has not as yet been systematically studied.

Historical Perspective

Before the nineteenth century, custody of children was rarely an issue. In the case of the death of a parent, the surviving parent automatically became the sole custodian of the children. In those rare instances where both parents were living and the custody of children was an issue, custody automatically went to the father. Such a decision reflected the social attitudes about power and property at that time (Roman & Haddad, 1978).

By the mid-1800's the agrarian life style was giving way to urban industrialization. As men left home to work, women's role with children increased and the supremacy of the father was eroded. During this time, children came to be seen less as property and more as developing individuals who needed emotional stability, nurturance and education. The rights and needs of children became an issue in custody decisions at the same time that courts began to recognize the ability of mothers to care for their infants and children (Derdeyn, 1978). The "tender age" doctrine assumed the need of children under seven years of age for their mothers, so by law mothers were awarded custody of young children. As late as 1857 children lived with their mothers until the age of seven, and then custody was given to the fathers (Roman & Haddad, 1978). Mothers contested the switch in custody mandated by the "tender age" law and maintained that they were superior to fathers as caretakers. In the early 1920's a re-evaluation of the "tender age" laws led to a new

standard for custody decisions -- the "best interest of the child" law (Salk, 1977).

The "best interests of the child" were determined based on the wishes of the parents; the wishes of the child; the interrelationship of the child with all family members; the child's adjustment to home, school and the community; and the mental and physical health of the child and each of the parents (Musetto, 1981). In the 1930's, the "tender age" laws were officially dropped in most states, and the courts agreed that custody of children should be decided based on the abilities of each parent to meet his or her child's particular needs, and that no parent should have a "prima facie" right to the custody of his or her children (Franklin & Hibbs, 1980). However, because of the influence of psychoanalytic theory in the 1920's and 1930's which purported that the mother was the paramount influence in the child's development, the tradition of mother-awarded custody was upheld.

It wasn't until the 1970's, as a result of both the women's movement and the "no fault" divorce laws, that equality of the sexes became an issue and fathers' rights to custody was again in question (Roman & Haddad, 1978). The current standard continues to be what is in the "best interests of the child," though there are few legal guidelines for this standard and so the trend of mother-awarded custody has persisted (Musetto, 1981). The dissatisfaction of fathers is reflected in the growing number of them seeking sole and joint custody of their children and their turning for help to organizations such as Fathers' Rights of America and Fathers Demanding Equal Justice. In the late 1970's, as a reflection of continued transition and cultural change, a

new trend emerged, supported by the courts, for parents to share custody of their children following divorce (Roman & Haddad, 1978).

Joint Physical Custody

The literature on joint custody is growing as researchers take more of an interest in this burgeoning trend. The themes in the literature on joint custody are: 1) the distinction between joint legal and joint physical custody; 2) the need of children for the physical presence of and emotional attachment to both biological parents; 3) the decreased sense of loss and helplessness usually experienced by children and the non-custodial parent; and 4) the necessity of the parents' ability to relate to each other after their divorce in ways that are not detrimental to their child's emotional development.

The definition of joint custody is imprecise and several terms are used interchangeably to describe the same arrangement. The term "joint custody" may refer to either joint legal or joint physical custody. Joint legal custody refers to the legal right of both parents to have equal say in major decisions affecting their child, although the child lives with only one of the parents (Gaddis, 1978). Joint physical custody refers to the situation in which the child lives with each parent a significant portion of time, for instance 50/50, 60/40, or on a week to week or month to month basis. Shared custody, shared parenting, coparenting, divided custody and split custody are terms also used to describe such an arrangement (Cox & Cease, 1978; Eder, 1978).

The need of children for the physical presence of and emotional attachment to both biological parents is the second theme in the

literature on joint custody. Rosen (1979) interviewed 92 children between the ages of nine and twenty-eight whose parents had divorced. He found that there were no significant differences in the ultimate adjustment of children reared by mothers to those reared by fathers. Free access to both parents appeared to be the major factor enhancing the child's adjustment. Rosen suggested that parents be assessed not by sex but by their suitability as custodial parents.

The "best interests of the child" is frequently cited as the appropriate standard for deciding custody disputes. Felner & Farber (1980) suggested that no single custody arrangement is suited to all families and that what is best for the child is a case by case issue. Musetto's (1981) criteria for what is in the "best interests of the child" included an assessment of which parent is able to love and want the child for the child's sake, not to meet the parent's own emotional needs or to be used as a weapon against the ex-spouse. Duquette (1978) identified the adversarial process as unresponsive to the child's needs and suggested that a mediation team of attorney and counselor resolve custody conflicts outside of the court system, in an attempt to help both parents remain involved with their children without continued dispute.

The main reason for the attempts of judges and counselors to keep both parents involved with their children after divorce is the decreased sense of helplessness, hopelessness and depression experienced by children and the non-custodial parent. In a survey of non-custodial fathers and fathers with joint physical custody, Grief (1979) found that the non-custodial fathers reported a higher degree of depression and

psychosomatic illness than did the fathers with joint physical custody of their children. The non-custodial fathers tended to withdraw from their children over time if feelings of helplessness persisted. The fathers with joint physical custody perceived themselves as having a satisfactory level of influence in child rearing matters and continued to maintain a high level of involvement with their children. Ahrons (1980) also found that divorced parents with sole or joint custody reported considerably more satisfaction with their parenting role than did non-custodial parents. A major benefit of joint physical custody for children is the decreased sense of loss and depression that children experience when one parent is suddenly removed from their daily lives. A decrease in loyalty conflicts and fantasies about the absent parent are other possible benefits (Benedek & Benedek, 1979).

The custody issue is being fought not only by parents and attorneys but by researchers as well. In a well known book, Beyond the Best Interests of the Child (1973), Goldstein, Anna Freud and Solnit took the position that the stability of one family is most important for the child's adjustment to parental divorce, and suggested that the non-custodial parent refrain from seeing the child during the post-divorce adjustment period. The authors also stressed the rights of the custodial parent to decide visitation without court intervention, assuming that the custodial parent would do what was best for the child regarding maintaining a relationship with the non-custodial parent. The authors also asserted that, in the event that the parents are hostile toward each other and the custodial parent forbids visitation, the child is spared the emotional upheaval of living with the ongoing hostilities

between the parents. The rebuttal to the position taken by Goldstein, Freud and Solnit can be found in Roman and Haddad's book The Disposable Parent: The Case For Joint Custody (1978). These authors asserted that the absence of a parent to whom the child had been close (usually the father) is the single factor most affecting a child's regression, depression and poor adjustment at home and in school. They emphasized the father's involvement and importance as a nurturing figure and thus concluded that it is more damaging to a child to have minimal contact with one parent than it is to adjust to two sets of homes.

The success of joint physical custody arrangements is still being studied, but preliminary findings point to the emotional atmosphere in each of the homes and the ability of the biological parents to relate to each other in a non-hostile way as the most significant factors affecting the child's adjustment to two different homes (Benedek & Benedek, 1979; Parley, 1979). Other studies found that the parents' commitment to the joint physical custody arrangement, their mutual support, their sharing of responsibilities and their agreement on the rules and logistics of the arrangement were also factors needed to make joint physical custody a success (Abarbanel, 1979; Wooley, 1978).

There are virtually no reports of systematic studies of joint custody as related to stepfamilies. However, two articles on joint custody that mentioned stepparents in passing reflected the traditional emphasis on the immediate needs of biological parents and their children following divorce. Gaddis (1978) stated that one reason for the review of the joint custody status might be the remarriage or co-habitation of one of the parents. Steinman (1981) studied forty-eight divorced

parents with shared physical custody, ten of whom had remarried, but made reference to the remarriages only in terms of the need of parents to remain living close to their ex-spouses in order to continue the shared physical custody arrangement.

Wald (1981) devoted a lengthy discussion to the legal implications of various custody arrangements and their potential effects on the stepfamily. She stressed the link between the legal realities and the problems of identity and role performance experienced by stepparents. Her conclusion was that the rights and obligations of stepparents are equally important to those of stepchildren and biological parents, and should be considered as such if stepfamilies are to weather the disruptions that lead to family breakup.

In her book on shared parenting, Ciji Ware (1979) devoted a chapter on shared custody's supporting players, which includes stepparents. She quoted one stepfather who said, "Being a stepparent can be a pretty thankless job, especially with joint custody. You have all of the problems of being a parent with few of the payoffs. After all, the kid has a real dad a mile and a half away, and he casts a very long shadow" (p.277). Ware's emphasis was on the importance of integrating all family members into the shared custody sphere and enabling them to feel they are a part of the child's life.

The emphasis in the books by Wald and Ware reflect the most recent trend in the literature, namely, the inclusion of stepparents in discussions which focus on custody and the needs of children and their parents.

Clingempell & Reppucci (1982) reviewed the literature on joint

custody and enumerated the major issues, as well as suggesting goals for future research. Regarding joint custody after remarriage, the authors noted that too few studies even mentioned remarriage in their discussions of joint custody. The authors' conclusion was that systematic research is needed to identify which variables best discriminate between successful and unsuccessful joint custody arrangements, to study the influence of remarriage on joint custody, to explore the impact of joint custody on the quality of the remarriage, and to identify the roles that emerge for stepparents and biological parents in a joint custody arrangement.

To summarize the review of the literature, existing studies mention, but do not fully investigate, the interaction between stepmothers' self-concepts and their performance of the stepmothering role. Some studies mention the psychodynamics of stepmothers as the major guiding force in their role performance. Other studies emphasize the negative influence of stepfamily adjustment problems on the stepparent's self-image. A few authors stress the circular nature of the relationship between self-concept and role performance. Most of the specialized literature on stepfamilies stresses the ambiguities in the stepparenting role and the inability of stepfamilies to compare themselves realistically to nuclear families. The joint physical custody arrangement, due to the particularly ambiguous nature of the stepparenting role, may be the most conducive situation for investigating the mutual influence of stepmothers' self-concepts and their role performance.

CHAPTER IV

METHOD

Each year in America two-thirds of the one million divorces involve children under the age of fourteen. It has been estimated that by the year 1985, almost 50% of the nation's children will be affected by divorce (Ware, 1979). Assuming that current trends remain the same, 75-80% of divorced parents will remarry within three to five years (Maddox, 1975; Wald, 1981). Given the increasing numbers of stepfamilies each year in this country, it is no wonder that researchers, clinicians and stepparents are asking for a conceptual framework for understanding stepfamily structure and dynamics. The absence of a conceptual framework allows the researcher much leeway in choosing a focus of investigation that could be theoretically and clinically useful as well as personally rewarding.

An important question faced by this investigator was whether to examine a particular stepfamily issue within a broad sociological context or to explore an issue in-depth with the hope that findings would be generalizable to stepparents not included in the study's sample. The latter choice seemed most feasible and interesting given this investigator's clinical orientation and experience. Taken into account in the choice of the focus of investigation was the emphasis in the theoretical and stepfamily literature on the interaction between psychological and interpersonal factors involved in a woman's experiences in the stepmother role.

Having made the decision to study an issue in depth, namely the relationship between stepmothers' self-concept and role performance, as well as the coping strategies utilized by stepmothers to maintain their equilibrium in stressful stepfamily situations, the choice of a research design was based on which design could best elicit such "interface" information

Design

The goal of this study was to explore the research questions in depth and to generate findings and questions that could later be subjected to more stringent investigation. A case study design utilizing interview methods is one appropriate design for examining relationships that cannot be manipulated or controlled in an experimental format and which are exploratory in nature. Since the goal of this study was to explore certain psychological and interpersonal factors related to stepmothers' role performance, the case study approach was felt to be compatible with an overall exploratory design. Isaac & Michael (1971) stated that the purpose of the case study is "to study intensively the background, current status, and environmental interactions of a given social unit: an individual, group, institution, or community" (p.20). The scope of a case study may encompass an entire life cycle or only a selected segment, and it may concentrate upon specific factors or take in the totality of elements and events. The authors further stated, "Because they are intensive, case studies bring to light the important variables, processes, and interactions that deserve more extensive attention. They pioneer new ground and often are the source of fruitful

hypotheses for further study" (p.20). Festinger & Katz (1953) assessed the strength of the case study as its ability to examine the interrelationship between social and psychological processes. However, there are two basic limitations of the case study--the difficulties in generalizing to the broader population from which the subjects are drawn and the vulnerability to the subjective biases of the researcher and the respondent.

The goal of the present research was to explore the interrelationship between self-concept and role performance, as representative psychological and interpersonal factors related to stepmothers' experiences, and to describe the interrelationship of these factors in order to generate findings and questions for future research. With this objective in mind, an exploratory case study design was deemed most relevant for the pursuit of the research goals.

Data Collection Methods

There is a close relationship among the goals of this study, the design used, the theoretical framework upon which the research is based, the clinical experience of the investigator and the choice of the data collection method.

A combination of a written questionnaire and a semi-structured interview was employed as the principle method of data collection. Cannell & Kahn (1953) said the usefulness of a combined technique is that the questionnaire can be used as a stimulus to evoke a response from the subject, and the semistructured interview can then be used to probe for deeper and more complete data or to get information of a

personal and sensitive nature. They further stated that a combined technique is most fruitful if the research goal is to explore the relationship among attitudes, perceptions and behavior (p. 329).

According to Isaac & Michael (1971), the semistructured interview most closely approximates the clinical interview in its use of structured questions from which the interviewer branches off to explore in depth, in its opportunity to probe for underlying factors or relationships which are too complex or elusive to encompass in more straightforward questions, and in its need for an interviewer with skill and experience in such interview techniques. Given the investigator's experience with clinical interviews, it was felt that the use of the semistructured interview as a data collection method would enhance the investigator's ability to obtain relevant information from respondents at the depth required to answer the research questions.

In the present study, a self-administered questionnaire was used to provide demographic information and role-related information. The demographic questions provided information on age, race, religion, occupation, education, family income, length of present and previous marriages, number and ages of children and stepchildren, and previous experience as a stepparent or stepchild. The role-related questions obtained information about the stepmother's perceptions of her parental autonomy and authority and the extent to which she felt supported by her husband in the stepmother role, her satisfaction with her role, her perception of her husband's relationship to his ex-wife, and whether or not she had received help for problems related to the stepmother role (See appendix).

The semistructured interview consisted of one beginning question designed to establish rapport and generate data. In addition, four sets of questions were designed to probe and expand on particular responses in the questionnaire, as well as to obtain data on the attitudes, expectations, perceptions and behavior of the stepmother in relation to her self-concept, her parenting/stepparenting roles, her relationship to her husband and stepchildren, discrepancies between her expectations and her experience, her coping skills and her beliefs about the issues raised by the joint custody situation (See appendix).

Sampling

An accidental (volunteer) sample consisted of 12 stepmothers whose husbands co-parent their children with their former wives. Stepmothers whose stepchildren lived with them at least 30% of the time were interviewed. However, of the sample of twelve, one stepmother had very recently given up the co-parenting arrangement after several years. The three month lapse of time was not felt to have affected her report, given the length of time she had been involved in joint physical custody and her continuing involvement with the children.

The choice of a research design and data collection method supports the overall goal of the study, which was to investigate in depth the relationship between certain psychological and interpersonal factors related to stepmothers' role performance. Decisions regarding sampling were also been arrived at with the same considerations. In order to obtain sufficient personal information on the attitudes, perceptions and behavior of stepmothers to answer the research questions, a small sample

size was optimal (Ruderman, 1983). The large sample size and random sampling required for experimental research aimed at broad generalizations would not have been appropriate for this study.

