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MOTHER: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPOARY MOTHERING IDENTITIES IN POPULAR DISCOURSE

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
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the Degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT
MOTHER: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPOARY MOTHERING IDENTITIES IN POPULAR DISCOURSE

Katherine Marie Mayer, B.A.

Marquette University, 2012

For centuries, women have struggled to understand the meaning of one of their most important roles in society, mother. Internet discussion boards have become an important venue for women to participate in ongoing discussions about the role of mothering in contemporary society and serve as a means by which they are actively shaping society's understanding of the role of mothers.

A textual analysis of a popular mothering discussion board yielded two dominate mothering identities, tensions that exist for each mothering type and how mothers resolve those tensions through the mothering discourse. The study ultimately revealed the ways in which the mothering discourse serves as an important part of the identity construction process and is used as a means of negotiating, managing and ultimately reinforcing a mother's own identity.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

"The collective voice we hear is no longer being dictated to us, but being written by us"

-Aliana Sheer

According to the United States Census Bureau, there are approximately 84 million mothers in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). While the number of mothers is large, understanding the role of mother is not as easy as one might believe. In today's society, the meaning of the term "mother" is complex, describing a wide range of women whose responsibilities vary dramatically. Understanding what "motherhood" means is challenging because the responsibilities of mothers are constantly changing. Women can find themselves in flux, constantly needing to manage and negotiate their own identities by continuously reflecting on the conflicting expectations of what it means to be a mother. Although it may be difficult to construct a mothering identity, it is salient because the mothering identity is believed to be one of the most significant identity transformations of adulthood (Block 1990; Golden 2001; Maushart 1999).

The Internet has become an important venue for mothers as they seek to unravel the complexity of understanding their identity. Particularly, Internet discussion boards have become a way in which mothers can participate in the ongoing discussions about the identity of mothers in contemporary society. This discussion is especially important because it is a topic that is incredibly personal and close to the hearts of many mothers, whose success as individuals is often measured through the success of their children.

The participation of mothers on these discussion boards becomes a means by which mothers are actively shaping both a personal understanding of their identities, as well as, society's understanding of the identities of mothers. Active or passive participation in this public forum gives a large number of mothers a "safe" space to negotiate, define and clarify their identities together. The result of this sense-making process is then incorporated into their talk both inside and outside of the discussion boards. These conversations contribute to larger discussion about the evolving role of mothers, and thus, play a part in shaping what it means to be a mother in contemporary society.

Contemporary Conceptions of Mothers in Society

Traditionally, the public discourse about mothering portrayed a mother as a stay at home mother (SAHM) – a White, middle-class woman who was entirely fulfilled through domestic aspirations (Boris, 1994). However, in the last few decades, women have become increasingly visible in a variety of arenas outside the family (DiQuinzio, 1999). As the economy has shifted over the years, the number of women who pursue higher education has increased and the likelihood of women entering the workforce has also increased (Boushey, Rosnick & Baker, 2005). The change has resulted in an increase in the number of mothers who no longer fit into that traditional image of motherhood. Scholars have also challenged the conception of motherhood as restricting mothers' identities and selfhood (Glenn, 1994), perpetuating the economic dependence of mothers (Chang, 1994), and excluding mothers who are adolescents (Bailey, Brown, Letherby, & Wilson, 2002), older, single, lesbian (Lewin, 1994), or racially diverse (Collins, 1994; Dill, 1988; Glenn, 1994).

As a result, we now experience an era in which the discourse includes many conceptions of motherhood (see Buxton, 1998; Collins, 1994; Darnton, 1990; Golden, 2001; Hays, 1996; Thurer, 1995). Although there are many mothering conceptions in contemporary society, two of the most common are *still* those of the SAHM and the working mother. Of the 80 million mothers in the United Stated approximately, 5.4 million mothers are classified as stay at home mothers and 75 million participate in some form of work outside of the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

Rationale for Study

Mothers find themselves in flux, constantly needing to manage and negotiate the tensions that can result from the tugs and pulls they experience because of the conflicting expectations that are a result of the different conceptions of motherhood (Buxton 1998; Collins 1994; Glenn 1994). Given the central role that mothers play in society, it is important to understand how women construct their maternal identities.

A primary arena where these identities are negotiated is in public discourse. The rules and expectations of the mothering identities are often learned and transformed through discourse. These discursive experiences appear in the form of talk, text (van Dijk, 1997) or observation of others (Piotrkowski & Stark, 1987). People not only actively engage in discourse as speakers, listeners, writers, and readers, but also as members of various social and cultural categories (van Dijk, 1997). Within these social categories, individuals engage in and respond to various discourses (Allen, 1997).

Through their shared discussions, mothers are participating in the larger societal process from which the meaning and expectations of good mothering emerges. By openly discussing what it means to be a mother in conjunction with the challenges and struggles

that mothers face, the mothers are contributing to an understanding of contemporary mothering identities. By examining the women's active participation in the discourse, through their participation on Internet discussion boards, this study will explore what mothers talk about, the tensions they feel, how these tensions are negotiated and how their discussions help them to construct their mothering identity.

Preview of Thesis

The following chapters introduce the key concepts, theoretical framework and methodology that guide this study, as well as the results and my conclusions. The literature review traces the evolution of the mothering identity. Following the literature review, I have built a theoretical framework based on the identity construction process. Next, I describe the data gathering and analysis process, which includes a constant comparative analysis of a mothering discussion forum. I then discuss the results of my study of stay at home mothers and working mothers, specifically how defining their roles, discussing the tensions and managing those tensions help inform the contemporary mothering identity. Finally, I present the limitations and implications of these findings and offer suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO:

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the following sections, I review how mothering identities have changed over the centuries and explore how shifting expectations have impacted the way in which women understand their mothering identity. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the way in which mothers form a mothering identity, I first discuss how societal expectations and dominant conceptions shape the identities of mothers. By exploring the way in which mothering roles have been affected by societal expectations and dominant discourse, I can better understand the way in which mothers construct their identity in the contemporary climate of complex mothering roles and responsibilities.

Societal Expectations, Individual Behavior & Defining Motherhood

To appreciate the complexity of the many meanings of motherhood, I start by exploring the social expectations and dominant conceptions that contribute to contemporary mothering identities. It is important to note that the dominant conceptions of contemporary mothering identities are decidedly focused on a white middle class experience. By examining the expectations and dominant conceptions through a social constructionist lens, that reality is created by and through discursive activity, it is evident that mothers have the ability to change the way in which society as a whole understands the meaning of mothering.

A social constructionist perspective will contribute to a greater understanding of the contemporary concept of mother. Communication scholars increasingly turn to social constructionism, an interpretive theoretical position that looks at how meanings arise through complex social systems (e.g., Allen, 2005; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006)[i]. The social

constructionist perspective stresses the “specific, the situational, and the particular and extrapolates these insights to seek transferability of ideas toward a redefinition of existing theoretical frameworks” (Turnbull, 2002, p. 320). Miller (2005) defines social constructionism as an intersubjective position in which reality is co-created through communicative interaction. Most importantly, Miller (2005) argues that social meanings are created through various historical and contemporary communication interactions that both enable and constrain social behavior.

Social constructionist scholars assert that reality is created by and through discursive activity. In other words, our meanings and understandings arise from our communication with others (Littlejohn, 1992, p. 190). However, this does not mean that individuals play a passive role in the process. Rather, individuals have the opportunity to respond to these discourses and reassess, resist, and restructure their lives (Ashcraft, 2005; Edley & Wetherell, 1997).

Individuals learn to conform to the expectations placed on them through their interactions with others and these expectations have a profound impact on individual behavior. From a young age, we learn how to act, dress, talk, who we are and how we should interact with others. This means that our experiences as individuals are often shaped by others’ expectations.

The concept of mother is a social construction that is the result of ongoing debate and discussion about what it means to be a mother. As media personalities, politicians and women themselves talk about their experiences of mothering, they are actively constructing expectations for what appropriate mothering should be. Parents then take the expectations constructed by public discussion and make it a part of their own identity.

