

MILFS and Matrons: Images and Realities of Mothers' Sexuality

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Abstract Motherhood and sexual appeal are rarely linked in Western culture. There seems to be a notion that once a woman has children she is first and foremost an example, and must be responsible and conservative in a culturally specific way. Most women become mothers at some point in their lives and this is a major physical, emotional, and role transition, one that many women struggle with privately given societal ideals of a “good” mother. Despite its essential role in motherhood and life, and the health benefits known to be associated with sexual activity, public expression of sexuality is still primarily associated with being young, childless, and unmarried. Using a social constructionist perspective, we look at the ways in which acceptable expressions of mothers' sexuality are defined and negotiated by contemporary women. Based on in-depth interviews with fifty women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, we discuss women's images of mothers' sexuality and the ways in which motherhood impacts women's experiences of sexuality. We find that for most mothers interviewed, the way they felt about sex, their sexual appeal, and their level of sexual desire changed after having children. Coupled with the fatigue and responsibility associated with being a new mother, women felt disconnected from their sexuality for a period of time.

Keywords Motherhood · Sexuality · Role transition · Media images of mothers · Women's sexuality

I think when I imagined my mom, and imagining what a mom is in my mind, I never imagine it ... that somebody would view a mom and say, “She's kind of hot.” But now, being a mom, I still imagine myself as just as hot as I was when I was 20. And just talking to other people who just make comments

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about other moms or people who are in their 30s and 40s I wonder, huh, maybe my mom was like that, too. I didn't think of a mom as being a sexual type person until I started thinking about it [for myself] (Jessica, 38, married, mother to 2 daughters).

Motherhood and sexual appeal are rarely linked in Western culture. Research suggests that mother and sexual person are separate identities and that mothers are perceived as generally asexual or "matronly" (Friedman et al. 1998; Tardy 2000; Weisskopf 1980). There seems to be a notion that once a woman has children she is first and foremost an example, and must be responsible and conservative in a culturally specific way. Despite its essential role in motherhood and life, and the health and relationship benefits known to be associated with sexual activity (Hinchcliff and Gott 2004), public expression of sexuality is still primarily associated with being young, childless, and unmarried (Dempsey and Reichert 2000). Being "mature and sensible" implies that one would not engage in sexual activities for recreational purposes or discuss or express sexual desire. Thus, motherhood and sexuality remain mutually exclusive aspects of women's lives in cultural conception (Friedman et al. 1998).

In reality, however, sexuality and motherhood are certainly linked. During pregnancy women may feel concerned about potentially harming their fetus and refrain from sexual intercourse (Hyde et al. 1996; Weisskopf 1980). During the first year postpartum, due to physical pain, exhaustion, stress, emotional adjustment, and, in some cases postpartum depression, women's sexual activity and desire often decreases (Ahlborg et al. 2005; Hyde et al. 1996). Beyond the first year, children complicate sexual relationships for or between their parents, can pose a distraction to women's sexual feelings, and often inhibit spontaneity in sexual expression (Trice-Black 2010; Trice-Black and Foster 2011). Mothers become concerned about the example they set for their children and the consequences of their sexual actions. And, as their children age, mothers begin to focus on directing their children's burgeoning sexuality and discerning appropriate means of educating their children about sex (Martin 2009; Martin and Luke 2010).

In recent years images of pregnant women and younger mothers as sexually desirable and erotic have emerged in popular culture. Photographs of pregnant celebrities wearing "belly-baring" fashions and films that feature "hot moms" who are lusted after by their children's friends have become normative, though not common (Oliver 2010; Tally 2006; Trice-Black and Foster 2011). The May 30th 2011 issue of *US Weekly*, for example, featured several pages of bikini-clad pregnant actresses like Selma Blair, Tori Spelling, and Jessica Alba, as well as a column about how celebrity mothers credit breastfeeding with helping them restore their pre-pregnancy figure (*US Weekly* 2011). Pregnant women have even begun to be depicted as sexual objects and featured in pornographic films (Huntley 2000). The term MILF (Mother I'd Like to Fuck) has become common jargon and serves as a special designation for desirable mothers. MILF has gained considerable attention since the 1999 movie *American Pie*. Since then, the term has appeared in television episodes on shows like *30 Rock* and *Weeds* (Trice-Black and Foster 2011), and found heavily on Internet searches containing pornography, magazine articles, and

blogging sites. The term exemplifies middle-aged mothers who are found to be attractive or desirable by younger men, most typically teenaged boys. *Men's Weekly* magazine published an article "MILFS, Cougars And Pumas—The Characteristics" where MILFs were depicted as mothers in the age group of late 30s to early 40s who frequent malls, schools, and daycares (*Men's Weekly* 2011). MILFs are also popular in pornography where they are defined as "hot housewives" with multiple pictorials of matured women in *Playboy*. Although *American Pie* is thought to be responsible for the genesis of the term, there is evidence it existed prior to the movie. *New York* magazine cites evidence of the term in an online Usenet post regarding a *Playboy* illustration of hot moms dated back to 1995 (Em & Lo 2007). The concept of MILF is also apparent in the 1967 movie *The Graduate*, where Mrs. Robinson is a mother who is sexually desirable to a college graduate (Nichols 1967). Google searches contain blogs and ample websites making the connection of the term MILF to Mrs. Robinson.

These mediated images are very specific, illustrating stability in ideals of conventional attractiveness. "Hot moms" are those who appear to spend significant amounts of time on their physical appearance, who do not "let themselves go" during pregnancy or after their children are born. These celebrity mothers are wealthy women who can afford full-time help with child care, cosmetic surgery, and have time to work on maintaining their appearances. Real women, particularly younger mothers and those who work outside of the home, however, comment on the difficulties of maintaining self-care and feeling attractive, given the physical limitations associated with caring for young children and meeting the demands of career and relationships, as well as changes to their bodies as the result of carrying a child.

Using a social constructionist perspective, we look at the ways in which acceptable expressions of mothers' sexuality are defined and negotiated by contemporary women. Most women become mothers at some point in their lives and this is a major physical, emotional, and role transition, one that many women struggle with privately given societal ideals of a "good" mother (Guendouzi 2005; Lorber 1994; Tardy 2000). Based on a review of literature on mothering, Guendouzi constructed a sketch of the characteristics of a good mother which include: protective, nurturing, caring, organized, and socializing ("instilling good social and moral values in their child") (2005, p. 20). Successfully reproducing this image requires focus on caring for others before (or instead of) oneself. This can lead to frustration, stress, and fatigue, particularly among first time mothers, as they learn that their orientation must shift from self to other. These feelings may manifest in disinterest in sexual relations or a disassociation with one's own sexuality, as one assimilates into the role of mother (Adams et al. 2006; Trice-Black 2010; Trice-Black and Foster 2011). Thus, it is useful to explore women's feelings about how being a mother relates to their sense of sexuality and the ways in which they identify a sense of change in their sexual identity. By interviewing mothers in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, we aim to provide insight into how women experience and manage this transition. It is also important to understand the ways in which mothers' sexuality is imagined in contemporary culture so that we can make sense of the pressures and influences on actual mothers' lives. In other words, studying realities in conjunction with perceptions allows for the illumination of both women's experiences and the

ideologies that shape those experiences. Based on in-depth interviews with fifty women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, we discuss women's images of mothers' sexuality and the ways in which motherhood impacts women's experiences of sexuality.