Given the small number of subjects to be interviewed, this investigator chose to focus solely on Caucasian, middle-class stepmothers for several reasons. Results of sociological studies have demonstrated significant differences between male and female conjugal and parental roles in Western society. Although the trend in the last decade has been toward increased sharing of roles between spouses with respect to child care and family financial support, a differentiation of tasks has been maintained, with the husband primarily responsible for financial support and discipline of the children and the wife primarily responsible for housework, childcare and emotional support of family members (Bott, 1960; Zelditch, 1960; Nye, 1976). In addition, there are significant differences in the self-esteem of men and women and their perceptions of their personal power in interpersonal situations situations (Ruderman, 1983). Including both men and women in the sample would have raised the need for comparisons between the self-concept and role performance of stepmothers and stepfathers, which, not being an intent of the present research, would have detracted from the overall goal of the study.

The difficulties noted above also pertained to the limitation of the sample to Caucasian, middle-class stepmothers. This investigator recognizes that there may be differences among socio-economic and ethnic groups in relation to issues of self-concept, conjugal authority, child rearing practices and marital and parental roles. The purpose of the

present research was to explore in depth and to describe the relationship between self-concept and role performance. However, self-concept, as an intrapsychic variable built upon early object relations, may be less subject to socio-economic and ethnic influences and more subject to the quality of early parent-child interactions (Rosenberg, 1965; E. Jacobson, 1964). If the relationship between self-concept and role performance is related less to cultural factors than to psychological and interpersonal factors, the findings of this study, while not automatically generalizable to other stepmothers or to stepfathers, may still pertain to stepparents in cultural groups other than the one being studied. The task remains for future studies to compare the findings generated by the present research to stepfathers and to stepmothers with other socio-economic and ethnic affiliations.

The stepmothers in the sample were referred by professional colleagues, experts in the field, and other stepmothers.

Procedure

Stepmothers who agreed to participate were telephoned by the investigator. The purpose of the phone call was four-fold. The first reason was to establish consent of the stepmother. The second reason was to give a general description of what her participation would entail and to make arrangements to send her a questionnaire and set up an interview appointment. The third reason was to begin to establish rapport with the stepmother to help ease any trepidation she might have in discussing her personal situation with a stranger. The forth reason was to stress the confidentiality of the questionnaire, interview and

report of the findings.

A packet was then sent to each stepmother, including a cover letter, consent form and questionnaire. The packets were picked up at the time of the interviews. The self-administered questionnaire was designed to elicit information that could be provided without taking up time in the interview and also to stimulate the stepmother's thinking in the hope that she would get in touch with the personal relevance of the issues and therefore be prepared to discuss them at the interview.

The interviews lasted 2-3 hours, depending on the degree to which each stepmother had given prior thought to the interview questions on her own, and also on the number and length of vignettes each stepmother used to describe her feelings and experiences.

The interview consisted of three types of questions:

1. A major question designed to establish rapport, to stimulate discussion and to allow the stepmother to raise issues that were personally relevant to her and to enable the interviewer to identify the areas and issues that needed to be explored further (See Appendix D);

2. Four sets of prepared questions used when necessary to guide the discussion and stimulate further information in areas needed to answer the research questions. Many of these questions were answered in the context of the interview and therefore were not asked specifically. Other questions were phrased to account for the stepmother's individual situation, for instance use of first names and reference to incidents the stepmother had referred to during the interview (See Appendix D);

3. Probing questions which could not be pre-determined but

rather emerged out of the personal and sensitive material brought out in the interview. These questions were asked in order to elaborate meaning while maintaining rapport and sensitivity to the stepmother's feelings.

Each interview was taped to avoid researcher bias in memory and recording as well as to allow for maximum attention to the subjects' sensitivities and nuances of speech and facial expression. For the most part, the subjects seemed eager to talk and were not overly concerned with the tape recording. Although confidentiality was discussed with each subject, two stepmothers asked for the tapes to be returned to them when the study was complete, and a third chose to discuss an issue with the investigator after the tape was turned off.

Analysis and Presentation of Data

According to Cartwright (1953) verbal behavior is the most important mechanism in the formation and transmission of cultural standards, values, attitudes, skills, education, and social and political issues. He stated that verbal behavior is therefore the best method for determining an individual's or group's attitudes, values and behavior responses to social situations. He further stated that the research interview is the most valuable technique for the study of variables related to personality, attitudes, values, cognitive structure and behavior responses to social situations. In the research interview, "verbal material is specifically stimulated, and usually taken to be indicative of something beyond itself" (p.423), for instance, attitudes, values and personality structure. He concluded that the systematic description of verbal behavior, that is, the classification or

categorization of verbal statements and determining their interrelations, can allow objective and general statements to be made about them regarding an individual's attitudes, beliefs and behavior responses to interpersonal situations.

Goode & Hatt (1952) stated that the case study method can be seen as a technique for eliciting data as well as a mode of organizing data in terms of some chosen unit, such as the individual, group or some delimited social process. Referring to the organization of qualitative data, they state, "The data from the case study interview must be condensed, and categories developed that define and delimit types of behavior with reference to" the variables being explored (p.339). The standardization required of statistical interpretation of data would be sacrificed in order to retain the depth of information about subjects' perceptions and experiences and to utilize the interviewer's clinical ability to detect delicate nuances in subjects' responses and behavior.

In the present study the investigator applied a qualitative method of analysis and interpretation of data collected in the questionnaires and interviews and systematically assigned the data to categories in order to identify similarities and differences in the subjects' responses with particular attention paid to the questions under investigation. There were four major categories for grouping the data: 1) the impact of self-concept on role performance, 2) the impact of role performance on self-concept, 3) coping techniques and 4) issues pertaining to joint physical custody.

In category one, the data was further broken down and organized according to the stepmother's comments about her expectations of herself

as a mother; her self-concept in general; her expectations of herself as a stepmother; her belief about how her self-concept affected her role performance; and the influence on her self-concept or role performance of a prior divorce, having her own children, or prior experience in a stepfamily.

In category two, the data was further broken down, and the stepmother's comments pertaining to her relationship to her stepchildren were grouped together, as were her comments pertaining to her role autonomy and authority, her perception of her husband's support and her perception of changes in her self-concept.

Comments pertaining to coping techniques were grouped according to whether the techniques were used in daily situations or crises.

In category four, the comments on the benefits of joint physical custody were separated from comments on its pitfalls.

The investigator compared the stepmothers' comments in the subgroups of each category and noted overall patterns and exceptions. The investigator then attempted to describe the relationship between self-concept and role performance as it appeared to emerge from the patterns in the data.

The obvious limitations of such a procedure are the subjective choice of categories for ordering the raw data and the inability to generalize to a larger universe. However, given the small sample size and the exploratory nature of the present research, a qualitative interpretation of data was the procedure most befitting the overall research goals and design. To quote Marsden (1965), "...a combination of linguistic analysis and clinical inference techniques applied to

interview materials can produce insights quite impossible without them" (p.314).

Limitations of the Study

A major limitation of the study was its restriction to stepmothers who are middle-class Caucasians and whose stepchildren are involved in a joint physical custody situation. A study of stepfathers or of stepmothers from a broader socio-economic-ethnic background would have enhanced the findings of the study. The small sample size further limited the study due to the difficulties in generalizing findings to even the broader population of stepmothers. Finally, the subjects interviewed were not randomly sampled; however, there was no identifiable sampling frame of "stepparents in a joint physical custody situation" from which to sample by random method. A group of volunteer subjects located by referral was the only available source of information.

The study is further limited by the fact that the qualitative method of analysis and interpretation of data is vulnerable to the investigator's subjective choice of units and categories. While the interviews were expected to yield an abundant amount of raw data, the criteria for ordering the data could not be pre-determined, as this would have detracted from the interviewer's purpose of eliciting material which the respondents felt was personally relevant to their experiences. According to Glaser & Strauss (1967), the units and categories into which the data are ordered must be generated from the data itself and reported along with interview material as illustrations

of the researcher's inferences regarding the emergence of general themes and issues.

An important limitation of studies that require respondents to expose their feelings, attitudes and behavior is the parameter of social acceptability. Respondents may tend to withhold information which they feel will cause them to be seen in a negative way by the interviewer. The voluntary participation of subjects raises the possibility that those stepmothers who chose not to participate may represent a population whose interviews might have exposed alternative data, possibly even refuting the findings of the study. Memory bias is another factor which renders even the willing respondent unable to provide accurate information (Cannell & Kahn, 1953). The level of insight of the respondents and their ability to discuss their self-concept and role performance was not uniform. It became the task of the interviewer to provide a comfortable atmosphere in which the respondents felt free to explore the questions and their personal relevance.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

The purpose of the study will be reviewed and the chapter's organization presented. A description of the sample and demographic data will follow. The identification and description of the relevant variables will precede the presentation of the findings that emerged when the variables were compared in cross-tabulation tables.

REVIEW OF THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to investigate and describe the relationship between stepmothers' self-concepts and their role performance. Joint physical custody was used in the study design since it was felt that the extreme conditions of this situation - in contrast to visitation only - would place greater demands on the stepparenting role. As such, the ego structure of the stepmother reflected in her self-concept would be tested more strongly. Potential strains on the role would be expected to occur due to the involvement of both biological parents, often in situations of conflict. In addition, there are few, if any, prescriptive guidelines for the stepmother role. Since the study sample was small, and since joint physical custody is an important and not well understood contemporary issue, the use of subjects in more extreme circumstances was expected to produce responses which would highlight and magnify the variables of interest.

The goal of the study was to explore and answer the major question: What is the relationship between self-concept and role performance for

stepmothers in a joint physical custody situation? In order to accomplish this goal, four sub-questions were devised.

1. How does the stepmother's self-concept affect her role performance?
2. How does the stepmother's role performance affect her self-concept?
3. What coping skills are utilized by stepmothers to regain their equilibrium in ambiguous or stressful stepparenting situations?
4. What do stepmothers perceive to be the issues, benefits and pitfalls raised by the joint physical custody situation?

The analysis of the data was undertaken with these four questions in mind. However, the purpose of an exploratory study is to identify variables and generate findings for further study through a process of ordering the data into units and categories grounded in the data itself rather than according to pre-determined categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Indeed, a closer scrutiny of the data revealed that the findings could not be forced into categories based on the original research questions. Therefore, the findings will be presented in the following order:

1. Description of the sample and demographic data
2. Description of the relevant variables
 - a. Stepmother's personality
 - b. Stepmother's perception of husband's support
 - c. Husband's relationship to his ex-wife
 - d. Stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother

- e. Stepmother's role performance
- f. Fluctuations in stepmother's self-concept
- 3. Relationships between the relevant variables
 - a. Variables affecting role performance
 - b. Variables affecting fluctuations in self-concept
- 4. Coping techniques
- 5. Benefits and pitfalls of joint physical custody.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SAMPLE AND DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Twelve stepmothers whose husbands co-parent their children with their ex-wives were interviewed. They range in age from 28 to 45. Seven are Jewish, two are Presbyterian, one is Catholic, and two do not state a religious affiliation. Seven currently work full-time, four in professional occupations and three in business. One works part-time. Of the four not currently employed, two consider themselves to have a career which they are not currently pursuing, and two consider themselves to be housewives. All of the stepmothers have completed high school. Three have some college, three have a college degree, and four have graduate level education. The sample was deliberately limited to Caucasian stepmothers, in order to reduce the number of differences among the subjects. However, the noticeably high proportion of Jewish stepmothers is accidental.

Four of the stepmothers are in their first marriage, six have been married once previously, and two have been married twice previously. Of the four stepmothers in their first marriage, one has a biological child with her present husband. Of the eight stepmothers married previously,

four have children from a previous marriage only and two have children from the present marriage only. Five of the stepmothers do not have biological children of their own.

Regarding the length of time in the present marriage, three stepmothers had been married slightly less than one year at the time of the study, four had been married 1 to 2 years, three had been married 2 to 3 years, and two had been married 4 to 8 years. However, ten stepmothers had lived with their husbands and stepchildren prior to the marriage, thus lengthening the actual time spent living in the home together. When time spent living together before marriage was taken into account, only one stepmother had lived with her husband less than one year, eight had lived with their husbands 1 1/2 to 3 1/2 years, and three had lived with their husbands at least four years.

The greater proportion of stepchildren was males. There were fourteen stepsons, ranging in age from 6 to 15, with a mean age of 9.8 years. There were four stepdaughters ranging in age from 5 to 13, with a mean age of 11 years. An explanation for the greater number of males might be increased motivation of the fathers to share custody with their ex-wives in order to maintain a close father-son relationship.

Only two of the women in the sample had prior experience as stepchildren themselves. One of the women reported having virtually no relationship with her father's second wife. The other reported being raised by her father and his second wife, whom she considers to be her mother. One stepmother in the sample had stepchildren in a prior marriage but had not lived with them nor seen them regularly.

There were varied joint physical custody arrangements. Seven

stepmothers reported a split week situation, where the stepchildren go from the father's home to the mother's home within the same week. Three reported a week to week arrangement, where the children spend one whole week in each home. One stepmother reported a 60-30 arrangement, with the stepchildren spending one full week a month in their father's home, plus time on pre-arranged weekends, holidays and vacations. /

One family had just given up the joint physical custody arrangement after 3 1/2 years, so at the time of the study one child had been living in the father's home and one child in the mother's home for approximately three months. This stepmother reported different experiences with each of her stepchildren and reflected the differences on the questionnaire. In order to compile the data from this stepmother's questionnaire in a manner consistent with the overall format for analyzing the data, those responses referring to the stepchild currently living in the stepmother's home were incorporated into the data pool. Responses referring to the stepchild who no longer lived in her home were analyzed separately, and will be discussed in this chapter under Pitfalls of Joint Physical Custody. The three month lapse of time was not felt to be a detriment to the study, given the length of time the stepmother had been involved in joint physical custody and her continuing involvement with the children. Also, data related to the interaction between this stepmother's self-concept and role performance were not based solely on her experiences with her stepchildren but rather on other variables, such as her personality style, her perception of her husband's support, and her attitude toward the biological mother -- factors which she reported were not altered significantly because of

the change in the custody arrangements.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RELEVANT VARIABLES

The stepfamily literature emphasizes the lack of societal guidelines for the enactment of the stepparenting role, with ambiguity and confusion the results. An assumption made by the investigator was that, in the absence of societal guidelines for her role, the stepmother's self-concept would play an important part in her role performance. The goal was not to determine if a relationship existed, but rather it was assumed that a relationship did exist and the goal was to describe the nature of that relationship. The stepmothers interviewed were individuals with different styles, personalities, capacities for insight, and life experiences. Their stepfamily situations were also quite diverse. But the purpose of the study was to explore the common denominators linking the stepmothers' experiences, and patterns did emerge from the data, leading the investigator to identify six variables having the strongest relationship to the interaction between the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance. The six variables were:

- 1) the stepmother's personality
- 2) the stepmother's perception of her husband's support of her
in the stepmother role,
- 3) the husband's relationship to his ex-wife as reported by
the stepmother,
- 4) the stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother,
- 5) the stepmother's involvement in parental role functions
related to the overall care and discipline of her step-
children, and

6) fluctuations in the stepmother's self-concept.

Stepmother's Personality

There are many criteria used for describing an individual's personality. The one used in the present study emerged from the stepmothers' descriptions of themselves, but the investigator recognizes that another researcher might have analyzed the data differently or chosen to focus on personality from a different perspective. During the analysis of the data, this investigator noticed a difference in the way the stepmothers described their personalities. Five of the twelve stepmothers described themselves within the context of their interpersonal relationships. They tended to see their feelings of frustration, sadness or anger as being most related to disagreements or arguments with their husbands, stepchildren or the biological mothers. Clair's description of her personality is one example.

