

## Stepfamily Stereotypes in Common Discourse and Lived Experiences

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The aim of this research was to explore step family constellations and popularly held perceptions. Study I comprised a word association test ( $N = 30$ ) and one focus group with young adults ( $N = 8$ ). The words *stepmother* and *stepfather* evoked more negative associations such as 'cruel' and 'bad' than neutral or positive associations. Discussion of the focus group revealed that stepfamilies faced difficulties and relationship issues. In Study II semi-structured interviews with 8 individuals ( $N = 8$ ) living in stepfamilies were carried out. Challenges faced by these individuals included adjustment difficulties, non-acceptance, societal biases, mistrust, lack of warmth and closeness and injustice. There were also supportive relationships and care within stepfamily constellation in some cases. The associations were compared with depiction of stepmother in three children stories that featured a stepmother. The themes that emerged were miserable stepchild, cruel stepmother, ineffective biological father, maltreatment and conspiracy, and problematic sibling relationships. As the dynamic social impact theory posits, social representation of families may be informed by popular narrative and does not necessarily reflect the real experiences.

**Keywords:** remarriage, experiences, step-families, blended families, stereotypes

*"They took her beautiful clothes away from her, dressed her in an old gray smock, and gave her wooden shoes and did everything imaginable to hurt her".*

Cinderella

Family is a social unit where all members have a close relationship either biological or through marriage. They depend on one another for fulfillment of emotional and practical needs (Hetherington & Parke, 1993; Suheyli, 2014). Although families are based on or involve long-term relationship, circumstances such as death of a spouse or divorce may bring about change in a family structure. A family in which one or both of the spouses has at least one child from a former marriage or relationship is called a step-family (Booth & Dunn, 1994) or more recently 'blended family' (Strong & Cohen, 2005). A stable family structure with availability of parental warmth is crucial for the healthy development of children and transition in family structure can disturb this stability (Spruijt & Geode, 1996). Research has supplied evidence for the negative consequences of parental divorce or death (Afifi & Keith, 2004; Berger, 1998). Findings suggest that social relationship and perceived emotional support is stronger in first time families. Whereas first-time families more often produce bonding social capital, stepfamilies more often develop bridging social capital, a resource helping individuals to develop autonomy and agency compensating for deficits in bonding when first family breaks up (Aeby, Widmer, & De Carlo, 2014). Previous research has indicated that step-families experience adjustment and relationship challenges

(Hussain, Kiran & Amjad, 2014). These challenges are an inevitable part of the transition and adjustment process and can be facilitated through better understanding of the attitudes that hinder the development of trust in new step relationships. Attitude and prejudice research shows that pre-conceived schemas can hinder interpersonal adjustment between individuals and between groups. Dynamic social impact theory proposed by Latané, (1996) suggests that sharing of ideas between members of society and smaller groups perpetuate ideas forms the bases for social construction of reality. Hence expectations about a new step parent or step sibling can be shaped by our popular narrative and societal biases. It is therefore useful to explore existing schemas about step-families in our society. Our research used multiple vantage points to glean an insight into the lived experiences of step-families, and the schemas that exist in popular narrative.

Step-families have been present throughout history and are often considered as challenging in most societies (Amato, 1994). Modern day stepfamilies in North America are seen as more problematic as most of them are formed after parental divorce instead of death of a parent. The existence of a natural parent can add to complexity of situation (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2003). However in Pakistan more stepfamilies arise after death of a parent (usually the mother) than parental divorce.

In many situations, the children in stepfamilies are reluctant participants. The transition from living with a single biological parent to living with a step-parent, and step-siblings can be an unwelcome change for the child "that is often initiated by the decision of two adults, who wish to join their separate lives together, and children are brought along as a 'package deal' (Berger, 1998, p. 45). Falci (1997) found that children living in stepfamilies showed lower levels of well-being as compared to other family structures and stepparents were less involved, distant, and expressed less control, warmth and affinity (Hetherington,

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Henderson, & Riess, 2000; Pruett, Calsyn, & Jensen, 1993; White, 1994) with the stepchild. Stepchildren especially girls are more detached and showed greater adjustment problems than boys (Hetherington & Araton, 1998; Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella, 1998; Hussain, Kiran & Amjad, 2014). Difficulties in relation formation between step-parent and step-children especially at the beginning of the remarriage are due to the ambiguity of role expectations and behavior (Wallerstien & Kelly, 1980) and better communication and removal of biases can contribute to clarity in this domain.

