

What's Culture Got to do with It?
Mothering Ideologies as Barriers to Gender Equity

Submitted for inclusion in the collection, *Real Utopias: Institutions for Gender Egalitarianism*. Cameron L. Macdonald, University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Gornick and Myers have offered reasoned and idealistic suggestions for the creation of institutional supports to assist working parents while simultaneously creating gender equity. Generous paid parental leaves that provide incentives for gender equitable parenting, policies limiting working hours, creating realistic wages and benefits for part-time workers, and universal child care are all important steps towards improving the lives of working families. In this essay, I raise the question of culture, and particularly of ideology, as a potential barrier social change. In particular, I raise the question of ideologies concerning the “good mother.” What are the implications of changing our parenting arrangements without also addressing the dominant mothering ideology? What if beliefs about motherhood, and by extension, the beliefs and practices of mothers themselves, stand in the way of gender-equitable change? Too little regard for the power of gender ideologies in general, and of mothering ideologies in particular may lead a set of progressive policies towards regressive results.

Based on my own research on working mothers and a review of the extensive literature on mothering, I raise two questions: first, given the contemporary norm of the ‘good mother’ as an ‘at-home’ mother, might women take up both parental leave and part-time work at a much higher rate than their spouses? This would effectively entrench an unintended “mommy-track” within a set of policies that are intended to be *both* family-friendly *and* gender equitable. Second, given that gender is also raced and classed, how will women of different backgrounds respond to the proposed policies, in particular to publicly provided child care, in class- and race-based ways, reproducing existing inequalities among children?

Mothering and Culture

In order for a policy change to be effective, individuals have to be willing to implement it in their daily lives. Believing in the utopian mandate of the project, I do not take on thorny questions concerning whether or not policy-makers would support or enact such changes, but I do explore the cultural and social belief systems in which actors are embedded to consider how such policies might be enacted on a daily basis. Blair-Loy presents the role of culture powerfully in her discussion of how women make sense of their lives through the concept of *Competing Devotions* (p. 219) to family and work.¹ Drawing on Sewell (1992), she argues that social structures are composed of “mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action” and adds that these schemas “help define and make sense of what [one] finds desirable and compelling. In the US context, mothers are not only expected to raise their own children using their own resources, but are expected to *want* to provide mother-care, particularly during the period from birth to age three. Mothering action emerges out of these cultural constraints, as mothers choose which aspects of existing norms to embrace and which to resist.

Swidler (1986; 2001) makes the case that in times of social upheaval, common-sense knowledge or cultural “taken-for-granted” often harden into dogma. This is clearly the case in the so-called “mommy wars.” We can see increasing dogma both in the strident nature of debates over childrearing and in the sheer number of didactic texts produced. For example, the panel of experts in the 1997 NICHD study intended solve debates regarding the value of mother care versus child care could not come to consensus and became divided over accusations of bias (Arnst 2001; Birns 1999; Bruer 1999; Chira 1998; Guensburg 2001; Kurtz 2001; Lamb 1990; Lopez 2001; Williams 2001; Williams

2000). Further, the number of advice books on parenting has increased significantly as mothers have entered the labor force in ever-larger numbers. Five times as many childrearing advice books were published in 1997 as in 1975 (Hulbert 2003). We live in a historical period of “unsettled mothering,” in which ideological views on “good mothering” both harden and proliferate.

Here I refer to ideology not so much in the Marxian sense, which can be interpreted to entail some degree of intention on the part of knowledge producers, but rather in the Weberian or Foucauldian sense of expert discourse that filters through the capillaries of popular culture, social structures, and form a general consensus concerning what is normal or abnormal. While I doubt that pediatricians and child psychologists set out to make mothers miserable when they formulate the latest version of what children need, this is the net effect. It is impossible to write about what children need without simultaneously implying what mothers 'ought'.

In my remarks here I do not wish to join the scores of writers who intentionally or not, blame the victim in writing about working mothers, or assume some degree of “false consciousness among the women who try to combine intensive working and intensive mothering. Good childrearing is both publicly valuable (see Folbre, this volume) and intrinsically fulfilling work. At the same time, the contemporary rhetoric of mother-blame has reached levels of near-hysteria. Mothers face pressures to maintain primary parent status from child development specialists, advice books, and the shifting tides of public opinion. It is not surprising, then, that many mothers would express reluctance to relinquish adherence to what Hays (1996) has termed “intensive mothering.”