For example, a study by Reynolds, Temple, Robertson & Mann (2001), showed that single parents recognized that societal expectations of parenthood require financial as well as emotional support for their off-spring. Thus, rather than rejecting the financial and emotional expectations, the single parents incorporated the "financial provision" in their own identities. In a study by Marshall (1991), pregnant women received advice, solicited or not, by well-meaning family members and medical professionals that shaped the pregnant women's concepts of motherhood. The pregnant women were encouraged to promote the interest of their child above all else, including their own needs and interests. From the moment a women announces her pregnancy to others, she is inundated with information about her new responsibilities and begins to construct an identity of mothering based on the perceived expectations of others (Heisler & Ellis, 2008). Beyond pregnancy the process continues as women with children are bombarded by messages about what behaviors and attitudes constitute those of a "good mother." These studies show how societal expectations can influence identity.

This process can become especially problematic when one is unable to fulfill the perceived expectations of her societal role. Individuals who are unable to conform to the societal expectations are set up for feelings of failure (Hochschild, 1989). The inability to fulfill societal expectations can cause both internal and external tension. This is especially true of the modern mother, who is often compared to the dominant mothering conception that has expectations that are difficult for them to achieve and maintain (Johnston & Swanson, 2006).

However, mothers, through discourse, have the ability to change the way in which society as a whole understands the meaning of mothering. Rather then simply following

the models of their own mothers (Gerson, 1985), contemporary mothers can use discourse to negotiate their own path (Johnston & Swanson, 2007). By participating in discussions about what it means to be a mother, the mothers are actively shaping both a personal understanding of their identities as well as society's understanding of the identities of mothers. By reflecting on, responding to, and at times resisting mothering expectations, mothers are inherently a part of an identity construction process. The results of this sense-making process are then incorporated into their talk and these discussions contribute to the way in which society as a whole understands the meaning of mothering.

The Historical Context of Mothering and Societal Expectations

Until the late 1970s, expectations of mothering was a topic that received little serious academic attention (Oakley, 1976). In one of the most authoritative academic sources on mothering expectations, *Women's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present*, Ann Oakley (1976) explores mothering and how expectations for mothers have evolved over the centuries[ii]. Oakley argues, that the notion of mothering as we know it today did not exist until the mid-nineteenth century. In a pre-industrial society, the family was viewed as one economic unit. This was in large part due to the fact that each member of the household, including the children, had specific duties. The duties performed by each family member were not the gendered household duties we see today. Instead, each member contributed to the farming, child rearing and household chores. In addition, the parenting roles were not child-centered like today; they were focused on maintaining the family's well-being. Children, although highly valued, were not the sole focus of attention; rather, they were trained to adjust to the needs and desires of the family as a whole (Sjoberg, 1956).

Mothering expectations began to change in the eighteenth century. As society became increasingly industrialized family roles began to shift. The differentiation of the family began with the individualization of roles within the family (Oakley, 1976). The most significant change came in 1802, when the first laws regulating child labor were passed. Child labor existed before the Industrial Revolution, but with the increase in population and education it became more visible. This drastic change from the socially accepted norm, in which every member of the family worked, left parents facing a new issue, the need to economically support their families when both parents could no longer work because of their need for childcare. In this scheme, the man became the primary breadwinner who worked outside of the home and the woman assumed the household and child rearing responsibilities (Oakley, 1976). This phenomenon, in conjunction with the moral question, "how might women's role in the work force affect their small children's health?", ultimately led to the shift from the pre-industrial society of family unity to the industrialized view of men's and women's separate roles in the workplace and in the home respectively.

Intensive Mothering

The movement of women into the home ultimately shifted the societal expectations of the mother's role to be child-centered. The societal expectations of child-centered mothering have been defined and best understood through what has been the leading ideology of mothering since the twentieth century. Many scholars agree that intensive mothering is the dominant mothering conception in North American mainstream culture (Garey, 1999; Hays, 1996; Wall, 2001). Best defined in Hays (1996) definitive work on intensive mothering, intensive mothering is a child-centered, expert-

guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, financially expensive endeavor, in which the mother is responsible for the nurturing and development of the child, and the child's needs take precedent over the individual needs of the mother.

The philosophy of intensive mothering is outlined in the highly popular *Baby Book* (Sears & Sears, 1993), a parent's handbook that is also referred to as the Baby Bible. This book refers to its style of parenting as attachment parenting (Bobel, 2002), but the basic style of attachment parenting parallels intensive mothering. There is a call for constant focus on the mother-child interaction, including recommendations of "baby wearing," which means keeping the baby in a child carrier or sling to keep mother and child in close contact at all times.The popularity of intensive mothering in our culture is also supported by a number of academic studies. Garey (1999) analyzes what it means to be a mother who is employed and finds that working mothers struggle with the expectations of intensive mothering because of their worker status. Hattery's (2001) study of 30 mothers, looks at the varying ways that women balance work and family life and finds that mothers are trying to meet the expectations of intensive mothering. The dominant discourse of exclusive and intensive motherhood is also illustrated in Ranson's (1998) study of professional women who were new mothers. Ranson found that almost all of the women judged themselves in terms of the dominant conception of exclusive, full-time motherhood, regardless of their current employment situation. Wall (2001) discusses the shift in child rearing toward "maximizing" and perfecting children. This shift seems to further support the popularity of intensive mothering in contemporary society.

In addition to academic writing on the subject, television shows, magazines and popular press books reinforce the correct and proper role of mother. However, these sources often help to feed into mothers' fear of failure and create what can be, for many, unrealistic expectations. For example, *Healthy Sleep Habits, Happy Child* by physician Marc Weissbluth (2003) is repeatedly shared by mothers as a go-to guide for childrearing. This book counsels parents to place the child's sleep needs at the center of family scheduling – suggesting that many parents err by running errands on weekends with the child, thus depriving the child of needed sleep. The author addresses the ways in which working parents' schedules can be particularly problematic for raising a healthy child. Advice such as this feeds into a particular conception of mothering that suggests the best mothers are those who are fully and constantly devoted to activities that put them in direct contact with their children, regardless of their stay at home or working status.

The Contemporary Mother

Since at least the early 1980s, there has been another dramatic shift in the notion of mothering. Mothers of all social classes are returning to the work force and the majority of women with young children are gainfully employed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). With advances created, in part, by the second wave of the feminist movement, more women have been accepted into college and have moved into positions of power in the workplace (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000). This dramatic change in mothering has created two dominant mothering categories, the stay at home mother (SAHM) and the working mother. Both are influenced by the expectations of intensive mothering (Arendell, 2000; Johnston & Swanson, 2007). However, the two roles exist in a dichotomy and the existence of the other creates unique challenges and tensions for each.

The Stay at Home Mother

Stay at home mothers (SAHM) are women who engage full-time in care giving and domestic work. Often characterized as the “traditional mother” (Arendell, 2000; Coontz, 2005), the stay at home mother has been a mainstay in United States culture since the 1950s. During this time period, the ideal stay at home mothers, as portrayed by the media (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Lowe, 2003), have been white, middle-class, married women who did not work for pay and lived in a new single family unit and were primary caregivers (Arendell, 2000; Glenn, 1994; O’Reiley & Chatman, 1996).

The SAHM’s duties vary from day-to-day, based on schedules that are constantly shifting and reordering to align with the ever-changing schedule of a child (Hochschild, 1997). Universally projected as the idealized model of motherhood, the SAHM is “at home” and “not working” because she prioritizes “being there” for her children above earning income and advancing in a career (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). The SAHM values involvement with children, development of children's self-esteem, and emotional care (de Marneffe, 2004). Because of its embodiment of intensive mothering the SAHM position has a stronghold in the U.S. (Boris, 1994), even though there are far more working mothers than SAHMs (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

The Working Mother

Working mothers are women who are employed outside the home (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). The term “working mother” typically evokes a career-oriented woman who spends 40 hours or more per week employed outside of her home. This woman is often characterized as “super mom” who should be able to effortlessly switch from career woman to attentive mother/homemaker without sacrificing job or children (Hays, 1996;

Hochschild, 2012; Perkings & DeMeis, 1996). However, the super mom image and the very label itself suggest that when women work outside the home, motherhood should still be their primary duty. In other words, a super mom is a woman who is able to juggle both a full-time career and family while meeting the societal expectations of intensive mothering. Additionally, the connotation associated with the term super mom suggests that both responsibilities are performed with an artful ease of organization, effortlessness and attentiveness.