Stereotypes are found in social narratives, for example, folk stories of evil step-mothers remain a part of universal children's literature (Kudszus, 2005). People in general also perceive stepfamilies as problematic and stepmother as a figure of cruelty and wickedness (Hussain, Kiran & Amjad, 2014; Phillips, 1997). For many years, general perception of a family has exclusively focused on the family as a 'biological' unit. Before the mid-1990's, much of the literature focused on "documenting problems, conflicts, and difficulties in step-families" (Berger, 1998, p. 5; Khalid, 1999). Much social change has occurred in society since then and it is time to challenge the common perceptions about step-family life. The parents remarry and form step-family in order to minimize the negative effects of losing a life partner. A large number of researches demonstrate the positive consequences of remarriage (Ganong & Coleman, 1984; Iqbal & Amjad, 2014). Nevertheless, remarriage of a parent necessitates an adjustment process for the child who has lost a biological parent. Many studies in Pakistan have addressed parenting, marital satisfaction and children adjustment, but issues of stepfamilies have gone unnoticed. According to an estimate, about 10 percent of families in a local municipality had a case of re-marriage and presence of a step child (Naheed, 2012). The present research focuses on challenges as well as benefits of step-families with a view to provide bases for counseling and attitude change interventions. Perceptions of common people and popular literature are inspected. It was deemed best to approach this investigation through various lenses: common narrative of individuals, children literature and lived experiences of step-families. The studies in West on stepfamilies have included divorced as well as widowed remarriage cases. We restricted our focus to widowed cases only.

This research is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do people generally perceive stepfamilies in our society and what associations exist for 'stepmother' and 'stepfather'?
2. What are the experiences of people living in stepfamilies and what challenges are faced by the stepfamily members?
3. What are the common themes found in the folk stories that feature step parents?  
And how do the folk stories characterize the stepmother?
4. Is there a reflection of popular stories in associations and do people's perceptions reflect actual experiences in stepfamilies?

The objective of the first study was to qualitatively explore popularly held schemas about step-families in our society. In the second study we aimed to obtain experiences of people living in step-families. The purpose of third study was to examine depiction of step relations in children stories. Overall the objective of the research was to acquire an understanding of step-families in our society in terms of popular perceptions and real experiences. The present research was conducted in accordance with APA ethical guidelines and it was approved by the Board of Studies in Institute of Applied Psychology, University of the Punjab. Prior to taking

part all participants were fully informed as to the purposes of this study.

## Study I

The objective of the first study was to gauge how people in general perceive stepfamilies. For this purpose a brief word association test was used followed by a focus group. While the word association test elicited traits that common people associate with stepmother and stepfather, the focus group generated more detailed commonly held conceptions about stepfamilies.

### 1a: Word Association Test

#### Method

#### Sample

15 male and 15 female students from a local university between the ages of 22-28 years participated in word association test. All participants belonged to intact families and lived with biological parents. Informed consent was obtained for all participants.

#### Measurement

The word association task used previously in studies on implicit prejudice or schemas about social groups was used (see Amjad, 2006 and Stats & Stats, 1976 for a review). This consists of presenting to the participants either visually or verbally, neutral and target words to obtain spontaneous associations about nationalities, marginalized groups and so on.

#### Procedure

Two words (stepmother, stepfather) were presented to the respondents and were asked to reply with the first word that came to their mind. Simple content analysis was employed to categorize response words as 'negative', 'positive', and 'neutral'. Inter-rater agreement was used to allocate words to categories. For negative words the agreement was 99 %, for neutral 90 %. Disagreement was resolved through third opinion. For positive words, agreement was 99%. Only one word 'mother' was seen as neutral by one rater and as positive by other. It was resolved after discussion with a third rater.

