

Cognitive Acrobatics in the Construction of Worker–mother Identity

Deirdre D. Johnston · Debra H. Swanson

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Abstract This study uses dialectical theory to explore the interaction of worker identity (perceived financial need and job/career identity) and intensive mothering expectations in mothers' identity construction. This study is based on extensive interviews with 98 at-home, part-time employed and full-time employed mothers of one or more pre-school children from the Midwestern United States. The narrative analysis reveals that mothers embrace intensive mothering expectations. Because of these cultural expectations, mothers must modify either societal mothering expectations or worker expectations in order to construct an integrated worker–mother identity. We found that while at-home mothers can embrace intensive mothering expectations, employed mothers engage in cognitive acrobatics to manage the tension between employment and the dominant mothering ideology.

Keywords Identity construction · Intensive mothering expectations · Discursive analysis · worker–parent identity

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how mothers construct their worker–parent identity in a context of competing pulls toward intensive mothering and career

success. A discursive analysis of the narratives of full-time employed, part-time employed and at-home mothers is used to explore the strategies women use to negotiate this dialectical tension in the construction of a worker–parent identity. Our analysis of worker–mother identity construction will help us to understand how mothers manage the worker–parent dialectic and provide for a foundation for future research evaluating the relative efficacy of these responses for parents.

The construction of mothering identity is believed to be one of the most significant identity transformations of adulthood (Block 1990; Golden 2001; Maushart 1999). In the past, mothers' identities were more proscribed and mothers had the models of their own mothers in negotiating this path (Gerson 1985). In contemporary society Golden contends that this identity transformation is confounded by the rise of expert systems (Giddens 1990; Kedgley 1996), by the increasing pluralization of our social worlds and experiences (Berger et al. 1973), and by the increase in social learning through mediated experiences (Gumpert and Drucker 1998). Other researchers note the climate of competing mothering ideologies (Buxton 1998; Collins 1994; Glenn 1994) and the difficulty mothers have reconciling employment options with the dominant mothering ideology of the culture (Johnston and Swanson 2004, 2006; Garey 1999; Hattery 2001; Hays 1996).

In this paper we will discuss mothering as an identity, rather than as a role. A role is defined by sociologists as a repertoire of behaviors performed to fulfill personal and social expectations (c.f. Heiss 1981). Discursive psychology has replaced more traditional social psychology concepts such as 'role' with the more encompassing concept of 'identity' to reflect social constructionist and post-structural theories of self (Gergen 1991, 1994). Motherhood for contemporary American women, we will argue, is more

Deirdre D. Johnston is Professor of Communication and Debra H. Swanson is Professor of Sociology at Hope College. This research was funded by grants from Hope College Frost Center for Social Science Research and the Ruth M. Peale faculty development fund.

D. D. Johnston (✉) · D. H. Swanson
Department of Communication, Hope College,
Holland, MI 49422-9000, USA
e-mail: johnston@hope.edu

D. H. Swanson
e-mail: swansond@hope.edu

accurately defined as an identity: “Who am I? I am a mother.”

Identity is a complex web of interconnections that integrate 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 identity (Roland 1988). In contrast to roles, identities are discursively constituted (Wetherell 2001). Augoustinos et al. (2006) explain:

“For example 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).

Any particular identity has at its essence core values and beliefs defined by Hecht et al. (2003) as “core symbols;” these core symbols in turn connect us to the broader social groups and categories to which we choose to identify, or which are socially ascribed to represent us. As a result identity construction involves a process of negotiation of social roles and expectations with personal beliefs (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Golden 2001; McCall and Simmons 1978; Weigert et al. 1986).

Identity construction occurs within cultural ideological discourse. We have to “speak through” the ideologies which are active in our society and which provide us with the means of “making sense” of social relations and our place in them...[I]deologies “work” by constructing for their subjects (individual and collective) positions of identification and knowledge which allow them to “utter” ideological truths as if they were their authentic authors. This is not because they emanate from our innermost, authentic, and unified experience, but because we find ourselves mirrored in the positions at the centre of the discourses from which the statements we formulate “make sense” (Hall 2003).

Mothering ideology is based on beliefs and values about mothering that mothers must either embrace or reject, but can seldom ignore. Recent research suggests that intensive mothering expectations define the dominant mothering ideology in our culture (Garey 1999; Hattery 2001; Wall 2001). As an *ideology* mothering expectations constitute a chain of meanings that are taken-for-granted (Hall 2003). Hays (1996) first identified intensive mothering expectations and defined these as an “expert-guided and child-centered... emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive” child-rearing philosophy (p. 46). Intensive mothering expectations position mothers as the sole source of child guidance, nurturance, education, and physical and

emotional sustenance. Hays (1996) maintains that intensive mothering expectations set the standards of “good mothering” for the culture and are inherently at odds with participation in the labor force. Another mothering ideology discussed in recent research is called “attachment parenting” (Bobel 2002, 2004). This ideology promotes beliefs and values regarding simple living, organic food, wearing babies, and family beds (Bobel 2002, 2004). Attachment parenting is, if anything, even more intensive in terms of mothering expectations.

Women must also construct a worker identity that justifies their decision to work or not to work outside the home. According to provider role research, employed women fall into four categories: co-provider, primary provider, secondary provider, or ambivalent provider (Perry-Jenkins and Crouter 1990; Perry-Jenkins et al. 1992). While provider roles reflect justifications for employment and provide insight into women’s perceptions of their employment roles, there is still considerable overlap between provider roles, number of employment hours, and perceived choice to work; that is, primary and co-providers are typically employed full-time, secondary providers are employed part-time, and ambivalent providers perceive no choice in their employment decision (c. f. Perry-Jenkins and Crouter 1990; Perry-Jenkins et al. 1992).