Background

The study of motherhood and sexuality is limited and has focused on certain types of mothers or particular issues that concern mothers. Specifically, teen mothers' sexuality has been of great concern (e.g., Bailey et al. 2002; Davies et al. 2001; Elliott 2010; Kidger 2005; Kirkman et al. 2001; Musick 1993). Though not as extensively as unwed *teen* mothers, single mothers' sexuality has also been explored (e.g., Potter and Knaub 1988; Williams et al. 2008). More recently there has been increased interest in mothers as cultural arbiters of their children's sexuality (Baier and Wampler 2008; El-Shaieb and Wurtele 2009; Martin 2009; Martin and Luke 2010; Pluhar et al. 2006, 2008; Usher-Seriki et al. 2008). These studies deal primarily with mothers' methods of and discomfort or anxieties regarding discussing sex with their children, rather than how a mother's personal sexual self is affected by watching her children mature. Though research such as this is important, it reinforces the image of the asexual and other-oriented mother.

The small body of research that has empirically examined mothers' sexuality has focused on several topics: sexual behavior and satisfaction during pregnancy and/or postpartum (Ahlborg et al. 2005; Apt and Hurlbert 1992; De Judicibus and McCabe 2002; Hyde et al. 1996), breastfeeding (Davis 2004), and media images of motherhood and sexuality (Oliver 2010; Tally 2006). Based on surveys and diaries, this research finds that mothers' interest in and frequency of sexual activity wanes during pregnancy (though not dramatically) and the year post-partum (Ahlborg et al. 2005, Apt and Hurlbert 1992; De Judicibus and McCabe 2002), though one longitudinal study found frequency began to increase to pre-baby levels by 12 months after the birth of a child and that sexual satisfaction gradually improved during the first year postpartum (Hyde et al. 1996).

As for the study of popular cultural depictions of women's sexuality, in an interesting examination of the films and public images of actresses Susan Sarandon and Diane Keaton, Tally (2006) noted that although there have been roles that featured "middle-aged" women expressing their sexuality in progressive ways, these roles generally depicted this sexual expression as liminal rather than definitive. In other words, these women play sexually active or expressive for a period in time, but by the end of the films studied, they returned to their primary focus as mothers, suggesting that this is their most important role. Thus, these films send mixed messages about "older" (50s) women's sexuality—on the one hand suggesting that older women should not be confined to their identities as mothers and should be free to express sexual desire; yet, on the other hand, communicating that such exploration is temporal and that it is most useful because it allows them to become better mothers (Tally 2006).

Experiences and perceptions of mothers' sexuality from their own perspectives have been conspicuously underexplored in the literature on women's sexuality. Few

studies have looked specifically at how becoming a mother and raising young children impacts women's personal sense of sexuality, desire, interest and evaluation of sexual activities, and satisfaction with sexual relationships. The studies that have broached the topic of mothers' sexuality have done so from a clinical perspective, offering guidelines for therapists working with new mothers, using very small samples (Adams et al. 2006; Trice-Black 2010; Trice-Black and Foster 2011). For example, Trice-Black (2010) interviewed five white middle class mothers between the ages of 35 and 40. She found that mothers were concerned about their appearance and desirability following giving birth, that they had a strong desire to "please, protect, and care for others" (p. 157), which led to prioritizing their husbands' sexual satisfaction over their own. Some of the women interviewed suggested they faked orgasms or engaged in sexual activity when they were not in the mood in order to make their partner feel good. Trice-Black (2010) also suggested that mothers found it difficult to balance their needs with those of their families and felt stressed about the lack of time to think about or engage in sex. We extend this research with a larger sample, and look not only at mothers' experiences but also perceptions of cultural images of motherhood.

A couple of scholars have suggested the importance of looking at the erotic elements of the maternal experience (Traina 2000; Weisskopf 1980), noting, for example, that arousal may accompany breastfeeding or the feelings of sexuality stirred by the stimulation of the body during care for an infant. However, these authors acknowledged the taboo associated with discussing this idea and the resistance they experienced to such research. This is not surprising given that motherhood is predominantly constructed as an asexual identity in Western culture, both in media and social norms. Such constructions aid in the desexualization of motherhood in women's experience and create a climate that makes it difficult for women to feel in touch with their sexuality, particularly in the early years of motherhood. The work of psychoanalytic scholars like Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan offer insight into why this disconnect seems to be the norm. Chodorow (1978) argued that because (most) girls are raised by their mothers they learn to see gender similarities and identify with their mothers, rather than their fathers. They see their mothers as connected to them, as similar, and as their primary nurturers. Thus, they learn that to be a mother is to be other-oriented, to be a girl or woman is to be connected to others and to focus on others' well-being. Gilligan (1982) built on this, noting that girls are socialized to see the world as a web of connections, and to prioritize relationships with others over individual achievement. We can extend these explanations specifically to sexuality. Sexual gratification is often viewed as indulgent. Religious taboos suggest that sex for the sake of sex is unnecessary and, in some religions, immoral. Thus, those who pursue sexual pleasure can be viewed as self-focused. Furthermore, the ideal mother in our culture is one who is self-sacrificing and whose primary concern is her children, rather than herself. Thus, it may be difficult for women to justify or reconcile their images of mothers and sexual women.

The present study concerns attitudes about and strategies for negotiation of sexuality among younger mothers. We look at how women feel about their level of

desire, body image and feelings of attractiveness, as well as the ways in which they interpret and respond to societal expectations for women generally and mothers specifically. Our focus is not on specific changes in sexual behavior or frequency; rather, we examine how motherhood affects women's sense of their own sexuality and the emotional experience of sexual activity. Additionally, we add to the literature on perceptions of mothers' sexuality by discussing constructions of "acceptable" expressions of sexuality for mothers as well as reactions to recent popular culture conceptions of mothers as sexual objects.

