"WHAT CAN I DO DIFFERENT, WHAT COULD BE BETTER, WHAT COULD YOU DO MORE?": GUILT, SHAME AND MOTHERING

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“WHAT CAN I DO DIFFERENT, WHAT COULD BE BETTER, WHAT COULD YOU DO MORE?”: GUILT, SHAME AND MOTHERING

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Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the concept of maternal guilt and shame. Though the notion of guilt permeates the literature on mothering, research has yet to clearly assess how guilt differs from shame. Following a socioecological model, I explore the experiences of mothering on the macro-level (ideologies of motherhood), at the meso-level (racial and peer communities), and at the micro-level (individual experiences and emotions). This dissertation contributes to the research on the sociology of emotions in that it reveals distinctions between the language of guilt and shame, and circumstances in which mothers are more likely to experience one or the other emotion. Both African-American and white mothers utilize the language of shame when discussing their sense of failure at "good mothering," but their stories resonate with guilt when discussing specific activities of motherhood. These findings contribute to a feminist study of motherhood in the attention placed on differences at the community level. While all of the mothers adhered to the ideological "good mother," the ways in which these attitudes are manifest in the lives of mothers varies based on community and family experiences.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Research exploring the experiences and roles associated with motherhood has gained momentum over the past three decades (Johnston and Swanson 2004). Even as opportunities for women outside the family have increased, sex-role differentiation and sex-segregation persist such that mothers remain at the center of the family as the primary caregiver and organizer (Bird 1997; Hochschild and Machung 1989; Marini 1989). Subsequently, role expectations, conflicts, and strain put mothers at risk for a wide variety of negative outcomes including lower earnings, less perceived control over their lives, and high levels of psychological distress (Cassidy and Davies 2003; Rosenfield 1989).

The purpose of this dissertation is to further explore how the experiences of motherhood give shape to the psychological well-being of women. Specifically, I will investigate guilt and shame in the mothering role. Guilt is identified as the result of the self’s evaluation of having transgressed against another, or having failed at some task. Shame arises when the self experiences a sense of public disapproval (Tangney 1990; 1996). Because research has demonstrated that guilt, especially if persistent, can result in a sense of ineffectiveness that impacts physical well-being, mental health, and the ability to be productive (Baker 2005; Harper and Arias 2004), it is important to explore guilt and shame within the mothering role. However, few sociological studies have directly and systematically examined mothering, guilt and shame. Despite the scarcity of research
considering this topic, the notion of “maternal guilt” in the media and in the everyday lives of women is inescapable (Seagram and Daniluk 2002). In popular magazines, as well as academic work across disciplines, guilt appears as a natural and common component of motherhood. While popular magazines such as Working Mother, Women’s Day, and Ebony, offer mothers tips on managing or coping with guilt, the assumption that guilt exists goes uncontested. Hays (1996) described the dynamics of the “guilt gap,” in which mothers, as compared to fathers, experience vastly higher levels of guilt – even when both are equally responsible for childcare. Further, Douglas and Michaels (2004) not only described women as guilt ridden, but also contend that this guilt co-occurs with and is exacerbated by feelings of inferiority, exhaustion, confusion, fearfulness, and anger. What are the origins of this guilt and shame?

There are three notable factors that may place mothers, as compared to others, at higher risk for experiencing guilt and shame. These factors include labor force participation, role identity, and “new momism.” First, the increased presence of mothers in the labor force may put them at risk for guilt and shame. In a ten year period (1993-2003), the percentage of mothers in the labor force, with children under six, increased from 58% to 62%. Women with children over the age of six participated in the labor force at a rate of 76% (Employment Policy Foundation’s Center for Work and Family Balance 2005). However, even as mothers’ labor force participation increases and men begin to participate more fully in home-life, mothers remain “in charge” and shoulder a larger burden of childcare (Ehrensaft 1983; Hochschild 1989; Bird 1997). Mothers are more likely to be responsible for a majority of the household tasks from the practical (e.g., feeding, clothing) to the complex (e.g., stimulating intellectual growth).
Additionally, when mothers are working in labor force, it is often difficult for them to relinquish child rearing to others (Aries, 1976; Beutel and Marini, 1996; Marini, 1989; Rubin and Shenker, 1978; Rossi and Rossi, 1991). Not only are mothers worried about the well-being of their children, they also fear social disapproval for being away from home. These stressors, worries, and burdens are ripe for the experience of guilt and shame (Johnson and Johnson 1977; Rankin 1993; Tangney 1996).

Second, a woman’s identity in relation to her role as mother may also put her at risk for guilt, shame and their associated consequences. In a well-known study on multiple roles, Simon (1995) discovered that 85% of her female respondents, “felt guilty about combining work and family because they perceive that a consequence of having a job is that they sometimes slight their children and neglect their husbands” (p.186). Further, as a result of having internalized “wife” and “mother” as their principal identities and the subsequent responsibilities associated with those roles, she found that wives carried much more guilt than their husbands did and felt much more responsible for the overall operation of the family. Similarly, other research (Cassidy and Davies 2003; Rosenfield 1989; Avison 1995; Ross 2000) has suggested that women internalize their perceived inadequacies not as externally mandated or caused, but rather as personal failures, which often occur in tandem with high levels of psychological distress and low perceived control. Unable to live up to standards that they have prescribed for themselves and that have been mandated by societal expectations, mothers may experience guilt and shame.

Finally, new momism, a phrase coined by Douglas and Michael (2004), captures the contemporary ideology of motherhood which, on the surface, appears to celebrate
women and motherhood, but actually creates standards of unrealistic proportions. All women are expected to crave motherhood, and approach it with instinctual joy and patience. Upon becoming mothers, women find themselves serving as the primary caregiver of children, with the norms of motherhood requiring devotion from all parts of the self-physical, emotional, intellectual and psychological – to the process of mothering. The “impossible standards” that women face in our culture are a primary source of guilt for women. In this realm, guilt emanates from three main sources: 1) the mothers’ experiences with their families, including their families of origin (specifically their mothers) and their families of procreation; 2) observations of other mothers; and, 3) the internalization of media images (Seagram and Daniluk 2002). These sources feed new momism, or the contemporary myth that fulfillment comes to women only in the form of self-less mothering with high expectations. The problem is that these expectations represent ideals that few, if any, women can actually achieve. Even though these expectations must certainly influence maternal guilt, little is known about the specifics of this process. As Duncan (2005) noted, understanding the inner experiences of mothers has been blurred, because subjective states, such as guilt, are weakened and often redefined by the larger context in which they occur.

Context: Macro-Meso-Micro

In contemporary research, motherhood is conceptualized as a social construction, which is both subjectively defined and contextually imposed (Duncan 2005; Pun et al. 2004). Mothering is subjectively defined in that through the day-to-day experience of providing nurturance and care for children women are able to arrive at what mothering means to them, to define when they have been successful at the tasks they view as
mothering, and to know what interpersonal resources they have at their disposal to carry out this role. Therefore, with regard to guilt and shame, these emotional states may occur for one mother, but not another, although both may have experienced similar sets of circumstances. Conversely, there are certain communalities (e.g., ensuring the well-being of children) across mothers. In fact, the context in which motherhood is lived has direct implications for how all women define and experience mothering.

The Macro-Context. There are multiple and overlapping contexts in which individuals, including mothers, enact their roles (Bronfenbrenner 1979). In a social ecological or environmental framework, these contexts are conceived of as “nesting structures, each inside the next” (Bronfenbrenner 1979/3). Contained within the macro level are the meso and micro structures. At the outermost level is the macro context which embodies the cultural ideals of a society as well as structural ordering that determines and defines the nature, values, and resources embedded in social relationships. The western ideological notion of the “good mother” is one such example of a macro contextual ideal that determines the values and meanings placed on the contemporary mother.

The Meso-Context. Attached to the structural conditions imposed by the macro-social context, are varying levels of individual and group social power and access to scarce societal resources. These resources are interrelated and range from the concrete (e.g., income) to the more abstract (e.g., social standing in a particular community). Bronfenbrenner (1979) referred to the meso contextual level as, “a system of Microsystems” in that it comprises the “interrelations among two or more settings” (25). Whereas the macro-social context represents societal level processes, the meso-social
context is more immediate to the individual and includes racial/ethnic communities, neighborhoods, school or other environments that are important for the daily functioning of individuals and families (Parke and Buriel 1998). Mothers in the community or at their child’s school with whom a mother encounters and may compare herself, is part of her meso contextual environment. In the social ecological model, while cultural ideals exist at the macro level, situational attitudes are found in communities at the meso-societal level.

The Micro-Context. In addition to macro and meso level contexts, the micro-social context is the most immediate and provides the setting for the development of the individual (Bronfenbrenner 1979). This context is represented by the daily interactions with children, spouses, friends and other intimates. For example, when casual relationships between mothers move to a more intimate level, including regular and meaningful interaction, they are now interacting at the micro-social level. It is at the micro-social level that we actually see the enactment of the mothering role (Robbins, Mayorga and Szapocznik 2003).

All three of these contexts shape the reality of mothers. Figure 1.1 displays a simplified model of how mothering, guilt and shame are conceptualized in this study. The figure is in three parts: 1) Contextual elements; 2) The self, which gives rise to the conception of mothering; and 3) the emotions of guilt and shame which emanate from the self. In addition to these three parts, the figure also specifies other important information. First, notice the interrelationships among the macro, meso, and micro-social contexts. Both the meso and micro-social are influenced by the larger social context, and, in turn, the meaning and interactions in the micro context are within and shaped by the meso-
context. Second, the model also displays how the contexts are related to both the self, in which individual conceptions of mothering arise, as well as guilt and shame. Finally, the model pictures the dynamic nature of guilt and shame on mothering. In other words, while guilt and shame emanate from the self as a result of contextual elements, the emotions also have the ability to influence the self. Therefore, not only will individual conceptions of mothering give way to guilt and shame, but also mothers may redefine self and motherhood based on the reciprocal influence of these emotions. The model also indicates the appropriateness of a constructionist approach for this study. The constructionist perspective will allow for consideration of how guilt and shame are defined in the larger context. This perspective places emphasis on how meanings are constructed, how social norms affect the individual, and the actor’s subjective experience.

**Self-as-Mother**

Considering the emphasis I will place on the role of the self, it is necessary to clearly define the term, as it will be conceptualized throughout this dissertation. According to Mead (1934), the development of the self is inherently social. The process of the self develops as the individual becomes capable of viewing, and acting upon oneself as both object (from the point of view of the other), and as subject (from one’s own perspective). The reflexive action whereby the individual experiences the values and attitudes of society, and makes adjustments to one’s own behavior and thought produces a consciousness of self.

The term “self as mother” that I employ refers to the process whereby the individual is able to reflect on herself as object, and to attach meanings to the self, as a result of social interaction, and group membership. A woman does not experience self
as mother individually, but only through her interaction with others, and others’ reactions to her. It is through these interactions that the subjective meanings of mother are internalized. As Cooley (1902) described in his concept of the “Looking Glass Self,” human beings are affected by the perceived attitudes and judgments of others. A woman imagines how others’ judge her as a mother, and these perceptions give shape to her sense of self as mother. Also, the development and experience of the self as a mother will vary among women. Contextual factors, such as those existing at the meso-level involving racial communities may indeed produce differing accounts of the extent to which a woman experiences herself as a mother.

![Figure 1.1 Simplified Diagram of the Relationships among Context, Self, and the Development of Guilt and Shame](image)

The Social-Ecological Framework and Mothering

In contemporary western society, Collins (1994) suggested that mothering is most affected by the macro-social environment, wherein women have less social power to determine their own life outcomes. This larger context is characterized by an ideological rigidity that circumscribes that motherhood is or should be the ultimate goal of all women (Oakley 1974; Rich 1976; Glenn 1994; Speier 2004). Furthermore, on behalf of their families, mothers are to sublimate their own needs and desires in order to become models
of selfless giving and caring (Hays 1996; Kruger 2003; Warner 2005). This type of mothering is not only defined as the proper way for women to perform this role, but also, if done correctly, this behavior is rewarded with self-satisfaction and fulfillment (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 1994).

The rigidity and power of these macro-contextual expectations has major implications for research on motherhood and guilt and shame. Macro-level ideologies are so prevalent that they may obscure how women truly experience mothering, including their experiences of guilt and shame. For instance, research (see e.g., Chodorow 1978; Tardy 2000) has noted that the strong ideological demands made on mothers frequently conceal how women themselves construct their roles as mothers, often marginalizing those women who are unable to portray and internalize motherhood as their major aim or priority.

As depicted in Figure 1.1, there exist additional meso level contexts that provide a framework for her experience and construction of meaning. Family sociologists (e.g., Elder 1974) have long considered the social matrix a vital ingredient for examinations of parent-child relations. Such mid-level indicators as neighborhood safety, cohesion, and exposure to crime and poverty were used in a study of values and attitudes of African-American mothers in low income populations (Abell, Clawson, Washington, Bost and Vaughn 1996). The authors found diversity among mothers’ childrearing strategies irrespective of similar economic conditions because of their attention to a broad array of meso-societal circumstances.

Research suggests that micro-level interactions, such as familial relations, have considerable impact on the experience of mothering. For example, the complexities of
the mother-daughter relationship have been shown to influence how mother identities are formed (Golden 2001). The dynamics and structure of the spousal relationship helps to shape mothers’ role identity (Perry-Jenkins and Crouter 1990), and psychological condition (Glass and Fujimoto 1994; Carr 2002). For instance, when mothers receive support in the form of housework, childcare, or emotional support, these household interactions contribute to her experience of decreased depression, anxiety, and role strain.

While seemingly less powerful than the macro-context, these meso and micro-contexts contribute greatly to how women respond to and interpret motherhood. While sociological research has considered the macro, meso, and micro, few works have sought to explore the process whereby all three social contexts work simultaneously in the context of mothering. For example, Christie-Mizell, Steelman and Stewart (2003) explored the meso and micro-social context in their analysis of neighborhood conditions, perceptions of neighborhoods and mothers’ psychological distress. Hays (1996) exposed the macro-societal structure of the “intensive mothering” ideology that permeates our society. This dissertation will draw attention to the ways the continuum of the macro, meso and micro-social environments impact the development of the self and subsequently produce feelings of guilt and shame.

Summary

The goals of this dissertation are as follows: 1) To understand a mother’s experience of guilt and shame, 2) To explore the relationship between guilt and shame and the psychological well-being of mothers, 3) To investigate how guilt and shame are experienced on the macro, meso, and micro-societal levels and, 4) To allow the voices of mothers to further distinguish guilt and shame as distinct emotions.
As previously stated, the existence of maternal guilt and shame in this culture is so pervasive as to be normalized. This work will uncover the seemingly “normal” conditions, experiences and coping strategies of mothers who report guilt and shame by providing the opportunity for mothers to discuss their experiences in a focus group format. While the notion of maternal guilt is acknowledged as normal, scant research exists which provides mothers the opportunity to describe the conditions and experiences in which these emotions take place.

Additionally, of particular concern to this work is the relationship between guilt and shame and the psychological well-being of mothers. It has long been established that women report significantly higher levels of depression, and a lower sense of control than men do (Ross 2000; Ross and Mirowsky 2002). The particular childcare and home life responsibilities that mothers’ face increase her levels of anger in the home (Ross and Van Willigen 1996). O’Connor, Berry, Weiss and Gilbert (2002) revealed a significant link between depression and levels of guilt. Therefore, for this study to illuminate a woman’s experience of guilt and shame in the mothering role would contribute to the literature regarding women and mental health issues. Few studies have attempted to directly understand whether maternal well-being is linked to guilt and shame.

While studies have investigated mothering at the macro, meso, and micro-societal levels independently, this work will explore how these three contexts work simultaneously in the context of mothering. Through semi-structured interviews in a focus group format, this dissertation will explore the relationships among macro, meso, and micro-social contexts, the development of the self, and the experiences of guilt and shame.
Lastly, this dissertation will contribute to the body of work distinguishing guilt from shame by providing qualitative accounts of these emotions. Social psychologists have contrasted the two emotions on a theoretical level, but this dissertation will tell us whether mothers experience guilt, or shame, or both, and the contexts in which they occur. In the next chapter, I discuss the literature that provides the foundation on which I constructed this research.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this dissertation, I explore how guilt and shame impact the experience of mothering. Because this topic intersects with the sociology of emotions and the sociology of gender, the purpose of this literature review will be three-fold. The first section of this chapter will review the research literature that establishes the various approaches, definitions, and the negotiation of emotions. I provide an explanation for the theoretical lens that I utilize in this study. Then, in the second part, I narrow the focus on emotions specifically to guilt and shame. Given the dearth of research on this topic, this part of the literature review will seek to establish how these concepts (i.e., guilt and shame) share a mutual theoretical basis, but may yield differing effects on how women mother. Third, after having established the theoretical and definitional underpinnings of this research, I will provide an overview of current research on mothering. Specifically, I will detail the multiple contexts in which mothering occurs, with specific attention to ideology, community, roles, and self-evaluations associated with mothering that may impact the emergence of guilt and shame.

Sociology of Emotions

This section contains a broad review of several traditions within the sociology of emotions and will help to situate this study within the field. The particular overlaps and strengths of these traditions are discussed. Throughout this discussion, the
appropriateness of my use of a constructionist framework for the study of guilt and shame is clarified.

**Classical Approaches.** Emotions scholars utilize various terminologies to distinguish the seemingly polar approaches to the sociology of emotion. For instance, Scheff (1983) identified the universalists and the culturalists as two diverse positions whose theoretical foundations appear to significantly conflict with one another. Universalists, which Scheff (1985) noted are also called instinctivists, take their cue from a Darwinian analysis rooted in biology, instinct, and inherited drives. According to this approach, emotions are largely biologically determined and universal in human nature (Scheff 1983). Conversely, the culturalists adopt the position that emotions are almost entirely determined by one’s environment, social roles, and influences imposed by group membership. While Scheff identified Durkheim, Skinner and Freud as early culturalists, he noted that contemporary approaches include Hochschild (1983) and Averill (1980). Scheff, however, has criticized the stark contrast drawn between the two camps. For example, while Cooley (1909) subscribed to the universality of emotions, he focused on the universal emotional patterns of intimate groups and the role groups play in generating similar emotions across cultures. Therefore, Cooley’s work points out the overlap in two seemingly dichotomous camps by drawing attention to the impact of both biology and culture.

An additional conflict between interpretations of emotions pits the positivists against the social constructionists. Not unlike strict universalists, positivists dismiss the influence of cultural norms on emotions, instead focusing on the role of biology, environmental stimuli and social structure (Kemper 1981). Social constructionists reject
the biological explanations in favor of the role played by cultural norms, interpretation and definition of the situation. Again, however, the two camps are not necessarily dichotomous. For instance, the emphasis that positivists place on social structure necessitates an individual, interpretive process whereby the situation must be defined (Kemper 1981). The primary difference is that positivists, such as Kemper, tend to view emotions as patterned and automatic, whereas social constructionists, such as Hochschild’s analysis of “feeling rules” (1979) do not treat emotional reactions as automatic but rather as resulting from an interpretive process that varies across culture, time and place (Thoits 1989).

Social Constructionist Approach. The constructionist approach places emphasis on several key tenets. First, interpretation and definition mediate the effect of environment on emotions (Schott 1979). In observing human behavior, constructionists do not link motive (independent variable) to behavior (dependent variable) without emphasizing the active role of interpretation and definition in which actors engage. This creative process allows for the continual construction of emotions. Also, social structures provide the framework for human action, which rather than working in a causal manner, shape and prescribe behavior. Emotions are shaped by the actor’s definition of the situation. The provocation of guilt and shame implies that the actor engages in active interpretation and social construction of meaning. Women report higher levels of guilt than do men (Tangney 1990; Baumeister et al 1994; Abell & Gecas 1997), and the constructionist perspective provides an explanation in terms of differing processes of interpretation and definition. For instance, societal expectations for mothers remain more strenuous than the ones fathers encounter. The gendered structure of parenting has
resulted in differing expectations for mothers and fathers (Rubin 1983; Lorber 2005). Therefore, mothers may apply different meanings to various actions, inactions or circumstances due to different expectations placed on mothers. The same behavior directed at a mother, when interpreted through her understanding of social norms, may encourage the construction of guilt and shame more often than for men. It is my argument that guilt and shame experiences for mothers do not occur as automatic stimuli but rather as a result of the internalization of cultural norms and interpretive processing.

A social constructionist approach allows me to consider the ways in which the women in this study negotiate meanings and work towards agreements of what is “real” and “rational” (Gergen 1997). This perspective, according to Gergen, promotes a process of “reflexive deliberation,” which calls into question those aspects of culture taken for granted. Rather than conceptualizing social meanings as static, a constructionist recognizes that meanings vary across cultures, time, among individuals and throughout individual’s lives (Kimmel 2004). Through this lens, I explore the process whereby ideas are given meaning, meanings are negotiated and realities are constructed.

Consider Thomas’s (1928/2003) concept concerning the “definition of the situation.” The “definition of the situation” refers to the process whereby actors, through interaction with others, negotiate and interpret symbols (e.g., speech, behavior) until a meaning of the interaction is secured. As mothers engage in interaction, they are negotiating the meaning and interpretation of the interaction. This negotiation can occur on the macro-social level when she encounters mothering ideologies that inform her of the expectations implicit in this role. It can happen on the meso-social when she encounters mothers at her child’s school who, because they do not work full-time, are
able to meet the socially approved ideal of the ever-present mother. And, on the micro-social, negotiations can occur in the home as she carries out her mothering activities in relation to a spouse or partner who is also interpreting and defining parenthood. In all of these situations, she is grounded in the pervasive, socially constructed reality of Mother, resulting from the internalization of cultural norms, values and ideologies. In the moment of interaction, these constructed realities provide her with the filters through which she interprets and negotiates. If her construction of mothering is at odds with the interaction, it stands to reason that negative emotions such as guilt and shame result from the subsequent definition (i.e., “I am a bad mother.”).

Through socialization, one learns the meanings, interpretations and appropriate displays of emotions (Hochschild 1979). What Hochschild referred to as “feeling rules” implies that social norms and arrangements largely encourage or discourage certain emotions. By a young age, actors have internalized the social norms regarding appropriate emotional displays (e.g., we should feel sadness at a funeral, gaiety at a party). Individuals learn proper displays through primary agents such as the family, and also through secondary sources such as the media. For example, a cultural assumption exists concerning parent-child relations that depict a parent’s love for a child as natural, often resulting in ambiguous emotions, such as how one “should” or “should not” feel (Hochschild 1983). Similarly, media sources offer images of mothers post-childbirth, content and joyful with their babies. However, for women who experience post-partum depression, the inability to display the appropriate emotions can illicit anxiety, fear of social disapproval, and increase depressive symptoms (Taylor 1996). When mothers do
not display the normative emotions in response to childbirth or mothering, the potential for guilt and shame is present.

A now famous experiment conducted by Schachter and Singer (1962) has been embraced by social psychologists for its demonstration of the role that social cues played in the emotional experience of the participants. The subjects in their study were exposed to epinephrine to induce excitation, or a placebo. They then interacted in positive or negative social contexts. Schachter and Singer found the emotional responses of their subjects to be dependent upon the social context to which they were exposed. A pleasant social experience resulted in the report of a positive emotion, whereas an unpleasant interaction produced a negative emotional response. The significance of their findings involves the role of the social context in providing meaning for an emotional response. It was the interaction with the confederates in the study that provided the material for defining the emotion, not simply the induced, physiological arousal.

From the position of the constructionist, the experience of the physical world is only noteworthy as it relates to the actor’s subjective experience of the emotion. An individual’s definition of the situation determines to what he/she attributes the physical arousal, thus providing the emotion with meaning. Similarly, the affective labeling identifies the individual internal states in relation to the experience of arousal. According to Schott (1979), “Within the limits set by social norms and internal stimuli, individuals construct their emotions; and their definitions and interpretations are critical to this often emergent process” (1323). The constructionist position guides this analysis of mothers and the process by which they arrive at meanings for guilt and shame.
Feminist Constructionism

In addition to utilizing constructionist theory, I am also employing a feminist social constructionist perspective. According to DiQuinizio (1993), a specifically feminist constructionist approach also rejects the argument of biological determinism and considers how the individual becomes a man or woman through the enactment of gender. It is the social construction of gender that creates the environment of difference and inequality, not biological differences between men and women. Similarly, “motherhood is not a fixed identity or role but is constructed through language and context” (McNab and Kavner 2001). Definitions of motherhood are historically variable rather than “natural” and biological. What is vital to consider in the feminist model is not that women have the ability to conceive and give birth and lactate – but that these biological processes are organized and given meaning according to dominate cultural ideologies and structural conditions (Arendell 2000).

A feminist constructionist approach directs this research to several important considerations. Chase and Rogers (2001) stated that we must consider how ideas of mothering are shaped by the social conditions in which they exist. Definitions of mothering change over time, therefore these ideas are constructed within cultures and social groups, and resonate in the lives of women (Marshall 1991). As Phoenix and Woollett (1991) pointed out, the social constructions of “good mother,” whether informing women of the appropriate age at which to give birth, or broader childrearing emphases, bring the public world into the private, “making mothers the target of surveillance” (15). We must consider how mothers negotiate within these dominant cultural expectations, and the gendered nature of the expectations themselves.
Feminist scholarship has also called attention to the diversity of motherhood and the need to include the voices of mothers across race, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation (Chase and Rogers 2001; see Arendell 2000). Feminist scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1992) have noted the absence of space allotted to African-American women in mothering research. By including the feminist perspective on constructionism in this study, I am able to better explore the processes through which mothers negotiate meanings within the context of the gendered environment in which they operate. In this way, I can more effectively unpack the stories of their day-to-day lives that reveal the contexts for guilt and shame.

**Distinguishing Guilt and Shame**

Attempts to distinguish guilt and shame extend back many decades and across disciplines. Tangney and Dearing’s (2002) review of the historical constructs of these emotions begins with psychoanalytic perspectives. Theorists taking their lead from Freud’s early work have tended to conceptualize guilt as a reaction to discord between the ego and the superego, emphasizing the relationship between the self and the behavior. On the other hand, shame has been conceptualized as “a reaction to clashes between the ego and the ego-ideal” (13). The emphasis here falls on the negative ideal that is experienced as inferiority or fear of abandonment. Tangney and Dearing add that, while contemporary theorists have placed more attention on shame, noting the risk of psychological maladjustments that accompany it, they have focused less on guilt.

The anthropological approach to guilt and shame posits that certain situations or kinds of behavior give rise to one or the other emotion. The public-private distinction conceptualizes guilt as the more private emotion, “arising from self-generated pangs of
conscience” (Tangney and Dearing 2002/14). Conversely, shame as the public emotion, arises when one feels exposed to the public, and fears disapproval for some transgression, failure or shortcoming. Guilt tends to be more secretive than and shame more dependent upon the failure to adhere to social norms. The empirical research conducted by Tangney and associates (see Tangney et al 1996) failed to support this distinction. In quantitative analyses of solitary guilt and shame, Tangney’s work revealed a lack of support for the notion that shame is the more public emotion. Both emotions involved similar levels of “audience awareness.” In addition, Tangney and Dearing argued that the evidence tends not to support the notion that certain situations or behaviors give rise to one or the other emotion. They do concede that some support exists suggesting that “nonmoral failures and shortcomings (e.g., socially inappropriate behavior or dress) may be more likely to elicit shame” (17).

The scarcity of social psychological research on guilt and shame is surprising, particularly considering the inherent social and interpersonal nature of these emotions (see Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1994). Each of the various perspectives begins with the assumption that both guilt and shame involve the self engaging in some kind of negative evaluation. The negative self evaluation that results from guilt stems from some specific act, or behavior (Tagney 1990; Baumeister et al 1994). Conversely, shame involves a negative evaluation of the self, a more core reaction to public disapproval, with a focus on the entirety of the self (Tangney 1990). According to Kemper (1987), guilt occurs when one focuses on the “hurt or wrong one has done to another,” while shame occurs when one feels he/she has acted “in a way that belies one’s status” (p. 280). Guilt involves fear of punishment, stemming from feelings of having
done something wrong, while shame focuses on the role of the self in relation to others, or a violation of group norms. According to these distinctions then, a mother would be describing guilt if she expressed a negative self-evaluation regarding behavior stemming from a specific task. However, her experience would be labeled shame if she described herself, in relation to others, as having not met an idealized self-image.

In her classic treatment of shame and identity, Lynd (1958) too distinguished guilt from shame. One of her contributions involved the integration of psychological and social components (Scheff 2000). According to Lynd’s conceptualization, guilt involves self-evaluations regarding the particular actions performed or not performed. In the case of shame, the self is less powerful and experiences weakness, unworthiness and perhaps even the desire to disappear. Not unlike the anthropological tradition, guilt is individualistic, while shame is social. In this regard, a mother would feel guilty about something she did, but feel shame about who she is.

Scheff (2000; 2003) has referred to shame as the “social emotion.” Scheff positions shame with other social emotions such as embarrassment, shyness and feelings of inadequacy. In each of these, the connecting thread involves the “threat to the social bond” (2000/97). Taking a specifically sociological approach, Scheff is drawing from the psychological perspective that emphasizes the clash between the self and idealized self, yet underscoring that ideas themselves are social in nature. Scheff’s conceptualization focuses less on the psychological harm that shame might induce, instead placing it in the category with other social emotions that arise when the individual responds to a perceived loss to bond to others.
Tangney, a psychological social psychologist, has produced a large body of work on guilt and shame (e.g., 1990; 1993; 1996) also stressing the importance of distinguishing guilt and shame, even though the terms are frequently used interchangeably in the literatures. The central difference, as with other perspectives, involves the role of the self. Recalling the influential work of Lewis (1971), Tangney (1993) explained that in a state of guilt, the individual is focused on specific behaviors, with a perception of having done something wrong, or having wronged someone. The experience of guilt can be unpleasant but as Tangney pointed out, “the self remains ‘able’” (162). However, in a state of shame, the individual fears negative evaluation relating to the entire self. The experience of shame is more painful because of the more global evaluation of the self.

Tangney and Dearing (2002) acknowledged the confusion in distinguishing guilt and shame, not only among the college students whom they question, but also among researchers. Studies frequently interchange the terms resulting in theoretical confusion as well as questionable empirical results. For the purpose of clarity in this study, I am inserting specific distinctions drawn by Tangney and Dearing in their text. In figure 2.1, the key dimensions of each emotion are identified. What is again made clear is that guilt is associated with behavior, while shame is focused specifically on the self. The experience of shame is potentially more painful as the individual often feels powerless, unworthy, mentally “undoing some aspect of the self.” The experience of guilt stays focused on the behavior, perhaps prompting the individual to confess or repair an action. These distinctions guide my conceptualization of guilt and shame in this study, providing a framework for exploring the stories of mothers.

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Figure 2.1 Key dimensions on which shame and guilt differ

(Taken from Tangney and Dearing 2002/25)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Shame</th>
<th>Guilt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus of evaluation</td>
<td>Global self:</td>
<td>Specific behavior:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;I did that horrible thing:</td>
<td>&quot;I did that horrible thing&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree of Distress</td>
<td>Generally more painful than guilt</td>
<td>Generally less painful than shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenological</td>
<td>Shrinking, feeling small,</td>
<td>Tension, remorse, regret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>feeling worthless, powerless</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operation of “self”</td>
<td>Self “split” into observing and observed</td>
<td>Unified self intact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“selves”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impact on “self”</td>
<td>Self impaired by global devaluation</td>
<td>Self unimpaired by global devaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern vis-à-vis</td>
<td>Concern with others’</td>
<td>Concerns with one’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the “other”</td>
<td>evaluation of the self</td>
<td>effect on others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterfactual</td>
<td>Mentally undoing some aspect of the self</td>
<td>Mentally undoing some aspect of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>processes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational features</td>
<td>Desire to hide, escape, or strike back</td>
<td>Desire to confess, apologize, or repair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Utilizing these distinctions of guilt and shame, the maternal guilt expressed in western culture more closely appears linked to shame. As Tangney and Dearing (2002/11) noted, “The average person rarely speaks of his or her ‘shame.’ Instead, people refer to guilt when they mean shame, guilt, or some combination of the two.” Mothers appear to be positioning themselves in relation to society and judging themselves accordingly, placing emphasis on the negative evaluation of the self. With this in mind, the focus group interactions in this study allow for an exploration as to whether these distinctions exist.
Sources of Guilt and Shame. Baumeister et al. (1994) noted two distinct categories regarding sources of guilt: empathetic arousal and anxiety over social exclusion (246). If humans are prone to feelings of empathy, they will likely experience emotional arousal in response to another’s suffering, especially if a sense of responsibility is present. Similarly, humans are social in nature and tend to suffer when excluded from the larger group. A strong sense of belonging and attachment exists between groups of people, particularly among primary groups to which we belong. With the threat of separation, come emotions such as guilt and shame. Implicit in this argument is the importance of human connectedness and one’s ability to relate to others. According to Baumeister and his colleagues’ analysis, the sense of group belonging, and the necessity to remain engaged in the group will encourage a mother to conform to existing social norms. In turn, the desire for conformity is reinforced by the fear of exclusion. However, should she depart (perform mothering in some non-normative fashion), she may experience anxiety in the form of guilt and/or shame. Similarly, the socialization of women concerning empathy and attention to the needs of others (Rosenfield et al. 2000), make it likely they will experience negative emotional responses when they feel their actions have brought suffering on another.

Guilt and Shame as Role-Taking Emotions. Symbolic Interactionists position guilt and shame within the category of “role taking emotions” (Schott 1979). Drawing from Cooley’s “Looking-Glass Self” (1902), Mead’s conceptions of “I” and “Me” (1934), and Goffman’s presentation of self (1959), shame and guilt surface as a result of the roles we enact, the cultural scripts for those roles, and the feedback our performances generate. Utilizing this reflexive role-taking perspective, mothers respond to societal
expectations on the macro-societal level, such as the media, on the meso-level such as in their communities, or on the micro-level such as within the family. Women internalize the messages of motherhood from these varied sources. According to the role-taking perspective, they put themselves in the role of the other and judge themselves to be unsuccessful (as compared to the ideological "good mother"), subsequently suffering guilt and shame.

For an actor to engage in role-taking, one must be capable of viewing oneself as both subject and object, a process key to the development of the self. To view oneself as object suggests the individual can see oneself through the eyes of others. Following the basic tenants of the development of the self (Mead 1934; Cooley 1902), the infant experiences life solely as subject, but through development begins to sense how others view and judge her. The baby knows her mother is angry with her, and begins to recognize the behavior that stimulates certain responses. When the child learns, "I have done wrong," he has learned to see himself through his mother's eyes. He can take the role of his mother by "stepping into her shoes" and gazing back upon himself.