I'm even-tempered, easy going, not a strong figure. I'm basically eager to please, so I chose to take a low profile, to be "supportive" of everyone else. I have a need to please everyone and be sensitive to everyone's feelings and put my own needs secondary. I proceeded cautiously at first, feeling out what was expected of me.

Grace's assessment of the source of her frustration reflects the feelings of this group of stepmothers.

Sometimes I feel depressed about parenting in general because I wonder if I'm talking to myself. I think I'm taking the right approach, so I don't blame myself when I don't feel effective with the kids because they just can't take in my good lessons.

The other seven stepmothers were more introspective in their

descriptions of their personalities. They tended to make statements most related to psychological issues or experiences and their feelings of frustration, sadness or anger were most related to their assessments of not having lived up to their conscious expectations of themselves. Ann described herself in the following way.

I think I stand very well as a parent. But for my own conflicts, who am I, what am I, where am I going in life, that's wherein the conflict lies. One is and can be influenced by the other. I put limits on my role myself. When I'm feeling good about something I can give 100%, and when I'm not, I'm terrible. My relationship with my stepchildren goes up and down based on how I feel about the stepmother situation or whatever else is going on. Sometimes my personality and temperament get in the way. The better I feel about myself, the more I can become involved with my stepchildren without fear or guilt. My self-concept still wavers back and forth, but overall my self-esteem has improved in the stepmother role.

Comments made by Lynn illustrate these stepmothers' beliefs about the causes of their frustration, sadness or anger.

I feel the worst when I'm not behaving in the way I want to, like if I'm not patient or I yell too much or I don't want to spend time with my stepchild. I feel bad about the changes in my feelings toward my stepchild since the birth of my own child, but I know I can't force my feelings. I used to feel terrible because I wasn't managing everything as well as I wanted, but now I realize that I can't do it all by myself.

Perception of Husband's Support

In the questionnaires, the stepmothers were asked if they thought their husbands offered enough support of them in the stepmother role. Eleven out of twelve stepmothers stated that they felt a high degree of support from their husbands. However, it is known that, due to the

parameter of social acceptability, respondents frequently report positive information readily and withhold information which they feel will cause them to be seen in a negative way by the interviewer (Cannell & Kahn, 1953). When the data from the interviews was further analyzed, it became apparent that, despite the written responses on the questionnaires, only five of these same eleven stepmothers actually felt they received adequate support from their husbands. These five respondents described their husbands as being very concerned about their needs as stepmothers. They saw their husbands as making a conscious attempt to support them in the stepmother role by actively supporting their attempts to discipline the children and by encouraging them to exert independent authority with the children even when he was present. Comments made by Fay illustrate the investigator's belief that this group of women did enjoy a high degree of support from their husbands.

I didn't want to be very involved as a stepmother. I wanted to have input while letting my husband do most of the parenting tasks and deal with the biological mother. That's always been ok with him. He lets me be as involved as I want to be. He's very easy going; I could have it any way I wanted. My stepchild frequently comes to me first, even when my husband is there, because I'm seen as the one in charge. I guess that's because I say how I think things should be and my husband usually goes along with me.

Hope also felt that her husband was highly supportive of her in the stepmother role.

Sometimes he makes decisions and doesn't include me and I don't like that. But usually he tries to show his appreciation to me. He tries to encourage me to talk, which is not in his nature, or to express anger and hurt even though it's hard for him to do, but he knows it's important to me. He has taught me how to

relate to his child so that I can be more a part of their lives.

In the interviews, some stepmothers described situations that appeared to reflect a perception that their husbands did not provide them with adequate support. For instance, seven stepmothers described their husbands as making a minimal attempt to focus on their needs as compared to his focus on his own needs or those of his children or ex-wife. These stepmothers felt that their husbands did not seek input from them, but rather acquiesced to their child rearing preferences only when they demanded it. They also felt that the husband's support of their attempts to discipline the children was inactive in that it took the form of "staying out of it," or that the husband's support of their authority with the children masked his goal of wanting to "spoil" his children or be seen as the "nice" parent.

Bea's statements poignantly illustrate her perception of low husband support.

I feel excluded from my husband's relationship with his ex-wife and children. It's as though they are the nuclear family and I am the outsider. I've told him of my unhappiness, but he doesn't understand and continues to leave me out. He doesn't make changes. I don't feel accepted or supported or included by him.

Irma had stated in the questionnaire that her husband was "always" supportive of her in the stepmother role. However, analysis of the data from her interview revealed her dissatisfaction with her husband's degree of support. Speaking of her husband, she said,

He's supportive in many ways, but his not sticking to agreements we make or following through on limit setting is a major issue. I feel like his kids come first. He lets them get away with things and I often feel like "the big

meany" because I make the kids do things and I nag at them.

Husband's Relationship to His Ex-wife

On item #12 in the written questionnaire the stepmothers were asked to check the one response they felt was most descriptive of the relationship between their husbands and their husbands' ex-wives. Only two stepmothers felt that their husbands had a very good relationship with their ex-wives. One of these stepmothers felt that her husband's positive relationship with his ex-wife enabled her to function more effectively as a stepmother. The other felt that her husband's positive relationship with his ex-wife prevented her from establishing an acceptable role as a stepmother. The investigator found that ten stepmothers reported, in varying degrees, a poor relationship between their husbands and the former wives. Five of these respondents described frequent conflicts around even minor issues related to the joint physical custody arrangement.

Stepmother's Attitude Toward the Biological Mother

Each stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother became evident during the course of the interviews. Only three of the twelve stepmothers interviewed felt obviously positive about the biological mother. They either made specific positive statements about the biological mother or her parenting capacity or they commented on their own parenting style as being similar to the biological mother's. Dale felt she had a uniquely positive relationship with her husband's former wife.

I think my situation is different than most people. I get along really well with the mother. She and I discuss things more than she does with my husband because our views are so

similar. She respects my womanhood and my profession, and I respect hers. Sometimes I defend her to my husband if he criticizes her for working so much, because I know we're all in the same boat.

Other stepmothers had more of an attitude of benign acceptance toward the biological mothers. In the interviews of these stepmothers the investigator noticed an absence of either specific positive or negative statements about the biological mother or her parenting style. Instead, they tended to recognize differences or annoyances in the life style, values or parenting style of the biological mother but made specific statements about the importance of accepting these differences. Edna's feelings reflected an attitude of benign acceptance toward the biological mother of her stepchildren. She said,

Things have always gone reasonably smoothly. There have been no crises or major issues to work out because all four adults are supportive of the children and make a conscious effort to work things out. They do things in their home that I don't approve of, but I'm sure they'd say the same about our home. We basically think alike, so we decided to just accept the things we don't like and respect each other's privacy.

Six out of the twelve stepmothers had strong negative feelings about the biological mother, her parenting style or her impact on the stepchild or stepfamily as a whole. The attitudes of these stepmothers are reflected in the comments made by Joan. She felt the biological mother was to blame for her stepchild's emotional problems. She described the biological mother as "abusive" and gave numerous accounts of how the family's daily life was upset due to the constant turmoil created by the biological mother.

Stepmothers' Role Performance

In the interviews, the stepmothers were asked to describe the expectations they had of themselves as stepmothers. They were also asked to describe the tasks or functions they actually performed in the stepmother role. The pattern which emerged from the data was that each stepmother had a style of relating to her husband and stepchildren which was separate from her actual involvement in parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren. This finding is consistent with Sarbin's (1954) description of role expectations as encompassing both actions and qualities. He states,

Analysis of the role expectations of mother, for instance, may reveal the potential action: mother provides food when child cries. In addition, certain qualities of the person enacting the role are expected: warmth, gentleness, friendliness, etc. Both the expectations of actions and the expectation of qualities are residua of prior experience. (p.227)

Style of Relating

In this study, the qualities of the stepmother's style of relating appeared to be most affected by four factors: 1) the stepmother's self-concept, 2) her prior experiences, 3) her parenting philosophy, and 4) her conscious ambivalence regarding the manner in which she thought she should relate to her husband and stepchildren.

1. Self-Concept

Like personality, self-concept can be examined on many different levels. Self-concept is used here to refer to the stepmother's

evaluation of herself as it influences her expectations of her rights and responsibilities as a stepmother. Each stepmother had an image of herself which she felt was evident in all interpersonal interactions. Each stepmother's self-concept was closely linked to her beliefs about her right to assert herself in the stepmother role. For instance, some stepmothers felt that their rights as stepmothers were not as important as the rights of the biological parents. These beliefs were linked to the way they saw themselves in general. In describing herself, Clair told the investigator,

I'm even-tempered. I don't believe in dwelling on problems or worrying too much. What's past is past. I'm easy going, not a strong figure, that's why I can get along with both parents. As a stepmother, I expected to handle the situation by being my normal and natural self. I'm basically eager to please, so I chose to be in a supportive role to the parents and not assert myself too much until they knew me better and trusted me.

Hope sometimes felt she was too assertive in the stepmother role, and believed it was not her right to be so assertive. She said,

I'm assertive, sometimes I think I'm too aggressive or obnoxious with my opinions in an immature way. I used to blunder into things and not have a positive effect on people. I'm definitely not a wimpy person. I have a jealous and insecure nature and that sometimes gets in the way. I need a lot of reassurance from my husband that I am loved and appreciated. But I'm also brilliant and loving. I'm enthusiastic and excited about life, and I'm very compassionate. I take my role very seriously. My image of myself is changing. I think I'm growing up, becoming more mature. I've tried to become more intuitive and sensitive to others. Instead of being too aggressive with my own opinions, I'm trying to stay out of it and let my husband and (biological mother) make the decisions parents should make.

Other stepmothers saw themselves as having the right to be assertive in all roles. Grace was one stepmother who felt this way.

I'm a very take charge person. I don't defer to others. I'm basically outgoing and aggressive. If I have something to say, I say it, whether it relates to my own children or my stepchildren.

Joan felt much the same way as Grace. She said,

I'm intelligent, caring, assertive, competent, and I need to be in control of my life. I'm strong-willed and independent. I wanted to be a parent. I always expected to be thought of as a parent, to be equal to the biological parents. I could not have functioned as a person just living in the household and not being a parent.

2. Prior Experiences

All but one of the stepmothers referred to prior life experiences which they felt influenced their styles of relating as stepmothers. For several, the experience of a prior marriage and divorce was significant. Five of the stepmothers felt that the painful experience of an earlier marriage and divorce negatively affected their self-concepts and may have had a profound impact on their performance as stepmothers. Grace described the effects of her divorce on her self-concept and style of relating in the following way.

I always knew I was competent, outgoing and aggressive, but I became even more so since the divorce. My husband didn't participate much as a father. I was managing everything myself, the house, kids, financially, etc. I finally left him when I realized that I was meeting all of my own needs. I wasn't happy and I didn't need him. I see myself as a survivor, but I've become more self-protective. I know I can get through every situation, but what you give up is a certain degree of your humanity and vulnerability. You have to learn to build somewhat of a shell that you can allow things to bounce

off of and protect yourself and continue to go on. I began to build up a shell prior to my divorce. I was becoming aware that less and less seemed to touch me way deep down because I couldn't afford that emotional weakness because I had such a burden to carry. I became more outgoing and aggressive and self-protective. The need to take care of myself is still important. I need to feel I'm my own person to keep confidence in my ability to manage with or without marriage.. Regarding my stepmother role, I say what I feel and what I want with my own children and my stepchildren. I try to maintain autonomy and authority in my life in all roles.

Two stepmothers provided a contrast to the experience just described. These women felt that their decision to divorce was a positive step which improved their self-concepts. As Kate expressed it,

I grew up with very strict parents. I married at a young age to get away from their strictness, but I married a man who turned out to be very domineering. He questioned me all the time and thought he was Mr. Macho. I became very interested in psychology and was involved with therapy and other things during my marriage. I became more independent, started to grow and mature, and eventually left the marriage. The marriage and divorce weren't as important as the growing I did during the marriage. I felt real good about myself for leaving that relationship. Now my husband listens to what I have to say and appreciates my help. I wouldn't have remarried anyone who didn't.

Several of the stepmothers in the sample spoke of their parental role with their own biological children as affecting their self-concepts and as having an impact on them as stepmothers. Particularly noteworthy are the experiences of Ann, who reported problems with her own child as causing her some trepidation in her role as stepmother, and Bea, whose rewarding relationship with her children served as a guide to how she should manage as a stepmother. Ann described how her experience as a mother affected her self-concept, which in turn affected her style of

relating to her stepchildren.

My husband was not involved after the divorce and I had some rough times as a single parent. My child had problems and I didn't feel good about myself as a mother. I blamed myself for the problems and this greatly interfered with my role as a stepmother. I held back with my stepchildren because I was afraid of damaging them in case I really was a bad parent. Therapy helped me to lessen my guilt, and my husband and stepchildren were very accepting of me in the stepmother role. I began to feel that I'm really an o.k. stepparent. My husband has always told me that I have the right to say yes or no to the children, but I put limits on my role myself. The better I feel about myself, the more I can become involved with my stepchildren without fear or guilt.

Bea's prior experience as a mother led to her hope that she would be very involved with her stepchildren. She became very disappointed when the stepfamily situation did not fulfill her wish.

I have a wonderful relationship with my own children. We're very close. After my divorce I was both father and mother to them. Because my relationship with my own children was so good, I hoped to be very close to my stepchildren and to be very involved with them. But their parents are both very involved. My husband is used to being both father and mother to them when they are in his home. There's nothing for me to do. I feel excluded from participating in the way I would like. I have the capabilities to work this out, but I can't, because my husband doesn't understand how bad I feel.

Four women described how their childhood relationships with their mothers continued to influence them as stepmothers. Irma and Joan felt their mothers were exceptionally good and had some doubts about their own abilities to be as good a mother as their own had been but felt they were doing o.k. Edna and Fay described their mothers as becoming bitter after their own divorces, and they felt that the conflictual

relationships they had with their mothers had an adverse affect on their self-concepts. Both of these women felt that their earlier experiences continued to have an impact on them in their ability to be understanding and sensitive to their stepchildren. As Edna said,

I had a mother who kept me under her thumb, so it took me a long time to figure out what I wanted. When my parents divorced I was caught in the middle of a loyalty conflict. My mother expected me to spend holidays with her instead of with my father because she complained of being alone. She played on my guilt and I spent them with her because I felt sorry for her. It was very hard to say no. Now I see the same dilemma for my stepchildren. When my husband and his ex-wife bicker about time with the kids on holidays, I tell him that he can't do that to them. Putting the kids in the middle, making them choose between their parents or making them feel guilty is a terrible thing to do to children. I can play an advocacy role for them because I went through it myself.

3. Parenting Philosophy

The third factor related to the stepmother's style of relating was her philosophy of child rearing. Five stepmothers spoke of their parenting philosophy as a personal guide in their manner of relating to their stepchildren. In speaking of the emotional relationship between parents and children, Fay said, "You will make mistakes, but you don't screw kids up or hurt them on purpose." Irma felt it was wrong to hurt anyone's feelings. And Joan said, "I'm a loving, caring person. I love my stepchild as my own and I believe that it's the way a stepmother should feel." Lynn expressed her belief that children are a gift from God and saw her relationship with her stepchild to be based on this belief. Finally, Hope told the investigator,

It's my philosophy that life and children are very precious. The mother role is the most

important in the world. A baby's personality is affected by the bonding between the mother and baby, so she is responsible for the "person" of the child. I'm scared a lot being a mother and stepmother because of how important the job is. I may not have equal power to the biological mother, but I'm just as responsible for my stepchild's development. What if he becomes president? You see, mothers are responsible for all the people in the world.

