Sex Roles, Vol. 51, Nos. 9/10, November 2004 (© 2004)

Moms Hating Moms: The Internalization of Mother War Rhetoric

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Work status and mothering are culturally constructed as rigid binaries. The purpose of this study was to explore the effect on mothers of these polarized characterizations of motherhood and to assess the social support mothers perceive they receive for their mother identity. This study, based on interview data collected from 98 married mothers of preschool children, demonstrated that Mother War rhetoric is most extensively internalized by at-home mothers. The majority of mothers perceived a lack of cultural support for their mother role, though the impact of cultural Mother War rhetoric was buffered or exacerbated by mothers' social support systems. The lack of adequate support from other mothers, spouses, parents, and in-laws led mothers to binary constructions of worker–mother identity. This, in turn, led mothers to seek support within shared contexts, which further separated at-home and employed mother from each other and separated mothers from the support of their parents.

KEY WORDS: social support; mothering; maternal; work status.

Popular discourse, from newspaper advertisements to popular books to television talk shows, perpetuates what has come to be known as the "Mother Wars." The Oprah episode (October 2002) with the highest number of viewers to date and the largest internet viewer response rate was a staged debate between at-home and employed mothers. Dr Laura, in her top rated radio talk show and New York Times bestselling book, *Parenthood by Proxy: Don't Have Them If You Won't Raise Them*, polarized mothers by instructing employed mothers to invest in a parakeet rather than a baby (Schlessinger, 2000). On the other side, although getting far less press exposure, Peters (1997) in her book *When Mothers Work: Loving our Children without Sacrificing Ourselves* claimed that all mothers should work outside the home in order to be better mothers and well-adjusted women.

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It is as if at-home and employed mothers are pitted against each other in a crazed cultural contest for "Worst Mother of the Year." We imagine the at-home mother, toxic with Prozac and smiling a beatific smile that suggests she's one day shy of institutionalization, freezing organic vegetables in ice-cube trays for baby, constructing life-size geodesic forts out of rolled newspaper for toddler, and baking welcome-home brownies for her kindergartner. We imagine the employed mother, frazzled, yelling at her children to hurry up, dragging screaming kids and diaper bags to the minivan to drop off children in substandard daycare, while clearly preoccupied with concluding a big business deal on her cell phone. As a result of these stereotypes, work status (i.e., employment or at-home) and mothering (good mother or bad mother) are culturally constructed as rigid binaries (Buxton, 1998; Darnton, 1990).

The purpose of this study was to explore the effect on mothers of these polarized characterizations of motherhood. Is there empirical evidence for the "Mother Wars?" Do mothers internalize and participate in this adversarial climate of competing mothering ideologies? Although the term "Mother Wars"

is widely used and understood, and the media circus that pits at-home and employed mothers against each other is familiar, there is little empirical research to confirm that this intolerance for other mothers and their work decisions characterizes the lived experience of mothers.

Polarized constructions of at-home and employed mothers are apparent in the media. In a content analysis of the representation of at-home and employed mothers in women's magazines, we found that employed and at-home mothers were represented in significantly different ways (Johnston & Swanson, 2003a). At-home mothers were more likely than employed mothers to be represented as traditional, in the home, and White. Specifically, at-home mothers were only found in the home, yard, or car. They were not presented as involved, or even present, in the public sphere. Employed mothers, when presented, were depicted in both domestic and public sphere contexts. Yet employed mothers were essentially absent in women's magazines; the ratio of at-home to employed mother representations was 9:1. We concluded that the traditional motherhood ideology is preserved in contemporary women's magazines and that anyone who differs on the basis of race, employment status, or public sphere involvement is outside normative mother-role expectations.

In another study, we conducted a content analysis of double bind messages in women's magazines (Johnston & Swanson, 2003b). That study revealed that magazines promote particular ideals of motherhood and then condemn mothers for achieving the ideal. Double binds were most prevalent for at-home mothers. For example, at-home mothers were presented with ideologies of domestic success but also represented as inept and incapable of achieving such success. The identity of at-home motherhood was lauded as an important and challenging job, yet at-home mothers were presented in magazines as one-dimensional objects for the gratification of others' needs. At-home mothers were also presented as naturally and innately prepared for the tasks of motherhood, yet in need of continual expert advice. The potential effects of double bind messages on mothers are significant; Bateson (1972) suggested that targets of double binds are plagued by feelings of guilt and inadequacy. When mothers are made to feel undermined, it is reasonable to speculate that it would exacerbate defensiveness about their work status decision.

In the studies of magazine content, we did not find content that explicitly addressed the Mother Wars; less than 1% of magazine content addressed ambivalence about work decision (Johnston & Swanson, 2003a). Although there was no evidence that magazine content pitted competing ideologies against each other, the refusal to acknowledge that women are passionately committed, or alternatively, conflicted, about their at-home/employment decision constructs work–family choice as a nonissue for readers of women's magazines.