Schott (1979) also categorized guilt and shame as role-taking emotions. She argued that, unlike other emotions, role-taking emotions "cannot occur without putting oneself in another's position and taking that person's perspective" (1323). The individual is able to take the perspective of the generalized other. Guilt and shame necessitate role-taking in that these emotions emerge when the individual realizes a transgression from expected behaviors, actions, or beliefs. It is the sense of having failed to meet some moral obligation (guilt), or feeling of incompetence (shame) (Turner 1999). Specifically, Schott placed guilt and shame into the category of reflexive role-taking emotions which
require a person to consider herself in terms of the generalized other. Not unlike Cooley’s (1902) “Looking Glass Self,” reflexive role-taking entails gazing into the mirror (society), interpreting what society might make of that image, and subsequently constructing a self-concept.

**Outcomes of Guilt and Shame.** What happens after one engages in reflexive role-taking, and subsequently experiences guilt and/or shame? Specific to guilt, one such outcome is often the need on the part of the individual to engage in reparative acts (Schott 1979). Recall that, in the state of guilt, the focus is on behavior, or the sense of having wronged someone. For this reason, the guilt experience is more likely to lead the individual towards reparative acts such as apologies, confessions, and attempts to mend the damage. Alternatively, the shame experience results from the individual having positioned herself in relation to the generalized other and the evaluation is experienced as a kind of exposure of the entire self. Subsequently, shame often leads the individual to concealment or escape (Tangney et al. 1996).

Baumeister et al. (1994) noted that guilt could produce specifically antisocial effects. While one may be motivated to confess or apologize to reduce guilt and make amends, others research has shown a tendency towards more antisocial outcomes, such as avoidance. The negative experience of guilt, in and of itself, could serve as a hindrance to facing another and lead individuals to avoid and withdraw. The authors’ note that the act of social withdrawal may more appropriately derive from shame than from guilt but, unfortunately prior works have failed to sufficiently make clear such distinctions.

Additionally, individuals often engage in defense mechanisms in order to avoid the unpleasantness of guilt and shame (Turner 1999). Repression, projection and
displacement are the three most commonly activated defenses in the attempt to protect the self from the experience of guilt and shame.

Mothering, Guilt, and Shame

The body of research on mothers and mothering has grown sufficiently in the last several decades. While motherhood is associated with notions of femininity, motherhood is also structured within the social confines of gender (Chodorow 1978). Is it assumed that motherhood is the natural course for women (Oakley 1974) and that her identity will hinge on her status as mother. The “myth of motherhood,” largely constructed by men, overwhelms women with expectations of “good mothering” so often beyond the bounds of obtainment in actual lived experiences (Thurer 1994). The oppressiveness of motherhood, steeped in the gendered relationships of our culture, produces a kind of “maternal thinking” that guides and informs the practices of mothers (Ruddick 1983).

Mothering research is varied ranging from interpretive to positivistic approaches (Arendell 2000). Some of these investigations include the influence of patriarchy and power affecting motherhood (Rich 1976; O’Reilly, Porter and Short 2005; Lorber 2005), constructions of motherhood (Ranson 2004; Chase and Rogers 2001), mothering identity (McMahon 1995), the devaluing of motherhood (Crittenden 2001; Fothergill and Feltey 2004), and the intersections of race, class, gender and motherhood (Baca Zinn 1990; Collins 1994; Hill and Sprague 1999). A dominant theme in much of this research involves consideration of the meanings that mothers bring to the mothering role, and how social contexts help shape ideas and beliefs concerning expectations.

The Ideological “Good Mother.” In February of 2005, Newsweek magazine featured, “The Myth of the Perfect Mother.” The cover depicted a mother, with a baby
on her lap, and six arms extending from her body, each holding an object signifying her myriad of roles—a soccer ball, a pan of bacon, a child’s doll, an exercise weight, a telephone, a high-heeled shoe. Within the text, Judith Warner described the frenetic style of mothering whereby women attempt to achieve success on all levels—including personally, professionally and in the lives of their children. These mothers lose themselves in their children as they embrace the contemporary child development paradigm, which encourages mothers to deeply engage with their children and sacrifice themselves in the process. Warner noted that many end up depressed, anxious, feeling less sexual, and certainly, full of maternal guilt.

In *Perfect Madness*, Warner (2005) described “the Mommy Mystique,” her phrase for the contemporary, stress-laden demands of good mothering. She traveled the country, talking with hundreds of mothers, uncovering the “mess” in which women find themselves. This mess extends from the current model of mothering that Warner found particularly insensitive to women. The ideological good mother was one who could find balance in her life, perhaps work part-time and arrange play dates for her children while maintaining a smoothly running home. Good and doting mothers found joy in bake sales, and birthday parties. Unfortunately, in their attempt to meet the expectation of the good mother, these women found themselves frustrated, exhausted, and angry. While the women in her study openly discussed the guilt which arose when their efforts to mother according to contemporary expectations failed, Warner noted the perceived normalcy of maternal guilt.

Warner’s book was not the first to expose the supposed normalcy of maternal guilt in contemporary mothers. In 1978, Heffner noted that, among other factors, the
desire for perfection, the nature of consumerism, and the proliferation of “expert” advice was contributing to frustrations within motherhood. Guilt was noted as the most prominent outcome. Heffner observed that women felt increasingly bad about themselves as mothers, concluding, “The answer is that women are vulnerable to these attacks because feeling guilty is a normal condition of motherhood…The functions of mothering induce intense emotional reactions which lead inevitably to guilt” (Heffner 1978/25-26). Not unlike Warner’s observation over 25 years later, Heffner was critical of how easily motherhood is tied to guilt.

Some mothers buffer feelings of guilt by dodging cultural definitions and constructing new ones thus maintaining the “good mother” label. Garey (1995) found that women working the night shift were able to identify by day as stay-at-home moms. By working through the night, these women were able to be mothers during the day. As Garey described it, “The women I interviewed told me about their activities in order to show me their motherness” (422). The “good mother” ideology stands opposed to the working mother, so these women negotiated this clash by positioning themselves such that they performed as stay-at-home moms. However, such a negotiation also meant negotiating sleep, which these mothers were routinely deprived of, resulting in physical and psychological problems.

As the 20th century gave way to the 21st, cultural expectations of mothering became increasingly rigorous. “Intensive mothering” was Hays’ (1996) phrase for a culture of all-giving, all-present mothering. Peggy Orenstein (2000) described it as “the perfect mother,” an idealized woman for whom childbearing surpasses all other identities. Douglas and Michael’s (2004) referred to it as “new momism,” and Warner (2005),
coined it the "mommy mystique." These observations described the model of motherhood that asks women to give at all times fully of themselves, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually. These works that detail the status of motherhood contain commonalities. The current motherhood paradigm presents women with a model of near impossible standards. As long as mothers continue to accept this ideology, they lock themselves into a kind of prison, bound by the myths of motherhood. And, as long as they ascribe to the myth, they will experience a number of negative responses – including guilt and shame (Villani 1997).

From her standpoint as a clinician, Swigart (1991) also critiqued the *Myth of the Perfect Mother*. She scrutinized a culture in which mothers are expected to love and nurture, in an environment that is often in conflict with these demands. Consumerism, the workplace, and financial needs complicate mothers' experiences with their children. In Swigart’s words:

Guilt. Uncertainty. Trying to do it better this time around. Trying to give more. Trying to be a better mother than Mother was. In spite of such feelings or because of them, the guilt that many mothers feel is endless and tyrannical. Guilt for providing too much attention or not enough, for giving the child too much freedom, or not enough, for spanking, or not—these feelings are common yet often hidden. The guilt of the working mother, the guilt of the mother who does not have to work, the guilt of the mother who tried to do both—work part-time and mother part-time—and feels both jobs suffer because of it...the guilt of the mother whose child is showing signs of disturbance, unhappiness, physical illness; the certainty you’ve somehow damaged your child permanently, no matter what you’ve done or fail to do. (66)

Swigart captured the paradoxical and all-consuming nature of guilt in the contemporary ideological “good mother.” The messages are unclear and often conflicting with regards to choices a mother must make for her child. Clearly, the
predicament Swigart described captured the tremendous weight of each decision, and each outcome concerning one’s child.

**Natural Mothering.** Other contemporary notions of the “good mother” place emphasis on particular methods of mothering and suggest a return to the “natural.” Throughout the 1980’s America witnessed the commodification of “expert advice” on this style of mothering that encourages natural childbirth (free of pain medication), breastfeeding for *at least* one year, baby-wearing, baby-bonding, and stimulating the baby even prior to birth (Hays 1996). The theoretical foundation for much of this ideology stemmed from the work of John Bowlby (1958) and his concept of attachment parenting. In his paper entitled, “The Nature of the Child’s Tie to His Mother,” Bowlby advanced the view that separation anxiety and fears of abandonment are caused by the rejection of the child by the parent. Specifically, the mother’s role in the life of the child must exceed everyday tasks such as feeding and meeting basic needs. For the child to be spared excessive anxiety, the mother must *bond* with the child, staying within close proximity, protecting and nurturing the child through any threats from the outside world. Attachment parenting and bonding became staple concepts in psychological approaches to good parenting (mothering). It stands to reason that mothers who felt they had failed on some level of appropriate bonding might experience guilt. In fact, Dr. William Sears, a popular childcare “expert” and leading proponent of attachment theory told mothers that, “The feeling of guilt can be healthy...Guilt is an inner warning system, a sort of alarm that goes off when we behave in way we are not supposed to...” (see Warner 2005/101).
Tizard (1991) both placed Bowlby’s work into context and pointed out the implications for mothers. Writing during the 1950’s, when often a sterile environment was of more importance than the psychological needs of the baby, Bowlby did bring an element of humanism to the care of children. However, stressing the vital nature of the mother-child attachment contributed to the belief that the children of working mothers placed in daycare settings would suffer great psychological damage. As Tizard pointed out, the evidence does not support this assumption, yet the belief remains a prominent one. And so, “for forty years in the West, women with young children who have chosen to work outside of their homes have been made to feel guilty and have been viewed as inadequate and selfish mothers” (192). Bowlby’s work, and the notion of “attachment parenting” survives today in the “romanticized” style of parenting that, paradoxically, is called “natural” (Buskens 2004).

At present, there is a strong movement, particularly among the white, middle-class toward a particular style of natural mothering (Bobel 2002). These mothers reject aspects of modernism and espouse a return to “old ways” of mothering. They value home birthing when possible, breast feeding for extended times, co-sleeping, consumption of whole foods, and avoidance of forms of technology such as disposable diapers, or television. According to Bobel, they describe “bad” mothers as those who fail to make “conscious” choices for their children (e.g., teaching through interactive play), and instead, practice conventional wisdom in childrearing (e.g., allowing the child to watch television). “Good” mothers, by contrast, sacrifice fully for their children and spouses by staying home and making themselves available for the betterment of the child’s development. One of Bobel’s respondents noted that many women “internalize
guilt” when they combine work and family because, “they intuitively know that their children need them at home providing full-time care” (23). Such statements reflect the mechanisms whereby “natural” mothering is at odds with contemporary society and the increasing numbers of mothers in the work force. Bobel pointed out the implications of cultural capital in the community of natural mothers. First, while the language of “old ways” suggests a return to simplicity, it is quite expensive to maintain a diet of whole foods, and dress children in organic clothing. And, of course, only a certain class of families can afford for the mother to be ever-present by removing herself from the work force. Yet the implication is clear that mothers who leave their children at day care, feed them processed foods and let them watch television are not practicing “good mothering.” As long as mothers are told that it is natural to want to mother and, in fact, a particular method of mothering is more natural than others, than anyone who deviates is likely to encounter and potentially internalize the label “bad” mother.

Glenn (1994), in her examination of the natural mother phenomenon is quite critical. She argued that by depicting motherhood as natural it, “denies (women’s) identities and selfhood outside of mothering” (9). Nevertheless, this ideology remains dominant. As Glenn pointed out, Ann Oakley’s work from the 1970’s exposed the “natural mother” ideology as one that locks women into reproduction and limits their identity to that of mother. Women are socially and culturally compelled to not only birth a child, but also serve as the dominate nurturer throughout a child’s life. Just as Oakley critiqued the fallacy of this ideological system in the 1970’s, Glenn’s work continued to criticize this prevailing myth. Everingham (1994) also argued that the biological assumptions surrounding motherhood overlook “the socialization of maternal-infant
emotions,” as if all aspects of mothering were hardwired into women (21). In spite of such scrutiny, the concept of mothering as natural remains prevalent.

**Ideology in the Media.** As discussed in Chapter one, dominate ideologies exist at the macro level. Whether through film, television, magazines, or the self-help industry, women are bombarded with images of motherhood. Douglas and Michaels (2004) deconstructed images of motherhood in the media – from film, television, and print. The images of mothers in film and television the 1970’s began to deviate from the classic 1950’s stay-at-home Mom, but a backlash was soon to follow. For instance, while *Diary of a Mad Housewife*, a film produced in 1970, offered a glimpse into female oppression and selfless mothering, Douglas and Michaels pointed out that by 1980, the film industry had returned full circle with its depiction of the mother in *Kramer vs. Kramer*. In this film, the careerist mother is so cold she deserts her family for her career, leaving the hapless father to somehow carry on. Similarly a popular television show in the 1970’s, *One Day at a Time*, featured a single Mom, raising two daughters in a non-traditional manner. However, aside from *Rosanne*, a show which featured a mother who actually displayed the myriad emotions of motherhood, including anger and frustration, as the 1980’s and 1990’s approached, television again returned to images of the traditional, stay-at-home, hyper-involved mother. Magazines glorified celebrity mothers who raved about the continual joys of motherhood, which they surely put before their careers. Motherhood, on magazine covers, became glamorous and sexy. No confusion, havoc, or anxiety was present in these images of beautiful, smiling (thin) mothers who graced the covers of *Good Housekeeping, People, McCall’s* or *Ladies Home Journal.*
The political environment of the last few decades remains critical of the women’s movement and this backlash against feminism has been evident throughout popular culture. The trend has been one that encourages “good” mothers to stay at home with their children (Douglas and Michael 2004). Unless, as the authors pointed out, the mothers are poor or African-American, in which case they are encouraged to work outside of the home. In fact, mothers receiving public assistance could be forced to work outside of the home. Even the news magazines took aim at motherhood such as when, in the 1970’s, Ronald Reagan made his now famous “example” of welfare queens – women who supposedly filed welfare reports under false names to receive multiple checks. Drawing upon the stereotype of the African-American, welfare mother, Reagan’s personal mission has had lasting, negative effects on poor, single mothers. Over the last several decades, motherhood, especially for the poor and in communities of color, has taken a beating in terms of publicity.

In the 1980’s and into the 1990’s a new kind of “mother bashing” became evident in books designed for improved mental health (Thruer 1994). The self-help industry flourished primarily through books that took aim at the “inner child,” calling specific attention to the failures of parents (e.g., Whitfield’s [1987] Healing the Child Within). This brand of pop-psychology, more often than not, focused on the parenting techniques of the mother. The childhood your mother gave you, the books informed, determined whether you had a healthy inner child, were excessively co-dependent, lacked intimacy skills, or relied too heavily on relationships.

The Continuum Concept (Liedloff 1975), a tremendously popular book during this time, offered a model of mothering that promised healthy, well-adjusted, confident
children. Based on observations of time spent in South American jungles, Liedloff’s work was highly critical of western approaches to childcare. She argued that children in the jungles of South American were better adjusted than North American children due to such important bonding techniques as increased physical contact, validation, and long term co-sleeping (with the mother). The failure to rise to the continuum standards, according to Liedloff, could result in a host of unpleasant outcomes for one’s child (e.g., dysfunctional sexuality, lack of creativity, drug addiction). Bobel (2004), in her critique of Liedloff, contended that while Liedloff shied away from a direct assertion, her work implied that when failure to comply with continuum practices occurred, the blame clearly fell to the mother. With fears of increasing the risks of drug addiction and deviance, it comes as no surprise that many mothers, after reading Liedloff’s book expressed guilt when their situations restricted them from carrying out her model of parenting. When they did follow Liedloff’s model, and still their child experienced negative health or behavioral outcomes, anxiety and guilt resulted.

In addition to the self-help books which implicated the failure of mothers to insure their children a healthy inner child, another set of publications suggested that mothers, for all of their efforts, in fact over-complicate their children’s lives. Contemporary publications include: Secunda’s (1990) *When You and Your Mother Can’t Be Friends: Resolving the Most Complicated Relationship of Your Life*; McGregor’s (1998) *Mama Drama: Making Peace with the One Woman Who Can Push Your Buttons, Make you Cry, and Drive you Crazy*; Cleese and Bates’ (2000) *How to Manage You Mother: Understanding the Most Difficult, Complicated, and Fascinating Relationship in Your Life*. For contrast, a few of the recent father-centered books include: *Why a
Daughter Needs a Dad: A Hundred Reasons; Why a Son Needs a Dad (Lang and Lankford-Moran 2000; 2003); Quests for my Father: Finding the Man Behind Your Dad (Staniforth 1998); Longing for Daddy: Healing from the Pain of an Absent or Emotionally Distant Father (Robinson 2004). While the father-centered books guide readers towards finding a father, the mother books portray the mother as complicated and overwhelming. As opposed to the father-child relationship, the mother-child relationship, at least as suggested by these books, will require a great deal of effort to survive.

For the mother who, as Swigart (1991) described, agonizes over most mothering decisions, what must it be like to encounter this culture of literature that depicts her as so complicated and difficult? The contemporary good mother must be doting and present to her child, but apparently not too doting or her child will eventually need to seek professional help. The paradox in which mothers find themselves is clear. As the primary caregiver, mothers are expected to be present to their children, meeting their emotional, psychological and physical needs, only to then be depicted as overbearing and difficult. The representation of mothers in popular culture – from film and television to print - lays the foundation and provides ample opportunity for mothers to question their roles and choices and subsequently experience guilt and shame.

Systematic Research Findings

Empirical studies exploring shame and guilt in motherhood are minimal. However, while not the focus of the research, associations between mothering and guilt are evident in a few studies in psychology and nursing. For example, in 1977, the American Journal of Psychiatry reported that women who experienced difficulties in home and work demands also experienced guilt in the mothering role (Johnson and
Johnson 1977). Rankin (1993), while exploring stressors and rewards for employed mothers, found maternal guilt to be one of the eight major stresses reported by mothers. Also, for inner-city women, among the several barriers to their own treatment for substance abuse were lingering and unresolved feelings of guilt and shame in the maternal role (Ehrmin 2001).

Ehrensaft (1983) found maternal guilt to be related to societal expectations of "good mothering" (50). While acknowledging the subtle shifts in child rearing, specifically the increased involvement of fathers, Ehrensaft pointed out that it is the mother who remained "in charge," carrying a greater "mental load" of parenting (53). The mother, more so than the father, knew when to buy diapers, when to visit the doctor or when to change the sheets. She added that for women who leave the home to work, it is difficult for them to relinquish the child rearing to someone else. They not only worry about the care of their children, they also fear social disapproval for time spent away from home. Ehrensaft argued that women in these egalitarian, shared-parenting situations give up power, "only to find societally induced guilt feelings for not being a 'real' mother, and maybe even for being a 'bad' mother" (50). The myth of motherhood, Ehrensaft noted, stood ideologically opposed to the working mother.

Much of the work on guilt and shame reports higher levels of guilt for females than for males (Tangney 1990; Baumeister et al 1994; Abell & Gecas 1997). Simon (1995) found that these differences had to do primarily with how women experience multiple roles and role meanings. Due to cultural expectations of mothering, women are more likely to feel conflicted when combining work and family, and to feel guilt when they sense they have let their families down in their emotional support role. One of
Simon’s respondents reported, “Guilt is probably the number one emotion because if I didn’t work, that time could be devoted to my kids or my home life…” (186). Simon remarked that men, however, reported no response of emotion in terms of combing work and family roles (italic in original). The sex differences, Simon reasoned, were due to meanings these men and women ascribed to mother, father and worker. For women, the combination of mother and worker resulted in feelings of guilt.

One of the few works to specifically address maternal guilt and motherhood asked women to describe the experience of and the meanings associated with maternal guilt (Seagram and Daniluk 2002). In an unstructured interview format, subjects were asked to talk about guilt and mothering. Many of the qualitative themes that Seagram and Daniluk developed for their discussion reflected the cultural expectations of mothering so prolific in other works. For example, Seagram and Daniluk described their respondent’s “sense of responsibility,” as “an unrelenting and total sense of responsibility for the health, welfare, and development of their children” (66). The women reported feelings of ultimate responsibility for all aspects of a child’s needs. This sense of total responsibility captures what Hay’s (1996) called “intensive mothering.” Similarly, the “sense of inadequacy” reported by the respondents reinforce Douglas and Michael’s (2004) assertions concerning the impact of the media on a woman’s sense of self as mother. Comparing themselves to women on television, or the information in parenting books, these mothers’ feelings of inadequacy have led them to believe that they have failed in the quest for “good mothering.”

Several texts have suggested how and why mothers experience guilt (e.g., Ehrensaft 1983; Everingham 1994; Villani 1997; Warner 2005). However, lacking
within the literature is an in-depth analysis of mothering, treating guilt and shame not as a natural outcome, but as the central inquiry. By allowing mothers to describe the experience of guilt and shame in terms of context and emotion, the qualitative research for this dissertation provides a multi-contextual level (macro/meso/micro) analysis.

**Additional Factors Affecting Mothering**

As discussed in Chapter one, women experience motherhood both subjectively and as a result of the structurally imposed contexts of their environments. At the macro-societal level a mother encounters dominant cultural myths of “good mothering,” which shape her development of self-as-mother, and thus her experience of guilt and shame. On a meso-societal level, the community in which she lives (e.g., her racial/ethnic group) influences her negotiation of self, and therefore, her experience of guilt and shame. And, the enactment of the mothering role, which we can observe through activity, relations with family and self-evaluation occurs on the micro-level. In addition to these levels, there exist various contextual threads that intersect and permeate them all, potentially altering the experiences of mothering even if conditions on the macro/meso/micro appear similar. These threads include, but are not limited to such factors as socioeconomic status, health, and sense of control.

**Socioeconomic Status.** A powerful contextual thread that weaves through the levels of the macro/meso/micro continuum is socioeconomic status (SES). Social scientists routinely measure socioeconomic status through education, income and employment (e.g., occupational status). The extent to which macro-level pressures to conform to the “good mother” actually influence the experience of guilt and shame may be far different for those with high SES than for those with lower levels. While no
research to date has provided empirical differences in guilt and shame according to SES, there is evidence of class differences in mothers’ attitudes concerning childcare and paid work (Duncan 2005). Also, those people with higher levels of SES are better able to confront the major stressors of life (Broman 2001). In order to further unpack such findings, is it necessary to look closely at how education, income and occupational status impact mothers.

Education is associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including good health (Ross and Wu 1995; Miech and Shanahan 2000). Education can benefit a person as a result of better work conditions, increased social psychological resources and generally healthier lifestyles (Ross and Wu 1995). Increased years of education decrease one’s chances of working for low wages or suffering the impact of unemployment (Sewell and Hauser 1975). With increased education come increased chances of securing employment, which Ross and Mirowsky (1995) demonstrated to be associated with better health in and of itself. Those with more education report increased social psychological resources such as mastery, the ability to self-direct, and communication and analytical skills (Ross and Wu 1995). Such skills enable a person to problem solve, to persist against outside forces, and confront the stressors daily life. Mothers with increased years of education will be better able to provide for their children in terms of overall lifestyle. The benefits of good health, secured employment and improved social psychological resources may serve as a buffer against feelings of guilt and shame. While education may not eradicate guilt and shame, it may be that the benefits associated will reveal different experiences for mothers.
With regards to earnings, a healthy income can afford a mother increased resources thereby placing her in a more advantaged socioeconomic environment than a mother with limited finances. The stressors of everyday life for the poor and working class are intensified. Stressors include living paycheck to paycheck or operating in government assisted programs such as welfare. Making ends meet might include struggling to adequately feed one’s children and living in housing unsuitable for families’ needs (Marger 1999). Higher levels of income, on the other hand, make possible the peace of mind that comes with knowing one’s children are fed, housed, and cared for. Higher incomes allow for consistent childcare, as well as resources such as entertainment, travel, and supplemental learning tools for children. While money does not guarantee a reduction in guilt and shame for mothers, it is likely that income differences will reveal different experiences of guilt and shame. While one mother might express guilt or shame because her child does not attend the first school of choice, another’s emotions might stem from her lack of resources to properly feed and clothe her child. Income levels in the home have the potential to shape definitions of motherhood.

Turning now to occupation, research has demonstrated the extent to which work conditions can impact the mothering role. Link et al (1993) isolated the extent to which particular jobs involved direction, control and planning (as measured in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles 1977). Workers who perform in jobs with these characteristics are in a position to and more capable of functioning at such tasks as negotiation, giving directions, supervising and organizing. Job conditions such as complexity, closeness of supervision, and routinization correlate with psychological functioning. Miller et al. (1979) found that women who perform jobs with more complexity and less routine
tended to be more receptive to innovation and change and have more confidence. Those with higher rankings in the bureaucracy tended to have more self-confidence and to make better use of leisure time. Jobs with high pressures negatively impacted self-confidence, intellectual flexibility and levels of anxiety. Another study (Rogers et al. 1991) found maternal mastery (a sense of personal control) to be associated with better working conditions (e.g., greater involvement with people, greater complexity). In turn, mothers with a strong sense of mastery were shown to have fewer behavioral problems with their children. The conditions under which a mother works has ramifications for her development of self, as well as her performance as a mother. Perhaps jobs that offer mothers the chance to gain more confidence, increased negotiations skills and stronger mastery might also serve as a buffer for increased guilt and shame in their roles as mothers.

**Mastery/Sense of Control.** Just as SES factors impact motherhood and the potential experiences of guilt and shame, so too does a more micro consideration which is the degree to which a mother feels she has control over her own life. Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman and Mullan (1981), termed this sense of control, or mastery. Having a sense of mastery, or control means that a person is likely to feel in control of the events in her life, to recognize her own efforts, and be better able to cope with difficult tasks (Mirowsky 1995; Bandura 1997). Those with low mastery look to powers external to themselves and attribute good fortunes to luck. They sense that little can be done to avoid failures (Mirowsky 1995). Cassidy and Davis (2003) found women scored significantly lower on mastery than did men and attributed it to the gendered nature of work and the home. In the macro-social world, women’s lower mastery can be
explained, in part, through lower earnings, while increased education and work autonomy can strengthen her sense of personal control. Cassidy and Davis demonstrated that, in the micro-societal context of the home, the feeling that housework and childcare is not shared contributes to lower mastery, while having more children increases mastery. While research has yet to test the relationships among mastery, guilt and shame, it may be that increased mastery protects a woman from these negative emotions. If a mother feels more in control of the events of her life, it may be that she is less vulnerable to the ideological demands associated with good mothering.

The importance of the mastery/control research for this dissertation concerns the conceptualization of mastery as yet another contextual thread, which weaves through the macro/meso/micro context, helping shape a mother’s development of self as mother, and subsequently her experience of guilt and shame. The degree to which an individual feels in control of her life impacts contextual experiences on the macro/meso/micro continuum. The administration of Pearlin’s Mastery Scale (1981) to the women in this study allows me to consider the relationships among mastery, guilt and shame.

Summary

While maternal guilt and shame exists in our culture as a “normal” aspect of mothering, surprisingly few works have systematically examined the processes whereby mothers interpret their experiences. Contemporary, ideological notions of the “good mother” permeate western culture – from the media to social science research (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Mothers are depicted as competing against one another in their communities, vying for “good mother” status by delivering baked goods to their child’s classroom, or rushing from work in time for a school performance for fear of judgment
from stay-at-home moms (see Allison Pearson’s [2002] popular novel *I Don’t Know How She Does It*). In the home, mothers feel pulled between their roles as workers and mothers, expressing guilt for time spent away from the children and spouses (Simon 1995). This dissertation explores the context in which mothers experience guilt and shame. By providing mothers the space and opportunity to give voice to these experiences, this work produces qualitative accounts of guilt and shame in the context of the larger society, in communities and in the family. In the next chapter, I explain the methods by which I conducted this research.
CHAPTER III
RESEARCH DESIGN

This dissertation investigates the experience of guilt and shame for mothers within the macro/meso/micro contexts of their lives. While "maternal guilt" is described as pervasive and abundant in past research, few works have systematically explored the topic. Given the scarcity of research, the purpose of this dissertation is to access the lived experiences of mothers, allowing their voices to provide descriptive accounts of guilt and shame at the macro, meso and micro-societal levels. In this chapter, I discuss the purpose and usefulness of focus groups for this research, as well as the role of feminist methodology. Consistent with feminist research, I also identify myself within mothering research. Next, I discuss my specific sampling procedures, data collection, and interview guide. Finally, I conclude with a description of my method of data analysis.

Focus Groups

A review of the literature suggests focus groups as the most appropriate method for exploratory research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006; Warr 2005; Wilkinson 2004; Lucal 1996; Stewart and Shandasani 1990). Considering the paucity of sociological literature in the area of mothering, guilt and shame, this project involves hypothesis forming in that I sought to investigate the meanings mothers give to ideologies of motherhood, relationships with others and activities in which they enact mothering. I also sought to investigate the language of guilt and shame. When research is hypothesis
forming in nature, focus groups are often utilized so that multiple respondents can be assessed in one setting. In this way, “key issues, ideas and concerns” may be explored in a setting consisting of multiple respondents (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006/196). Morgan (1996) stipulated that other forms of research such as individual interviews and quantitative surveys, also access ideas, therefore, it is not enough to simply say that focus groups are the best method for exploratory studies. This methodology, Morgan noted, does not simply access what people say, but it provides “insights into the sources of complex behaviors and motivations” (139). The primary advantage of focus groups involves the interaction among participants.

According to Warr (2005), through the group interaction, participants are encouraged to “present, explain and occasionally defend their opinions” (201). The “group effect” is the term given by Carey and Smith (1994) to the dynamic by which participants exchange, discuss and explain to one another. In doing so, the process of the interaction creates a means of negotiation of meaning (Frith 2000; Smithson 2000). The interaction moves between personal beliefs and collective narratives, making it possible for researchers to tap the contexts that frame the lives of the participants (Warr 2005).

In this study, I am interested in the ways in which mothers construct meanings and emotions. The use of focus group methodology produces data not merely on the “content of the collective identity…but also on the process of interaction, negotiation, and affirmation through which such an identity is produced and sustained within the group” (Munday 2006/90). As Munday stressed, the traditional use of focus groups for market research oftentimes reflects positivistic characteristics in that the goal involves the researcher listening to the respondents, and collecting data as a kind of “reality.” Instead,
she argued, the true advantage of the focus group is achieved when the researcher pays attention to the process of the construction of reality among the participants. Thus, my use of focus groups allowed me to not only listen to the stories of mothers, but to observe the context in which the language of mothering was produced, and observe the ways in which the mothers made “sense of themselves as a group who share common values and ways of understanding themselves and the world” (95).

**Feminist Methodologies**

Munday (2006) also noted the increased use of focus groups in feminist research. Wilkinson (2004) also discussed the appropriateness of focus groups for feminist research. First, she outlined three specific drawbacks inherent in traditional methods of research. First, feminists have been critical of the artificiality of the experimental design, noting that settings for research should be a natural as possible. Second, the issue of decontextualization is of concern when research focuses on the individual without regard for the social context. Third, traditional research often advantages the researcher producing a hierarchical power structure of “researcher/researched” (274). Focus groups resolve these issues first by creating an atmosphere as natural as possible, which is a group of people, gathered together in conversation. The idea is to allow for social interaction in a way that more closely resembles everyday life. The interaction among participants creates the space for collective sense-making, and provides a layer of context. Lastly, in the format of the focus group, “the balance of power shifts away from the researcher” (279), reducing the power differentials between researcher and participants.
It is important to the success of this research that I employ feminist methodologies for a variety of reasons. First, I should note the general division that has been drawn between traditional, positivistic research and feminist research. Feminists have argued that the history of positivistic science is a “hegemonic epistemology” (Sprague and Kobrynowicz 2004/78) in that a theory of knowledge is often produced without significant attention paid to the subjectivity of the researcher. This kind of science tends to distant the researcher from the knowledge produced (Allen 2000). The challenge to this type of epistemology, according to Sprague and Kobrynowicz, has been the development of radical constructionism which posits knowledge as not derived from hypotheses, but rather from discourse about the processes that unmask it. Feminists contend that positivism “reinforces inequality” by presenting the views of the white, male elite as “universal truths” (Cancian 1992/625).

DeVault (1996) drew a distinction between feminist research and feminist methodologies. Her comments are important to note as this research is employing both of these. First, feminist research refers to, “a broader category including any empirical study that incorporates or develops the insights of feminism” (31). This investigation of the lives of mothers and their experiences of guilt and shame is feminist research in that it is sensitive to the qualities of motherhood that may negatively impact the lives of women.

Feminist methodologies, according to DeVault (1996), refer to methodologies that “emerge from the feminist critique” (31). Following DeVault’s lead, my conscious use of feminist methodology is related to three goals. First, feminist research aims to place focus on all women, the diversity of women’s lives, and the “ideological mechanisms that have made so many of those lives invisible” (32). While our culture has revered
motherhood as the most important job, the under-valuing of motherhood has been perpetuated by patriarchal ideology and structural conditions and the lives of mothers largely ignored (Crittenden 2001). Certainly, the guilt and shame so prevalent in the lives of mothers is both obvious and invisible in social science research. Second, as pointed out by Munday (2006), a troubling characteristic of positivistic research involves the hierarchy of power advantaging the researcher over the participant. DeVault asserted that feminist methods seek to dismantle the power differentials. My employment of focus groups allowed me to conduct this research and also level issues of power that might have emerged. Third, DeVault claimed that “feminists seek a methodology that will support research of value to women, leading to social change or action beneficial to women” (33). Acknowledging that most research seeks to improve the lives of those whom they study, DeVault noted that the distinctively feminist goal involves the emphasis on the social structures that control and affect the lives of women. As has been stated, a primary motivation for this research involves the lack of attention paid to mothers who carry on their day-to-day lives under the weight of guilt and shame. My goal is to improve those lives by uncovering the forces that sustain the environment of guilt and shame.

