

Exploration of “Good Mother” Stereotypes in the College Environment

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Abstract This study extends research on the good mother stereotype by examining students’ perceptions of other students who return to school after having a child. Undergraduate students attending either community college or a 4-year southeastern university within the United States were asked to review a vignette in which a mother’s decision to return to college and her role satisfaction were manipulated. The 205 participants rated the woman who elects to continue her education shortly after the birth of a child as significantly less feminine, more dominant, more arrogant-calculating and cold-hearted, and less warm-agreeable than the mother who discontinued her education. The impact of these results is discussed in the context of Tinto’s (Review of Educational Research 45, 89–127, 1975) classic theory of student retention and Eagly and Steffen’s (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 46, 735–754, 1984) theory of gender stereotypes.

Keywords Good mother stereotype · Stereotypes · College women · Non traditional students · Motherhood · College students · Parenting students

Introduction

This study explores students’ perceptions of other students who are mothers. Gender-role theory asserts that society holds stereotyped expectations for the appropriate behaviors in which men and women should engage. Men are expected to adopt the role of breadwinner, and women the role of caretaker (Bailyn 1993; Judiesch and Lyness 1999). Russo (1976) specifically refers to the gender-role expectations for women as the “motherhood mandate” which involves the culturally proscribed belief that to be complete and successful in the female role, a woman must have children and must spend her time with them. The motherhood mandate involves social and cultural forces suggesting that “all women should be mothers and that the ‘good mother’ is measured by the number of her children and the quantity of time she spends with them.” (p. 148.) Because pursuing higher education takes women away from their parenting role and develops their breadwinner capabilities, gender role theory suggests that unfortunately students who are mothers may not be perceived as positively as women who discontinue their education. In this study, college students’ perceptions of another college student who drops out of school are compared to those of a mother who returns to school when her child is 6 months and 6 years old.

If present, the Good Mother Stereotype may impede a woman’s process of social integration and adjustment upon return to school after the birth of a child, and may present a powerful barrier to her success given that social integration has been identified as a critical element in retention of all students (Tinto 1975). Specifically, the support of peers has been found to be crucial for students who are mothers (Van Stone et al. 1994). Thus the presence of a Good Mother stereotype among college students could be a serious deterrent to women who return to school after having children. Moreover, although men and women tend to hold

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similar gender stereotypes, greater endorsement of traditional gender roles has been found consistently among men (Levant and Majors 1997; Spence and Hahn 1997; Twenge 1997). This fact also suggests that women returning to male-dominated majors and classrooms may be at particular risk.

Female students over the age of 25 are the fastest growing group of nontraditional students in our colleges and universities, and the continued success of postsecondary institutions may be linked to meeting the needs of nontraditional female students (Carney-Crompton and Tan 2002; Scott et al. 1998). Many of these female students are mothers and this group, in particular, has been recognized as particularly at-risk for attrition due to lack of financial and social support. To this end, Senator Elizabeth Dole introduced the Elizabeth Cady Stanton Pregnant and Parenting Student Services Act which proposes grant support for colleges and universities to develop services for pregnant and parenting students. Although this bill is in the initial stages of the legislative process, it has increased attention and resources directed to this issue (GovTrack.us (2007); <http://www.feministsforlife.org>). In order to retain our female students who are mothers, these women must feel acceptance from peers as well as faculty. In his classic theory on retention, Tinto (1975) noted the importance of social integration, feeling accepted and part of a group, as equally important to academic integration. One mother, who wrote of returning to school, summed up her social experience this way:

Crammed behind my desk, I fidgeted and shifted my eyes to observe the other students in the room. I tried not to look the way I felt- like I didn't belong there with them... I tugged at my baggy clothes hiding my postpartum weight. I thought of my 6-week old son, and hoped I'd make it home to nurse him at the scheduled time...In my experience there is no better motivation to finish college and to appreciate the marrow of the experience than a child whose future depends on your decisions. I had to continue my education to give him a better life and to set an example for him to follow." (Rizer 2005, p. 5).