These employed versus at-home mother distinctions appear to be real to mothers. In a comparison of the social construction of motherhood in the narratives of at-home, part-time employed, and full-time employed mothers, we found that employment status has become a standard for evaluating "good" mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2004a, 2004b; Swanson & Johnston, 2003). Mothers defined the ideal mother through the construction of definitional boundaries that exclude mothers different from themselves. At-home mothers defined the ideal mother as always present and accessible, thereby excluding employed mothers from the definition of a good mother. Good mothers were defined as self-sacrificing, according to at-home mothers, and as not putting their own needs (e.g., career) before the needs of their children. In turn, employed mothers believed that a happy mother makes a happy child and that a mother's happiness is derived from multiple roles and interests outside of motherhood. This position is used to exclude those at-home mothers who do not have a socially recognized identity separate from their mother-role (e.g., volunteer activities).

It follows that mothers may perceive and construct their own mothering identities by differentiating themselves from other mothers who have made different work choices. This research leads us to question the extent to which mothers have internalized the culture's Mother Wars rhetoric.

RQ1: Do at-home, part-time employed, and full-time employed mothers hold stereotypical and judgmental views of mothers who make work choices different from their own?

RQ2: Do at-home, part-time employed, and full-time employed mothers perceive that the culture is supportive of mothers, and, in particular, of their own worker–mother identity?

How, then, do the cultural characterizations of good and bad mothers affect the personal support mothers receive? The construction of identity, according to Berger and Luckmann (1966), involves both sociocultural influences and personal influences,

such as the validation of others. Golden (2001), for example, noted the importance of affirmation of friends and family in the construction of worker–parent identity. We know that social support in general has positive effects on psychological well-being (Van Willigen & Drentea, 2001), and lack of perceived support is associated with increased levels of stress and unhappiness (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996). Ray and Miller (1991) found that decreased levels of social support are related to greater role ambiguity, exhaustion, and burnout. The implications of mother burnout cannot be ignored. In studies of teacher burnout, Moracco and McFadden (1982) found that burnout led to psychological and physical distancing from students. It follows that mother burnout could have similar detrimental effects on children.

It is almost as if there are too many choices, and each choice carries its own condemnation. DeChick (1988) found that mothers are ambivalent about their worker–parent identities: 56% of at-home mothers said they would choose a career if they could, and 21% of employed mothers said they would, if they could, leave their job. Maushart (1999) contends that no matter what work status decision we make what unites all mothers is a sense that they are "missing out" (p. 173). We found that at-home mothers and full-time employed mothers were significantly less happy, according to a life satisfaction index and Beck's Mood Inventory, than were part-time employed mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2004a). Part-time "chameleon" mothers attributed their role satisfaction and happiness to alternatively playing the role of at-home and career mother to avoid social sanctions.

In light of the ambivalence and unhappiness experienced by some mothers, it is worthwhile not only to assess the perceived cultural support of mothers, but also to assess the personal support mothers receive. To what extent are the Mother Wars being enacted on a personal level?

Social support is defined as relational communication within a network of relationships that provides emotional messages conveying belonging, love, caring, esteem, and value. As such, social support is "essential to maintaining the integrity of the self and feelings of group solidarity" (Bharadwaj & Wilkening, 1980, p. 338). Various types of social support have been identified in the literature, including emotional support, esteem support, network support, tangible support, and informational support (Xu & Burleson, 2001). Studies of social support have included measures of support given as well as perceptions of support received (Xu & Burleson, 2001). Many have argued that measures of perceived support are important, or more important, than measures of actual support provided (Cunningham & Barbee, 2000; Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 1997).

When we examine who provides social support to mothers, the research on shared context is revealing. In numerous studies it has been demonstrated that in difficult times people seek support from those with whom they share a context. For example, widowers seek someone who has also been widowed (Morgan, Carder, & Neal, 1997), people experiencing job stress seek support from other people at work (Albrecht, 1982), and nurses experiencing burnout seek support from other burned out nurses (Anderson & Gray-Toft, 1982). For mothers this may mean turning to their co-parenting spouses, to their own mothers, or to their friends who are also mothers. It is possible that at-home mothers shift their support network to include more at-home mothers, and employed mothers shift their network to include more employed mothers.

Research on spousal support suggests that women desire higher levels of support from their spouses than they receive (Xu & Burleson, 2001) and that spousal support is vital to marital satisfaction (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). Moreover, research has shown that spousal support is not only related to marital satisfaction but parenting role praise from one's spouse is the best predictor of parental competence and closeness to children (Ehrenberg, Gearing-Small, Hunter, & Small, 2001). Spousal emotional support is related to an increased commitment to family role (Wiersma & Vander Berg, 1991), and spousal support is associated with nurturing and with more positive and responsive parenting (Belsky, 1990; Belsky, Youngblade, Rovine, & Valling, 1991). There is also considerable evidence that perceived spousal social support is greatest in equitable marital relationships (Deutsch, 1999; Risman & Johnson-Sumerford, 1998; Van Willigen & Drentea, 2001). Other researchers have concluded that nonequitable relationships are more likely to be associated with increased depression (Glass & Fujimoto, 1994; Mirowsky, 1985; Schafer & Keith, 1980), decreased marital satisfaction (Hatfield, Greenberger, Traupmann, & Lambert, 1982), and reports of decreased marital quality (Pina & Bengston, 1993).