**Researcher Identity.** One of the criticisms that feminists level against positivistic methodologies concerns the assumption that social scientists are objective, and thus their findings are unhindered by the biases of the researcher (e.g., Allen 2000; Cancian 1992; Collins 1990). One of the ways in which feminists have sought to rectify the issue of objectivity is through “feminist objectivity,” or “situated knowledges” (see Hess-Biber and Leavy 2006). By this, Hess-Biber and Leavy referred to the undertaking by feminists...
to conduct their research objectively, while at the same time acknowledging their own
relationships towards the subject matter. Rejecting the dichotomous nature of subject and
object, feminists adopt a more holistic, and dialectical approach to research. Objectivity
is gained specifically when the researcher reflexively revisits her place in the research
process. As Allen (2000) argued, our positions, biases, and experiences should be
integrated and included as part of our research.

Again, the identification of one’s experiences need not belie objectivity. Instead,
the researcher acknowledges her relationship to the subject matter. In her review of
feminism and motherhood, Snitow (1992/32) identifies herself as “a woman who tried so
hard to have babies late,” and thus, “might well feel sheepish and hypocritical about
mounting a heavy critique of pronatalism.” Lorde (1984/114) also located herself within
her research as a “forty-nine year old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two,
including one boy, and a member of an interracial couple.” In doing so, Lorde
acknowledges herself as the prototypical “other,” or one of the oppressed who are
especially responsible for calling attention to oppression. These and other feminist
researchers identify themselves as a way of locating themselves within the material they
are studying, and acknowledging how they will negotiate that location as they conduct
research. By doing so, the opportunity for objectivity is increased through the act of
naming one’s own subjective relationship.

My own interest in the topic of mothering, guilt and shame came to fruition
shortly after the birth of my daughter Savannah in 1998. Having prepared for a “natural”
birth, I was deeply disappointed that contrary to my physical and emotional preparations,
her birth included drugs, forceps, and an episiotomy, eventually followed by a cesarean
section. Though I relished in the first days of her birth, I found myself disappointed in my inability (as I constructed it) to deliver her according to the natural plan. As the weeks and months went by, I experienced anxiety over any number of issues related to her well-being. I subscribed to *Mothering* magazine and attempted to enact the “attachment” method of caregiving. Thus, I rarely left her side, and when I did, I felt guilty, afraid she would “need” me in a way that only I could provide (I did exclusively breastfeed after all). My love for my daughter exceeded that of any other. I felt completely and utterly responsible for her physical needs, such as food and clothing, but also her emotional and psychological needs. I wanted to be a “good mother,” and thus kept from her processed sugars, bleached flour, and excessive chemicals in soaps and diapers.

When Savannah was a baby, I heard a speaker say to her audience one Mother’s Day, “What does it feel like to have a child? It’s like watching your own heart walk around outside of your body.” I have since heard that phrase numerous times and it is always presented as a lovely image and met with a response of joy and understanding. Indeed, it does feel as though your heart is walking around outside of you, but often your very self is attached as well. I began to notice that for most mothers, and certainly, myself included, the feeling, while joyful and beautiful was also heavy and often laced with guilt when any slippage occurred between the ideology of “good mothering,” and activities in real life. Fatigue, frustration, and fear had no place in the psyche of the “good mother.”

It was conversations with mothers – friends, family members, and colleagues – that initiated my interest in researching the topic of mothering, guilt and shame. Of
significance to me was the relative acceptance of so many mothers as they discussed the
guilt that they experienced. I also noticed that most fathers did not seem to be
experiencing these phenomena. I began to listen to the language of mothering, note the
dominance of ideology, and specifically I noticed that for most of us these experiences
simply felt bad.

My own experiences as a mother and particularly those with guilt and shame helped to inform this project. What I could not do in this research was transfer my experiences and interpretations to the women with whom I spoke. The use of focus groups helped me to distance myself from the dialogue among the women, more so than would have occurred with individual interviews. This methodology was useful in data collection as it allowed the interactions among the mothers to produce the data. In this way, I could ask questions, yet distance myself somewhat from the discussions (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). While my own experiences as a mother prompted this study, I also sought to allow the voices of the mothers in this study to speak for themselves, without giving preference to my experiences at the expense of theirs.

The Sample

Of concern to this project was mothering as it occurs in multiple contexts. Utilizing a feminist constructionist framework, I was interested in accessing the experiences of a diverse group of mothers (Chase and Rogers 2001; Collins 1992). For a qualitative study that is exploratory such as this, a certain amount of homogeneity is acceptable (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006; Knodel 1993; Walker 1992). That is, when a topic is investigatory, there is no expectation of representation from multiple groups (e.g., age, social class, sexuality). I chose to focus this study on differences that might exist at
the community, or meso-level, such as those within racial communities. I also chose to limit this study to those who had children currently living in the home, so that the participants would be at similar locations in their life course. Thus, I recruited mothers with at least one child, under the age of 18 currently living in the home. Below I discuss my sampling procedures, the means by which I accessed these groups of mothers, and the demographics of the mothers.

**Convenience Sampling.** I received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) within the Office of Research and Sponsored programs in February of 2005 to begin research on this project (Appendix A). I initially sought to conduct these focus groups in three locations - two area churches, and the University campus. To assure racial diversity, I sought to select one church that was populated by the African-American community, and one predominately white. I planned to post flyers at these area churches and throughout the University, specifying the project and soliciting participants.

Upon receiving IRB approval, I conducted a pilot group in order to test my interview guide and probe for themes I had not considered. I used convenience sampling to construct this group. I posted an email on the list-serv of a women’s group to which I belonged, asking if those with children, under 18 and living in the home, might be willing to participate. I also contacted acquaintances who fit this profile. I secured a room in the classroom section of the church I attend, and eight women gathered for this first group. I provided childcare for those mothers who were unable to obtain babysitters. This first group consisted of seven white, and one African-American mother.

I also began to contact local churches. I chose a predominately African-American church that I had attended some months back when they hosted a political event. I visited
the church on a business day and spoke with the church secretary as well as a few volunteers gathered for a food distribution program. I presented the research to them, specifying that I had received IRB approval, and added that I could conduct the focus group at any time that was convenient for 6 to 8 women in their community. The church secretary showed enthusiasm for the project but told me that she needed to give the information to the president of the women's missionary society, as well as the church Pastor. I left some flyers for them to review (Appendix B). I let a week pass and called the secretary, inquiring as to the status of interest. She informed me that no decision had been made. At that point, she asked me why I had chosen their parish as a site for research. I explained to her that I had visited their church and we spoke of the event I attended. I sensed that she, and perhaps others, wondered why I had chosen their church as a site of research. She told me once again that she would contact me when the women's missionary president and the Pastor reached a decision. I stopped by the church a second time, asking if there was further information I could provide. Again, after a week, I telephoned the office. She asked me if I could write a description of the research and fax it to the church office for the Pastor to review. I did so and again awaited her reply. I called after several days and she informed me that the Pastor's response was "no," he did not feel this church was the right site for my study. In terms of gaining entrée into this community, I believe I met with problems based on my status as a white researcher, with no direct relationship to this church.

At the same time, I contacted a predominately white church. I called this office and spoke directly with the Priest who gave me immediate approval to proceed. He stated his enthusiasm in working with "the University" and when I asked, said he did not
need to review my IRB approval, nor my specific research agenda. This is a large church in the area and his response indicated to me that I was not the first researcher to seek access to this community. I visited this church and spoke with a member of the church staff who showed me a conference room I could use to conduct my focus groups. She took from me approximately six flyers, stating that a staff member would post them. The flyers specified a date and time for a focus group. Unfortunately, I received no phone calls as a result of this contact. I do not know how many of the flyers this employee posted, or where in the large facility he posted them.

I contacted another predominately white church and again was met with enthusiasm for the project. The woman with whom I spoke coordinated education programs for the church and told me she could gather six to eight women for an afternoon focus group. I stressed I would meet with them at the date and time most convenient for them. I emailed to her a flyer, and a copy of my IRB approval. Weeks passed and she and I maintained contact via email. Each time we communicated, she told me that the mothers in their church were busy with a variety of projects and she was having a very difficult time gathering six to eight of them at any one time. We maintained contact for approximately four weeks, and in that time, she could never coordinate the schedules of mothers such that any six or eight were free at one time. I was discovering that, while “mothers” as a population are certainly not hard to find, gathering them in one space was more difficult than I had anticipated.

In terms of the University site, I contacted the office coordinating adult education programs and spoke with two people in that office. They offered a conference room to me and gave me permission to post flyers in and around the building in which their
students worked. Thinking that this program attracted non-traditional students, it was my hope that a population of mothers would respond to the flyers. I received one phone call as a result. I then chose two dates and times, created another flyer and posted them throughout the University with no more success that before. It was at this point in that I decided on a more direct form of convenience sampling.

I contacted an acquaintance who worked as a birthing coach and therefore had access to a large community of mothers. She sent an email to a group of mothers, most of whom were involved in the La Leche League (a group of mothers that supports breastfeeding), and all of them were stay-at-home moms. I received nine responses from mothers and began corresponding with them in order to schedule a focus group. Again, I realized how difficult this process of organization would be as each mother had an extensive schedule to juggle in order to agree upon a date and time. Working around school, after-school activities and childcare dilemmas was again making this process more complicated than I had anticipated. I decided to construct two groups, one in the afternoon, and one in the evening thus satisfying the schedules of these mothers.

During this time, I also made contact with some mothers at my daughter’s school and informed them of the date and time of the focus groups. Similarly, schedules were difficult to coordinate. One mother cancelled at the last minute when her child fell ill with a cold. Another mother, from the La Leche league, contacted me through email with a list of available times “we” can attend. She signed each email with hers and her infant son’s name. One mother was unsure until the last minute whether or not she could attend, stating in an email, “Wednesday would be better for me and my husband would be able to babysit.” Securing commitments from six women per group, I arranged for
them to meet in two consecutive days. The first group actually consisted of five mothers. The second, after several last minute cancellations, consisted of three. In the case of several of the mothers who cancelled, I received emails later offering apologies, regret in their inability to participate and inquires as to future groups.

In a conversation with a teacher at my daughter's school, I spoke of my research and my desire to access a group of African-American mothers for the purpose of diversity. Thus far, my groups had been made up of white mothers (with the exception of one African-American mother in Group one). She put me in touch with the mother of a former student of hers. I called this mother, told her of my research and she expressed interest in participating. She told me she would gather some friends, probably close to ten, and we could then decide on a date. In the next several weeks, I once again ran into the problem of getting a number of mothers to agree upon a date and time, as their schedules were so busy. The number of her friends available on the date we selected was eventually five. I asked two students from the University if they would be interested in participating in this group. One of these students was available which brought the number of participants in this group to six.

A final group was constructed at the University again through convenience sampling. I contacted two mothers who were graduate students, and they informed me of two more mothers, also likely to participate. I also asked two undergraduate students who I knew had children living in the home. Six mothers were scheduled for this group but, with last minute cancellations, the group met with four. This group took place in a conference room at the University.
As Hess-Biber and Leavy (2006/71) pointed out, “sometimes the selection of informants boils down to who is available, who has some specialized knowledge of the setting, and who is willing to serve in that role.” In the case of these groups, I found myself writing in my field notes that putting together groups of mothers was like “herding cats.” Before any actual dialogue with these women took place, I had some sense of the juggling that they encountered each day.

Sample Diversity. My final sample consisted of twenty-six mothers. Table 3.1 displays the demographics of these groups. Eighteen of the mothers were white, and eight were African-American. Their ages ranged from 26 to 48, with an average age of 37. Eight of these women specifically identified as stay-at-home mothers, one reported her occupation as “painter,” later revealing that she painted in her home studio. She was also at home with her two children even home-schooling her eldest child. The remaining seventeen reported employment either part, or full-time. In terms of their employment, their jobs ranged from professional careers such as engineer, nurse, and commercial underwriter, to service oriented jobs such as part-time sales in an art gallery. Five mothers listed their work as “student.” Three of these were graduate students and two were pursuing undergraduate degrees.

In all, my sample met my goal of attaining racial diversity. One group consisted of only African-American mothers, two groups consisted of only white mothers, and two groups contained one African-American mother in each group. Morgan (1996) referred to this as “segmentation,” or organizing by homogenous groups so that conversation might flow freely among those with more in common. It was with that purpose in mind that I felt at least one of my groups should consist of only African-American mothers. As
far as other demographics, the women were heterosexual, middle-class mothers, and represented education levels higher than national averages. As stated earlier in this chapter, some degree of homogeneity is expected in focus groups (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006; Knodel 1993; Walker 1992). Therefore, having achieved racial diversity, the fact that all of the women are middle class, with similar education levels, allows me to draw conclusions based on race that are not necessarily related to issues of socioeconomic status. However, because of these factors, my findings are not representative of a larger population of mothers that extend across ethnicity, age, social class and class, sexual orientation.
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AA=African-American  S=Step  E=Elementary  H=High School  CD=College Degree  SG=Some Grad
C=Caucasian  P=Pre-school  M=Middle School  C=College  SC=Some College  GD=Grad Degree
Interview Process. Four of the focus groups took place in the classroom area of a local church. I chose this site because of the layout of the facility, and because my membership in this church community allowed me access. In the downstairs area, I was able to hold the focus group in one area, and allow children to play nearby with available toys, arts supplies or books. In the case of two of the four groups that took place at this site, I secured a childcare worker to supervise the children. The pilot group took place in the classroom directly adjacent to the room in which the children played. Moments into this focus group, I realized this set-up a mistake as the voices of the children next door were often loud. Two of the groups took place in a larger, open room so that mothers could supervise their children. In these two groups, I did not provide childcare as these mothers insisted that either they wanted their infant to remain with them, or their slightly older children would be fine without supervision. I therefore chose an open space so that a closed door did not separate us from their children. In the last group that took place here, the children and the childcare worker were in an area far enough away from the room in which we spoke as to not be heard.

In the second focus group, three young children (one elementary aged and two pre-school) and one infant accompanied their mothers. As I said, the group took place in a large, open room. A classroom, with the door left open, was nearby for the children to draw, or play. This arrangement worked well for the first twenty to thirty minutes of the group, but eventually the children began to trickle into the room. I became distracted by the disruption, worrying that the presence of the children would significantly alter the context, but this did not appear to happen. When a child entered, or ran through the room, one of the mothers would casually walk over to her child, continue talking or
listening, guide her child back into the play area and return to her seat. Several times the noise of the children became quite loud. Once, as Samantha\(^1\) spoke, her pre-schooled aged daughter stood just at her side yelling, “Mama! Mama!” repeatedly, with hopes of interrupting. Eventually, Samantha paused, listened to her daughter, and continued speaking. Only one infant attended the third focus group. This mother was very concerned that her son not disrupt the group, and during those few moments that he fussed, she held him and walked the perimeter of the room, remaining engaged in the conversation. I did not notice any variation in the candor of the mothers’ interactions from group to group as a result of these differences.

The last group required no childcare and took place at the University. However, this group was interrupted by malfunctions I experienced with my recorder. I began each group with new batteries, to ensure effective taping. In this case, the batteries opened for this occasion were already dying. The tape began but only recorded for a few minutes before I noticed it had stopped. I made two trips down the hall to my office, to retrieve working batteries and we began again. I was able to fill in the missing dialogue from notes that I took during the elapsed recording.

At the beginning of each focus group, I gave each mother a copy of my informed consent (Appendix C). I read the consent to the group and instructed them to sign the last page if they agreed to the contents. I offered them the first page of the form which contained mine and my advisor’s contact information. I told them that the group would be audio taped and that they may halt participation at any time. At the conclusion of each group, I asked the mothers to fill a brief closed ended survey with questions regarding the

\(^1\) Pseudonyms have been given to all participants to protect their identities.
woman's demographic profile (Appendix E) as well as the shortened version of the Pearlin Mastery Scale (Appendix F). I also provided each group with a variety of beverage and food options, both for the mothers and the children, when applicable.

As previously stated, I began with a pilot group consisting of eight mothers. I found this group to be very helpful in refining my interview guide (Appendix D), yet the changes made to the guide were minimal such the data from this focus group could be included in the study. I began this group by talking about micro-level relationships, and worked towards the meso and then the macro. In reviewing the tape and transcript, I decided to reverse this order for the remaining groups as I felt the opposite order that began at the macro and moved inward would be more effective.

The Interview Guide. I used an interview guide to steer the conversations. My intention was to conduct groups “less structured” than “structured.” According to Morgan (1996), definitive distinctions of structured and less structured remain vague though the less structured a group, the more the “group can pursue its own interests” (145). My interview guide included many probes. However, in no group did I use all of them, as the mothers typically carried the conversations in the desired directions without my prompting. In the larger groups (groups one, two and four specifically), my involvement was decreased which is often the case with larger numbers of participants (Morgan 1996). In the smaller groups, group three specifically and less so with group five, my involvement was increased, though I remained conscious of my attempt to guide the conversations, while not inserting personal responses or opinions.

In each group, I began by asking the mothers to discuss the notion of “good mother.” Actually, in all groups except the first, I began by having everyone state their
first name, and the number and ages of their children. My experience with the pilot group encouraged this introduction as several of the mothers began asking each other questions such as how many children they had, and the ages of their children. In most groups, the questions pertaining to one aspect of their lives, such as those concerning mothers in their communities, lead them to the next series of questions, such as a their families of origin. Many of the mothers noted how good it felt to discuss mothering.

"No one usually asks us about this," one participant said.

Initially, I made a decision not to directly ask the mothers about guilt and shame. My intention was to let this topic emerge from the interactions. I felt this decision might produce a different set of meanings concerning guilt and shame than if I asked them directly to speak of it. However, I made a decision at the conclusion of the pilot group to ask the mothers, more directly about maternal guilt. Mentions of guilt had been made throughout the groups, though only once was the word shame used. I wondered then what kinds of answers a direct inquiry would produce after so much dialogue concerning mothering. I asked them to consider the idea of maternal guilt and to tell me if they could imagine what would make them feel guilty as mothers. Because this question produced dialogue on areas of their lives I had not included in my interview guide (such as employment), I decided to do the same in subsequent focus groups, always at their conclusion.

Data Analysis

At the conclusion of each group, I completed field notes regarding my reactions to the physical setting (i.e., the presence of children), the interview guide and my sense as to whether or not I was accessing the topic I had set out to explore. Because initially I
thought my findings would benefit from very specific mentions of the words guilt and shame, I worried as to whether the focus groups were generating “good data.” After the first group, I noted that it felt no different than hearing a group of mothers talk in any other setting. I realized, of course, this reaction had to do with my own experiences as a mother, and one who spoke to other mothers rather frequently. Once I began to consider the dialogue of the pilot group from the stance of a researcher, I realized that indeed there was much to the interactions that spoke to my topic. It felt somewhat un-dramatic to me simply because it was so normal. That, I reminded myself, was the purpose of the study: to listen to the day-to-day stories of women’s lives. These were their experiences, many of which I shared.

For the sake of time, I chose to have the focus groups transcribed by two different court stenographers recommended to me by a legal friend. They were able to present me with the transcripts in a brief period of time. I did not ask them to insert names of the participants in the transcripts. Upon receipt of the transcribed groups on CD, or via email, I would listen again to the tapes and insert pseudonyms for the mothers. This allowed me to go through each group again, at times making slight changes to the transcriber’s choice of wording when my notes or memory of the conversations provided more accurate transcription.

The data were then entered into NVIVO, a data software program used to explore and interpret qualitative data. NVIVO allowed me to create conceptual categories and identify dominant themes. These themes included; “Good Mother,” “Community,” “Working and Stay-at-Home Moms,” “Home Dynamics,” “Fun Dads,” “Books and Magazines,” and “Guilt and Shame.” I was able to select comments and interactions that
fell into these categories from each group, print them and analyze them for similarities and differences. These broad categories produced more defined sub-categories such as racial variations, divisions of labor in the home, and “yelling” at one’s children. These themes became the framework for my analysis of these data.

At the conclusion of the fifth focus group, I determined that I had reached “theoretical saturation” for the purpose of my study (Strauss and Corbin 1998). While Morgan (1996) stated that four to six focus groups are common and appropriate in most studies, I would have continued conducting focus groups had I felt my data lacked necessary substance. Instead, my comparison across groups demonstrated that additional focus groups were unlikely to produce substantially new information. My goal in this research was to access the lived experiences of mothers on the macro, meso and micro-social levels. My analysis of the data demonstrated to me that the stories the women had told, and the interactions in the focus groups, reflected, and could be linked to the literature upon which this study was based. In the next chapter, I begin a discussion of the findings with consideration of the macro-social level.
CHAPTER IV

MOTHERING AT THE MACRO-LEVEL

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which the women in this study conceptualized the "good mother." Recall a central goal of this work is to clarify how motherhood is conceptualized by women at the macro-level. My exploration of macro-level forces moves the literature in this area forward in four ways. I first discuss how these mothers defined the "good mother" and whether their lived experiences clash with expectations of new momism (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Second, I discuss the mothers' experiences within the expectations of "attachment parenting." Third, I consider the role of media (e.g., parenting books and magazines). Do these materials, designed to provide assistance, actually contribute to the identification of the "bad mother?" And fourth, I discuss the mothers' language of guilt within the context of the distinctions outlined in chapter two. I begin by placing new momism within the macro-social context.

The Macro-Context

In a social-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner 1979), the values and meanings associated with the ideological good mother would be embodied within the macro-societal context. The belief system that surrounds the ideological good mother serves as a kind of blueprint that dictates the expectations of motherhood. These expectations enter the lives of mothers at the macro-social level in the form of cultural truisms and
traditions. For example, in books, magazines, films and television, women are inundated with information regarding beliefs and ideologies surrounding the mothering role. This cultural mandate locks women into rigid definitions and meanings of motherhood. According to Chira (1998), the image of the good mother knows no racial, ethnic or class boundaries. Indeed, most mothers would agree on those characteristics that constitute good mothering, such as provider and nurturer of one’s children (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996). Nevertheless, the existence of dominating macro-ideology certainly does not preclude variations in motherhood at other levels. By way of illustration, the 1950’s “June Cleaver” model appears to embody white, middle class motherhood, while the strong, industrious black mother is imagery associated with mothering in the African-American community. The variations in this imagery do not indicate different ideological stances. Bronfenbrenner’s model situates the meso and micro within the macro-context, suggesting that, while the macro-level blueprints may be the same, the manifestations of such belief structures may vary at the level of community (i.e., across racial, ethnic and class lifestyles), and also at the micro-level (i.e., at the level of lived experience).

Research suggests that individuals internalize ideology and cultural norms, and the failure to meet macro-societal, culturally prescribed expectations can impact lived experiences. For instance, norms of femininity and masculinity instruct the individual on how he or she should behave, and failure or compliance with conventional gender displays can contribute to social and psychological oppression (see Chu, Porche and Tolman 2005). Not unlike our culture’s rigid prescriptions for motherhood, the expectations for ideal masculinity and femininity are also difficult to obtain. Pleck
(1995) has argued that attempts to meet socially prescribed constructions of masculinity are rarely fully attained and thus may in fact contribute to poor psychological health. Such reasoning also applies to mothering. If women internalize normative ideas about mothering and similarly, fail to live up to hegemonic “good mothering,” we might expect similar negative psychosocial consequences.

The monolithic force and dominance of the macro can impinge on a person’s life in three interrelated ways. First, the macro can encourage a person to make decisions that contradict the self. For example, Gilligan (1994) discussed the ways in which young girls in adolescence begin to undervalue their skills in math and science, seemingly irrespective of their interests and abilities. Macro-level ideologies concerning appropriate gender display are thought to discourage young women from pursuing traditionally masculine fields and in order to secure their femininity, they often downplay their abilities. The macro, in this case the norms of femininity, often lead young women to make decisions that actually contradict aspects of the self resulting in the loss of voice for young women.

Second, the power of macro ideology can encourage one to draw conclusions for which there is little to no actual evidence. For instance, much of the debate concerning differences between men and women rests on the argument that women and men behave differently due to biological differences (Kimmel 2004). This sort of “common sense” take on sex and gender thrives in the face of a plethora of research indicating that cultural and political explanations are more robust than biological arguments. However, our culture leans towards biological explanations, which is evidenced by popular press books and magazines that emphasize the “Venus and Mars” dichotomy of the sexes (Kimmel
2004). While ample evidence suggests that social and cultural conditions shape constructions of male and female “differences,” macro-level “common sense” explains masculinity and femininity as culprits of testosterone and estrogen. When conclusions regarding masculinity and femininity are attributed to biological differences, the norms of family life, which place the mother in the home and the father in the workforce, are supported.

Third, the macro provides an inflexible road-map for life choices and life strategies. Ideologies, according to Ranson (2004) have the power to “shape our perceptions of our activities (88).” Ranson interviewed forty-five white mothers, in order to explore their particular family choices and formation. Her analysis exposed the language these mothers used regarding the “shoulds” of mothering. As mothers, their practices and activities were shaped by the dominate models of motherhood that they described in the course of interviews. Ranson showed how her participants depicted the white, middle class model of mothering and went on to demonstrate the ways in which this model determined life choices. For instance, the ideology of “full time mothering” greatly determined the practices undertaken by women in her study such as the structuring of childcare and the discourse surrounding it. Regarding her stay-at-home status, one mother told Ranson, “I just feel for my kids and me it is the right thing, you know, it’s just the right thing” (90). The mandates of motherhood are at work informing women of the “right” ways in which to mother. It is important to consider macro-level ideologies in this way as they are so often lived out as personal “choices.” While these are indeed choices made by individuals, we must also consider the roots and sources of
ideologies that are "of doubtful value, unsympathetic to caregivers, arbitrary, and, literally, man-made" (Thurer 1994/xxv).

In *A Mother's Place: Choosing Work and Family Without Guilt or Blame*, Susan Chira (1998/22) wrote, "When I was a child, it was clear to me who the good mother was...the bland suburban homemaker mother of Sally, Dick and Jane. She lived in my television set: Mrs. Cleaver, the ever-aproned, ever-available mother of Wally and the Beav. She even lived in my house." Chira, a New York Times journalist, goes on to describe her process of becoming a mother and adopting the 1950's suburban model described above. This idealistic mother was blissfully happy to make herself available to her family, never displaying boredom or anger. Sacrifice and devotion came with the job. The good mother showed her love of her children by her willingness to deny herself. Unfortunately, when the actual experiences of mothering were not consistent with the "good mother" model, mothers such as Chira often experienced anxiety and guilt. Chira felt frustrated in the early months of her child's life. Rather than the blissful early months at home with her baby, she missed her career and longed to return to work. Reflecting on this period of confusion she stated, "I still feel a sense of shame, a belief in a secret corner of my heart that my emotions brand me a bad mother, alone amid a tide of rapture (23)."

Chira's account illustrates the power of the macro-level ideology in which she struggles. All three macro-ideological traps are evident in her experiences. First, staying home and thus performing as the ideological "good mother" contradicted her definition of self as so defined by her relationship to work. Second, Chira's shame in relation to missing her career was grounded in the conclusion she had drawn that working was "bad"
for the child and signaled “bad mothering.” Of course, this conclusion was reached amidst existing evidence which indicates no harm befalls the child of the working mother. Third, her experience of shame came as a result of not following the inflexible roadmap drawn for her by the ideologies of motherhood. When she attempted a deviation from this powerful ideology, she felt shameful. The traps into which Chira fell illustrate the ideology of motherhood as depicted by Douglas and Michaels (2004).

New Momism as Ideology

Douglas and Michaels (2004), in their analysis of the current trends in motherhood, specifically as depicted in the media, termed the contemporary construction of motherhood, “new momism.” This conceptualization is derived from macro-societal ideology that depicts mothers as all-giving and self-sacrificing. According to the authors, contemporary mothers are met with rigid and demanding expectations of motherhood that are unrealistic at the core and set women up for a sense of failure, disappointment and guilt. While the model from which Chira (1998) drew existed in a 1950’s, white, suburban world, new momism is contemporary and claims to know no racial, ethnic or social class boundaries.

According to Douglas and Michaels, new momism has at its core three essential features of “good mothering.” First, motherhood completes a woman. As Oakley (1974) noted over three decades ago, there exists in our culture an ideology that links women’s identities to their identities as mothers. This thinking assumes that all women desire to have children, and questions the lifestyle of those who do not. In a pronatalist culture such as ours, women internalize the idea that the ultimate role they are to play is that of mother, and true fulfillment comes only with motherhood (Speier 2004). Further posited
is the romantic notion that mothering is “natural” (Buskens 2004), suggesting that nature will guide a woman through her trials of motherhood, as it is in her body’s wisdom to know how to parent. According to Glenn (1994/9), “by depicting motherhood as natural, a patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into biological reproduction, and denies them identities and selfhood outside of mothering.” If a woman chooses not to have children, or if a mother’s experiences conflict with this dominant ideology, she may experience shame for what she perceives as her lack of “innate” ability to mother according to cultural prescriptions.

The second feature of new momism asserts that mothers are a child’s best caretakers. This notion grew out of the separation of spheres which divided work and home, making home the province of women, and childrearing the responsibility of mothers (Bassin, Honey and Kaplan 1994). Prior to the mid 19th century, work was largely home based, and women and men tended to share in the rearing of children. Changes brought about by industrialization took men away from the homes as they transitioned into the public sphere of factory and office jobs. This shift left women in the private sphere of the home, where their primary role was to serve as nurturer to children. Child rearing not only became a woman’s primary responsibility, but through the privatization of nurturance, motherhood in a capitalistic system became less valued (Bassin et al 1994). Thus, the “gap between work and home grew dramatically both in reality and in ideology” (Kimmel 2004/120). It is important to note that this “cult of domesticity” occurred in the white population, largely excluding African-American, Latina and Asian-American women (Glenn 1994).
The social policies that punish mothers in the form of promotions and pay scales are based on this belief that mothers are the natural and most qualified caretakers of children (Lorber 2005). Chira (1998) made this point by reminding her readers of the slogan used by popular radio psychologist Dr. Laura Schlessinger. Dr. Laura, as she is known to her listeners, railed against mothers who allowed childcare centers to “raise” their children, and proudly declared, “I am my kid’s mom.” Within the confines of this feature of new momism, we would expect that the working mother who placed her children in the care of another would express guilt and shame.

The third feature of new momism is that mothers must devote themselves fully to their children: physically, intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically. Not unlike the 1950’s June Cleaver image, today’s mothers are expected to approach motherhood joyfully and completely, while sacrificing themselves to the demands of motherhood. To enact new momism is to be physically present with one’s children. The doting mom attends soccer matches, chaperones school trips and understands the importance of being there for her child. A mother is expected to give of herself, including her time and energy, willingly and lovingly. A “good mother” is rarely angry, but instead, she is kind, considerate and patient with her children. “Being there” surpasses the physical and also implies that a mother is in touch with her children intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically. She plays classical music to her unborn fetus. She purchases educational videos, utilizes flash-cards, and teaches infant sign language. A mother is expected to understand her children’s needs beyond the physical (food and clothing), but also their emotional and psychological ones, while preparing them intellectually. Many mothers who attempt to achieve these many demands of mothering report negative
psychological consequences, among them guilt. To mother as prescribed within the ideology of new momism, and experience it as anything less than joyful sets a mother up for feelings of guilt and shame.

What is a “Good Mother?”

I began each focus group by asking the mothers to consider the phrase, “good mother.” Asking them to define “good mother” produced descriptions of qualities consistent with Douglas and Michaels’ (2004) new momism. At the core of this ideology are the following features: 1) Motherhood completes a woman, 2) Mothers are a child’s best caretaker and, 3) Physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological devotion. The mothers had no trouble describing the “good mother,” and demonstrated the pervasiveness of these constructs.

Motherhood Completes a Woman. In the conversations that occurred around the question of “good mother,” I did not hear comments that specifically suggested a sense of “completion” as a result of motherhood. However, while the focus group participants failed to specifically describe their mothering as a “completion of self,” data from these groups revealed that Oakley’s (1974) observations regarding the prominence of the mothering identity remain relevant today as these mothers emphasized their identification of self as mother. Similarly, several mothers made reference to their “instincts” as mothers. When discussing the various influences in their lives (e.g., media influences), a few of the mothers responded, “You just have to trust your instincts.” As Hays (1996) stressed, many mothers think of themselves as relying on the use of “common sense,” or some instinctual knowledge in the raising of children. A dominant ingredient in the
ideology of motherhood contends that much of mothering comes naturally to women (Glenn 1994). Many of the comments in these groups spoke to that belief.

**Mothers are a Child's Best Caretaker.** The second of Douglas and Michael's (2004) features suggest that mothers are their child's most qualified caretakers. Not only does our culture expect women to be the childcare providers for children in general, but we also expect mothers to provide the care and nurturance for their own children. This expectation, of course, will be a difficult one for mothers who work outside of the home and need to rely on others to care for their children. Dating back to the separation of the home and workplace, the idea has become increasingly normalized that women are the more appropriate caretakers of the home and children (Hays 1996). When the (white) men left the farms and headed off to the factories, the home became the haven of women, and nurturing became their jobs.

For the mothers in these focus groups, the belief permeated the discussions that it is their job, as mothers, to meet the myriad needs of their children, including the job of primary caregiver. One stay-at-home mother expressed the implicit "rightness" of not working outside the home by saying, "I wasn't supposed to be working. I'm supposed to be home with her and I really feel that way." For the working mothers, as shall be shown in a later chapter, the joy they experience in relation to labor force participation is often tempered by the notion that they have failed at some level of motherhood by occasionally turning childcare responsibilities over to others.

Also suggesting adherence to the importance of a mother as childcare provider, Anita, an African-American mother of two described a good mother as one who "takes care of her children, nurtures them, and is there for them." Later, in the same focus
group, Debra, also African-American and mother of two discussed her decision to quit her job in relation to the guilt she experienced as a result of not being home with her children: “Someone else saw them walk first. Someone else heard them talk first. The majority of the time they were with someone else and for me, I couldn’t get past the guilt of not being home with them.” For Debra, the belief imbedded in the ideology of new momism, specifically that she needed to be the everyday caregiver to her children, made it impossible for her to work outside of the home without experiencing tremendous guilt. The dominant belief holds that a mother “should” stay at home with her children, and often times the struggle with this macro-pressure induces guilt (Villani 1997).

