THE STEPMOTHER IN FAMILY RELATIONS

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Abstract: This article analyzes family relations from the stepmother's perspective. As a result of new family arrangements, the structure of the contemporary family now includes several members. However, without the places that were so well defined at the beginning of the 20th century, functions and positions have been reinvented. The appearance of the stepmother, which previously could only enter a family in the case of a father's widowhood, fits into that context. We know that not all representations of stepmothers are negative. Still, she is often portrayed as evil or antagonistic, especially in classic Disney fairy tales, carrying what Goffman would call Stigma and Social Identity. Currently, what would be the place of the stepmother in "contemporary conjugalities"? How is the stepmother's parentality conceived?

Keywords: stepmother; family; contemporary society.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa as relações familiares na perspectiva da madrasta. A estrutura da família contemporânea, passa a comportar diversos membros frutos de novos arranjos familiares. Entretanto, sem esses lugares que eram tão bem definidos no início do século XX, as funções e as posições vêm sendo reinventadas. Assim, surge a madrasta, que antes só era possível em caso de viuvez do pai. Sabemos que nem todas as representações de madrastas são negativas. Todavia, muitas vezes, ela é retratada como malvada ou antagonista, especialmente em contos de fadas clássicos da Disney, carregando o que Goffman chamaria de Estigma e Identidade Social. Atualmente, qual seria o lugar da madrasta nas "conjugalidades contemporâneas"? De que forma a parentalidade da madrasta é concebida?

Palavras-chave: madrasta, família, sociedade contemporânea.

I. INTRODUCTION

Cultural representations evolve over time, and new narratives can bring different perspectives to the figure of the stepmother. We know that not all representations of stepmothers are negative. However, most often, she is portrayed as an evil or antagonistic figure, especially in classic fairy tales such as *Snow White* (1937), *Cinderella* (1950), and *Sleeping Beauty* (1959).

The bad reputation given to stepmothers is rooted in cultural traditions, folk stories, and fairy tales throughout the centuries. In many popular narratives, stepmothers are portrayed as cruel, envious, and malevolent toward their stepdaughters and stepsons. These negative portrayals have perpetuated the idea that stepmothers are inherently evil or less nurturing. These traditional stories often have their origins in ancient stories, myths, and fairy tales, where the figure of the stepmother was used as a symbol to explore themes such as jealousy, envy, rivalry, and power struggles within families.

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* This article is the result of a presentation held at the V International Seminar on the History of the Present Time in Florianópolis (October 2023) and the discussions with the Childhood and Youth Working Group associated with ANPUH/BR.

Thus, supported by Marc Augé's concept (although he refers specifically to physical places), we will analyze the stepmother's symbolic "non-place." The concept of "non-place" was introduced by the French anthropologist and sociologist Marc Augé in his work *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, published in 1992. According to Augé, "non-places" are spaces that do not possess a significant cultural or social identity, and thus are not places of belonging or lasting social relationships. These spaces are characterized by transitivity, that is, they are places of passage and transit where people only stay for a short period of time. Examples of "non-places" include airports, subway stations, bus stations, shopping malls, hotels, and other fast-moving areas. In these spaces, people do not establish deep social bonds and rarely interact with others present. They are places of anonymity, where people become strangers to each other.

"Non-places" are seen as symbols of the contemporary era, marked by mobility, globalization, and individualism. Marc Augé argues that, although these spaces are considered "non-places" in the anthropological sense, they are essential elements of modern society, as they reflect the fluidity of our social interactions in an era of constant displacement and transience.