Whereas provider role research identifies economic rationales for maternal employment, Golden (2001) explores the social predictors of worker identity. Golden (2001) maintains that increased choice in worker–parent identity construction increases anxiety and uncertainty and, as a result, parents seek validation from others. Golden notes that Berger and Luckmann (1966) first observed that family is the source of primary socialization. The family exerts a life-long influence on the “range of possible selves available to an individual” (p. 245), and Golden (2001) found that worker–parent identity construction was best predicted by family of origin. Johnston et al. (2007) extend Golden’s research on family of origin by analyzing the impact of mothers’ employment decision on adult daughters’ worker identity construction. Although half of the adult daughters modeled their own mothers’ work decision and about half rejected their own mothers’ employment identity, all talked about the powerful influence of their own mothers on the construction of their worker identity (Johnston et al. 2007).

In an attempt to bring the economic and social rationales together to explain worker–mother identity construction, Duncan and Edwards (1999) propose to call the construction of employment and motherhood choices “gendered moral rationalities” (GMRs). GMRs are the social understanding of the appropriate and responsible decision a mother should make in regard to employment, co-parenting, and childcare. GMRs are gendered in that they

delegate childcare to mothers, moral in that they proscribe cultural values, and rational in that these values are used as the basis for making decisions about how a child is raised (Duncan and Edwards (1999)). GMRs take three forms: primarily mother (physically caring for children yourself), mother/worker integral (defining employment and financial support as part of good mothering), and primarily worker (separating employment and mother identities). The primary GMR with which a mother identifies varies by socio-economic class, education, and culture (Duncan and Edwards 1999). For example, lower socio-economic mothers are more likely to assume a “primarily mother” GMR, and more educated mothers are more likely to assume a “primarily worker” GMR (Duncan and Edwards 1999).

The economics of worker–mother identity construction is often overlooked (Crittenden 2001). In reality, economic, political and historical context has always played, and continues to play, an essential part in worker–mother identity construction (Hays 1996; Williams 2000). Some mothers have the privilege of choosing not to be employed outside the home; some mothers do not. Some mothers have the educational and work experience to negotiate employment options, secure personally fulfilling work, make enough money to offset daycare expenses, and attain jobs with health care and other benefits; some mothers do not.

This cultural tension between employment and mothering expectations also has implications for mothers’ success in the labor force. Hewlett (2002) found that professional women are postponing motherhood, and Williams (2000) found that employed mothers are not advancing in their fields because they are more likely to forego promotions, travel and overtime. For mothers who do have a choice in constructing their worker–mother identity, it seems reasonable to assume that some cognitive process is necessary to construct an integrated identity that reconciles the potential contradictions of worker identities and mothering identities.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996), building on the research of Bakhtin (1981), developed a dialectical theory of relationships that views contradictions along a continuum, rather than as a dichotomy. A dialectic is a bipolar continuum that simultaneously pulls in mutually exclusive directions. Thus any movement toward one end of the continuum creates a stronger pull toward the opposite end.

Maternal and work identities, as constructed in our culture, are a dialectic. Bakhtin (1981) defines a dialectic as “a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies” (p. 272). Like Golden (2001) and Giddens (1990), who suggest that conflicting multiple identities for parent workers may well be the norm of post-modern society rather than a stage along a process of accommodating and restabilization, Bakhtin (1981) maintains that social life is not a “monologue” ideology but a “dia-

logue”—characterized by contradictory ideological discourses. Though no research has applied dialectical responses to the question of maternal employment, there is evidence that mothers construct work identity and mothering identity in response to a perceived dialectic.

Johnston and Swanson (2006) explored how mothers alter their construction of intensive mothering expectations to resolve contradictions between work and mother identities. We found that full-time employed mothers, part-time employed mothers, and at-home mothers construct accessibility, mother–child happiness, and the separation of employment and domestic spheres differently (Johnston and Swanson 2006). Whereas Garey (1999) and Hattery (2001) found that mothers change the situational constraints of their work to adapt to intensive mothering expectations, Johnston and Swanson (2006) found that mothers also change intensive mothering expectations to adapt to work status constraints. For example, employed mothers constructed maternal accessibility as emotional availability whereas at-home mothers constructed maternal accessibility as continual physical presence.

This is consistent with the research of Uttal (1996) who found that employed mothers perceive themselves as involved mothers despite their physical absence. Employed mothers recognized that care giving, and even “mothering” functions, can be jointly accomplished by parents and non-parental caregivers. Uttal’s findings suggest a (re)construction of meanings to reconcile employment with intensive mothering ideology.

The social construction of mothering identity explored by Hattery (2001), Uttal (1996) and Johnston and Swanson (2006) contribute to our understanding of intensive mothering expectations. However, worker identity, conceptually defined here as the weighting of perceived financial need and the strength of career/job satisfaction, is neglected. In Hattery’s (2001) typology we don’t know how the strength of a mother’s career/job identity and perceived financial need affect her proclivity to be a conformist (at home), non-conformist (work), pragmatist (part-time or temporary worker) or innovator (restructure work to avoid paid childcare). Innovators in particular must have a strong career/job identity and/or financial need that drive them to develop creative strategies for working from home, working 3rd shift or bringing children to work. In Johnston and Swanson’s (2006) research, worker identity is operationalized as employment status (i.e. full-time, part-time or at-home) which tells us little about why mothers adopted a particular work identity or when and if this identity was defined by life circumstances.

Blair-Loy’s (2001) research provides some insight into the impact of career/job satisfaction on maternity choices by exploring how women executives construct their identities around the culturally competing family devotion

schema and work devotion schema. Blair-Loy (2001) found that executive women did perceive the two to be in tension. Older executives were more likely to reconcile this tension by avoiding marriage and/or motherhood, the middle-age cohort were more likely to experience divorce as a result of these competing tensions, and the younger cohort, at least at this point in their lives, appear to be most successful at redefining marital and parenting roles to fully engage and integrate both family and work devotion schemata. Additional research is needed, however, to explore how non-executives, who may not have resources to out source domestic tasks or have high paying, high powered careers, manage maternal worker identities.