A recent comprehensive study of spousal support delineates the number and type of tasks

and the amount of time fathers contribute to domestic chores and childcare (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). Although the majority of married couples believe that housework should be shared, these beliefs do not always translate into practice (Huber & Sptize, 1980). Spain and Bianchi, in fact, found that gender inequalities persist in the distribution of domestic work and childcare. Husbands participate most in childcare and yard work, and are least likely to do cooking, cleaning, dishwashing, laundry, and grocery shopping (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Spain & Bianchi, 1996).

Support from one's own mother is also important. Golden (2001) found that the single most important source for construction of worker–parent identity is family-of-origin, and Trees (2002) found that adult daughters seek support from their own mothers; this support is most likely to take the form of emotional and problem-focused support. In our own research, we found a more complex relationship of mother–daughter support (Johnston & Swanson, 2004c). We found a modeling/reaction pattern whereby at-home daughters either modeled their stay-home mothers or reacted against their negleetful employed mothers. Employed daughters either modeled their employed mothers or reacted against their depressed at-home mothers.

If Mother Wars rhetoric is perpetuated at a personal level, we would expect mothers to complain of a lack of support within their social networks and, perhaps, to talk about a buttressing of networks with like-minded people who support their chosen worker–mother identity. If Mother Wars rhetoric is not perpetuated at the personal level, the level of perceived support may have more to do with situational factors than with a threatened worker–mother identity. Leslie (1989), for example, looked at the impact of social support on work/family stress in dual-income couples and found that work overload was a more powerful predictor than social support in determining level of stress. The following research questions were designed to explore whether the adversarial Mother Wars have penetrated mothers' social support networks. We wanted to explore how and by whom mothers are supported, and whether or not mothers are receiving adequate social support.

RQ3: Do mothers perceive adequate support for their worker–mother identity within their personal support networks?

RQ4: Do mothers perceive that they are supported in their worker–mother identity by their spouses? Do mothers perceive that they are supported in their worker-mother identity by their friends and extended family? If so, what kinds of support do they perceive from each of these sources?

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

Interviews were conducted with 98 married mothers with at least one child under the age of 5 years. The interviews were semistructured and open-ended. The recorded interviews averaged 2 hr in length and were usually conducted in the woman's home. A modified network sampling technique was used to solicit participation in the study (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). An initial list of 54 names of mothers with at least one preschool-aged child was generated using contacts in the community such as church, neighbors, colleagues, preschool, sports teams, and friends who fit the criteria. Fifteen percent of the initial sample provided referrals; only an average of 1.8 referrals from any respondent was included in the sample to avoid becoming enmeshed in groups of like-minded people. An additional 21% of the interview sample came from referrals made by people not part of the sample but interested in the study.

The mothers ranged in age from 22 to 51 years. Seventy percent of the women had more than one child (sample average = 2.16 children). The sample included mothers who were self-defined as employed full-time ($n = 39$, 40%), employed part-time ($n = 29$, 30%), and at-home full-time with their children ($n = 30$, 30%). The majority of the women were White, married, and middle-class; all had an education of high school or above. The sample for this study was purposively homogenized by race, marital status, economic status, and education to provide the largest cell sizes for comparison of the three employment groups. It will be important for future researchers to validate the lived experience of mothers who have less choice in their decision to be employed (cf., Glenn, 1994).

The Interview

The internalization of Mother Wars stereotypes was assessed by responses to the following questions: How would you describe [employed

women/at-home] mothers? How would you describe mothers who [stay home if you are employed/seek employment if you are at-home]? What three words would you use to describe the experience of [employed/at-home] mothers? What do you think of mothers who [work outside the home/stay home]? What sorts of pressures and expectations do you have as an [employed/at-home] mother that other mothers don't? What do you think would happen if you were to [stay at home/work outside the home] now? Part-time employed mothers were asked to describe both full-time employed and at-home mothers.

Cultural support for a mother's work or home choice was measured from responses to the questions: Do you think that the culture is more supportive of mothers who are employed or mothers who stay at home? Do you think that you receive adequate support for your [part-time or full-time employed/at-home] mother-role? Who supports your [part-time or full-time employed/at-home] mother role? Do you ever feel undermined for your [part-time or full-time employed/at-home] mother role? If so, by whom? Personal support was measured by asking about amount and type of emotional, tangible, affirmation, and advice support received from own mothers, spouses, family, and friends.

Coding

The narrative data were first coded thematically (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Themes were analyzed by work status using NUDIST qualitative data analysis software and interpreted for frequency, repetition, and dominance of discursive interpretations (Burr, 1995; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). The coding was done by the two researchers and two students trained in qualitative analysis. To protect the anonymity of our Participants, they will be referred to by a randomly assigned interview number.

RESULTS

RQ1: Do Mothers Hold Stereotypical and Judgmental Views of Other Mothers?