In methodological terms, our analysis will stem from five different works written by stepmothers and especially for stepmothers: (i) *Stepmothering*, by Donna Smith, published in 1990; (ii) *A Mulher do Pai. Essa Estranha Posição dentro das Novas Famílias* [The Father's Woman. This Strange Position within New Families], by Fernanda Calos Borges, published in 2007; (iii) *100% Madrasta - Quebrando as Barreiras do Preconceito* [100% Stepmom - Breaking the Barriers of Prejudice], by Roberta Palermo, published in 2007; (iv) *Madrasta também educa?* [Does stepmothers also educate?], by Mari Camardelli, published in 2021; and (v) *Madrasta é a Mãe. Reflexões sobre uma Maternidade Marginal* [Stepmother is the Mother. Reflections on a Marginal Maternity], by Leticia Tomazella, published in 2022. The choice for these books was based on a search for works on the subject of the stepmother in Brazil; these were the books that appeared most in that search. We also consulted the series of Civil Registration Statistics (IBGE) from 1984 — the year when divorce data began to show — to 2021, the last one published.[2]

We know that there is a plurality of components regarding what makes up being a stepmother, and in no way do we intend to generalize this place. Nevertheless, it was not possible in this research to explore same-sex configurations, nor to encompass a careful analysis of social classes. We know, however, that each of these existing configurations has its specificities. What we will be dealing with here mainly — in the context of the sources used — is stepmothers inserted in heterosexual and middle-class Brazilian contexts.

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[2] Available at IBGE | Biblioteca | Detalhes | Estatísticas do registro civil. Accessed 18 December 2023.

II. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCED FAMILY DIVERSIFICATION THROUGHOUT HISTORY

The stepmother's social role is constructed in relation to her partner's children from other relationships, that is, the stepmother is the role played in relation to that partner's children. Unlike being recognized as "the father's wife," being recognized as a stepmother creates a direct relationship with those individuals, whether they are children, young people, or adults. From this perspective, once the children of the new couple recognize this woman as their stepmother, they recognize a bond that exists between them, as opposed to recognizing her as "her father's wife," a role that does not create a direct relationship with them, only with their father/mother. Thus, a stepmother will only exist when there are children from other relationships.

Although the role of a stepmother seems like something from contemporaneity, a result of the times of divorce, her presence within families dates back to the Middle Ages. As it was common to see women die in childbirth then, children were often raised by the father's new wife. With the advent of divorce, this figure, who was normally known for entering a family to make up for a lack of a female presence in it, has taken a new role within the remarried family, sharing a place with her stepchildren's father and mother and relating with all of them (Alves and Arpini, 2017; Debald, Silva, and Oliveira, 2013)

In Brazil, before the divorce law of 1977 (Law 6.515), whoever married remained legally bonded for the rest of their lives. If coexistence was no longer possible, a legal separation could be requested, which would interrupt conjugal duties and end conjugal society. In other words, the assets were divided, the coexistence under the same roof ended, but neither man or woman could restart their lives with another person, supported by the legal protection of marriage. At that time, there were also no laws that protected the stable union and safeguarded the rights of those who lived together informally. Before the 1970s, for cultural and social reasons, "recomposed families" could be less common or more stigmatized. However, with the changes in marriage, divorce, and cohabitation patterns, the formation of "recomposed families" has become more frequent and widely accepted in many societies around the world. Before the 1970s, families where the father became a widower and remarried were more common. In these cases, the stepmother would fill the place left by the mother's death. In other words, she would occupy a "vacant" spot in that family.

Almost half a century after the enactment of the divorce law in Brazil, one in every three marriages ends in separation in the country, according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). By noting the evolution of historical analyses, it is possible to see that the number of dissolutions has skyrocketed over the years. In 1984, they represented around 10% of the total number of marriages, with 93,300 divorces. This

correlation jumped to 31.4% in 2016 — with 1.1 million marriages and 344,000 separations. The survey shows more than 7 million dissolutions registered in the country between 1984 and 2016, or 580 divorces per day, compared to 29 million marriages. During the period, marriages rose 17%. Divorces increased by 269%. In practice, Brazil now has three generations of legally separated couples.

The number of divorces in Brazil reached a record of 386,800 in 2021. On average, men divorced at an older age than women. In 2021, at the date of divorce, men were, on average, 43.6 years old, while women were 40.6 years old. The same difference between the ages of men and women at divorce was observed in 2020. This average age represents a population that is still young and often longs for new relationships and other family formations.