Rizer describes feeling out of place and uncomfortable on campus. In fact, Van Stone et al. (1994) found that support of peers was the most important factor to the academic success of poor single-mother students tying with "university services" and ahead of "support of family" and "support of faculty." A body of research suggests that in addition to domain-based learning and skill acquisition, women judge their academic experience in relation to the quality of the relationships they build with others (Belensky et al. 1986; Brown and Gilligan 1992). Clearly social integration and acceptance from other students can impact the retention and academic performance of our students who are

mothers. The presence of the Good Mother stereotype could subtly discourage women from returning to higher education after the birth of a child. This would be unfortunate given the potential benefit of education for mothers and their children. In addition to yielding increased earning potential, students who are mothers also describe their education as a transformative experience that changed and strengthened their identity and self-esteem, leading to personal empowerment. Mothers who are students also commonly report that pursuing postsecondary education provides important modeling to their children (Haleman 2004).

The Good Mother stereotype has been found for mothers in paid employment. Women who work outside the home are perceived as less nurturing and less competent in the role of mother compared to their counterparts who choose to stay home to raise their children (e.g. Bridges and Etaugh 1995; Bridges and Orza 1993; Shpancer et al. 2006). For example, adult females who rated their perception of a videotaped parent-child interaction evaluated the same mother as providing worse care when the mother in the video was described as a working mother than when she was described as a stay-at-home mother (Shpancer et al.). Gorman and Fritzsche (2002) noted the impact of maternal role satisfaction on perception of the employed mother. Maternal role satisfaction focuses on the mother's overall affective reaction to her roles rather than on her particular motive (such as returning to work for financial reasons or for fulfillment). In their study, a mother who stayed at home and expressed satisfaction with her decision to do so was seen as more committed to her role as a mother and more selfless than an employed mother who was satisfied with the decision to return to work. Furthermore, a mother who took 6 months maternity leave and was dissatisfied with her decision to return to work was rated higher in commitment to motherhood and was seen as more selfless than the mother who was in the same circumstance but was satisfied with doing so. Despite the fact that satisfaction with one's parental role is strongly linked to positive parental and child interactions (e.g. Barling et al. 1993; Lerner and Galambos 1985; Stuckey et al. 1982), the good mother stereotype influenced perceptions of working mothers, and the happily employed mother was perceived in a negative light. The message to these mothers is "Stay at home or wish you did!" (Gorman and Fritzsche 2002).

The existence of the good mother stereotype in employment contexts certainly raises the question of whether the good mother stereotype may also be present in environments of higher education. Gender role theory would suggest similar findings in both employment and education contexts. However, the college student role differs from the role of employee. The role of student offers a flexible schedule, opportunity to do coursework at home, and perhaps even the ability to take courses online from the

home. While commitment to a career and occupation may be perceived as a long-term or life-long endeavor, pursuing a degree is time-limited with an end goal. Because of these differences between the role of student compared to the role of employee and also because of the large number of female students who are mothers, it is important to empirically examine the motherhood mandate and the impact of gender role stereotypes in the education context.

Interpersonal models propose that what has been described as masculinity and femininity (Spence and Helmreich 1978) can actually be conceptualized as variations in dominance and nurturance (Wiggins and Holzmuller 1978, 1981). Wiggin's Interpersonal Model (1995) provides both a conceptual and measurable representation of personality types based on an interpersonal circumplex of the many possible blends of these two fundamental motives, dominance and nurturance, and the resulting patterns of social exchange involving the granting or denial of love and status to self and the granting or denial of love and status to others. Wiggins interpersonal model yields eight interpersonal variables: assured-dominant, arrogant-calculating, coldhearted, aloof-introverted, unassured-submissive, unassuming-ingenuous, warm-agreeable, and gregarious-extraverted. The eight variables are considered interpersonal in that they "have relatively clear-cut social (status) and emotional (love) consequences..." (Wiggins 1979a, p. 398). This model elucidates core issues in the investigation of sex roles, masculinity, femininity, and psychological androgyny (Wiggins and Holzmuller 1978, 1981).