Other contributors to this collection (Coltrane, Milkman, this volume) have addressed the problem of ideology and motivation, but from the father's side, or from the employers' perspective. These clearly are important questions. The need for incentives and sanctions to promote employer and paternal participation in countries that have enacted family leave policies prove this. However, most work-family studies assume somewhat uncritically that mothers will embrace the equal earner/equal carer model, particularly the earner model, whether that means increasing their hours at work if high-quality care is provided, or welcoming fathers and other loving adults into the parenting endeavor. The question I raise, then, is not the ubiquitous "can men mother?" (Risman 1998). I ask the somewhat more complex question of "can/will women father?"

The intensification of "Intensive Mothering"

Never in American history have the daily lives of so many mothers been so at odds with beliefs about children's needs. Although 70% of mothers work outside of the home, prevailing beliefs on child rearing are more than ever based on the ideal of the ever-present, continually-attentive, at-home mother. Child development research, advice books, parenting magazines, and general cultural sentiment have converged to "raise the bar" (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001) on expectations for mothering young children so high that even full-time at-home mothers would be hard-pressed to meet them. Because these expectations, however, *require* at a minimum the presence of a full-time mother as the primary caregiver, they are by definition impossible for working mothers to meet.

Hays writes convincingly that while the "ideology of intensive mothering" is entirely at odds with the market rationality that is in some senses required of the

successful worker, this ideology holds sway among working mothers and at-home mothers alike: thus her title, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Through an analysis of child rearing literature, and of mothers' interpretations of that literature, Hays (1996) defines "intensive mothering" as:

child centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive. Finally the task of child rearing is considered primarily the responsibility of the mother (69)."

Although contemporary child rearing manuals do make efforts to include fathers and the gender-neutral term, "parents," they refer almost exclusively to mothers, and suggest that "consistent nurture by a single primary caregiver is crucial," ideally for the first three years of a child's life (Hays 1996, p. 53). Further, a good mother is "not a subject with her own needs and interests" (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 1994, p. 2) Therefore, a belief in the value of intensive mothering inherently supports both the ideal of nuclear family self-sufficiency and of the gender inequities inherent in this ideal. Intensive mothering also places working mothers squarely in the crosshairs of two incompatible ideals: the "unencumbered worker" (Williams 2000) and the ever-present mother.

Since the publication of *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, scholars of early childhood development have intensified "intensive mothering," by further emphasizing the importance of maternal devotion to childrearing during the period from birth to three. These new models of childrearing emphasize not only emphasize "intensive mothering," but also emphasize mother-child attachment to a degree never before seen, and a fetishize the period from birth to three. These new ideological strains combine to create notions of child perfectibility and the attendant need to produce the

perfect child. In 1980, Jerome Kagan wrote with some prescience that, “The question of how to rear the better baby is so glamorous, so attractive to Americans and so fraught with emotionalism, that it invites judgments and ungrounded speculations.” 1997 was the halcyon year for that prediction, with the publication of the first findings from the NICHD attachment study and the Families and Work Institute’s *Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development*, and the Clinton-sponsored conference, *Starting Points*, on the birth to three period, all occurring in the same year and producing the same result: media hysteria about mothering. The issue of *Newsweek*, “Your Child from Birth to Three” that documented the findings of the Clinton conference sold a million copies, setting a record for the magazine (Hulbert 2003). These converging developments created, or in some cases, reinscribed what Breuer refers to as the “Myth of the First Three Years.”²

The NICHD attachment study,³ while producing reassuring findings about the benefits of high-quality day care, ultimately devolved into an argument between those researchers who had a “mother is best” bias and those who wanted to prove that quality child care could be as salutary as good mothering. The media contributed to the general confusion by publishing only the negative findings with respect to institutional day care. The key finding from the first wave of research was that once they controlled for the mother’s behavior, placement in childcare, regardless of type of setting or duration of care made no difference in children’s levels of attachment to their mothers (Network 1997). However, the media focused attention, not on this finding, but on questions concerning secure maternal-child attachment. In 1998, an article in the *New York Times Magazine* drew on the NICHD findings to draw parallels between American children in

day care with Romanian orphans who were left to lie face down in a crib all day with no human contact (Talbot 1998). Later rounds of research provided guidelines for the optimal care setting for children of different age groups, and found that although being in child care was not a predictor of negative outcomes, being in low-quality care was (Network 2000). However, the finding that got the most media play was a more minor finding that some at-risk children placed in day care were, by age six, “smart and nasty (Lopez 2001).” . Even though a later round of research on the same children disproved the earlier findings arguing that children in extra-familial child care had low self-control and exhibited problem behavior, this particular finding became the “take away” message from the multi-year study (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 1998; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network 2004).