4. Conscious Ambivalence

For the purposes of this study, ambivalence is defined as an aspect of the self-concept consciously recognized by the stepmother as related to her own personality, rather than to an interpersonal problem related to the stepfamily situation itself. The existence of ambivalence caused self-generated confusion regarding the manner in which the stepmother thought she should relate to her husband and stepchildren. All of the stepmothers in the sample were consciously aware of some ambivalence which they saw as affecting their role performance in certain situations.

Nine of the stepmothers expressed conscious ambivalence around the issue of control. Although the issue of control is generally a nebulous one for stepparents, these stepmothers linked their ambivalence to their personalities or to their prior experiences, rather than to the ambiguities inherent in the joint physical custody situation. For instance, four stepmothers had questions about their general level of assertiveness. They wondered if they were too aggressive or selfish in their stepmother roles and cited prior experiences which they felt caused them to become perhaps overly self-protective, opinionated or demanding. As Dale reported,

When I was younger I think I always screwed

up on setting limits with other people, and I think I made a really fresh start with my stepchild. I know a lot about leadership, but I "lost it" by being insecure in leadership situations. With my husband I fall back into the old trap of being too protective of not being pushed around, too defensive perhaps and making a big issue out of everything to protect my independence and to "look out for me." I'll pick an issue whenever I feel like it; I'm not the type that just lets it slide. It's a personality flaw that I have. My husband tends to be too permissive and I'm really strict. Maybe I'm so strict because I saw how I lost leadership by giving in too much and I don't want to repeat that experience with my stepchild. I don't think I need to be so hard and tough in order to maintain all my responsibilities. Maybe I can soften now. I'm not always sure how to act as a stepmother.

Ambivalence about her own feelings, or about how she should relate to her family created some confusion for Irma. The relationship between ambivalence and role performance is illustrated in her contradictory statements.

When I first met my husband I wondered if I should get involved with a man with children. I felt his children came first. I always thought that the kids were way above me. I never felt in the same category, but I never felt left out. Sometimes I'd get the "poor me's" and want a little more attention and have to ask for some attention and support. I think I'm honest about how I feel and it helps me to get along with everyone. I believe in saying what I feel. I don't like to hurt people's feelings. I'll hold in anger until the last straw and then let it out.

Parental Role Functions

In addition to style of relating to husband and stepchildren, the role performance of each stepmother could be described according to her degree of involvement in parental role functions related to the overall

care and discipline of her stepchildren. Analysis of the data revealed that only two out of twelve stepmothers had minimal involvement with their stepchildren. Of these two women, Fay preferred a peripheral role but Bea would have preferred a more involved role. Ten out of twelve stepmothers reported moderate to high involvement in parental role functions related to the care and discipline of their stepchildren even while both biological parents maintained their own parental roles. However, there were differences even among these respondents. Five stepmothers saw themselves as "mothers" to their stepchildren. They said their stepchildren felt like their own regarding the love they felt for their stepchildren and the parental tasks they performed. Five other stepmothers saw themselves as "parental figures" or "adult figures". They said their role was to teach, support or advocate. They performed many of the parental tasks for their stepchildren, but did not feel the same degree of love or emotional closeness as the group of women who described themselves as "mothers."

Hope expressed the wish that she could be her stepchild's only mother.

I do everything for my stepson as if he were my own. Sometimes I wish I were his mother. I wish he lived with us full time. My stepson's a unique, beautiful creature. I never knew a more wonderful child. Although I'm uncertain about my rights related to my relationship to him should something happen to my husband, I see myself as a parent. I had a hard time realizing that I wasn't his mother.

And Clair said,

I'm very close with my stepchild. She feels like my own. The roles and tasks are divided along traditional gender lines in our home. I'm more responsible for childcare than my husband

is, even though I try to be supportive of the parents and not override them.

Kate was involved with her stepchildren but did not see herself as a mother to them.

I do many of the parental tasks like cooking, but my husband does a lot because he did them before he met me. He would allow me to have more of a role, but I don't want to get in the way of the biological parents. I'll step in when he's not there, but the father and mother are both good parents and I don't want to take over the mother's role. I can understand my stepchildren and they like to come to talk with me more than their parents sometimes, but I encourage them to go to their parents with the really important things.

Ann's feelings were similar to Kate's.

I see myself in a supportive role, to be there at critical times when the parents can't be there, to teach them health habits, hygiene and household responsibility. I think I'm the best one to teach them values related to male and female roles and housekeeping roles. I'm not as close to them as their parents are, but I can offer them some things that their parents can't.

Bea was one of the two stepmothers who reported having a peripheral role with her stepchildren. She had expected and hoped for more involvement with her stepchildren than she actually experienced. She told the investigator,

I love my stepchildren, but I don't do much for them because their father is both mother and father to them and doesn't leave room for me to develop a role. I think my husband is over-involved with them and leaves me out. In one sense I feel good about my relationship with them because I think they love me and accept me as their "other mother", but that doesn't make up for my dissatisfaction at not having a defined, accepted role with them.

Fluctuations in Self-Concept

All the stepmothers in the study described situations in which their self-concepts were threatened and disequilibrium resulted. However, when quotations from the interviews were analyzed, the data revealed differences in the frequencies of fluctuations in the stepmothers' self-concepts. For instance, seven stepmothers tended to experience frequent but brief "ups and downs" in their self-concepts in response to daily issues, annoyances or problems in which they felt they had not lived up to their expectations of themselves. They also tended to describe fluctuations in their self-concepts by type of recurring incident. "I feel bad about myself when I'm not patient enough" or "I feel bad about myself when my stepchild doesn't return my affection" are examples of statements made which illustrate the types of recurring incidents which affected the self-concepts of this group of stepmothers. Edna's comments reflect the sentiments of the stepmothers reporting frequent fluctuations in self-concept.

Sometimes I feel great and sometimes I feel awful. I feel bad about myself when I don't handle something in the way I think I should. I don't like myself when I fall short of my own expectations. But I also accept the fact that this is normal. I tell myself that it isn't realistic to always be just how you want to be, and then I feel o.k. again.

Joan also reported frequent but brief fluctuations in her self-concept when she felt she had not lived up to her expectations of herself.

Sometimes I feel as though I'm not that wonderful a parent, when I'm not patient enough or I yell at him. I'm not the best parent; I'm not the worst parent. Sometimes I feel incompetent because I can't put the frustrations

aside. But I must be doing something right because of our love relationship. When I feel bad about myself I have to remind myself that there are problems but I must be coping with them somehow because my life is happy in so many respects.

The remaining five stepmothers in the sample tended to experience intermittent fluctuations in self-concept lasting for prolonged periods of time, with extreme dips in their self-esteem. They tended to relate fluctuations in self-concept to specific, non-recurring crises and major upsets rather than to daily annoyances and problems. "I felt bad about myself after my divorce" or "I felt bad about myself early in the marriage when my husband took my stepchild's side in an important issue and undermined my authority" are examples of statements made which illustrate the upsets or crises that affected the self-concepts of these stepmothers. The comments made by Irma illustrate the feelings expressed by stepmothers in this group.

I don't think I've changed or feel any different because of my stepmother role. Problems may come up, and sometimes I get mad at myself, but I don't think I really feel any differently about myself because of them. I did feel bad when my husband broke up with me while we were dating. I tried to be patient with him and give him time, rather than feel rejected.

Initially, Bea's situation was difficult to understand. She described feeling bad about herself frequently due to unresolved issues with her husband related to his lack of support of her as a wife and stepmother. However, she described more consistency in her self-concept in the past than what she was currently experiencing. After reviewing the data from her interview several times, the investigator felt that the best explanation for the incongruities was that Bea was in the midst

of a crisis. She told the investigator,

I generally feel good about myself in all my roles. I'm able to manage things well and all my roles are very rewarding. Whatever I have wanted to do, I've always been able to do. But now I'm excluded, and my husband doesn't understand how bad that makes me feel. I feel worse about myself now than at any time in my life, including after my divorce. I'm not coping well, and that's not my style.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE RELEVANT VARIABLES

Variables Affecting Role Performance

The stepmother's performance of parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren appeared to be most related to the husband's relationship with his ex-wife, the stepmother's own attitude toward the biological mother and the stepmother's perception of her husband's support.

The most prominent finding was related to the relationship between the biological parents. The investigator observed that those stepmothers reporting a positive relationship between the biological parents were most likely to see themselves in a teaching or supportive role with their stepchildren. They saw themselves as "parental figures" and performed many parental tasks, but did not describe a high degree of emotional closeness with their stepchildren. On the other hand, those stepmothers reporting a negative relationship between the biological parents tended to report the highest involvement in parental role functions and were more apt to feel love and affection for their stepchildren and see themselves as surrogate mothers.

Another variable which emerged as a prominent factor in the stepmother's performance of parental role functions was her attitude

toward the biological mother. In most cases, the stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother paralleled her husband's attitude toward and relationship with his ex-wife. This investigator observed that, for the most part, those stepmothers who reported either a positive attitude toward the biological mother or an attitude of benign acceptance also reported less emotional closeness with their stepchildren and less involvement in parental role functions than did those stepmothers who reported a negative attitude toward the biological mother.

The findings were less clear cut with regard to the relationship between the stepmother's perception of her husband's support of her in the stepmother role and her performance of parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren. Of the seven stepmothers who believed that their husbands did not support them enough, only two described a high degree of emotional closeness and involvement with their stepchildren. Five out of the seven described a lower involvement in parental role functions. There did not appear to be a direct relationship between a high degree of husband support and the stepmother's high degree of involvement with her stepchildren. In other words, the perception of high husband support did not, in and of itself, encourage a high level of involvement with the stepchildren. Other factors, such as the relationship between the biological parents and the stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother, were factors of considerable influence. Those stepmothers who felt adequately supported by their husbands, but who also described a positive relationship between the biological parents and at least an attitude of acceptance toward the biological mother, tended to take on a supportive role rather

than a highly involved parental role.

When age of stepchildren and length of time married were taken into account, no clear pattern emerged. Two stepmothers reported that having teenage stepchildren was a factor in their degree of involvement in parental role functions. Another reported that knowing her stepchild for several years added to their feeling of closeness. Other studies have shown age of stepchildren and length of marriage to be important variables (Nadler, 1976). However, given this study's small sample size and the varying responses and experiences of the subjects, it was not possible to determine a general trend or pattern.

The next variable to be discussed will be the stepmother's self-concept. The investigator had assumed that the stepmother's self-concept would be the major determining factor of her role performance, given the high degree of involvement of both biological parents and the absence of prescriptive guidelines for the stepmother role. Surprisingly, a relationship did not appear to exist between the stepmother's self-concept and her performance of parental role functions. The meaning of this becomes clearer when role performance is described in terms of style of relating as well as participation in parental role functions. In this sample, the stepmother's style of relating appeared to be most dependent on her self-concept as it influenced her beliefs about her rights and duties as a stepmother, her prior experiences, her parenting philosophy and her conscious ambivalence regarding the manner in which she thought she should relate to her husband and stepchildren. The stepmother's involvement in parental role functions appeared to be most dependent on the relationship between the biological parents, the

stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother, and the stepmother's perception of her husband's support of her in the stepmother role. To summarize, the stepmother's self-concept appears to be an important determinant of her style of relating and can either enhance or impede her performance of parental role functions (See Tables 1 & 2), but it does not appear to be the major determinant of her actual degree of involvement in the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren. The implications of these findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

Enhancers and Impediments to Role Performance

In the questionnaires, the stepmothers were asked to rank in their order of importance the three factors they felt most enhanced their performance in the stepmother role. They were asked to do the same for three factors they felt caused them the most difficulty in their performance of the stepmother role. These were open-ended questions, designed to allow the stepmothers to respond with whatever came to mind. There were no choices to make or constraints on their answers, except that they be ranked.

An important finding is that the stepmothers included aspects of their self-concepts as both an enhancer and an impediment to their role performance. A combination of personal and interpersonal factors was listed for each question.

Enhancers

Ten out of twelve stepmothers listed their positive relationships with their stepchildren as one of the three enhancers of role performance (Table 1). In speaking of their stepchildren, many stepmothers said, "They are basically good kids." Other stepmothers commented on

their love or affection for their stepchildren or their feeling of acceptance by their stepchildren.

Nine of the stepmothers listed factors related to their self-concepts as enhancers of their role performance. A need to be loved, an easy-going temperament, insight and sensitivity and a sense of humor were felt to be important by this group of women. They also referred to their conscious efforts to support the joint physical custody arrangement and to prior experiences they felt equipped them to be sensitive to other stepfamily members.

Table 1
Enhancers of Role Performance

	Number of Times Chosen
Stepchildren	10
Self-concept	9
Husband's support	6
Ex-wife's support	4
Relationship with parents	3
Stepfamily relationships	2
Love for husband	2
Time alone with husband	1

Husband's support ranked third as an enhancer of role performance for six stepmothers, with four of the six feeling it was the most important enhancer of their performance of their stepmother role. In order to explore the issue of husband support in more depth, the investigator analyzed the data according to the stepmothers' descriptions of events, rather than solely according to their verbal reports of

the degree of their husbands' support. Although in the questionnaires six stepmothers commented on the support of their husbands as an enhancer of their role performance, the investigator observed that only two of these stepmothers actually appeared to enjoy a high degree of husband support. Two interpretations are offered to explain this discrepancy. First, subjects are influenced by the parameter of social acceptability. They tend to overreport positive factors in an effort to be seen in an acceptable way by the investigator (Cannell & Kahn, 1953). Second, the husband-wife relationship is most important to the stepmother. In an effort to bind the marriage, the stepmother may need to see her husband in a positive light. If this is so, negative or contradictory information may only be revealed through an analysis of reported vignettes.

Other enhancers of role performance were the biological mother's acceptance and support of the stepmother, the stepmother's relationship to her own parents, the flexibility or warm feelings shared between the stepmother, her husband and her stepchildren, the stepmother's love for her husband, and the built-in time alone with the husband.

Impediments

In the questionnaires, the stepmothers were asked to rank in their order of importance the three factors they felt caused them the most difficulty in their performance of their stepmother role (Table 2). Three factors stood out during the analysis of the data. Receiving the most first choices were factors related to the ambiguities in the stepmother role itself. Comments relating to the stepmother's unequal authority, confusion about her role as stepmother, and disruption of the

household routine due to the stepchildren changing homes were included in this category.

The second category of impediments was the stepmother's self-concept. Ten of the stepmothers commented on their own personalities, style of relating or prior experiences as causing them difficulty in the performance of their stepmother role. This group of stepmothers commented on such things as inexperience as a parent, negative experiences either as a parent or as a child, ambivalence about aspects of the mothering or stepmothering role, lack of confidence in themselves around particular issues, and feelings of being left out, hurt or angry as factors causing them difficulty in their performance of the stepmother role. As stated above, the stepmother's self-concept was not found to be a direct determinant of her involvement in parental role functions but was found to both enhance and impede her enactment of the stepmother role.

Table 2
Impediments to Role Performance

	Number of Times Chosen
Role ambiguity or conflict	10
Self-concept	10
Biological mother	8
Stepchildren	2
Lack of time with husband	1
Differences in "other" home	1

Difficulties with the biological mother were listed as a

significant problem for eight of the stepmothers in the sample. Comments ranged from "constant contact with the ex-wife" and "inconsistency of the ex-wife" to "poor mothering," "lack of communication" and "hostility".

None of the stepmothers specifically noted insufficient husband support as an impediment to role performance, although seven stepmothers perceived their husbands as not supporting them sufficiently. The absence of this variable may be due to the stepmothers' not perceiving absence of support as an active impediment or to their reluctance to be critical of their husbands on the questionnaires or in the interviews. Some of the responses related to role ambiguity, however, also relate to degree of husband support. "When the biological parents make decisions on behalf of their child that affect me as well" and "Not having the same authority to discipline as the parents" are two such responses.