The current study examines students' perceptions of mothers, who return to school or drop out, in relation to the Spence and Helmreich's (1978) dimensions of masculinity and femininity and Wiggin's (1995) Interpersonal Model's fundamental motives, dominance and nurturance, and the resulting eight interpersonal variables. As was done in Gorman and Fritzsche's investigation of perceptions of employed mothers, this study investigates perceptions of a mother who returns to school 6 months after the birth of her child, 6 years later when the child is of typical school age, or never returns to college. Maternal role satisfaction which focuses on the mother's affective reaction to her role is investigated as this also was determined to be of importance. Maternal role satisfaction is an important variable in that the mother's satisfaction influences parent-child interaction including maternal interactive behavior (Isabella 1994), child behavior, mood and overall psychological adjustment and parenting behavior (Barling et al. 1993; Lerner and Galambos 1985; Stuckey et al. 1982), ratings of child's behavior by teachers and parents (Barling et al. 1988), and perceptions of the mother's commitment to motherhood (Gorman and Fritzsche 2002).

Specifically:

- Hypothesis 1: It was expected that mothers who are students would be perceived as less feminine and less nurturing than mothers who stay home and do not continue their education.
- Hypothesis 2: In relation to specific interpersonal variables of Wiggin's Interpersonal Model, compared to the mothers who drop out, the mothers who return to school were expected to be perceived as more cold hearted and more arrogant-calculating, which both involve denial of love to others while granting status to self.
- Hypothesis 3: Consistent with research on maternal role satisfaction in the work place, it is expected that mothers who are satisfied with their decision to advance their education would be perceived as less nurturing than mothers who are dissatisfied. In other words, stay at home or wish you did!
- Hypothesis 4: Consistent with research on gender-role expectations, it was hypothesized that male participants would perceive mothers who are students as less feminine and less nurturing than would the female participants.

Method

Participants

Participants were 213 undergraduate students from a Southeastern community college and a 4-year university. Eight surveys were incomplete and therefore could not be used in this study, leaving 205 remaining participants. The participants included 55 male students and 87 female students from community college and 15 male and 56 female college students from a 4 year university. For the community college participants, the mean age was 22.38, $SD=7.52$, and for the university participants, the mean age of participants was 26.58, $SD=7.99$. Participants at the community college were enrolled in general education courses whereas participants at the university were students taking upper-level courses, and all received a small amount of extra credit for their participation. For this reason, less than 1% of students in these classes declined to participate. The total sample consisted of 69 male participants and 136 female participants with a mean age of 24.05, $SD=7.93$. There were 140 Caucasians, 17 African-Americans, 11 Hispanics, 2 Native-Americans, 6 Asians, and 13 multira-

cial ethnic backgrounds. An additional 4 participants claimed an ethnicity other than the listed ethnic background. Additionally, there were 12 participants who did not reply to this particular item on the demographic form.

Design

The design used was a 2 (satisfaction) x 3 (duration of leave from school following childbirth) between-subjects, factorial design with the IAS and PAQ scales as dependent measures. After randomly assigning the 205 participants to conditions, the minimum cell sizes were $n=9$ men and $n=19$ women.

Procedure

Participants were each given a packet containing the following materials 1) one Vignette depicting one of six conditions of the stimulus mother “Jennifer”, 2) the Personal Attribute Questionnaire (PAQ: Spence and Helmreich 1978), 3) the Interpersonal Adjective Scale Appendix (IAS: Wiggins 1995), and 4) a Participant Information Form to collect demographic information. Participants received one of six descriptions of a mother named Jennifer. The descriptions varied with respect to maternal pursuit of education (dropped out, returned to college when child was 6 months, returned to college when child was 6 years) and maternal role satisfaction (satisfied or dissatisfied). Participants first read one of these six versions of the vignette randomly assigned to them, and then rated the mother described in the vignette on the PAQ and the IAS scales. These scales were counter-balanced within the study packets such that half the participants received the PAQ first and the other half received the IAS first. Finally, the participants completed the Participant Information Form.