During the same time period, new research in neurology claimed to present new findings that demonstrated that the brain created its primary neural pathways from birth to age three, and that a child's long-term cognitive functioning depended in large part on the kinds of cognitive stimulation he or she received during this period. As Harvard child psychiatrist Felton Earls proclaimed, “A kind of irreversibility sets in. There is this shaping process that goes on early, and then at the end of this process, be that age 2, 3 or 4, you have essentially designed a brain that probably is not going to change very much more (quoted in Breuer, 1999, pg 23).” Statements like these sparked a flurry of cognitive stimulation activity, including the “Baby Genius” and “Baby Mozart” series, and the attendant fear that if a parent were not ensuring that her child was exposed to these stimuli, he or she would fall behind academically before reaching preschool. A Nationwide survey of parents with children under three conducted after these findings

were made public found that 92% believed that their children's educational successes would be influenced by their birth-to-three cognitive experiences and that 85% feared that if they did not provide proper stimulation, their babies brains would not develop properly (Bruer 1999, p. 52).

Neurologists were not so sanguine about the simplicity of these findings, pointing out that neural development, while especially active during the early years, did not stop as brains continued to develop, and further, that children's brains were particularly resilient and prone to growth and development, and that "no unusual interventions were required, and only the grossest neglect seemed to impede the process in normal babies" (Hulbert 2003). The closing passage of *Rethinking the Brain* noted that "new insights into child development confront policymakers and practitioners with thorny questions (Shore 1997, p. 65)." These questions, as it turned out, restated the common themes: demonizing middle class mothers for working and depriving their children of cognitive stimulation while simultaneously blaming low-income mothers for staying home and doing the same. Actor and director Rob Reiner, whose charitable foundation funded the cognitive development conferences acknowledged later that although he had funded the *I Am Your Child* program with the intention of proving the need for high-quality publicly-funded day care, he had not anticipated that his project would add fuel to the working/at-home mother debates and that questions of public funding for day care would fall by the wayside (Hulbert 2003).

These studies and the plethora of advice books that followed coincided with strong opinions and deep ambivalence among Americans about working mothers. These powerful and often contradictory beliefs became evident in any discussion of Welfare

Reform, of working mothers, of child care. For example, a poll reprinted by Public Agenda in 2000 found that 80% of mothers 18-29 preferred to stay home. The general public seems to agree. A poll conducted the same year indicates that 75% of Americans polled agree that children *already* spend too much time in day care or with babysitters, 80% of Americans agree that while “it may be necessary for the mothers to be working because the family needs money, it would be better if she could stay home and take care of the house and children.” (Public Agenda 2000)

At the same time, competing ideologies regarding the value of at-home mothering and the value of self-sufficiency and the work ethic produce contradictory results in opinion polls concerning working mothers. A poll conducted the same year (Public Agenda 2000), indicated that 84% of Americans surveyed considered the rise of women in the workforce a “positive development” and 71% disagreed with the statement that “Women should return to their traditional roles.” This ambivalence is *most* clearly articulated when it comes to poor mothers. A survey of parents showed that 86% of parents with children under age five agreed that it was more important for mothers receiving public assistance to work than to stay home with their children, even if that meant the children would be in child care. Although the belief in at-home mothering is strong, so is the belief in child improvement. Some children, it seems, are better off with mother, while others would benefit from professional care, and these children are categorized by race and class.