Method

As part of a larger study on women's sexuality through the life course, in-depth interviews were conducted by the first author with fifty-five women aged 20–49. Four more interviews with women in their 20s were conducted by a research assistant who worked with the first author during the first year of data collection. Participants were recruited in several ways. Primarily, women were located through snowball sampling. The first author began the study by asking women she knew for references of women in the relevant age groups and then asking those women for referrals. Additionally, women were recruited through fliers posted in colleges, health clubs, and community centers. In order to be eligible to participate in the study women needed to be between the ages of twenty and sixty-nine. Initially, the intention was to interview women of varied sexual orientations; however, the diversity of sexual development experiences as well as the existence of studies on sexual orientation and sexual development, in addition to the evaluation of variables like age, parental status, marital status, and religion, led to the decision to interview heterosexual women only. Two bisexual women were interviewed prior to deciding to focus on heterosexual women; and another two women who were married and identified as heterosexual during recruitment, described their sexual identity as more fluid during the interview, and noted that they had had bisexual relationships in the past. Thus, 91 women interviewed identified as heterosexual and four women as either bisexual or "undefined."

The interviews of fifty women are used in this paper because the first nine women were not asked questions about mothers' sexuality, as this was determined to be an important element of the study as interviews progressed. The first nine interviewees were in their 20s and 30s and none were mothers and thus the initial intention was only to ask questions about motherhood and sexuality to mothers. However, given popular culture conceptions of mothers' sexuality and other generalized images of women's sexuality, questions about mothers' sexuality were added to the interview guide. Questions were modified as interviews and analyses progressed, with new questions added to further explore themes identified as important. Furthermore, preliminary analysis of data suggested that women who were mothers (or not) and married (or not) varied in terms of attitudes and experiences. Thus, we employed theoretical sampling to stratify subsequent groups of women selected for interviews. Using 2007 Census data, we decided to follow patterns of majority for marital and motherhood status; so, the majority of the women interviewed in their 30s and 40s

were married and mothers; and the majority of women in their 20s were neither married nor mothers.

Interviews were conducted at locations convenient to participants such as their homes, public parks, quiet coffee shops or restaurants with tall booths, or the first author's office. Privacy was of key concern given the sensitive nature of the interview so occasionally, when in public places, we changed seating in order to attain more seclusion. Interviews lasted between 50 min and 3 h, and averaged about 97 min. Questions focused on how women's sexuality changed during their lives. Specifically, for this paper, relevant questions included: "What is your image of a mothers' sexuality? Do you think women who are mothers should show their sexuality in a way that is different from women who are not mothers? Are you familiar with the term MILF? What do you think of this term and what do you think it suggests about mothers' sexuality?" Additionally, mothers were asked to reflect on how they felt their sexuality changed during the various stages of motherhood including pregnancy, postpartum, and as their children matured.

Twenty-seven of the women interviewed were mothers. Most (14) of the women who did not have children were in their 20s. Twenty-five of the women (and 21 of the mothers) were currently married, seventeen women were never married (though seven of those women were in relationships), eight were divorced, and three were separated. Twenty-eight women self-defined as middle class, 11 as working class, 10 as upper middle class, and one as upper class. Sixty-two percent of the women were white, 16% were Asian, 12% were African American; two women were Hispanic, two women were Middle Eastern, and one woman was bi-racial. Although this is part of a larger study of women's sexuality through the life course, we chose to focus on women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, as they were the ones most likely to be currently experiencing the transition to motherhood and raising young children. We decided to analyze the comments of women who were not mothers as well as those who were because we wanted to explore the perspectives of those who were less familiar with the realities of how children impact sexuality and whose perceptions were informed by societal constructions of mothers' sexuality.

Interviews were audio recorded and either professionally transcribed or transcribed by the interviewer. Transcripts were imported into Nvivo 9.0 and then analyzed for themes and patterns, using a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). The first author began analysis by doing open coding and microanalysis. This process involved reading through the interview transcripts multiple times, labeling data with codes, and writing memos about emergent themes. The focus of the larger project is the impact of major life course transitions on women's sexuality; and, it became evident through open coding that motherhood was one of these significant experiences. As coding progressed and once the second author began working on the project, the authors read interviews together, discussed possibilities for interpretation of comments, and reached a consensus on how data should be organized. As analysis continued, more themes were added and the authors, as well as another research assistant, developed additional themes, which were organized in Nvivo. Thus, after developing initial themes like "children," "motherhood," "images of mothers' sexuality," and "MILF," we engaged in axial and selective coding within those themes to explore variations and sub-categorizations.

This is how we determined the attitudes about motherhood, and tracked variations in experiences. We used Nvivo's advanced coding query function to explore mothers' perspectives separately from women who were not mothers; this enabled us to make theoretical comparisons (Strauss and Corbin 1998) between these groups of women which helped us refine our understanding of perceptions of mothers' sexuality. Although, the goal for the project was to interview equal numbers of women in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, and that determined when data collection terminated, after approximately three quarters of the interviews with mothers in these age groups were completed, we appeared to reach theoretical saturation, as no new themes regarding mothers' sexuality were discovered.

Findings: Images of Mothers' Sexuality: Matron or MILF?

Approximately two-thirds of the women interviewed believed women's sexual expression should change when she becomes a mother. Not only do mothers have larger responsibilities that may prevent her from being sexual; but, the popular conception is that she should also be concerned with how she presents her sexuality in front of her children. When asked if they thought a mother should show her sexuality in a way that is different from women who are not mothers, most women discussed what they believe to be appropriate in terms of how a mother dresses, and how privacy becomes an important factor when expressing sexuality. Within these topics, women also made mention to the messages mothers are sending to children, especially when expressing sexuality inappropriately. Although the majority of women noted differences they believe a woman should develop as a mother, there were a number of women who did not see a difference in the way a woman should communicate her sexuality before and after motherhood. Themes that emerged related to images of mothers' sexuality were: Responsibilities of a Mother, Physical Appearance and Messages to Children, Public versus Private, and Mixed Messages.

The Responsibilities of a Mother

Five women commented on the responsibilities new mothers have when they take on their additional role as mother which lead mothers to experience time and energy constraints. Rearing children begins to replace sexuality as mothers become consumed in having to care for their children. Jessica, the married 38 year old mother of two, quoted at the start of the paper, is a good example of this, as she noted having no image of a mother's sexuality before becoming a mother herself. She believed mothers experience a change in sexuality as children become a larger part of the mother's life. After seeing this occur with her sister she noted, "It seems like they become not as attached to their sexuality because they're mothers. Because they're so wrapped up in their kids' lives. That's just what it seems like. Maybe it's not. I didn't have a role model mom in my mind so it felt like I was kind of venturing into new territory." Other women simply believe mothers have less time for sex, either due to exhaustion or busy schedules. Bridget, a 25 year old single woman without children, inferred, "Everything I've viewed—whether it's in

magazines or help pages—it's as a mother I have less sex or want less sex or have less time for sex. I know that's a stereotype and that's certainly what's in my mind." Similarly, Victoria, a recently separated 27 year old woman without children, constructed her image of mothers by what she has seen from her friends. She has found that "the ones that are not married and are in relationships seem to like it and enjoy it, but they're not married yet and don't have kids. And those who have kids they're tired and [sex] seems annoying to them almost." Thus, women perceived motherhood to be a time where women are focused on others and have a hard time juggling their responsibilities.