Women work outside the home for a variety of reasons. Two primary reasons why women stay in the workforce are financial need and for their personal growth and self-actualization (Bridges, 1989). For many, work is essential to support the family. However, this is not the case for all; a number of women would not leave the work force even if their family could survive without their income (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). Unlike mothering in the mid-nineteenth century, mothering in the twentieth century became coupled with personal rewards such as pride and fulfillment.

Tensions and Contradictions in the SAHM and Working Mother Dichotomy

By definition, the SAHM and working mother exist in opposition to each other, but this simplistic and dichotomous view belies the complexity of the situation. Each mothering role (i.e., SAHM or working mother) embodies particular tensions that constrain and enable sense-making processes about what the role of mother should be.

The role of full-time SAHM has been challenged by the movement of women back into the workforce. In a study by Clair (1996) finds that society places value on having a career and identifying with an organization and job. Clair's research (1996) identified the top characteristics of a job as a position where you earn money, utilize

education or potential, and participate in an eight-hour day or standard 40 hour work week. The characteristics are essentially implying that a job means working for an organization and being paid well for one's work neither of which is the case for stay at home mothers, who complete their work in the privacy of their home and are not paid for the work that they do. In light of these findings, mothering and domestic labor would not be viewed in the same respect as a "real job" and therefore would not be valued as work at all (Clair, 1996).

SAHMs, whose work is completed in the privacy of their home, often struggle with feelings of ambivalence and uncertainty regarding their roles. This sentiment is echoed again and again by SAHMs who are often met with disapproval when they answer the question "what do you do for a living?" (Medved & Kirby, 2005). The mothering role is generally considered one of the most important jobs in the world. However, it is often the most undervalued position in the United States (Crittenden, 2001). For SAHMs, the unpaid family work remains invisible, even to the women who do most of it. Since family work is mostly unseen, it is also unacknowledged because it is private, unpaid, commonplace and mingled with love and leisure (Thompson & Walker, 1989).

A working mother's ability to identify with a career and organization does not make her role immune to tension. The working mothers' struggles are characterized not by their need for economic justification, like the SAHMs, but by their dual commitments to both their family and their career (Blair-Loy, 2001). For example, in Hochschild's book, *Time Bind* (1997), a mother's work at home, after her work outside of the home, is often referred to as the third shift. The third shift can be best understood as the time after

work when daily housework and childcare becomes a mother's responsibility. The introduction of the concept of a third shift marks a radical change in the way individuals talk about motherhood and mothering: "third shift" signals that motherhood is being viewed as work. The idea of a third shift and the associated connotation of the third shift evokes feelings of burnout, long hours, stress and work in general. Additionally, the concept of a third shift increases the perception that mothers who work outside of the home are inadequate in their role of intensive mothering because of their dual commitments of outside employment and their families (Hochschild, 1997). It also marks the difference between the working mothers of pre-industrial society and the modern working mothers. As opposed to viewing children as contributors to the family, and the family as one unit working towards one goal, for modern society, the responsibility of mothering falls almost entirely on the mothers.

Theoretical Framework

Identity construction is an ever-evolving process in which individuals communicate about, participate in, learn about and reflect on who they are and what their role is within their environment. A theoretical framework built around identity construction will generate an understanding of the ways in which mothering ideologies and societal expectations about mothering shape mothering identities. Whether explicitly acknowledged by mothers or not, the ways in which mothers interact with the discourses on mothering – reflecting on, responding to, and at times resisting them – are inherently a part of a identity construction process.

Identity Construction

Identity is best understood as a complex web, one that combine self, others and culture. The self defined "I," emotional connectedness and interdependence with relational others, and in a context of cultural, historical and economic factors all interact to form ones identity (Roland 1988). Identities are created through discourse as explained by Wetherell (2001) and Augoustinos et al. (2006):

> The identity of parent can be worked up in a variety of ways by use of culturally recognized narratives in talk regarding parental rights, responsibilities, and moral obligations...speakers actively construct [identities] in talk (some of which may even be contradictory) to accomplish a range of interactional goals" (p. 57).

All identities have core values and beliefs, as defined by Hecht et al. (2003) as "core symbols;" these core symbols connect us to the broader social groups and categories to which we choose to identify, or which are socially ascribed to us as individuals. As discussed by Stets and Burke (2000), "one's identity is composed of the self-views that emerge from the reflective activity of self-categorization or identification in terms of membership in a particular group or role" (p. 225). This definition contains two important aspects of identity.

First, the process of self-categorization is significant because individuals acting in the context of social structures name one another, and themselves. The categorizing of individuals into specific roles is significant because each role invokes meaning. Roles point to the expectations that are associated with them and define standards that guide one's behavior according to their self-categorized role. This is especially true of the

mothering role that, as discussed above, is so closely tied to a traditional set of clear expectations and standards of mothering.

The second important aspect of the definition posed by Stets and Burke (2000) is that one's identity emerges from a reflective activity. Individuals do not passively accept the identities that may be assigned to them but instead, are actively engaged in the process of identification. In other words, human reality is created and renegotiated through the agreement of constructed practices such as symbols and language. However, since social constructions rely on the consent of everyone involved, multiple realities may exist at any given time. Meaning individuals must contend with an ever-present challenge of negotiating, re-negotiating and managing their identities.

One of the reasons why there is a constant need for reflection on one's identity is that there is a strong connection between our identity and context. Context can best be explained as the conditions and circumstances in which one resides. As discussed by Kondo (1990), identity "is the result of culturally available meanings in everyday situations" (p. 24). In other words, one's identity is intertwined with the relationships of which they are a part and the cultural expectations that surround them. As Kondo explains, "selves have to be modified to 'fit in' with society" (p. 17).

There is not one set of mutually exclusive identities, and individuals often identify with a number of different roles at any given time. More often than not, the different roles with which one identifies have competing sets of attached meaning and expectations. As a result identity construction involves a process of negotiation of social roles and expectations with personal beliefs (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Golden 2001; McCall & Simmons 1978; Weigert et al. 1986).

Societal discourses are the material resources from which individuals construct their identities. According to Holmer-Nadesan (1996), “with each articulation the subject invokes his/her identity by drawing upon discursive forms” (p. 52). Our identity is a reflection of the ways in which we negotiate, change, and manage societal expectations and norms. This is also true for the notion of mothering. Mothers have developed discourse communities to help them negotiate, change, and manage their identities. Through the stories they tell of themselves, in their discourse communities, the identity of the contemporary mothers emerges (Eisenberg et al., 1998).

Summary

A review of the literature suggests that the role of mother is constantly evolving and that mothering identities are deeply rooted in societal expectations. In contemporary society, there are many “types” of mothers. The SAHM and the working mother are two popular mothering categories. Both the SAHM and the working mother are influenced by the standards set forth in intensive mothering, which creates unique challenges and tensions for both types of mothers.

A social constructionist perspective serves as a good lens to begin to understand the complex ways in which mothers understand their identity. Social constructionist scholars assert that reality is created by and through discursive activity. Internet discussion forums provide a relatively new discourse arena where mothers discuss their role and the tensions they feel in their role. Analysis of these discussions will help shape an understanding of how contemporary mothers make sense of their identity.

Statement of Research Questions

In this study, I first explore the way in which mothers understand their roles and describe them through their discussion board participation. Second, I consider the tensions and struggles that arise as a result of their conversations. Third, based on the mothering discourses on Internet discussion boards, I try to understand how mothers are making sense of their modern mothering identity. In this, I consider the ways in which tensions between mothers serve to function as an important ongoing conversation between mothers that help reaffirm their identity. The following questions guide this study:

RQ1: How do SAHMs and working mothers describe their roles in public discourse?

RQ2: What tensions are revealed in the discussions of SAHMs and working mothers?

RQ3: How do the mothering discussions and management of tensions ultimately inform a mother's identity?

CHAPTER THREE:

METHOD

In order to understand mothers' identity construction as an ongoing discursive process, and examine the ways in which mothers shape their identities through discussion I employed constant comparative textual analysis. Specifically, I sought to uncover how the SAHMs and the working mothers discuss their role in public discourse. Then I explored the tensions that are revealed in their discussion and how those tensions are managed. Finally, I sought to understand how the tensions informed the contemporary mothering identity.