The cultural fallout from these two sets of inquiry into the effects of mother-absence on child development represent a worst case scenario for advocates of gender-equitable policies: research intended to reassure the public and invoke support for

publically funded child care instead raised the stakes for mother-only care. In evaluating the cultural impact of these studies, it is important to critically assess both their research design and the framing of research questions. As Max Weber points out, each set of scientific researchers uses the methodological tools at hand to solve problems that are socially and culturally relevant to their historical period (Weber 1949). In this case, the movement of mothers of young children into the paid labor force is defined as the socially relevant historical problem, and tools such as the “strange situation test” and new techniques in neuroscience have become the tools of the day. In child development research, we see research questions framed again and again in terms of the effects of maternal absence on cognition, emotional stability, and social adjustment. The fact that most research is framed in this particular way is significant. It creates normative discourse around early childhood development that is constructed around the mother/not-mother binary. Findings based on this narrow research frame are then transmitted to the general public through an upsurge in advice books and magazine articles aimed at anxious mothers.

Mothers and Ideology: putting culture into action

How do mothers interpret and implement these discourses? Here I draw on Michele Lamont’s perspective on the impact of culture on social action. While rejecting ideological determinism, she also tempers the “voluntaristic” view proposed by “tool kit” theorists (Swidler 1986; Swidler 2001):

...the multicausal explanation I propose takes into consideration how remote and proximate structural factors shape choices from and access to the tool kit – in

other words, how these factors affect the cultural resources most likely to be mobilized by different types of individuals and what elements of tool kits people have most access to given their social positions. (Lamont 1992, p. 135)

Mothers will therefore interpret dominant childrearing ideologies based on their exposure to these discourses and based on their ability to implement their dictates. They will also implement the dominant ideology through the filter of their own cultural and class background and their own experiences of being mothered. Nevertheless, childrearing ideologies are both ubiquitous and unrealistic, and most mothers must at least take them into account and “be accountable” (West 1987) to them.

“The ideology of intensive mothering” is unquestionably a powerful aspect of the contemporary Western cultural repertoire. This does not mean that all mothers *automatically enact* this ideal, but that the attitudes and actions of mothers, and the responses of public opinion to mothers, take this ideology into account. For example, Hays (1996) demonstrates that white working class and middle class mothers, whether they work outside of the home or as at-home mothers, incorporate the logics of “intensive mothering” into their work/family strategies. At-home mothers justify their boredom and lack of income by doing “ideological work:” drawing on the logic of intensive mothering, they emphasize the need to put their “children’s needs of ahead of their own, and telling stories about the problems that families, especially children, experience when mothers go out to work for pay.” (Hays 1996, p. 139 \. Working mothers in Hays’ study also draw on “intensive mothering” for their ideological work, explaining that “quality time” is as important as quantity time, and that happy mothers make happy children. The point is that both sets of mothers feel accountable to intensive mothering as an orienting schema,

and draw on its vocabularies to explain their motives. Their strong adherence to the ideology of intensive mothering runs contrary to their self-interest, and begs the question of whether institutional change would be enough to challenge the fear of being inadequate as a mother.

In my own study of professional-class working mothers in dual earner families, I also found mothers wedded to the intensive mothering ideal. I was surprised at this finding because initially I had believed that the women who had broken the glass ceiling would easily leave outmoded mothering ideologies behind. Not so. For example, Jessica, a corporate consultant, and the highest earner in my study, explained that even though her husband was an actively-involved parent and she had the “dream *au pair*,” she intended to leave her job even though her earnings represented 80% of the household income. She described a

...deep, deep hurt that even to this day, Sammy wants Anabel, or he wants Jack, and I'm third. And I worry. I feel like, 'Is our relationship ever gonna recover from that? Is he ever gonna be more mommy-oriented? I hope so.

Jessica felt that she was failing on two fronts – she was no longer the unencumbered worker that her ‘male-pattern career’ demanded, and she was not the omnipresent mother that the stacks of advice books she read told her she should be.⁴ Feeling inadequate as a mother was the norm in the context of the 60 childcare arrangements I studied, and anxiety over being a good enough mother played out in their marriages and in their relationships with their childcare providers.⁵

The dominant beliefs about infant development portray a child's capacity to relate to adult caregivers as “zero-sum attachment.” Therefore, any other loving caregiver can

be viewed as an infringement and a possible threat to the mother-child bond. This sense of threat was especially problematic if the caregiver was particularly talented or especially committed to the employers' children. In fact, numerous nannies recounted being fired for seeming too attached to children in their care, or for allowing those children to become attached to them. Signals of excessive attachment included crying when the nanny left for the day, accidentally calling the nanny “mommy,” or running to the nanny instead of the mother after falling down or being alarmed.