Tina, a white mother of one discussed her son’s reaction when, during a kindergarten orientation hers was the only hand raised when asked, “Who would be going to after-school care.” She described him looking at her raised hand, looking around the room, then back to her. She sensed his embarrassment in the moment. While relating this story, Tina reasoned that surely there were others going to after-care who simply were not present at that particular meeting. However, “I’m going to remember that moment where I was the only one that raised my hand and what Josh’s face did when he looked around. I’m going to remember that for ten years, you know?” Tina, a single mother, not only enjoys her work outside of the home, she also stressed that it is the only source of income she and her son receive. Self-employed, she is able to structure her workdays such that she picks her son up from school on some days. But still she struggled with the emotions brought on when her son said, “Nobody else has to go to after-school care. Why can’t you pick me up everyday?”
In the same group, Brenda, an African-American mother of two reacted to Tina’s story. She too had experienced the “stigma” of after-school care. Brenda described her daughter asking her, “why can’t I be car people?” as opposed to one of the after-care children who board a bus that takes them to another facility. She told the group of her daughter saying to her, “Can’t I be car people today? I want to be car people.’ And it hurts because I wish that she could be car people…” Brenda then went on to describe how she had made changes in her job, where she held a supervisory position. She was driven to management, she told the group, primarily because of her degree from a prestigious university. Her degree, she said, held certain expectations for her, and she wanted to work her way up in her company, eventually to a management position. However, when her daughter pleaded with her to be “car people,” it “hurt” as it highlighted the conflict between the roles of caregiver and economic provider. Having secured a degree from a “good” university, Tina felt driven to put her degree to use. However, her daughter’s pleas to be picked up after school, rather than transported to after-care caused Tina to pause, question her priorities, and feel guilty that she could not be available to her child.

While both of these women are employed outside of the home, and both expressed satisfaction in their work, yet they also struggle with a particular pull. This pull tells them that, no matter how good the child-care arrangements for their child, it is still their job to pick up their child at the end of a school day. Even for the mother who values her life outside of the home, this macro-level ideology is a source powerful enough to produce doubt, hurt and guilt in a mother. As Ranson (2004) noted with the women in her study, macro-level constructions of full-time mothering often lead women
to reframe their work and family choices. In Tina and Brenda’s cases, macro-level pressures inform them that a “good mother” is her child’s best caretaker, and that ideology is serving as a kind of road-map for their life choices. Unfortunately, it often conflicts with their own career plans with the result being guilt and shame.

Physical, Intellectual, Emotional, and Psychological Devotion. The third feature of new momism involves total devotion of the self to one’s children, physically, intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically. Tardy (2000) observed that in the construction of motherhood it is unthinkable that a mother would put her needs ahead of those of her child’s. When asked, “what does ‘good mother’ mean to you?” Nancy, a white mother of two responded: “to be everything for your child.” When I repeated, “To be everything?,” Emily, another white participant in the group responded, “a tall order, but, yeah.” In this exchange, the assumption that a mother could meet all of her child’s needs, as much a “tall order” as it suggested, was clear. No one in the group questioned the remark and there existed an understanding of its meaning – a mother must, should and could be “all things” to her child.

Several of the mothers noted that a good mother is “there for her child.” Clair, a white mother in another group said that a good mother “spends time with their kids, does things with them, doesn’t just turn on the TV.” To Meghan, a good mother “has a lot of time…” Sharon said that the first thing that came to her mind in terms of good mothering was a mother who “just makes time for her children.” Being “there” for their children implied not only the physicality of the job, but suggested that they also must construct time with their children in a specific way. A good mother does not turn on the television, but engages with her child.
Part of being “there” for one’s child implies that a good mother also “understands and gets her kids.” “You know,” Meghan, a white mother of two joked, “a good mother must be one who endlessly plays board games, and, you know, does crafts and takes outings.” She “gets” them and has internalized the importance placed on interaction for the sake of healthy development. Karen, white with three children, listened to Meghan, and then spoke with frustration of her earlier commitment to this type of mode, “…I felt like I had to spend all my day at home interacting with my kid.” Years later, with her oldest now 15, Karen resents the pressures she once experienced in regards to structuring events for her children. While she acknowledged that this kind of macro-level pressure once impacted her life, her tone now is dismissive of it as she espoused the importance of simply “hanging around,” and being “way less into the structured events.” As we will hear later, Karen also struggled during this time to find part-time work when her children were young. She did not enjoy mothering fulltime and spoke of missing her career. However, she did want to find part-time work so that she could be at home, at least part of the time, with her children. Perhaps the tone of resentment we hear in Karen’s voice for the “pressures” of interacting all day are also due, in part, to the various difficulties she experienced in terms of finding the right balance for herself in terms of motherhood and work within the “good mother” ideology.

For some of the mothers the need to “be there” for their children induced guilt when they sought alone time. When their desires to make time for themselves clashed with the sense of needing to be “there,” the result was often guilt. Samantha (white, two children) stated:
That’s really important to me, my alone time. I think that’s the hardest thing giving up... You don’t see that in the books and magazines, how to get that back. It’s about how to give to your kids and how to give to your husband. It’s not about how to take. And going back to the guilt – and feeling guilty because the kid is up there crying. I should be going and taking care of the kids... and you feel guilt about your alone time.

In expressing her guilt, Samantha also noted the absence of any support in books and magazines for mothers who deviate from the all-present mom.

Samantha was not the only mother who expressed guilt in relation to the sense of spending less time with her children than she “should” if practicing “good mothering.” Clair spoke of her desire to have more children, “but the reality is, and I’m crazy about kids, but I feel so guilty when I don’t spend time.” Though she mentioned twice in this focus group of her desire for more children, she both times stressed her current state of guilt for the lack of time she spent with her children. Employed part-time, Clair is able to spend most days of the week at home with her children but still expressed guilt in relation to the hurriedness of their lives and the lack of time she can give to each of her three children.

In another group, Shelley, a white single-mom, said she felt guilty for the times she dated men, bringing them into her daughter’s life. She told the group, “I can’t become involved with somebody because of my child... any time you get somebody else involved in your life, you take time away from them (children).” She went on to describe the jealousy her child would experience when she dated men, and how her daughter would then demand more of her time. Shelley reconciled that she will more than likely not be with a steady partner until her daughter is over 18 years of age. “That’s what I feel guilty about,” she told the group. Not only she, but also her daughter expected a certain
amount of attention and time be given her child, and when a potential partner entered the picture, her daughter actually demanded more of her, and she struggled with the guilt induced from this kind of pull.

In the same group with Shelley, Alicia, African-American, described herself as someone who “needs to be alone.” And yet, she added, “Sometimes my mother makes me feel so guilty about that, because I’m not like her in that respect…I need my space, you know, physically as well as mentally.” Alicia’s descriptions of herself in regards to “alone time” suggested an acute awareness of the importance this time served in her life. She told the group of her independence and autonomy, and how these characteristics resonated from her childhood. But, she went on to say in regard to her children, “sometimes I worry, am I nurturing them enough? I tell them that I love them and I hug them and kiss them and that sort of thing. But when I need to be alone, I need to be alone.” As previously noted, one of the ways in which the macro can impinge on lives is that it can encourage a person to make decisions that do not reflect who they are. In Alicia’s case, she recognizes that she is a person who needs solitude and yet, when juxtaposing that personal need next to the expectations implicit in new momism ideology, she ends up questioning herself as a mother (“am I nurturing enough?”) and feels guilty.

The guilt associated with not spending the requisite time with one’s children continued in this group as Alison then spoke. Her work in graduate school meant long hours away from the home, as well as work brought home. Regarding the decreased time she spent with her children she said, “I struggle with this a lot.” She said, “I am often not home, and I always feel like I don’t spend enough time with my kids…” Feeling like her life was busy, and confronted with work that required her attention, she told of the
stress these dynamics induced and how she then found herself, “yelling at my kids.” That was wrong, she said, “because I put my needs and my being stressed and pressured ahead of, I mean, they’re just little kids... so I think issues like that definitely make me feel stressed out and just guilty, very guilty for, you know, as if I’m being selfish.” In Alison’s story, we can see the impact of the macro on her lived experience. Separated from her husband, Alison, who is white, is seeking an advanced degree while also serving as the primary parent to her two children. New momism requires selfless devotion to one’s children and so, even when work, family, stress and fatigue collide, Alison expects that she will be able to keep the needs of her children ahead of her own at all times. Even when there is little to no evidence that suggests a mother can actually perform this feat of sacrifice, macro-level ideologies have the power to impinge on everyday experiences resulting in more stress, and guilt.

Perhaps Alison is impacted by the belief that a “good mother,” one who loves her children is capable of managing her emotions more carefully. In another group, when asked, “what does ‘good mother’ mean to you?” Joyce replied:

> When I think of good mother, I think of Loving – everything’s wrapped up in that. If she’s understanding, she’s loving. If she’s nurturing, she’s loving... so, loving would be my answer of a good mother.

In the same group, Jewel commented that a good mother gives her children, “unconditional love.” In another group, the “good mother” was synonymous with “nice.” Another described her as “patient.” As in Alison’s case, when a mother often finds herself temporarily “not nice,” or feels more frustration than love, she is surely to call into question her “good mother” status. The women with whom Villani (1997) spoke also expressed guilt for deviating from the nice, calm and loving mom they felt they

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“should” be at all times. Many women expect they can adhere to the ideological “good mother” who is patient and loving regardless of the immediate circumstances or of her personal propensity for “nice-ness.”

Meghan seemed aware of the expected “nice-ness” of mothers, and even joked of her inability to live up to it as she noted, “I always think a good mother as one who has a lot of time and is very patient, which is to say someone completely other than I am.” In Meghan’s disclaimer – “which is to say, someone completely other than I am,” we see that she holds herself to a standard that even she knows she cannot meet. Again, the macro is impinging itself on a mother in a way that feels contrary to who she is. She lists the qualities of a good mother and adds that she actually lacks those qualities.

As Douglas and Michael’s (2004/6) declared, “Motherhood has become a psychological police state.” They added, “The best mothers always smile. They always understand. They are never tired. They never lose their temper...Their love for their children is boundless, unflagging, flawless, total.” The words of the women in these focus groups resonate with Douglas and Michaels’ typology. To be a good mother is to be “everything for your child.” A good mother is kind. A good mother allows her children “to voice – to express.” In terms of her children, a good mother “puts them first.” One mother, when asked what the “good mother” meant, simply responded, “Sacrifice.”

These women in a variety of ways expressed the weight of being so utterly present to one’s children. Olivia stated, “You want to do what’s best for your kids. You do feel doubt when you worry so much about it. You want to do what’s best for them. It stirs up strong emotions. You know, protectiveness, doubt.” Olivia expressed the
pressures she felt when she tried to follow the good mother ideology, or “do what’s best for your kids.” In her attempts to protect and care for her children, at times she also doubted herself and acknowledged the strong emotions that arose. The “psychological police state” can in part be understood by Olivia’s comments. She knows that she must do what is “right for her kids,” yet she is not entirely sure just what that constitutes. And new momism leaves no room for moments of such doubt.

In another group (of white mothers), the dialogue concerned the sense that mothers must make things “right for your kid.” Emily responded:

*Perfect, not just right. And I know, it’s the dichotomy of - I know better. But, at the same time, you really want to make things – I want her ride to be as easy as possible. But, at the same time, I want her to have enough obstacles along the way so she can learn from them.*

Emily had earlier stated that, though her child was not yet school aged, she felt that, as contradictory as it was to her “mind as a teacher,” she would feel guilty if she discovered her child struggled with a learning disability. “But, as Mom, I think if there’s anything wrong, if she’s not a valedictorian, I’d feel like, ugh, what did I do wrong?” Again, we have macro-level ideology impinging on Emily such that, even contrary to the evidence she has before her as a teacher, she would feel guilty if her child was diagnosed with a learning disability. New momism asks that mothers be present to their children on all levels. One expects that if mothers perform according to this mandate, her children will be freed from challenges. As a result, Emily feels it is a reflection on her mothering if her child does not succeed according to certain standards of success. The paradox for Emily’s is that while she feels her child should have a certain amount of obstacles in her
life in order to learn, she wants to protect her from as many obstacles as possible. How this paradox can be resolved remains unclear to Emily and causes her concern and worry.

In the same interaction, Nancy listened to Emily talk, agreeing with and understanding Emily’s plight. She commented that if she were to imagine what might make her feel most guilty as a mom, “If my child had poor self-esteem. I’d feel terrible. I’d feel really like it was my fault or something.” As with Emily, Nancy has internalized the ideology of mothering that tells women that they should be present to their kids on all levels. The result for Emily and Nancy is that being “there” for their child means that whatever becomes of their children is a direct reflection on them. Whether it is a learning disability or low self-esteem, these mothers stated their realities – they have to make things right and good for their children, and any deviation from this calls into question their abilities to mother according to the ideological “good mother.”

Mothers often feel that their own identities are confirmed through the impressions others have of their children (Collett 2005). In this study, most mothers’ agreed that “good mothers” raise happy and healthy children. Nicole described a good mother as one “whose children are happy and well cared for.” Angela agreed with Nicole and took that idea a step further by saying, “A good mother raises happy, well-adjusted human beings.” In another group, Tina replied, “The good mothers are the ones whose kids turn out happy.” Like Nancy and Emily above, the outcomes of your children, whether their self-esteem or how happy they appear, is a reflection on their mother.

To devote oneself to the rigors of new momism, a mother must pour herself into her child’s life physically, intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically. The mothers in these groups, by buying into the good mothering ideology, set themselves up to
experience guilt and shame when they find that they cannot perform according to the high demands implicit in this ideology. At this level, racial variation was not readily apparent. All of these mothers were not only well aware of, but also embraced current definitions of motherhood even as the remainder of the focus group discussion revealed the extent to which this model negatively impacted their lives.

The initial descriptions of the “good mother,” stand at odds with what they seem capable of actually accomplishing in everyday life. The disjuncture between perceived expectations and day-to-day experiences was expressed in the form of guilt. Macro-level forces such as the ideology of new momism are powerful enough to negatively impact even the mother who considers the implausibility of such demands. The “road map” that this particular macro-level force lays out for mothers is one that requires maneuvering between perceived expectations in order to maintain standing as a “good mother,” and psychological discomfort in the form of guilt and shame.

**Attachment Parenting**

Another “road map” exists for mothers who have adopted what is known as attachment parenting. The concept of “attachment parenting,” has become an increasingly popular approach to parenting. While contemporary versions of attachment parenting exist (also called natural mothering), little has changed from the foundations set forth by Bowlby (1958). Bowlby’s original method told parents (but specifically addressed the mother) that, in order for a child to develop in a healthy manner, free of anxieties, the parent should stay in close proximity to the child. Mothers/parents were to accomplish healthy child development by holding or carrying the child when possible, protecting, nurturing and “bonding” with the child.
A popular parenting website (parentingweb.com) describes attachment parenting in its contemporary form as an “intuitive, nurturing style” of parenting. Their key principals include; immediate bonding with your baby (co-sleeping is encouraged rather than nurseries), breast-feeding on baby’s cue, responding quickly to your baby’s cries, “wearing” your baby as much as possible, and spending as much time as possible with your baby. Beyond these kinds of instructions, the website also tells parents that, “by meeting your child’s needs during infancy and toddlerhood you are encouraging the development of a healthy, happy, independent person.” Not surprisingly, many of these “components” of attachment parenting were mentioned by the mothers in these focus groups as characteristics of a “good mother.”

As was the case with Bowlby’s (1958) initial work, this particular ideological approach to parenting has ramifications that are more significant for mothers than for fathers (Bobel 2002). It is the mother who will be breast-feeding on baby’s demand, and subsequently responding to the baby’s cries as quickly as possible. And, it is assumed in the community of attachment parenting, that “spending time with one’s baby” is also the job of the mothers (who will more than likely be the stay-at-home parent). The website informs:

You make time with your children a priority, regardless of material sacrifices that might have to be made. Obviously, single parents have to work, and there are other families that truly need two incomes. But you recognize that nurturing is of vast importance in your child’s early years and that day care, while it may be adequate, is not as beneficial to your child as you are.

Consistent with the second feature of new momism, the assumption in this statement is that the mom is the best caregiver for her child, irrespective of the quality of daycare, or her desire to work outside of the home. In fact, should a mother embrace attachment
parenting, and see herself as a working mother, chances are these two sets of beliefs will collide and set the stage for feelings of guilt and shame. It also suggests that one’s recognition of the importance of nurturing your own child is the “natural” route to take, without reference to the social construction of this “intuition.” Villani (1997) noted the language of natural mothering in her interviews with mothers. She also quoted those mothers’ expressions of guilt when they felt they had fallen short of the image which they strove to emulate. One of her participants told her, “I thought I could be more loving…” (137).

Several of the women in my focus groups spoke of their experiences in relation to attachment parenting. Angela, a white stay-at-home mother of an infant, adheres to this method, feeling as though her child should be held when at all possible, and soothed when he cried. She said, often times she feels the need to perform some other activity and struggles with the dilemma in which this leaves her:

I feel guilty if my son cries. I can be at home, like, with him all the time, I just feel like, well, sometimes I just have to get something done. Like maybe there’s someplace I have to go, maybe there’s something I have to do that’s pressing. I have to put him down. And he’ll cry. Like sometimes I put him in his crib and he’ll cry. I take a shower. And I feel horrible. Like wanting to take a shower – as if I’m going away or something. That does make me feel guilty, but I know it’s not hurting him. But I just – I have a hard time letting him cry. Like I want to stop, pick him up or whatever, even when I’m getting ready to put him in a sling and swing him around to the back to do my hair, to dry my hair or whatever. I just hate hearing him cry. It makes me feel horrible.

While she knows that temporarily putting her son down does not hurt him, the ideology of attachment parenting, which tells her to listen to his cues, and pick him up when he cries, makes it nearly impossible for her to do little else lest she feel guilty.
Buskens' (2004) analysis of “natural parenting” drew attention to the loneliness and social isolation that accompanies this method. Adhering to the attachment parent ideology “requires a home base, however, this ‘home base’ is often a no-man’s land (literally there are very few men here) on the social periphery” (106). In Angela’s case, isolation at home seemed to compound her confusion as the ideology of attachment parenting clashed with such simple life events as showering and drying her hair.

For Angela, the ideology of attachment parenting conflicts with the childrearing ideologies promoted by her mother and grandmother. That clash leaves her confused and further guilty as to which method is correct. She told of her grandmother’s fears that she was “creating a monster” through her method of mothering. Angela then feels as if she cannot win: “I feel bad either way, but I carry him all the time. It makes me feel guilty, answering to my mother or my grandmother – ‘Maybe you’re spoiling him, maybe you carry him too much, you run every time he cries. You need to let him soothe himself.’” But, when Angela abandons the attachment method and tries the style proposed by her mother and grandmother, she feels as though she has let her son down. “And then, if I do that to him, I feel horribly guilty, in his eyes, you know, ‘why aren’t you helping me Mommy? I need you’...so it’s like, either way...”

As long as mothers adopt the ideology of attachment parenting that stresses the need for mother-child bonding – for the good of the child and society at large – these mothers will remain locked in the cultural belief that demands they stay at home, and give themselves fully to their children. The attachment parenting website, at the conclusion of its principals tells its supporters:
The premise that fully nurturing your children is considered by many to be the antithesis of feminism infuriates you, and you won't buy into that belief system. If you are female, you are proud to be a stay at home mother and consider it the most important thing you could possibly be doing right now. You want to raise your children yourself, not hand them over to someone else to do the job. (parentingweb.com)

Feminists might in fact argue that this style of parenting (which is to say, mothering) assures that women are “kept in their place.” Just as the model of “true womanhood” cast women as passive, nurturing and unselfish, the “good mother” who appropriately bonds with her child is also unconcerned with her own needs, and consumed with the needs of others (Hays 1998). For the mother who embraces attachment parenting, she is told it is in the best interest of her child to stay at home, respond to that child’s needs at every turn, and all the while trust that this method is “intuitive,” and should be embraced and experienced as “natural.”

**Parenting Books and Magazines**

As Douglas and Michaels’ (2004) asserted, the norms of new momism are represented in various forms of the media. Mothers are inundated with messages on how to parent effectively, and the costs associated with making the wrong choices for their children. Whether the topic is effective discipline techniques, the dangers of over-scheduling and under-scheduling her child’s activities or methods of toilet training, hundreds of books and magazines are available to mothers. These books and magazines are one specific way in which macro-level ideologies of mothering can infiltrate the daily lives of mothers. They are often presented as factual and scientific – written by experts in the field.
Parents have been turning to books and magazines for advice concerning child rearing since the turn of the 20th century (Stearns 2004). Using a constructionist perspective, Marshall (1991) outlined the motherhood mandates implicitly contained in these sources. She argued that within childcare manuals, the mandate states: a mother should be present to her child 24 hours a day and stay engaged with her child, providing stimulation and attention. Should the child not develop normally, all blame then falls to the mother. As Marshall added, “The guilt induced in a mother whose child does not meet the relevant yardstick at the right time would seem to be one obvious consequence of following the word of the manuals” (83).

Hays (1996), in her analysis of “intensive mothering,” asked mothers about their consumption of advice manuals. She found that most of the women did read some form of advice manual, but they tended to read selectively and to distrust advice that clashed with their set of circumstances. Her participants dismissed much of this material as “just theory,” “too demanding,” or “idealistic” (73). According to Hays, many of the women to whom she spoke utilized parenting books as references for specific problems such as potty training, discipline, or sleep issues. More often than not they told Hays that they, “believe what feels good to me” (75).

In each focus group, I asked the mothers whether they read parenting books and magazines and to name those they had read. In the course of this discussion, I then asked them to talk about their experiences with the information in the books and magazines. The questioning then became more specific, asking whether they ever felt as though they could not meet the expectations of the advice this literature offered.
Just as Hays (1996) found, most of the women in my groups read parenting advice in some form. Of these mothers, only one stated that she never read any parenting literature. Seven mothers specifically reported that they currently read some form of advice material, and ten noted that they once read such material, but for various reasons, no longer did so. The remaining nine did not comment specifically. The number of mothers who acknowledge reading parenting materials, whether currently or previously, speaks to the popularity of this form of media. There are currently over 1500 books in print and over 200 magazines devoted to some aspect of parenting (Simpson 1998). Considering the proliferation of this medium, the popularity of parenting material was no surprise.

The variety of materials accessed by these mothers included books, magazines, radio shows and websites. Two mothers mentioned the important role that specific books played in their lives as they struggled with issues concerning their child’s disability (both had a child diagnosed with a developmental problem). One of these two mothers called herself an “information junkie” in this regard and was still relying on such texts. The other mother, Karen, said she had “burned out” on the books, adding that she lost interest in other’s views on the topic (recall her earlier dismissal of pressures to parent in specific ways). Two mothers currently subscribe to Mothering Magazine, a publication marketed towards the attachment parenting population, with information on “natural” approaches to mothering (e.g., extended breastfeeding, organic foods and clothing and co-sleeping). Another mother spoke of her past subscription to this publication but noted she no longer had the time to read it. Websites were another means of access to advice. These
included mothering.com, the site for “natural family living,” and a PBS website that offered cultural advice to a white mother raising her adopted, African-American son.

The reactions to these materials varied. However, more often than not, the majority of mothers noted their general dissatisfaction with their experiences reading parenting advice. Only three mothers specifically noted their positive experiences. One mother felt she learned a great deal about controlling her anger outbursts and yelled at her children less as a result of reading Peaceful Parenting. Peaceful Kids. Another mother in the group asked her to elaborate on this text, noting that she too would “like to read something like that.” One participant who spoke positively of her experiences with books said that she “read all of the Sears’ books – attachment parenting, and all of those. I kind of agree with their philosophy, I think, of parenting.” As with Hays’ (1996) sample, many of these mothers used advice books to target specific, relevant problems.

The degree to which the mother agreed or disagreed with the advice espoused in the books impacted the positive or negative experience she had in relation to the material. If the mother previously agreed with the general ideological framework, she spoke of her reading of the material in a positive way. However, reading material that conflicted with the mothers’ existing ideology often left them feeling doubtful and guilty. Olivia’s comment captures this:

It’s kind of challenging to read information that sounds very compelling, and then realize it’s just not your philosophy in the long run. And it’s conflicting in my mind for a week or so after that, and I find that ends up making me really – you become a bad mom, because here I am trying to make structure in my life because that’s what it’s all about. And in that article maybe that I read, which is really compelling, it made a lot of sense, but then for me to become that structured person is really going against my personality so much that it causes a lot of tension...although it may be good advice, I might not be ready to hear it right then.

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Olivia's account demonstrates the power of the macro to impinge on one's life such that it encourages decisions that contradict the self. Social psychological research (Festinger 1957; Lavine, Thomsen and Gonzales 1997) tells us that, typically when an individual is confronted with incongruent information, the individual will likely experience cognitive dissonance. One tactic for resolving or avoiding this is to dismiss it. In this case, Olivia is confronted with advice that she admits goes "against my personality." The struggle between knowing who she is, what she is capable of, and what to do with advice that is pitched as good for her children, leaves her feeling conflicted, tense, and like a "bad mom."

According to Hays (1996), mothers who embrace the intensive mothering ideology are, in essence placing themselves within cultural contradictions. The strength of the ideology itself is in conflict with many other ideologies of Western culture. The working mother may appear to be acting "irrationally" when she engages in the work force, while also giving to her children the time and energy that "intensive mothering" requires. The beliefs that make up the ideological good mother, such as selfless devotion to one's children stand opposed to other cultural trends, such as the value our culture places on individuality and self-pursuits. The strength and dominance of the intensive mothering ideology, and its contradictory nature helps explain why Olivia would experience conflict when reading mothering advice books. She has internalized the ideology to the degree that she cannot simply turn her back on incongruent information. Rather, she feels stuck, at least for a week she said, in this gray area of doubt.
Like Olivia, Clair said that her experience with popular television psychoanalyst Dr. Phil’s advice led her to re-think her mothering style such that it made her feel, “like the worst mom in the world.” She said that the expert’s classification of certain categories of childrearing were too often too harsh and said, “I don’t like to second guess what I am trying so hard to do, and what works.” Again, like Olivia, Clair recognized that the information she received was incongruent with her beliefs. She does not agree with Dr. Phil, or other “experts,” but is susceptible to the contradictions of their advice. The ideology of the “good mother,” the one that asks Clair to always second-guess her actions in order to assure that she is meeting all of the demands of new momism appears to supersede her ability to cast off incongruous information.

Meghan spoke at first positively of her experience with parenting books. She said that she felt “great about reading the books,” and agreed with the philosophies, such as not spanking. She said she felt calmer as a result of reading, but then added a caveat. She said that she “felt guilt if I’m not following the advice.” Her positive experiences stem, in part, from her existing agreement with the material presented. The “calmness” that resulted could in fact stem from receiving validation from “experts” that she is making the right decisions. She and the experts agree, so she must be a good mother. However, on those occasions when she strays from the path of the advice, she experiences guilt. Again consistent with Hays’ (1996) findings, a woman’s experience with a parenting manual is conditioned upon the fit with her existing beliefs. Meghan’s experience with books that fit her circumstances and beliefs were calming and validating. When she felt the information conflicted with her methods, she experienced guilt.
Others mentioned the guilt or other negative reactions to their perceived inability to meet the standards prescribed in the materials. Alicia said she once read books and magazines but “they made me feel so guilty.” As Alicia spoke of this reaction to books, the group acknowledged understanding and support by nodding and voicing their agreement. The mothers then went on to dialogue about how various books and magazines set mothers and women in general, up for disappointment. The group agreed that most of the books and magazines set forth unrealistic ideals. “Why read them?” one mother asked, “They just make you feel guilty.”

Interestingly, the women in the above group were either reading them, or at least they acknowledged that they once read them. Perhaps their tendencies to dismiss not only the advice but also the material itself are a reflection of their middle-class status. According to Hays (1996), working and poorer class mothers are more likely than middle and upper-middle class mothers to give credence to child “experts.” The above average education levels of this group of mothers might explain why many of them mothers dismissed the material, even as they also acknowledged the guilt it exposed them to. While their education levels provide a kind of buffer against “advice” to which they do not agree, they are at the same time subject to macro-level pressures of “good mothering” contained in these materials.

**Perceived Pressures.** In a particular group interaction, the discussion of parenting materials turned to a discussion of more specific macro-societal “pressures” on mothers. The pressure to follow the advice in the books led to discussions of a perceived sense of pressure on mothers to not only mother well, but to do it with particular displays. These particular behaviors are demonstrative of the really good mothers. Samantha discussed
her reluctance to read popular publications because, "It puts too much pressure on me." Regarding parenting books, Nancy later added, "It's almost pressure on us. We read it, and it's kind of another thing we haven't done, and we feel guilty about it." The group echoed their agreement. Nancy then joked about how she attempted to do what "works for her," and realized that some of it did not apply to her. She said that she tried not to feel pressured when she was reading: "Do this, and cut out these shapes for your kid's sandwiches and do this for the eyes." While the women in this interaction seemed cognizant of the various pressures mothers' experience, their language shifted from their experiences of it, to their rejection of it, and then to the sense that perhaps, mothers' themselves are to blame.

While they acknowledged the pressure that books and magazines placed on mothers, the dialogue concerning these pressures quickly turned away from the macro. Chess (1982) suggested that often times mothers' experiences of societal pressures induce guilt specifically because the macro has been ignored. This process of ignoring the role of the macro was at work as the dialogue shifted from contempt for parenting books and magazines and the pressures they placed on mothers to how moms themselves might be at fault. "Moms are their worst critic," Lori responded adamantly. "And parents who criticize," Samantha added. Emily agreed and then spoke of the competition she felt with other mothers who inquired into how soon her baby crawled, or walked, or generally developed. "That pressure is out there," Tammy added. The pressure not only suggested to these mothers that they must perform according to certain standards, but that mothers' also sanction those deemed deficient. The conversation regarding pressures
from society quickly shifted from a macro to meso-perspective, finding fault within the community of mothers.

The comments concerning the consumption of expert advice and the resulting experience hinged upon: 1) the degree to which the mother already agreed or disagreed with the philosophies contained in the materials; 2) the degree to which she felt she could meet the ideals of the advice and; 3) the extent to which she felt pressured to go against her own “gut instincts” of mothering her children. If the mother agreed with the philosophy, such as Nicole’s consumption of natural mothering materials, then her experience was described as positive. For Meghan, her experience was positive until she felt she could not actually follow the advice given and then she claimed feelings of guilt. And, for Clair, when Dr. Phil and others challenged what she considered to be the best choices she could make in her day-to-day life with her children, she then felt “like the worst mom in the world.”

Guilt or Shame?

The language used by these mothers as they described themselves in relation to “good mothering,” is more demonstrative of shame though they used the word guilt. Shame involves a negative self-evaluation with emphasis at the level of the self. According to Scheff (2003/254), shame serves as a kind of “moral gyroscope,” signaling to us when we have deviated from conventional morality. The macro-ideology of motherhood mandates that “good mothering” is all-giving, selfless, natural, and joyful devotion to one’s children. If a mother cannot live up to this conventional wisdom, her bond with this social ideal is threatened. And, as Rubin said (1983/200), “…to fail at motherhood is to have failed self in some fundamental way.” The macro informs women
of ideological constructions of “good mothering,” and it is through the process of seeing the self through other’s eyes that shame manifests itself. Whether real or not, when a mother feels as though she has transgressed the morality of motherhood in some fashion, the resulting sense of shame is experienced at the level of the self.

As noted in chapter two, guilt emanates from the sense of having done something wrong, with an emphasis on specific acts or behaviors (Tangney 1990, 2002; Baumeister et al 1994), while shame stimulates focus on the self in relation to others, or the violation of group norms, guilt leads an individual to focus on negative behavior. To be sure, guilt is also social in that it often leads one to make amends to others for transgressions (Scheff 2003). However, when one experiences guilt, the negative self evaluation is at the level of the specific act. Unlike shame where the individual calls into question the entirety of the self, with guilt, the self is stable even as the individual perceives having committed a wrongful act (Tangney 1993).

Shame and “Good Mothering.” Alison used the word guilt as she described returning home from a long day, stressed and busy and aware that she was not spending what she considered to be enough time with her children. While it is more prevalent in our culture’s vernacular to use the word guilt, Alison’s experience is more indicative of Tangney and Dearing’s (2002) description of shame:

(I) yelled at them (her children) over something that’s stupid…and I thought, that was really selfish, that was really wrong, because I put my needs and being stressed and pressured ahead of, I mean they’re just little kids…So I think issues like that definitely make me feel stressed out and just guilty, very guilty for, you know, as if I’m being selfish.

Alison’s negative appraisal did not stop with her awareness of the act or behavior in which she engaged. Her disapproval is on the level of the self. Feeling as though she
does not spend enough time with her children, she returns home with this knowledge within the busyness of her life, which she describes as “stressful.” She stated that she “had things to do,” yet instead of enacting the patient and selfless mother, she yelled at her kids. The resulting emotional experience was on the level of the entirety of her self—she must be a selfish person if she cannot handle the pressures of work and family and remain calm and loving with her children at all times. In this course of this story, Alison never justified her stress or her loss of temper on this occasion. Instead, she felt selfish for putting her needs and her stress ahead of her children. The ideology of new momism that requires total devotion of oneself leaves no room for fatigue and impatience. And when Alison felt herself acting in disaccord with the “good mother,” the result was a sense of shame.

As Alicia discussed her desire for aloneness and the conflicts those desires created in her family she said, “Sometimes I worry, am I nurturing enough? I tell them that I love them and I hug them and kiss them and that sort of thing. But, when I need to be alone, I need to be alone.” Like Alison, Alicia expressed guilt when she failed to meet the prescribed time spent with children as contained within the good mothering ideology. Her description of the emotions associated also resound as more indicative of shame than guilt as it leads her to question who she is. She is very clear in her knowledge that she is the type of person who desires a certain amount of alone time. But that knowledge of who she is conflicts with the “good mother.” It leads her to wonder whether or not she is nurturing enough to her children. This kind of negative evaluation is consistent with shame in that she goes beyond questioning the behavior, but then questions herself.

Consistent with prior research (e.g., Arndt and Goldenberg 2004; Tangney et al 1992),
indicating that heightened self-awareness increases proneness to shame, the self-focus in which these mothers engage makes them particularly vulnerable to experience shame. As Tangney and Dearing (2002) indicated (see table 2.1), the focus of evaluation with shame is on the self: “I did that horrible thing.”

**Guilt and Parenting Advice.** The emotions associated with the mothers’ inability to enact the advice given them in parenting books and magazines were less descriptive than the emotions discussed above. More often than not, a mother would note, as did Alicia, that she once read parenting materials, but presently did not because they made her “feel guilty.” The language the mothers used described the self negatively evaluated on the basis of specifics acts or behaviors. While the group discussions indicated the mothers’ general Inabilities to separate themselves from new momism, and the expectations that accompany that ideology, they did express the desire and willingness to dismiss books and magazines specifically. As Olivia spoke of her experience with parenting books, Nancy shook her head in agreement. Olivia felt as though the books often go against her “philosophy,” and create conflict in the end. Nancy agreed, “We read it and it’s another thing we haven’t done, and we feel guilty about it.” With guilt the focus of behavior remained at the behavior: “I did that horrible thing.”