Variables Affecting Fluctuations in Self-Concept

Existing reports in the literature state that the stepmother experiences a decrease in her self-esteem due to the adjustment problems inherent in the stepfamily (Maddox, 1975; Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976). These reports also emphasize the negative effect of role ambiguity on the stepmother's self-concept (Fast & Cain, 1966). Contrary to these reports, the stepmothers in this sample did not report changes in self-concept specifically due to role ambiguity or stepfamily problems. Neither did they report fluctuations in self-concept as a result of their actual performance of parental role functions. In fact, each of the twelve stepmothers stated that she thought she was doing an adequate

or better job as a stepmother. The variable that appeared to be most strongly associated with fluctuations in the stepmother's self-concept was her personality.

Those stepmothers who described their personalities in the context of their interpersonal relationships and who reported their feelings of frustration, sadness or anger as caused by interpersonal problems also tended to report intermittent but extreme fluctuations in self-concept as a result of interpersonal crises. They stated that stepfamily problems did not affect their self-concepts on a regular basis because they did not blame themselves for problems arising within the stepfamily. These stepmothers tended to feel that their husbands did not offer enough support of them in the stepmother role. They tended to blame the husband or the biological mother for problems they were experiencing.

On the other hand, those stepmothers who were most introspective and who reported that their feelings of frustration, sadness or anger emanated from their negative evaluations of themselves tended to report brief but frequent fluctuations in self-concept usually in response to their assessments of not having lived up to their expectations of themselves. They, too, may have felt that their husbands did not always support them sufficiently, and they may have blamed the biological mother for problems affecting the stepfamily, but they still reported frequent fluctuations in their self-concepts related to their negative self-evaluations.

All of the stepmothers interviewed felt that the attitude of the biological mother or their relationship to her in some way affected

their roles as stepmothers. However, none of the stepmothers felt that changes in her self-concept was due to her relationship with or the involvement of the biological mother. For instance, positive feelings about the biological mother and her parenting ability was generally associated with the stepmother's less active involvement with her stepchildren, but was not directly related to the stepmother's evaluation of herself. The investigator observed, however, that a negative attitude toward the biological mother did appear to serve a useful purpose with regard to the stepmother's self-concept. For six stepmothers, problems related to the biological mother consumed much of their thoughts and discussions with their husbands. The problems they described as emanating from the biological mother ranged from being discounted as a significant person in the lives of the stepchildren, to selfishness or lack of consideration for the children's needs, to irresponsibility or incompetency as a mother, to mental illness. It seems highly significant that problems with the biological mother did not have a negative impact on the stepmother's self-concept. On the contrary, five of the six stepmothers in this sub-group felt they were managing as well as they could with the frustrations and pressures they were experiencing. These stepmothers reported feeling satisfaction with themselves when they evaluated their performance as superior to the biological mother's. However, they continued to experience fluctuations in self-concept when they were displeased with themselves for not living up to their own expectations of themselves as stepmothers.

It is interesting to note that, of the seven stepmothers who appeared to the investigator to be most introspective, six had had

psychotherapy and found it helpful to them in the stepmother role. Three of the five interpersonally-focused stepmothers had also had psychotherapy. Psychotherapy was utilized as one way to help the stepmothers remain objective in their stepmother roles and maintain stability in their self-concepts. This finding raises the question whether the more introspective women tended to seek out psychotherapy, or whether they became more intrapsychically focused as a result of psychotherapy. As nine out of twelve stepmothers interviewed had had psychotherapy at some point in their lives, the investigator wonders whether the stepmothering role requires professional help at times or whether certain kinds of women, perhaps the more "psychologically minded," tend to allow themselves to become stepmothers.

COPING TECHNIQUES

A major purpose of the study was to investigate the strategies used by stepmothers to regain their equilibrium in ambiguous or stressful stepparenting situations.

The various coping techniques used by the stepmothers fell into one of three categories: the psychological, the interpersonal or the somatic. The psychological techniques included: 1) conscious suppression of feelings, 2) decreased expectations, 3) self-supportive behavior, 4) empathy, 5) emotional distancing, and 6) displacement.

The interpersonal techniques included: 1) avoidance, 2) discussion, 3) display of anger, and 4) utilization of support systems.

The somatization of stress was the third kind of coping technique.

Psychological Techniques

The conscious suppression of feelings refers to the stepmother's attempt to "forget about" an annoyance or her attempt "not to let it bother" her. While this coping strategy is similar to the ego defense mechanism "denial," the investigator was not able to make judgments about unconscious defenses, so the phraseology is used here to emphasize the conscious nature of this coping technique. The four stepmothers who reported using this technique happened to be categorized as having Low husband support. The tendency of these stepmothers to "hold things in" may have been related to the projection of prior experiences onto the husband or perhaps to a reality-based perception that their feelings might have been ignored by their husbands.

Four stepmothers described a process of changing or lowering their expectations when confronted with the reality of being unable to effect change in a situation or in someone's behavior.

Self-supportive behavior in the form of "talking to myself" was valuable to three stepmothers, one of whom said, "I have to keep telling myself I'm a good stepmother." Another said, "I tell myself that I'm dealing with a lot and I have a lot of stress and I'm not perfect but I'm doing as well as can be expected."

The ability of four of the stepmothers to be sensitive to the feelings of their husbands, stepchildren and the biological mother was helpful in enabling them to relate in an empathic way even when angry. These stepmothers were able to avoid taking the behavior of others personally and thereby maintained a positive self-concept. Comments expressed by this group of stepmothers were: "I know my stepchild

didn't mean to hurt me, so I didn't want to take my anger out on him," and "Their mother is doing the best she can; I just wish she could do better," and "My husband thinks he's doing me a favor by leaving me out of discussions with his ex-wife, but I feel I want to be involved."

Emotional distancing as a self-protective device was a technique used by four stepmothers who described "putting up a wall around myself." These stepmothers referred to prior experiences, such as divorce, as affecting their abilities to cope as stepparents.

Another technique was exhibited by three stepmothers who at times appeared to maintain their equilibrium by displacing onto the biological mother the sole blame for the existence of problems in the stepfamily. These stepmothers viewed their own performances and self-concepts as unrelated to the problems they experienced with the biological mothers.

Interpersonal Techniques

Those coping techniques designated as interpersonal involved the stepmother's relationship to her husband, stepchildren and others. Avoidance, or physical distance from the stepchildren was described by three stepmothers. At times it took the form of "getting out of the house." It was also a means of "avoidance of close contact with" or "avoidance of activities on behalf of" the stepchildren. Although the stepmothers did not mention problems with their stepchildren as being significant, they distanced themselves from their stepchildren in order not to "take my anger out on them."

All of the stepmothers preferred to discuss the issues and their feelings with their husbands, a process they found essential to their satisfaction with their performance as stepmothers. The point at which

each of them approached their husbands to discuss their feelings differed, depending on the stepmother's personality and her particular situation.

All of the stepmothers described situations in which they felt compelled to express their feelings of dissatisfaction and anger. Five stepmothers tended to express their anger to their husbands as soon as they themselves were aware of feeling it. Seven stepmothers described this technique as effective as a "last resort," when communication with their husbands had broken down or when their attempts to assert themselves went unnoticed.

Utilizing support systems was emphasized by four stepmothers, however, all of the stepmothers used this technique when the family unit failed to provide support or when its resources were inadequate. The support systems referred to as most helpful in providing encouragement were female friends, the stepchild's school teacher, the stepmother's own parents and the rabbi or minister. Four stepmothers found psychotherapy helpful in their attempts to cope with specific problems in the stepfamily. Five others had received psychotherapy for help with prior life experiences but found the earlier therapeutic experience continuing to be beneficial to them as stepmothers.

Somatic Symptomatology

Expression of somatic symptomatology was a third method utilized by four stepmothers to cope with stress. This was usually a warning sign to the stepmother that something was bothering her that was as yet unresolved. Two stepmothers reported back pain, one reported neck muscle cramps and spasms, and one reported stomach pains.

Every stepmother reported a combination of psychological and interpersonal techniques for coping with stresses stemming from the stepmother role. Analysis of the data revealed no particular pattern or combination of techniques, nor were there relationships between the techniques used and the other variables investigated in the study. Further investigation would be needed to develop more clear-cut criteria and to explore the possibility that certain personality types utilize characteristic coping techniques. Such an investigation might also explore the possibility that certain strategies would be helpful to certain kinds of people or in particular kinds of stepfamily situations.

BENEFITS and PITFALLS of JOINT PHYSICAL CUSTODY

In the questionnaires and interviews the stepmothers were asked to discuss the benefits and pitfalls of joint physical custody as they perceived them. Unanimously, they felt this custody arrangement to be ideal for children whose parents were able to communicate sufficiently to maintain the arrangement. Interestingly, even those stepmothers who reported severe communication problems between the parents or difficulties with the biological mother still reported that joint physical custody was working.

Six stepmothers reported that the joint physical custody arrangement was working well, without conflict, although three of these stepmothers also reported major problems with the biological mother. Five stepmothers reported that the arrangement was working smoothly, but with periodic conflict. The conflicts ranged from scheduling difficulties, to lack of freedom in planning, to differences between the two

homes in values and parenting styles, to major problems with the biological mother. One stepmother reported that the arrangement seemed to go from conflict to conflict. However, the conflict appeared to stem from the stepmother's feeling of being left out. For the biological parents and children, the arrangement was reportedly satisfactory. In one case, the stepmother reported several years of constant conflict, and recently joint physical custody had been discontinued, with each child living full-time with a different parent (This stepmother's situation is discussed in more detail under Pitfalls of Joint Physical Custody.)

The fact that all but one stepmother interviewed reported that the joint physical custody arrangement itself was working may be interpreted as the stepmothers' recognition that their husbands might have had less time with their children had it not been for the joint physical custody agreement, and therefore problems were tolerated in order for the father to maintain his close relationship with his children. Also, the feeling reported by stepmothers in situations where the biological mother was felt to be less than acceptable to her and the father was that the father and stepmother hoped to mitigate the negative influence of the mother on the child. Having such a plan in mind perhaps contributed to their sense that the arrangement was "working."

Benefits of Joint Physical Custody

The stepmothers expressed the benefits of joint physical custody in similar ways (Table 3). Their comments seemed to fall into readily identifiable categories. The most important benefit was felt to be the

child's ability to grow up knowing both parents and benefiting from what each had to offer. In all cases, the stepmothers felt that they and their husbands provided something for their stepchildren that the biological mothers could not provide, related to style of living, activities, values or emotional support.

Similarly, the biological parents each benefited by being able to maintain a close relationship with their child and by having an influence on the child's development.

Table 3
Benefits of Co-Parenting

Perceived Benefits	No. Times Chosen
1. Children have both parents	10
2. Both biological parents maintain relationship with children	9
3. Stepparent and husband get time alone	6
4. Stepmother has close relationship with stepchildren	5
5. Father gets help from stepmother	2

The investigator had assumed that the stepchildren's frequent changes in homes would be highly disruptive to the stepmother's role. However, half of the stepmothers remarked that they enjoyed the time alone with their husbands and were also able to focus on their own needs without the guilt feelings they might have had if they had pursued their own interests to the same degree while the stepchildren were in their home. But time away from the stepchildren was but one half of the issue. Several stepmothers spoke of their genuine happiness at being able to have a relationship with their stepchildren and felt they would

be missing something rewarding and meaningful had they not known their stepchildren.

In addition, two stepmothers remarked that their husbands benefited by having them as a partner to help care for the children.

Pitfalls of Joint Physical Custody

The stepmothers' responses regarding the pitfalls of joint physical custody were not as clear-cut as were their responses on the benefits of joint physical custody. The responses appeared to be related more to the individual stepmothers' current experiences than to their beliefs about joint physical custody in general. The issue raised most frequently was the need to deal with communication problems or animosity on a regular basis. The feeling expressed by the stepmothers had to do with their husbands being divorced but being unable to separate fully from their ex-wives, due to the frequent communication needed in order to maintain the joint physical custody arrangement. The high amount of energy needed to accomplish this was also mentioned.

A related issue considered to be a pitfall by five stepmothers was the amount of compromise and adjustment needed to work out the logistics of joint physical custody. The need to take into account another parent and another family was linked to a lack of freedom felt by these stepmothers. They also felt they had to maintain flexibility in order to adjust to the demands of joint physical custody. Along this same line, five stepmothers stressed the reality of having to accept the different values or life style of the biological mother and to recognize their inability to alter her influence on the stepchildren. This was

found to be important by stepmothers who reported serious problems with the biological mother as well as by stepmothers who reported a relatively smooth relationship between the two families.

In the opinion of the stepmothers, the negative side to joint physical custody for the children was having to go back and forth frequently and having to adjust to two sets of rules, values, expectations and personalities. For some children, the loyalty conflict reportedly was not lessened by being able to maintain a relationship with both parents, even when the parents had a basically amicable relationship. One stepmother felt it was hard on her stepchildren trying to please two sets of parents.

Four stepmothers reported having "less than" the biological parents - in other words, less authority than, less love from the children than, or less commitment than the biological parents. Finally, a few stepmothers remarked on the disruptions and lack in continuity in having the children go back and forth, with two feeling that the joint physical custody arrangement was an intrusion at times.

Table 4
Pitfalls of Joint Physical Custody

Perceived Pitfalls	No. Times Chosen
1. Dealing with animosity	6
2. Amount of compromise and adjustment	5
3. Acceptance of other parent's life style	5
4. Problems for kids in having two homes	5
5. Lack of full authority or love of child	4
6. Lack of continuity	3

Grace had experience with joint physical custody for approximately 3 1/2 years but had terminated the arrangement three months prior to the time of the study for reasons related to the needs of the stepchildren. In the case of the adolescent, a hostile relationship with the biological mother led to the arrangement whereby this child would live full-time with the father and stepmother and visit the mother on a regular basis. In the case of the younger child, the stepmother reported that "the child had to expend so much effort just to deal with the changes (inherent in joint physical custody) that all other aspects of development were being impeded." This child was closer to the biological mother and had never seemed to "fit in" to the stepfamily as had the older child, so it was decided that the mother would retain sole custody but the child would visit the home of the father and stepmother on a regular basis.

The experiences of Grace demonstrate how the pitfalls of joint physical custody can become detrimental to the children and adults involved. In this case, "fitting in" was a particularly relevant issue and was of paramount importance in the ultimate decision of where the children would live. Grace described her family as feeling like a "unit" when the younger child was not there. This child was seen as being so similar to the biological mother as to be intolerable to the stepfamily, where negative feelings toward the biological mother actually drew the stepfamily together. The issue of stepfamily unity as related to the attitude toward the biological mother will be explored further in the next chapter - DISCUSSION.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The purpose of the study was to investigate and describe the relationship between stepmothers' self-concepts and their role performance.

Six variables were identified as being related to the interaction between the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance. They were:

- 1) Stepmother's personality,
- 2) Stepmother's perception of husband's support,
- 3) Husband's relationship to his ex-wife,
- 4) Stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother,
- 5) Stepmother's involvement in parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren,
- 6) Fluctuations in self-concept.

The pattern which emerged from the data was that each stepmother had a style of relating to her husband and stepchildren which was separate from her actual involvement in parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren. The stepmother's style of relating appeared to be most affected by four factors: 1) the stepmother's self-concept as it influenced her expectations about her rights and responsibilities as a stepmother, 2) her prior experiences, 3) her parenting philosophy, and 4) her conscious ambivalence regarding the manner in which she thought she should relate to her husband and stepchildren.