#### Results

There were 22 negative, 5 neutral and 3 positive associations with 'stepmother'. Example of negative associations in order of frequency were 'cruel', 'wicked' 'evil', bad, and intruder. Neutral were 'neither good nor bad', 'not bad', 'can't say'. Positive associations were 'helpful' and 'mother'. In a similar pattern, there were 17 negative associations with 'Stepfather' (cruel, bad, distant, insecurity, cold, artificial, and dangerous), 2 positive association (cooperative and protective) and 11 neutral associations ('not bad', 'neither bad nor good', 'nothing'). Among negative words, 'Dangerous' and 'artificial' were only used by females and 'insecurity', 'distant' and 'cold' were only used by males. Table 1 shows break up of word associations according to gender of step parent, gender of participants and type of associations elicited

Table I  
Associations (Positive, Negative and Neutral) Elicited through Word Association Test by gender of Step-parent and Participants (n= 30)

Negative	SF		SM		Positive	SF		SM		Neutral	SM		SF	
	F	M	F	M		F	M	F	M		F	M	F	M
Witch	-	-	2	1	Cooperative	-	1	-	-	Neither good nor bad	2	3	2	1
Evil	-	-	3	1	Mother			1	-	So so	-	1	1	-
Wicked	-	-	2	1	Helpful	-	-	1	1	A person	1	1	-	-
Bad	1	2	1	2	Protective	1	-	-	-	Can't say	2	1	1	-
Dangerous	1	-	-	-										
Artificial	1	-	-	-										
Cold	-	1		1										
Cruel	2	2	3	2										
Distant	1	1	-	-										
Insecurity	-	1	-	-										
Unpredictable	1	2	1	0										
Intruder	1	-	-	1										
Imposed	-	-	-	1										
Total by gender of participants	8	9	12	10		1	1	2	1		5	6	2	3
Total by gender of step-parent	17		22			2		3			11		5	
Total by type of association			39				5					16		

Note. SF=Stepfather, SM=Stepmother; F= female participant, M=male participant

(negative, positive and neutral). Hence the variables were: words associated (negative words, neutral words and positive words) with step parents (stepmother, step father). Chi-square analyses for significance of differences between types of words associated showed that more negative than positive or neutral words were associated with *stepmother* ( $\chi^2 (2) = 21.8, p < .001, \phi=.60$ ) as well as *stepfather* ( $\chi^2 (2) = 11.4, p < .01, \phi=.44$ ). Most negative words used by male and female participants were similar. Chi square test of independence between type of word associations and step relationship was non-significant. There was no association between type of word associations and the two step relationships; apparent differences between negative, positive and neutral words were statistically non-significant. Male and female participants associated three categories of words in similar proportion to stepfather and stepmother.

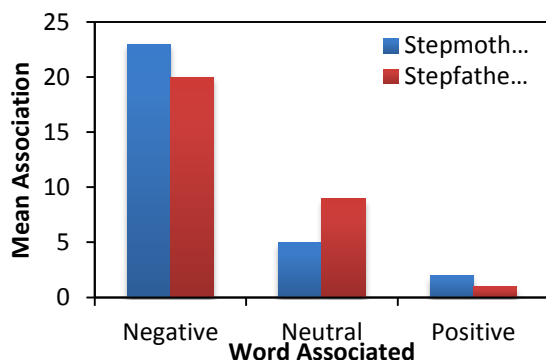


Figure 1. Mean positive, neutral and negative word associations for “stepmother” and “stepfather.”

## 1b: Focus Group

### Method

#### Sample

Eight participants (4 male, 4 female) with age range of 22-30 years were selected from departments of a local university using non-probability, convenience sampling.

#### Procedure

The first author moderated and recorded the discussion, and also took notes. The average duration of focus group discussion was 45 minutes. The focus group protocol consisted of four questions; the nature and structure of a step-family, the relationships within step-family, attitude of stepparents and step-children and family atmosphere. Transcribing was done with the help of notes and recorded discussion. The transcript was read and re-read, each line was searched for a sentence or phrase that related to a broad theme and these were highlighted with similar colour and marked with a code. These codes were then combined under sub-themes and the sub-themes under main themes.

#### Findings from Focus Group Discussion

The two main themes that emerged were challenges in stepfamilies and benefits of stepfamilies. Sub-themes for challenges were: relationship issues (less authority, lack of affection/warmth, less sharing), Effect on children (effect on personality, violation of

rights of children- neglect/abuse/partial treatment, property issues) and stepfamily schema (stepfamily as unwanted, resistance, social stigma). People perceived that the stepchildren suffer at the hands of stepmothers. Some people viewed the stepchildren as introvert, shy with difficulty in forming new relationships and having mood and conduct disorder. Other people perceived that stepchildren were independent and self-determined. In this way both deficits as well as strengths were identified. Benefits of step family had sub themes of care and companionship for widowed spouse. Participants felt that by remarrying the widowed person finds a companion, relieves loneliness and children have someone to look after them. All the participants shared that their opinions came from what they read in stories as well as from some actual examples observed in society of happy and unhappy stepfamilies.