In summary, we need to know more about how women construct their maternal identities and how they reconcile competing pulls for intensive mothering and labor force participation. If mothering ideology and worker identity are consistent (e.g. high intensive mothering expectations and low worker identity, or low intensive mothering expectations with high worker identity), employment decision and intensive mothering expectations are mutually reinforcing and the mother may select to be home full-time in the former scenario or select to be employed full-time in the latter. Mothers driven by intensive mothering ideology may also choose to stay at home; despite worker identity, extreme intensive mothering expectations may subjugate worker identity.

However, if a mother is driven by worker identity and still embraces intensive mothering expectations, another dialectic resolution strategy is necessary. Such a mother might change her work identity and intensify her commitment to intensive mothering expectations, or change her intensive mothering expectations and intensify her commitment to her work-identity.

Baxter (1990) proposes four possible responses to the inherent tensions of a dialectic: (1) select one option while ignoring or denying the other (e.g. select work-identity and abandon maternity or vice versa); (2) separate competing options by satisfying each in separate contexts or spheres (e.g., cyclically sequence mothering and work, or separate work and mothering cognitively, temporarily and/or spatially); (3) neutralize the contradiction by satisfying both competing needs to some extent, but without fully realizing either; or (4) reframe the contradiction by socially constructing a reality whereby the two competing needs are no longer perceived as contradictory (e.g. work from home, take child to work, reconstruct meaning of work or motherhood). Baxter (1990) found that selection is seldom a satisfying response to dialectics in relationships, that separation is the most common response, and that reframing, though the most sophisticated and potentially the most satisfying, is infrequently used. Baxter (2004) also notes that selection, separation and neutralization are

temporary solutions that hold the dialectic tensions in limbo, but do not resolve or eliminate the dialectic.

The purpose of this study is to explore the narratives of at-home, part-time employed, and full-time employed mothers for perceived dialectic tension between employment and mothering identities, and for signs of selection, separation, neutralization and reframing responses in the construction of an integrated worker–mother identity.

Method

The theoretical rationale for our method is based on the work of numerous scholars who assert that it is through discourse that the internalization of ideologies in individual lives is revealed (Bristol and Fischer 1993; Gergen 1985; Weedon 1997). Discourse reveals the boundaries of cultural ideology: who is inside, who is outside, and who resides in the contested zone. The cultural ideologies reflected in discourse yield collective understandings and meaning systems (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985), while also creating expectations for women's constructions of their personal experiences and identities (Bergum 1997).

Discursive productions for constructing understanding are limited by cultural, historical and linguistic resources (Wetherell 2001) and are also constrained by the dominant ideologies that we must “speak through” (Hall 2003). In this study, we employ discursive analysis to focus on how people use talk to construct their identity and understand their subject positions with larger social frameworks. We analyzed mothers' narratives for “interpretive repertoires,” which Wetherell and Potter (1988) define as arguments and metaphors that are used recurrently in discourse to construct meanings.

Interviews were conducted with 98 married heterosexual mothers, from the Midwestern United States, with at least one child under the age of five. A modified network sampling technique (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981) was used to generate an initial list of 75 mothers who met the selection criteria of having at least one preschool-aged child and who self defined as one of the following: full-time employed mother (FTEM), part-time employed mother (PTEM) and at-home mother (AHM). Of the initial list of 75 mothers meeting the selection criteria, 54 agreed to participate. The 54 initial participants were asked for three referrals each and an additional 44 women agreed to participate. Some participants explicitly made referrals of people who were similar, and others explicitly referred people who they believed would have a different perspective than their own. An average of only 1.8 referrals from any one woman was used in order to avoid over-enmeshment of the sample with like-minded groups.

The mothers ranged in age from 22 to 51. Seventy percent had more than one child (sample average = 2.16 children) and, although all participants had a child younger than 5 years old, their oldest child ranged in age from 8 weeks to 23 years. We argue that when there is a child younger than school age, no matter how many other children or the ages of the other children, the mother of that young child has a responsibility for the care of that child that is different than the mother of children who are all school age. Participants self-defined as full-time employed mother ($n=30$, 30%), part-time employed mother ($n=29$, 30%), and at home full-time with their children ($n=39$, 40%). The sample is 98% white and all of the women identified as heterosexual, middle-class, and achieving an education of high school or above. Total household income ranged from less than \$17,000 to over \$113,000 with the largest modal distribution between \$50,000 and \$80,000. The occupations of employed mothers are listed in Appendix A.

Three trained interviewers conducted the interviews. The interview was comprised of semi-structured and open-ended questions, averaged two hours in length, and was usually conducted in the woman's home. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of our interviewees. To explore how mothers constructed worker identity, we asked a number of questions about job/career identity, financial determinants of employment decision, and integration of worker and mother identities. See Appendix B for actual wording of the interview questions.

The narrative data was first coded thematically (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and 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 and Potter 1988). The two primary investigators and two research assistants independently developed categories that were proposed, defined and explored in the data. Recurring cycles of category definition and data

analysis, and subsequent discussions among the coders, led to categories being refined, modified or abandoned, as fit of data to the categories was reflexively assessed. Twenty percent of the data was used to establish coding reliability. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and after refinement of coding categories, intercoder reliability was 94%. Due to the large qualitative sample ($n=98$), the interview excerpts do not represent the entirety of the data, but are intended to exemplify and clarify the narrative themes that emerged from the data.

Results

The narrative analysis of the interviews of at-home, part-time employed and full-time employed mothers, who have some choice in the construction of their worker identities, revealed the use of selection, separation, neutralization and reframing strategies. An additional strategy of selection through subjugation of worker-identity also emerged. These strategies were used by mothers to resolve employment and maternity dialectics and to construct a coherent worker–parent identity (Table 1).