Some mothers in my study were so afraid of child-caregiver attachment that they purposely hired foreign *au pairs* because their stay with any host family was limited by law to no more than one year. As one mother noted, the children “get very close to them,” but with high turnover, “*you’re* the continuity, as opposed to other moms who have the same person who comes in for ten years - and this person is really more like their other mother, is their mother. And I don’t think that I could deal with that.” Although most studies of child-care quality indicate that *low* turnover is ideal for children’s security and well-being, and many of the mothers who sought high turnover were aware of this, they felt that their own security as the primary attachment in their children’s life was more important than continuity of care. These findings raise questions about how mothers who could afford to stay home or to hire private care would adapt to a policy of high-quality public care. If they do not embrace it, a new policy would only reproduce a class-stratified system of child care in which mothers could buy out of a gender and class equity ideal in favor of living up to an intensive mothering ideal.

These findings also raise questions about how mothers would adapt to sharing the primary parent role with fathers. Over half of the mothers that I interviewed had second-shift sharing husbands. Yet, this created more, not less strain in family life.

Significantly, those mothers with husbands who had more flexibility at work and were able to stay home more sometimes envied the time their husbands had at home. Other mothers felt threatened when a child preferred daddy to them. Some of fathers' second shift work frequently entailed helping mothers have quality time with their children.

Suzanne, a corporate executive, expressed envy because her husband had more time at home with the baby when she was first born because he was in school. He did not have the responsibility of being the primary caregiver - the nanny had that responsibility, but he did have, as Suzanne noted, the "at-homeness" that she missed:

Well, my husband's been in sort of a unique situation in that he was in school when Lindsay was born, and so for a year and a half, kind of had that at-homeness, and he's just transitioned into working and he uh, keeps on joking that he'd like to stay home. I told him that's not an option [laughs].

Suzanne gratefully acknowledged that her husband often did the cooking in the evenings, in order to give her "face time" with her baby, since she had the more demanding work schedule. However, when they discussed the possibility that one of them might take time off from work, she made it clear that it is her turn to be at home with the baby and to catch up on the "face time" she had missed.

This kind of behavior has been termed "emotional hoarding" (Hochschild 1989) as well as "maternal gatekeeping" (Allen and Hawkins 1999; Gaunt 2008) and is viewed as a barrier to gender-equitable parenting (see also Ehrensaft 1984). Research on

maternal gatekeeping defines this behavior as: “a reluctance to relinquish family responsibility by setting rigid standards; b) a desire to validate maternal identity, and c) differentiated conceptions of family roles” (McBride, Brown, Bost, Shin, Vaughn, and Korth 2005). And while some of this literature takes on a “blame the victim” tone towards mothers, it does demonstrate fairly conclusively that the more salient motherhood is to a woman’s identity, the more likely she is to expect motherhood to be her sole domain.

Research on mothering identities indicates that mothering is a more powerful aspect of identity than either marital status or occupation (Rogers and White 1998). s McMahan’s (1995) study of men and women preparing for parenthood indicates, the social psychological process of becoming a mother and “thinking about the baby” in itself increases the salience of both gender and maternal identities. Maternal identity salience can also arise from insecurity regarding the mother’s place in the child’s psychological life, as in the time-deprived professional mothers I interviewed, but it can also stem from finding little stimulation or nourishment at work, as may be the case among working-class women. In either case, I would argue that anxiety concerning maternal identity is a potential barrier to equal uptake of parental leave, especially if parental leave policies include fathers. The widespread belief in mother-only attachment needs to be overcome in order for gender equitable leave-taking to be successful.

Social Class, Race/ethnicity and Mothering Ideologies

Research on social class and intensive mothering shows mixed results. Hays (1996) interviewed both middle-class and working class mothers and found that they held

themselves equally accountable to the ideology even if they were not always able to enact it. In other cases, women interpreted the *content* of intensive mothering in class-based ways, but held themselves no less accountable for its enactment. The single mothers, interviewed by Nelson (2005) reinterpret intensive mothering as “practical motherhood:”

Each woman makes central to her account of mothering the efforts that go into simply keeping her children alive and safe. Each woman also highlights the extra challenge incurred because of limited human and financial resources. As they do, the women acknowledge that their efforts might compete with, and occasionally cause them to diminish the range of what they believe their children deserve.