Participants & Context

One of the ways in which the mothers interact with each other is through a relatively new form of communication, an Internet forum commonly called a discussion board. A discussion board is a digital space where individuals meet and interact on the Internet. Individuals link together online together to form a community based on a shared interest or experience—for example, sports, age, marital status, or religion. On a discussion board, participants discuss topics pertinent to specific identified interests. Online forums that discuss issues of mothering are very prevalent. In a rudimentary search of forums online, over 200 websites offered discussion forums geared towards mothers.

Internet discussion boards are a rich form of communication for this type of study for a number of reasons. An Internet forum allows members and visitors to read, post, and participate in a discussion on topics of personal interest. They also can read previous posts, open new topics, and control their individual settings and profiles. Setting and

profile information ranges in detail from name and birthday to relationship status. An Internet forum is monitored by a site administrator who screens posts for anything inappropriate, illegal or against the websites terms of use. A forum is a unique form of electronic communication in that it allows for interaction between multiple users. Members can post questions to the online community and get a number of replies. Conversations in response to an initial comment or questions are often called threads. Finally, it is anonymous which allows users to post and respond honestly and openly.

The website mommytalk.com is a website that offers parenting resources for moms and dads with kids from toddlers to teens. To fully participate in the forum, one must become a registered member of the community and create a username. According to its homepage, the site has over 7,000 discussion users, 51 discussion boards, and over 26,000 topics being discussed. Each topic is categorized into one of the 51 discussion boards. Discussion boards are labeled according to major themes. For example, one discussion board is labeled “parents with multiples”, “parents dealing with grief and loss” or “single-parents.” The two boards of particular interest for this study are the boards labeled “stay at home mothers” and “working parent.” These boards were chosen because of the number of posts and depth of posts relating to research the questions.

Although no demographic information could be pulled from the discussion boards the conversations of the mothers who posted on the “stay at home mothers” and “working mothers” boards seemed to tell the story of white, middle class mothers who appear to have the choice to stay at home or work, which is not the case for all mothers. The majority of posters also referenced a spouse, referred to as DH or darling husband. As a result of the frequent reference to a spouse, it was assumed that most of the SAHMs and

working mothers who post on these two discussion boards are married. Additionally, the mothers' discussions imply that the spouse is the breadwinner and the mother's income, or potential income, is secondary to their spouse. This concept, of the mother's income as secondary, is evident in a number of conversations where the mothers refer to their own income as being "additional," "extra," or "for perks."

Procedure

In my role as a researcher, I accessed the discussion forum as a "guest." Guest access allows for "read-only" status; in other words, the discussion boards are available for the public to read, but only registered users are allowed to participate in the discussion. I read archived discussion boards from the time period between November 2007 and May 2008. Comments reference specific quotes and statements without any reference to usernames to protect the identities and location of the mothers who post on the board.

Between November 2007 and May 2008 an average of three new threads had been posted a week and each post generated from five to fifty responses. After reading all the discussions, I culled out relevant and irrelevant postings and responses. The threads that pertain to the above research questions were then analyzed, approximately 1000 posts. The heavy use of the website means that the topics analyzed were discussed by a number of members. I made the assumption, based on the heavy use, that the discussions were relevant to the experiences of both the working mothers and the SAHMs.

Data were analyzed using textual analysis. Textual analysis is a means by which researchers gather information about how people make sense of who they are and how they fit into the world in which they live (McKee, 2003). Individuals use text to craft a

story or narrative of events that exposes a way of life and the organizing processes of a particular environment (Ricoeur, 1991). Through text-based communications, shared understandings develop across individuals, and assist these individuals in processing information and organizing activity. At the same time, text creates, reaffirms, or changes our shared understandings. Thus, while the text itself may be fixed, the shared understandings and interpretations of text may be specific and evolve through additional communications over time (Dickey et al. 2006). Texts are one of the ways in which we have evidence of how individuals make sense of their world.

Through textual analyses, I bring my lens to the text and attempt to understand the likely interpretation of texts made by people who consume them. Textual analysis also allows me to better understand sense-making by seeing limitations and possible alternatives to them. Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Charmez (2000) define the task of the researcher in conducting a textual analysis as working to understand what messages are being constructed and received, and how individuals manage their roles through their discourses. Researchers analyze data searching for recurring themes, concepts and terms using an inductive methodology. Inductive methodology begins by making observations of data, detecting patterns, formulating questions and finally coming up with conclusions based on those questions. As the researcher works through the material, conceptual categories are identified and examples are cataloged. These categories are tentative, deduced step-by-step so that the researcher can add categories as she works, and can compare meanings across categories. The inductive methodology is an iterative process that allows the researcher to compare and add categories as they work through the data. After all texts are examined, the categories are reconsidered and appropriately combined

into main categories (Krippendorf, 1980, p.76). The goal of the constant comparison, while gathering data, is to recognize and explain underlying themes.

For this study, I read each post. As I read, I noted interesting points, questions, issues and minor themes that emerged from the data. I then identified significant themes, reread all of the posts and compared them to these categories. The structure of the discussion boards informed my initial categorization scheme for analysis. The boards were structured by the web master to separate the conversations of the SAHMs and the working mothers. Members select what board to post on and read. It is important to note that the SAHMs sometimes post on the working mothers board and vice versa. The initial read of the discussions looked at the two boards independently. Then, a closer reading looked at overlap between the two boards and the conversations where SAHMs or working mothers posted on the “opposite” board. After rereading the data, I compiled my results. I identified themes and tensions and used them to answer the research questions that I posed.

CHAPTER FOUR:

RESULTS

In this chapter, I answer the three research questions posed in this study. In addressing the first research question, I identified three themes in both the SAHM discourse and in the working mother discourse. The SAHM themes are their desire to stay at home, acting as the primary caregiver and their role as household manager. The working mother themes are providing financial security for the family, generating disposable income for the family and the working mothers "separate life" outside of the home. Analysis of the themes shows that the mommytalk.com discussion board functions as a place for mothers to talk about their daily lives and create expectations of mothering for both the SAHM and the working mother

Then, I turn to answer the second and third research question by exploring the major tensions felt by SAHMs and working moms. This type of discourse shows that there can be tension between these two mothering roles but that the tension and ultimately the way the mothers manage the tension helps them reaffirm their own mothering identity.

SAHM

Three major themes emerged: the desire to stay home, acting as an engaged primary caregiver and the role of SAHMs as household managers. The themes highlight the way in which mothers use the discussion board as a means of creating a SAHM identity by creating expectations of mothering for SAHMs.

Desire to Stay at Home

The SAHMs on the discussion board embrace their status as SAHMs, which is very closely tied to their desire to stay at home. For many mothers who posted to this site, staying at home is seen as the only viable option to fulfill their commitment as mothers. Additionally, they “work” hard to make it possible to stay at home and there is a feeling of sacrifice when choosing to be a SAHM. The discussions reveal that these SAHMs recognize that their status may be affecting their professional lives and their families’ financial standing; however, their desire to stay home with their children is more important to the SAHMs than material gains.

Many of the SAHMs discussions centered on the idea that SAHMs are good mothers because of the amount of time they spend with their children. Several comments addressed this idea directly. For example, “It is so great to be there to see all the little moments of your kids. I love being able to kiss boo boos, to watch them explore and learn, to be there for all their firsts.” This desire to be in direct contact with their children mirrors the intensive mothering defined by Hays (1996) in which mothering is characterized by the amount of time mothers spend interacting with their children. The desire of these SAHMs, to remain in the home, is so strong because they believe that any time spent away from their children causes a loss of time with their children that cannot be recaptured. As one mother states:

> I'm just really trying to enjoy each moment, each new word, each milestone even more because I feel like life with her is just flying by and I don't want to forget anything. To be able to be home with her is such a blessing.

Or, “If I could trade places with my husband and have him stay and home and have me be out making the $$, I would still chose to be where I am.” These sentiments reflect a larger theme on the discussion board and explain why the desire for these mothers to remain in the home is so strong. For these SAHMs, their argument is, being there for all of their children’s key moments is the penultimate in mothering.

SAHMs discuss being going to great lengths to ensure they get time with their children, and working hard to make this possible. As one mother posted:

> I feel like, if you want to be with your kids, there is a way to do it…if that means selling your house and moving to a smaller one, so be it. Shopping at Aldi’s vs Pick n’ Save or Whole Foods, forgoing extravagant vacations, not having a ton of new clothes and shoes for yourself, going out to dinner.