Physical Appearance and Messages to Children

When a woman becomes a mother, 15 women believed there is a certain way she should convey her sexuality. In terms of physical appearance, most women believe it is inappropriate for a mother to dress provocatively because they thought mothers should be setting a good example to their children. These women question what type of message is being sent to children when sexuality is overtly expressed by a mother's actions or appearance. According to these women, dressing conservatively is more acceptable for mothers in order to prevent children from getting the wrong message. Danielle, a 35 year old married mother of two suggested, "You're not supposed to dress [sexually] if you're a mom. What kind of image is that putting forth? It may not be fair to the other part of you who may still feel like an unmarried or newly married woman, but you never know." Responses like Danielle's were consistent through the interviews as women focused on messages that are displayed to children, and how mothers should be responsible in order to ensure they are setting a good example. For instance, Camille, a divorced 47 year old mother of three, reflected on a neighbor that demonstrated inappropriate behavior and how she believed this can send a wrong message to children. As she stated:

Being at things with my kids and all, you do have these moms that are like hot mammas or whatever. And I just think it's inappropriate sometimes, you do have children. I have an old neighbor that got breast implants and it was all about flaunting them. And I did think - she had two teenaged daughters and one of them definitely had some self-esteem issues and I'm just thinking, "What did she tell her teenaged daughters when she went into have these breast implants?" Like what's that doing to their self-image? Like this is what you have to do? But I just think, you know, there are certain ways [to express sexuality] because you're an example to your children. You're supposed to be an example to your children.

Some women believed it could be embarrassing to others for a mother to dress too showy. For example, Marcia, a 22 year old unmarried woman without children, believed dressing in such a manner could be embarrassing, not only for the mother, but also for the children or the husband. She said:

I have friends that have really young mothers they're like late 30s, really young and they'll wear really tight clothes. They look nice, you know, they look really

good but when we're around like her daughter might be embarrassed I guess. The children might be embarrassed, their parents come out in like a tennis suit and they're not even going to play tennis, they're going to go out you know. You wear a tank top and a skirt and I guess they'll be embarrassed and I guess that's a reason why. Or the husband might be embarrassed because it's like why is your wife trying to impress other guys? Why's she wearing that?

Although most women believed a mother should not dress provocatively, some women could not make a distinction on whether this should be the case as a mother, or as a woman who is older and should appear more responsible. For example, Amanda, a divorced 39 year old mother of two, said, "I have to be concerned how I dress and how I am definitely now that I have children. But I would have that same respect if I was getting dressed and going to a second grade class to read a book and I didn't have children. So I don't know if it's a mother thing or just an adult responsible thing." This raises an interesting issue regarding how age links with images of motherhood and sexuality. Perhaps younger mothers who dress provocatively are more likely to be excused or even viewed positively, as they more closely mirror popular culture images of a "hot mom" or "MILF."

Public Versus Private

Most women believe there is an appropriate setting for a mother to express her sexuality, especially in a context away from children. Many women feel that sexuality should only occur behind closed doors or in a private area alone with their partner. It was common for women to say that dressing provocatively for certain instances such as going out on dates were acceptable, as long as it was in a safe place away from children. Nia, a married 29 year old mother of two, said, "You're still a sexual person even though you're a mother. It's just, you know, once your kids—like if you're going out for the evening and your kids aren't with you, then it's okay. If you're taking your kids to the mall or what have you, you shouldn't have men, you know, ogling you. I just don't think you should put it out there when you're with your kids." Many women made similar remarks about women's sexuality being more open when alone with their partner.

Three women believed exposure to sexuality can be confusing to kids, and others noted the disturbance or trauma that can be placed on children if sexuality isn't private. Gretchen, a single 42 year old woman without children, constructed her image of how a mother should be based on her earlier experience of walking in on her mother and the resulting trauma. Gretchen, like many others, believed sexuality should be private, but also went further to say there are some forms of sexuality that are acceptable, and even beneficial, to be demonstrated around children:

Well, I think there's an appropriate time and place, you know, when raising children. I happened to walk in on my mom (laughter) and that was traumatic for me at the time and took years of therapy to overcome.... But yeah, there's a time and a place for kids, you know. I mean you can express your sexuality without doing the sexual act in front of children. You can express your love for your husband, you know. I think children need to see that. They need to see

that this is what safe love is without going into the graphic details of, you know, the private part. There are private parts, but I think a child that doesn't see their parent touch or kiss or hug or snuggle or laugh together is ... I think that they grow up lacking something. I don't know what the exact word is but I think that they miss that.

Women who communicated the importance of appropriate displays of affection believed it was important for children to see some forms of sexuality such as hugging and kissing because it sets a good example of what a respectful relationship is.

Although most women feel there are responsibilities mothers should obtain to ensure they are being appropriate and setting a good example to their children, some women do not believe that motherhood should be a catalyst to changing women's sexuality. They support this belief with the fact that mothers are still women and sexual beings despite having children. Adena, a separated 30-year old woman without children, expressed how she thinks it is unreasonable that a woman is restricted from sexuality for the mere fact that she is a mother:

For so long we put that on the mother figure—no sexuality because you are a mother now. Even boobs are not sexual anymore because you are feeding a baby. It's so unfair, it's such a pressure for women. I'm glad now they are sexy, they care about themselves. Their clothes change now. They are still pretty when they are pregnant. I'm really glad we got over this because it's ridiculous. People in their 30s [it's a] great time Women with no kids is different than women with kids? I think it is so unfair. They are very sexual.