(Nelson 2005, p. 128)

What they feel their children deserve is the time, attention and “emotion work” that intensive mothering entails. While these mothers acknowledge that they have good reason not to provide that intensity of care, they are left with feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and uneasiness.

The working-class and middle class working mothers Garey (1999) interviewed also stressed “doing motherhood” in a way that emphasized “maternal visibility” and “being in the mother-appropriate place at the mother-appropriate time.” These symbolic expressions emphasize their awareness of being “in interaction with dominant-culture conceptions of mother-appropriate activities, and it is *as mothers* that their actions are assessed (27).” These strategies may include working the night shift so that they can be “at home” and “available” during the day, or taking time off from work to attend a school outing. Garey points out that,

...in going on the field trip, a mother is also indicating to herself and others that she is the *kind of mother* who acts to keep her child safe, or the *kind of mother* who is involved in her child's education, or the *kind of mother* who is not too busy to do her part to support school activities. (Garey 1999, p. 29)

These examples indicate the power of intensive mothering as a cultural context in which even mothers who lack the financial resources, time, flexibility (or sleep) to approximate the “at-home mother” will go to great lengths to *produce the image* of the at-home mother. They produce the image because they are not only accountable to others, but to themselves and to the ideal of motherhood that they hold. This sense of accountability holds true regardless of social class. Further, working class mothers may be *more* drawn towards home because unfulfilling and low-paying jobs may cause them to identify more closely with motherhood than with working as a primary role (See e.g. Gerson, 1985).

Still, cross-national research shows that education remains the greatest predictor for women's increased time with children. (Sayer, Gauthier, and Furstenberg 2004). Educational differences in mothering practices are likely the product of several factors: more educated mothers may be married to higher-earning husbands who can “buy them out” of the labor force; more highly educated women read more advice literature (Arendell 1997); finally higher education may coincide with the ways that middle and upper-class women use “mothering is a means of transferring middle-class status to children” (Johnson and Swanson 2006, p. 510). In my own research with middle-and professional class mothers and their childcare providers, mothers worried significantly less about their children's physical safety in their absence than they did about whether the nanny could provide appropriate intellectual stimulation, social interactions with the

“right” playmates, and the transmission of class-based cultural values. In other words, highly educated women worry about how to delegate the transmission of middle and upper class *habitus* through an intermediary. This worry was a key factor in selecting a nanny over a childcare center in the first place, and was the most frequently cited reason for creating nanny turnover. These findings suggest that educated middle-class and professional women may opt out of publicly provided day care in favor of scaling back to part time work themselves or hiring a suitable mother-substitute to provide their children the appropriate class-based cultural and social capital.

It is no wonder, then, that admonitions to stay home with children are aimed at middle- and upper- class mothers rather than at their low-income counterparts. Longstanding and pervasive individualism in the United States has given rise to “the rhetoric of competitive mothering” (Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001, p. 26). Each family, and indeed, each mother, is expected to marshal and transmit the economic, social, and cultural resources needed to reproduce or enhance children’s class status. In her study of executive women, Mary Blair-Loy found that those who “opted out” of their careers were “busily engaged in transmitting an upper-class capital to their children.” (Blair-Loy 2003, p. 54). By comparison, recent welfare reform laws and public opinion about welfare-to-work policies indicate that poor women should provide their children access to middle-class cultural capital by putting them in day care where, presumably, their life skills and educational preparedness would be enhanced by care received from others. With the exception of mothers in poverty who are expected to work, it seems clear that most mothers feel significant pressure to be at home with their children, and that pressure has significant implications for how work-family policies are likely to be implemented.

Challenges to Intensive Mothering

So where might the challenges to intensive mothering emerge? In her study of mothers negotiating shared mothering with child care providers, Lynet Uttal describes women who are able to reframe their beliefs to include the hired caregiver as a vital part of their mothering practice. These mothers used a variety of strategies to make their caregiving relationships work, however, most of these concerned a concept of shared maternal identity. As one respondent noted, “We were both women, we were both mothers, and we were both trying to make it and have a little bit of, you know...goodness in our lives.” (Uttal 2002, p. 137) . Clearly it is not impossible for mothers to include loving others in childrearing. Yet Uttal’s study focuses on *how* working mothers reframe the concept of shared mother-work, not on which mothers do so or why.