The stepmother's performance of parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren appeared to be most

related to three variables: 1) the husband's relationship with his ex-wife, 2) the stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother, and 3) the stepmother's perception of her husband's support of her in the stepmother role. The findings revealed that a positive relationship between the biological parents and the stepmother's positive attitude toward the biological mother were both associated with a lesser degree of involvement with the stepchildren. Conversely, a negative relationship between the biological parents and the stepmother's negative attitude toward the biological mother were both associated with a higher degree of involvement with the stepchildren and a greater degree of emotional closeness between the stepmother and stepchildren. Perception of husband's support was not as clearly related to the stepmother's involvement in parental role functions, but stepmothers perceiving insufficient support from their husbands did not report the highest involvement or emotional closeness with their stepchildren.

Fluctuations in the stepmother's self-concept was found to be most related to her description of her personality. Stepmothers who described themselves in the context of their interpersonal relationships tended to experience intermittent but extreme fluctuations in self-concept related to interpersonal crises. Stepmothers who were more introspective tended to experience brief but frequent fluctuations in self-concept due to their negative evaluations of themselves.

There were three kinds of coping strategies used by stepmothers to regain their equilibrium in stressful stepparenting situations. The psychological techniques included conscious suppression of feelings, decreased expectations, self-supportive behavior, empathy, emotional

distancing, and displacement. The interpersonal techniques included avoidance, discussion, display of anger, and utilization of support systems. Somatization of stress was the third kind of coping strategy.

The stepmothers in the sample felt there were pros and cons to the joint physical custody arrangement. The perceived benefits were the child's ability to maintain a relationship with both biological parents, the biological parents' ability to influence their child's development, time alone for the father and stepmother, the stepmother's close relationship to stepchildren, and the stepmother's help to the father in tasks related to child care and discipline. The perceived pitfalls of the joint physical custody situation were having to deal with animosity between various dyadic relationships (ex-spouses, siblings, parent-child), the tremendous amount of compromise and adjustment needed between the two families, the need to accept differences in the other parent's values and life style, the children's feelings of shuttling back and forth between homes, the stepmother's lack of full authority or love of the child, and lack of continuity in the home resulting from the child coming in and out so frequently. The experiences of one stepmother who had recently given up the joint physical custody arrangement illustrate the need for further research on the possible detriment of joint physical custody in some situations.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

This chapter reviews the purpose of the study and discusses the major findings as they pertain to the theoretical and stepfamily literature. Implications of the findings will also be addressed.

REVIEW OF THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

A common theme in the stepfamily literature is the inapplicability of theories on nuclear family functioning to the stepfamily situation. In the literature reviewed, clinicians and researchers overwhelmingly commented on the need for a conceptual framework specifically related to the uniqueness of the stepfamily structure. No one study could hope to accomplish the task of providing a conceptual framework that would be relevant to all stepfamily members and all stepfamily situations. This study was conceived and designed with the investigator's hope of being able to offer the findings as one building block toward a conceptual framework for understanding stepfamily functioning. Specifically, the goal was to investigate and describe the relationship between the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance.

In order for the findings to be useful, it was felt that they would have to address factors that would be applicable to all stepfamilies, while preserving the uniqueness of individuals and of family units. In essence, the study would have to address psychological as well as interpersonal factors and would need to account for past and present influences. Theoretically, no one orientation was considered to be

entirely appropriate to the goal of the study. It was felt that theories which focused on the "here and now" would not have accounted for the influences of ego structure on interpersonal relationships. Just as limited would have been those theories that focused on the intrapsychic life of individuals to the exclusion of extended family dynamics. This investigator identified the need for a conceptual framework that would account for psychological, interpersonal and sociological factors involved in stepfamily functioning. In the absence of a conceptual framework identified by the investigator as suitable to this purpose, an attempt was made to combine relevant theoretical approaches. Ego psychology was utilized to illustrate the depth of influence of intrapsychic factors on individual functioning. Role theory was utilized to illustrate the interaction between intrapsychic, interpersonal and sociological variables.

The major goal of the study was to answer the question, "What is the relationship between self-concept and role performance for stepmothers in a joint physical custody situation?" The point in question was not whether or not there was a relationship, but rather what the nature of that relationship was. Underlying the research question was the basic assumption that an individual's functioning in any given role or relationship is based on the interaction between psychological and interpersonal factors. For according to Hartmann (1958), the context within which all humans develop and relate to each other is at once biological, psychological and interpersonal. He described how the development of the ego commences at birth and proceeds under the mutual influence of genetic endowment, the mother-child relationship and

environmental influences. As development proceeds, these influences interact and affect each other in increasingly complex ways. It therefore must be stressed that at the point of investigation, both the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance were already composites of years of unique intrapsychic and interpersonal experiences.

In order to answer the research question, an exploratory case study design was used, with written questionnaires and semi-structured interviews the data collection methods. An accidental (volunteer) sample consisted of twelve stepmothers whose husbands shared physical custody of their children with their former wives. A qualitative method of analysis and interpretation of data was applied.

REVIEW OF FINDINGS

Variables Affecting Role Performance

A major finding of the study was that each stepmother had a style of relating to her husband and stepchildren separate from her actual involvement in parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren. The stepmother's style of relating appeared to be most affected by her self-concept and personal experiences, while her involvement in parental role functions appeared to be influenced more by her particular stepfamily situation. This dynamic interaction between psychological and interpersonal factors is consistent with role theory. Sarbin (1954) stated that role is a dynamic concept and refers to the particular manner in which a given individual performs the duties of a specific position. He also stated that an individual's enactment of a role depends on the existence of clearly

defined societal expectations of that role. This latter statement was just partially true in regard to the present study.

While stepparents do not have the same legal and social guidelines as biological parents, the stepmothers in this sample were able to devise their own role expectations. The investigator had assumed that the active involvement of both biological parents in the joint physical custody arrangement would inhibit the stepmother's formation of her own role. This turned out not to be the case. The investigator was struck by the fact that eleven out of twelve stepmothers interviewed had a definite sense of their roles as stepmothers, although the process of formulating their role expectations was sometimes difficult and some dissatisfactions could not be totally resolved. With support from their husbands, the stepmothers were able to carve out roles for themselves thanks to their resourcefulness, their love for their husbands, and their desire to be a good stepmothers. Bea was the only stepmother who felt she had no defined role, and she blamed this on her husband's lack of cooperation in helping her to establish one.

In formulating their roles, the stepmothers in this sample were greatly influenced by significant prior experiences. Indeed, the stepfamily literature emphasizes that the stepmother's history follows her into the remarriage (Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976; Sardanis-Zimmerman, 1977; Schulman, 1972). The important finding of this study, however, was that the meaning of prior experiences was not uniform to all the stepmothers. For instance, to some, a divorce had been a horrible experience; to others it had been ego-boosting. To some, the mother role had been rewarding; to others it had been conflictual. To some, the relationship

with their own mothers had been positive and useful as a role model; to others it was a model of what not to do as a parent.

In referring back to the stepfamily literature, the investigator noticed the attempts of some authors to describe what could be called "the stepmother experience," unwittingly minimizing the individuality of stepmothers and their personal assessment of their experiences. For instance, Schulman (1972) wrote about a common stepfamily myth, the "myth of instant love," as being the stepmother's expectation to knit together the stepfamily into a new family unit similar to the nuclear family. But not all stepmothers in this study could relate to that particular expectation. As one stepmother said to the investigator, "I've read most of what has been written on stepmothers and stepfamilies, but I don't see me in any of it."

The findings of this study may be useful in that they take Schulman's point a step further. What must be stressed is that stepmothers indeed have expectations about the stepmother role, but investigators need not look for uniformity in expectations. Since role expectations evolve from the stepmother's self-concept and prior experiences, to be useful, a conceptual framework must provide a means for identifying each stepmother's conscious expectations of herself and her role. The possible influence of unconscious expectations will be discussed further on in this chapter.

In addition to style of relating, the stepmother's role performance also encompassed her involvement in parental role functions related to the overall care and discipline of her stepchildren. Ten out of twelve stepmothers had at least a moderate degree of involvement with their

stepchildren. Only two stepmothers reported minimal involvement in the care and discipline of their stepchildren. Of these two, Fay chose to maintain a peripheral role with her stepchild. In fact, except for Bea, all the stepmothers reported being satisfied with their stepmother roles even with the accompanying problems. Bea's unhappiness stemmed from her wish to be more involved. This finding is in contrast to the stepfamily literature, which emphasizes the stepmother's difficulty in assuming a parental role with her stepchildren.

Fast and Cain (1966) discussed the contradictory expectations of the stepparent to act as parent, stepparent and non-parent. They recognized that social norms make it inappropriate for most stepparents to completely assume parental role responsibilities because of the need to share their role with the biological parents. Visser and Visser (1979) cited the lack of a legal relationship as being largely responsible for the inhibition of stepparents to perform certain parenting functions for their stepchildren. Other authors have specifically advised stepparents to be "teachers" rather than parents and have warned stepparents not to "take over" the parenting role (Einstein, 1979; Noble and Noble, 1977; Draughon, 1975).

In this sample, differences between the stepmothers' involvement in parental role functions appeared to be most related to the relationship between the biological parents and the stepmother's attitude toward the biological mother. One of the most prominent findings was that, when there was a positive relationship between the biological parents and the stepmother had a positive attitude toward the biological mother, the stepmother held back from being highly involved with her stepchildren.

Conversely, when there was a negative relationship between the biological parents and the stepmother had a negative attitude toward the biological mother, the stepmother tended to pursue a more active involvement in parental role functions and reported a closer relationship with her stepchildren. The exception was Clair, who reported an acceptable relationship between her husband and his former wife and had an attitude of benign acceptance toward the biological mother. Clair told the investigator that she loved and treated her stepchild as her own, while still supporting the child's ongoing relationship with the biological mother. For Clair, the acceptance and encouragement of the biological mother to be actively involved was a major factor in her development of a close relationship with her stepchild.

In general, though, the stepmothers in this sample were not as actively involved with their stepchildren when the biological mother was felt to be adequate. This finding is consistent with reports in the stepfamily literature. Goldstein (1974) wrote about "parental role freeze" as the stepmother's inability to perform parenting functions with her stepchildren because of feelings of competition with the biological mother or because of a lack of acceptance by the spouse or stepchildren for her performance of parental functions. The stepfamily literature is replete with accounts of stepmothers feeling left out because of ongoing relationships between the spouse and his ex-wife (Roosevelt & Lofas, 1976; Schulman, 1972). The joint physical custody arrangement fosters frequent contact between the biological parents, which could serve to hinder the development of a feeling of unity within the stepfamily and particularly between the remarried couple. On the

other hand, a negative relationship between the biological parents, coupled with the belief that the biological mother is less than or barely acceptable, may serve to unite the father and stepmother in their anger at the biological mother and in their common cause of providing "good parenting" to his children. The stepmother would then be given increased support by her husband and freer reign with the children because the needs, wishes and feelings of the biological mother would not hold the same degree of importance to the father. In such a situation, the stepmother herself might choose to be highly involved with her stepchildren out of her need to "rescue" the children and provide them with guidance and nurturing that the biological mother is not seen as providing.

As a clinician, the investigator is concerned about the implications of this finding. The need for a negative relationship between the biological parents in order to enhance the development of a feeling of unity or "we-ness" within the stepfamily may have repercussions on the development of the children and detract from the existence of a secure, relaxed feeling for all family members. On the other hand, a positive relationship between the biological parents may impede the development of couple unity and threaten the relationship between the father and stepmother. Such was the case with Bea. An important task for researchers and clinicians would be to examine the manner in which families such as Clair's maintain positive relationships while fostering a feeling of separateness and "we-ness" in both families.

Although the investigator noticed a distinction in the degree of involvement between those stepmothers who felt the biological mother was

adequate and those who felt she was inadequate, the general observation was that all of the stepmothers (except Bea and Fay) had at least a moderate involvement with their stepchildren. They may not have been as actively involved with their stepchildren as were the biological mothers, but neither did they experience "role freeze." In summarizing this finding, the investigator is reminded of a quote by Gloria Steinem that has meaning and relevance to the present discussion. In response to a comment made to her on the occasion of her fortieth birthday that she didn't look forty, she replied, "This is what forty looks like!" Applying this sentiment to these stepmothers' descriptions of their stepmother role, perhaps we can say that "This is what stepmothers do!" Stepmothers are not the biological mothers of their stepchildren. The roles they devise must take into account the needs of the children as well as the degree of participation and wishes of the biological parents. The less active involvement of some stepmothers may not be a sign of "role freeze" at all, but rather an accurate assessment of the stepmother role appropriate to their particular family situation.

The basic point here is that lack of role clarity may have caused ambiguity, but it did not prohibit the stepmothers in this sample from developing their own roles informally. In contrast to stepmothers with visiting stepchildren, these women had the time to develop a relationship with their stepchildren, and the great amount of time the stepchildren lived with them presented a need and an opportunity for establishing some kind of parental role. The presence of an active biological mother and the lack of a socially defined and accepted role did not deter these women from taking on parenting responsibilities.

What enabled these women to enter an ambiguous situation and impose clarity? Was it in response to a biological or psychological instinct to nurture or care for the stepchildren? Was it in response to the influence of early identification with the mother role? Was it in response to the needs of the husband or stepchildren? Was it in response to a societal implication to assist the husband in childrearing duties? This investigator believes that each of these factors -- biological, psychological, interpersonal, societal -- plays an important part in the unique way that each stepmother devises and performs her stepmother role.

Variables Affecting Fluctuations in Self-Concept

All the stepmothers in the study described situations in which their self-concepts were threatened and disequilibrium resulted. Some stepmothers appeared to have frequent fluctuations in self-concept; some appeared to have intermittent fluctuations in self-concept. Change in the self-concept of stepmothers is addressed in the stepfamily literature. Lundgren, Jergens and Gibson (1982) found that hierarchical power relations were associated with one's decreasing evaluation of oneself. They assumed that a positive self-concept might lead to the pursuit of equal power relations.

If we apply the authors' findings to the present study, we would expect to find that stepmothers experience fluctuations in their self-concepts and a decrease in self-esteem. In a stepfamily with joint physical custody, both biological parents are highly involved by choice and by legal mandate, and the stepmother usually does not feel equal to her husband in the parental hierarchy. In addition, the husband/father

is in a particularly difficult and awkward position. He must find a way to relate to his ex-wife, his current wife and his children, all of whom have different needs and expectations of him. The very nature of the stepfamily situation itself, and particularly joint physical custody, causes conflicts over alliances and loyalties. Every stepmother is bound to feel unsupported and left out at one time or another.

But in this sample there were differences in the frequency of fluctuations in the 'stepmothers' self-concepts. The investigator believes that the concept of self-blame can help to explain this finding. There were five stepmothers who reported intermittent but extreme fluctuations in self-concept as a result of interpersonal crises. This sub-group of stepmothers tended to focus anger and blame on others, perhaps protecting their self-concepts until a crisis situation occurred. There were seven other stepmothers who reported brief but frequent fluctuations in self-concept due to their assessments of not having lived up to their expectations of themselves. This latter sub-group of stepmothers focused anger and blame on themselves, thereby generating frequent fluctuations in self-concept. It would appear that, when things went wrong, fluctuations in self-concept depended on the stepmother's degree of self-blame. The following example will help to explain this further.

Six stepmothers had a negative attitude toward the biological mother. Initially, the investigator thought that blaming the biological mother for problems in the stepfamily (whether based in reality or a sign of displacement) enabled some stepmothers to feel better about themselves. However, this turned out not to be the case. Blaming the

biological mothers enhanced a feeling of unity and "we-ness" in the stepfamily but did not actually affect fluctuations in the stepmothers' self-concepts. The six stepmothers who reported a negative attitude toward the biological mother did express satisfaction with themselves for "doing a better job" than the biological mothers, but three of these stepmothers still reported frequent fluctuations in self-concept as a result of blaming themselves for not living up to their own expectations in other stepfamily situations.