Analysis of mothers' narratives revealed discursive differences in the ways mothers described other mothers. For this particular question, part-time employed mothers were aligned with at-home mothers in their responses and the responses of these two groups were contrasted with the responses of full-time employed mothers.

The interviews revealed that mothers do hold stereotypical views of each other on the basis of work status, but even more interesting are the discursive patterns that emerged in these descriptions. Employed mothers were objectified in the descriptions of both at-home and part-time employed mothers. Detailed, but stereotypical, images of the superficial appearance and behavior of employed mothers were presented by at-home and part-time employed mothers: "The Working Mother? You've got your briefcase, and your suit and your java, and you're in your LandRover Jeep whatever rushing off to work" (67); "[The working mother] is appearance-oriented . . . goal-oriented" (3); "[The working mother] is going to work, she's eating her little yogurt and bag of carrot/celery sticks for lunch and staying thin. And she has time to keep her hair regularly trimmed. And she's also stressing out, you know, having to balance home and family, and she comes home and then falls apart and screams and yells and may have to take off work . . . I guess that's my image of someone at work" (76).

The internal goals, feelings, and motivations of an employed mother were rarely recognized by at-home mothers, and, when they were, at-home mothers described an employed mother as a wayward at-home mother: "She's unhappy . . . someone who's yearning to be a stay-at-home mom" (42). The narratives of at-home and part-time employed mothers consistently portrayed the stereotype of the crazed working mother who neglects her home and family. "You're so busy that you don't have time to think; you don't have time to do stuff with the kids" (18); "Frazzled . . . they're deprived of . . . time at home with their kids" (96).

At-home and part-time employed mothers also made a point in their narratives to construct the image of the employed mother through self differentiation: employed mothers are neglectful—I am not. "[She is] frazzled and frustrated. How do they do it? How do you look calm, cool, and collected? Who picks up the house? Who does all this stuff that I do all day long?" (10); "Busy. I wish I could think of a stronger word—busy and so torn and so pulled. That's the image I get of the typical [employed] mom in our society—putting herself last. Work and kids and hopefully husband, when there

is one, all being forced to be first. It just seems like a very harried, hectic lifestyle. American [working] moms, I think, put too much on their plate" (26); "Busy . . . Juggling. Just to juggle both schedules would be difficult, and rewarding—to a point. It's not for me" (49); "If I were to be full time employed, three words I would use to describe myself would be unhappy, frazzled, and discontented" (54); "I think of stress. I think of always needing to run from one place to another and never having enough time to please everybody. That's what comes to mind. I think of day care, getting up in the morning, getting everyone ready, packing all the bags, getting to the sitter, hurry, hurry, hurry, getting to work, doing your job, hurry, hurry, gotta get home, gotta make supper, gotta get every one ready for bed, and then start all over the next day. It just doesn't sound good to me" (90). It is interesting to note that some at-home mothers assume that the children's father is absent or uninvolved.

The unidimensional objectification of employed mothers was also evident when at-home and part-time employed mothers acknowledged the positive attributes of employed mothers. These descriptions once again focused more on the mothers as "image," than the mothers as people: "Working moms are organized . . . incredibly busy . . ." (14) "they are flexible . . . superwomen . . . organized" (84). Part-time employed mothers similarly described employed mothers as "efficient" (96). The slightly more positive attributions made by part-time employed mothers acknowledge that the employed mother does have internal qualities, such as feelings and goals, but these qualities are only attributed to her career, not her children: "[They are] highly motivated, very goal oriented, successful . . . they've just got the world under control" (23). Only one respondent, a part-time employed mother, mentioned the mothering dedication of full-time employed mothers: "[They are] busy, working, and CARING. I have friends who work full-time, and they really do care about what's going on at home. It's not like they're out there and they don't care. They really do, and they're working very hard to do both" (52).

Employed mothers were less critical of at-home mothers and had little to say about part-time employed mothers. Employed mothers' characterizations of at-home mothers were laden with ambivalence, and employed mothers did not differentiate themselves from the identity and experiences of at-home mothers. "I think stress would be one way to describe them (at-home mothers). Rewards—more rewards in seeing your child grow than it would be working full time. Maybe isolation would be another" (28). "I think they're probably running, because they allow their children to be involved in more activities . . . I think that they're probably a little bit more relaxed in the sense of not as hurried . . . If you're home you can be a little bit more flexible. Organized but flexible" (7). "Caring, involved, very involved with their children, and maybe more dependent. More dependent on their relationship with their children" (80). Whereas the constructions of at-home motherhood by employed mothers focused more on the mother as person with feelings and desires (e.g., serene earth mother), the construction of employed mothers by at-home mothers focused on the mother as an image (e.g., efficient java guzzling machine).

Although not prevalent, a few employed mothers did stereotype at-home mothers. Stereotypes reflected attributions regarding the personality and disposition of at-home mothers. Positive stereotypes of at-home mothers reflected the creativity of at-home mothers: "You have to be creative to stay home and entertain your kids all day and think of things to do all day" (50). Negative stereotypes reflected a lack of ambition in at-home mothers: "[At-home mothers are] not ambitious. [They are] people who are maybe just content to sit around with their kids" (37); "I think that they always look exhausted. If they didn't get to the shower that day that's okay . . . maybe they're not motivated to do much" (79).