The strategy of selection was defined as choosing career over maternal responsibility or choosing maternal responsibilities over work. Selection involves ignoring or denying the forsaken identity. While there were no mothers that explicitly ignored or denied their mother role for pursuit of career, there were mothers whose narratives explicitly ignored or denied any desire for a worker-identity in their pursuit of motherhood. A subset of this group expressed struggling to deny their strong worker-identity to select motherhood.

The strategy of separation was defined as drawing clear boundaries between worker-identity and mother-identity; this separation is maintained physically and temporally by working away from home. The separation strategy is unique in that the separation of identities is so clearly

Table 1 Dialectic resolution strategy by employment status.

Self-defined employment status	Dialectic resolution strategy					
	Selection	Selection through subjugation of worker identity	Separation	Neutral	Neutralization through prioritizing motherhood	Reframing
At-home ($n=39$)	28	11	n/a*	n/a*	n/a*	n/a*
Part-time ($n=29$)	n/a*	n/a*	0	0	8	21
Full-time ($n=30$)	n/a*	n/a*	5	16	0	9
<i>n</i>	28	11	5	16	8	30

*n/a means that this strategy is, by definition, inconsistent with some employment/at-home decision

constructed that dialectical tension between work and motherhood is not expressed. In contrast, the strategy of neutralization is defined as seeking to satisfy both worker and mother identity needs, but expressing feelings that one is never fully satisfying either.

Reframing involves constructing an integrated worker–mother identity or redefining worker or mother identities so that they are no longer in tension. While we expected reframing to be evidenced in women’s accounts of working from home or taking children to work, reframing was most often characterized by a perceived integration of worker and mother identities in claims that employment makes the woman a better mother.

Also emerging from the narratives were variations in worker identity (e.g. low or high) and intensive mothering expectations (e.g. low or high). Low worker-identity was reflected in statements that denied a desire to work outside the home for personal interest, financial or career aspirations (Tables 2 and 3). High worker identity was characterized by claiming an identity tied to a profession or job as important for self concepts, or as financially important. Low intensive mothering expectations reflected a focus on meeting basic needs for children, whereas high intensive mothering narratives focused on omnipresent accessibility, extensive nurturing, and high directive involvement in children’s daily life and play (Table 4).

Dialectic Resolved through Selection

For 72% ($n=28$) of at-home mothers it was clear in their narratives that their decision to stay home was driven by intensive mothering expectations, and this ideology was used in turn to justify their work decision. These women’s narratives reveal a moral imperative to be at home; being home full-time is the right thing to do. “In the grand scheme of things, developing this little person is more important than business type things” (Lisa). “Well, feeling like I’m doing the right thing” (Peggy). “I couldn’t think of a better thing to do than be home with them while I can” (Kate). The narratives of these women reveal a certainty and confidence in their decision. When asked about the

Table 2 Financial need as a factor in work-identity construction.

Frequency			
Self-defined employment status	Not mentioned	Low perceived need	High perceived need
At-home ($n=39$)	29	8	2
Part-time ($n=29$)	20	0	9
Full-time ($n=30$)	11	0	19
	$n=59$	$n=8$	$n=30$

χ^2 (4, $n=98$)=35.2, $p<.01$

Table 3 Career identity as a factor in work identity.

Frequency			
Self-defined employment status	Not mentioned	Low career identity	High career identity
At-home ($n=39$)	19	9	11
Part-time ($n=29$)	15	0	14
Full-time ($n=30$)	17	0	13
	$n=51$	$n=9$	$n=38$

χ^2 (4, $n=98$)=15.8, $p<.01$

difficulty of the decision to stay home, they were unequivocally sure in their answers: “Not difficult at all. I knew I was going to do it [stay-at home]” (Ellie). “It didn’t seem like a big decision at all. I didn’t even flinch” (Judy). “It wasn’t difficult at all. It was pretty clear cut” (Holly). In these narratives an internalized moral imperative leaves little room for ambivalence.

Twenty-three percent ($n=9$) of the at-home mothers interviewed selected to stay home primarily due to low worker identity. These mothers said that it was an easy and obvious decision to quit because of low job/career fulfillment and/or they had no strong perceived financial need. For these mothers, their narratives revealed little detail about intensive mothering and focused almost exclusively on worker identity. “It just so happened that we were getting ready to move and I was pregnant with [my son] so it was an easy transition. You know, ‘we’re moving, so I’m going to quit and I won’t be coming back’” (Cynthia). Some at-home mothers suggested that the family had some financial need, but they described their lack of job fulfillment in processing their decision to stay home; for these women, low worker identity trumped financial need. “It would probably be financial because that would be the only reason why I would probably go back to work. It’s important to show your kids that you need to contribute, but I think there’s lots of ways to do that [besides financial]” (Liz).

Table 4 Intensive mothering as a factor in work-parent identity construction.

Frequency			
Self-defined employment status	Low mothering identity	Medium mothering identity	High mothering identity
At-home ($n=39$)	1	0	38
Part-time ($n=29$)	0	12	17
Full-time ($n=30$)	5	10	15
	$n=6$	$n=22$	$n=70$

χ^2 (4, $n=98$)=29.3, $p<.01$

Many of the same mothers that described low career identity also said they didn't work outside the home because their family did not experience any financial need. "Another practical factor was I never had a very high-paying job, so economically it wouldn't have made any sense for me to work in the job I was in and pay for daycare" (Samantha). Thus, for some at-home mothers, less driven by intensive mothering ideology, lack of job fulfillment or lack of financial need made selection of at-home work-identity a viable option. Staying home full-time with children is likely to relieve some of the intensive mothering expectations, or at least social pressure from others that one is neglecting mothering responsibilities. In this sense these mothers should experience minimal tension from the employment/mothering expectations dialectic.