## Study II

### Method

#### *Sample*

Four stepparents (2 step-mothers and 2 step-fathers) and four stepchildren (2 step-daughters and 2 stepsons) living together for minimum last five years were selected through snowball sampling. It has been pointed out that stepfamilies take four to seven years to experience emotional stages as the step-family members move toward new family identity (Papernow, 1993). None of the children had living biological parent; the second marriage of father or mother was after death of spouse.

#### Procedure and Analysis

Demographic data sheets and two forms of semi structured interview protocol were used separately for the step-parents and step-children. The step-parent interview protocol consisted of nine questions and step-child interview protocol consisted of eight questions. After informed consent the formal interview lasted around 25-50 minutes. The key question for every participant was "Tell me about your family." This open-ended question was followed by further questions that focused on circumstances of remarriage, family constellation, challenges faced and gains experienced (as per their role), relationship with step relations and advice for step-families to facilitate this process.

Each interview was transcribed and analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The transcripts were read and re-read several times. Two main themes were identified, negative experiences and positive experiences. These were named challenges and benefits. Challenges were organized into challenges for stepparents and challenges for stepchildren. The sub themes were allocated to these main themes. The themes were extracted from each interview and researchers using consensual approach made sense of these interpretations.

#### Findings

The themes that emerged have been illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. The themes of challenges of stepparents (see Figure 2) included rejection by stepchildren, attitude of spouse, violation of rights, biases of extended family and general societal biases towards step-relations. The challenges faced by stepchildren (see Figure 3)

included problems in adjustment with new relations, emotional issues such as feeling lack of closeness and neglect, differential treatment and long term effects on life including education, financial deprivation and future marriage prospects. Some participants also shared positive experiences of stepfamilies that included care that stepchildren received from a stepparent, feeling of belonging that a stepparent experienced, and companionship that remarriage offered.

The advice offered by our participants to other stepfamilies was; positive attitudes, careful choice in remarriage, open communication, building trust, having realistic expectations and keeping balance.

## Study III

### Method

#### *Sample*

Children Popular Stories. Three stories that featured stepfamilies Cinderella, Snow White, and Hansel and Gretel (Grimms Tales, 1975) were selected. These stories are folk tales that have been around for almost a century, transferred from oral storytelling to printed books and more recently became subject of films and animation (Davis, 2011). These have touched deeply the heart and soul of mankind or maybe one should say womankind, because of the female conflict found within the stories. For this study, the original versions of these stories by Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm were content analyzed. Although these tales have emerged from various geographic settings originally, in contemporary world, these have become familiar to children in an increasingly global culture. However we did not assume familiarity without evidence from an earlier study. During a previous study in which we were investigating story-telling by mothers in connection with vocabulary of children, these were quoted most often among our participants. It may be the case that middle class educated school children and their mothers are more familiar with these tales and children also watch them in animated form. It should be mentioned that these have been translated in all major world languages and have been subject of research (Davis, 2011).

#### Procedure and Analysis

Stories were read and re-read by authors and their content was analyzed. Common themes in sequence of events were identified. Common themes in character description of stepmother were identified. Common themes were also identified for other character descriptions and endings. Inter-rater agreement was reached through consensus.

#### Findings

Some themes found across the three stories were death of real mother, father's second marriage, a cruel stepmother, ineffective father, miserable stepchild (children), maltreatment, conspiracy, happy ending through reward for good character, and perishing or punishment of evil stepmother. In Cinderella and Snow White, the stepmother was jealous of step-daughter's beauty. In snow White and Hansel and Gretel, she turned the stepchildren out of the home.