Materials

Vignettes

The stimulus vignettes used in this study varied with respect to whether Jennifer, the mother in the vignette 1) discontinued her college education after the birth of her child, 2) resumed her education when her child was 6 months old, or 3) resumed her education when her child was 6 years old. Additionally, the vignettes varied as to whether Jennifer was 1) satisfied or 2) dissatisfied with this decision about her schooling. The description of the stimulus person began with the same two sentences. It was as follows:

Jennifer is a 31-year-old wife and mother. Before the birth of her child, Jennifer attended a local university as a full-time undergraduate student. (After giving birth to her child, she decided to end her schooling) or

(When her child reached the age of 6 months, Jennifer decided to return to school) or (When her child reached the age of 6 years, Jennifer decided to return to school). She is (satisfied) or (dissatisfied) with her decision (to return to school) or (to remain at home). Her husband is employed outside of the home from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Interpersonal Adjective Scale

Participants completed the Interpersonal Adjective Scale (IAS: Wiggins 1995) based on their perception of Jennifer, the mother in the vignette. The IAS provides 64 interpersonal adjectives that are rated on an eight-item likert scale. The IAS responses generate scores on two primary scales: Dominance (DOM) and Nurturance (LOV) that break into 8 octant scores: Assured-Dominant (PA), Arrogant-Calculating (BC), Coldhearted (DE), Aloof-Introverted (FG), Unassured-Submissive (HI), Unassuming-Ingenuous (JK), Warm-Agreeable (LM), and Gregarious-Extraverted (NO). Table 1 contains a description of the characteristics and patterns of social exchange found for each of these octant scores. Each of the eight octant scores is calculated by summing participant responses to eight items on the IAS so that there are eight octants with eight items per octant. The overall Dominance Score is derived using a formula that combines and weights T-scores for the subscales (Dominance Score = $.03[(PA-HI)+.707(NO+BC-FG-JK)]$) as is the Nurturance Scale (LOV = $.03[(LM-DE)+.707(NO-BC-FG+JK)]$). A sample item from the IAS reads as follows:

Self – assured
12345678

1 = *Extremely Inaccurate* and 8 = *Extremely Accurate*

The IAS has been found to have coefficient alphas on seven of the eight IAS scales $>.80$. The IAS scale for Unassuming-Ingenuous was found to have an alpha coefficient of $.733$ (Wiggins 1995). In the present study, coefficient alphas for the IAS scales ranged from $.78$ for the Unassuming-Ingenuous scale to $.92$ for both the Warm-Agreeable and Gregarious-Extroverted scales. Global peer ratings of Dominance and Nurturance on the IAS were found to be substantially correlated with their corresponding peer-ratings of Assertiveness ($r=.84$) and Altruism ($r=.75$) as measured by the NEO-PI (Wiggins 1995).

Personal Attribute Questionnaire

The Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ: Spence and Helmreich 1978) allows for assessment of an individual specifically in relation to gender role stereotypes. The scale measures attributes that are purported to be particularly

Table 1 Descriptors and interpersonal styles for the IAS subscales.

Subscale	Characteristics	Patterns of social exchange
Assured–dominant (PA)	Forceful Assertive Dominant Self-confident	Granting love and status to self Granting of love but not status to others
Arrogant–calculating (BC)	Egotistical Arrogant Cunning Exploitative	Granting love and status to self Denial of love and status to other
Cold-hearted (DE)	Not warm Not kind Not sympathetic Not understanding	Granting of status but not love to self Denial of love and status to other
Aloof–introverted (FG)	Introverted Aloof Distant Unsociable	Denial of love and status to self Denial of love and status to other
Unassured–submissive (HI)	Timid Meek Shy Self-doubting	Denial of love and status to self Granting love and status to other
Unassuming–ingenuous (JK)	Mild Gentle Conventional Not argumentative	Denial of love and status to self Granting love and status to other
Warm–agreeable (LM)	Sympathetic Forgiving Kind Softhearted	Granting of love but not status to self Granting of love and status to other
Gregarious–extraverted (NO)	Friendly Outgoing Sociable Cheerful	Granting of love and status to self Granting of love and status to other