At-home and part-time employed mothers' negative portrayal of employed mothers, the tendency to construct employed mothers in objectifying terms and images, and the compulsion to differentiate oneself from employed mothers all suggest that the Mother Wars rhetoric that is polarizing at-home and employed mothers appears to be internalized most by at-home mothers and to a somewhat lesser extent by part-time employed mothers. The construction of at-home mothers by employed mothers, in contrast, was more ambivalent than consistently negative, more focused on person-centered traits and qualities, and efforts to differentiate oneself from at-home mothers were not found. Employed mothers may be less likely to internalize, or at least reiterate, the Mother Wars rhetoric.

RQ2: Is the Culture Supportive of At-Home Mothers, Employed Mothers, or Both? Does the Culture Support Your Worker–Mother Identity?

Both at-home and full-time employed mothers perceived that the culture is more supportive of other mothers. Cumulatively, only roughly one-third of at-home and employed mothers felt validated that the culture supports their choice or supports the work status choices of all mothers. It is interesting that 12–19% within each group perceived that the culture doesn't support mothers—no matter what choice they make.

Part-time employed mothers are conflicted in their assessment of cultural support: they perceived, without exception, that their community is more supportive of at-home mothers but that nationally the culture is more supportive of full-time employed mothers. In a culture that constructs work and motherhood in binary terms, this may be a way for part-time employed mothers to validate both identity roles. Personally they have integrated these roles, but the culture is lagging behind. Cultural representations and discourse give little attention to, and by extension validation of, part-time employed roles.

There are differences in the way mothers discursively construct cultural support. The answers of the full-time employed mothers were consistent and straightforward with very little elaboration. "[The culture is more supportive of] the mothers that stay at home I would say" (28); "It's definitely more supportive of mothers who stay home" (30); and "I think moms who stay at home" (60). Full-time employed mothers may perceive that the culture is not supportive of their role, but they are not compelled to justify their mother-role or discursively to position themselves in opposition to the culture.

In contrast, at-home mothers seek to justify their mother identity by condemning the values of the culture. According to at-home mothers, both employed mothers and society have misguided priorities. "[You are] working for the lifestyle, not working for your child. You know it's not like you're putting all kinds of money aside for their college education or something. You're working for the lifestyle and, I don't know, but I think society puts pressure on people to do that . . . *and they don't necessarily validate people who say I'm going to give that up for the next 10–15 years so that I can provide more time with my child*" (62). Ironically, even some media personalities were perceived to be countercultural: "I think that now people think that it's good for moms to work and daycare isn't such a bad thing . . . but I've been listening to Dr. Laura and she's kind of brainwashed me a little bit because she's very into stay at home moms *and being your kid's mom*" (92).

Part-time employed mothers perceived a cultural shift from support for employed mothers to support for at-home mothers: "I used to think, even a few years ago, that is was more supportive of moms who went to work. But in the last year or so, I don't know, I watch a lot of Oprah . . . and a lot of people watch her and her biggest thing these last two years have been giving some honor to moms who stay at home and a lot of topics about that and it seems to carry over into other media as well" (90). "Actually, I would say we're probably shifting more to stay at home moms, being more supportive of stay at home moms again. In my experience, in my little realm of people, I probably socialize with more moms who stay at home" (56). A shifting cultural position validates the part-time employed mothers' place in the worlds of employment and at-home motherhood.

All of this suggests that whatever worker–mother identity an at-home or employed mother may choose, she may well perceive herself to be at odds with the culture. She doesn't believe that her identity is valued by the culture. This perceived lack of support—or sense that the other choice receives more support—is consistent with the polarization of employed and at-home motherhood perpetuated by Mother War rhetoric. The tendency for at-home mothers to justify their mother identities by positioning themselves vis a vis the culture suggests that they may feel even more threatened by cultural Mother Wars messages than do employed mothers. Meanwhile, part-time employed mothers ride the rails, garnering support from either or both sides of the Mother Wars.

RQ3: Do Mothers Perceive Adequate Support Within Their Social Support Networks?

When asked if they believe that they receive adequate support within their personal network of relationships for their decision to work or to stay home, two-thirds to three-fourths of all mothers said that they do receive adequate support (68%, $n = 27$, of all at-home mothers, and 77%, $n = 43$, of all full-time and part-time employed mothers).

When asked if anyone undermines their worker–mother identity, a surprising pattern emerged. At-home mothers said that they are undermined by intimate others, whereas full-time employed mothers said that they are undermined by sources less central to their intimate social support network. Part-time employed mothers did not feel undermined; they did not believe that their worker–mother identity was undermined by generalized others, and they said it was only rarely undermined by family.