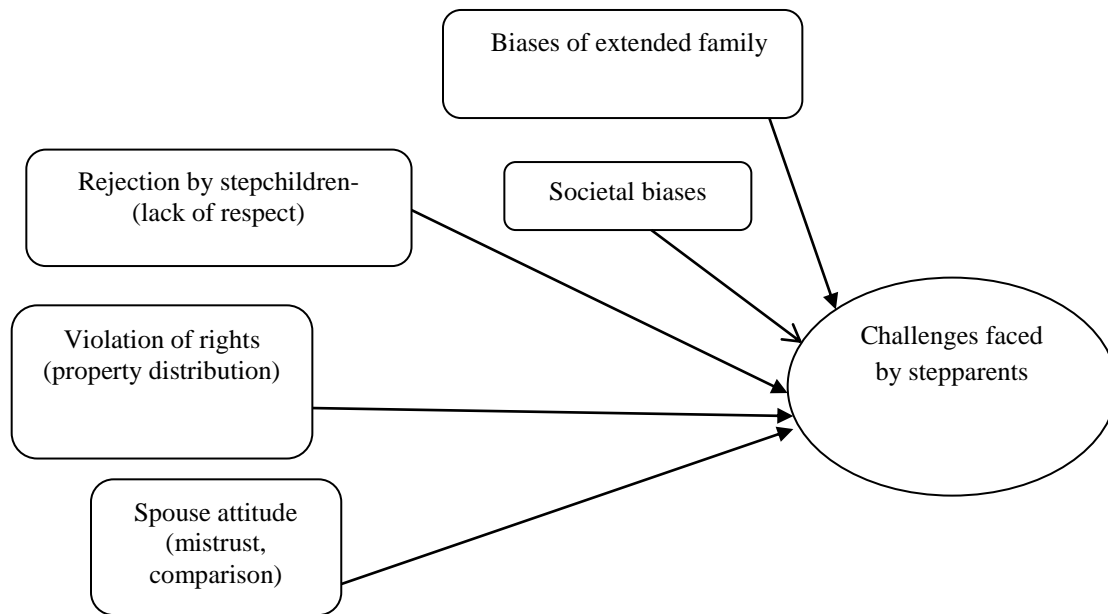


Figure 2. Challenges Faced by Stepparents

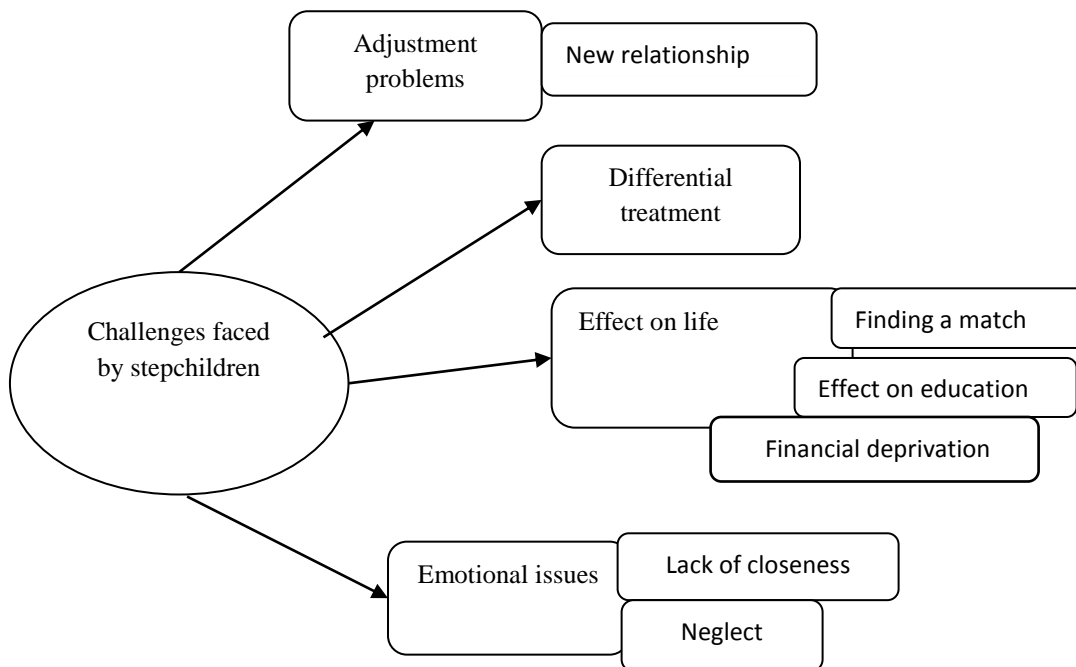


Figure 3. Challenges Faced by Children Living in Step-Families

Table 2  
*Similarities of Themes in Three Stories*

Cinderella	Snow White	Hansel and Gretel
Fairy Godmother/Animal helpers	Dwarf helpers	Bird helpers
Stepchild neglected and exploited	Stepchild abandoned	Stepchild abandoned
Exploitative stepmother and evil stepsisters	Evil witch stepmother	Cruel stepmother
Stepchild deprived of inheritance	Plotted to kill stepdaughter	Stepchildren sent to die away
Happy ending: Finds love	Happy ending: Finds love	Happy ending: Safe return

In all these stories, the step-mother was evil, wicked, cruel, envious, and unkind. The children are portrayed as innocent, helpless, sad, lonely, frightened, obedient, and hardworking. The father was either ineffective or absent. The themes of reward and punishment also appear in all stories. The victims were blessed and the step-mothers were punished. Some element of goodness appears as Cinderella got help from fairy god mother who is a symbol of compassion as opposed to her stepfamily and Snow White got help from seven dwarfs (see Table 2).

### Discussion

This research made observations on stepfamilies from three vantage points: Common societal discourse was examined in spontaneous associations and through open focused group discussion. The associations are presumably conditioned without conscious deliberate learning whereas discussion involves access to ideas held in awareness. These were seen as two ways of accessing common discourse on stepfamilies hence grouped in one study. More negative than positive or neutral words were associated with stepparents. This has been reported earlier. Dainton (1993) observed that the myth of 'evil stepmother' had a strong legacy; the negative associations of the phrase step-mother were firmly ingrained in social consciousness since centuries. The 'wicked stepmother' is typically familiar character in fairy stories and appears in all sorts of fiction (Wald, 1981). Is it truly the feminine that is capable of horrific deeds to step children? Our study shows that step father also received more negative than positive or neutral association with just 2 positive associations and stepmother was not the only villain. Association word such as 'witch' typically belied carry over from Grimm's tales. Associations are mostly held by majority of group members and our association test confirmed the position of Social representation theory. A brief look at stories, notice the shadows in word associations.

*"You, Cinderella?" she said. "I have scattered a bowl of lentils into the ashes for you. If you can pick them out again in two hours, then you may go with us."*

Cinderella