The issue of placement of blame raises an important question. Is the stepmother's focus of blame an indication of her defensive style as well as a partial description of her personality? While this study did not attempt to examine the stepmothers' unconscious ego defenses, the stepmothers' behavior and feelings as described in vignettes told to the investigator bore resemblance to defenses such as denial, projection, displacement and turning against the self (A. Freud, 1966; Blanck and Blanck, 1974). A study conducted by Frank and Anderson (1980) revealed that marital and parental role strain rose to distressing levels when the women's ideals and expectations of themselves were incompatible with their perceptions of their actual role behavior. Taking their findings into consideration, we can wonder if perhaps the self-evaluators in this sample focused anger and blame on themselves in a defensive attempt to deny problems between themselves and their husbands. Conversely, perhaps some stepmothers projected anger and blame onto others in a defensive attempt to protect their own egos. Grace's situation may illustrate this process.

Grace recognized her need to be self-protective. She also firmly

believed that others were to blame for problems she experienced in the stepfamily. Perhaps for Grace displacement and projection were unconscious defenses underlying her conscious recognition of her need to be self-protective. Although this study did not attempt to examine unconscious forces, the investigator suspects that a research method designed to analyze case material in depth would reveal findings about unconscious forces affecting the stepmother's self-concept and role performance.

The influence of unconscious forces has been discussed in the literature. Several studies have reported on the lowering of the stepmother's self-concept due to her disappointment, frustration and anger at her unmet expectations (Satir, 1972; Blanck and Blanck, 1968). Some authors remind the reader that expectations may be unreasonable and therefore incapable of being fulfilled (Visher and Visher, 1978; Strean, 1980). According to these authors, unreasonable expectations derive out of the unconscious and are based on childish fantasies and expectations (Strean, 1980). Statements made by Bea appeared to the investigator to represent unconscious negative expectations.

Bea reported feeling very dissatisfied in the stepmother role and disappointed that her wishes and expectations for fulfillment as a stepmother had not been met. In speaking of her prior marriages, Bea said that her first marriage was totally inappropriate and that she had married because it was "the thing to do." Regarding her second marriage, she said that she felt "passion and admiration" for her fiance, but by the time of the marriage she knew "things were missing." Similarly, in speaking of her present husband, she said she felt passion

and admiration for him but had wondered if she should enter into the marriage knowing that problems existed in their relationship due to his continuing relationship with his ex-wife. This investigator is struck by the similarities in her descriptions and recognizes the possibility that an unconscious expectation to fail or to be unhappy might be operating for this stepmother. If future studies could clarify or account for unconscious forces, our understanding of stepfamily functioning would be greatly enhanced.

The possibility that unconscious expectations influence the stepmother is again illustrated in the following example. Eleven stepmothers reported ambivalence about the manner in which they thought they should relate to their husbands and stepchildren. If we consider that ambivalence fosters contradictory self-expectations which are impossible to satisfy, we can see how the stepmother would experience periodic feelings of not measuring up to her own expectations. E. Jacobson (1964) wrote about the development of the ego ideal and the superego. She said that the superego regulates self-esteem through its reliance on internal standards as set by the ego ideal, rather than on external success or failure. Therefore, it would seem quite plausible that the stepmother's style of relating to her husband and stepchildren would be unconsciously influenced by her ego ideal, rather than by her particular stepfamily situation. For example, Joan reported great respect for her own parents and held the belief that she could not measure up to them. If she had a demanding ego ideal and a punitive superego one by-product might be the expectation of being unable to live up to the demands she placed on herself. It is not surprising that she reported frequent

fluctuations in her self-concept.

The finding that fluctuations in the stepmother's self-concept were influenced more by her personality than by external problems within the stepfamily is supported in the literature by Coopersmith (1967) and Rosenberg (1965). Relating their theories to the present study, we can say that, although interactional influences may have a powerful bearing upon the stepmother's self-evaluation, generally her self-concept reflects a subjective feeling about herself that is independent of the situation in which she finds herself. The authors stated that self-concept determines expectations of the self and others, and the assessment of the degree to which one has lived up to one's expectations in turn affects the self-concept. In this study, the expectations explored were conscious ones. Joan's expectation of not measuring up to her own parents and Dale's expectation that she would give more love to her stepchild than she would get in return are examples of conscious expectations that affected fluctuations in these stepmothers' self-concepts. Although not explored, the data led the investigator to suspect that unconscious expectations also influenced the stepmothers' images of themselves. For instance, Bea reported extreme unhappiness at being left out and unsupported by her husband, yet she told the investigator, "I have a need to love more than I am loved." In this case, the fulfillment of an unconscious expectation to feel unfulfilled or rejected may have affected Bea's self-concept. Further research in this area is warranted.

COPING TECHNIQUES

The various coping techniques used by the stepmothers fell into one of three categories: the psychological, the interpersonal or the somatic. In an initial analysis of the data it appeared that stepmothers utilized coping techniques reflecting their characteristic style of relating to their husbands and stepchildren. However, further analysis of the data revealed the investigator's earlier impression to be inaccurate. In fact, every stepmother utilized a combination of psychological and interpersonal techniques for coping with stresses stemming from the stepmother role, and there did not appear to be relationships between the coping techniques used and the other variables investigated in the study.

Although the investigator was able to compile data only on the stepmothers' conscious use of coping techniques, there is reason to believe that the techniques utilized reflect unconscious forces as well. A. Freud's theory on transference phenomena would support this belief. A. Freud (1966) defined transference as impulses experienced in present situations which have their source in the earliest object relations. One of the coping techniques utilized by several stepmothers in the study bears a resemblance to her description of transference phenomena. Specifically, six stepmothers reported becoming self-protective in response to prior situations in which they had felt taken advantage of, unaccepted or rejected. They noticed that they frequently distanced themselves emotionally and were overly self-protective in stepfamily situations which they felt did not warrant the vehemence of their self-

protective behavior. These stepmothers reported that emotional distancing had become part of their coping strategy and as such reflected their expectations that they might still be taken advantage of if they didn't watch out. In other words, these stepmothers had "transferred" onto the stepmother experience feelings and defensive postures which had originated in earlier experiences.

Of interest to this investigator was the finding that six stepmothers reported severe problems with the biological mothers. While the scope of the study did not allow the investigator to determine if the complaints against the biological mothers were reality based or a function of projection and displacement, a situation does exist for such coping mechanisms to serve a useful purpose for the stepmother. There is the possibility that the stepmother would feel that her marriage was threatened if she identified with the former wife and recognized in her husband some of the ex-wife's dissatisfactions. In fact, a few of the stepmothers in the sample remarked that their complaints about their husbands were similar to the complaints of the former wife. The stepmothers believed that they were compatible with their husbands because there were significant differences between them and the former wives. In defense of their own marriages, they appeared to take comfort in recognizing the dissimilarities between them and the biological mothers and in blaming the divorce on the former wife.

Another important technique used by all the stepmothers to various degrees was the utilization of support systems when the family unit failed to provide support or when its resources were inadequate. The periodic reinforcement of the stepmother's self-concept by teachers,

friends, and husband was vital to the stepmother's coping strategies and enabled her to manage in a difficult and complex job. For four stepmothers, psychotherapy was seen as a support system to be utilized for dealing with stepfamily problems. Five others had received psychotherapy for help with prior life experiences but found the earlier therapeutic experience continuing to be helpful to them in the stepmother role. In lieu of societal guidelines for the stepmother role, reinforcement from friends, family and others may provide the support required by the stepmother in order to function satisfactorily in an ambiguous situation.

The important finding was that all stepmothers utilized a combination of psychological and interpersonal techniques to maintain or regain their equilibrium in stressful situations. The stepmothers recognized that they reacted not only to what was going on within the family, but also to what was going on within themselves. The findings support the need for a conceptual framework of stepfamily functioning that incorporates psychological and interpersonal variables. They also have potential implications for practitioners in that they illustrate the need for clinicians to familiarize themselves with issues pertaining to stepfamilies and to incorporate them into clinical practice, along with an emphasis on individual psychodynamics and interpersonal family relationships.

BENIFITS AND PITFALLS OF JOINT PHYSICAL CUSTODY

As discussed in the review of the literature, the major themes relating to joint physical custody were: the need of children for the

physical presence of and emotional attachment to both biological parents; the decreased sense of loss and helplessness usually experienced by children and the non-custodial parent; and the necessity of the parents to be able to relate to each other after their divorce in ways that are not detrimental to their child's emotional development (Rosen, 1979; Musetto, 1981; Grief, 1979; and Ahrons, 1980). The first two themes were clearly pertinent to the present study. The stepmothers in the sample reported the two main benefits of joint physical custody to be the ability of the children to maintain a relationship with both of their parents, and the parents' ability to remain close to their children and exert influence on their development.

Not as clear cut was the necessity of the parents to be able to relate to each other in a non-hostile way. For example, all but one stepmother interviewed felt that the joint physical custody arrangement was working, even though eight of them described significant problems having to do with the biological mother's life style, her parenting capacity or her emotional stability, with communication problems between the ex-spouses as a result. In fact, dealing with animosity was the factor chosen most frequently as a pitfall of joint physical custody. Regarding this discrepancy, perhaps the stepmothers recognized that their husbands might have had less time with their children had it not been for the joint physical custody agreement. The feeling reported by stepmothers in situations where the biological mother was felt to be less than acceptable to her and the father was that the father and stepmother hoped to mitigate the negative influence of the mother on the child. Having such a plan in mind perhaps contributed to their sense

that the arrangement was "working." In a joint physical custody arrangement "working" might be defined in terms of the actual maintenance of the arrangement itself, separate from its effects on the emotional well-being of the various family members. At present, there is no reliable means to determine the value or detriment of joint physical custody. Also, given the fact that one family had given up the joint physical custody arrangement after several years raises the possibility that those stepmothers in the study describing major problems may also experience an end to their present arrangement in years to come. In the case of Grace, joint physical custody was discontinued because the children were not making an adequate adjustment. Also important was the feeling that one child did not "fit in" or seem an integral part of the stepfamily unit. In the case of this stepfamily, the "out-group" included not only the biological mother but one of the children as well. Further study would be needed to determine fully what factors enable the joint physical custody arrangement to continue and which factors do not.

The current custody issue before the public and the legal system is related to deciding custody based on the "best interests" of the child (Goldstein, A. Freud, and Solnit, 1973; Roman and Haddad, 1978). Based on the findings of this study, the investigator believes that at this time, not enough is known about how to decide the best interests of the child. In some cases, perhaps, parental hostility is enough to award custody to one or the other parent. In other cases, perhaps, parental hostility is preferable to either parent having sole influence on the child's development. According to the stepmothers in this sample, a

negative relationship between the biological parents was not, in and of itself, grounds for termination of the joint physical arrangement. Most of the stepmothers expressed the need to tolerate the problems in order to get the benefits of such an arrangement. As Lynn told the investigator,

Joint physical custody calls on a human being to be at a higher level than you would ever consider being in this situation. You have to bring out your best on behalf of the child. You don't always do it; sometimes you fall on your face.

The findings of this study raise a very important question for the investigator. Half of the stepmothers described significant problems related to the mother's life style, parenting capacity, or emotional health. Why were there so many stepmothers describing the biological mothers in very negative terms? The possibility exists that, due to unresolved animosity from the divorce or jealousy of the stepmothers, the mothers become available repositories of blame and anger. Another possibility is that the perception of the ex-wife as being a "bad" mother might prod some fathers into seeking joint physical custody of their children. In any case, the findings of this study suggest that joint physical custody is not solely the option of the amicably divorced. In fact, a negative attitude toward the biological mother appeared to foster a sense of "in-group" esprit de corps in the stepfamily and perhaps served to strengthen the marital bond as well as the stepmother's self-concept.

Finally, one of the study's findings was supported by the vast majority of literature that emphasizes the existence of problems due to ambiguities in the stepmother's role (Fast & Cain, 1966; Messinger,

1976; Visher & Visher, 1978). When asked what factors hindered their performance of the stepmother role, ten out of twelve respondents identified factors related to the lack of clear guidelines or equal authority as major impediments to effective functioning. However, all but one stepmother had come to some formal or informal agreement with her husband about the nature of her role. These findings suggest that in the absence of societal guidelines for the enactment of the stepmother role, each stepmother develops her own expectations of the stepmother role, based on aspects of her personality and self-concept and influenced by the particular interpersonal relationships within her stepfamily.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Clinical Social Work Practice

The statistics on divorce among remarried parents is alarming. Almost 40% of all second marriages involving children end in divorce (Ware, 1979). If the current trend continues, the compounded effects of multiple divorce on parents and children will be felt by close to half the population of the United States by the year 2000. While it is not known how many of these divorcing couples seek counseling before ending their marriages, significant reasons exist for the psychotherapist to be aware of the particular issues unique to stepfamilies and their relationship to individual psychodynamics and family dynamics in general. Just as young couples are required to seek pre-marital counseling, clinicians may be called upon one day to do pre-remarital counseling for remarrying parents, in an effort to curb this unfortunate trend.

The findings of this study have particular implications for clinical social workers who practice within settings such as schools, family counseling agencies and the Conciliation Courts, as well as those who are in private practice or do mediation work. Social workers in these settings have an opportunity to assess the needs of the children as well as the adults, and to deal with stepfamily issues directly. Clinicians who feel comfortable working with couples, families and extended families, and who are able to focus on individual psychodynamics as well as interpersonal family dynamics would be more effective than clinicians trained solely in an analytic, behavioral or systems approach.

The clinician's ability to sort out individual psychodynamics from interpersonal conflicts is especially important in regard to marital counseling. Unreasonable expectations on the part of the stepmother, along with conflicting expectations of the marital pair, can cause disequilibrium severe enough to lead to marital dissolution if not resolved. As Satir (1972) stated, many people expect their second marriage to make their lives better, but disappointments are inevitable. Blanck and Blanck (1968) also stated that some people expect their marriages to be a panacea for their intrapsychic conflicts, but unfulfilled, inappropriate expectations lead to anger and resentment pervasive enough to lead to eventual disruption of the marriage. The authors believed that people marry for conscious and unconscious reasons, both regressive and progressive, and that one's reasons for marrying are important to understand in order to sort out reasonable from unreasonable expectations. The clinician who encourages remarried parents to articulate their expectations of themselves and each other

may be helping the couple to put their feelings of success or failure in perspective. Though the focus of this study was stepmothers and their husbands, the investigator believes that the findings would pertain to stepfathers and their wives as well.

The investigator recommends that clinical social workers pay special attention to the study's findings that strengthening the marital bond often depends on a negative relationship between the biological parents. The stepfamily literature emphasizes the need for the remarried couple and the stepfamily as a whole to develop a feeling of unity. But unity at the expense of a cordial relationship between the biological parents has repercussions for the children as well as for the atmosphere within the stepfamily. The social worker who can assist the remarried couple in strengthening their relationship, while at the same time accepting the need for an ongoing, working relationship between the biological parents on behalf of their children, would be contributing to an effort to curb the trend of multiple family breakups.

Of particular importance is the need for stepmothers to develop a well-defined role even when the biological mother is seen as adequate. One way to accomplish this would be to help the couple articulate such a role for the stepmother taking into account her needs and the unique qualities she has to offer, and perhaps including parental tasks that she alone performs. Another way would be to include the stepmother in decision-making discussions between the biological parents. This would be helpful for several reasons. First, the stepmother would be involved in decisions which affect her. Second, the stepmother's presence in discussions would tend to dissipate inappropriate feelings of unity

between the biological parents and offer a reminder that the stepmother has entered the family. Third, the stepmother and biological mother would have an opportunity to meet together for positive reasons related to their mutual interest in the well-being of the children. Finally, the stepmother might function as a mediator between distant or hostile parents.