New momism, as an ideology, imposes itself on these mothers in a way that impacts them at the level of the self, whereas, just as with Hays’ (1996), they experience advice materials as tasks and behaviors that could more readily be dismissed. Advice materials bring with them expectations of behavior, as does the ideological “good mother.” However, the ideology of new momism is experienced as cultural “common sense” while specific books are treated as works of particular experts in the field. A
mother can express her disagreement with an individual expert, or a specific approach to parenting much easier than she can object to cultural expectations of how a mother should be. Not following the advice of a book, or website appears to make a mother prone to guilt in that they express negative self-evaluation for not living up to the tasks as outlined in the material. However, negatively evaluating herself for not living up to the features of new momism – not performing as the ideological “good mother” at all times -- induces shame with its global devaluation of the self.

**Conclusion**

In a social-ecological model as outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1979), cultural ideologies exist at the macro-societal level. New momism (Douglas and Michaels 2004), one such ideological construct that describes contemporary expectations of good mothering contains three essential components: 1) Motherhood completes a woman, 2) Mothers are a child’s best caretaker and, 3) Physical, intellectual, emotional, and psychological devotion. The mothers in these focus groups, when asked to describe the “good mother” ideology described her in accord with these expectations. They described their desires to meet the needs of their children, give of their time, stimulate their children, remain patient, and be kind. The mothers identified the “good mother” as prescribed by contemporary standards even as they admitted they could not meet these expectations. And their failure to meet the “good mother” ideal produced, in some, the experience of shame, such that their negative evaluations were experienced at the level of the self.

The macro has the power to impinge on a mother’s life in three primary ways. First, the macro can encourage a person to make decisions that contradict the self. In the
case of these mothers, many spoke of experiences in which they did just that. While Alicia knew she required a certain amount of alone-time, the doctrine of new momism, with its emphasis on being “there” for one’s children, caused her to “feel guilty” and often neglect this aspect of herself. Shelley, a single mother, wanted to explore the option of another relationship, but decided this could not happen until her daughter was grown. Again, new momism mandates complete devotion to children and supersedes the needs of the mother.

Secondly, the macro can encourage one to make conclusions on issues to which there is little to no actual evidence. For Angela, the thought of her son crying for her stimulated numerous expressions of guilt. She imagined her infant son questioning, “Why aren’t you helping me Mommy?” if she did not respond quickly enough. In this case, there is actually ample evidence that her son will develop normally if allowed to cry momentarily. No evidence exists that, should Angela take that shower and not respond quickly enough to his cries, he will question his mother’s allegiance to him. But, the ideology in the attachment parenting ideology informs mothers that they should intuitively react to the needs of their children and hold babies more often than not. This macro-level ideology appears to trump the lack of actual evidence that children who cry momentarily while their mothers complete another task, are free from psychological damage.

Thirdly, the macro can provide a road-map for life choices and strategies. When Emily told the group, “I wasn’t supposed to be working. I’m supposed to be home with her and I really feel that way,” she was demonstrating the power of the macro to impinge on life strategies. While speaking of her life as a stay-at-home mom in terms of choice,
Emily framed it as something she was “supposed” to do. The ideological “good mother” stays home with her children, serves as their primary care-giver and only considers work outside of the home if it does not interfere with this set of priorities. Her fluctuation between “choice” and feeling trapped was evident when she continued:

But along with that comes, he works very long days and often he is out of town, so I have to take care of — and I have the house and I have bills to pay…and while I signed up for that as my job, because I’m going to stay at home, I feel like, I have a master’s degree, and I’m taking out the trash… but then I have to remember this is what I asked for and this is what I want — I want to be home and I want to be a stay-at-home mom, but it’s kind of hard to leave that former life behind.

The ideology of new momism provides, for Emily, a road-map of life choices. She speaks of accepting this road-map as an autonomous choice, not something filtered down to her by way of a particular cultural mandate to mothering. You can hear her ambiguity as she shifts from “I signed up for this,” to “I have a master’s degree,” and from “I want to be home,” to “it’s hard.” Whatever forces led her to pursue a graduate degree, at least for the time, are overwhelmed by features of new momism that require that she be her child’s caregiver and devote herself fully to her child.

Ideologies impact the construction of the self in many forms and one form in which mother’s internalize the good mothering ideology is through mothering books and magazines. Only one mother specifically said she did not read “any of those.” Otherwise, all remaining mothers spoke of their current and/or past consumption of books, magazines, the frequenting of parenting websites, and radio shows directed at parents.

From these groups, I determined that positive experiences with these materials are associated with a pre-existing agreement with the advice. If the mother already agreed
with the ideas contained in the material, then the material served to reinforce her values, or, as Meghan said, it “makes me feel calmer.” However, when the material conflicted with her mothering philosophy she either turned away from the material or expressed feelings of pressure and guilt. Hays (1996/75) said of the women in her study, “The point here is that in order for advice to serve successfully as reassurance, it must to some degree match the practices and beliefs of the advice-seeker.” The same can be said of my findings. Generally, the mothers acknowledged the guilt that would come their way as a result of reading conflicting information, and so many did not. To feel reassured, those who did read parenting manuals chose materials consistent with their mothering ideologies.

Books and magazines are not the only resources that mothers call upon in the process of childrearing. For several in these groups, another important source of information comes to them from other mothers — their own mothers, grandmothers, aunts, or other mothers in their communities. These relationships are more immediate to the individual and take this analysis from a consideration of macro-societal forces to the impact of meso-societal, or community relations. In the next chapter, I will explore these meso-level processes and their relevance to mothering, guilt and shame.
CHAPTER V
MOTHERING AT THE MESO-LEVEL

In this chapter, I further examine guilt and shame by exploring the experience of mothering at the community level. Moving from the constructions of motherhood that exist at the macro-societal level, I now explore meso-level dynamics. Having established that macro-level conceptions of motherhood impinge on a mother’s construction of self-as-mother, I next explore to what extent peer groups, neighborhoods and racial communities impact the experience of mothering and the provocation of guilt or shame. I then discuss the meso-societal context by first examining the ways in which these mothers engaged in social comparisons. Then I consider the ways in which community impacts the construction of meaning in relation to stay-at-home or working mother. Throughout this discussion, I address the ways in which racial communities intersect with gender in the social construction of motherhood.

The Meso-Context

Bronfenbrenner (1979/25) defined the mesosystem as comprising, “the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates.” As a “system of Microsystems,” the meso-context entails the interconnection of such settings as neighborhood, peer group, family and work. For the mothers in this study, the significance of meso-level factors was demonstrated in their discussion of community level experiences such as their encounters with other mothers and their constructions of worker and mother identities as filtered through perceived
definitions at the community level. The meso-context is "nested" within the macro-level ideological structures of "new momism" (Douglas and Michaels 2004). And so, while motherhood is a construct that applies across lines of race and class, social patterns at the level of community contribute to varying constructions of meaning (Fineman 1995). The struggle to live up to the expectations of the ideological "good mother" is shaped by the social conditions in which each mother lives.

LaRossa and Reitzes (1993/153) conceptualized the mesosystem as analogous to a "stream cutting through the topography of a mountainous area." While the stream is produced by the topography, the topography is also affected by the life of the stream. In this way, the meso-context exists in this intermediate locale between the structure of the macrosystem, and the process of the microsystem. As discussed in chapter four, the ideological "good mother" exists at the macro-level and impinges itself on mothers in a variety of ways, impacting the decisions she makes, and the life choices she perceives. The "stream" that is the meso-context is the community in which she lives. Macro-level forces influence communities yet at the same time, communities help to shape the macro. According to the social ecological model (Bronfenbrenner1996), it is in this mesosystem that a person connects within social networks, and encounters and interprets the dominate symbols, beliefs and expectations. To explore the meso-system allows for a more thorough consideration of the impact of social networks on constructions of mothering and subsequently on the experience of guilt and shame.

The mesosystem shapes a person's life in three distinct ways. First, it affects the lives of individuals through social comparison. According to Festinger (1954), in order to evaluate the self, individuals make social comparisons to assess their abilities and
competencies. One motivation for social comparison is self-evaluation, which typically involves comparisons with similar others. In the act of comparison, the social category to which one belongs provides a set of defining characteristics and these attributes afford the individual with the material for defining the self (Hogg, Terry and White 1995; Sheeran, Abrams and Orbell 1995). Membership in a particular group provides a basis for behavior (i.e., how to act and feel). Membership in racial and ethnic communities provide a significant context for mothers as they negotiate their day-to-day experiences of mothering within the framework of the larger, cultural domain (Collins 1994). It is to members of one’s community that mothers look in the process of self-evaluation, as it is the mesosystem that provides the context whereby social comparisons occur.

A second way that the meso shapes the lives of individuals is through the enactment of identity. As salience for a specific social identity increases, so too does conduct that is “in-group stereotypical and normative” (Hogg et al 1995/260). Members of social groups will evaluate their behaviors in the process of maintaining their sense of self as a member of a particular social category. Mothers have long looked to other mothers not only for help in childrearing but for the norms of motherhood (Chase and Rogers 2001). The community of mothers looks to other mothers to enact mother-identity, tailoring their behaviors according to stereotypic, normative conduct. At the same time, racial and ethnic communities provide a meaningful setting that intersects with the norms of motherhood. For example, African-American mothers are not only drawing from the dominant western models of motherhood, but also from long-standing traditions specific to the black community (Hill and Sprague 1999; Collins 1994).
Third, the meso shapes the lives of individuals through specific performances of the self such as mastery/sense of control. While studies of mastery tend to focus on structural explanations for low and high levels of control such as gender, work autonomy and earnings (Cassidy and Davis 2003), communities both define and organize structure. The degree to which a mother feels in control of her life occurs in the context of community. The community of mothers in this dissertation has a set of characteristics that locate them in the middle class. That is, they have the advantages of income and education that suggest they will have higher levels of mastery than, for example, women in the lower social classes for whom these structural conditions do not exist. While mastery is explained structurally, it is a social-psychological concept that is fed through community relations with others (Colletta and Lee 1933). Whether a mother resists or conforms to contemporary mandates of “good mothering” might be affected by the degree to which she feels in control of her life.

**Compared to Other Mothers**

To direct the conversation to the meso-level, I asked participants to consider others in their communities; mothers in their neighborhoods, or mothers they encountered at their child’s school, or at the park. I asked whether they thought other mothers worried about being a “good mother.” I asked, “Do you ever find that you compare yourself to other mothers? If you have compared yourself to others, how do you then feel about yourself?”

There was a general consensus among the groups that all or most mothers, at some point, engaged in some kind of comparison to others. When asked if they thought other mothers worried about the conception of “good mother,” Angela, in a group
consisting of white mothers, responded, “Yeah, I think everybody does.” Nicole voiced immediate agreement with Angela and said, nodding, “Every mother, I think, does.” The response of these two was so immediate and sure I asked them from where they thought this tendency came. Nicole elaborated,

I think the majority of mothers try to be good mothers. And they look to each other to try and find ideas and look to each other and decide what not to do. I mean, there’s people I see in the grocery store — I form opinions pretty quickly — but since I had my second one… I eased up on my strong opinions on parenting a lot.

Clair picked up on Nicole’s thought adding that when she had one child she was “such a different mother, now I have three… with one you had them perfectly, impeccable clean. With three, you’re getting what you get.” In this interaction, the agreement that most or all mothers had some knowledge of the performance of “good mothering,” led to the disclosure that mothers’ indeed looked to one another, and not just in friendship or family circles, but in community settings such as grocery stores, for evidence of rights and wrongs. However, Clair and Nicole were also quick to say that their sense of judgment of others, and their sense of concern as to how others might judge them lessened after their second child. Clair told the group, “I can’t be perfect anymore. It’s too hard.”

While Clair was dismissive of how others’ judged her mothering at this stage in the dialogue, a few moments later, she returned to it. She acknowledged with a bit of humor and reluctance that when she entered a friend’s home, and if it were clean, she would begin to question herself. “There are days when I will work from morning ‘til night practically, cleaning my house.” She found that she could never quite keep her house clean, and wondered how her friend could possibly do it. She concluded, “What’s falling by the wayside - and it usually comes to they’re not doing more with their kids.”
Her friend, like Clair, worked outside of the home but worked more hours than did Clair. She reasoned that her friend’s ability to keep an orderly home must be at the expense of “quality time” with her children. I asked Clair how all of this made her feel. “There, I feel like a failure.”

Initially Clair was able to rationalize her friend’s orderly home by concluding that her friend surely took that valuable time away from her children. Her friend’s clean home came at the expense of the children, whom Clair described as “pretty wild.” But even this reasoning was not enough to buffer Clair from the experience of shame that she expressed when she described feeling like a “failure” as a result of her inability to keep an orderly house in the midst of three small children. Implicit in new momism (Douglas and Michaels 2004) and intensive mothering (Hays 1996) is the understanding that the presentation of neat and orderly children is a reflection of a good mother. For Clair this thinking extends to the value she places on a clean and orderly home and the sense that anything less is an indication that she has failed on some level of “good mothering.” It is through this meso-level process of social comparison that Clair experiences negative self-appraisal as she holds herself to standards she sees in her community. And the result is an expression of shame. In order to bring about stability, she explains that while her house is not as orderly, she is spending increased time with her children.

Other responses to the question of comparison also indicated that the tendency to compare lessened over time and with the addition of more children. In the group of African-American mothers, Patricia stated that, “In the beginning, I thought I just had it all, you know and I would compare and I just thought that, oh I know what I’m doing…But now this late in the game, there’s no comparison really.” She went on to tell
how, as she had more children (eventually two and one step-child), she simply did not compare herself with other mothers because each child possessed a distinct personality and comparing to others provided her with no useful information. Joyce seconded Patricia’s comments by saying, “I wouldn’t compare myself to anyone. Except my Mom – at first….” The group then fell into agreement that they had never given the idea of comparison to others much thought and a moment of silence followed.

However, a moment later Anita spoke up adding,

Okay, I compare myself to these ladies (motioning to two friends in the room) all the time. She stays up until 3:00 in the morning making homemade cinnamon rolls for her daughter’s birthday to bring them to school…And then I go buy cupcakes and take them in (laughter from group). And then, I guess, you know I don’t know if this has anything to do with mothering but I compare, with my two friends here like, to make things, and so I think, that’s so sweet, they make things for their kids to wear, stuff like that. So I compare myself in that kind of way. Like, man, I don’t even bake anything.

When I asked Anita how that comparison made her feel about herself as a mother she answered, “I’m proud of them…It does make me feel bad, but it makes me think sometimes, wow, they’re the really good moms.” Even as Anita joked with the group about her friends’ baking, she added that these kind of touches made them the “good moms.” “Good moms” bake fresh cookies and sew for their children (Warner 2005; Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996; Villani 1997). And while Anita kept her tone light and playful, she acknowledged that it made her “feel bad” to compare herself to her friends and feel as though she came up short in terms of “good mothering.”

At this moment in the focus group, Patricia, who had just spoken of how she no longer compared herself to other mothers, began to reflect on Anita’s words by returning
to the very different personalities of each of her children and how, at home, they may be 
at “peace,” or “at war” with one another.” But:

You take them somewhere and I see people who have more children than me, and 
everybody seems to be like little soldiers, marching in a row, doing what they’re 
supposed to do, and I’m like, how do they do that…and I compare myself and I 
say, maybe I’m not doing something right…

Patricia went on to describe this experience, in particular, in the environment of her 
church when people with more children than she, seem better capable of controlling their 
children’s behavior. Unlike Anita, who compared her “good mothering” to her friends’, 
Patricia did so in the environment of her church. But, like Anita the result was that she 
ended up negatively reflecting on herself, specifically questioning what she might be 
doing wrong as a mother.

Debra picked up on Patricia’s story by describing her experience observing other 
mothers. Debra felt that other mothers seemed more capable of maintaining orderly 
children, “Because you see other kids, and they walk toward you and they’re like holding 
Mama’s hand…mine, I’m running after him…” Like Patricia, Debra wondered what she 
was doing wrong. The cost of social comparison is doubt in her ability to mother 
effectively. She went on to say,

And I compare myself and I say, maybe I’m not doing something right, because 
they can get this behavior out of their kids…I compare myself, especially to the 
people at church…I’m just, what am I doing, what am I doing wrong? Like, what 
can I do different? What could be better? What could you do more?

Like the mothers in Collett’s (2005) study, these women chose for their reference 
group women they encountered socially. Whether friends, mothers at church or in 
neighborhood grocery stores, the act of comparison occurred at the meso-level. While a 
few of the mothers claimed to engage in comparison less as they had more children, all of
them spoke of some experience with it. New momism, while it is imposed on mothers at the macro-level, is reinforced at the meso-level through this process of social comparison.

As Chase and Rogers (2001) noted, mothers look to other mothers for the norms of motherhood. Here we see these mothers looking to the community for in-group, stereotypic behaviors, which in this case would allow for the enactment of identification as the “good mother.” Their identities as “good” or “bad” moms are affected by how they sense they compare to others. Interestingly, several of the mothers wanted to dismiss their participation in social comparison and might be hesitant to admit the extent to which meso-level relations impact their identities as mothers. However, the group interactions indicate that, however hesitant, mothers are familiar with the tendency to compare and gauge one’s goodness of mothering against others. And, oftentimes the result is a negative self-appraisal more indicative of shame, compared with guilt and a focus on behavior.

**Competition.** Questions concerning the prevalence of social comparison often led to a discussion of the competitive nature of mothering, usually involving other mothers. In the focus groups, I found the mothers to be tremendously supportive of one another. If a mother began to talk negatively about herself, the others would rally around her, offering support. For instance, Tina once stated that, “Good mothers stayed married.” Sarah quickly responded to Tina by reassuring her that good mothers did not stay married to abusive men, but rather knew when to leave to protect the child (Tina had revealed these details earlier). I found, then, that in the groups, mothers tend very much to want to help one another and offer encouragement. However, when discussing mothers in the
community, the tone often shifted, either towards disapproval of another, or feeling judged by others.

Some of the mothers described the competition they sensed in others. Angela described a friend, whom she enjoyed, however:

She always just wants to outdo me...every time I talk to her I get so annoyed because she is like, “well, how is Cory doing? My baby’s doing this, is he doing that?” It’s like a constant comparison, like rivalry.

Nicole understood and added, “I see a lot of competition and rivalry.” Alison, in another group, sensed competition from her sister, but added, “It’s not just my sister. I’ve heard other moms do that. Like, okay, I have two kids. Well, I have four kids.”

In light of the demands of “new momism,” it is little wonder that a central issue of identity for women involves being perceived by others as a “good mother” (Collett 2005). It is through interaction that this identity would arise and, at least according to these mothers, this often involves a sense of competition. Mothers are often seen as responsible for the outcomes of their children (Phoenix and Woolett 1991), and thus might engage in competition with one another in order to assure their community standing as “good mothers.”

Some of the discussions regarding competition revealed how these mothers felt evaluated by others. Tina described moving to a new neighborhood so that her son could attend the school of her choice:

It seemed like all of these women were right out of the 1950’s...I’m terrified of these women. They bother me. Why do they challenge? There’s something very Stepfordy about a lot of the mothers at this school...they are very judgmental...

Tina went on to describe her experiences as both a single mother in a community of mostly married mothers, and also a working mother, in a community with a large
number of stay-at-home moms heavily active in the Parent/Teacher Association (PTA). Meghan told Tina that, individually, many of these people were very nice but, "it's when they get into a group they do it." She said that she, like Tina, felt herself to be a good mother, but when she visited the school, (the same school to which Tina referred) "I'm like, oh, all the good moms are here. They walk their kids to school. They go to PTA meetings, make homemade bread with homemade jams..." Sarah, whose children attend the same public school joked, "I've never been to a PTA meeting, so I'm a really bad mom."

For Tina, this air of perceived competition produced in her feelings of anxiety and doubt. She described how she:

perfected this art of dropping my son off next to the door where he goes in at 8:22 every morning because there's this cluster of mommies outside the door before the bell rings and I go and I have nightmares about girls from Junior High.

While Tina made this comment in jest, her dialogue on this topic was filled with emotion. She expressed her sense that others judged her both on the basis of her non-married status, and also as a full-time, working mother.

**Racial Distinctions.** Collett (2005) found that "good mother" identities are enacted when mothers place importance on well-groomed children. The mothers in her study managed the appearance of their children's dress as one way of demonstrating to others that they were good and capable mothers, with concern for their children. Having conducted this research through an on-line chat room, Collett does not indicate the racial demographics of her study. While she found similarities across social class, we are left to wonder whether African-American and white mothers perform this kind of impression management (Goffman 1959) similarly.
I found, in the stories of two women, interesting racial variations in attitudes towards children’s dress and the perceived appraisal of others. As Samantha described above, she often encountered what she considered to be harsh judgments from others on the basis of how she and her children dressed. Samantha, a white woman, practices many aspects of mothering that are considered “alternative,” and even observes several key tenets of attachment parenting. She is an advocate of “natural” mothering, extended breastfeeding, and homeschooled her oldest child. On this day, she wore her hair long and her clothes resembled those of the counter-cultural era – flowing, colorful skirt and loose fitting top. Her children, who were with her on this occasion, wore nothing others might consider unusual, but also did not appear in labeled, designer clothing. Her view is that children are free to express themselves in how they dress, and she places no value on displays of name-brand clothing. She told the story of taking her younger child to preschool on the first day:

I noticed that most of the kids were dressed very, very nicely, you know, first day of pre-school clothes. My daughter dressed herself – you don’t even want to imagine what she put on…it’s not worth the battle – you want to wear that? Swimsuit and tights? Whatever…and you know, I dress the way I dress, where a lot of the moms came looking very cute…and I actually noticed that not one of the moms came up and talked to me.

Samantha went on to describe how she framed these experiences for herself, but also how she presented it to her children. Her attitude, she said, was, “who cares if she’s in a swimsuit. I mean, she’s clothed, that’s all I ask.” She understands that her family is “different” in how they dress and how they present themselves. I asked her how these experiences impacted her specifically as a mother and she responded:

I think it’s a good thing. I mean, I figure I’d just kinda show my kids – because whenever they ask about somebody, like why somebody has this, what do we
say? And they say, ‘because we’re different.’ And that’s kind of what I’m teaching them. My son is growing his hair out long....everyone’s calling him a girl...but you know, I just think it’s really validating, actually. Say, ‘people are different.’ It’s all good.

Samantha’s ability to dismiss the negative evaluation she perceives from others and her capacity to encourage her son to explore his difference is provided by her membership in two social categories: the community of alternative parenting, and her race. The two are related as proponents of “natural mothering” tend mostly to be white (Bobel 2002). Samantha is making a political statement in her rejection of “traditional” parenting by her decisions, disavowing the need to present herself or her children in a certain fashion. She is aware that she is “breaking the rules” of her immediate social world but she does so with the knowledge that, not only will her children survive, they will prosper.

Contrast this experience to Alicia’s, an African-American mother in another group. Alicia told the story of raising kids in the spirit of “difference,” but from the perspective of an African-American mother. As a mother of African-American sons she said:

But I’m in a special place where my kids are concerned, particularly my boys because I have to prepare them for a society that’s very hostile to their just being there and being who they are. So, I have to kind of parent in a different way than lots of mothers because there’s lots of—you have to earn your way, you have to do twice as much to be thought of as half as good or even a fourth as good...Like ‘you have to put a belt on, you can’t wear your pants sagging around your ankles.’ You know, stuff like that because, you’re already at a disadvantage, don’t make it worse for yourself.’

While Samantha encouraged her son to be different, calling it “validating,” for Alicia there exists an element of cost. Alicia, not protected by the white privilege (Collins 1990) afforded to Samantha, sees her sons’ funneled into life circumstances that
she can not change. For her children, their minority status as black males is fixed and cannot be changed. She feels she can help them by discouraging “difference,” at the least the kind of difference that connotes further disadvantage for a black male. Samantha’s son might be socially rejected, but not to the extent that she fears for his safety or his life. Already at a disadvantage, Alicia feels she must protect her boys from further societal hostility. “And they hate it when I say that,” she added, also hoping that, as they grew older they would understand her motivations.

African-American mothers, as Collins (1992) has pointed out, face a variety oppositions not considered in much of the white, feminist analyses on motherhood. Collins noted, “The pain of knowing what lies ahead for Black children while feeling powerless to protect them is another problematic dimension of Black mothering (236).” Collins’ work included a letter from an African-American mother at the turn of the last century who wrote, “It does not matter how good or wise my children may be, they are colored (237).” A hundred years later Alicia spoke of the same dynamic – the knowledge that her kids have to be “twice as bright.” And, unlike Samantha, who spoke with humor and disregard for the stares she and children received from others, Alicia could not so easily afford her kids the freedom to dress any way they pleased. “Unfortunately,” she said, “we’ve got to teach our kids that way – we live in a time where it still matters.”

Labor Force Participation

Racial distinctions continued to be apparent as the mothers discussed issues surrounding work at home and in the labor force. Many of the mothers, both white and African-American spoke of guilt in the context of working outside of the home. Guilt in relation to work outside of the home is not surprising, according to Hays (1998). In
considering the Parental Investment in the Child Questionnaire (PIC), an instrument widely used to ascertain parent-child attachment, Hays noted that the structure of the measure assumes a certain appropriateness with regard to guilt and work. For example, to indicate investment in one’s child is to answer that one’s child is “never completely comfortable” in anyone else’s care save their mother. As Hays noted, the implication is that a good mother should feel guilty leaving her children when she heads off to work. Separation anxiety is a correlate for good mothering (787).

Polatnick (1996) explored the language of two 1960’s radical women’s group concerning their views of motherhood. One group was made up of white, mostly middle class women, while the other consisted of African-American women, mostly from the working and lower class. Polatnick found a contrast between these two groups regarding ideologies surrounding motherhood. The black mothers placed great importance on the value of the mother role, while the white mothers tended to view motherhood as isolating, and resulting in sacrificed possibilities. While the African-American group confronted the social and political burdens facing women at this time, they did not necessarily attribute the problem to motherhood. For the white mothers, on the other hand, becoming a mother meant “domestic confinement, economic dependence, and therefore powerlessness” (697).

During this period of the late 1960’s and 1970’s, feminist were vocal in their rejection of motherhood as the primary identity of women (Chase and Roger 2001). These were, of course, white feminists for the most part. Bernard’s (1974) The Future of Motherhood, and Adrianne Rich’s (1976) Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, were both widely read, and highly critical of the Western tradition of
motherhood that required suppression of women. Not to suggest that African-American women were not part of the feminist movement of this period, but as Collins (1992) pointed out, this classic feminist work on motherhood was grounded in the white, middle class world. While white feminists have sought to shun the image of motherhood as self-sacrificing, African-American women can draw upon the image of mother as a symbol of power (Collins 1994).

With this historical perspective as a framework, I consider the discussions that occurred in these focus groups surrounding the statues of working mom versus stay-at-home mom. Whether it was due to the time work took them away from their families, or the rushed nature of their lives, there was a general consensus that employment and motherhood were difficult to juggle, and they often felt guilty as a result. Racial variations were evident as the women discussed the guilt surrounding labor force participation combined with features of “new momism.” Their experiences and struggles with these two statues emerged from their interactions in the meso-context.

The “Mommy Wars.”

Several of the white mothers spoke of their awareness of the conflict that women experience in terms of their decision to stay at home or leave the home for employment. Emily, a stay-at-home mother, discussed her conflicted feelings regarding her decision to leave the work force: “But that pressure is out there. If you’re a stay-at-home mom, and do things a certain way. There’s pressure if you’re a full-time out of the house working mom. You just have to go with what works for you.” Samantha agreed with Emily, adding, “I suppose there’s a competition. I don’t know if that’s the right word. Between working moms and stay at home moms. There’s a certain separateness…” In another
group, Sarah commented on the bind mothers’ find themselves in regarding these “choices”: “mothers should be working...using their degrees...stay at home moms are less valued, but if a mother is working...it is self-indulgent for a mother to work when she doesn’t have to...”

These comments capture what the literature and the popular media refer to as the “mommy wars,” – the battle supposedly raging between working and stay-at-home moms. Some have argued that this rhetoric of “war” between mothers was birthed by images in the media (Johnston and Swanson 2004). Others go further, claiming that the “war” is in fact largely fabricated, existing more so in the media than in the real lives of mothers (Gandy 2006). Douglas and Michaels (2004) give credit to Nina Darnton of Newsweek magazine for dubbing the “mommy wars” phrase in 1990. As the authors noted, the media of the 1980’s and 1990’s was saturated with images of careerist moms who had decided the “supremom” lifestyle was simply too frenetic, and their children too neglected. In turn, they returned to domesticity. The rigors of new momism glorified the stay-at-home mom, stereotyping her homemaking and motherhood as much as the working mom was stereotyped as selfishly in pursuit of her own goals at the expense of her children. The “catfight storyline,” as Douglas and Michaels (235) called it, became a media phenomenon with polar images of “good” and “bad” mothers chiding one another. In truth, most mothers, working or at-home, tend to be sympathetic to one another, not waging war on the other camp.

In late February of 2006, ABC’s Good Morning America broadcast a series entitled “The Mommy Wars.” This series, hosted by reporter Diane Sawyer, prompted a response by Kim Gandy, President of the National Organization for Women (NOW). In

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her letter to ABC, and Ms. Sawyer, Gandy accused the piece of promoting a false war between employed and stay-at-home mothers. Gandy’s letter pointed out how the media was largely responsible for creating this false conflict, particularly by ignoring a large segment of mothers such as those who must work to feed and clothe their families. Gandy argued for more appropriate reporting on the struggles of mothering, specifically family leave, childcare dilemmas, health benefits and men’s roles in parenting. The notion that women are at war with one another concerning their “choices” to work outside the home or not, Gandy said, is “bogus” (Gandy 2006).

If there is a “war,” it appears to be brewing in the white, middle class. The idea that mothers can “choose” to stay home or work is clearly a privilege not afforded to most women. Media depictions of mothers and the issue of employment versus new momism have tended to remain fixed on a white model. Douglas and Michaels (2004) exposed the television and film images of triumphant new momism. These included “thirtysomething,” “Parenthood,” “Babyboom,” and a barrage of celebrity moms, from Cindy Crawford to Kathie Lee Gifford, who touted motherhood as more important than career (without recognition of the perks of wealth). With the rare exception of Clair Huxtable on “The Cosby Show,” who somehow managed to work and fulfill new momism, the images were of white mothers. In fact, in all aspects of media representation, at-home moms tend to be represented as white far more so than African-American (Johnston and Swanson 2003a). Even those television shows that took specific aim at debunking the idealization of motherhood such as, “Rosanne,” “Married with Children,” and “The Simpsons,” depicted white families. There does not appear to be
much evidence, at least in popular culture, that African-American mothers were engaged in the "mommy wars."

While popular culture produces images of this polarization of mothers, it is at the meso-level of community that the meanings and experiences of working and stay-at-home mothering is lived. Many of the white mothers in these focus groups seemed to be acutely aware of the rhetoric concerning this "war." Recognition of it occurred when they reflected on themselves in comparison to their community – in this case, to other mothers.

Samantha, an artist by trade, is able to work out of her home studio, also allowing her to be at home with her children during the day. After noting that she sensed a certain "separateness" between working and stay-at-home moms she said:

Someone said to me a while back, people like Gloria Steinem fought so that you can work, and a lot of people like that fought so I can have a choice...But I notice that if you say you’re a stay-at-home mom, certain other moms say that – some moms feel it’s wrong to stay home, because people worked for women’s rights – they fought so we could do this. We’ve got a choice now. It’s cool!

While the above account suggests that Samantha is comfortable with her family arrangement, she still speaks of her awareness, or at least her sense that "certain" other mothers in her community disapprove of stay-at-home mothers. Her impression is that women owe it to the feminists who have gone before them (such as Gloria Steinem) to work outside the home. On the other hand, Samantha feels that the feminist movement provided her with a choice, which she celebrates. In this "war," working mothers are cast as heroines for breaking free of the "Feminine Mystique," while at the same time they are victims in a system that does not provide structural support for balancing work and family. Stay-at-home moms are casts as "throwbacks" to another era while at the same
time as the "good mothers" who put their children's needs first. Working moms are selfish, while stay-at-home moms are bad feminists. Samantha appears familiar with the language of the "mommy wars" and embraces her situation as one of personal choice also allotted to her by feminism.

Julie, in another group commented on her frustration as a "working mother" participating in the La Leche League, a group made up of mostly stay-at-home moms. Speaking as an employed, single mother Julie said, "So, you know, I guess I would say I try not to compare, but I guess I'm not there, because if you're anything other than a stay-at-home, married, heterosexual mom, then you're somehow inadequate..." Julie refers also to what Johnston and Swanson (2003b) called the "double bind message," whereby women are presented with ideological images of motherhood and then condemned for attempting to achieve it. In Julie's case, while she strives to achieve "new momism" through her commitment to natural mothering, she falls short of the ideal due to her other statues. She experiences the repercussions of this bind when in the company of other mothers who, at least to Julie, have seemingly met this ideal.

**Race and the "Mommy Wars."** The "mommy wars" rhetoric, according to a February 2006 article in the New York Times, is reserved for white mothers, and simply does not speak to experiences in the African-American community (Clemetson 2006). Clemetson spoke with African-American mothers gathered together to discuss Lonnae O'Neal Parker's (2005) book that confronts issues of mothering — from the perspective of an African-American mother. The article concluded that this "tension" between working and stay-at-home mothers exists largely in the white, middle class.
Parker began her book by acknowledging the lack of representation that black mothers receive in the media and in popular culture. She also noted the irony of leaving black mothers out of work and family dialogue, since the majority of black mothers have been working outside of the home for well over a hundred years. Parker said that kind of “insularity…helps explain why I didn’t realize there existed a culture of guilt in motherhood or that some women felt they had to choose between work and family…” (xvi). The “mommy wars,” Parker asserted, does not register in the African-American community where women have essentially always worked outside of the home and “balanced” it with family.