socially desirable based on stereotyped gender-role expectations. The PAQ ratings determined participants' perceptions of the mother in the vignettes as measured on this 24 item, 5-point likert-style rating scale which divides into three subscales: Masculine (M), Feminine (F), and Masculine-Feminine (M-F). According to Eagly and Steffen (1984), perceived masculine traits are self-assertiveness and competitiveness, and perceived feminine traits are selflessness and concern for others. The PAQ has been found to have alpha coefficients $>.80$ (Aube and Koestner 1995). In the present study, the PAQ Masculine scale had a coefficient alpha of .81 and the PAQ Feminine scale had a coefficient alpha of .88. Spence and Helmreich (1978) reported correlations of .73 or higher between the Bem Sex Role Inventory and the PAQ's Masculine scales, and .57 or higher between the BSRI and PAQ Feminine Scales.

Participant Information Form

Demographic information including age, gender, ethnicity, and parental status was collected from all participants.

Results

Tables 2 and 3 present the means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for the dependent variables separately for men and women. A one-way MANOVA was conducted using participant gender as the independent variable and the IAS and PAQ scale scores as dependent variables. With the use of Wilks' criterion, the combined dependent variables were significantly related to participant gender, $F(10, 194) = 2.462, p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = .113$. As indicated in Table 2, male participants perceived the mothers as more arrogant-calculating, cold-hearted, and aloof-introverted than did female participants. Moreover, male participants perceived the mothers as less warm-agreeable, gregarious-extraverted, feminine, and nurturing than did female participants.

Because data were collected at two different institutions, we examined whether there were differences associated with participant institution. An institution by gender MANOVA was conducted on the combined IAS and PAQ dependent measures. Findings suggest that there was no main effect for

Table 2 Scale means and standard deviations for women and men.

	Women		Men	
Scale				
IAS dominance	43.25	8.54	45.65	9.85
IAS nurturance	46.92 _a	11.47	41.56 _b	11.92
IAS assured–dominant	45.61	14.15	44.19	13.52
IAS arrogant–calculating	39.27 _a	10.37	42.74 _b	10.64
IAS cold-hearted	44.85 _a	9.62	50.03 _b	11.46
IAS aloof–introverted	43.48 _a	10.98	47.94 _b	10.53
IAS unassured–submissive	43.96	13.29	44.72	11.79
IAS unassuming–ingenuous	48.00	14.14	46.46	12.18
IAS warm–agreeable	46.53 _a	15.53	39.06 _b	15.98
IAS gregarious–extraverted	46.24 _a	14.33	39.14 _b	14.99
PAQ masculinity	18.01	4.97	17.16	5.96
PAQ femininity	22.02 _a	5.39	19.57 _b	5.48

$N=136$ women and 69 men. IAS scale scores are T scores that can range from 10 to 100; PAQ scale scores can range from 0–32. For each scale score, higher scores suggest more of the trait as labeled. Means with different subscripts are statistically different ($p<.05$)

participant institution ($F(10, 192)=1.542, p=.127$, partial $\eta^2=.074$) nor was there an interaction between participant institution and gender ($F(10, 192)=1.048, p=.405$, partial $\eta^2=.052$). These analyses suggest no effect for participant institution. Thus, the data from the two institutions were combined for the remainder of the analyses.

Tests of Hypotheses

To test the hypotheses, 2 (satisfaction) \times 3 (duration of leave from school following childbirth) \times 2 (participant gender) between subjects MANOVAs were conducted on the 4 main dependent variables: a) IAS *dominance*, b) IAS *nurturance*, c) ratings of *femininity* on the PAQ, and d) ratings of *masculinity* on the PAQ and on the 8 IAS

subscales: a) Assured-Dominant, b) Arrogant-Calculating, c) Cold-hearted, d) Aloof-Introverted, e) Unassured-Submissive, f) Unassuming-Ingenuous, g) Warm-Agreeable, and h) Gregarious-Extraverted. The Bonferroni post-hoc test was used to adjust for family-wise error.