Adena, quoted above, shares in common the thoughts of seventeen other interviewees who believe that women who are mothers are no different than any other women. Some women made comments in the interview similar to Jennifer, a 40-year-old mother of four children who claimed, "You're a woman regardless, it doesn't matter" or Irina, a 46 year old mother who remarked that, "Women are women." Similarly, Kiko, a married 47 year old mother of two, made the connection of sexuality as a need that continues to exist regardless of being a mother. She said, "Sex is like you eating food. That's there. It can't be like because I'm a mother no sex, or because I'm a mother I'm not going to eat dinner—not like that." Overall, however, it was clear that interviewees viewed mothers' sexuality, and particularly the public expression of it, as consistent with cultural ideals of matrons and conceptions of the "good mother" whose primary concern is her children and who prioritizes her children's need over her own. However, given changing conceptions of younger mothers in popular culture and the idea of the sexually desirable mother known as the MILF, we decided to explore women's thoughts about this term and the implications of these depictions.

Mixed Messages: "It's Degrading! But I Wouldn't Mind if Someone Called Me a MILF"

Most women interviewed were familiar with the term MILF; only 10 interviewees had never heard the term or did not know what it meant. When asked for their interpretation

of it, some women suggested the term stands as recognition that mothers are still sexual people. As Adrianna, a 38 year old single woman without children said, “I would say it is commentary that it has taken away the image of women in the ‘50s where you’re a mother and you cook dinner and you quietly close the door to your bedroom and have very quiet sex with your man on top and you know, have babies. And it’s like yeah, you know, women are very sexual into their 40s and 50s.”

Sixteen women believed MILF is a positive term and would regard it as a compliment. They believe it is a way to call someone attractive, and would be pleased if considered one. Autumn, a 41 year old mother said, “I think it’s funny. Yeah, I’m sure it’s offensive to plenty of people, for all the right reasons, but it doesn’t bother me personally. And I have to be very honest in saying that when that term was coined it was like, ‘Oh, yeah, I want to be a woman who’s attractive to her children’s friends.’” Tamara, a divorced 48 year old mother of one, also viewed MILF positively. She responded saying, “Well, if it’s a guy that’s calling me a MILF, I’d take it as a compliment (laughs). Yeah, I would take that as a compliment. I hope the old gray mare still has it.”

However, some women believed MILF is a demeaning term. Eight women reported negative feelings towards the term for reasons that it is crude and they find it oppressive. Hailey, an unmarried childless 20-year-old woman, responded to say not only that she finds the term crude, but it also implies that women do not have a say in the matter.

The whole concept weirds me out like friends looking at your mom like, ‘oh she’s hot—I want to...’ First of all it assumes the woman doesn’t have a choice in it. Like, ‘oh I want to fuck her.’ Just cause the guy is younger and admires her that must mean she should be flattered. Maybe it creeps her out, grosses her out. Um it’s assumed that women—that term makes me think it’s assumed that women want to be the objects of that kind of attention. Or that it’s flattering—and it is in a way—I mean everybody likes to feel attractive but I think that’s a really crude way of saying it.

As a married mother of one, Charlotte, thirty-six, communicated her standpoint on the term and the reasons why she dislikes it. She said, “I don’t think it’s very flattering—the fact that like all of the sudden you’re a mother—like yeah, you’re a mother I’d like to fuck because most mothers I wouldn’t because they’re mothers, they’re different. I don’t know I think that’s pretty derogatory, that you reach a whole other plateau, where people view you differently.”

Seven women expressed mixed feelings towards the term MILF. The biggest issue for many women was not what the term implies, but the term itself. Although most women agreed that it is nice to be called attractive, they feel the term MILF is derogatory and people should find a different way to show appreciation to mothers. As Blair, 20, dating and without children, stated, “I don’t think it’s good because I think it’s demeaning. I mean it would be explicit that they would like to fuck a mom. Who’s to say you can? I mean why can’t you just say, “Your mom is good looking”? I mean I understand as kids and just [in] general ... older people too, make jokes and think things are funny but I think that it gets to a certain point where it becomes demeaning and if there’s already a society around demeaning women

then it starts to get blurred in there.” Brittany, a married 21 year old mother of one, considered MILF a compliment, but acknowledged the positive and negative aspects of the term. She said, “I don’t think that it is a negative thing. You hear about it after women have babies and they still look really good. If anything I think it is kind of a compliment because having children is just so tough on your body that if you look great after doing it and someone is going to call you that, it is a compliment. It does sound negative because you don’t want to walk down the street and be like, ‘I want to fuck her,’ but just the way it comes out, makes it sound more negative.” As referenced here, it became a common theme in the interviews for women to acknowledge the positive aspects of the term MILF, such as being considered attractive or complimented, coupled with the negative aspect of the word MILF in general. Thus, the term MILF is imbued with positive and negative connotations for the women interviewed for this study. Many women acknowledged the upside is that the term actually recognizes that mothers can be sexual and felt it would be a compliment to be deemed attractive; yet, others resisted the crude terminology and the way in which the term objectifies women.

Realities of Motherhood: Women’s Experiences

Twenty-six of the 27 mothers interviewed for this study agreed that the way they felt about sex, their sexual appeal, and their level of sexual desire changed after having children. For many this carried over from pregnancy, when they felt heavy, unattractive, and self-conscious about their bodies. Coupled with the fatigue and responsibility associated with being a new mother, women felt disconnected from their sexuality for a period of time. Time management, exhaustion, and the demands of meeting the needs of children often left women disinterested in sex. However, some women found the transition to motherhood opened the door to a stronger sense of their sexuality, as they learned what their bodies were capable of and found common ground with other women. Several themes emerged in the interviews that capture the experiences and feelings of younger mothers: Fatigue and Time Management, Other Orientation and Role Conflict, Appearance Pressures and Body Image, and Self-Discovery through Transformation.

Fatigue and Time Management

The most often mentioned barrier to feeling sexual for new mothers was exhaustion and a lack of time to focus on personal pursuits. Twenty women cited this as a major factor. Coping with a lack of sleep or an altered sleep schedule can leave anyone less interested in the activities that they previously enjoyed. Autumn, a married 41 year old mother with a 7 year old, experienced this for an extended period of time, noting that she had insomnia and anxiety during the first 5 years of her son’s life. This left her completely uninterested in sex, which caused a strain in her relationship with her husband. Kelly, 35, married mother of one, also noted that fatigue played a major role in her feeling disconnected from her sexuality, in the first year after her son was born. She said:

I didn't even address my sexuality. That was one of those sort of like fringe benefits of being a human that I pushed off to the side.... My husband and I did not have sex for months.... My son was colicky then he was like—he had this oral fixation where he had to have a pacifier or he had to nurse. So I was awoken at every hour and a half, two hours, until he was six months old.... I took time off work so I could adjust but I was like a total zombie.... So I think of that period as a phase of like—we were in survival mode. Sexuality wasn't even on the table. And even if my husband was in the mood, he would never dare bring it up to me... (laughs). So there was a time where that was off the table. And also I think after that it was hard for us to kind of get back on track with our connection.