*His second wife (stepmother) often ill-treated the children "we must get rid of the two brats," she declared.*

Hansel and Gretel

*"Take Snow White out into the woods and kill her. I never want to see her again".*

Snow White

Whereas the associations were closer to stereotypical character in stories, the conscious discourse in focus group discussion brought out more realistic perceptions of step parents. As a participant expressed

*I think there are good and bad examples of all types of families, step or biological. Some step mothers or fathers are caring and raise stepchildren like their own.*

In lived experiences of step children no significant cruelty or extreme animosity was reported towards stepfather. Claxton-Oldfield et al. (2005) suggested that there are nine negative and six positive stereotypes that are associated with step-fathers (e.g., supportive stepfather, decent stepfather, and unloving stepfather, exploiting stepfather). Actual experiences with stepmother were both negative and positive. Conflicting ideas also were expressed regarding personality of step children. Some saw them as 'damaged', others as independent and confident. In true nature of perceptions these seemed to be shaped by individuals' own encounters or social representations.

Turning to actual lived experiences, the challenges faced by stepchildren and stepparents came mainly due to difficulties in forming new relationships. The stepfamilies reported tension in initial stepparent and stepchild relationship. Stepmothers reported more adjustment problems with their step-children and extended family as compared to step-fathers. They expressed that stepmother is presented as 'wicked' in discourse of society hence she is never expected to become a good mother. Sometimes the attitude of extended family members and larger community caused the damage. It is likely that step-mothers are more involved in day to day dealings of raising children than fathers so they received more attention. Common challenges faced by step-parents are: not being accepted easily by their step-children and the extended family, adjustment in the new household, gaining trust and establishing a relationship.

A step-mother, who had six step children from her husband's first marriage, recounted:

*I was 19 years old when I got married and the oldest step-daughter was 14 years old. They did not treat me as mother, if I said something, they reacted, and complained to their grandparents, aunts and Uncles. My in-laws believed the children rather than me*  
 (Interview 5)

Children initially disapprove of a step-parent and may feel their biological parent is being forgotten (Pecchioni, Wright &

Nussbaum, 2008). Their efforts to build positive relations with step children are not always reciprocated because their intentions are not seen as sincere.