With the use of the Wilks' criterion, the combined dependent variables of dominance, nurturance, femininity, and masculinity were significantly affected by duration of leave from school, $F(8, 380)=5.223, p<.001$, partial $\eta^2=.099$, satisfaction with the decision, $F(4, 190)=13.222, p<.001$, partial $\eta^2=.218$, gender of participant, $F(4, 190)=4.481, p=.002$, partial $\eta^2=.086$, and the interaction between duration of leave from school and satisfaction, $F(8, 380)=2.639, p=.008$, partial $\eta^2=.053$. The combined 8 IAS subscales were significantly affected

Table 3 Scale intercorrelations for women and men.

Scale	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
IAS dominance		-.03	.75	.83	.66	.02	-.23	-.26	-.11	.31	.45	-.15
IAS nurturance	.18		.11	-.02	-.21	-.04	.26	.68	.89	.76	.02	.63
IAS assured–dominant	.86	.29		.40	.11	-.45	-.59	-.31	.03	.53	.70	.01
IAS arrogant–calculating	.88	.22	.71		.55	.19	.05	-.21	-.03	.18	.17	-.10
IAS cold-hearted	.75	-.09	.38	.51		.52	.21	-.01	-.32	-.14	-.02	-.31
IAS aloof–introverted	.30	-.04	-.03	.15	.67		.72	.35	-.05	-.40	-.50	-.23
IAS unassured–submissive	-.20	.30	-.42	-.14	.11	.46		.51	.28	-.19	-.64	.12
IAS unassuming–ingenuous	.05	.70	-.02	.01	.15	.40	.67		.45	.16	-.33	.33
IAS warm–agreeable	-.02	.92	.16	.06	-.30	-.21	.23	.51		.62	-.06	.64
IAS gregarious–extroverted	.40	.84	.53	.44	-.01	-.19	-.08	.30	.71		.43	.49
PAQ masculine	.55	.31	.74	.56	.03	-.29	-.45	-.09	.22	.58		.10
PAQ feminine	.02	.58	.19	.12	-.29	-.27	.13	.25	.59	.55	.35	

Note. $N=136$ women and 69 men. Correlations above the diagonal are those for women and correlations below the diagonal are those for men. IAS scale scores are T scores that can range from 10 to 100; PAQ scale scores can range from 0–32. For each scale score, higher scores suggest more of the trait as labeled

by duration of leave from school, $F(16, 372)=2.593$, $p=.001$, partial $\eta^2=.100$, satisfaction with the decision, $F(8, 186)=8.553$, $p<.001$, partial $\eta^2=.269$, and participant gender, $F(8, 186)=3.191$, $p=.002$, partial $\eta^2=.121$.

According to Hypothesis 1, it was expected that mothers who are students would be perceived as less feminine and less nurturing than mothers who stay home and do not continue their education. Examination of the tests of the between-subjects effects suggest that there were no differences in perceived femininity, $F(2, 193)=2.878$, $p=.059$, partial $\eta^2=.029$, nor were there differences in perceived nurturance, $F(2, 193)=1.066$, $p=.347$, partial $\eta^2=.011$ for mothers who made different choices about going back to school following the birth of their child. Thus, no support for Hypothesis 1 was found.