Dialectic Resolved through Selection following Subjugation of a Strong Worker Identity

Interestingly, 28% ($n=11$) of at-home mothers' narratives revealed strong intensive mothering expectations and strong worker identity. Those with a strong job/career identity report struggling with employment decisions. Their ambivalence is palpable in their stories. "So if I go away from my kids to work I'm tortured and if I stay home I'm tortured. How did this happen?" (Ann). "I was defined by my job and so, when my job was to be a mom, that didn't seem like an important job although I really believed it was" (Rhonda). "I definitely felt like part of me was cut off, you know, like a hand or something you know...that explained who I was...[when I quit my job]" (Lori). For these mothers, perceived financial need was not compelling and intensive mothering expectations were high. These two factors superceded job/career identity and they selected at-home motherhood. Discussing the difficulty in making the decision to stay home they talk about the struggle: "I wrestled with it [the decision] quite a bit, but I was fortunate in that I was able to make that transition [to being home full-time] slowly. ... [A]fter really enjoying the summer at home with [my son] I decided to stick with my decision to stay home. I felt fortunate in that I was able to kind of test it all out" (Adrienne). "It was difficult ...I knew in my heart I wanted to stay home...Women have always worked, always brought something to the table...not that vacuuming isn't important...but my relationship with the rest of the world is important too" (Ann).

When intensive mothering expectations and worker identity are inconsistent and the response is to change worker identity, mothers' narratives also reflect a reinforced commitment to intensive mothering. Intensive mothering expectations become a self-justification for abandoning employment. The neediness of children is highlighted in these mothers' narratives. Also implied in their narratives is

a comparison with employed mothers who would not be able to respond, as they do, to children's needs. "[The most important thing is] being there for their needs. My son wasn't feeling good at school; they were able to call me and I was able to zip over there right away, pick him up, take him to the doctor, and not have to worry about an employer or anything like that" (Kendra). "Some babies would be a real pain when the mom gets home because they want that time with mom, whereas [my child], we don't get that, because I'm here all the time. And they don't need that unless they fall or get sick. [I provide] a sense of security" (Natalie). "Who else would do this for her, you know? She has a schedule like any little kid her age, but it's like it's flexible because I am at home. If she's not ready for her nap at 12, that's okay. I can lay her down at 1 or 2, because I'm going to be here anyway" (Audra).

Overall, all but one at-home mothers were so invested in intensive mothering that they did not remain conflicted about employment. Any discussion of missing career, contributions to the community, or a sense of accomplishment was rare. Forty-six percent ($n=18$) of the at-home mothers acknowledge that there are some days when they wish they were employed outside the home, but the source of their ambivalence is not career aspirations per se. The source of their ambivalence is being excluded from the world of adults and relegated to the world of children. It is telling that at-home mothers talk about a loss of adult identity rather than a specific loss of job/career identity. "[At a party or social gathering]...once they realize you're a stay-at-home mom, 'Let's not go any further with this conversation...she doesn't have much to contribute'," (Lori). "People say all I do is talk in kid language—and if I blurt out the ABC's, that's what I do all day!" (Kate). Asked what they are missing out on as at-home mothers, the responses are unanimous: "association of being with other adults" (Abby); "companionship and friendship, not going to lunch from work with girlfriends" (Brenda); "interaction with other employees...just the conversation, I guess," (Cynthia); and "one thing I do miss is conversation, especially at work," (Colleen).

Dialectic Resolved through Separation

Separation was used by 17% ($n=5$), a small group of the full-time employed mothers interviewed. These mothers experienced no inconsistency between intensive mothering expectations and worker identity because they were primarily driven by worker identity. When asked what makes a good mother and what makes them a good mother, these women's constructions were characterized by meeting basic needs and adequate love and affection; they did not talk about intensive mothering expectations, such as self-sacrifice, a child-centered mom-identity, omnipresent ac-

cessibility, and mothers as the primary source of education, guidance and emotional sustenance. When asked what makes them a good mother, these mothers' narratives highlighted basic caregiving. "I don't mind changing her diaper...I like making sure that she's clean and comfortable" (Jennifer). "Making sure their lunches and all their food is put together. I'm good at asking them what's going on at school" (Sherry). "I know the importance of setting standards...discipline" (Erin). When asked if they have adequate time with their children, these women said "yes." "I'm with my kids quite a bit, and my kids are happy," (Erin). When asked if they were missing out on anything by being employed full-time, these women said "no." The consistent lack of reference to intensive mothering expectations across multiple questions made these mothers stand out among their peers. These women have a strong worker identity and, because they do not appear to buy into the culture's intensive mothering expectations, they seem less conflicted about their decision to be an employed mother. "If I didn't have contact with other adults, contact in which I'm constantly being challenged to think, to read and discuss things, it would be very difficult for me to have any kind of satisfactory life without that. I'm also somebody that believes in doing things for our community" (Susanna).

For these women, the jobs of motherhood and employment are performed in separate contexts at separate times. "I get to bake cookies with them when they're snack person. I'm there to do their homework with them or read to them. I'm totally involved in their school. I'm on the board of the PTA and help with their book fairs and fun nights...So I feel like my kids are not affected by my work" (Christine).

Dialectic Resolved through Neutralization

In contrast to at-home and part-time employed mothers, who say they seldom second guess their work decision, 53% ($n=16$) of the full-time employed mothers interviewed perceive their worker identity to be in constant conflict with their mother role. "I'm struggling with this a lot...I'd like to work part-time," (Kristina). "I had a lot of agony about what I would do...If I didn't work I wouldn't have a big chunk of my self-identity...I had to struggle...I really, really wanted to stay home...but I was the main income earner in our house," (Lucy). "Being a physician I struggle with balancing home and at times don't always feel like it's quite going the way I would like to, as far as how much I can be involved in my kids' life, working at the same time," (Donna). "[People say,] 'I gave up my profession, I never regretted it' And I feel...guilt when I hear those stories... Should I be giving up?...I think I'm doomed to live guilt no matter what," (Leanne).