Kelly's comments illustrate the effect that lack of sleep had on her sexuality and her relationship with her husband. Though her exhaustion did not last as long as Autumn's did, both women noted long term effects on their sexual relationships with their husbands. Like other mothers interviewed, these women got into the pattern of not being intimate and not thinking about their own sexual desires, and so when they felt ready or interested in sex again, it took some time to reconnect emotionally before they felt comfortable physically.

When asked about how they felt their sense of sexuality changed after having a baby 74% of the mothers commented on the lack of time that was available for anything beyond caring for their children and work. Thus, sex was not something that they thought about or felt they had time for. Ninety-two percent of the mothers interviewed worked full-time outside of the home, in addition to caring for their children. Naomi, 39, a full-time nurse and married mother to two boys who said that prior to her children reaching school age sex was not a priority to her, noted that now that her kids were older, the desire was there but the time was not:

Our society plays a huge part in it where you're working 60 h a week, you've got one, two, three kids, three different practices. You're passing each other in the wind so the thought isn't there and you know—as many things as I've read... you need to plan it. Or you're not going to have sex and I laugh, if we don't really plan it—so how do I write that [on the calendar] next to the kids' soccer game? You know? “Mom and dad have sex tonight.” And I'm like what if it doesn't happen? There has to be that forethought and society is so crazy now I think it gets put on the backburner by most people.

Although Naomi acknowledged intimacy was important in her relationship with her husband, as it helped to maintain their emotional connection and functioned as an expression of love, she felt it was difficult to make time for it.

Though most of the mothers with babies or pre-school aged children did not feel a strong sexual desire at that stage, a couple of women did say that sex was as important as it was before they had babies and so they made every effort to keep up regular intimacy. Misty, an unmarried 31 year old with a 10 month old baby and a 6 year old child, for example, said that she and her partner make sex a priority in their relationship; yet, they acknowledge that finding the time is not easy. A couple of other mothers made similar comments, noting that children's nap time was sometimes designated as intimate time, when both partners were available.

Single mothers felt time pressures more acutely than others. When they were solely or primarily responsible for meeting the needs of their children, their sexuality was often compartmentalized or “shut off” when their children were young. Kristen, 41, a mother of two, who was remarried at the time of the interview, commented on this during her experience as the primary parent:

Being a single mother it was all about work.... I don't know that I really—I mean there were very few times that sexuality crossed my mind throughout a week. And even sometimes having a date or two.... I mean it was like there was no point in wasting time or having sex just to have sex, it wasn't where I was. It wasn't the purpose of going on a date. So I think that, you know, there were dates that I think I had showered and dressed and still never had a thought of being a sexual being. It's funny how at certain times in my life I get this tunnel vision and, you know, when there's difficult things going on it's easy to get tunnel vision.

Other Orientation and Role Conflict

Caring for a newborn or young child requires orienting one's schedule around her or him. Thirteen of the mothers interviewed for this study specifically stated that they learned that they needed to change the way they organized their time and priorities, and this often left their own needs unmet. Most did not resent this; rather, they acknowledged it as part of the transition to becoming a mother and also as temporary. Jennifer, a married mother of four, 40, communicated this when asked what sexuality was about for her when she was in her twenties. She stated, “I was having kids in my twenties. I mean I had my first daughter at twenty-two and ... I was married and so sex at that point was about, you know, making love to my husband and having kids. And ... most of my time was engulfed in my children and raising them. I really didn't think much about myself.” Sometimes, however, this lack of time for one's self resulted in frustration and it often took time to rediscover or feel in touch with their sexuality again. Jane's statements are representative of other women who felt this way.

Being a mom, that space that was occupied with how am I doing as a sexual person now is knocked down really far [compared] to being a mom and taking care of them. Especially early on when they're toddlers and they're sick and stuff like that. And that's so, in a way, to me, very asexual. So you have to take parts of your body that you see sexualized and not even purposefully become very asexual for a while and then resexualize them. And I think the resexualizing stage is not easy to accomplish. I found it very hard to get back into the swing of things. I did but it wasn't just a, “Oh now that I'm all healed up and feeling better, let's go do it.” It wasn't—my emotional experience was very different (married mother of two, 38).

The focus on caring for others often led women to experience conflict between the roles of mother, wife, and sexual person. Charlotte, a married 36 year old teacher with a toddler, expressed this when she said, “I just think the married woman with

the child is supposed to be it all. Supposed to be that sexually attractive person to the husband and just takes on way too many roles at one time.... And ... sometimes when you have kids you don't necessarily want to be sexual at times because you're just exhausted. I mean that changes a lot, like I find. Especially with going back to work." Many of the mothers felt similarly to Charlotte, as if there were not enough of them to go around and that the level of care required being a "good" mother and wife left them drained and craving time where no one needed them. Nadia, a 40-year old married mother of four, became emotional when she described how this lack of independence and time to herself led to resentment and feeling disconnected from her sexuality. She stated:

I've had kids and you do, I feel like there's nothing left of you, you're not there anymore, you've given it all. You've given it to this kid, to that kid, to that kid and whatever you had left you give it to him because, well, it was Saturday night. And you lose who you are as a person. And when you lose who you are as a person you can't be – you're not there.... [Y]ou have these kids and they need so much of you, like they need you for everything, especially when they're really small, you know. They need you to nurse them and to change them and to take care of them and to, you know, every little thing. They can deplete you and they can, honestly – I remember one day he came home and ... he just wanted, you know, "Hey, I'm home," and ... I felt like if one more person frickin' touches me I'm gonna harm somebody. And it was I had been touched all day long. You have kids here and pulling here and needing to be carried and wanting a hug cause they, you know, and you're over-touched, like you physically are over-touched. And that just one more person wanting to touch you just makes you want to, oh, you just want to say "ewww, stop."

In Nadia's comments, it is apparent that this other focus contributed to a distancing from herself and feeling like she lost a sense of who she was as an individual—separate from her role as wife or mother and craving time where her body and her time was her own.

Twelve women reported experiencing some type of role conflict. For some, this manifested in conflict between being a mother and a sexual person, given that they were concerned about what message they might send to their children if they showed their sexuality. As Brittany, married and 21 years old with a 3 month old baby, commented, "I guess right now I feel less sexual and not as appealing as I did before I got pregnant. And ... I feel the way I present myself now that I have a daughter growing up with me. I have to be a little bit cautious of how she views things and I don't want her to be [getting the wrong message] that this is how things should be sexually." Single mothers felt role conflict as they negotiated dating while having children. Jacqueline, 44 and a mother of seven who had been separated from her husband for about a year, did not feel ready to tell her younger children she was dating so, she told them she had meetings in the evening. And Kristin, 41, now remarried, felt it was difficult to figure out how much intimacy to express with her current husband when her two sons were present.