Hypothesis 2 stated that, compared to the mothers who drop out, the mothers who return to school were expected to be perceived as more cold hearted and more arrogant-calculating, which both involve denial of love to others while granting status to self. Examination of the tests of the between-subject effects suggest that the mother who returned to school 6 months after the birth of her child was perceived as significantly more coldhearted ($M=50.98$, $SE=1.308$) than the mother who dropped out of school following the birth of her child ($M=44.67$, $SE=1.330$), $F(2, 193)=5.874$, $p=.003$, partial $\eta^2=.057$. Likewise, the mother who returned to school 6 months after the birth of her child was also perceived as significantly more arrogant-calculating ($M=43.88$, $SE=1.290$) than the mother who dropped out of school following the birth of her child ($M=37.625$, $SE=1.311$), $F(2, 193)=5.928$, $p=.003$, partial $\eta^2=.058$. Thus, support was found for Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 suggested that mothers who are satisfied with their decision to advance their education would be perceived as less nurturing than mothers who are dissatisfied. Overall, there was a significant main effect for satisfaction level. Mothers who were satisfied with their decision were perceived as significantly more nurturant ($M=46.46$, $SE=1.223$) than dissatisfied mothers ($M=41.94$, $SE=1.196$), $F(1, 193)=6.966$, $p=.009$, partial $\eta^2=.035$. However, there was no interaction between the return to school and satisfaction variables on the nurturance dependent variable. Thus, no support was found for hypothesis 3.

According to Hypothesis 4, it was expected that compared to female participants, the male participants would perceive mothers who are students as less feminine and less nurturing. As stated earlier, the male participants perceived the mothers, in general, differently than did the female participants. However, there was no interaction between the gender of the participant and the return to school variable. These results provide partial support for Hypothesis 4.

Additional Findings

The MANOVA results suggest additional interesting findings. Specifically, the mother who chose to discontinue her education was perceived as significantly less dominant ($M=40.29$, $SE=1.078$), masculine ($M=15.28$, $SE=.598$), and assured-dominant ($M=38.58$, $SE=1.549$) than either of the mothers who returned to school following the birth of her child ($M_{\text{dominance}}=47.62$, $SE=1.060$ and $M=45.37$, $SE=1.021$; $M_{\text{masculinity}}=18.42$, $SE=.588$ and $M=18.96$, $SE=.567$; $M_{\text{assured-dominant}}=48.01$, $SE=1.524$ and $M=47.44$, $SE=1.468$ for the mother who returned to school after 6 months and the mother who returned to school after 6 years, respectively). The mother who discontinued her education was also perceived as more unassured-submissive ($M=47.52$, $SE=1.566$) than the mother who returned to school after 6 years ($M=41.68$, $SE=1.485$).

There were also unanticipated findings related to the satisfaction of the mother. Specifically, the dissatisfied mother was perceived as more unassured-submissive ($M=47.99$, $SE=1.236$) and aloof-introverted ($M=49.28$, $SE=1.045$) than the satisfied mother ($M=41.03$, $SE=1.264$ and $M=42.59$, $SE=1.069$, for unassured-submissive and aloof-introverted, respectively). The satisfied mother was perceived as more dominant ($M=50.81$, $SE=1.250$), masculine ($M=19.80$, $SE=.483$), feminine ($M=21.78$, $SE=.562$), assured-dominant ($M=50.81$, $SE=1.250$), arrogant-calculating ($M=43.66$, $SE=1.058$), and gregarious-extraverted ($M=48.09$, $SE=1.456$) than the dissatisfied mother ($M_{\text{dominance}}=41.64$, $SE=.85$; $M_{\text{masculinity}}=15.30$, $SE=.472$; $M_{\text{femininity}}=19.75$, $SE=.55$; $M_{\text{assured-dominant}}=38.55$, $SE=1.223$; $M_{\text{arrogant-calculating}}=38.44$, $SE=1.035$; $M_{\text{gregarious-extraverted}}=37.02$, $SE=1.424$).

Discussion

This study explores whether the good mother stereotype found in employment settings is also present in environments of higher education. Unlike perceptions found for working mothers, this study revealed no differences in perceptions of femininity or nurturance for mothers who return to school compared to those who do not. There were no differences in perceived femininity or perceived nurturance for mothers who made different choices about going back to school following the birth of their child. Thus, the first hypothesis was not supported. Perhaps the time-limited nature of the role of student as well as the flexibility provided by this role contributes to why women in the role of student are perceived differently than those in the role of full time employee. The fact that the male participants perceived all the mothers as significantly less feminine and less nurturant than the female participants suggests that gender differences do still exist between men and women in their perceptions.