In the same period, the highest proportion of divorces occurred among families in which children were exclusively minor. The 2021 divorce numbers also showed the continuation of the trend for an increase in the proportion of divorces involving custody of minors. This fraction, which was 7.5% in 2014, rose to 34.5% in 2021. In 2020, it was 31.3%. This increase has been occurring since 2014, when Law no. 13.058 began to prioritize this modality in divorces between couples with minor children.[3] Still, the woman is responsible for custody of the children in the majority of divorces: 54.2% in 2021, compared to 57.3% in 2020. In other words, the child will increasingly live in both the maternal and paternal context.

Nowadays, the stepmother, in most of the cases, joins another family after a divorce, not characterizing a replacement but rather a new place to be created. Stepmothers do not have a model they can identify with and draw inspiration from, finding themselves in a position between the maternal figure, with an idealized image, and the fairytale stepmother, evil and envious, which makes their identity process within the new family context difficult (Falcke and Wagner, 2000; Gonçalves, 2012).

Many researchers from different areas have been studying new families arising from separations and new marriages. These families are not nuclear, and many names have emerged to name them: reconstituted families (Carter, 1995), remarriages, multinuclear families, mosaic families (Claire, 2000), tentacular families (Kehl, 2013).

We chose here to use the terminology "tentacular family," by researcher and psychoanalyst Maria Rita Kehl (2013), since the name "reconstituted family" may entail the idea of a return to the nuclear family and thus may not be able to incorporate new arrangements and new family characters. "Multinuclear family", on the other hand, also refers to nuclei, which I consider not to be very integrative.

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[3] The objective of Laws 11.698/2008 and 13.058/2014, which amended §2 of art. 1.584 of the CC, was to establish shared custody as the rule in Brazilian law, based on the premise that both parents have an equal right to exercise custody of minor children and that this exercise would be healthy for their development.

According to Kehl 2013, as it occurs with all goods subject to scarcity, it appears that today the nuclear family, which is on the verge of extinction, has been more valued and idealized than ever, creating a permanent and unpayable debt that weighs on the members of families that deviate from the old model. The cultural industry feeds on these idealizations by constantly calling for the restoration of the "ideal family".

However, the post-divorce organization does not break with the family system but rather modifies it and, in the case of remarried families, amplifies it, complicating the relationship between the various subsystems involved. There may be some changes in roles and boundaries, as well as in the relationship with other subsystems of the original and extended family (Carter and Mcgoldric, 2001).

In new marriages, there is a previous relationship between parents and children, in which the stepmother is introduced and will need to create her place. This relationship differs from that experienced by the mother and the father. But, after all, what is the stepmother's "place"?

III. THE LEGITIMACY OF STEPMOTHER CARE

Is the stepmother part of the family? This question is quite recurrent in all the books we use as a source for this research. Based on the analysis of these sources, the answer is: "She should not be part of the family because she, the stepmother, morally and within the imaginary of the 'ideal family', should not exist." However, since she does exist, this question still does not have a definitive answer, varying between different cases and the relationships established between the subjects that make up each family configuration. In other words, the functions and roles of today's family are undergoing complete change, and no one knows yet what their function and/or position is in this "new" situation.

From this perspective, it is important to understand the experience of stepmothers regarding parental functions in the children's daily lives, in terms of physical, emotional, and social care and discipline and the division of tasks between the children's stepmother and father. Stepmothers, when sharing responsibilities towards their stepchildren, play a parental role, be it more active in terms of caring and transmitting values, or supporting the father's role. However, differently from the past, this role does not replace the mother's place, although society still wrongly believes that it does. In reality, the relationship with stepchildren happens differently, creating different bonds.

The stepmother should not be seen as a threat to the maternal place. When creating bonds with their stepmother, stepchildren may feel that they are being disloyal to their mother. If the children regard the stepmother as a threat to the mother, they will reject her.

Furthermore, any negative feelings of the mother towards the stepmother that are perceived by the stepchildren will reinforce the stigma of the bad stepmother.