At-home mothers indicated that it is most often family members who undermine their worker–mother identity. Negative support messages were most often received from own parents, parents-in-law, and sisters-in-law. Although not condemned for their choice to stay home, they are condemned for not being a "good enough" mother: "My dad [criticizes my parenting] definitely. I try to avoid even being around him a whole heck of a lot" (27). "I can't call my dad and say how hard it is [to parent]. He would say 'Well, your mom did it.' He would never understand" (3). "My in-laws . . . undermine [me as a parent]. Sometimes there are even comments made in front of the kids, and I feel like that really undermines me" (32). "[My husband's] family makes me very nervous . . . when we're together, I feel like I have to do everything right, including parenting" (61); "It's the little things. [My mother-in-law] will say, 'I can't believe you haven't taken her to the doctor yet' or 'I can't believe you're using the front burner on the stove.' It's like things like that" (62). At-home mothers also reported feeling belittled by employed moms: "Sometimes when I'm with moms that work, I don't quite fit in . . . we were over at the beach, and most of the moms were working moms, one mom made a comment something about how she's always rushed to make dinner . . . She said, 'Oh I bet it's nice to be able to have so much time to be able to make dinner.' It's like, 'So you think I have all this time'?" (43).

Full-time employed mothers' answers reflected a lack of support from external sources (e.g., church, employers, nonspecific acquaintances, or culture at large): "I think ministers can [undermine you as a parent] in their sermons" (33); "[At work] they would all go out for a drink or a get-together at 5:00, and I would say that I had to get home. I felt more bound to the clock than they did, so I ended up not doing things like that with them" (81); "I sometimes feel that my husband's employer, who is a woman by the way, says, 'well, can't your wife stay home and deal with that' or my boss will say, 'well, you need to be here, that's all there is to it.' That kind of thing. There's pressure" (4).

Full-time employed mothers are not immune to Mother War rhetoric that challenges their competency as mothers but the challenges come from generalized others, not specific people with whom the mothers have relationships. "I would say that mothers that have chosen not to work until their kids are in school are the ones that probably have the most [negative] effect on me. Those are the ones that may get me second-guessing myself. They'll say how important it is to stay home at these certain ages" (51). "People in the community or neighborhood will suggest or make comments to my son, 'Oh, it'd be nice if your mom could come, but she's probably working, she can't come.' Those kinds of comments make the children feel like somehow their mom is abandoning them. Their best friend's mom is at home, and his mom is not [abandoning him]" (80).

The undermining of social support is most pronounced for at-home mothers. At-home mothers perceived undermining images and behavior within the most intimate levels of their support network, whereas employed mothers were more likely to experience support. Part-time employed mothers perceived the most consistently positive support.

RQ: Level and Type of Support from Spouses, Family, Friends, and Own Mother

When asked who affirmed them in their choice to work or stay home, there were no significant differences by mothers' work status. Most mothers identified their spouses as most affirming. In decreasing order of mention, additional support from the following sources was acknowledged: family, friends, coworkers, own mother, and parents-in-law. If extended family support, own mother support, and parents-in-law support are combined, family support exceeds spouse support.

For each source of support, respondents were asked what kind of emotional, tangible, affirmation, and advice support was received. Respondents identified encouragement, listening, respecting decisions, and latent approval (e.g., making the same decision as own mother or friend) as forms of emotional support.

Respondents usually defined tangible support as childcare, but also included buying gifts and supplies (e.g., diapers), transporting a child to an activity

or to daycare, and regular long-distance visits. One part-time employed mother explained, "Like my mom will just go to Wal-mart and pick up a pack of diapers. I don't ask her to, but she does it because she wanted to. She was there, my son needed diapers, she picked them up for me and she paid for them, and I appreciate it" (22). One full-time mother told us that, "My parents come every 2 or 3 months. When they come out they let us go out; they'll do whatever they can. . . . [But the rest of the time] she is always sending cards, and my sister is sending little packages and gifts even if it is just like socks, something to open up in the mail or cards with a dollar . . . stuff like that" (79).

Respondents constructed affirmation support as verbal agreement with mother role identity or work decision. One at-home mother explained affirmation as the support she received from both personal contacts and the media: "I'll still call my friend on the phone, especially on days that I'm having an 'I don't want to read Dr. Seuss for the thirteenth time.' I found myself turning on radio shows on radio stations that really support stay-at-home moms or real family-oriented kinds of shows. Just to be hearing those messages over and over, reminding myself' (14).

Advice support was defined in both positive and negative terms and included information from friends, family, doctors, and other parents. Most of the mothers reported getting positive advice and encouragement when they asked for it, but they resented the unsolicited advice offered by neighbors, church members, and women who have made a different decision.

It is also important to note than when asked about social support, mothers talked about "negative support"—messages and actions that are critical of their mother role identity. The mention of not just a lack of support but actual "negative support" when we asked about support for their mother roles suggests that women expect positive support from these people within their social networks, and damaging messages and behaviors have significant impact on perceived support for their mother roles.

For part-time and full-time employed mothers, coworkers were identified as a source of "negative support" more often than positive support. Nearly one-half of the mentions of childcare provider support were negative. For at-home mothers, in-laws and own mother were primary sources of negative support.