Furthermore, as predicted by our second hypothesis, the mothers who return to school at 6 months were rated as more cold hearted and more arrogant-calculating, the two octants in Wiggin's interpersonal circumplex model specifically involving denial of love to others while granting status to self. While the results in relation to our first and second hypotheses can be seen as progressive in the sense that mothers who return to college are perceived as having the positive qualities traditionally linked with masculinity and dominance, unfortunately the results of this study also expose that what comes with this is the perception that mothers who returned to school soon after the birth of a child are more arrogant-calculating, more cold hearted, and less warm-agreeable than those who drop out. These findings suggest women who return to school after the birth of a child may be perceived simultaneously in negative and positive ways by peers. Due to this mixed perception and particularly the perception of being cold-hearted, arrogant-calculating and less warm agreeable, these women may not receive the social support that is critical to academic integration and success. In subtle ways the perception that these new mothers are cold-hearted, arrogant-calculating and less warm-agreeable may exacerbate the role conflict and stress of these women as they endeavor to return to college soon after childbirth. Yet for mothers experiencing lower socio-economic status, education and subsequent employment may break the cycle of poverty, leading to increased income potential. Higher education has been described as empowering and transformative, a means to personal growth (Haleman 2004).

The pleasantly surprising finding in this study related to our third hypothesis. We hypothesized that similar to perceptions of employed mothers, the mothers who are satisfied with their decision to advance their education would be perceived as less nurturing, less feminine, and more masculine. However, in this study, our participants responded positively to the role satisfaction level of the mother, rating all satisfied mothers (regardless of whether or not they returned to school) as more masculine, less feminine and more nurturing than dissatisfied mothers. Satisfied mothers were perceived as more assured-dominant, arrogant-calculating, and gregarious-extraverted than the dissatisfied mothers. Moreover, the satisfied mothers were perceived as less aloof-introverted and unassured-submissive. Although previous research established the link between maternal role satisfaction and quality of parenting/ mother-child interaction, this link was ignored in the perception of employed mothers (Gorman and Fritzsche 2002) but not overlooked by our study participants who rated all satisfied mothers more positively than dissatisfied mothers.

The sample used in this study was limited to community college and university students at southern institutions, and expanding the type and location of participants is an area of

future exploration. While significant differences were neither expected nor found when comparing our community college and university students who participated in this study, a larger and equal number of participants from similar institutions would rule out the possibility of differences across institution type. Similarly, investigating whether differences exist across different academic majors, in particular traditionally female versus male dominated areas of study would be worthy of future exploration. It would also be quite valuable to investigate faculty and advisors' perceptions of mothers who are students because these individuals also have influence on the academic integration and retention of students. In the Van Stone et al study, the mothers reported that "students with children were generally viewed with suspicion by the academic institution and its employees..." (p.157). Nevertheless, it is very important to specifically investigate college students' perceptions of other students who are mothers given the importance of social integration/acceptance for retention and academic success (Tinto 1975; Van Stone et al. 1994). Psychology majors were strongly represented in the sample used in this study. Because psychology majors study human behavior including stereotypes and diversity, it seems quite likely that our participants were no more likely to endorse stereotypes than other students. Thus, the fact that some negative stereotypes were found in our sample, to the extent that the new mothers who were students were perceived as significantly more arrogant-calculating, more cold-hearted, and less warm-agreeable, speaks to the pervasiveness of the motherhood mandate and related stereotypes.

The college-level student body is changing with increasing numbers of adult learners, many of them mothers (Home 1998). Eliminating barriers for women who are mothers, including discouraging stereotypes, would be a big step in helping to support the academic success of these women. Etaugh and Spiller (1989) note that the "growing voice of these older students in academe may encourage the development and implementation of institutional efforts to increase the access and participation of women in higher education in all areas and at all levels" (p.45). The results of the present study indicate that while the perception of women who return to school after the birth child is not entirely negative, there is indeed work to be done in order to ensure support to of the pursuit of higher education by women who have children.

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