Further, it is not clear if these expanded notions of mothering went beyond the mother/childcare worker dyad to include fathers. The model Uttal describes as a caring “partnership,” while moving beyond the traditional model of mother-only care, does not move beyond caring for children as a gendered practice. In fact the mothers in her study “maintained that they had executive responsibility [for] managing and monitoring care” (Uttal 2002, p. 174). Selecting and scheduling childcare, as well as the emotional labor involved in maintaining good relationships with childcare providers falls to mothers. To the extent that mothers who view cultivating positive relations with childcare providers as a way of assuring quality care for their children, childcare becomes a labor-adding service for mothers that reinforces gender inequity in parenting. The good news regarding mothers who are able to challenge the ideology of mother-only childrearing is not necessarily good news in terms of gender equitable parenting.

Despite the power of intensive mothering as an ideological framework, there are women who have, by choice or by necessity, challenged this model. Mothering is historically and culturally contingent. According to Hill-Collins motherwork among African-American women primarily involves teaching children how to cope with inequality, family and racial survival, and inculcating a positive ethnic identity. Further black women's mothering includes the active participation of "othermothers" – be they relatives, friends, or neighbors – who actively participate in childrearing because it is assumed that most biological mothers will have to work to support their children. As Arendell points out, "African American mothers' employment rates have been higher for a longer period of time and are recognized within the community as being essential to family survival" (2000, p. 1199).

Likewise, Denise Segura (1994) studied the effects of ethnic culture on mothering beliefs by comparing Mexicana and Chicana mothers. Her findings reinforce the significance of the "at-home" mother as an ideal in developed countries. The Mexicana mothers she interviewed, who had migrated from Mexico as adults, were accustomed to "a world where economic and household work often merged," did not view work and family as separate spheres, and therefore experienced very little internal conflict in combining working and mothering (p. 219). Chicanas, on the other hand, born in the United States, drew on the cultural binaries of mother/worker that were prevalent in US culture. They therefore approached combining motherhood and employment with much greater ambivalence than the Mexicanas, who originated from a more "traditional" country. Her findings and those concerning African American mothers suggest that the more a

woman frames her identity in terms of “mainstream” American cultural ideals, the more likely she is to feel conflicted concerning combining work and mothering.⁶

In my own research, the women who were able to renegotiate their relationship with intensive mothering ideologies were most likely to be women of color who came from generations of working mothers. Not only were working mothers normal and acceptable within their cultures and communities of origin, but they also pointed to the fact that they were more available to their children than their mothers had been to them, just as their mothers had spend more time with them than their grandmothers before them. Unlike the white women in my study, the women of color could point to a rising “emotional standard of living” in each successive generation. (Macdonald, forthcoming).

The white women I interviewed, on the other hand, framed their own generational trajectories as one of a declining emotional standard of living. While were raised by mothers who stayed at home during their early childhood, even those whose mothers had worked during their own early development did not interpret this positively. Instead, they viewed their mother’s work lives as “cautionary tales.” They did not derive this interpretation because they had suffered as children because their mothers had worked – quite the contrary; most had good memories of child care centers or of beloved nannies. They interpreted their mother’s employment negatively because their mothers had done so themselves. So the fact of a working mother is not a sufficient positive role model in the face of intensive mothering ideologies. Rather, how that fact was interpreted by the mother and, in turn, by her child going into adulthood and family-building shapes the lessons the daughter carries forward. As Hochschild (2003) argues, children take cues concerning what nonmaternal care *means*, whether they should feel fortunate or

deprived, from how parents talk it. Thus, the meanings of maternal work and childcare need to change inside of families before women will feel comfortable taking up a fully gender equitable earner/carer model.

Implications:

Nancy Fraser (1997) argued that men needed to become more “like women are now.” Here I raise the question of how policy and changes in ideology can encourage women to become more like men are now. If we cannot, we are likely to see even the progressive policy changes proposed by Gornick and Meyers take a decidedly regressive turn. Would the emphasis on parental care in the Gornick and Meyers model only serve to strengthen intensive mothering ideologies? With the ideology of intensive mothering firmly in place, would we see more working women take improved part-time jobs, recreating and reinforcing existing employment discrimination and inequalities? Might we also see increased class inequalities as well-to-do families “buy out” of publicly provided childcare and the equal opportunity it provides (Kenworthy, this volume). Middle- and upper-class families could opt out of the new childcare supports either by purchasing one-on-one substitute mother care or by “buying the mother out” of the workforce, a move that would reinforce *both* class and gender inequities. In either case, the pressure to transmit middle class *habitus* and its attendant upward mobility will drive middle-class mothers to act, unless upward mobility and mother-care are somehow de-linked in the public imagination.