For full-time employed mothers, worker identity was strong, whether it was constructed primarily as financial, job satisfaction, or both. Full-time employed mothers with a strong worker identity said that financial need was the main benefit of employment. "I would have to say economics or money would be one of the main benefits of me working full time" (Kristina). Finances *as well as* job/career identity/satisfaction were benefits of employment. "The benefits for me are that financially I am able to get things I want, live the way that I would like. The social factor is important too, for me to [be around] friends" (Stacey). Or job/career satisfaction was the main benefit. "I need an intellectual life that involves other people, not just reading at home or writing at home" (Jennifer). It is interesting that in mothers' narratives employment satisfaction is often tied to social connection, but relatively infrequently to accomplishment or societal contribution.

An analysis of demographic variables reveals that financial reasons for full-time employment were not related to household income. Perceived financial need is relative; married employed women with annual household incomes exceeding \$100,000 invoked financial need reasons for employment, and married unemployed women with annual incomes less than \$30,000 neglected to mention it as a factor in their decisions. One way to make worker identity more socially acceptable, as many full-time employed mothers and part-time employed mothers noted, is to frame worker identity with an emphasis on financial need. If a woman says that she works because her family needs the money, whether it is true or not, her decision seems justifiable.

Despite the fact that full-time employed mothers described the maintenance of their worker–mother identity as a struggle, there was little adaptation of worker identity. Full-time employed mothers consistently reported little or no change in work goals since becoming mothers. They did, however, note they altered the ways they accomplish these goals to accommodate parenting. These changes reflect neutralization and little separation. "I've brought them [to the office]. We have a room where we do supervised visits for foster parents that has toys in it. [My child] always wants to play with the toys. I don't think there's anyone saying I couldn't do that. I don't think my children view it as that mommy is at work...I have to integrate them, or I'll never get it done" (Heather). "My whole [work] schedule is set up around [my son's] school schedule. Even [my daughter's] day care is set up for the fact that I only have a 5 minute window when I can drop her brother off. Today I'm going to pick him up and take him to the [department] luncheon with me" (Lucy). "I'm less willing to have evening meetings...because I know that it's going to take away from the kids" (Leanne).

Neutralization by full-time employed mothers was evident in their stories of how work spilled over into home and home into work. "That night is stressful because as

soon as I cover city council meetings I have to come home and write two to three stories by midnight. So I'm on the laptop and she's wanting something and he's wanting something. Sometimes I'll scream at her...It's the only time we clash is when I'm on deadline and she's wanting something" (Wendy).

Full-time employed mothers talk about trying to meet the demands of both ends of the dialectic simultaneously, but are not able to fully realize either. "Guilt. If you're doing your best at work you feel guilty about what you're not doing at home. And if you're doing your best at home... you feel guilty about what you're not contributing at work" (Marcy).

Baxter (1990) discusses the lack of satisfaction with neutralization responses to dialectics and this is revealed in full-time employed mothers' attempts to live up to intensive mothering expectations. They talked about missing time with friends, community involvement, leisure, and self-care because these activities take time away from children: "I don't have as much opportunity for involvement in outside activities...comes out of my own sense of guilt. I sit and think if I choose to do those things I'm taking time away from her and I already choose to work full time," (Annie). They also worry they are missing out on their children's development: "I'm worried I'm going to miss something—one of [my son's] big discoveries or some exciting thing that goes on," (Anne). This worry clearly reflects an internalization of intensive mothering expectations because it presumes developmental stages occur in a moment rather than throughout a day, week, month or year.

The narratives of full-time employed mothers are different in this regard from the narratives of part-time employed mothers. Twenty-eight percent ($n=8$) of all part-time employed mothers neutralized the tension between employment and motherhood by prioritizing motherhood over employment. "My son is my life now...and the career drive is not my heart anymore" (Nina). "I just like being a mom. I think it's one of the most important jobs that we have...I love my job, but it's not what I live for" (Sally). Worker identity, like intensive mothering expectations, was modified by part-time employed mothers in an effort to try to meet both dialectic demands.

Dialectic Resolved through Reframing

Of the three groups of mothers, part-time mothers were the least conflicted about their work decision; 72% ($n=21$) of the part-time employed mothers repeatedly asserted that they had integrated intensive mothering expectations with worker identity. At first it appears that part-time employed mothers compromised "good mothering" expectations for worker identity needs. "My joke is I work because it's the only socially sanctioned way for a mother to regularly run away from home...I get out and am able to define myself in

a role other than mother," (Marsha); "I'm not stay at home material. I know that. I know my personality. I would go crazy staying at home," (Amy). "[I was] not feeling completely confident that I could do a good job staying home twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week with my child,...[I was] worrying that I wouldn't be happy and that I would resent the babies," (Pat). Yet, further analysis reveals that these mothers were reframing their worker–mother identity such that their work identity makes them a better mother. "It makes me a better mom because my kids have a break from me, I have a break from my kids" (Kathy). "If we've had a couple of days where they're like ornery and tired and grumpy, and mom's ornery, tired and grumpy—not a good combination. If I can get away just even for a couple of hours and come back I'm much more able to handle the stresses of small children" (Sue).

Part-time employed mothers also (re)framed the intensive mothering expectations of omnipresent accessibility. Accessibility was constructed in terms of quality, not quantity: "our time together is quality time" (Kathy). "I plan a family night each week. I do stuff that the kids enjoy. We have a meal together every night. We have a devotional time together every day. I try to make sure that I have individual time [with each child] throughout the week" (Susan). Time away from children and childcare was reframed as a benefit for children: "[My children] get me at least part of the time, so I can do activities with them, but they also have a little bit of time without me, which has been good" (Traci). "They have the benefit of [pre]school and interaction with other kids, and [the benefit of] me being with them on the days they were home" (Lynn). "I'm here for them when they need me, but yet we get a break" (Janet).

Although, part-time employed mothers reframed the *omnipresent accessibility expectations* of intensive mothering, they embraced the *irreplaceable mother expectation* in intensive mothering. Part-time employed mothers differentiated themselves from full-time employed mothers by constructing their mother identity based on the belief that only a mother can adequately fulfill certain needs of a child. Part-time employed mothers used this ideology to differentiate themselves from full-time employed mothers. They said that full-time employment meant they would miss out on "raising" their own children: "[I] want to have more of an influence on my children growing up than a full time mother I believe would have," (Marsha); and "I do want to have a lot of time with my children...be able to teach them morals...I think that when children go to daycare...that's almost their second home...that really bothers me," (Mindy).