In this sense, everyone faces the challenge of establishing meaning for "new families." The family has changed and our imagination did not completely follow this change. We live in a symbolic delay, trapped in a family model that does not correspond to the new family dynamics. Many people who are part of "new families," such as the stepmother, the couple's children from other relationships, or the stepmother's children from other relationships, live under the threat of the frugality of the bond, as if they did not form a family, something that will weaken bonds of affection and responsibility (Kehl, 2013).

Unless a new imaginary that produces meaning for tentacular families is collectively created, the stepmother will remain as if she were not an integral part of the family (made up of father, mother, stepmother, stepfather, children, stepchildren, siblings on the father's, mother's, stepmother's, and stepfather's side), and will continue to be associated with a negative image of being evil and, especially, an intruder.

However, a historical process of change can also be observed. An example is a campaign that lasted two years and was led by the Somos Madrastas [We are Stepmothers] movement (@somos.madrastas). In 2023, this collective managed to get Google to stop displaying pejorative definitions for the word "stepmother." The website's dictionary, whose database is provided by Oxford Press, removed the figurative designation of the word as "That from which embarrassment and unpleasantness come instead of protection and affection".

Today, a Google search will present a definition similar to that of the word "stepfather" — "a woman who is the wife or partner of one's parent after the divorce or separation of the parents or the death of one's mother." "Bad woman, incapable of affectionate and friendly feelings" also stopped appearing immediately in the search. To read that definition, you need to click on a command that indicates translation and other meanings, and, in another step, a strip appears warning that it is a "figurative and pejorative" meaning.

For Erving Goffman (1975), stigma refers to a negatively perceived attribute that marks a person as different or deviant regarding social norms. He explored how stigmatized individuals face prejudice and discrimination, and how this affects their interactions and social identity. Goffman highlighted that stigma can be both physical (such as a disability) and social (such as belonging to a certain ethnicity) and can have profound impacts on the way people are treated and perceived by society. We can thus perceive the stigma attached to being a stepmother as yet another form of violence suffered by women.

This author also describes social identity as the way in which people construct and present an image of themselves in social interactions. He argued that a person's identity is shaped

by interactions with others and the social context in which they find themselves. Therefore, social identity is a dynamic construct that develops through social interactions and the representations that people make of themselves in different situations.

Just as the imaginary of family is still tied to an ideal that no longer accommodates current demands, the imaginary regarding the stepmother is still loaded with stigma that contributes nothing to the well-being of individuals inserted in these "new" family configurations. And one of the causes that makes it difficult to perceive and legitimize this parental plurality is the idealized persistence of the nuclear family. Another is the pejorative feature attributed to stepmothers by society.

VI. THE ATTEMPT OF INVISIBILIZATION AS A FORM OF DENIAL

No woman dreams about being a stepmother or learns to be one the same way she does in regard to being a mother. This is probably explained by the fact that the idea of stepmother is related to an unromantic event, such as a marriage that didn't succeed. According to Kehl (2013), the contemporary tentacular family carries in its irregular design the marks of frustrated dreams, projects abandoned and resumed, hopes of happiness of which the children continue to be bearers. Because each child of a separated couple is a living memory of a moment when that couple made sense as a couple, when that couple, in the absence of a pattern that corresponds to the new family compositions, invested in building a future as close as possible to the ideals of an idealized nuclear family.

On the other hand, sons and daughters of separated parents may resent the absence of their father or mother at home. Adults complain that they have not been able to form families, and others who are separated blame themselves for not having been able to keep theirs together. Divorced people pursue a second chance to start a family. Single mothers and fathers feel guilty because they failed to give their children a "real family." Thus, the idea of a family that represents itself as unstructured — because its reference is the anachronistic image of an ideal/structured family — is related to an imaginary of a certain type of "existential failure."

From this perspective, Papernow (2013) presents five challenges faced by members of tentacular families: (i) the feeling of inclusion/exclusion experienced by the stepmother, with regard to the previous family dynamics; (ii) loyalty conflicts experienced by children/stepchildren; (iii) parental tasks polarizing the new couple; (iv) the creation of a new family identity, and (v) the inclusion of the ex-spouse in matters pertaining to children from the previous marriage. This author states that the stepmother experiences ambiguous feelings towards the parental roles to be played, a fact that is also quite recurrent in the sources used.