*Society creates the bad image of a stepmother due to which children have negative expectations and doubt sincerity and efforts of stepmother* (stepmother Interview 6)

The stepmothers are stigmatized as cruel and wicked and faced the conflicting demands of being a good mother with limited authority (Coleman et al. (2001; as cited in Pryor, 2008). It was more difficult for the stepparent to raise the stepchildren than their genetic children and they face difficulty in playing dual role (McDonald & Demaris, 1996).

Stepchildren face slightly different challenges (Figure 3). There is a lack of sharing, lack of responsibility, less intimacy, and lack of positive relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. The step-daughter and step-mother/fathers relationships were more problematic than step-sons and step-mothers/fathers. Forced marriage and property was another issue which made the life of a step-child miserable. A stepdaughter expressed sadly that because of her property (her late mother's home), her stepmother forced her in-laws to divorce her and then banished her from their home. Other step-children did not face such situations.

Common people perceived that there was lack of warmth between step-parent and step-children and persons from step-families confirmed that there was less communication and understanding and more mistrust between members of step-families. A step-son who had formed one-parent household with his mother for three years before remarriage, shared:

*My relationship with my step-father is cordial but not close. We do not share our feelings or talk much.* (Interview 4)

Another category in relationship theme was neglect.

*My step-mother did not show any concern towards me especially my studies.* (Interview 2)

However the other stepdaughter felt,

*I was looked after when I was sick and my needs were mostly fulfilled.* (Interview 1)

The relationship between stepparent and stepchildren are less warm, more controlled and less supportive as compared to parent-child relationship in biological families (Amato, 1994). Ganog, Coleman and Janisen (2011) using grounded theory approach, discerned six patterns of step-relationship development: accepting as a parent, liking from the start, accepting with ambivalence, changing trajectory, rejecting, and coexisting. These patterns of development were distinct trajectories that related closely to qualitatively different stepparent-stepchild relationships. Some of these patterns are reflected in experiences of the families we interviewed.

Another major theme was the weakening of bond between children and biological parent after re-marriage of parent. People perceived that after remarriage, parents' attention was diverted to their new spouses and they become less concerned with their children's needs and desires.

*When people remarry; they put all their efforts in building their relationships with their spouse, and may lose the bond with their biological children-children feel insecure"* (Interview 4- a stepson)

A stepdaughter expressed sentiments that other children in stepfamilies shared:

*Before his remarriage, I shared all my feelings with my papa and he also gave me full attention but now..... he has no time for me- comes home and goes to his room with his new wife* (Interview 2).

Hetherington and Arasten (1988) found that in the early period of remarriage, children are more negative; show less warmth, and less communicative towards both the step-parent and biological parent.

Sibling relationship is another theme which traverses the three studies.

*My step-siblings did not support me, favored their mother. They prosecuted me to get hold of my ancestral home. I had to leave home and live on rent. I spent about ten years alone, my marriage broke up, and no one came to see me* (Interview 2)

*They took her beautiful clothes away from her, dressed her in an old gray smock, and gave her wooden shoes and did everything imaginable to hurt her.*

Cinderella

There were also positive examples as a step-son shared his experiences regarding his relationships with his half step-siblings:

*My half-siblings are all very good. We have good understanding and love each other.. I appreciate that they never misbehave towards us. They support me when my step-mother does something nasty* (Interview 4)

Some commonalities were identified between perception of general people and experiences of step-children. The main problem they faced was to develop and maintain relationships with their step and biological parents and step-siblings. They faced adjustment problems, lack of finances, marriage issue, and education problems.

A stepson reported as:

*I faced crises of money in my childhood, stole money sometimes. I loved someone but my stepmother rejected her as a proposal despite my pleas. I had lost my mother... I got married, my stepmother arranged it, my husband divorced me. My step-mom often said negative things against me behind my back- like backbiting against me with my husband and in-laws* (Interview 2)

Flinn, Leone and Quinlin (1999) propose that stepchildren may receive less parental care than genetic offspring and their growth suffers; stepchildren had lower body weight than other children including their co-resident half-siblings. A real case was reported where a stepfather forced his 12-year-old stepdaughter to marry an old man by taking payment from her husband (Islam, 2012).