Being a mother of two boys it is very difficult. I don't really know how to have those two entities coexist. At different stages of their maturity levels it seems like it's a struggle at different points. I go "ahhhh," and then I sort of get comfortable and then I go "ohhhh," you know. Well, they were seven and nine when I started dating my husband, my second husband. And then I think that they were like early teens and maybe trying to find their way or their comfort zone and, you know, we'd be cuddled up on the couch watching TV. And not that we're having sex on the couch or even sharing a kiss, but it's just like there was this unity.... And it was interesting because when they were younger they were much more willing to come join that, and then, you know, when they reached that, like "Oh, no, I'll go watch TV in the other room." And you think, "hmm, okay." It's ... kind of a balancing act that I don't know if I've addressed very well.

Appearance Pressures and Body Image: Not "Letting Yourself Go"

A woman's body changes during pregnancy in ways that, for the most part, bring it further from societal ideals. It was evident that physical appearance postpartum was a concern for 40% of the mothers interviewed. Women repeatedly expressed that they did not feel sexual when they did not feel good about their appearance. Misty, a divorced mother of two, 31, was eager to restore her sense of self after giving birth and risked pain by having intercourse prior to the doctor recommended time line in order to feel desirable and close to her partner again. Misty said:

You know, they give you that six week deadline. With [my daughter], I think we had sex at five weeks because we couldn't stand it anymore.... We were trying to be good and do the time but it was like we need to do something—for both of our sakes. And it wasn't pretty the first time but it worked for us.... And I think that actually probably helped me quite a bit with regaining my sexuality as someone other than the person who just had a baby. Knowing that I was attractive to him, even though I was still really stressed out, was helpful.

The validation she received from her partner's desire for her allowed Misty to feel good about herself and enabled her to feel a sense of maintain intimacy in her relationship. What distinguishes Misty, who was the only mother interviewed who expressed eagerness to have sexual intercourse soon after giving birth, is that she was in a newer relationship. Having been divorced and realizing the distance she and her former husband had experienced, she felt a stronger connection in her relationship with her boyfriend, as well as a more satisfying and meaningful sexual relationship. Other women who had been married for longer periods of time seemed less concerned with being sexually active so soon after giving birth.

Several women commented on the pressure to get back in shape after having a baby or the fear of the image that mothers "let themselves go" or become martyrs who neglect their own needs. These mothers were determined not to let that happen to them and discussed the ways in which they kept themselves and their bodies in check. Jessica, a married 38 year old woman with two young daughters, described her observations and fear of women who "let themselves go" when they had

children. She stated, “I see a lot of moms let those—anything that’s [a personal interest or hobby] fall to the wayside. So, for those reasons—and also appearance.... I really put a huge priority on keeping myself attractive through that process and afterwards. So I think that helped me stay happy and sexual.” And Monica, quoted above noting that she would not mind being perceived as a MILF, suggested that she and her friends motivate one another to not dress “like a mom” or suppress their physical expressions of sexuality. She said:

When me and my girlfriends started having children we would just always, like just felt like so adamant just to kind of maintain that one part of yourself of feeling, you know, hot, whatever that was to you, you know, just kind of keeping it together.... So whether that meant just wearing some pumps with your jeans [laughs] and not always wearing your flats, you know, I think it shifts. The way you dress is definitely different, especially if you have children. But maybe you’re not as provocative but you find your sexuality in maybe other ways, you know, just in terms of the way you dress or how you present yourself. And when we go out we try to get together and just kind of maintain at least that part of ourselves that sometimes can get lost (35, married, mother of two).

These comments about physical appearance imply several ideas. First, they again reinforce the norm that mothers are not attractive and it is important and necessary to work against that norm. Acknowledging that the dominant image in popular culture or based on experience is the asexual matron, emphasizes its power and influence on women’s perceptions of how they should be. It also underscores the importance of physical appearance over accomplishment in evaluating women in society. Rather than recognizing the changes as a result of pregnancy, childbirth, and/or breastfeeding as symbols of the strength of women’s bodies, women’s value is held in their looks. And whether or not women felt this pressure themselves, several noted that they were aware of the expectations of others for their postpartum figure. For example, Jane, 38 and married, commented on the surveillance on her body that she experienced after giving birth. She remarked, “While you’re pregnant everyone constantly touches you and looks at you and your body and if you have any insecurities, they’re going to be hounding them. And then as you recover the only thing anyone ever talks to you about is how you look.... And everybody focuses on how much weight people have gained or lost and that becomes uh, I think, very difficult, because I feel like people will never say anything negative but you hear them talking about other people and then that makes you feel very insecure. I’m like wow, have I lost it?” And, Jamie, 40, a married mother to 4 and 7 year old children who was unique in saying her appearance is not a big concern to her, still acknowledged she questions her decision to dress “like a mom.” As she said, “I think that maybe... I sometimes feel like oh, I should try harder, you know, just not be in my frump, you know.... When I see other moms and ... some of them are dressed so nice or, you know, they really take the time to put on their face or whatever, you know, and they seem very together. I think, “Oh. I should look like that rather than ... frumpy.” [But] I’m gonna get Jell-O on me anyway, so why, why put on something nicer?

Transitions: Self-Discovery Through Motherhood

Six women reported that motherhood was a journey and that the time in their lives where their children were young and extremely dependent on them was a phase that they could see passing through in the future. Through this experience, some women noted that they learned new things about themselves, their desire, or their bodies. For example, Melissa, a single 23 year old mother of a 2 year old son, noted, "During the pregnancy I was pretty active sexually and it wasn't until after I had him that I just—I didn't like the same things. I had different hot spots. I just felt different because I was a mother. And over the last 2 years I have come back into my own in a different way now I'm a lot more mature and I know what I want and I am in control of my sexuality because I had a baby I had to kind of re-explore everything and accept myself for who I am now."

Other women also noted that the physical experience of carrying and bearing a child enabled them to become more in touch with their bodies and sexuality. Because women's bodies are monitored and examined so thoroughly by relative strangers during this process, some more modest women felt this forced them to come to terms with their embodied sexuality. Heather, a 46 year old married woman with one daughter, also said that her sense of sexuality changed when she realized the essence of her femaleness in her reproductive capacity. She said, "My sexuality became more normal then, like more just a part of who I was. Like it wasn't some secret special thing that everybody talks about sex all the time and stuff.... It was more like, 'Wow, I'm female, I have these parts. Look what my parts did. This is amazing.' I mean when I had my daughter it was like a parade of people kept coming in and out of—I had no shame, no, you know, it's like, 'This is it, this is who I am as a person.'"