An analysis of worker identity revealed that for 49% ($n=14$) of part-time employed mothers job/career identity is still strong. They talked about what they would be missing if they were not employed: "I have this degree, now I have to use it," (Mindy); "I was at a point of unless

I got back into an acute care setting I would put myself out of the market,” (Jill); “I needed to be somebody besides a mom and a wife. I needed to be me. I needed to be a nurse...I didn’t want to lose my skills,” (Darcy). Part-time mothers were more likely to talk about personal fulfillment and less likely to talk about financial need as a reason for working. For the 31% ($n=9$) of part-time employed mothers who talked about being driven by perceived financial need, their narratives revealed a reframing of good mothering to include economic support, thereby reconciling good mothering expectations with employment; even then, the emphasis on financial justifications is not strong. “I like getting a paycheck, but it also affirms kind of who I am. [Financially] it allows us to do some things [for the kids] we wouldn’t otherwise be able to do” (Marie).

Reframing was most often used by part-time employed mothers. However, 30% ($n=9$) of all full-time employed mothers also used reframing to reconcile work-family tension. These full-time employed mothers constructed good mothering and care-giving separately. That is, a good mother provides for omnipresent accessibility and intensive care-giving but the mother is not necessarily the only source of intensive “mothering.” Fathers and childcare providers are constructed as competent sources of primary care when the mother is unavailable. The goal of omnipresent accessibility and interactive care is the same, but the mother is not constructed as the sole provider of this care: “I love it when she calls out in the night for ‘mommy/daddy’ as if we’re morphed into one source of love, care and nurturance” (Diana). Time away from mother is reframed as an opportunity for social development. “It [daycare] gives her time to be someplace else, with different kids, different people influencing her, exposing her to new things that she wouldn’t otherwise have if she was home with me” (Annie). “My kids are very social. They don’t cling to mom and dad. I think it’s a good thing. They like to have activities. They like the interaction. [Daycare has] been social as well as [learning] manners” (Erin). Full-time employed mothers, recognizing the limitations of one person to meet intensive mothering expectations, even suggest that these expectations are best met by the combined efforts of both mother and father. “She has a relationship with her father that a lot of children don’t have. She gains a lot of things from spending time with him, that she wouldn’t get if I were home” (Marcy).

Discussion

This study suggests that for most women the perceptual dichotomy between employment and motherhood is maintained. This dichotomy can have serious implications for

women’s careers and relationships (Blair-Loy 2001). In a cultural climate that promotes both worker identity and intensive mothering expectations, the process by which women reconcile these potentially inconsistent expectations is important to our understanding of maternal identity and essential for supporting mothers in the identity constructions they adopt.

In this study, most at-home mothers were satisfied with their employment status decision because worker identity and intensive mothering expectations were consistent. While some at-home mothers found it difficult to make the decision to stay home because this required a reconstruction of worker identity, upon selecting at-home motherhood, these high work-identity mothers reinforced their decision (and presumably reduced their dissonance) by embracing intensive mothering expectations. Intensive mothering is used to justify at-home decisions and to bolster these decisions with moral rectitude. Part of the selection process, according to Baxter (1990), is denial of the alternative. For at-home mothers who select intensive mothering expectations over employment, the appeal of worker identity can be denied, thereby minimizing the force of the dialectic. It should be noted, however, that not all at-home mothers embrace intensive mothering; we did find a small number of mothers who stayed home and attributed this decision more to low worker identity than to ideological adherence to intensive mothering expectations.

Most full-time employed mothers had to engage in cognitive acrobatics to manage the tension between intensive mothering and worker identity. Interestingly, full-time employed mothers did not reconcile inconsistency by reconstructing worker identity or by denying intensive mothering expectations. The full-time employed mothers in this study said their worker identity goals had not changed but the logistics of how they did their work had changed (e.g., bringing children to work and changing work schedules to accommodate children).

Full-time employed mothers did not separate employment and mothering identities as much as one might expect. Their most common response was neutralization—a state of perpetual disequilibrium in which they are ricocheted back and forth between dialectic poles. For full-time employed mothers in this study, neutralization did not provide a satisfactory resolution to tensions between work identity and mother identity. Only a small number of the full-time employed mothers successfully reframed intensive mothering by constructing the source of intensive nurturing to include fathers and caregivers.

Part-time employed mothers were least conflicted about their employment status decision. Though their worker identity and intensive mothering expectations were inconsistent, they resolved this inconsistency through what they described as “balance.” Some chose neutralization. They

constructed their mother-identity as dominant and their worker identity as secondary in order to demonstrate their adherence to intensive mothering expectations even though they still maintained an important, but secondary worker identity. Most employed mothers used reframing to integrate worker identity and mothering such that contradiction no longer existed: employment made them better mothers. This finding is particularly important in light of earlier research reporting that part-time employed mothers are significantly happier than either at-home mothers or full-time employed mothers as measured by life satisfaction scores, marital satisfaction scale and depression inventory (Johnston and Swanson 2006).

Bakhtin (1981) suggests that chaos, not stability, is the norm of social life. He suggests that dialectics are continual and a resolution is only temporary. In this sense at-home mothers and full-time employed mothers may be attempting to manage a dialectic with a dualistic mindset. It is puzzling that more full-time employed mothers did not engage in successful reframing. They too could conceivably argue that worker identity made them better mothers. Are full-time employed mothers enmeshed in the intensive mothering expectations that, almost by definition, exclude them from cultural ideals of good mothering? What is preventing full-time employed mothers from reframing these expectations to create an integrated worker–parent identity?