The concept of parentality is comprised by the set of activities that aim to ensure the survival and development of children. Even though the word parentality refers to the idea of a biological bond, it can be performed by any person or parental couple who maintains a relationship with and serve as a reference for the child, playing the role of caregivers. However, in this stepchild-stepmother care dynamic, children may experience conflicting feelings regarding the new family, as they bring with them a feeling of loyalty to their fathers and mothers.

The fact that they belong to more than one family system can lead to feelings of guilt towards the affection received by and given to the stepmother. On the other hand, if the child is able to love not only his or her mother but also his or her stepmother, he/she feels supported to form an emotional bond with the stepmother without feelings of guilt and indebtedness (Valentim de Sousa & Dias, 2014). In line with these considerations, Soares (2015) points out that the relationship between stepmother and stepchildren is strongly mediated by the mother.

One of the biggest challenges regarding mother-stepmother dyads refers to the tension that exists in the negotiations of parental roles, together with the delimitation of boundaries between the marital and parental subsystems (Schrodt, 2011; Suanet, Van Der Pas, & Tilburg, 2013). Remarriage demands a better delimitation of boundaries, since several levels of subsystem adjustments — marital, parental, fraternal — occur simultaneously, requiring flexibility and creativity to deal with different demands (Costa & Dias, 2012; Dantas et al., 2018).

However, the relationship between mother and stepmother is extremely complex and diverse. The levels of this relationship depend on many factors, such as the circumstances surrounding the end of the relationship with the father of the children. The ego defense theory, developed by Sigmund Freud, is fundamental in psychoanalysis and describes the psychological mechanisms that people use to deal with anxieties, internal conflicts, and uncomfortable emotions. These defense mechanisms are unconscious strategies that the ego (part of the conscious mind) employs to protect itself from emotional stress. This theory suggests that denial is a defense mechanism that the ego uses to deal with threatening or disturbing thoughts, feelings, or information. Instead of directly confronting these uncomfortable issues, denial allows a person to reject reality or downplay its importance, helping to preserve psychological integrity. This mechanism can be observed in situations where people refuse to accept information that will challenge them or go against their deeply held beliefs.

Thus, the invisibility attributed to the stepmother can often be a form of denial both on the part of a mother and/or society still attached to a family ideal, and on the part of the stepchildren in dealing with a situation not yet completely accepted and/or traumatic. Likewise, the stepmother, by denying the past history of her partner and, therefore, her own history, can also harm various family relationships.

In this scenario of extreme mobility in family configurations, new forms of coexistence are improvised around the need to raise children/stepchildren. Still, the discomfort that is often present comes from feelings of indebtedness and an implicit demand when comparing the tentacular family with the idealized nuclear family. However, as Hooks (2021) rightly pointed out, individuals learn about love in childhood, and whether the family is called functional or dysfunctional, it is the first school of love. Thus, the author highlights the need to ensure children's basic civil rights, which will be effective if the family environment, in all its diversity, is prone to respect.

V. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Following half a century of the divorce law, the family imagination is still stuck in an ideal that no longer meets the current demands. Even children of separated mothers/fathers or separated grandparents still have in their imagination the idea of the tentacular family as anomalous. In this regard, the ideal of the nuclear family, if not overcome, can act as an impediment to the legitimization of the experience of these families and consequently the establishment of the stepmother's place as legitimate and healthy.

Contrary to the common belief, the stepmother's place should not be in a situation of competition and/or rivalry with that of the mother. As part of a family, the stepmother adds to the care and transmission of values that parenthood presupposes. Understanding how the adjustments pertinent to the marital subsystem will affect the parental subsystem and vice versa can strongly contribute to the understanding of a family configuration.

Also, the way we deal with trajectories "outside the script" compared to the ideally fantasized can strengthen healthy and respectful bonds for the creation and transmission of values that will undo old ideas of normality and structure. Finally, the stigma towards stepmothers must be perceived as yet another form of violence against women, which collaborates with a society with a patriarchal culture that encourages rivalry instead of collaboration between women on a recurring basis.

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