This mother’s argument is that the child’s needs take precedence over the needs of the mother. There is a cost to remaining in the home, but the trade off of being able to spend time with their children is worth any sacrifice the mothers and their family need to make. Some mothers argue that not only is staying home a professional and personal sacrifice, but it is an obligation that anyone, regardless of financial status, has the ability to do for the well-being of their children. For example, “Anyone that wants to stay home can. It’s all about priorities, patience, and living within your means. (I’m still getting used to the single income, it’s hard, but worth it!).” Another mother posted, “It can be done you just have to willing to make sacrifices both professionally and financially.” These comments support the idea that the ultimate reward and satisfaction for a SAHM is being around to watch her children grow up. Furthermore, the comments and the tone of some SAHM

arguments is that *all* mothers *should* remain at home. The comments and tone address all mothers while simultaneously reaffirming their own choice to remain at home.

Engaged Primary Caregiver

To suggest that the SAHMs' identity is solely about being at home belies the complexity of their role. The SAHMs also measure their success by the quality of time they spend with their children. Through their participation on *mommytalk.com,* SAHMs establish the view that it is the engaged presence of the mother in the child's life that is essential to the SAHM identity; the engaged presence of the mother is what ultimately influences the outcome of the child. As a SAHM states:

> we teach our children to be respectful, loving, humble, patient, kind and on and on and on……. We are their teachers. We don't always do the right thing, and we all know we have bad days, but what we give to our kids is irreplaceable.

Another mother states, "By staying home, I know that my kids are cared for by the best caretaker for them." Although not necessarily their intended goal, these mother's comments are outlining what they perceive to be the correct way for a mother, any mother, to raise her children. By staying at home, these mothers feel that they can give their children the attention that a daycare worker could not. By placing the mother at the center of the children's well-being and as the one who is ultimately responsible for the future of the children's moral character, the SAHMs contend that staying at home is the only way to guarantee that their children will be raised "correctly."

The mothers who stay at home feel that they have a much more positive impact on their children's lives then mothers whose children are in some form of childcare. For example, "I remind myself that even on my worst day, I can give my children more love

than a stranger can provide on their best day." This belief and attitude is at the heart of what these SAHMs consider to be a defining aspect of a SAHM. The directness of these claims is striking. The SAHMs associate mothering with being engaged. The best mother, to a SAHM, is one who assumes all responsibility for the well-being of their children. That responsibility is measured in the time, both quantity and quality, they spend with their child. By associating good mothering with being an engaged mother, the SAHMs are embracing the idea of acting as an engaged primary care-giver and are making it an important part of their mothering identity.

Household Manager

The third theme that emerged in the SAHM discourse is their role as household manager. For the SAHMs, managing the household include a variety of household tasks, including managing the finances, housework, yard work and organizing the family schedule. The SAHMs share ideas and tips on saving money and helping with family finances. While the topics may be far afield from actual childcare, much of the conversation still revolves around the schedule of children. The flexibility of the SAHMs to rearrange their days according to the needs of their children once again reveals the idealized notion of mothering that puts the children and their needs at the center of the family.

Although housework and chores are important, the children's needs take precedence in the day and schedules of the mothers. The SAHM's schedule is organized and reorganized according to the schedule of her children, with responsibilities fitting in between play dates, naps, feedings, appointments and other needs of her children. For example, "I usually try to get some things done in the a.m. before DH[iii] leaves for work,

during naptime, or bedtime." The ability to rearrange one's day based on a child's needs is unique to the SAHM role and these mothers considered it a positive aspect of staying at home. "I like that I can go grocery shopping, run errands, and make appointments during the week with DD[iv] in tow." Another states, "It is nice to be able to throw in laundry during the day instead of having to do it after supper, after the kids go to bed, or having to spend all weekend doing it." This type of discussion about scheduling is important because it shows that the SAHMs continue to give their children the majority of their attention. Yet at the same time, these sentiments do belie the image of the SAHM as completely selfless as they suggest that the choice to be a SAHM represents a certain kind of freedom.

These themes are significant because they function as a means of articulating a particular identity of SAHMs. The SAHM mothers construct an identity of good mother as one who invests time in the mothering role by being constantly present in the lives of her children. The SAHM identity closely aligns with intensive mothering in that it is child-centered. The SAHMs who post on this discussion board take intensive mothering even further by suggesting that anyone, regardless of her situation, can and should remain in the home. This sentiment creates a tension between SAHM and working mothers that will be discussed later.

Working Mothers

Among the discussions of the working mothers who posted on the boards, three major themes emerge: security, disposable income for the family and having a separate life. The themes begin to outline a working mother identity by expressing expectations

for working mothers. Additionally, the discussions show that working mothers reframe the expectations of intensive mothering to fit the mother worker identity.

Security

The first theme uncovered in the discussions of working moms is the security that is provided to the family when the mother has a career outside of the home. Examples of security discussed on the discussion board are the financial stability of the family and a personal sense of financial security and self-worth.

Placing financial well-being as mother's primary responsibility demonstrates a shift in priorities from the idealized notion of mothering, making the working status of mothers a central component of working mother identity. Evidence of this shift is seen throughout the discussion boards in comments such as, "For us, with me working, we can provide such a financially secure future for his/our present and future that it far outweighs the benefits of me staying home." Working mothers discussed the "need" in this day and age for both parents to contribute to the family's income and savings. The discussions pertaining to the need working mothers feel to contribute to the families financial well-being became especially prominent when the mothers were discussing issues of healthcare, retirement and college savings. As one mother posts:

> Not a chance that I would be a SAHM. I probably could be if we changed our lifestyle a bit but I don't feel like DS[v] is missing out enough to sacrifice our families [sic] financial security, and his college savings.

By including financial security in their discussions, working mothers are reframing the expectations of working mothers. Ultimately, these discussions suggest that, for these

working mothers, caring for their family financially is just as important as caring for them physically and emotionally.

The stability provided from having a career outside of the family also provides the mothers with a sense of personal security. For example, “I don’t think I could sleep at night if I knew my kid(s) and I were completely dependent on him [her husband] for everything.” The personal sense of security mothers feel from having their own source of income is important because it allows the mothers to feel as though they could continue to care for their families “if” they became a single parent. As one mother posted:

> I believe my marriage is solid, but it strikes fear into me that I may have to be the sole provider of our family. So my motivation for working is also that of family preservation.

This fear, of having to provide for the family, is another important shift in mothering because it shows how the movement of women back into the work force is beginning to change the mothering identity of the women who post on the discussion board. The shift in the modern mothering identity is different from the mother role of the early 19th century discussed above because not only do the working mothers feel that they need to contribute to the family to be considered a “good mother,” but they must also be prepared to fulfill the role of sole provider, too. Additionally, it is important to observe that the motivation for working is still child-centered. As evident in the comments above, it is the child and his or her well being that is at the center of the discussion. This shift creates a new working mother identity that values both the financial and personal gains from working outside the home while keeping the children at the center of the mothers focus.

Disposable Income

The working mothers also discussed the benefits of the disposable income that their work outside the home provided to the family. These benefits were described in a variety of examples ranging from not having to clip coupons to being able to take extravagant vacations, and are always viewed as additional ways to provide for children. Disposable income allows mothers to be engaged with their children by sharing in experiences outside of the home. This is especially true when both parents are making enough money to afford an affluent lifestyle. Examples of this idea can be seen throughout the discussions of working mothers. As one mother states, “my working full time and my husband working full time enables us to get some extras without worrying about all the costs.” Not only are the mothers able to provide, they are also able to afford additional benefits as a direct result of their career outside of the home. And, because they may feel more financially secure they can share in more experiences with their children. For example, “I really enjoy our lifestyle with 2 incomes. We have a place up north and I would hate to give that up to stay home.” Or as another mother put it, “I think its [sic] great to have money to do things with your kids on weekends and have those cherished memories.” These comments do more then just discuss the ability of working moms to spend more money on extras for their children, they point to the ways in which the working moms connect with their children while maintaining a full-time career. Rather than making the connection with their children via constant physical presence, they make it through experiences they create while they are with their children. This theme shows how the working mothers are differentiating their role from the role of the SAHM.