Over the past several decades, it has been mostly white women who have struggled with various identities and constructions of motherhood (Polatnick 1996; Blum and Vandewater 1993). As Polatnick found with African-American and white feminist groups in the late 1960’s, white women tended to view motherhood as limiting and isolating, while black women held the mother role in higher regard. For the African-American community, mothering has traditionally be less isolating, with mother relying on kin networks and shared mothering more so than white communities (Blum and Deussen 1996; Collins 1994). These various struggles were apparent in these focus groups as several of the white stay-at-home mothers spoke of their decisions to stay at home with their children with a great deal of ambiguity. Many times when discussing the stay-at-home status they seemed to feel the need to qualify it with evidence that they were capable of more. Emily, a white mother who holds a Master’s degree, and is now home with her infant said:
The reason I’m staying at home for our children as long as I want is because he’s out making the money. But in my grand plan, I never thought I’d be a stay-at-home mom. I worked hard to get a Bachelor’s and I got a Master’s and I have this grand plan to be a working mom. And that’s something that I find myself—a 1950’s typical take care of the house and the kids and he goes off to work and “how are you dear,” and “dinner’s on the table,” and not at all where I was going to be. But I’m here, through the grace of God, really. I wasn’t supposed to be working, I’m supposed to be at home with her and I really feel that way.

While Emily spoke highly of her decision to leave the work force and be home with her child, her story reflects ambiguity and a sense of struggle. She went on to later say, “But then I have to remember, this is what I asked for and this is what I want. I want to be at home and I want to be a stay at home mom, but it’s hard to leave that former life behind.” Like the language Polatnick (1996) unpacked, spoken over thirty years ago, Emily acknowledges her “choice” in staying home, but also the limiting quality to the lifestyle. She made it clear to the group that she had an advanced degree, and that she was certainly capable of more than housewifery.

Other white mothers, who were not employed outside of the home, spoke with a degree of apology for their status as stay-at-home mom. Angela said, “I’m stay-at-home. But I would work it if I could find the right part-time job…” Jennifer, the only stay-at-home mom in one group said, “I worked full-time until I had – the doctor made me quit when I was pregnant with my fourth.” This tone of apology reflects the predominately white, middle class revolution against the institution of motherhood (Chase and Rogers 2001). White feminist ideologies of motherhood had been informing women to largely reject the doctrine of the separate spheres which kept women out of the workplace. In a community of like-minded white women, these mothers were reassuring their place in
feminism by making known they were kept from the workplace by forces beyond their control, or at least capable of working outside of the home.

While Emily and other white mothers in these groups spoke of the "mommy wars" and with a tone of apology for their stay-at-home status, neither of these dynamics were present with African-American mothers. Debra spoke of her decision to leave the work force after a long period of guilt:

I couldn't get past the guilt of not being home with them. Even though my mom wasn't home with me, and that wasn't the way I grew up, I couldn't get past that...And then I quit work and I felt like a huge weight was lifted off of me. And I started to do some of the things that I thought a mom should do. I love the baking, I love teaching my kids things, and spending quality time with them.

Similarly, Patricia left her job when the pressures of work and family became too intense for her. Also speaking without a tone of apology for the stay-at-home mom identity, she told the group, "I worked. I didn't care for that working thing." She and the group laughed at this comment. Patricia continued, "I mean, I was raised an only child, and my mother was at home. When I got home, I could smell the food once I hit the garage door, going through the kitchen. I like that." Unlike Emily, the white mother who specifically struggled specifically with the image "food on the table," Patricia spoke of it with a sense of relief, glad that she could now do this for her family.

For Debra and Patricia, the stay-at-home mom status did not appear to carry with it the same meanings it did for some of the white women, and thus they did not place qualifiers on it. No mention was made to their decision in the context of feminism (as with Samantha), nor did they feel they needed to remove themselves from the image of the stay-at-home mom (as did Emily). Consistent with Parker's (2005) argument, the
“mommy wars” simply does not resonate in the communities of these African-American mothers in the same way it does in the white community of mothers.

If the meaning of stay-at-home mom varies for white and African-American mothers, we can then look to meso-level community interactions for the enactment of these identities. According to Johnston and Swanson (2004a), mothers tend to look to their social networks for social support. Similarly, Hogg et al (1995) argued that people look to their own networks and communities for behavioral guidelines and expectations. For these mothers, the meanings surrounding the stay-at-home status are reinforced at the community level. In considering the value one’s racial group places on the mother who stays home, versus the mother who is employed, we are able to further understand the ways in which guilt and shame are experienced in relationship to labor force participation. Further models that are communicated at the community level make this more clear.

The “June Cleaver” Model. Unlike some of the white mothers who, in the group interaction, wanted to distance themselves from the “typical 1950’s mom” who baked and stayed home, African-American mothers not only did not mention this 1950’s model, but also showed no conflict when describing themselves in this way. The same level of comparisons did not happen as the African-American women reflected on their status as stay-at-home mother. The “June Cleaver” mom that several of the white mothers referred to did not resonate with the African-American mothers. Clearly, this “1950’s mom” is a white model to which the African-American mothers felt no relationship. Indeed, the archetypal, 1950’s housewife that was June Clever not only did not represent the African-American family, neither did it adequately capture the realities of the dominate white
family of the era (Coontz 1992; Douglas and Michaels 2004). As bell hooks (2001/34) said in relation to “Leave it to Beaver” and other 1950’s family sit-coms, “Often we measured our black families by these shows and found them wanting.” Nonetheless, the June Cleaver model worked well for the white mothers in these groups when making a point regarding the idealistic, 1950’s mother.

Several of the white mothers made mention of June Cleaver in jest, using this image as the prototype for the non-feminist, oppressed stay-at-home mom. Recall Emily’s comment, “And that’s something I find myself – a 1950’s typical take care of the house and the kids and he goes off to work, and ‘how are you dear,’ and ‘dinner’s on the table,’ and not at all where I imagined I was going to be.” When Tina spoke of her frustrations as a working mom in a community of stay-at-home moms, she said, “but it seemed like all of these mothers are right out of the 1950’s.” However, when Debra, an African-American mother spoke of staying at home with her children she said, “I love the baking, I love teaching my kids, my girls, things and spending quality time with them.” Patricia agreed, “I really like being at home taking care of my children.” Debra and Patricia, without specific mention, allude to the June Cleaver model that meets her kids after school with baked goods. But instead of apologizing, they speak with an air of relief and power. Relief that they were able to leave their jobs and stay home, and power in their role in the lives of their children.

The “typical 1950’s, June Cleaver” model of the stay-at-home mother is a white model. While the white mothers in these groups often felt the need to separate from this image, for African-American mothers, this did not appear to be an issue. All of these mothers are looking to their communities in the process of defining various aspects of
motherhood, and the meanings of stay-at-home mother do not necessarily look the same for white women as they do for African-American women. Relations at the meso-level have the power to shape these definitions, and thus the enactment of the identity of stay-at-home mom. As Collins (1994/45) noted, “motherhood cannot be analyzed in isolation from its context.” Most African-American women grew up in homes where they saw their mothers work, as opposed to many white women who grew up at a time when their mothers either stayed at home or were beginning to leave the home to enter the workforce. And, as bell hooks (1989) pointed out, for black women of the Betty Friedan era, paid work was often drudgery and alienating – and work in the home would have been thought of as far more satisfying. Thus, we find meanings shaped by the context of community, and community impinging on the enactment of identity as mother.

Guilt or Shame?

According to Tangney and Dearing (2002), there are key dimensions on which guilt and shame differ (see model 2.1). Again, with shame, the focus of the evaluation is at the level of the self. With shame, there is a tendency towards concern with the evaluation of others, “mentally undoing of the some aspect of the self,” and a desire to hide or escape. Conversely, with guilt, the focus of the evaluation is at the level of the specific behavior. The experience of guilt will illicit “concern with one’s effect on others,” “mentally undoing of some aspect of behavior,” and the desire to apologize or repair one’s actions. With this framework in mind, the language that permeated discussions of mothering in the context of community at times resonated with shame (specifically as they spoke of social comparisons and attempts to maintain good
mothering). More often, for white and African-American mothers, their language stayed at the level of behavior, suggesting the experience of guilt.

In discussing meso-level interactions and experiences, the focus tended to remain at the level of specific behavior. For example, Olivia, a white mother, discussed her experiences encountering differing parenting choices from others in her community. She told the group that she found it “frustrating” to “hear a mom talk” and then find herself questioning her parenting. She said, “I’m thinking, should I be doing this that way? Should we be trying that new thing? Is that something we should do?” Compare Olivia’s comment to the ones made by Debra, an African-American mother in another group: “I’m just - what am I doing, what am I doing wrong? Like, what can I do different? What could be better? What could you do more?” While they begins their sentences with an emphasis on self (should I be doing this), their evaluations appear to concentrate more on the behavior (should I be doing this) than on the self. Again consistent with Tangney and Dearing’s (2002) distinctions, the experience of guilt motivates them to apologize, confess and repair as opposed to hide or escape.

While Meghan, also white, compared herself to other mothers on the basis of the performance of new momism, her tone also remained at the level of behavior. Recall that in her discussion involving the dynamics of hyper-involved mothers at her children’s school she said, “…but I go up there and I’m like, oh all the good moms are here. They walk their kids to school. They go to PTA meetings, homemade bread and jams…” She told the group that she thought she was a “good mom” but this process of comparison, like with Olivia, resulted in a concern for her behavior more so than a global devaluation of the self. To compare to others brought about concern as to whether she was practicing
“good mothering,” but the focus remained on the tasks more so than on her operation of self.

In the group of African-American mothers, the language of guilt in relation to community was also evident. When Patricia told of watching other’s children march “like little soldiers,” she followed with “maybe I’m not doing something right.” The desire to repair (Tangney and Dearing 2002) comes across in Patricia’s discourse as she questioned what she might do in order to instill this kind of behavior in her children. In this example, as with the others, the self appears intact. With the exception of Clair, who described her feelings of “failure” as a result of comparing the state of her home to that of a friend’s, the others’ tone stayed at the level of tasks and behavior. Rather than the shirking feelings of worthlessness associated with shame, the experiences are ones of regret, desire to confess, and desire to repair – all key dimensions of guilt.

Guilt, Shame, Race and Stay-at-Home Moms

Qualitative research has demonstrated that mothers tend to associate employment as oppositional to good mothering (see Duncan 2005; Coontz 1992). In this study, both white and African-American mothers spoke of guilt in relation to mothering and labor force work. However, leaving the work force provided more relief from the guilt for African-American mothers than it did for white mothers who felt compelled to deny the stay-at-home model, even if they spoke so vehemently of “choosing” it. The white mothers’ tendencies to distance themselves from the stay-at-home mom identity served as a block to the relief of not leaving their children for the work place. The perceived relationship between stay-at-home mothering and the 1950’s June Cleaver model prevented the white mothers from embracing the “baking,” and “being at home with my
kids” spoken so highly of by several of the African-American mothers. These racial
distinctions were reminiscent of Polatnick’s (1996) findings that white women were more
inclined to see mothering as limiting to their wider potentials, while African-American
women were more inclined to embrace the mothering role without such concerns.

What this meso-level analysis has offered is the opportunity to consider how
meanings are constructed and reinforced at the community level, and how those
meanings shape guilt and shame. While all of these mothers adhere to the “good mother”
ideology and struggle with guilt and shame, it appears that the meanings placed on stay-
at-home differ according to racial communities. Consistent with Glenn’s (1992)
framework, I am not suggesting a dualist nature between African-American and white
mothers’ meanings regarding various identities. What I am exploring is the relational
quality of gender and race, or the ways in which race and gender intersect to impact
constructions of motherhood.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which the meso-system affects the
lives of mothers and shapes their experiences of guilt and shame. Meso-level
relationships, such as those found at the community level, affect the lives of mothers in
three ways. The first way is through social comparison. I found that, for the most part,
all of the mothers in this study engaged in some degree of social comparison. Even if
they answered “no” to the direct question as to whether or not they compared themselves
to other mothers, in the course of conversation they eventually spoke of it. Many added
that while they compared themselves to other mothers shortly after the birth of their first
child, this lessened significantly as they had more children. Similarly, many said that the
degree to which they felt they judged the actions of other mothers lessened with the birth of a second and third child.

The language that is suggestive of their dismissal of the concerns of others might in part be explained by cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957). That is, encounters with others create psychological discomfort when mothers confront information that conflicts with their own. In order to bring about stability, they dismiss the new information so as to avoid this discrepancy. As we have heard, the ideology of new momism and the extent to which these mothers seek to uphold the standards of "good mothering" run deep. Another caveat to cognitive dissonance theory posits that if one is highly committed to a set of beliefs, the likelihood of their abandoning these beliefs is rare. However, this process is complicated where struggles to perform new momism are concerned. While the values and expectations are present to mothers (as we saw in chapter four), interactions in one's community provide opportunities for variations on performance of better "good mothering." Thus the sense of competition that the mothers' reported.

Villani (1997) wrote that the myths of motherhood create an environment of competition among women. It is the socially constructed mandates of motherhood that create the standards whereby women can then decide which among them is actually more deserving of the "good mother" award. Boyd (2005) argued in fact that the debate that exists between stay-at-home and employed moms is placed on women specifically to draw attention away from male employment structures that limit the "choices" supposedly existing for mothers. In the same way, the dominant ideological constructions of motherhood that tell women the "good" mothers are available for their children, not at the workplace, create the environment for competition among mothers.
When the stakes are so high, such as they are in this culture that values new momism, there will be those moments when mothers experience motherhood as a contest.

Johnston and Swanson (2004) described the competitive nature of the “mommy wars” as a construction of media, and Gandy (2006) argued that the “war” between mothers was a fabrication. My findings reveal that, whatever the original source of the “mommy wars,” white mothers are aware of it. While I concur with Gandy that the media exaggerates the polarization of employed and stay-at-home mothers, I did find that these women not only used the correct phrase, they often felt themselves caught up in the war. However, as was the case with other mentions of competition, it was other mothers whom they felt acted in this manner, not themselves.

A second way that the meso shapes the lives of individuals is through the enactment of identity. As we saw, racial communities provided the symbols whereby meanings associated with the stay-at-home mom were exchanged. In the white community, June Cleaver still serves as the model of the oppressed mom – the make-believe mother who met her family at the door in dress and pumps, had dinner on the table, and never lost her temper even as she raised two boys and neighbor Eddy Haskell. For the white mothers in these groups, this model of mother was one to be avoided. From some, such as Tina, it collided with their desires to work outside of the home. For others, such as Emily, it simply represented an anti-feminist way of being. Therefore, many of the white mothers went out of their way to apologize for their stay-at-home status, noting that they “could” be doing more.

The African-American mothers neither referred to the June Cleaver model, nor apologized for being stay-at-home moms. Those who were able to quit their jobs spoke
highly of the tasks they felt they were now able to perform, with less guilt for time spent away from their homes. As Debra said in relation to her decision to leave the work force, “And I just wanted to always be there for them, and like I said, the guilt of not doing that really weighed heavy on me.” Patricia told Debra that she agreed with her, adding that her mom did not work when she was young and “When I got home, I could smell the food once I hit the garage door, going through the kitchen.” With no pause to justify their decisions in the context of feminism, these performances of new momism brought relief from the guilt felt while working outside of the home. Members of social groups, in these cases, racial communities, in the evaluation of behaviors, help provide the meanings associated with mothering.

Third, the meso shapes the lives of mothers through specific performances of the self such as mastery/sense of control. At the conclusion of each focus group, I asked each participant to complete a shortened version of the Pearlin Mastery Scale (1981). This scale consisted of seven questions concerning the degree to which they felt in control of their lives: can solve life’s problems; does not feel pushed around; has control over what happens to her; can do what she sets her mind to; does not feel helpless dealing with problems; the future depends upon her; and she can change the important things in life. With five the highest and one the lowest, the mean score for my sample of women was a 3.3, indicating high levels of control. While structural constraints typically disadvantage African-Americans’ levels of mastery (Mirowsky 1995), the middle class African-American mothers in this study reported scores higher than the group average (3.5).
Because all of the scores were generally high, what I cannot conclude is the relationship between mastery, resistance to “good mothering,” and guilt and shame. It may be that these mothers enter relationships with other mothers in their communities with similar high levels of mastery. Perceived sense of control could then be a valued trait that mothers hope to present to others. The isolation of stay-at-home moms was one of the factors Ross and Wright (1998) used to explain differing levels of control between worker mothers and homemakers. Perhaps the communities of mothers who talk about mothering provide a culture whereby women can question the ideologies of motherhood and feel more empowered to take control over the mandates which inform their lives.

In the next chapter, I move from community to family. By moving further inward in the social-ecological model, I analyze the micro-context of mothering in the lives of these women.
CHAPTER VI
MOTHERING AT THE MICRO-LEVEL

In this chapter, I continue to examine the experience of mothering through a consideration of micro-level relations. I begin by defining the micro-context and the process of negotiation of meanings within the roles played by family members. By conceptualizing the micro-level as a pattern of activities, roles and relations, I can observe the experience of mothering at the level most proximal to the individual.

The Micro-Context

It is at the micro-level that we can observe the enactment of mothering. In Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social-ecological model he stressed that key in our consideration of the microsystem should be an emphasis on the meanings individuals construct in any given context or situation. Bronfenbrenner noted that his model draws heavily from Thomas’ (1928/2003) notion of “definition of the situation.” In opposition to a behaviorist or a biological approach, Thomas proposed that the individual, in any interaction, actively engages in sifting through the norms and definitions provided to her by society in order to arrive at her own subjective meaning. For example, the announcement of a friend’s pregnancy is typically met with joy and congratulations. However, for the woman who has miscarried or lost a child, the announcement might be defined as sad or even foreboding. In this case, she is not only responding to the “reality” of the moment, which is her friend’s news, but to the meaning the situation has for her. Additionally, once this meaning has been ascribed, behaviors are likely to follow. This
act of negotiation captures Thomas’ assertion that “if men (sic) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” In this example, the woman reacting to her friend’s news might attempt to portray a face of joy for her friend (the normative response), but also indicate in her speech and gestures emotions of sadness or fear.

The power of the definition in shaping one’s experience of an event was demonstrated in Saloviita, Italinna and Leinonen’s (2003) study examining parental stress and the care of a child with an intellectual disability. The author’s found “that the way in which parents define their situations and the various resources available to them are more important in the prediction of parental stress than properties of the child” (309). To define the event as a “catastrophe” was the most significant predictor of parental stress. While factors such as family and social support were valuable, the meanings these families assigned to the events played a larger role in predicting family stress. Consistent with Thomas’ (1928/2003) theorem, defining their child’s behaviors in a negative fashion increased the likelihood of experiencing them negatively. Regardless of the objective “reality” of the child’s diagnosis and behavior, the meanings given were associated with increased stress.

Exploring mothering in the micro-context allows me to observe the ways in which mothers manage the societal and community level norms of motherhood, make meaning of them, and enact them in the context of their family lives. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) stipulated, at the micro-level we can consider the phenomenology of one’s environment by this introspection of meaning. To examine the environment in which these mothers interact, and with whom, allows for this approach.
We can investigate experiences at the micro-level in three ways. The first involves a consideration of *activities* in which the individual engages. Activities, Bronfenbrenner (1979) wrote, are the kinds of tasks or operations a person performs. According to Prus (1997/14), for research to consider the “doing” of individuals draws attention to the “constituent notions of defining, anticipating, invoking, encountering resistance, accomplishing, experiencing failure, reassessing, and adjusting,” both in interaction with others and at a more solitary level. It is through social practices that thoughts concerning mothering arise (Ruddick 1983) and thus to shift my analysis to the day-to-day operations of the mother will provide further insight into meanings of motherhood and to possible sources of guilt and shame.

A second consideration of experiences at the micro-level involves *roles*, or expected behaviors associated with the status “mother.” The importance of roles in the lives of individuals stems as far back as Mead’s (1934) account of the genesis of the self and the significance of role-playing for a child. A child learns to take the role of the other through play, such as playing at being a mother, or father. By putting him/herself into the role of the significant other, the child learns behaviors and expectations. Throughout the life course, the growing child will negotiate the role she plays according to perceived expectations associated with that role, and her own subjective meanings she brings to it. The self then emerges in context with others. A matured adult subsequently internalizes a “generalized other,” – a sense of how the social group to which one belongs orients to particular social activities. As both self and object, the individual exists in relation to others, making communication possible. To consider the importance of roles
allows me to focus on the meanings the mothers ascribed to expected behaviors of "good mothers," and how these meanings are enacted in their day-to-day lives.

The third way in which the micro-level can be considered is through *relations*, or the "interconnections" between people in "complimentary, or relatively independent undertakings" (Bronfenbrenner 1979/25). As Cooley (1902) established, the self emerges only through interaction with others. It is the perceived appearance of oneself in the eyes of others, and the imagined perception of that appearance that helps form one's self-concept. This reflexivity is at the heart of Cooley's theory, and continues to guide the social psychological perspective. Research on division of labor in the home has shown dynamics between husbands and wives impact the manner in which couples carry out childcare tasks (Johnson and Huston 1998), household tasks (Manke, Seery, Crouter and McHale 1994) and parent-child relations (Starrels 1994). By probing the interconnections of families, researchers have been able to make conclusions regarding the ways in which families across racial, ethnic and social class lines, as well as those of varying gender ideologies, construct and experience day-to-day family life. By looking into patterns of family interaction, we can observe how a mothers' sense of self emerges and to what degree family dynamics impact, or set the stage for her experiences of guilt and shame.

I do not mean to suggest that these three components; activities, roles and relations, are separate entities that can be extracted from one another. Certainly, we experience all three in concert with one another. The enactment of the mothering role is visible through the activities in which the mother engages. And those activities happen in and through our encounters with others. However, for the sake of this analysis I will
examine each in conjunction with the mothers’ focus group dialogue in order to explore the ways in which they experience mothering on the micro-level.

Activities of Mothers

Prus (1997) has argued that, as social scientists exploring the human condition, one avenue into such study is consideration of activity. According to Prus, “the emphasis on performing activity puts the focus squarely on the enterprise (successful or not) that undergirds the practical accomplishments of human group life” (65). This focus on the enterprise allows us to observe the emergence of the self in the process of “doing” things. As Garey (1995/422) noted in her interviews with mothers working night shifts, “The women I interviewed told me about their activities in order to show me their motherness.” Not only do activities have practical functions (keeping one’s child safe), there is also a symbolic component to activities that mothers perform (presenting oneself as a good mother). The ways in which the women in my study attend to their lives in respect to mothering reveals aspects of self in relation to the social world. It also provides an opportunity to explore the ways in which they construct meanings of motherhood and home life, and how those meanings then take shape emotionally.

Division of Labor in the Home. Work and family literature has demonstrated that women spend considerably more time in domestic (see Coltrane 2000; Hochschild 1989) and childcare work (Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kern and Hofferth 2001) than do men. At the same time, a large body of work has shown that most men and women in couples do not perceive the unequal division of labor as unfair (e.g., Frisco and Williams 2003; Daphne, Shelton and Luschen 1995; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994). Recent works have moved away from pragmatic kinds of explanations (i.e., time management) to more
symbolic and interactional considerations in perceptions of fairness. These works have argued that it is in fact the gendered nature of family work (DeVault 1991), the performance of gender in everyday life (West and Zimmerman 1987), and gender role attitudes (Baxter and Western 1998) that help determine perceptions of fairness in the division of tasks between couples. It is the everyday construction of meaning concerning family work that introduces asymmetry into the division of tasks.

The stories told by the mothers in these focus groups were consistent with findings in the work and family literature. They reported performing the majority of domestic and childcare work, and very few experienced this equity as implicitly unfair. While some spoke of more contribution from their husbands than others did, all reported some level of inequity. (All of the mothers, with the exception of one, who were living with a male partner were married, thus I will refer to “husbands” or “spouses.”) Some stated that their husbands did little to nothing in terms of housework. Others acknowledged that their spouses contributed to housework and childcare, but with her as the one in charge, and the husbands’ contributions described as “help.” Most felt they performed the primary childcare responsibilities.

An interaction that occurred in one of the groups allowed the mothers to establish a common bond in regards to their sense of feeling “in charge of the house.” The tone of this dialogue was one of humor and lightness but also illustrative of the extent to which they felt in control of their homes and families. These were white mothers, two of whom (Nicole and Angela) were not employed outside of the home: The conversation began as Nicole described her husband’s general lack of involvement in home life.
Nicole: It gets to the point when I, like, have to set the baby on his lap and say, “here, monitor your child.” I’ll say, “Here you go, and I’m leaving for a while.” When I come back, he has a whole new perspective.

Clair: And I say, “You better not call me one hundred times at work. And you’d better have dinner ready like I do every night when you come home”...and I feel like I have to teach my husband how to make dinner.

Angela: My husband plays down, like he doesn’t want to do something, like putting away the dishes. He’ll stand there and ask me, “Where does this go, where does this go?” (laughter from Angela and the others) He just wants me to do it. But I think I would be nervous leaving our baby home with my husband all day. It makes me really nervous because when he watches him – because I feel like - he’ll put the baby on the changing table and walks away to put the diaper in the diaper pail.

This interaction shows these mothers creating a process of negotiation of meaning through the telling of their stories (Frith 2000; Smithson 2000). This light, almost joking dialogue actually revealed quite a bit concerning the activities in which these mothers engage and the ways in which they experience them. They established that they are the primary caregivers for their children, their husbands even requiring instructions from them. While they maintained lightness, they also suggested that their experiences of this ranged from aggravation to nerve-wracking. In order to leave the house, Nicole felt she had to physically hand her baby off to her husband for care. Clair warned her husband not to call her a hundred times when she was at work. And Angela actually feared leaving her child alone with his father. It does not appear to feel very good to the mothers to be in such control, though they speak of it with laughter. Their tones of acceptance are reminiscent of the literature concerning perceptions of fairness in regards to unequal divisions of labor in the home (see Lennon and Rosenfield 1994; Ross 1987). For the most part, research finds women not opposing the inequality in house and childcare divisions.
Allen and Hawkins (1999) would interpret the above interaction as illustrative of "maternal gatekeeping." According to their work, greater father involvement is hindered, in part, by a mothers' hesitancy to give up responsibility of family matters. Research indicates that mothers report higher levels of stress (Bird 1997). Do they experience more stress because they actually orient themselves to it by operating as "gatekeepers?"

At the other extreme, Lorber (2005) would argue that in a gendered society such as ours, whereby work and family are divided into male and female domains, the subjugation of women into childcare and domestic work leads to the exploitation of women. This perceived "natural" arrangement, men as financial providers and women as childcare providers, results in women paying the heavier costs of parenting in the form of increased responsibilities and stress (not discounting too the structural costs such as decreased earning capacities). These mothers may be reluctant to give up some degree of control, but it is motivated more by the gendered construction of parenting than simply control for controls sake.

The positions of Allen and Hawkins (1999) and Lorber (2005) represent two ends of a continuum regarding power. In the first, the woman seizes power, and in the latter power is stripped from women's lives. Perhaps they are not mutually exclusive. A story told by Olivia suggests that perhaps she enforces some maternal gatekeeping specifically in reaction to the subjugation. Olivia (also white) discussed her activities in the home in relation to feeling "in control." A stay-at-home mom, Olivia revealed that her husband worked in management and she took care of the home and primary care of their three children. She told the group:
It all comes down to control to me. That you’re at home. You’re in control. When your husband comes home – in my situation, occasionally, because he works a lot, I have to really balance letting him feel like I need to let him be in control of something. However, lately, that’s turned into a phrase that we have because, at work, he’s in retail and they have a phrase called the M.O.D., the manager on duty. They take turns who’s on duty. I say, when you’re at home, I’m still the M.O.D. – I’m the Mom on Duty.

In the course of Olivia telling this story, others in the room were audibly agreeing with her as she said, “When he comes home and just turns everything upside down, or it feels like he does...” Lacking any power in the labor force, Olivia is able to assert power through her identification as M.O.D. in the home. Some research has argued that having reduced economic resources equates with less power in the home and might explain lower standards of perceptions of fairness in regards to division of labor (e.g., Lennon and Rosenfield 1994; Ross 1987). Olivia is a stay at home Mom with a college degree who waited until she was 32 years old to have her first child. If she experiences her position now as one of lessened power, her perception of self as M.O.D. in the home would bring her back to a more equal state with her husband who is manager at his workplace. In fact, her experience is that she has so much control in the home that she has to divvy some out to her husband so that he will not feel out of touch when he comes home from work. When he does come home, she experiences it as if he “turns everything upside down” and she has to maintain control, making sure that even in the excitement of Daddy’s return, the children are still readied for bed on time. As a stay-at-home mom, Olivia does not perceive her set of activities as oppressive. She has, in fact, defined her position as one of a manager.

Baxter (2000), in a study of perceptions of fairness concerning division of household labor, found that it mattered less to women how much time men spent on
housework, but rather what specific tasks they performed. Women do not evaluate
fairness so much on the amount of time men spend doing domestic work. However, they
do perceive fairness based on how much men engage in chores considered traditionally
female, such as cleaning, shopping, laundry and cooking. The key issue for women in
perceiving fairness, then, is the sense of men providing “help” with specific activities
(Baxter and Western 1998).

Several mothers utilized the word “help” in reference to their spouses and
domestic work. Angela, a white stay-at-home mom told the group that, since she quit
work to be at home with her child, there is the sense that she should “do it all” in terms of
housework and childcare. She told the group, “I mean, I have to ask him for help if I
want help. And he does help me, but I have to ask, and sometimes beg.” As the group
laughed at the remark, Nicole, also a stay-at-home mom replied, “I have help in some
things, but as my husband says, he doesn’t do babies – doesn’t help with babies.” As the
group laughed again, this time a bit more uncomfortably at this remark, Nicole explained
that her husband certainly loves their baby saying, “like, he’ll hold him if I set him on his
lap.” But, “he’s very helpful in other ways, with the three year old. They do things, and
go places.” While contemporary men are spending more time in domestic work than did
generations prior, it is still the women who are the have primary responsibility for the
home (Lindsay 1999).

Other remarks were made concerning husbands “helping” with the domestic and
family work. Anita, an African-American mother who works outside of the home told
the group that her husband “works about 50 hours a week. And, “believe it or not, even
with that, sometimes he’s helpful as far as – he likes to, I think he likes to mop because
he thinks he does it better than I do.” The group laughed in response to this comment and began teasing Anita about her floors. She continued,

Yeah, yeah, he thinks he does it better than me, so sometimes he does that — that’s not a lot of the time. Most of the household things, I do. I cook. If I didn’t cook, though, he’s not the type to be — I say, “You know, I don’t feel like cooking.” He’ll say, “oh I wanted a bowl of cereal anyway.” He’s real easy going as far as that kind of thing.

Jewel understood Anita’s remarks. Though unlike Anita who is employed, Jewel stays home and thus does “most of the household things.” But her husband, “even after he’s worked all day, he’ll come home, and if the dishes haven’t been done, he’ll do the dishes.”

As the literature demonstrates, African-American men tend to perform more household labor than do their white counterparts (John, Shelton and Luschen 1995). Therefore, African-American families tend to be more egalitarian in household divisions of labor (Taylor 2002). African-American mothers, like the white mothers, described themselves as performing the majority of the housework and childcare. But, in general, the African-American mothers tended to describe their husbands as “helping” more so than did the white mothers. Of course, this was not absolute. Alicia, an African-American mother who participated in another group, described herself as the one who “filled in gaps all over the place” in her family. She told the group that her husband did perform “the physical things around the house,” including making sure the “kids are fed.” Unlike those mothers whom the literature describes as perceiving the division of labor as fair, Alicia, a graduate student with a busy work schedule, did not:

And sometimes it just makes me really resentful, because when the newsletters come, I’m the one reading the newsletters, putting down the dates, reminding him
that this has to be done, the school needs to be paid, that sort of thing. And if I
don’t do that, then it just won’t get done, or it’s delayed.

Alicia, like so many women, tends to be the member of the family more likely to
perform the activities that establish contacts with community organizations (Doucet
2000; 2001). The concept of responsibility, according to Leslie, Anderson and Branson
(1991/199), exceeds merely behavioral participation in a task, but also incorporates,
“feeling accountable for or obligated to the child, thinking about possible dangers in the
house, and taking action” (italic in original). The care and commitment involved in the
kinds of responsibilities that mothers report in response to childcare take on an emotional
and psychological component. It adds a layer of parental strain that most fathers do not
necessarily experience.

Alicia provided another example of her sense of responsibility when she
explained her husband’s action concerning their daughter’s hair when she vacationed
without her family for a week:

And so, he said, “you know, while you’re gone, I’m just gonna get her hair
braided so I don’t have to worry about combing it everyday.” And I said, “you
never thought to do that when it was me combing her hair every single day. But,
when it was you, all of a sudden you think about the convenience involved in
taking care of this child.” And I was resentful of that.

She went on to tell how she stopped fixing lunches and washing clothes for her husband
and two older children because, “even when I was doing it, I was so angry about it. I was
resentful...Just because I’m the mom doesn’t mean that I should do everything in the
home.” She said the experience of abandoning certain chores was “freeing,” and that her
interactions with her teenaged sons improved since they began doing their own laundry.
However, she joked, her mother does not approve and “has the guilt thing down to a

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science.” Her mother, Alicia told the group, could not understand these deviations from traditional mothering and housewifery. Alicia mentioned the guilt she experienced as a result of her interaction with her mother on numerous occasions throughout the group. In each instance, it was in reference to her mother’s disapproval and concern for Alicia’s non-normative mothering activities.

Doucet (2000/173), in her interviews with 23 couples, found that “guilt emerged as the dominate response” to couples who deviated from dominate socially constructed norms regarding gendered parenting. When mothers in her study felt they were not performing as a mother “should,” they were likely to express guilt. Alicia, of all the mothers in my focus groups, was the most vocal in terms of trying to abandon the traditional model of mother as primary caretaker and homemaker. She was also the participant who, far more than others, used the word “guilt” in the telling of her story. Considering the wealth of literature that makes clear the expectations that women are primarily responsible for the home (e.g., Hochschild 1989; Leslie et al. 1991), we can link the guilt in Alicia’s accounts to her abandonment of expectations so dominant for mothers.

In terms of these mothers and their “doing,” they are performing the majority of the housework and childcare, regardless of whether or not they work outside of the home. Also consistent with the literature is that most of them, while they joked about the lack of help, or the increased work, did not speak of their situations as oppressive or unfair. Consider Emily, a white mother who laughed as she said:

I’m laughing when you are talking about sharing duties because we don’t. It’s not my husband’s fault at all. He’s also a wonderful father and he’s the provider. (she went on to talk about her acquisition of a master’s degree and sense that she
was capable of more than housework) I should have more shared duties like it sounds like you have at your house. But, I have to remember, this is what I asked for.