Bakhtin describes “balance” as a temporary measure to hold the dialectical forces at bay. Perhaps what full-time employed mothers are doing is “balance.” Perhaps they are invoking a temporary reprieve in a continuing dialectic, rather than truly transcending the dialectic continuum. Even though part-time employed mothers talk about “balance” what they may be securing is a transcendent point off the dialectical continuum where they can be both at-home and employed; they can play the role of at-home mother or employed mother as the social situation dictates. Meanwhile, at-home mothers and full-time employed mothers are still sliding back and forth between the dialectical tensions of career and home.

This exploratory study contributes to our understanding of mothering ideology and worker identity in the construction of an integrated worker–parent identity. Future research is needed to make more specific distinctions in worker identity by conceptually and operationally separating perceived financial need and employment satisfaction. Additional research is also necessary to explore the role of perceived financial need. Rather than being a demographic predictor of employment decision, in this study perceived financial need was socially constructed to justify employment or at-home decision.

We also need to know more about the mothers who reject intensive mothering expectations. Whereas previous research has over-generalized to suggest that all full-time

employed mothers are “reluctant mothers” (Gerson 1985) or non-conformists who reject intensive mothering expectations (Hattery 2001), this study found only a small number of full-time employed mothers who lacked narrative themes of intensive mothering in their descriptions of the good/ideal mother, and found no mother who overtly rejected intensive mothering expectations. Have these mothers made a conscious choice to dismiss what they perceive to be unrealistic or patriarchal mothering expectations? And, if so, what mothering ideology replaces the culturally dominant intensive mothering expectations?

Generalization of the results of this study are clearly limited by the sample of white middle-class, educated, married heterosexual women. The socially privileged mothers comprising the sample do, however, have more choices in their worker–parent identity construction. As a result, privileged mothers, such as those represented in this sample, may experience more ambivalence around worker identity and intensive mothering expectations.

Although there is a difference between working a job because of perceived financial need versus working at a career that is important to one’s identity, we were unable to separate these two factors in the narrative analysis. Some respondents with a relatively low total household income perceive no financial need to seek employment, others with a relatively high income from their partner reported a compelling financial need to be employed. This may reflect identity characteristics related to financial independence. Moreover, many middle-class women appear to find it more socially acceptable to justify employment for financial need than job satisfaction (Segura 1994; Zavella 1987).

This study raises a number of questions about additional factors that may influence maternal identity construction. How does the length of time a woman has been out of the labor force, or length of time a woman has been managing dual identities, impact the salience of the worker–parenting dialectic? How do the age of the mother and/or the age of her oldest children affect internalization of intensive mothering expectations? How are older women starting a second family affected? What life circumstances change the salience of worker and parent identities? How do fathers’ identity constructions affect mothers’ worker–parent identity? Does volunteer work affect at-home mothers’ worker identity?

The cognitive acrobatics described by full-time employed mothers and at-home mothers in particular in this study are likely to create stress that is not healthy for women, their parents or their children. As a cultural construction, parenting ideologies do—albeit slowly—change over time. A cultural ideology of co-parenting would reframe the work/mother dialectic such that employment and parenting would no longer be construed as oppositional forces. Instead parenting would be seen as a natural stage of the life-cycle

for men and women. Glass (2000) calls for cultural change and describes the need to create a “practical utopia” in which both worker obligations and familial care-giving responsibilities are shared by the community. We need to “create a normative climate in which all adults contribute effectively to the well being of children, elderly and disabled individuals, as part of the obligations of citizenship” (Glass 2000, p. 137). This climate requires that all workers and all workplaces share responsibility for familial care and community building. It means that communities share responsibility for flexible employment programs, community facilities, and support for caregiving. Gerson’s (2000) utopia preserves the opportunity for every person to balance the need to care for others and to develop the self (p. 181). Indeed the key to whole person development, in terms of both worker identity and relationship/care identity, is community. The shared investment and responsibility inherent in “community” is necessary to promote healthy families, healthy parents and healthy children.

Appendix A

Occupations or former occupations of participants.

	Stay-at-home	Part-time	Full-time
Teacher	8	7	6
Professor	0	3	7
Health care profession	5	5	0
Business/office worker	10	4	2
Engineer	1	1	3
Minister	0	0	1
Librarian	0	0	2
Dentist/doctor/lawyer	0	2	2
Writer/reporter	0	1	1
Banking/real estate/accounting	2	1	3
Waitress	0	1	0
Farmer	1	0	0
Daycare Owner/director	0	1	1
Hair/beautician	0	2	0
Unspecified	13		
Total	39	29	30

Appendix B

Interview Questions

Questions assessing job/career identity included: “How difficult was it to make your decision to be a [FTEM/PTEM/AHM]?” “What are three words that describe you?” “What three accomplishments are you most proud of?”

“How do you define success (for you personally)?” and “Has having children changed your job/career goals?”

Questions exploring financial determinants of employment decision included: “What factors influenced your decision to be a [FTEM/PTEM/AHM]?” “What is the greatest tension in your family?” “How many hours per week does your husband work?” For the purpose of this study, worker identity will be considered strong if either perceived financial need or job/career fulfillment are high.

Questions that explored intensive mothering expectations included: “Do you ever feel that you’re missing out on anything by being a [FTEM/PTEM/AHM] mother?” “What are the benefits to your child of your work status decision?” “How do you define the ideal ‘good mother’?” “In what ways are you a ‘good mother’?” and “In what ways could you be a better mother?”

Questions that explored how mothers constructed the integration of their worker and mother identities through selection, separation, neutralization or reframing included: “Do you ever feel any pressure to be [insert opposite work status: FTEM/PTEM/AHM]?” “What are the benefits for you being a [FTEM/PTEM/AHM]?” “What are the stresses for you being a [FTEM/PTEM/AHM]?” “Do you feel a competing tension between your desires to be a good mother and making contributions outside of the home?” and “How do you integrate or separate your child responsibilities and your household, community, or employment responsibilities?”

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