Some of the mothers say the financial advantages they receive from working directly relate to their children's well being. As one mother states:

> I think that if I were to be a SAHP we probably could make it, but we would really struggle, and we'd have to sell our house and move into an apartment, and give up the cars and we wouldn't get to take DS[vi] to places like the zoo or the Museum or anything like that. He would be stuck in the apartment all day with me, and would gain no real world experience.

From this perspective, the standard of mothering includes a monetary investment in their children. The working mothers are changing their mothering identity to include financial security as another way to provide for their children. Additionally, the working mothers are keeping the children at the center of their motivation to work. Reframing their identity to include financial security means the working mothers are making sense out of what it means to be a good mother in a similar way that the SAHMs make sense out of what it means to be a good mother. Both the working mothers and the SAHMs are still aligning their identity with intensive mothering. However, the means by which they fulfill their mothering expectations are different.

Separate Life Outside the Home

In addition to the financial security of living in a dual career household, the working mothers also discussed having a separate life outside of the home. Many of the mothers who choose to work expressed a great deal of ownership over their decision to work outside of the home and viewed their careers as vital to their well-being.

For many of the working mothers, it seems that their career becomes an important part of their identity and is part of how they understand who they are. For example, "I

work because I love my career…it is truly a career, and not just a job for me. What I do is valuable to my company, my patients, my community, and yes to my family." The working mothers who participated in this board also suggested that working allows them to be more engaged in their role as mother. As one mother states:

> I have always been a working mom. I'm just not the type of person who could stay with my children all day. I know that sounds terrible – why did I have children then, right? I work because I love my daughters and I know my limits as a parent. I can be much more patient with them if I have adult interaction throughout the day.

The implication of this mothers comment is that without the mental stimulation they would make "bad" mothers. In a similar discussion another mother said:

> I know for certn [sic] that I couldn't be a FT SAHM – I need the adult interaction (beyond talking about kids), a sense of accomplishment and mental challenge/stimulation.

This discussion of work status and personal fulfillment on mommytalk.com points to an important definitional aspect of the identity of working mothers. The working mothers have a career or organizational identity that is adjacent with their mothering identity. They feel that the two ultimately make them better mothers because work fulfills their need for autonomy and self-fulfillment. This presents an important point of differentiation between the SAHM and working mother identities: concern for oneself. When mothers say that their career makes them a better mother they are essentially saying their career makes them more fulfilled as a person, which in turn makes them better mothers.

Through their participation on the boards, working mothers construct an understanding of “mother” that a working mother provides for her children by offering financial security. They also see their work as a way to be engaged in their children’s lives by providing them with experiences outside of the home. Finally, the working mothers view work as a way to take care of them selves that will in turn make them better mothers.

Implications of Mothering Discourse

In analyzing the participation of both SAHMs and working mothers on mommytalk.com, several points emerged. First, both groups have clearly established and differing expectations. The SAHMs set expectations that a good mother is one who stays home with their children and acts as an engaged primary care giver, whereas the working mothers believes that good mothering includes providing for their family financially and having a separate life outside of the home.

Second, the SAHMs and working mothers both participate on the discussion boards in ways that serve to justify and in many ways rationalize their separate and differing choices. Each group defines the responsibilities of a mother in ways that best fit with the choices that they have made. For the SAHMs, the expectation is that mothers make an investment of time that translates into continuous presence with their children. The SAHM provides for her children full-time and keeps them at the center of her focus. The working mother sees herself as investing time in the home and in the workplace. However, for the working mother, the investment of time translates into spending time away from her children to provide for the family’s financial well-being. The working mother spends time away from her children in order to provide for her children and in

this way, also keeps them at the center of her focus. In the end, while seemingly different, both groups are working to fit their lives into a frame that parallels the standards set forth by intensive mothering.

While the discussions may present a somewhat concrete conception of the SAHM and working mother identities, further analysis suggests that there is also tension and contradiction in these identities. In what follows, I turn to exploring these tensions.

Exploring the Tensions of the Contemporary Mother

In answering my second and third research questions, I turn to the tensions discussed by the mothers who post on the board and how the management of these tensions help mothers reaffirm their identity. Mothers who participate in the forum discuss tensions that are unique to their role as either a SAHM or a working mother, and tensions that are felt as a result of being mothers. SAHM discussions focused mainly on a lack of respect for their work in the home. Working mothers discussed how difficult it is to find balance between having a career and raising a family. Finally, both mothers discussed the guilt they feel in their roles. These conversations highlight areas where mothers from each group feel as though they may not "living up to" the identity that they as a group have come to agree upon. How the mothers manage these tensions provides insight into how mothers reaffirm their contemporary mothering identity.

SAHMs

The tension most frequently discussed on the SAHM board was a lack of respect for their work as mothers. This type of disrespect most often came from their spouses, who, as a result of the family's decision to have a SAHM, must bear the financial burden. As one mother wrote, "how the heck am I supposed to respond to the statement 'you're

an economic drain'??" Another mother noticed similar feelings from her husband, who communicated his disrespect in a slightly different manner. "I would get, the 'what do you do all day' or 'this house is a disastour' [sic] comments. Those kind of comments would get under my skin."

The SAHMs also discussed feeling disrespected by family members and strangers whose comments and questions also devalue the SAHMs role. One mother states, "My father will say that it was a waste of nursing school and all the money it cost to get the degree. He feels that I'm not doing anything with it right now." Another SAHM offers, "One question I am a bit tired of as a SAHM is, 'So where do you plan to go back to work at when your youngest goes to kindergarten?' " These comments cast a shadow on the previous themes discussed above that depict SAHMs as proud and confident of their desire to remain in the home. Although the SAHM value being home with their children, these conversations also cast doubt, whether on their own or because they are pushed to it, about their decision to remain in the home.

The SAHMs' comments reveal an inherent tension in the SAHMs' role. They have established the expectation that the SAHM is to be a physically present and engaged caregiver. Yet, at the same time, they do not feel respected for what they do. The SAHMs negotiate a paradoxical situation in which they are valued and undervalued at the same time.

Working Mothers

When working mothers discuss struggles, they most often discuss the need for balance in their lives. When discussing balance, the discussion often focused on a lack of time to complete all the "mothering" tasks.

> It took me a while to figure out I couldn't do everything every day, like work full time, keep a spotless house, make dinner, have a happy baby and not go to bed completely exhausted ready to do the same thing the next day.

Another expressed a similar sentiment:

> Too many days, I leave work resenting it because I feel like I have to do all the work of a SAHM even though I work everyday. Groceries still have to be bought whether you do it during the day or you do it after hours. Too often I find myself sacrificing sleep to get chores done.

Another working mother states:

> The most difficult thing for me is feeling pulled is so many different directions. I feel pressure to work more and to accomplish more at work yet I want to spend more time with my family. I feel like nothing is getting the attention it deserves because I'm always trying to do so many things or race from one place to another.

Each of these comments express, in a powerful way, the tension that working mothers experience. The dual commitment associated with being both mothers and full-time career women weighs heavily on their ability to complete both the tasks associated with their careers and the tasks that are historically associated with their mothering role. The need, desire and pressure to fulfill all the tasks that a full-time SAHM does and meet all the expectations of a contributing member of the workforce means that, for the working mothers, either both or one role always suffers to some degree. This dual commitment creates a tension they need to negotiate.

Common Guilt

In addition to the tension each group of mothers felt, there is also a common tension discussed in great detail by both the SAHM and the working mothers: guilt. For both types of mothers, guilt relates to their inability to fulfill the expectations of their role. SAHMs discuss feeling guilty when they are not being fulfilled by their role as a SAHM and when they feel they are not acting as engaged as they feel they should be as the primary care giver. For example, “I also feel guilty for being unhappy because I'm so lucky in most ways.” It appears that the SAHMs appreciate their ability to remain at home with their children. However, for some they may not always be fulfilled by domestic aspirations. As another mother discussed, “I think the worst for me was the guilt, then I felt guilty about feeling guilty because I knew I had it so good.”
SAHM also felt guilty when they were failing to act as an engaged primary care giver and putting their child at the center of their day. As one mother states:

> I will still feel guilty if I let them watch TV in the afternoon instead of getting them to go outside or something. It's like I'm just too hard on myself and sometimes think I have to be this "perfect" mom or it's not good enough!!

Another mother felt a similar sentiment by stating: “I have trouble letting go of the mess and thinking about what needs to be done instead of just ‘being’ outside with them. But if I stay in to clean then I feel guilty.” This guilt shows how the SAHMs, who appear to embrace intensive mothering also, feel the inability to meet its expectations.