As long as mothers continue to “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987), the division of labor in the home will remain divided along gender lines. According to Leslie et al. (1991/208), their data “suggest the main determinant of responsibility for children is one’s gender: Women are more responsible than men.” And, as long as gender remains such a function of parenting, then women will continue to bear the brunt of the activities associated. Meanwhile, what these women described was a home life in which being a mother implied increased responsibilities. And, not unlike the acceptance of the norms of motherhood we saw in chapter four, the acceptance of these norms bring with it added emotional, physical and psychological cost.

Roles that Mothers Play

In DeMeis and Perkins’ (1996/778) study of “supermoms,” they argued for the importance of understanding the “relationship between the actual work that women perform and their interpretations of the mother role.” While prior works have explored either activities in which mothers engage, or perceptions of motherhood, few have considered the two simultaneously. She found in so doing that employed mothers differed from stay-at-home mothers in perceptions of mothering. Considering the various meanings that these mothers ascribe to themselves in the role of “working mother,” helps us to understand how those subjective meanings are experienced psychologically as well as in interactions with family.

A reference to roles implies knowledge of those expected behaviors that accompany a social position – in this case, mother. To explore how one plays their role
is to consider the ways in which she defines the role (which we saw in chapter four), and
how she gives subjective meanings to that role. First, I will consider the ways in which
employed mothers discussed themselves in relation to employment and mothering.
Second, I will explore their language in respect to how a good mother “should” act with
her children. Specifically, a good mother displays calm and loving behaviors and never
yells at her children.

White Mothers, Employment and “Mommy Brain.” As was discussed in chapters
four and five, employment and “good mothering” are at odds, and often lead to guilt
(Warner 2005; Doucet 2000; Hays 1996; 1998). To practice new momism is to provide
fulltime childcare to your children (Douglas and Michaels 2004). According to Hays
(1996), mothers negotiate the clash between employment and intensive mothering by
making various arguments as to the benefits of their employment status. The mothers
that she quoted claimed that their work provided their children with a variety of benefits
including financial provisions, the positive aspects of alternative caregivers and, “quality”
time they spent with their kids as a result of working. It is this last benefit that I will
examine most carefully.

In Hays’ (1996) interviews with employed mothers, several noted that they felt
the quality of time with their children increased because their employment provided them
a chance to be away from the house for a period of time. The break, Hays argued,
“reinforces your feeling of competence and therefore results in more rewarding time with
your children” (148). Again, this is one way that working mothers seek to resolve the
ambivalence they may experience due to the clashing nature of work and new momism
(or, in Hays’ typology, intensive mothering). Consider the words of a mother in Hays’
study: “And now when I come home from work...I think I’m a better mom. There you go! Because when I come home from work, I don’t have all day, just being with the kids. It’s just that when I’m working I feel like I’m competent, I’m a person!” (147-148). Juxtapose those words with mothers in my study and we find remarkably similar meaning constructions occurring. For example, Meghan no longer works outside of the home but said, “When I worked with my kids, I was more involved. I did more floor time with my kids when I worked...” Clair, who works part-time said, “I was guilty for a while, working, but I’m such a better mom on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday because I look forward to those days together.”

By framing their employment status as a source of stimulation that, in fact, made them better mothers, they could maintain a child-centered ideology (Hays 1996). For some, this resulted in a decrease in the guilt associated with employment and intensive mothering. They are still putting their children first.

The “mommy brain” was a phrase several of the white mothers I spoke to used to describe the general lack of stimulation they experienced when they were not employed. Clair had said earlier:

But I also work two days a week and one Saturday a month. And I did that on purpose...I don’t have to work. Not that we have a lot of money, I mean fortunately I don’t have to work if I don’t want to, but it’s a career that I feel if I get out of, I’ll have a hard time getting back in. Because my brain is like, oooo, the mommy brain, so I keep it in practice.

An interaction occurred in another group whereby a white mother was describing her desire to work outside of the home, and how miserable she had been as a stay-at-home mom. Another mother agreed by adding, “Because otherwise you become baby brained.” The group laughed in agreement.
Not unlike the "mommy wars," "the mommy brain" appears to live mostly in the white mother lexicon. In Ellison's (2005) book, entitled *The Mommy Brain*, even the descriptions of the rise in popularity of this phrase suggest that it may not resonate in the African-American community. Stemming from the "historic flood of women into the workplace beginning in the 1960's," Ellison claimed that a new consciousness emerged for women when jobs outside of the home meant increased mental aptitude for mothers. As we know, the surge of women into the workplace was a surge of white women, for the most part. African-American women were already working outside of the home. Betty Friedan's (1963) wake-up call to women was a call to middle class, white women who, according to Friedan, had accepted the unrewarding and unchallenging job of stay-at-home mother.

Again, for many of the white mothers with whom I spoke, employment outside of the home not only provided stimulus, it made them feel like a better parent. Warner (2005) stated that when mothers are asked why they work, many reply because they like to. Research indicates that mothers subjectively construct motherhood norms to bring themselves into alignment with "good mother" norms (e.g., Doucet 2000; DeMeis and Perkins 1996; Garey 1995). If a mother likes to work outside of the home but experiences guilt as a result of the clash with "good mothering," one way to resolve this dissonance is to frame one's employment as beneficial to mother and child. Meghan said, "I'm one of those, you know, better parent when working." At the time of the focus group, Meghan was not working at her job as an event coordinator. She went on to say:

I did more floor time with the kids when I worked than when I'm not working because you always say, "I'm just going to do the laundry, just going to make dinner, then I'll do that." Next thing you know, it's bedtime and I didn't do
anything because I was busy housewifing. You know, when I worked, I’m home. I want to spend time with you...Being at home full-time now, I feel like I have to spend time with them.

For Meghan and Clair, employment provided a stimulus that made them feel more “present” when they were home with their children. This sense of presence then made them feel they were performing as better mothers. Both of them were referring to part-time jobs that allowed them to avoid the “mommy brain” and yet still have “quality time” with their children. Several white mothers spoke of their desire for the part-time job that would allow them the stimulation of employment and yet still perform as “good mothers.”

Karen, who works full-time as an engineer, spoke of her desire for the “elusive part-time job.” She spoke of how she tried, for years, to work part-time but found that “good part-time work...it’s not available in our field.” When her youngest started kindergarten she realized the part-time job would never come. She said of her full-time work, “But I would say that over the years I have less guilt about it. And I don’t know if guilt is the word. Regret in that I wish we weren’t always rushing.” A moment later, her tone shifted from the personal, to the more structural as she again lamented the lack of part-time work available to women, especially in her field of engineering. Turning back to her home life, she recalled that when her eldest child was young, she was at home with him full-time and, “I was so depressed. I needed that stimulation so I took a job that didn’t pay anything but it kept me sane.”

In the same group, Candace, who also works as an engineer, described how badly she felt as a working mother who could not participate in as many of her son’s kindergarten activities as could the stay-at-home moms. I asked her how it felt on those
occasions when she was asked to read to his class and her work did not allow it. She responded, “Well, I wish I could say yes. Yeah, it doesn’t feel good, but then again I would go completely insane if I wasn’t working.” For Karen and Candace, work not only provides stimulation but, as they construct the meanings of their roles, it stymies a psychological breakdown.

For many of these mothers, the stressors of balancing work and family often temper the well-being (in the form of the stimulation they described) that employment offers. Interestingly, according to Hoffman (1979, cited in Lewis 1991) working mothers will often compensate for time away by increasing the “quality time” with children (e.g., taking them on outings, reading to them). The compensation, which has been induced by guilt, actually exacerbates overload. The features of new momism (Douglas and Michaels’ 2004) that require devotion to children physically, intellectually, emotionally, and psychologically stand at odds with work outside of the home, even when the mother values her work. In order to bring symmetry to this paradox, many of the white mothers described employment as beneficial for them and their children.

None of the African-American mothers used the term “mommy brain,” nor did any of them describe work as a stimulus. Historically, African-American women have always worked outside of the home. There is also a lengthy legacy of egalitarianism in black families that is only recently emerging in white families (Taylor 2002). African-American women have been juggling work and family all along and therefore it stands to reason that the “mommy brain” rhetoric would not resonate in this population. Work does not have to be framed as a stimulus when, for most African-American women, this is simply what one must do in order to care for her family.
Good Mothers Don’t Yell. As we read in chapter four, many of the mothers in these groups, when asked to define a “good mother,” described her as “nice,” or “kind,” and one who is “very patient.” A dominate message in childcare advice materials that mother’s consume concerns the importance of a mother’s sensitivity to her child for the sake of healthy development (Hays 1996). An implicit expectation of the mother role is that she be loving, attentive and constantly aware of the impact of her actions on her child’s development. The love a mother exudes is vital to the mental health of her child (Thurer 1994). In fact, the first line of Thurer’s text, *The Myths of Motherhood* reads, “As a psychologist, I cannot recall ever treating a mother who did not harbor secrets about how her behavior or feelings damaged her child” (xi). If mothers have internalized the expectation that they be patient and kind, then it would stand to reason that any loss of patience, or loss of control would illicit guilt and shame. After all, a “good mother” loves her children, so a “good mother” does not yell at them. So said the women in this study.

An encounter in the first of the five focus groups brought up the topic of “good mothers” and yelling. After it was mentioned in the second and each subsequent group, I realized how central this was to mothers. In this encounter, Candace had just told the group about a friend who, working full-time was still capable of sending homemade cards in the mail. The group issued a collective gasp, and jokingly questioned how a contemporary mother could possibly do such a thing. Sarah finally said, “Christmas cards and thank you notes! That’s nothing to do with motherhood. I have a friend who can write thank you notes and screams at her children.” The group shifted in tone, agreeing that cards were not a definitive sign of good mothering. However, moments
later Meghan made a reference to a friend who “shames her” with her abilities to perform specific mothering tasks. Sarah then tried to reassure Meghan that she too was a good mother and that Meghan’s friend would not want her to feel badly about herself. Meghan was reluctant to accept Sarah’s reassurance and added, “There’s times I’m a bad parent. I’m a bad mom. I’m horrible. When you scream at your kids ‘shut up,’ that’s bad. That’s a bad mom.”

So much of the guilt that mothers carry concerns the fear that their behaviors will cause irreversible harm to their children (Villani 1997; Hays 1996). In Bobel’s (2004) analysis of mother blame, she cites the work of Phares (1993) who determined that mothers are generally held responsible for behavioral problems in children such as depression, anxiety and shyness. Bobel adds that mothers have also been shown to accept responsibility for child outcomes thus contributing to the guilt-induced experience of motherhood. Mother blaming, as the literature has dubbed it, fails to take into account numerous other socialization factors, including the role of fathers, and encourages guilt in mothers (Chess 1982).

There is also no indication from my discussions with mothers that the guilt and shame stemming from yelling at one’s kids is reserved for white mothers. The following exchange took place among African-American mothers.

Jewel: And I am a yeller. And I said, ‘oh my goodness, I’m just like my mother.’ And I feel bad when I get to that point. So I know my kids must feel bad when I get to that point…

Sharon: My mom was a yeller also. And I’m a yeller. (the group laughed) But what makes me feel really bad (she pauses, laughs a bit), what makes me feel real bad about being a yeller is when I hear the kids sounding just like me. I’m like, ‘I’ve done it to them!’ Now I’ve done it to them too.
Debra: I can agree. My mom was very, I don’t want to say emotional, but she wore her heart on her sleeve. So, if she was frustrated, it came across in how she was talking to you. And you know those things you say? I’m never gonna do this to my kids…it’s like, I did it. I sound just like Mom…Like, okay, I want to get out of the habit of yelling. I’ve got to practice getting out of the habit…

Joyce: I agree with that too, in a way. Like, my mom was the yeller, and a sailor, because she cussed like a sailor…

In this interaction, Jewel began by describing her behavior as like her mothers. She added that she did not want her children to experience what she did, and therefore feels bad when she hears herself raise her voice at them. Subsequently, the others admitted to yelling and, like Jewel, did not want to repeat the pattern. Not only do they acknowledge the role their mothers played in their socialization, but they take responsibility and acknowledge the power they have to “do this” to their children. The conversation continued:

Anita: Well, what I shared before is that I yell like a crazy woman sometimes, and I have two little kids. I think I really, really, really feel guilty about that. I mean, it hurts sometimes when I see how much – how afraid I’ve made them or sometimes I scare my own self I yell so much. Sometimes I feel guilty about the way I make my children feel sometimes when they irritate me. Instead of just handling it…just depends on my stress level and what’s going on. I really feel guilty when that happens.

Patricia: Anita and I have had the yell conversation. (laughter from all) Something’s wrong with us!

Jackson and Mannix (2004) pointed out that, from a feminist perspective, placing the blame on mothers for any and all psychopathology in children only contributes to an already “burdensome” experience for women. Like the mothers in this study, Jackson and Mannix revealed the guilt and shame associated with the blame that mothers have internalized. When so much of the contemporary psychological theory emphasizes the vital role mothers play in the development of the child, it is of little wonder that so many
experience guilt when they deviate from expectations of the mother role. A mother is patient and kind, they are told, and if there is a loss of temper, there is not only a concern for the well-being of the child in the moment, but for the future of the child. After all, it was their mothers who modeled the yelling for them.

Relations with Others

As was stated above, it is through interactions with others that the self emerges (Cooley 1902). McBride et al. (2005) found that a mother’s perception of the role of the father was a better predictor of father involvement than was the father’s own perception. That is, “a mother’s belief about the role of fathers moderates the link between a father’s perception of himself as a parent and the degree to which he is accessible to his child” (368). The authors’ findings indicate the power of perceptions in a pattern of interactions, for influencing actual parenting behaviors. Thus, parenting beliefs and behaviors are not occurring in private vacuums, but rather in the process of negotiating meanings in the home (Van Egeren 2004; Maurer, Pleck and Rane 2001).

The “Fun Dad.” In each of the focus groups, I asked the mothers to discuss parenting in relation to their child’s father. I asked whether or not they shared parenting duties and whether they felt their spouses worried about the same sorts of things they had discussed up to this point. In several of the groups, this question stimulated a conversation about what several termed the “fun dad.” That is, the sense that while she, the mother, performed the day-to-day grunge work of parenting, the fathers were parenting when and how they chose, in and around the mother’s duties.

In the following exchange, Alison began by describing her (estranged) husband as one who did not equally contribute to housework and childcare. One Thanksgiving, she
decided to bake pies for a large family gathering. Her then-husband was “goofing off with one of his friends.” Frustrated that she could not prepare the desserts for Thanksgiving and care for her children at the same time, she drove her small children to the friend’s home. She said to her children’s father, “Here, you take them (the children). And when you’re done, what you do, you pack them up and bring them home.” Not only did he not take responsibility for their care, she felt she had to instruct him on exactly what to do at the day’s end. However, she told the group that since their separation, “he’s super Dad, and he does everything for my kids. He makes a spectacle of himself with all the kids.” Interestingly, Kruk (1994, cited in Kimmel 2004) made the observation that oftentimes Dads who were less involved with their children tend to increase involvement following a divorce. Consistent with Kruk’s observation, Alison told how her ex-husband, at least in her opinion, presents himself as the “great dad…and it infuriates me.”

As Alison told her story the group laughed with a sense of understanding and agreement. Julie, not married to her infant daughter’s father added:

My baby’s Daddy’s a superdad too, so I hear you on that one. I always want to pin a sign to his back if we ever go somewhere together that, well...I don’t pay any child support, I really don’t do anything. But, we meet in public places a lot, so we’ll be at the mall and he’s gotta push the stroller, and he’s gotta change the diaper, and people are saying, ‘oh, look at that.’ But yeah, so that’s how we do parenting. I do everything and occasionally – we get in fights because, what I say is he treats his daughter like a pet...he doesn’t have a parenting philosophy. He likes to play with her, and he does a great job playing with her and right now she loves him and thinks he’s great and a lot of fun. He doesn’t pick up after her...

Alison: That’s a great way to put it.

While fathers are spending increased amounts of time caring for children (Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004), mothers continue to perform the majority of the work (Lindsay 1999). Also, fathers who co-parent are likely to be rewarded socially by friends and
peers (Dienhart 1998). While mothers engaging in childcare are seldom noticed, as this is the expectation of motherhood, father involvement brings with it positive appraisals from others. Julie and Alison described this dynamic in relation to the father of their children. While both mothers described themselves as the primary provider of childcare, they saw the fathers “doing fatherhood” in such a way as to project to others the image of “good dad.” Alicia also understood this dynamic as she described her first husband who participated little in the day-to-day of their sons’ lives. However, when:

...his family gets together, then he wants to come and get the kids so they can see what a wonderful job he's doing. So, I told him, the last time he called to do that, I said, “if you come and get these kids, I’m going to come to your mother’s house and embarrass you in front of everyone...I mean, if you can’t call once a day to see how they’re doing, then certainly you can’t have them for the weekend.” You know, just showing up to show off.

For Alicia, the imbalance of parenting with her ex-husband was all too clear. Her reaction might be read by some as evidence of the kind of maternal gatekeeping that prohibits divorced fathers from claiming their father identities (Braver and O’Connell 1998). However, Alicia’s response sounds like a mother aware of the inequality in parenting and unwilling to allow her sons’ father to, as she put it, “show up to show off.” For her, “playing dad” meant, at the very least, checking in on them through phone calls. As we have seen through these focus groups, mothers “do mothering” so that they might project to others the image of “good mother.” However, they are actually performing the great majority of duties. They seem reluctant to allow dads to relish in the “good father” role if he is simply performing for the public without any real performance in the home.

In another group, Olivia, described her struggle to balance her responsibilities to her children, her husband’s role in parenting, and the conflicting emotions that arose. A
stay-at-home mom, Olivia spoke of her day-to-day involvement with her children and the
dynamics that occurred when her husband came home. She described her husband
returning from work and her children, thrilled to see him. Irrespective of her schedule, he
might begin to play with the kids, which introduced a struggle to her. She struggled, she
said, with:

Not getting angry because Daddy just took them outside and they’re playing with
water balloons when I was trying to get them ready to go to bed. And it’s like,
okay, am I gonna sit here and be an angry mom about not seeing him first? Or am
I gonna be a nice mom, or the kind mom who says, you know, this is the first time
they’ve seen Daddy in two days – play with them. And be nice.

Remaining true to the “good mother” ideology, Olivia felt it important to maintain
“niceness,” even as water balloons disrupted her routine at bedtime. He entered the
house and the role of the “fun parent,” and she was conflicted on a variety of levels. Hers
and the children’s routine was disrupted, and she would have liked some adult-time with
her husband. In this dilemma, her choices spanned two extremes; anger (which may in
fact be her authentic reaction), and niceness (what a good mother should do).

Olivia weighed her reaction in terms of the impact it might have on her children.
Should she be a nice mom, or an angry mom, and what might the latter response do to the
described the construction of motherhood and fatherhood ideologies within the social
sciences, pointing out that the ideology of motherhood included the construction of
mother as “scapegoat for children’s problems” (72). “However,” Drakich argued, “social
science is constructing fatherhood as a panacea for the problems mothers created or
cannot control” (73). Children’s responses to absent fathers and the importance of
fathers’ roles in the development of a child’s gender role ideology are just two examples
of the ways in which the research suggests that an active father can essentially counteract the negatives imposed on children by the mistakes of the mother. A simplistic review of the literature paints a picture of fathers’ increased time in childcare essentially buffering the myriad mistakes of the mother. We can see elements of this at the micro level as Olivia negotiates her emotions within the ideology of motherhood, and through the interactions with her children and husband. On some level, she “knows” that his playtime with the kids is good – for her children and their relationship with their father. Any attempt at interfering, regardless of whether or not their playtime exceeded their bedtime, would be the actions of an “angry mom.” And, as Olivia and all mothers have internalized, an angry mom is not good. Anger and yelling, in fact, make them feel guilty.

While the above interactions occurred with white mothers (with the exception of Alicia), the “fun dad” appears to exist in the middle-class African-American family as well. In the discussion regarding parenting, several of the mothers began to laugh and dialogue about their husbands as fathers:

Anita:...it’s playtime when he gets home. When he gets home, if he gets home before they go to bed, then they just, you know, are playing – having a good time. (the group laughs)

Jewel:...he is the (pause, thinking) rewarding parent. Every time the kids do something good, he’s the one who gives out rewards...just like tonight, he fooled him (their son). He said he was taking him to the library and he took him to the movie. It’s a school night. (laughter from her and the group) That’s what I said, “It’s a school night!” But they brought home good report cards...

Debra: And I feel like I’m the strict, stern parent and he’s always the Dad. You know, I can get away with murder with Dad. And a lot of times, you know, the kids will forget who they’re with, and I’ll have to tell them, “I’m not your Dad! This doesn’t fly over here!” So, that’s kind of – he’s the fun one, I’m the get it done.
As Coltrane (2001/104) noted, “Compared to the complete self-sacrifice expected of mothers, being a father in our culture carries far fewer burdens.” Van Egeren (2004) conducted a longitudinal study of the development of the co-parenting relationship following the transition to parenthood. Her findings revealed that asking a father about his co-parenting experiences revealed something about his place in the family and whether he considered the couple harmonious or not. Asking a mother of her experiences revealed little information regarding behaviors in the co-parenting family interactions. Van Egeren concluded that, for mothers, family time was “a given” (471). Fathers, on the other hand, experienced co-parenting in relationship to the mother. The ways in which couples negotiate parenting occurs in the context of meanings surrounding “mother” and “father.” As long as mothering continues to be associated with the daily nurturance of the child, and fathering with play (see Roggman 2004), the weight of responsibility for childcare in the home will continue to fall to mothers. And the cost to mothers is the continued negotiation of good mothering. To deviate from the gendered norms of parenting in family roles hastens guilt (Doucet 2000), yet the norms of motherhood, as we have seen, require a complex process of negotiation.

_Guilt or Shame?_

The women in these focus groups mentioned many emotions associated with mothering at the micro-level, specifically the activities in which they engaged. Resentment, anger, frustration, depression – all of these were named, yet seldom was their _tone_ one of anger or frustration. In fact, most of the mothers, when they spoke of their home lives, laughed and joked about the increased work they performed, compared
to their spouses. The lack of any real demonstration of anger at the unequal division of household chores and childcare could be explained in part by the dynamics of focus group interaction. While the mothers might have been willing to admit their husbands took less domestic responsibility, or that dads were in fact the “fun” parent in contrast to the “stern” mother, they may have been less willing to project this as a negative evaluation of their spouse. Thus, it was difficult to determine the extent to which the activities mothers engaged in, in relation to their families, fed guilt and shame. I suspect it is difficult and women are hesitant to complain too harshly about the division of labor in a group setting. Future investigations that include individual interviews might flush out the connection between activities and guilt and shame.

Some of the mothers specifically mentioned the guilt induced by working outside of the home. Emily, a white, stay at home mother responded that the thing that would make her feel most guilty, without a doubt would be, “going back to work.” Brenda, an African-American mom, when asked about guilt, said, “The answer to that is because I work full-time.” While most of the mothers acknowledged that combining employment and mothering made them feel guilty, some racial variation was noted. In chapter five, it was observed that African-American mothers who experienced guilt as a result of working, and were able to quit their jobs, consequently experiencing relief from the guilt. In this chapter, for the white mothers who experienced guilt over employment, defining their employment status as a source of stimulation reduced their experience of guilt. When they perceived employment as a stimulus that actually made them better mothers, they could, as Hays (1996) noted in her sample, maintain a child-centered ideology.
The experience of shame was noted specifically when the mothers spoke of their disappointment in themselves for yelling at their children. They spoke of feeling "bad" about their behavior. They feared what impact yelling would have on their children. Abell and Gecas (1997/101) discussed guilt and shame as role-taking emotions that function "in monitoring the behavior of the self in relation to others." Emphasizing the social roots of guilt and shame allows me to explore how these mothers make meaning out of their behaviors in relation to others. Following Lynd's (1958) lead, Abell and Gecas described shame as "an experience of discovering oneself to be deficient, unacceptable, or incompetent relative to established norms or within interpersonal relationships" (101). The language the mothers utilized when they spoke of their disappointment in themselves for yelling indicates the experience of shame.

Gecas and Abell (1997/101) went on to say, "Shame arises when one perceives that the interpersonal connections between the self and others are damaged or threatened." When the mothers spoke of their fear of doing to their children what their mothers had done to them regarding yelling, they feared not only teaching a bad habit, but damaging the long-term relationship with their children. They worried about their children's well-being in the moment, and whether they were causing irreversible harm to their kids or not. All of this concern and worry regarding behavior and one's disappointment in self, in relation to other, is evidence of shame.

Negotiating in the family when she perceives the father as the "fun" parent, often takes its toll on the mother. By accepting these distinctions as natural, many of the mothers spoke as if this style of co-parenting worked for them. As Anita, an African-American mother who works outside to the home commented:
He helps, you know, check the kids’ homework and helps them out with their homework because he’s the patient one in the house. I help them too, but he’s really calm when he helps them. And then he – it’s playtime when he gets home. If he gets home before they go to bed, they just, you know, are playing, having a good time.

Once again, we see the value placed on remaining calm (i.e., not yelling) in one’s role as parent. One might note that it would certainly be substantially easier to be calm if one is playing the role of the “fun” parent whose return home signals “playtime.”

While Anita did not connect this episode to guilt and shame, we can see how these micro-level encounters pave the way for such emotions. We saw, in chapter four, that these mothers embraced new momism and the cultural expectations for good mothering. It is through the negotiation of meanings in the homes, the ways in which couples’ beliefs impact their parenting behaviors that these larger, cultural ideologies play themselves out. By casting the father as “fun” and the mother as “stern,” clearly the stage is set for mother blaming (Chess 1982). And blame, of course, carries with it the unpleasantness of guilt and shame. Just as the Thomas Theorem (1928) states, “if we define something as real, it is real in it’s consequences.” For these mothers to define their roles in the family as normal, or natural without regard for the imbalance of work load, stress and anxiety, the consequences of that “reality” will be present.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I examined mothering at the micro-level. Following Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) model, I began with a consideration of the activities in which the mother engaged. As Ruddick (1983/214) summarized, “all thought arises out of social practice.” “Maternal Thinking,” as Ruddick termed it, emerges out of a mother’s place in a culture. I looked closely at another aspect of the mothering culture by
observing her activities in the home. Specifically, how she constructed meanings and defined those activities in the context of her family. I found that, like the larger population, these mothers are performing the majority of the housework and childcare (Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kern and Hofferth 2001; Coltrane 2000; Hochschild 1989). Also consistent with the literature, most of the mothers did not speak of this as terribly unfair (Frisco and Williams 2003; Daphne, Shelton and Luschen 1995; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994).

The doing of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) in the home places substantially more burdens on mothers than on fathers (Lorber 2005; Coltrane 2001). While these women acknowledged their increased responsibilities, the perceived “naturalness” of the maternal and paternal roles helped to explain the manner in which they spoke. Most of the discussions regarding division of labor in the home carried a tone of humor and lightness. It was as though all of the mothers understood, and the points were so obvious as to be nearly comical. Some of the families had clearly defined duties – the mother stayed at home as nurturer and the father was employed as provider. In other homes, both spouses were employed. In either case, the mother assumed responsibility for the majority of the tasks, and doing so, as Van Egeren (2004) noted was “a given.”

Some of the mothers did note their disapproval at how the implicit inequality in their homes was played out with their spouses. Alicia mentioned the resentment she felt and the anger she harbored for the expectations that, as mom she should “do it all.” Her protests are met, for the most part, negatively from family members. She told the group numerous times how guilty her mother made her feel for her deviation from the
traditional mother. While her sons have begun to do their own laundry, her husband's lack of involvement in the "little things" Alicia described, such as notes from school, had not altered. In terms of defining activities as gender appropriate, or as "mother" or "father" specific, it does little good to re-define these tasks unless the couple arrives at these meanings together. Otherwise, the dynamics of mother-expected activities will continue to exist for the spouse and her attempts at re-defining will live only in her experience.

My second consideration of the micro-level involved the roles, or expectations associated with being a mother. Mothers have deeply internalized the expectations of new momism, and play out those expectations not only in larger social contexts, but in the family. The norms of motherhood create an environment whereby work outside of the home and good mothering clash and induce guilt (Warner 2005; Doucet 2000; Hays 1996, 1998). For many of the white mothers, in order to resolve this conflict, they have re-defined employment as healthy to themselves and to their children. Whereas African-American mothers in chapter five found relief from the guilt when they left their jobs, these white mothers found relief in this process of meaning construction (Hays 1996).

As Jackson and Mannix (2004) noted, the psychopathological problems experienced by children is often blamed on mothers in some fashion. Mothers tend to feel responsible for the overall well-being of their children, including their long-term mental health. Naturally, this breeds the experience of guilt and shame when the mother feels she acts in a way that might be harmful to her child. The mothers in these groups mentioned, without any probing on my behalf, the concern and guilt they felt as a result of their yelling at their children. We can see the influence of the parenting books that
stress the importance of “healthy” relationships with children. We can see the enactment of motherhood norms of “patience” and “kindness.” But in all of this we see a mother struggling to enact a reaction that may or may not be her authentic response. She is constantly negotiating within the expectations of good mothering.

The third way that I took into account mothering at the micro-level was through the relations, or interconnections between the mother, her children and their father. As McBride et al (2005) demonstrated, parents’ beliefs about theirs or their spouses’ role in the family helps us to understand their performance of co-parenting. Beliefs initiate processes of interaction. When both spouses believe the father to be the “fun” parent, and the mother to be the “stern” one, the family will interact in such ways. We saw this in some of these accounts as mothers described the dynamics of working in and around the father. Some described their child’s father as performing as dad without any real participation in the child’s life. Others described the dad as the one who signaled “play.”

Research has consistently shown that women report more guilt and shame that do men (Abell and Gecas 1997). Maternal guilt runs through all of the literature, but a parallel term, paternal guilt, does not exist. According to Lillian Rubin (1983/196):

When a man shares parenting equally with his wife, he’s more apt to share also some part of her inner experience. Then he, too, will monitor his behavior, will worry about what he does and how he does it, will feel responsible if something goes wrong. But, even among those men, I have never seen the corrosive, all-encompassing guilt and fear that’s so common in women...He hasn’t internalized the belief that a child’s future rests with him alone, that almost anything he does today will exact some terrible price tomorrow, that an illness may be the result of his neglect, that “neglect” means not being there always and on time.

It would involve a deconstruction of the mothering ideology, a questioning of the assumed naturalness of gendered duties and a redefinition of mother and father — all
within the context of the family – in order to begin to alter the scene in which mothering is experienced. While steps have been taken by researchers, as well as by individuals engaged in parenting, we must keep in mind the psychological toll that the enactment of new momism takes on mothers. Overload, anxiety, resentment, guilt and shame coated the experiences of the mothers with whom I spoke. Some recognized it and felt betrayed by it. Most seemed to work within the “reality” of it. All of them were behaving as mothers, and mothering is exhaustive work. In the following chapter, I will review my original research goals, summarize my findings, and offer suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER VII

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study, I set out to explore the experience of guilt and shame for mothers. In so doing, it has never been my intention to focus specifically on the negative aspects of mothering without acknowledging the tremendous joys and pleasures that children provide. Clearly, mothering is a daunting task within a culture so inundated with expectations for complete sacrifice and devotion, often at the expense of self. What I have not discussed are the many, many moments of utter happiness that children bring to the lives of mothers. The women with whom I spoke deeply love their children and love mothering them. My goal is to expose the culture within which these women enact this mothering, and the price they often pay for the socially constructed, ideological “good mother.” In this conclusion chapter, I will review my research goals, summarize my findings, discuss limitations, and offer suggestions for future work in this area.

Goals of the Dissertation

In chapter one, I outlined four specific goals of this dissertation. Those goals were: 1) To understand a mother’s experience of guilt and shame, 2) To explore the relationship between guilt and shame and the psychological well-being of mothers, 3) To investigate how guilt and shame are experienced on the macro, meso, and micro-societal levels and, 4) To allow the voices of mothers to further distinguish guilt and shame as distinct emotions. In the following section, I return to these goals and discuss my findings.
Understanding a Mother's Experience. The notion of maternal guilt is so pervasive in our culture as to be considered a "natural" component of motherhood (Seagram and Daniluk 2002). To read a popular press book or piece of social scientific research on motherhood is to read about guilt. That mothers experience guilt and shame in relation to their roles as mothers is the most prevalent finding in mothering research, though it has not specifically been researched with any depth. It simply is. As Adrienne Rich (1976/217) said of mothers: "the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt."

But, what kind of systematic understanding of guilt and shame in regards to mothering does social science offer? There have been so few empirical works that have specifically explored this topic, there is much we assume, yet much that needs inspection and analysis. This study has sought to provide a more in-depth awareness of the experience of guilt and shame by allowing the voices of mothers to tell the stories. By speaking to twenty-six mothers, in five focus groups, I was able to probe the culture in which guilt and shame emerge. And, it did not take long. As Meghan said, approximately ten minutes into the first focus group I conducted, "That's so funny. A lot of our responses have been like there's almost a guilt spin to it."

What I found was that mothers do indeed speak of guilt and shame in regards to mothering. Some of the mothers, like Karen, spoke of maternal guilt with a tone of impatience:

I think I spent a very, very long time with that whole guilt thing. I mean, I think I finally got over it — she's six — so, I started with the good mother. You know, the
good mother probably doesn’t work full-time. She’s raising her kids, da-da-da-da, and I scraped that and that’s just not it. Throughout the group in which Karen participated, she spoke many times of her dismissal of guilt, and her refusal to participate in the “good mother” culture of high expectations. While I can not definitively dismiss Karen’s rejection of guilt, on the other hand, she did speak of “good mothering” expectations to the extent that her immersion in this ideology was clear. She also spoke of her desire for part-time work that would allow her more time with her children. A desire she finally abandoned when her youngest child began kindergarten. Has Karen really abandoned the guilt and shame, or is her adamant denial of it her way of reconciling the aspects of work and family that are seemingly out of her control? Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957) suggests that when individuals are met with conflicting information, they often dismiss the information so as to restore stability. It appears as though Karen, and others in these groups, engage in cognitive dissonance as a means of bringing symmetry to asymmetrical situations brought on when the ideologies of motherhood conflict with their real lives.