The theme of relationship quality included categories of distant and reserved. A stepson shared his experiences:

*His (stepfather) attitude towards me... I think .... It is normal, I*

*saw him reserved since my childhood, and maybe he is reserved by nature that is why he seems distant* (Interview 4)

The positive examples were inspiring; raising stepchildren with care and sacrifice and fondness and affection was reported by both stepchildren and stepparents as well as participants of focus group.

The participants were eager to give advice for other stepfamilies. It is summarized below:

One advice was sacrifice and patience;

*I just want to say that you can win the hearts of new family (step) by making sacrifices and being patient.* (Interview 6- a stepmother)

Step children stressed choosing a kind person as new stepparent;

*Should consider the children while re-marrying... ask yourself- will this person love only me or my children also?*

(Step son, Interview 4, stepdaughters Interview 1 and 2)

Open communication and realistic expectations were also mentioned;

*Family members should convey their feelings.* (Interview 3 stepson)

*Keep communicating to each other.* (Interview 8, step father)

*We should not expect too much from a new step relation - they can not always take place of real parent or be as obedient as your own child.* Interview 8 step father.

One advice was unanimous;

*Be fair and balanced in giving attention.*

(Stepsons- interview 3, 4, stepdaughter Interview 2)

*Rights of all members are important.*

(Stepfather Interview 7 and stepmother Interview 5)

Finally it is befitting to end the discussion with personal narrative of first author.

*"I embarked upon this research journey inspired by my own experience. My mother is second wife of my father. My step siblings are much older and they never accepted my mother as a substitute for their real mother who was my mother's sister. My mother tried her best. There was mistrust and distance. I realize that my view may be biased as I see things from my mother's perspective. The relationships improved when the step siblings grew into adults and today they do value contribution of my mother. The transition from distance to closeness and from mistrust to affection has taken years and I have plenty of lessons to learn and share".* First author

The personal narrative speaks for itself so just a brief commentary; the outcome was positive though the process was challenging and motivated the first author to explore the experiences of others as well as societal discourse that shapes expectations within stepfamilies.

The negative word associations with step mothers and negative portrayal of step relations in stories are very similar. However experiences of people living in actual step-families are not all negative and similarly common people also shared positive aspects of step-families. It may be the case that word associations formed through a classical conditioning process reflect effect of stories

whereas conscious discussion brings in more actually more consciously processed and mindful information. Sometimes remarriage of father or mother bridges the social capital that was lacking due to loss of first biological parent. There is evidence that remarriage increases wellbeing hence it seems to be a healthy solution for men and women who have lost first spouse. In the end we will consider Islamic perspective on this issue. Stepmother according to Islamic Jurisprudence has rights similar to real mother (Ghamdi, 2000). Although emotional bond may not be the same, respect and care from step children is her right. The animosity between step relations reflected in popular narrative is not supported by religion and may be an artifact of folk stories and stereotypes promoted through social impact and social representation of concepts (Moscovici, 1981; Richardson, & Latané, 2001).

### Limitations

One limitation of the study was use of convenience sample of step-families that may not be representative of other families. Focus group and associations test were based on young and educated sample. Older and less educated sample representing community samples can be included in further explorations. We did not include local stories that feature step mother, there may be some folk tales that may shed light on schemas in our own culture. Since research plan included three studies, in-depth and detailed analyses of interviews were omitted in order to keep the article within limit.

### Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to gain an understanding about perception of general population regarding step-families, the depiction of step-families in folk stories, and the real life experiences of people living in step-families. Generally more negative words were associated with the stimulus words 'step-mother' and 'step-father' than positive words or neutral words. This is similar to children tales. As real life experiences are mixed and more positive as compared to what is presented in stories, it offers a different and better picture of the situation that should be conveyed to general population whose views might be influenced by popular stories and are more negative than neutral or positive as depicted in study one on perceptions of general population. This would in turn improve experiences of stepparents whose challenges, were highlighted in focus group discussions and actual experiences of families include extended family and societal prejudiced attitudes and consequently might possibly be transferred to stepchildren in form of differential attitudes and other social emotional problems. These challenges can be resolved through family counseling, rejecting the stereotypes and fostering mutual trust and acceptance.

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