For working mothers, the feelings of guilt center on the fact that the majority of their time is spent at work while their children are in some form of daycare. Working limits family time and the lack of time available to spend with their children leaves the

working mothers feeling very guilty about their decision to work. One mother described her guilt by saying:

> I admit, to keep my sanity, I want to work. But I would much prefer a part-time job. It kills me to think I work all day to rush home and spend barely 2 hours with my kids before they start making their way to bed.

Another mom said, “I do feel guilty that I don’t have more time with my son, but I try to pretend I don’t to make myself forget about it.” Another mother says, “It’s to the point that I feel guilty about enjoying my job.” As evident in their discussions, the fact that working mothers split their time between family time and work does not mean that their decision comes without a feeling of guilt. Instead, like the SAHMs, they weigh their options and the needs of their family and ultimately they manage the guilt in order to do what they believe is best for their family.

The feelings of guilt are not the most uplifting or unifying, and yet, the guilt does function in this way. The discussion boards provide the venue by which these women can reflect on the many pressures they face as they struggle to meet expectations of mothering. In many respects, by acknowledging the guilt that they feel, these mothers create a space where they can challenge the expectations of a “good mother.” These powerful feelings of guilt transcend their differences and eventually serve as a common ground for understanding between SAHMs and working mothers. This common ground becomes a space in which they can begin to negotiate a mothering identity that stands apart from their decision to stay at home or to participate in the workforce.

Resolving the Tension

After analyzing this data, I argue that any tension that exists in these two groups of mothers stems from their struggles with the mothering expectations that they themselves and society have created and points to their feelings of guilt over the fact that they are not always "living up" to their own definition of mothering. A close read of the discourse from both stay at home and working mothers shows that these women recognize that they all share a common goal of providing for and supporting their families the best way they know how. While on the surface the tension that is created by the expectations, defined by each group, represents a divisive force between the two types of mothers, deeper analysis proves that the tension actually provides a foil that allows mothers to manage, negotiate and ultimately form mothering identities that unify SAHMs and working mothers rather than divides them.

The mothers who post on the discussion board have crafted their own resolutions to the tensions. Throughout their discussions, these mothers respond to challenges and tensions by saying that a good mother should "do whatever works for your children and your family." The mothers who participate in this discussion repeat this mantra that reinforces the values of their family and (re)asserts their ability to choose to stay at home or go to work. The resolution is in step with the expectations of idealized conceptions of mother but offers a slightly different trajectory. The means by which each mother takes care of her family is different but what remains constant in these discussions is that the children are at the center of the resolution.

The resolution that the participants of mommytalk.com use is one that encompasses many different mothering categories, including the women who choose to

stay at home and the movement of women into the workforce. Rather than just argue about the merits and issues facing mothers who stay at home versus mothers who work, these mothers have also made an attempt to resolve these tensions. One mother SAHM explains the resolution best by saying. “We all have our challenges, and we’re all trying to make the best of our situations and have meaningful lives and relationships with our kids, our spouses etc.” The mothers recognize that it is important to honor the choice that individual families and parents make. One working mother describes this stance as she talks about the decision to stay at home or to work:

> It really is a parenting choice, and there may be guilt either way. I think as soon as that baby comes out we are just hard wired to feel guilty about something. I think we all do what we have to for our kids, and it that means working vs. staying at home, our kids will be ok either way.

In their comments, the mothers seem to be saying that it is better not to judge other’s decisions but support each other and use their conversations as a productive format for mothers.

The mothers seem to essentially be saying that the decision to work or stay at home is not one that is open for debate or argument. It is a decision that each mother must make on her own and it is important for all mothers to respect and acknowledge individuals for their hard work and caring, regardless of which mothering role they may choose. As one SAHM said:

> We are one workforce with the same agenda: to be valued for which we contribute. The amount we get paid for that contribution is far less important than the advancements we all gain (as women) by our collective effort. Across the

> board, regardless of your background, education, race or financial status, women hold a unique responsibility on this planet. We must operate as one.

Rather than using the board as a place to incite arguments, it is a place where mother can learn, discuss and find solidarity with other mothers.

At the same time that mothers use the discussion board share their stories and discuss the tensions that they face, they also begin to resolve them in community with the other mothers on the board. As they reveal their struggles, the mothers begin to recognize the common and shared experience they have with other mothers, regardless of their context.

The common thread, “do what is best for your family” builds a ground on which the mothers can resolve the tension while at the same time reaffirming their own mothering identity. For example, one working mother stated, “I work because it is what makes the most sense for me and my family.” It is through this resolution that the mothers are able to address the competing sets of attached meaning within their different roles and negotiate the social roles and expectations with their personal beliefs (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Golden 2001; McCall & Simmons 1978; Weigert et al. 1986). By negotiating the expectations and reasserting their understanding of their role the mothers are forming their own identities that unify SAHMs and working mothers rather than divides.

CHAPTER FIVE:

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the discourse of stay at home mothers and the working mothers, as revealed on an Internet discussion forum. I first explored how mothers talk about their roles. By examining the mothers' comments, I was able to uncover the major themes in the conversations of both SAHMs and working mothers. I then looked at the tensions felt by both the SAHMs and the working mothers. Finally, I sought to understand how their discussions play an important role in the identity construction process and are used as a means of negotiating, managing and ultimately reinforcing their own identity.

In this final chapter, I first examine the ways in which this study builds on the theories of dominant mothering ideology and identity construction. Next, I suggest ways in which my findings apply to various social contexts, in particular, women and families. Finally, I present limitations to this study and offer suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study have implications on both the dominant mothering ideology and the identity construction process. This study begins to expand the traditional mothering role into two contemporary mothering roles, the SAHM and the working mother, which expands the traditional mothering ideology. Additionally, it uncovers how the mothers resolve tensions felt by SAHMs and working mothers. The results also add to the social constructionist view of identity and move it to a new forum in which individuals are simultaneously asserting and negotiating their identities. The online discourse community represents an entirely new arena for identity construction and

shows how the online discussion forum adds a new dimension of interaction to public discourse. It gives individuals a place where they can discuss, accept or resist popular expectations on a larger scale then has been available in the past.

Expanding the Dominant Mothering Ideology

The first findings of this study revealed that, due to a number of key shifts in the organization of contemporary family life, the role of mothering is beginning to change. Mothers are participating in a larger conversation about what it means to be a mother. These discussions are evolving the traditional conception of motherhood to include mothers who, because of their work status, no longer align with its expectations. Within this mothering discourse are two dominant mothering roles, the SAHM and the working mother. My analysis shows women in each of these groups understand their roles in distinct ways. In some ways, the SAHM still aligns most directly with a traditional view of mothers in which the mother is able to stay at home and does not participate in any type of paid work outside or inside of the home. Through their discussions on mommytalk.com, these women define their role as one that aligns with the intensive mothering that is prevalent in popular and academic discourse. More specifically, SAHMs focus their talk on mothering behaviors that allow them to be child-centered and their decisions are guided by the needs of the child and family. The mother fully embraces her desire to stay at home and act as the engaged primary caregiver and household manager.

For working mothers, a good mother is a woman who is acting in a manner that offers her family success by contributing to the family's economic well-being. However, economic survival is not the most important definitional aspect of working mother.

Working mothers also see their working status as an investment in themselves by having a “separate life” outside of the home. At first glance, it may seem that the working mother’s focus is different than the SAHM, as the working mother is able to focus on both her children and her career simultaneously, contributing a great deal of effort and energy to meet the standards of both roles. However, a close read of the discussions of working mother shows that they explain their career in the context of how having their career keeps their children at the center of their lives. That is, the career allows them to more fully serve the needs of their families.

These expectations and explanations by both SAHMs and working mothers are the base upon which these women construct definitions of mothering. These definitions are not without their problems. The mere existence of the other leads to tensions for both the SAHMs and working mothers. Although the tension is a salient aspect of mothering what is seemingly more important is the extent to which the tension discussion influences mothers’ identity construction processes.

The conversations allow these mothers to reflect upon, analyze, and discuss how they wish to define themselves as mothers. Their discussions reveal that these mothers are embracing many aspects of a traditional mothering ideology and transforming it to fit their needs and that their mothering identity is not based on one’s decision to stay at home or to participate in the workforce, but based on the premise that mothers ultimately do what is best for their family.