Furthermore, some women noted that they felt more open discussing sexuality with their mothers or friends, though particularly as it related to labor and childbirth, after having children. Danielle 35, and a married mother of two, noted this, "I see myself as being more free with my body now that I know it can do what it was truly meant to do, have children. I guess that's kind of opened up new avenues of discussion and things like that." Comments such as these suggest that for some women motherhood brings a deeper understanding of their sexuality and their bodies, and actually resulted in positive changes for them. It is important to acknowledge these affirmative experiences and the benefits that motherhood can bring in women's sexual subjectivity.

Discussion

The majority of women interviewed, mothers or not, believed that mothers' sexuality is distinct from women who are not mothers. Mothers were expected to keep their sexuality private, to not dress provocatively, and to be good role models for their children. For the most part the images that women had of mothers were reflected in the realities of the experiences of mothers interviewed here. It makes sense then that women have internalized these constructions and that these influence

the way they view their sexuality as they become mothers. Even the mothers who believed that there should be no difference in how a woman expresses her sexuality, mother or not, acknowledged change in their sexual expression postpartum. When asked if they connected being pregnant or becoming a mother as part of their sexuality, none of the mothers interviewed said they saw these elements of themselves as related. In fact, the question was met with quizzical expressions and confusion. Motherhood was so asexual to most of them, that to link it with their sense of sexuality was a very strange thought. Given social constructions and media images of motherhood, this is not unexpected. Returning to Guendouzi's (2005) description of the "good mother" (protective, nurturing, caring, organized, and socializing), it is not surprising that it is hard for women to connect these other-focused characteristics with the idea of a sexual person, in theory or in practice. Sexual activity in the abstract is often associated with pleasure, indulgence, and gratification. It is about sensual satisfaction and release. These qualities are antithetical to those stereotypical of mothering. Furthermore, this is not just an issue of sexual person versus mother; rather, this is a gendered situation about sexual *woman* and mother. Women's sexuality is already fraught with mixed messages and stereotypes that hinder public sexual expression. Adding "mother" to the equation further complicates identification for women with their sexuality. The tasks associated with mothering force de-sexualization. Breasts become objects for feeding a child. Bodies become about nurturing and comforting others. The physical demands of mothering exhausted many of the mothers interviewed here and repelled them temporarily from the touch of their partners. In reality, the experience of being a new mother is not conducive to being in touch with one's own sexuality. The time demands and distractions from one's own needs and interests make it difficult to pursue other roles, as Adams et al. (2006), Trice-Black (2010), and Trice-Black and Foster (2011) noted. Trice-Black and Foster (2011) suggested that trying to successfully meet the idealized image of mother, "can be frustrating, confusing, and often isolating. These images essentially reinforce the conception of motherhood as test of a woman's psychological adequacy.... The continual denial of one's own feelings and needs may lead to confusion and difficulty in determining what one desires" (pp. 96, 97). In other words, the incompatibility of mothering and sexuality may result in women who are mothers being permanently disconnected from their sexual self pre-pregnancy and to any sense of sexuality for a period of time postpartum.

Additionally, even though about a third of interviewees believed the way a woman expresses her sexuality should not change when she becomes a mother, the image of a mother who is sexually appealing or in touch with her sexuality is generally unavailable to contemporary women. Recall the quote from Jessica at the start of the paper, as well as comments from other women throughout. There are few images of what a sexual mother looks like, few role models for women to identify with; thus, the asexual mother is reinforced. Most of the women cringed at the idea of thinking about their own mother as a sexual person and Gretchen, quoted above, reported being "traumatized" by witnessing her mother engaged in sexual activity. The introduction of cultural images of sexy pregnant celebrities and "MILFs" has had minor influence on these conceptions. Some women acknowledged the benefit

of a term such as MILF because it allows for recognition that mothers can be sexual and desirable. However, other women recognized that this term renders women sexual objects. The term leaves mothers to be the target of men's sexual desire and focuses on their physical appearance, rather than their identity. Furthermore, it too underscores the idea that most mothers are *not* sexually desirable. MILF is a special designation for those that have managed to avoid the socially expected matronly image.

Age also seems to be an important factor in perceptions of mothers' sexuality. When women talked about mothers' sexuality, most seemed to think only of mothers with babies or young children. Mothers with older or adult children were never mentioned despite the fact that interview questions referred only to "mothers" and made no mention of age. As Tally (2006) noted, it is only recently that films have featured the exploration of "older" (50s) women's sexuality as a major part of the story, and these films are still few and far between. There is a perception that older women lack interest in and cease to be sexually active, and it is clear many of the women interviewed saw motherhood as a marker of transitioning from young to old.

In summary, mothers' sexuality was transformed by having children in ways consistent with the perceptions of women who were not mothers, as well as women who were. This research suggests that demographic characteristics like marital status, length of marital relationship, and employment status may impact the degree to which women feel in touch with their sexuality postpartum and through their lives as mothers. Women who were in newer relationships were more eager to engage in sexual activity and to feel desirable and attractive than were women who had been in long term relationships. Single mothers reported compartmentalizing their sexuality as they raised young children. And, most of the mothers interviewed here noted that the demands of work coupled with childrearing responsibilities left them disinterested and lacking energy for anything other than sleeping when they had free time. It is encouraging, however, that several of the mothers interviewed reported feeling an increased awareness of their sexuality as a result of experiencing this transition. If perhaps women shared these feelings of transformation, more women might have the opportunity to reflect on this as well or recognize these changes. However, this may be a luxury that or experience that many women do not have. Research with larger numbers of single mothers might yield more insight on this issue. Also, because the women interviewed for this study were primarily heterosexual and middle class, the effects of motherhood on sexuality for lesbian mothers or working class women are not known and should be explored with further research. Furthermore, the focus in this study was on younger mothers. It would be interesting to see how motherhood affects women's sexuality at different stages in life, as women and their children age and go through other social and biological changes.

Because sexual activity has been shown to have health benefits and lead to higher levels of satisfaction in relationships (Hinchcliff and Gott 2004), the mutual exclusivity of motherhood and sexuality can have significant consequences. In addition to alienation from one's sexuality, it may lead to increased stress or relationship strain. Lacking interest in sexual contact may further mothers' feelings

of anxiety or at the very least not allow for the release of tension. It is interesting that most women did not mention fathers' role in parenting responsibilities, and those mothers that did, suggested that their partner were less affected by the transition and were still interested in sex. It seems this disconnect is very much a gendered experience. It would be interesting to explore this issue in a study of fathers, to see the degree which being a new *parent* rather than a new mother impacts sexuality.

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