Although spouses were mentioned most frequently as a source of worker–mother identity support, when we asked specifically what types of emotional, tangible, affirmation, and advice support spouses provide, spouses were not perceived to be primary sources of specific types of support. Full-time employed mothers were more likely to mention spouses as a source of emotional support than were at-home or part-time employed mothers. This may support the shared-context support theory that people seek support from those who share the same experience, as employed mothers share the challenges of balancing employment and parenting roles with their spouses.

Overall, spouses were the least frequently mentioned sources of tangible, affirmation, and advice support. One at-home mother said, "I think that because they're male, they don't get it sometimes. They think they can give you a few things to do, and it's all fixed. . . . I think sometimes you confide in your girlfriends, and your husband would be mortified if he knew what you confided in your friends about" (42). Spouses were also behind family and friends in the provision of emotional support, and only one mother mentioned spouse as a source of advice support.

Family and friends were the primary sources of emotional, tangible, and affirmation support provided to mothers. Sources of family support were primarily siblings and siblings-in-law; parents and parents-in-law were excluded from this category, as they were coded separately. "Both of my sisters gave us a ton of stuff which was helpful because we only had a few days notice and we didn't have very much. They've been very supportive with giving us baby things to use and baby tips and that kind of thing" (29, at-home). "My girls' favorite thing to do is go to these family reunions and stuff with all of their cousins or the holidays when everyone is over at mom's and dad's. It is like their favorite thing to do" (72, employed part-time). "I have a sister who stays with me 3 nights a week and she helps me with childcare if I need to work in the evening while my husband is gone at meetings" (89, employed full-time). "I think there's a lot of support here from the people in our neighborhood and my friends. It seems like we're all from a different city—it's like we're all in the same boat—so I think we try to help each other out when we can" (1, at-home).

These results indicate that contemporary mothers are not relying as much on their parents' generation as they are on similar-aged family and friends for parenting support. Coworkers and friends

were identified more often than own mothers as a source of emotional, tangible, and affirmation support. And although perceived as generally supportive, spouses provided little emotional, tangible, affirmation, or advice support.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study suggest that Mother War rhetoric does affect mothers. At-home mothers construct a mother identity consistent with cultural Mother War rhetoric, and the majority of all mothers perceive a lack of cultural support for their mother role. The results also suggest that the impact of cultural Mother War rhetoric can be buffered or exacerbated by mothers' social support systems.

The binary constructions of at-home and employed mothers perpetuated by Mother Wars rhetoric are most extensively internalized by at-home mothers, and are somewhat less internalized by part-time employed mothers. The characterization of employed mothers by at-home and part-time employed mothers was negative, based on appearance and image, and objectifying. At-home mothers actively framed their discourse to differentiate themselves from employed mothers.

The discursive efforts to differentiate from employed mothers are consistent with our earlier findings that at-home mothers' definition of a "good mother" is constructed to exclude employed mothers, and full-time employed mothers were more likely to see work/motherhood options as a continuum, rather than a dichotomy (Johnston & Swanson, 2004a). Blair-Loy (2001) found that employed mothers had both work and home devotion schemas, and Garey (1995) and Hattery (2001) found that mothers construct their motherhood and employment in ways that cross over boundaries of work and home distinctions (e.g., the night nurse who defined herself as an at-home mother).

At-home mothers may rely on binary constructions because they perceive employed mothers primarily in their employment, rather than in their mother, role, which results in little basis for role identification. At-home mothers create a psychological distance from employed mothers that is conducive to stereotyping and objectifying employed mothers. In contrast, employed mothers may perceive at-home mothers primarily in their capacity as mothers, and are therefore more likely to identify with at-home mothers due to their shared mother identity. The role identification hypothesis may also explain why part-time employed mothers are less intense in their nullification of full-time employed mothers. The fact that part-time employed mothers choose to differentiate themselves from full-time employed mothers speaks to the power of the "good mother/bad mother" in Mother War rhetoric. To identify with full-time employed mothers would be an association with bad mothering.

Mothers also perceive that their roles are not valued by the culture. Perhaps the most interesting finding related to cultural support is that at-home mothers responded to a perceived lack of cultural support by defining a moral position in opposition to the culture. In a sense they reframed a lack of cultural support as a moral justification for their mother identity choice. If roughly the same number of full-time employed mothers believes that the culture does not support their mother identity, are they more at risk for feeling undermined in their mother roles because they do not discursively reframe this lack of support as a position of strength? Or, are employed mothers simply less threatened by the lack of cultural support for their mother roles because they have multiple roles upon which to base their identity?