Shifting the Social Constructionist View of Identity

Taken all together, the conversations that comprise this forum create a particular discourse. Analysis of this discourse reveals the extent to which the identity construction

process is best understood as an active process. The women who are posting on these discussion boards are asserting their identities while at the same time they are actively negotiating what these identities might mean. This process is one in which the women are watching the actions of one another while simultaneously reflecting upon their own actions. In this way, the boards act somewhat like a panoptic gaze. Even in this space designated for women to support one other as mothers, the women are subjected to the watch of other mothers and their expectations of mothers. The discussion board encourages the panoptic gaze because it allows readers to follow the multiple posts of a single discussion topic. The mothers are cognizant of everyone's ability to read every post at any time and it affects the poster as well as reader. In following any one of these threads, one can see the ways in which the women both present themselves as mothers and take up the issues presented by other mothers to modify their sense of self.

This process also reveals the contradictory nature of the mothering roles as defined by the mothers themselves. There appears to be an incompatibility between the standards of their collectively defined identities and reality of their daily lives. Through their own talk, these women seem to be place themselves in a paradoxical position by holding themselves to one standard that causes them to lose out on the other end. This study shows that a challenge faced by mothers as they seek to make sense of their mothering roles is that they struggle to simultaneously incorporate the expectations gleaned from popular discourse while at the same time feeling satisfied with their choices. This struggle is encapsulated in the repeated expressions of guilt from these mothers. In working through this struggle, the women have in some ways constructed an untenable position. The stay at home mother fits the ideal of being completely and

constantly child centered, but in choosing this, she feels undervalued and misunderstood. On the other hand, the working mother feels fulfilled in her career but then feels as if she is falling short in terms of finding balance in their lives.

Finally, the online discussion forum adds a new dimension to understanding of identity construction. This online forum demonstrates one way that individuals interact with public discourse. Although not always references directly, it is evident that in addition to their daily experiences and the conversations between mothers, these mothers are also responding to the pressures they feel from those outside of their own community. Specifically, the pressures felt from other sources of popular discourse including newspapers, advertisements, popular books and television talk shows (Johnston & Swanson, 2004).

The mass media has gone to great lengths to "shed light" on the expectations of contemporary mothers. For example, as cited in Johnston & Swanson (2004), Dr. Laura, polarizes SAHMs and working mothers on her radio talk show and in the New York Times bestselling book, *Parenthood by Proxy: Don't Have Them If You Won't Raise Them*. Her book, argues that working mothers, who in theory, do not have the "time" to raise their children and therefore should not have children. Dr. Laura is not alone in her questioning of contemporary mothering expectations. More recently, *Bringing up Bebe: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting*, by Pamela Druckerman, argued against the intensive mothering that is so popular in the United States and instead suggests raising children in accordance with the expectations of French mothers. These two examples are not alone in their arguments a number of books, both successfully and unsuccessfully, have hit the bookstore shelves with their own ideas on

the expectations of contemporary mothers. However inflated or dramatic these arguments may be, it has had a profound effect on women's understandings of their roles and has had a hand in creating a climate of competing mothering identities that makes choosing and adopting a maternal identity increasingly complex (Golden, 2001).

The mommytalk.com website offers mothers a real-time space where they can assess, respond to, accept and/or reject societal expectations of mothering. This study shows that online communities can be resources for resisting popular expectations and reveal a new forum for identity construction.

Pragmatic Implications

In addition to its theoretical implications, this study has several pragmatic applications. Previous research shows that historically the mothering role was tied to one dominant mothering ideology. This study reveals that some mothers actively participate in identity construction processes by using the online forums as a space in which they can respond to, agree with and reject the ideas presented by society and in public discourse. This is an important shift in the how the mothering role is understood. What is significant is that this shift is starting with the mothers themselves. In this section, I consider some ways in which these mothers begin to move from a space in which they hold themselves to an unattainable standard of a traditional mothering identity and instead see mothering as an evolving role where there are many different avenues to success.

Transforming the Mothering Identity

In this era of multiple mothering identities, rethinking assumptions about families and about work may be helpful. By embracing the opportunity to discuss the transformation of the mothering roles mothers may be able to recognize their ability to

play a prominent part in the formation of the new mothering identities. Many of the mothers in this study participated in discussions weighing the differences between SAHM and working mothers although it may “hurt feelings” or “get ugly.” However, reframing the conversation as a collaborative conversation, between women about the role of mother in society, may curb some of the negative feelings surrounding the conversation. It may also allow for more women to participate in the conversation, in turn creating more developed and accepted mothering identities.

Although the conversations on the discussion board appear to be those of white, middle class mothers their resolution of guilt, that mothers make their choices based on what is best for their family, opens the door to allow for additional conceptions of mother. The additional conceptions of mother could include mothers of different ethnicities, economic standings and regions. For example, single mothers, who do not have a choice of whether or not to work, may define and understand their identity very differently. However, from the position presented on the board by these mothers, a single mother’s identity would be readily accepted as the SAHMs or working mothers because the single mother is doing what is best for her family. Through their participation on mommytalk.com these mothers are beginning to work towards a formation of multiple conceptions of mother that can shift and evolve according to each mother’s situation.

Limitations

This study has limitations. First, this study is limited by the fact that it was based on conversations on a website discussion board. The challenges this presented included the limited sample size, only looking at a single website and the socioeconomic implications of using only computer literate members as a research group. Additionally,

there was limited background information about the discussion participants available to me. Due to the setup of the discussion board, I was unable to gather data regarding to socioeconomic background, age, education level and family income of the posters. In many ways, a number of these issues were alluded to in the discussion, but without the relevant data it was impossible to make interpretations based on the background of the posters.

Second, this study is limited because it was bound by the pre-assigned categories and questions of the discussion forum with the inability of the researcher to ask follow up questions or probe for more information about relevant topics. Further critical research should be performed on the self-selection process of the board and how women select which board to post on. A number of women do not fit into the “perfect” structure of the board as either a SAHM or working mother. Instead there are a number of women who are working part-time, work from home or find themselves in other situations that leads them to have a difficult time identifying completely with the categories of SAHM or working mother. The women who do not fall into a one of these categories post on the board in areas that they feel are pertinent to their situation as mothers. They choose which group they personally identify with at any given time. For example, one work from home mother may feel that her comments would benefit the working moms and therefore chooses to post to that board on that given day and on another day may choose to post to the SAHM board. Studying the movement of these mothers back and forth between the pre-defined categories would shed light on other groups of mothers and help understand the identity construction process of mothers who do not fit into the socially defined categories as presented on the discussion board.

Future Direction and Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to gain insight into the identity construction process of mothers. This study presents a number of areas for future study. The study has pointed to an increased need of in-depth studies relating to the intersection of popular discourse and identity construction. More specifically, how individuals have shifted their use of the Internet from an information-seeking medium to a means of creating a community of support.

The evolution of the Internet and the online discussion forum presents only one aspect of popular discourse. Mothers are inundated with much information pertaining to their role of mother. Public discourse has become such an important aspect of our modern society that it is important for researchers to continue to study the far-reaching affects of it on mothering identities.

It is also evident that the mothers are turning to the boards for support and guidance that might traditionally have been sought through interactions with family members and friends. The number and quality of posts on the boards may suggest a shift in the places that mothers go to find support. As the Internet and social websites become more popular, it would be beneficial to study the use of the online discussion forum as a new means of community support. The mere idea of mothers shifting their support community from close family relations to the global Internet community presents a fascinating and relevant area of study.

This study enhances scholars' understanding of the evolving role of mother in society. As we become increasingly aware of the affects that societal expectations have on ones identity scholars must continue to study the changing ways in which mothers are

responding to the public discourse and how those responses are ultimately transforming the role of mother.

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FOOTNOTES

[i] Although some social constructionists favor a more psychologically grounded approach (see, e.g., Dickins, 2004; Gergen & Davis, 1985; Lyddon, 1995), this study employs social constructionism as a purely interactive and interpretive process that is rooted in discourse.

[ii] Oakley's historical research focuses on white middle class mothers and does not present the expectations for mothers of different races or economic standing.

[iii] Darling Husband

[iv] Darling Daughter

[v] Darling Son

[vi] Darling Son