Anita Garey has argued that “we need a way of thinking about women’s employment that doesn’t presume a zero-sum relationship between women’s

commitments to their employment and to their families. (1999, p. 9) While this may seem self-evident to some, creating that way of thinking is more difficult than one might expect. Even changes in social structure may not be sufficient. As Crompton (this volume) points out, “State-sponsored dual-earner policies...can coexist with gender traditionalism (and therefore gender traditionalism) in the domestic sphere.” In fact, research by Elvin-Nowak and Thompsson (2001) conducted in Sweden suggestst that although one predominant discourse frames the mother as a worker whose absence is beneficial to children provided they receive high-quality childcare. However, this discursive position exists side-by-side with competing positions that frame the mother’s well being as existing for the good of the child and that frame motherhood as a context in which the “mother exists for the child.” (Evlin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001, p. 423). Thus, even in a country with progressive work-family and childcare policies, the question of how to organize childcare and time with children remains contested for women.

Gornick and Meyers present a compelling structural view of social change: build the social supports and they will come. Yet I believe this view underestimates the force of culture in motivating action. The persistence of American individualism, competitive mothering, and intensive mothering indicate the need for broad changes in belief systems. These are possible, but are only likely to accompany a social movement or a change in expert discourse, or both. Stone (2000) and Glenn (2000) have both argued persuasively for a care movement. They call for mobilization around the rights of care-recipients and paid and unpaid caregivers across the dependency spectrum. This would be a start, but it would also have to include advocacy around the equitable distribution of care and the concept of “good enough” care. This last piece is particularly difficult, especially in light

of expert advice that seems bent on perfecting the child. Researchers need to move away from studies of optimal mothering to studies of “good enough” care, and to move beyond the mother-care/other-care binary to a broader model of care that encompasses the wide range of caring adults who enter the lives of young children.

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Endnotes

¹ Blair-Loy breaks these into “devotion to family” and “devotion to work” schemas. While I disagree with her oversimplification of this binary, (which she also views as an ideal typical analytic tool), her interpretation of how cultural schemas influence action is compelling.

² This fetish actually began in 1975 with the publication of Burton White’s *The First Three Years of Life* (New York: Avon), but became a fixation in the American public imagination during the late 1990s with the sometimes unintentional assistance of the Clinton Administration and public figures like Rob Reiner, who sponsored the “I Am Your Child” series, focusing on birth to three research.

³ This study involved a longitudinal study of over one thousand families diversified by race and social class. Researchers followed children who were cared for at home by a parent and those who were cared for in various child care settings. The children were followed through elementary school.

⁴ Interestingly, the recently released Pew Study on Women, Family, and Work found that most mothers found themselves inadequate as mothers. The least satisfied mothers were college-educated, with 72% of at-home mothers “less satisfied” with their mothering skills, and 68% of working mothers unsatisfied. Mothers without college degrees were not pleased with themselves as mothers, but they were less self-critical than those with college degrees, with 62% of working mothers and only 54% of at-home mothers reporting dissatisfaction with their own mothering Leonard, Mary. 1997. "Mother's Day: A Guilt-Edged Occasion." in *The Boston Globe*..

⁵ I refer to sixty *arrangements* because although I interviewed eighty women (fifty childcare providers and thirty working mothers who employed them), many of the women were interviewed as worker-employer dyads, and therefore among eighty women, we find sixty childcare relationships.

⁶ See, for example, Lareau, Annette. 2002. *Unequal Childhoods*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. Her research on parents of school-age children reinforce this assertion. She found no difference between African American and white middle class parents, who shared a penchant for labor-intensive “concerted cultivation.” Working class parents, both white and black, were more likely to take a more relaxed approach to parenting. However, given the age of the children in the study (8-10 years old), it is impossible to tell how the mothers from different class backgrounds might have interpreted the needs of infants and toddlers.