The analysis of mothers' social support systems revealed that part-time employed mothers appear to be riding the margins between full-time employment and at-home motherhood in such a way that Mother War rhetoric does not invade their personal support network. Part-time employed mothers are not targets of the Mother War rhetoric, and in this study they reported that they do not feel undermined in their mother roles. Both at-home and full-time employed mothers—the targets of Mother War rhetoric—reported feeling undermined by others in their personal support network. Yet, full-time employed mothers seemed, with some success, to insulate their social support systems from Mother War rhetoric. Full-time employed mothers reported that undermining messages and behaviors infiltrated their external networks of neighbors, acquaintances, and coworkers, but not their most intimate networks of social support, such as family and friends. At-home mothers' narratives, in contrast, included elaborate examples of undermining messages and behaviors from the most central members of their social support system. Future research is needed to explore the impact of this lack of social support on role ambiguity, exhaustion, burnout (Ray & Miller, 1991), stress, and unhappiness (Deater-Dekard & Scarr, 1996). Our results also raised questions of whether

at-home mothers feel defensive about their roles and are therefore more susceptible to perceptions of undermining messages, or whether employed mothers have more diffuse networks of support that buffer their susceptibility to undermining messages and actions.

The analysis of sources of support revealed that spouses are lacking in their provision of emotional, tangible, affirmation, and advice support. This finding is important in light of previous research that demonstrated that spouse support is important for marital satisfaction (Hatfield et al., 1982; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) and parent–child involvement (Belsky, 1990; Belsky et al., 1991; Ehrenberg et al., 2001). Full-time employed mothers reported more emotional support from spouses than did at-home mothers, and this may be a result of the overlap of worker–parent identities shared by employed mothers and fathers. The finding that mothers wanted to portray their spouse as supportive when asked generally about source of support, but cited others as primary sources of specific kinds of support, is important. On the other hand, Spain and Bianchi (1996, p. 171) wrote that "academic researchers seem more troubled by the division of household labor than the women they interview."

All mothers cited friends and family (e.g., siblings and siblings-in-law) as the primary sources of emotional, tangible, affirmation, and advice support. In particular, mothers sought support from peers with whom they had a shared context. These findings provide further evidence of the gender inequity in the family domain identified by other researchers (Deutsch, 1999; Hoschild, 1989; Moen, 1992; Spain & Bianchi, 1996).

Support from parents and parents-in-law was secondary to friends and siblings, which suggests a decreased role of parents in the transmission of parenting values and support to their adult children. Indeed, negative support—the lack of support from people within the social support network from whom a person expects support—was highest for parents and parents-in-law. The lack of perceived support from parents may reflect the insidious effect of Mother War rhetoric in undermining mothers' roles and creating greater psychological distance between contemporary mother identity and the mother identity of their parents' generation. The lack of support from own parents and parents-in-law may also be an artifact of our increasingly mobile society. Mothers frequently mentioned that lack of family support is related to extended family not living close-by.

From these results we can speculate that Mother War rhetoric leads at-home mothers to binary constructions of worker–mother identity, leads mothers to seek support within shared contexts—further separating at-home and employed mothers—and leads mothers to disconnect from the support of their parents' generation. Although we found evidence of Mother War rhetoric, additional research is needed to determine if these patterns hold true for a more diverse sample of mothers, including women compelled to work for financial reasons and Women of Color.

A limitation of this study is the differentiation of mothers by work status. Clearly there are more subtle differences within groups that reflect the situational and attitudinal factors that influence work status decision. Another limitation of this study is the homogeneity of the sample. The results say little about the identity construction of non-White, less-educated, less financially privileged, or single mothers. This study is also limited to the construction of identity based on intensive mothering expectations. Worker–parent identity is also necessarily influenced by the degree to which a mother ties her identity to her job and her perceived financial need. The weighing and integration of mothering ideology and worer identity need to be explored in future research (cf., Johnston & Swanson, 2004b).

The binary construction of good mothers may well explain why mothers perceive career and motherhood to be incompatible. Blair-Loy (2001) found that women feel the need to choose between motherhood and career, and Hewlett (2002) reported that women in high-level careers are less likely to have children. Hays (1996) was one of the first to articulate how women perceive employment and motherhood as oppositional binaries. According to Hays (1996), the logic of the marketplace is at odds with the cultural ideology of intensive mothering expectations. Intensive mothering expectations, as defined by Hays, are characterized by omnipresent availability and expectations that the mother is full-time teacher, primary playmate, and resource for all gratification.

It is reasonable to speculate that intensive mothering expectations encourage a construction of good fathering with minimal domestic sphere responsibilities. Hattery (2001) concurred that an intensive mothering ideology is the predominant ideology, though a number of studies suggest that mothers vary in the degree to which they embraced, rejected, or modified these expectations to fit their mother

identity and lived experience. In reality, women most likely experience a complex continuum of work and at-home integration.

The construction of good and bad mothering identities, as opposed to good and bad mothering behaviors, may well be creating untenable role expectations for mothers. Winnicott (1987), for example, recognizing the limitations of the intensive mothering ideal, advocated the psychological and developmental benefits of good enough mothering. The child, according to Winnicott, develops important life skills as a result of compensating for a mother's inadequacies. Yet, few mothers describe good enough mothering as their ideal.

Contemporary parents are under stress (O'Neil & Greenberger, 1994; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1999). Golden (2001) contended that the conditions of modernity, the rise in expert systems, the pluralization of our social worlds, and social learning through the mass media have made choosing a worker–mother identity more complex and stressful than ever before. The current cultural climate that pits mothers against mothers undermines all women and is not healthy for mothers or children.

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