Given the complexities of working with a number of individuals, social workers who see stepfamilies may need to pay close attention to their own transference and countertransference issues. Given the high rate of divorce in this country, it is reasonable to assume that many clinicians will have personal experience with divorce and remarriage. In addition, counseling whole families may tap into the clinician's memory of early family experiences and parental identifications. Finally, clinicians should be aware of their own need to "rescue" the children or to blame a parent they see as inadequate. These examples illustrate the need for clinicians to separate their experiences from those of the stepfamily if they are to help these families identify and cope with their own particular issues.

During the course of the study, several issues about the joint physical custody arrangement itself have been raised. With the numbers of stepfamilies growing, and the increase in custody options, social workers need to acquaint themselves with the pros and cons of the various custody alternatives in order to assist families in deciding which option is best for them. This investigator recognizes that not enough is known about the factors making for success or failure of the joint physical custody arrangement. Social workers who pay attention to

custody issues as an integral part of clinical work may be in a position to help parents assess if their children are developing normally or are suffering from the frequent changes in residence. In addition, families may need extra help during the early adjustment phase even if their relationships are basically satisfactory. This investigator recommends that clinicians take the opportunity to add to the growing body of knowledge in this area by sharing their own clinical expertise with others who work with stepfamilies.

Although joint physical custody is gaining popularity, single mothers still compose the largest group of custodial parents in the United States. Stepfathers remain much more prevalent than stepmothers. In addition, divorce and remarriage is prevalent among all racial and cultural groups. The investigator believes that the findings, although based on a study of a homogenous group of stepmothers, may be applicable to stepfathers or to stepmothers affiliated with other ethnic groups. The possibility of generalizing the findings to the larger population of stepparents is supported in the literature. According to both ego psychology and role theory, all human behavior is a response to a combination of intrapsychic and interpersonal demands. The findings of this study demonstrated that stepmothers reacted not only to situations arising within the stepfamily but also to internal demands or in response to feelings and expectations transferred onto the stepfamily situation from earlier experiences. The findings of this study may be suggestive with regard to populations or clinical situations not specifically studied by this investigator.

Implications for Research

The goal of this study was to explore and describe the relationship between stepmothers' self-concepts and their role performance. While the investigator believes the goal to have been accomplished, the method used was a qualitative one and was therefore subject to the biases of the researcher. The investigator recognizes that a different researcher, perhaps with a different theoretical approach or clinical orientation, might have had different insights into the data and might have come up with different results. The task of refinement of the variables described in this study, or discovery of other important variables affecting the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance, will remain for future research.

This investigator was interested in describing the relationship between the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance. One way to expand the scope of this study would be to devise measures which would enable researchers to systematically describe the interaction between these two variables. For instance, current measures of self-esteem, of marital power and roles, and of parent-child relationships are based on the nuclear family system. This investigator was unable to utilize these measures in the present study because of their inapplicability to the population being studied. The stepfamily literature and the findings of this study support the need to develop measures based on the uniqueness of the stepfamily structure and dynamics. There is a particular need for a method to measure what is "normal" for stepparents in regard to their parental role functions, their emotional closeness with their stepchildren, and their relative degree of marital

autonomy and authority. Such measures would enable researchers to compare stepparents to each other, rather than to biological parents, and could be used as diagnostic tools for assessing stepfamily functioning.

The exploratory method used in the present study was appropriate to a beginning attempt to determine the stepmother's conscious assessment of her self-concept and its relationship to her role performance. But other research designs could offer other findings. For instance, unconscious motives may influence role performance, and these could be determined only through an analysis of in-depth case material or projective tests. The use of an intensive case study design would allow the researcher to explore the relationship between unconscious ego defenses and conscious coping techniques, or the relationship between stepparents' unconscious reasons for choosing their mates and their experiences in the stepfamily. The use of projective tests might illuminate the relationship between stepparents' parental introjects and their performance of the stepparenting role. Longitudinal studies may be most useful in assessing the pros and cons of various custody options and their affects on the development of children. Finally, a larger population would be needed to determine the influence of the duration of marriage, the ages and sexes of stepchildren, the ex-spouse's current marital status, and other variables on stepparenting in joint physical custody arrangements.

The findings of this study raise questions for the joint physical custody arrangement, and further research would be needed to attempt to answer them. First, there appears to be an absence of protocol in

regard to the determination of the appropriateness of a particular custody option for an individual family. Under what conditions is joint physical custody the option of choice? What factors would ensure its success? Indeed, what is the definition of success for this type of custody? Should the ages of the children be a factor in deciding which custody option to choose? What is the effect on the children of having to shuttle back and forth between two homes? An important contribution of future research would be the development of a measure to assess the functioning of children in the various custody arrangements.

At present, there are very few studies on joint physical custody, but so far the recommendation seems to be that parents need to relate to each other in a non-hostile way (Wooley, 1978). The findings of this study would appear to contradict that recommendation. In fact, some stepmothers interviewed felt that joint physical custody was very appropriate in situations where one or both parents was hostile toward the other because it was felt that the joint physical custody arrangement, no matter what the relationship between the biological parents, would at least ensure the continuation of the relationship between the children and both parents.

This study represents a link in the small, but growing, number of studies on stepfamilies and custody issues. Particularly, this study attempted to explore the relationship between the stepmother's self-concept and her role performance, in an effort to bridge the gap between the psychologically-focused and interpersonally-focused literature existing at present. The implications and ramifications of this study could be useful and practical for clinicians who treat stepfamilies.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Judith Stock-Sitko, MSW
Licensed Clinical Social Worker
12217 West Pico Blvd. Suite 3
Los Angeles, Ca. 90064
(213) 390-4216

February 29, 1984

Dear

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my research study on the self-concept and role performance of stepmothers involved in the joint physical custody arrangement. I would greatly appreciate your taking the time to fill out the enclosed questionnaire. I am interested in YOUR perceptions and feelings as a stepmother, so please, do not discuss the questionnaire with your husband until after you have been interviewed.

Your name will not be used in any way or disclosed to anyone, and the results of the study will be reported for the project as a whole; no respondent will be identified in any way. All material from the questionnaire and interview will be disguised to protect the anonymity of all respondents.

Please sign the Informed Consent Form enclosed with the questionnaire. I will get it from you, along with the completed questionnaire, at the time of our interview, on .

The questionnaire will take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

This project may increase our understanding of stepmothers' experiences and feelings and there are no expected benefits or risks to you personally.

Thank you again. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Judith Stock-Sitko

APPENDIX B
INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK
INFORMED CONSENT

I, _____, hereby willingly consent to participate in Self-Concept and Role Performance: An Exploration of Their Relationship in Stepmothers' Experiences With Joint Custody, a research project of Judith Stock-Sitko, MSW, of the Institute For Clinical Social Work.

I understand the procedures will include a questionnaire filled out in advance and an interview.

I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I understand that this study may be published and my anonymity will be protected unless I give my written consent to such disclosure.

Date _____

Signature _____

Witness _____

APPENDIX C

Questionnaire

1. What is your age? _____
 race? _____
 religion? _____
 occupation? _____
 yrs. of school completed? _____
2. What is your spouse's age? _____
 race? _____
 religion? _____
 occupation? _____
 yrs. of school completed? _____
3. What is your current family's approximate yearly gross income?
 (check one)
 _____ Below \$25,000
 _____ \$26,000 - \$45,000
 _____ \$46,000 - \$60,000
 _____ \$61,000 - \$75,000
 _____ Over \$75,000

4. Marriage History

	No. of years married	Why Ended		No. of children	No. of stepchildren
		Divorce	Widowed		
Present		---	---		
Previous Marriages					
1					
2					
3					

5. Please list the ages and sexes of your stepchildren.
 (For example: F-12, M-9)
6. How frequently do your stepchildren change homes? Please describe.
7. Previous experience living in a stepfamily. (check one)
 Have you ever been a stepparent in a live-in (de facto)
 relationship? _____ Yes _____ No
 Were you ever a stepchild? _____ Yes _____ No

8. Do you feel you are accepted in the stepmother role by the following people?

Husband (check one)	<input type="checkbox"/> Very	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Barely	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all
His ex-wife (check one)	<input type="checkbox"/> Very	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Barely	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all
Stepchildren (check one)	<input type="checkbox"/> Very	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Barely	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all

9. How important is the acceptance of the following people for your performance of the stepmother role?

Husband (check one)	<input type="checkbox"/> Very	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Barely	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all
His ex-wife (check one)	<input type="checkbox"/> Very	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Barely	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all
Stepchildren (check one)	<input type="checkbox"/> Very	<input type="checkbox"/> Somewhat	<input type="checkbox"/> Barely	<input type="checkbox"/> Not at all

10. How satisfied are you in the stepmother role? (check one)

☐ Very satisfied
☐ Somewhat satisfied
☐ Somewhat dissatisfied
☐ Very dissatisfied

11. How satisfied are you in your stepparenting role compared to your parenting role? (check one)

☐ Not applicable, no biological children
☐ Much more satisfied with stepparenting role
☐ Much more satisfied with parenting role
☐ A little more satisfied with stepparenting role
☐ A little more satisfied with parenting role
☐ Equally satisfied
☐ Equally dissatisfied

12. How would you describe your husband's relationship to his ex-wife?

☐ Very good
☐ O.K.
☐ Not good
☐ Very poor
☐ No contact

13. Have you ever received counseling or psychotherapy for problems or tensions you think were caused by or related to your stepparenting role? (check one)

☐ Yes ☐ No

The remaining questions pertain to your perceptions about your autonomy, authority and responsibility in the stepmother role. These questions will be explored further in the interview. For now, I am interested in YOUR assessment of how you perform your stepmother role. Please feel free to add any comments that you feel would help to clarify or explain any of your answers. PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ALONE. PLEASE DO NOT DISCUSS YOUR ANSWERS WITH YOUR HUSBAND UNTIL AFTER YOU HAVE COMPLETED THE ORAL INTERVIEW.

14. How much authority do you feel you have to make decisions regarding the care and discipline of your stepchildren? (check one)
- ☐ Most of the authority
 - ☐ Equal to husband's authority
 - ☐ Some authority
 - ☐ Very little or no authority
15. How responsible do you feel for the care and discipline of your stepchildren? (check one)
- ☐ Totally responsible
 - ☐ Very responsible
 - ☐ Somewhat responsible
 - ☐ Not at all responsible
16. How many of the concrete tasks related to the total care and discipline of your stepchildren do you perform in comparison to your husband? (check one)
- ☐ Almost all
 - ☐ More than half
 - ☐ About equal
 - ☐ Less than half
 - ☐ Very few
17. How often do you make independent decisions and judgments regarding the care and discipline of your stepchildren? (check one)
- ☐ Almost always
 - ☐ Frequently
 - ☐ Sometimes
 - ☐ Rarely or never
18. How often do you act on your own authority regarding the care and discipline of your stepchildren, independent of your husband? (check one)
- ☐ Almost always
 - ☐ Frequently
 - ☐ Sometimes
 - ☐ Rarely or never

19. Do you think your husband offers enough support of you in the stepmother role? (check one)

- ☐ Usually
- ☐ Frequently
- ☐ Occasionally
- ☐ Rarely

20. Do you think your parental authority would be any different if your stepchildren lived with you all the time? (check one)

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

21. How has your role as a stepmother been decided in the family? (check one)

- ☐ Informally, through relationship and necessity
- ☐ By conscious agreement or planning with husband

22. How do you think your stepchildren see you for the most part? (Choose one for each child by placing age in space provided)

- ☐ Parental figure
- ☐ Friend
- ☐ Outsider
- ☐ Other: specify: _____

23. How is the present arrangement working? (check one)

- ☐ Well, without conflict
- ☐ Smoothly but with periodic conflict
- ☐ Crisis to crisis
- ☐ Constant conflict

24. Please list in their order of importance the three factors you feel most enhance your performance as a stepmother. (1=most important, 3=least important)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

25. Please list in their order of importance the three factors that you feel cause you the most difficulty in your performance as a stepmother. (1=most important, 3=least important)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

26. How would you describe your role and functions as a stepmother? Please say as much as you would like. This question will be discussed further in the interview.

27. What do you perceive to be the major issues, benefits and pitfalls of the joint physical custody situation for yourself? For your husband? For your stepchildren?

APPENDIX D

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STEPMOTHERS' SELF-CONCEPT AND ROLE PERFORMANCE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Starting Question: "For the first ten or fifteen minutes, please tell me in your own words - What has the stepmother experience been like for you?"

Sub-questions:

1. The Impact of Self-concept on Role Performance. In the years before you married, what thoughts, feelings and expectations of yourself did you have about becoming a mother? How would you describe yourself and your image of yourself before you married? What roles were rewarding? What roles were unrewarding or conflictual? As you considered marrying a man with children, what expectations did you have for yourself as a stepmother? How do you think your self-image in general affected your expectations of yourself as a mother and stepmother? How do you think your self-image in general affected your actual performance in the stepmother role? If the stepmother has been divorced ask--How did your divorce affect your feelings about yourself? If stepmother has her own biological children ask--how does having your own children affect the way you feel about yourself as a stepmother? If stepmother has prior experience in a stepfamily ask--How has your prior experience as a stepparent (or stepchild) affected your expectations of your

current stepmother role?

2. The Impact of Role Performance on Self-concept.

A. Relationship to stepchildren. I assume your experiences with each stepchild are somewhat different. How would you describe your relationship and stepmother role with each of your stepchildren? Have the ages or sexes of your stepchildren been an issue in your experience as a stepmother? Do you involve your husband any differently with your individual stepchildren? How has your relationship with your stepchildren influenced the way you feel about yourself as a stepmother? The way you feel about yourself in general?

B. Role autonomy and authority. Can you expand on the responses in the questionnaire regarding your autonomy and authority in your stepmother role? (Questions for further probing will depend on the responses in the questionnaire.) How does your degree of authority and autonomy in the stepmother role compare to your degree of authority and autonomy in other roles? How does your degree of authority and autonomy in the stepmother role affect the way you feel about yourself as a stepmother? The way you feel about yourself in general?

C. Husband's support. When you are feeling most angry, frustrated or upset with problems related to being a stepmother, what does your husband do? Can you describe an incident in which your husband enhanced your ability to function in your stepmother role? Can you describe an incident in which your husband actually hindered your ability to function as a stepmother? How does your husband's relationship to his ex-wife affect your experiences as a stepmother? How has your husband's degree of support influenced the way you feel about

yourself as a stepmother? The way you feel about yourself in general?

D. Changes in self-image. How do you feel about your performance as a stepmother? How has your role performance affected the way you feel about yourself in general? How have stepfamily-related experiences (other than your own role performance) affected the way you feel about yourself in general? If there has been a change in the way you feel about yourself since before your marriage, what is the change mostly due to? How do you cope with any discrepancies between your earlier self-image and your current self-image?

3. Coping Skills. Please describe a memorable situation related to your stepmother role in which you felt particularly anxious, rejected, angry, or jealous. How did you cope with the situation? How did you cope with your feelings? What was most helpful to you in regaining your equilibrium? Did anything or anyone appear to hinder your attempts to cope with the situation? Are there different coping skills required to deal with daily situations as compared to more stressful or conflictual situations?

4. Joint Physical Custody Issues. (Expand on open-ended question in questionnaire) As a stepmother who has experience with the joint physical custody arrangement, what do you think have been the principle issues, benefits and risks for yourself? For your husband? For your stepchildren?