Other mothers were more willing to admit the guilt they experienced in regards to mothering. Often the guilt stemmed from a perceived sense of failure in regards to performing as the “good mother.” New momism requires that moms devote themselves fully to their children, and when anything short of that occurred, they often expressed feelings of guilt. Samantha, who stays at home with her children, still experiences guilt when she desires alone time: “I should be going and taking care of the kids…and, you feel guilt about your alone time.” Others, such as Nancy, spoke of guilt in regards to parenting books and magazines: “We read it, and it’s another kind of thing we haven’t
done, and we feel guilty.” Many of the mothers admitted feeling guilty for working outside of the home when the message seems to be, “good mothers” stay home with their children. In nearly every group there was mention made of the guilt one felt when yelling at her children. To Alison, yelling at her kids at the end of a stressful day made her feel guilty, “as if I’m being selfish.”

In terms of race, all of mothers with whom I spoke were familiar with guilt and shame. All of them had well internalized our cultures expectations for “good mothering” and maternal guilt was prevalent in the interactions among white and African-American mothers. The racial variations most prominent involved the ways in which white mothers sought to distance themselves from the stay-at-home label, while African-American mothers did not. For those African-American mothers who experienced guilt from employment, leaving the workforce provided relief from the guilt and I heard no attempts to apologize for their new roles. White mothers, on the other hand, wanted to not resemble June Cleaver, the consummate stay-at-home television mom, and made numerous mentions of their college degrees, their desire for part-time work, or reminders of their previous work lives.

These racial variations are further reminder for the need to consider motherhood from the perspective of multiple groups and not assume that it looks the same on all women (Collins 1994; 2001). The great bulk of research speaks of mothering without distinguishing the whiteness of the research. More often than not, studies that announce findings regarding mothering attitudes (Ranson 2004; Seagram and Duniluk 2002), work and family guilt (Simon 1995), mother blame (Jackson and Mannix 2004), or “Supermoms” (DeMeis and Perkins 1996) are actually reporting findings related to white
mothers. The invisibility of gender (see Kimmel 2004) that exposed the extent to which findings based on male participants could not be applied to women with the same logic should be extended in regards to race. The lack of literature regarding African-American mothering suggests that mothers are mothers, and experiences will be the same. In this study, I have found evidence that racial communities do impact constructions of motherhood and therefore must be considered with the same fervor that generates our desires to investigate mothering as a whole.

**Guilt, Shame and Psychological Well-Being.** An additional goal of this study was to explore guilt and shame as it relates to a mother’s psychological well-being. These mothers spoke of resentment for the lack of equality in the division of labor in the home. They spoke of fatigue, fear, resentment, anger, stress, anxiety, depression, guilt and shame. When Candace could not be present at her son’s school as often as they asked she said, “I feel bad, I wish I could…” As the research indicates, guilt and shame do not feel good, and can often accelerate an already depressive state (Turner 1999; Tangney 1993). My findings indicate relationships among guilt, shame, and a myriad of additional negative indicators of well-being. The continual striving to meet the expectations of new momism comes at a cost to women.

While the mastery survey instrument indicated that these middle class women all have a fairly high sense of control, what I did not systematically measure were their symptoms of depression. The focus group format made it difficult to link particular scores to particular mothers, and so future research should attempt to isolate these correlations for more precise relationships between guilt, shame and depressive symptomology. Relying on their stories, however, I am able to assert that the experience
of guilt and shame is caught up in a host of other unpleasant conditions (fatigue, anger, stress, anxiety, and fear).

A thorough review in Tangney and Dearing (2002) revealed the links between guilt, shame and psychological maladjustment. Studies utilizing the Tests of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA), an instrument designed to measure guilt and shame, find proneness to shame most highly linked to psychological problems. Guilt, with its focus on the specific behavior, can often lead the individual to make amends or seek to change the behavior deemed negative. On the other hand, shame involves a more “global condemnation of the self” (118) and is related to a host of indices of psychopathology (120). While neither guilt nor shame feel particularly good, the experience of shame actually leaves one vulnerable to a variety of maladjustments.

The manner in which the women in this study spoke of guilt and shame indicated the unpleasantness of it. I asked one group to think about what might make them guilty. The following interaction took place:

Nancy: If my child had poor self-esteem, I’d feel terrible. I’d feel like it was my fault somehow.

Lori (a white mother, raising an adopted African-American son): I kind of struggle with the fact that I’m not black...that my son would be best served with an African-American family, but it wasn’t in the cards. And I think that’s okay. But it’s still something deep down I struggle with.

Emily: She’s (her daughter) not school-aged yet, obviously, but being an educator, I think you get to the point where if she or any of our children to come are struggling, are having learning disabilities or whatever, I think I’ll feel guilty about that, about not being able to fix it...

Lori: You just want to make it right for your kid.

Emily: Perfect – not just right...
Samantha (who had spoken of her own mother’s abusiveness): Mine would be doing something that I know my Mom would do...It’s just not who I am, but accidentally. There would be a lot of guilt over it.

In this exchange, the manner in which the mothers quickly surmise what they might feel guilty about stirs emotions. Clearly, it does not feel good to experience the dread and fear they are expressing. We can also note the heavy sense of responsibility in their speech. They perceive responsibility for their children’s self-esteem, their own race, and the fear of becoming abusive though “it’s just not who I am.” Perhaps we do not need an instrument to measure their psychological state. It is clear that carrying such enormous emotions and perceived responsibilities for another feels bad. We also know that one’s ability to care for one’s children is hindered when that person is experiencing all of these maladjustments. In a twist of irony, as mothers struggle to maintain the “good mother” status, the very struggle places them at risk for psychological maladjustments that may hinder their abilities to parent effectively.

I recently received an email from a woman friend who is aware of this research only vaguely. In our exchange, we were discussing motherhood and the emotional pushes and pulls of daily life. Her reply read:

Well, it is good to know I'm not the only one going through this CRAP! And I have been in a big funk with the depression, stress, etc. I have pimples all on my face and Saturday I took a TWO HOUR nap and still went to bed at 11pm, tired. Then on Tues. I took another nap (due to severe headache) and again had no trouble sleeping that night and then woke up at 6:45am and Sam took (the) boys to school and I went back to sleep until 10am. It's kind of worried me like what's wrong with me? Anyway, I've been feeling reflective and wondering where I want my life to go, and do I have that choice (for financial reasons). I also find myself dreaming of a weekend (or longer) where I could go away somewhere and just be by myself - NO kids, NO husband, NO friends, NO family, JUST ME!!!!!!! Then of course, I get mommy guilt because if I really loved my kids I wouldn't want to get away from them. But I gotta tell you if I have to referee one

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more fight about who's toy is who's (even though they are identical) I think I'll FREAK out!!!!

My concern when I read this response was two-fold. On the one hand, it was written in the vernacular of the mother. Mother’s simply speak this way with generally no recognition of the seriousness of the language. If any other aspect of a woman’s life resulted in this level of stress and depression, I suspect there would be recognition of it’s severity. As I have stated, the notion of maternal guilt has been normalized and accepted as a natural feature of motherhood. As one focus group member commented, “I think it’s inborn.” My second concern involves the parallels with depressive symptomology. The extensive sleeping, the skin break-outs, the tone of utter anxiety, combined with a sense of hopelessness. Her fantasy of breaking free from her stressors, even temporarily, was immediately met with guilt. A good mother who loves her children would never desire distance from them, not even to temporarily meet her own needs.

Douglas and Michaels (2004) concluded their text with a discussion of the reality of the psychological costs of new momism to mothers. New momism, they argued, “draws its strength from our fears and anxieties, and in the process, has become an increasingly reactionary ideology, resembling the feminine mystique with each passing year” (298). As history documents, the feminine mystique trapped many women in an ideology that proved unhealthy and unreasonable. Friedan (1963), in The Feminine Mystique, told the stories of women suffering from “the problem that has no name” (20), of women that “slept more than an adult needed to sleep” (30), and took “tranquilizers like cough drops” (31). Like the women in the 1950’s and 1960’s the mothers with whom I spoke, as the sender of the email above echoes, often feel physically and
psychologically bad under the weight of new momism. As Douglas and Michael’s warned, “Unless we start admitting to ourselves and each other that it’s not always a walk in the park, our guilt, anger, fear and depression will continue to go underground” (323). The serious implications that guilt and shame have for mothers – the ways in which these emotions limit a mother’s propensity to meet her needs, which in turn affects her abilities to provide care for her children, needs to be acknowledged not only by mothers in these situations, but by social scientific research.

**Macro, Meso, and Micro-Societal Levels.** In the literature concerning the division of household labor and perceived perceptions of fairness, there have emerged many explanations concerning the sources of perceptions (e.g., Doucet 2000; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994). In this large body of literature, sources such as gender, ideology, time availability, power and resources, and household interactions are noted as predictors for perceptions of fairness. John et al (1995) noted that in-group social comparisons occur which might explain racial variations in men and household labor. All of these studies, put together, touch upon contextual factors occurring at the macro, meso and micro-societal levels. The contribution of this study has been the social-ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner 1979) guiding my analysis, which has allowed me to consider mothering in the specific contexts of each level.

Beginning at the macro-level, I demonstrated the impact of culturally specific ideologies on mothers’ constructions of self-as-mother. No racial variation was noted as the mothers’ spoke of their conceptions of what it meant to be a “good mother.” Without hesitation the mothers described a “good mother” consistent with Douglas and Michaels (2004) notion of new momism. A “good mother” is her child’s most qualified caregiver.

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A “good mother” gives fully of herself to her children; physically, intellectually, emotionally and psychologically. A “good mother” is kind, patient, and loving. Unfortunately, the lived experiences of the mothers often do not match these expectations, resulting in guilt and shame. Even as the mothers acknowledged the falsity of the ideology in which they struggled, they internalized the rhetoric and the cultural symbols and negatively evaluated themselves when they sensed they had stepped out of line. The ideology is supported in the media in the form of parenting books and magazines which only one mother stated to have not consumed. The macro impinges on mothers’ lives, encouraging them to make decisions that contradict the self, encouraging them make decisions with little to no evidence to support it, and providing a roadmap for potential strategies.

When we hear that no racial variations were readily apparent in descriptions of the “good mother,” we may be tempted to conceptualize motherhood as similar across racial and ethnic lines. In many ways it is. However, if we stop there, we miss a vital piece of the puzzle provided by the meso-level context. I found that white mothers strove to separate themselves from the label of stay-at-home mom, while African-American mothers more eagerly embraced the role. The process of social comparison happens at the community level (Hughes and Demo 1989). When the white, middle class mothers of this study engaged in social comparison, they sought to disengage from the stay-at-home mother image by reminding the group of their educational attainments, their desires for part-time work, or their utter amazement that they were not employed in the workforce. The guilt that all expressed concerning employment and motherhood was not assuaged by staying at home as they struggled with this “June Cleaver” image. The African-American
mothers spoke passionately of their abilities to be at home when their children arrived, to
bake and “do the things a mother should do.”

Feminist scholarship on mothering has largely ignored the experiences of
minority women (Collins 1994). In a review of the mothering literature, whether
academic or popular press, we see the word “mother” where “white mother” would read
more appropriately. The experiences of white mothers, more thoroughly researched, has
eclipsed the experiences of other groups and become the basis on which we gauge
mothering. Black mothers, Collins (1992) reminded us, mother beneath a different
historical backdrop, with different meanings, fears and motivations guiding her. As we
read in chapter five, Samantha, a white mother, sent her child off to school in whatever
clothes her child imagined wearing, without fear of the social costs. Alicia, an African-
American mother, much to her sons’ chagrin, forced them to consider their outward
appearance in their choice of clothing. In Samantha’s case, she and her child can
essentially change their minds, choosing to dress within the norms of school attire and all
is restored. For Alicia, her sons’ cannot change their race, and will always enter a world
in which she fears for their acceptance and survival. These kinds of racial distinctions are
vitaly important in mothering research and should not be consumed within a white
model. Probing experiences at the meso-level encourages consideration of such factors.

Through an analysis of the micro-context, I was able to observe with more detail,
how mothering felt to these women. I explored the micro-level as a pattern of activities,
roles and relations – all arenas in which mothers construct meanings. Consistent with the
larger population of women, these mothers are performing the larger portion of
housework and childcare, and tend to not perceive the inequality as unfair. Many
described their husband's contributions as "help." Constructing their roles as managers of the home and the children places more responsibilities upon them, and increases their role overload. It is this increased sense of responsibility that contributes to a mother's sense that she is to blame for any perceived abnormality in her child. As Alicia said, though her husband cooks and cares for the children in many ways, it is she who maintains contact with the school and other community relations. Nicole told of placing her infant on her husband's lap with instructions to "monitor your child." Similarly, Alison drove her children to her husband so that she could bake pies for a holiday meal. This increased sense of responsibility places mothers in a more central position to their children such that they are more inclined to experience guilt and shame. Yet, consistent with the literature to date, most of these women found their situations to be equal, even when they clearly were not. As Jewel said, "So, as far as the chores, and breaking up the parenting, I think we're pretty equal, even thought there's times when I feel like I'm just going in circles like a rat on a wheel."

In terms of micro-level interactions, we saw how mothers often described their partners as "fun dads." While mothers go about their mothering duties, in accord with societal expectations of what is "natural," involved fathering is looked upon by society as above and beyond the expected and is socially rewarded (Dienhart 1998). Within this gendered construction of parenting, the mothers described themselves as the enforcers, or the "stern" ones in contrast to the parent who "plays." Daniel Paquette (cited in Roggman 2004) emphasized that fathers are the primary playmates of children, while a mother's function is principally one of nurturer. Contrasting mothers and fathers, Paquette argued that this father-child play serves a motivational and developmental
purpose. The kind of play style in which fathers engage, “tends to be wilder and
physically more rambunctious and, as a result, more exhilarating, while mother-child play
tends to be more conventional and verbal” (Roggman 2004/230). It is my argument that,
drawing these kinds of distinctions casts the mother firmly in the role of caregiver,
making it difficult for her to enforce, nurture and play. Paquette’s model is built upon the
assumption that attachment to fathers is formed primarily through play, while attachment
to mothers is formed through caregiving. This division of roles sets the mother up to
experienced as the “bad guy” to the father “fun guy.”

Consistent with their general perceived sense of fairness regarding the division of
labor in the home, the mothers also perceived this division of “good cop/bad cop” as
normal and fair. Jewel described it thus:

He (her husband) gets really excited about doing things with them. He gets on the
floor and plays with my son. I’ll say, “Wait ‘til your Daddy gets home, he’ll get
down there and roll your cars around with you.” Because if I’m doing things
during the day, I really don’t have time to just get down with my three-year old
and play with cars every day, all day.

The flip side of this for many of the mothers involves the increased work load it
places on them. As Alison spoke of her ex-husbands reluctance to co-parent when they
were married, she said:

He just really didn’t want the hassle, I don’t think. But he would give them a
bath. That was his job. He would always give them baths at night before
bedtime. And that was like the only twenty minutes of peace I would get. I
would just run upstairs and read or do whatever it was that I wanted to do.

Post-separation, according to Alison, “He makes a spectacle of himself with all the kids!
Everywhere he goes, everyone’s going to see what a great Dad he is – he’s got these great
kids, and where’s that Mom?”

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Julie’s analogy of her daughter’s father responding to their child as his “pet” is an interesting one. She said:

You come and play with your pet. There’s no real responsibility. Because the mom’s always picking up after the pet, right? The mom walks the dog and cleans up after the dog and gives the dog a bath and takes it to the vet to get its shots. So, that’s that.

The stark division of parenting that divides mothers as caregivers and fathers as playmates is another piece of the puzzle explaining the preponderance of guilt and shame that mothers experience. If a father experiences his role as the one responsible for the kind of development that stems from play, as Paquette (see Roggman 2004) argued, then mothers carry the remaining load. In that load are the less attractive duties such as assuring that the home is clean, that clothing is available and clean, that food is prepared and healthy, that injuries are treated with medicines that sting, that tangles are removed from hair, that homework is completed as directed, that doctor appointments are kept, that shoes actually fit, that clothes match, teeth are brushed, nails are cut, friends are appropriate, television does not exceed its limits, and bed time is consistent. Not near as much fun as a movie on a school night, as Jewel reported. Moreover, this increased load is what is expected of mothers. When a child comes to school in clothes that do not match, or un-brushed teeth, the father can more readily afford a relaxed, “who cares?” attitude. After all, it is not the father whom the world will hold accountable for the child’s appearance. And so, the mother will harbor the guilt and shame for all of the missteps that are bound to occur as she plays out her role, especially in interaction with the more “fun” parent.
Distinguishing Guilt and Shame. The last of the goals I set out to achieve in this dissertation was to allow the voices of mothers to distinguish guilt and shame as distinct emotions. While the word guilt is more dominate in our cultural lexicon, I proposed that mothers would describe experiencing shame. Guilt is conceptualized as a negative appraisal in relation to a specific task, while shame is experienced at the level of the self (Tangney 1993). I actually found that mothers are experiencing both.

According to Tangney and Dearing (2002), an important distinction between guilt and shame involves their relationships to psychological symptoms. They make the case that guilt can actually be adaptive. In other words, because the experience of guilt involves bad feelings related to specific behaviors:

...there is an implicit distinction between self and behavior that essentially protects the self from unwarranted global devaluation while keeping the door open for changing the guilt-inducing behaviors and/or for making amends for its consequences (118).

In this way, the authors argued, “guilt doesn’t look so bad.” It can prompt a person to examine their behaviors, make amends for them, without the threat of psychological symptomatology. On the other hand, because shame does involve a global devaluation of the self, it is linked to psychopathology. Tangney and Dearing reviewed the research that has explored these relationships, revealing that indeed a relationship exists between shame and psychological maladjustment. The empirical evidence shows a tendency to experience shame is linked to depression, anxiety, and eating disorders. While the relationships exist across age groups, women are shown to consistently report higher levels of guilt and shame. The implications for mothers in light of Tangney and Dearing’s work are important to consider. If mothers are indeed experiencing guilt, as
defined above, then our concerns are lessened. These experiences allow them to reflect upon their behaviors and potentially make amends. However, if they are experiencing shame, we should take notice, as the psychological ramifications are more dire.

In chapter four, I discussed the reaction of mothers to the question of “good mothering.” I found that, in regards to “good mothering,” their language was more indicative of shame in that their sense of failure to live up to the ideological good mother was experienced at the level of self. In saying this, I do not mean to definitively exclude feelings of guilt, but I observed that when the mothers spoke of the traits they felt defined the “good mother,” and their inabilitys to live up to those standards, their words resonated with the qualities indicative of shame. Even when some of the mothers spoke of their behaviors, they spoke of them with an awareness of self-as-mother. For example, Jewel told the group, “But I am really hard on myself as a parent, because I don’t want my kids to look back at their life and say, ‘oh our Mom was just horrible and she did this and she did that.’” In this statement, Jewel is not distinguishing between behavior and self, rather she questions her concerns related to her mothering with a more global fear of failure. As Tangney and Dearing (2002/25) articulated, one dimension of shame concerns the “operation of the self.” Specifically, the self “is split into observing and observed ‘selves.’” In this sense, Jewel is not only observing her own mothering, but experiences her mothering as observed by her children. As with the experience of guilt, Jewell is concerned with the effect her behavior has on others, but add to that the concern with other’s evaluation of herself, and it becomes more clear that her language reveals the experience of shame.
When I asked the women to speak of their relationships to parenting books and magazines, their responses were more suggestive of guilt than shame. Several noted that the books they read made them “feel guilty.” Others noted the “pressure” it placed on mothers. But they were more capable of dismissing this kind of macro-level influence than the “good mother” ideology. Subsequently, some described reading material that left them conflicted but, in the end, they were able to sort out the information with the self having remained intact. For example, when Clair who told the group that, after watching a popular television psychologist, she said she felt “like the worst mom in the world.” She felt as though she did the very things he told viewers not to do. However, she concluded, “You know, this is life…I just wing it.” Angela commented shortly after, “I think books is a kind of take it or leave it thing.” The experience with “expert advice” might induce feelings of pressure, doubt and guilt, but the mothers seem more capable of rebounding, perhaps even more renewed in their own convictions of childrearing. The resulting phenomenological experience may be one of regret or remorse (guilt), but not necessarily feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness.

At the meso-level I noticed again the language of guilt. As the women looked out into their communities and reflected on themselves as mothers, their appraisals tended to remain focused on behavior. Their comments included; “Should I be doing this that way?” and, “Maybe I’m not doing something right.” Even as they spoke of the judgment they felt from other mothers, or a sense of competition, they did not appear to be experiencing it as a global failure in mothering. They acknowledged it as frustrating, aggravating, and even analogous to “junior high,” yet they did not question their selves-as-mothers. I am not suggesting they were able to dismiss community appraisals.
However, I did not detect the sense of shame. An interaction between Candace and Jennifer illustrates this point. The group was discussing their children’s school environments. Candace told the group that her son’s school expected lunches to be sent in reusable containers. She continued:

Candace: They really don’t like it if you – because it’s not environmentally friendly if you send something in plastic or whatever, but I get up at 5:00 and I do the farm. I do all the work on the farm and probably fifty percent of the time, his lunch ends up in a plastic bag instead of one of the containers. You know, and I fret about the fact that I’m not sending environmentally friendly –

Jennifer: Oh, tell him to bring the bags home.

Candace: But the moms talk about it. They do. I know they talk about it. I have heard them talk about it.

Jennifer: It’s only if they say it to your kids that it matters, but do you think your kid picks up on it?

Candace: Absolutely.

In this exchange, we can hear the “fretting” and guilt in Candace’s speech. She feels as though others will disapprove of her environmentally unfriendly practices. Just prior to this exchange, Candace expressed guilt in the environment of her son’s school because so many of the mothers were available during the day but because she worked full-time, she was not. Jennifer’s comment reveals an important transition. Does this information trickle down to your child? If so, then perhaps it should be of concern. If not, it is at least slightly more dismissible.

At the micro-level, the language of shame was most evident when the mothers spoke of the regret that followed yelling at their children. Had they expressed their reactions as guilt, they would have indicated regret at the behavior, and perhaps some desire to make amends, as in the instances above. However, for these mothers, the
experience of yelling appears to be related to their sense of who they are. As several of
the moms noted, “I’m a yeller.” They did not say that they “yelled,” rather they were “a
yeller.” It is a part of who they are. Therefore, engaging in this kind of behavior was
associated with a more global devaluation of the self. Additionally, the degree of distress
was greater than in their discussions of books and magazines, or community level
interactions. The tone of regret detected with guilt was replaced by a tone of pain.

The devaluation of themselves begins with the sense that they have hurt their
children with their loss of control. Jewel worried about the effect her yelling had on her
kids saying, “I feel bad when I get to that point.” Sharon responded that yelling makes
her feel “really, really bad...I’m like, I’ve done it to them.” Anita said she “yelled like a
crazy person, and I have two little kids.” In all of these examples, the mothers felt they
were performing poorly as mothers in relation to their children. Instead of undoing some
aspect of their behavior, they are undoing some aspect of their selves. The risk, of
course, is the relationship these feelings of shame have to other psychological symptoms
such as depression and anxiety.

Alicia so wants to avoid yelling and anger outbursts that she goes to great lengths
to protect her children and herself from them. She told the group:

Sometimes we have really bad mornings, and sometimes we argue about things,
and in particular, my older two. If I say, “get out of bed!” “I don’t want to get
out of bed!” And it goes back and forth, and I never want them to leave with
negative words in their heads. I’ve just seen too many school shootings and
things happening, and I’ve looked at those parents thinking, how many of them
are crying because their kid is dead and the kid left home, and you didn’t say “I
love you,” or you were fighting or something like that. Or, “we’ll talk about this
when you get home, and you’re gonna get in trouble!” And then you never see
that kid again. So, when they go to bed at night or when they leave the house, I
always try to make it positive. And when it’s not positive, I feel guilty about that
because I don’t want the last word that I speak to them before they go to sleep or leave the house to be negative. I really worry about that a lot.

Alicia’s desire to keep peace in her home, to assure that she does not part from her children with negative words requires extensive emotion work on her part (Hochschild 1979). Even so, she still expresses guilt at the fear of sending her children off to school with “negative words in their heads.” But in this language of guilt that Alicia describes, we also see the intermingling of shame, anxiety and the potential for depressive symptomologies.

In Of Woman Born, Rich (1976/223) recalled the birth of her son. She wrote, “Soon I would begin to understand the full weight and burden of maternal guilt, that daily, hourly, Am I doing what is right? Am I doing too much? The institution of motherhood finds women more or less guilty of having failed their children…” If it were only guilt, that would be unpleasant enough. Motherhood, as is told through the stories of the women in this study, and countless other publications, is laced with mentions of guilt. Mothers worry about the effect their behavior has on their child. They are constantly undoing some aspect of that behavior. They desire to confess, apologize or repair. The say, “I did that terrible thing.” As the literature stated (see Scheff 2003; Tangney and Dearing 2002; Tangney et al 1996), they are demonstrating guilt tendencies. They also say, “I did that terrible thing.” That is, they also feel the distress that comes with shame. Their self splits into observing and observed, and they experience powerlessness and feelings of worthlessness.

This study has distinguished guilt and shame and revealed the places in mothers’ lives when they are more prone to experience one or the other emotion. Tangney and
Dearing (2002) argued against the idea that certain situations or behaviors give rise to one or the other emotion. Instead, through empirical research, they maintained that it is individuals who are more guilt-prone, or shame-prone, and not the specific circumstances involved. However, their studies administered survey instruments concerning the likelihood of experiencing guilt or shame, largely out of the contexts of their real lives. In this work, I targeted a specific population (mothers) and allowed their responses to open-ended questions to reveal evidence of guilt and shame. In so doing, I argue that for mothers, there are circumstances that are more likely to produce guilt, while others are more likely to produce shame.

While maternal guilt is well documented, we know less about maternal shame. In light of the relationship between shame and psychological maladjustments, it is crucial for research to continue to explore the ideology of new momism. The demands placed upon mothers exceed the boundaries of realistic possibilities for women. They cannot be all things to their children at all times, and the pursuit of such heights is contributing to their already over-loaded lives. The gendered nature of parenting results in women paying higher costs (Lorber 2005). One of the foundations supporting the gendering of parenthood is the belief that mothers are “naturally” more inclined to caretake children. This belief is upheld not only by fathers in our society, but also by mothers, as evidenced by the acceptance most of the women in this study voiced regarding their roles in the family.

Isolating those factors more likely to induce guilt and those more likely to induce shame contributes to the social sciences in a variety of ways. It would expand our understanding of these social emotions in the lives of mothers and the impact upon their
psychological well-being. Doing so would contribute to the body of feminist mothering literature that has sought to expose the ways in which women respond to the dominate definitions of motherhood (Chase and Rogers 2001). Further distinguishing guilt and shame in mothering would take the “so what?” out of mentions of maternal guilt. To say to someone that mothers experience guilt often results in some form of laughter. The reaction is one of, “Of course they do. Was there ever a question of this?” Little consideration is given to how guilt and shame feels to mothers, and how these feelings impact her ability to interact with her children. Rather than take for granted that mothers experience guilt and shame, we need further deconstruction of the ideologies of motherhood that give life to the unpleasant side of mothering.

Limitations

Like any study, this one is not without its limitations. Because so little systematic research exists on the topic of mothering, guilt and shame, this project serves as an exploratory investigation. In a study of this sort, a certain amount of homogeneity is accepted (Knodel 1993; Walker 1992). I chose to focus on racial distinctions, selecting mothers on the basis of race rather than diverse ethnicities, social class, educational levels or sexual orientation. My sample consisted of heterosexual mothers residing in one region of the United States, all middle class and with above-average educational levels. Therefore, the findings presented here are not generalizable to the larger population of women. In fact, one of the disadvantages of focus groups is that this technique limited my ability to generalize my findings. While these data did produce evidence of racial variations in mothering, I cannot generalize to the larger population.
A second limitation stems more directly from the exploratory nature of this study. Because so little qualitative research has addressed the topic of guilt and shame for mothers, the construction of my interview guide, while guided by my own observations and the mothering literature, could have more directly addressed guilt and shame. It was my intention to allow the topic to emerge from broader questions regarding the mothering role, but in retrospect, asking direct questions as to their emotional experiences might have further illuminated the distinctions between guilt and shame. These data do provide the foundation for future works, specifically interview guidelines, investigating this topic.

**Future Research**

As stated above, one limitation of this study involves the homogeneity of the sample. Future works should further explore the experiences of mothers across ethnicity, age, social class, and sexual orientation. While this study revealed a great number of issues that are of concern to middle-class women, both African-American and white, more information is needed regarding the worries and anxieties of mothers who are struggling to meet the basic needs of their children. Might working and lower class mothers experience guilt and shame with the same ferocity but concerning different matters? While a middle class mother expresses guilt for working outside of the home, we may find that women less privileged feel guilty when unemployment impedes their abilities to feed their children. Similarly, this study consisted primarily of mothers with young children. Again, we might expect to find differences among mothers with older children or children no longer living in the home.

With a sample consisting of heterosexual mothers, I was able to draw conclusions regarding the gendered nature of parenting. These mothers reported that they and their
partners were “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987) in their enactment of parenting roles. We saw the repercussions of this for mothers specifically as it involved increased labor in the home, increased childcare responsibilities, guilt and shame. Future works that explore mothering among lesbian mothers would provide another layer of analysis regarding gender, mothering, guilt and shame. As Benkov (1998) pointed out, often times when lesbian couples mother, they must negotiate parenting within their consciously created family structure, and traditional stereotypes of motherhood. The degree to which lesbian mothers define and enact new momism would be beneficial to mothering studies.

Attention should continue to be placed on the psychological cost to women who experience guilt and shame. Utilizing mixed methodologies, as called for by Arendell (2000/1193) would allow for the bridge between the interpretive and the positivistic. Administering an instrument such as the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA) as developed by Tangney and associates (see Tangney and Dearing 2002) would provide statistical analysis of guilt and shame. This measure presents the participant with a variety of scenarios, asking her to rate her response to situations likely to induce guilt or shame. Combining empirical data such as these with qualitative accounts could provide a more thorough account of guilt and shame for mothers and further develop theory.

Another neglected area of research in the mothering literature involves the decline in sexual interest mentioned by a great number of women (Warner 2005). Mothers are reporting depression, and as a result, many are prescribed anti-depressant medications. As Rich (1976/264) noted, “A woman in depression usually doesn’t welcome sex.” Warner noted that the women with whom she spoke exhibited a “depressing twist to the
denial of self that underlay millennial motherhood: a pervasive, dreary loss of sexuality” (127). The medical industry scurries to find the newest drug to treat erectile dysfunctions in men, yet vast numbers of women have simply shut down their sexuality with little to no notice from the medical or social scientific fields. Future works would benefit from explorations into the relationships among guilt and shame, which research has shown to be associated with depression (e.g., Tangney and Dearing 2002; O’Connor et al 1998), and the loss of sexuality, which often accompanies depression.

This research has demonstrated the myriad of ways in which mothers experience guilt and shame. Living in a culture such as ours, with strict mandates encapsulated in the contemporary ideological “good mother” results in women held to unrealistic standards. Interactions in communities and in the family perpetuate the ideals of motherhood that hold mothers fully accountable for the nurturance, care, health, and overall well-being of their child. Mothers themselves must confront the paradox of new momism and the price they pay for the continual striving to be all things, at all times, for their children. As Warner (2005/278) said, “Let’s free ourselves from the chains in our minds and spirits, as Friedan urged so long ago.” Also, fathers must engage in parenting beyond the gendered boundaries that still leave the majority of work in the hands of the mother. And social science must take seriously the social and mental health repercussions of this taken for granted phenomenon that to be a mother is to feel guilty.
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APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW

Ms. Sutherland:

Your protocol entitled "The Social and Cultural Forces..." (#20050213) has been approved and the approval letter is in the mail to you.

THE APPROVAL WILL EXPIRE February 18, 2006.

If at that time you intend to renew the project, an application for continuing review must be in our office and approved by the expiration date. There is no grace period.

- If changes are made to the protocol before the expiration date, you must submit an application for continuing review for IRB approval of the modifications. (Present only the form which is in current use. * Old forms will not be accepted.)

- When the project is completed, you must submit a final report form to complete the IRB file. (Present only the form which is current use. Old forms will not be accepted.)
*Please see:
http://www3.uakron.edu/orssp/public_html/compliance.html

You may send the form to Research Services and Sponsored Programs +2102.

(Change of mailing address, phone number or e-mail address must be forwarded to this office.)

Please call if you have questions.

Thank you.
Mary Samartgedes, IRB Secretary
The University of Akron
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs
225 S. Main St., 284 Polsky Building
Akron, Ohio 44325-2102
Phone 330-972-7666
Fax 330-972-6281
APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT FLYER

Seeking 6 to 8 Volunteers for a Focus Group

Doctoral Student in Sociology is conducting research on emotions and mothering.

If you are the mother of at least one minor child who lives at home with you – please consider participating in this research. For more information, or to volunteer please contact

Jean-Anne Sutherland
Department of Sociology
(330)972-7940
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

As part of my work toward a doctorate degree in the Department of Sociology, I am conducting a study of the experiences involved in mothering.

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the ways in which social and cultural factors in the lives of mothers contribute to their experience of mothering.

Confidentiality of you as a participant and your responses will be protected throughout the study and publication of results from this study. A pseudonym will replace your real name and any paperwork connecting your real name and pseudonym will be kept under lock and key.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You may refrain from participating without penalty or explanation. Please note that your responses are appreciated and will benefit the validity of this work.

It is estimated that each focus group will last approximately one to two hours. Your participation will involve responding to the questions presented to the group, and filling out a brief survey at the conclusion of each group.

Refreshments are made available to you.

If you have any questions regarding this study, you may contact me at my office:
University of Akron
Department of Sociology
(330)972-7940
Or my dissertation advisor, Dr. C. Andre Christie-Mizell
University of Akron
Department of Sociology
(330) 972-6940

Sincerely,

Jean-Anne Sutherland
This signature acknowledges that I have read, had explained, and received a copy of the Informed Consent Form for the Research project, "Exploring emotions in the Mothering Role"

Check all that apply:

I consent to participate in this project ( )
I consent to have this focus group audio-taped ( )

______________________________  ______________________
Signature of Participant        Date

______________________________
Researcher
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>&quot;Exploring Guilt and Shame in the Mothering Role&quot; Focus Group Interview Guide</th>
<th>Introductory Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ice breakers: Go around the room, each tell their name, name and ages of children. Go around the room, have each say what they think it means to be a &quot;good mother.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Accessing the experience of mothering on the macro-societal level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. How do mothers internalize messages of mothering from parenting books and magazines?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do they look to books and magazines for advice?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Do they experience guilt and shame when they feel they have not met the standards set by this medium?</td>
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<tr>
<td>I want to start by talking about parenting books and magazines. Do you read books or magazines that offer advice on mothering?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• If so, which ones?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• How much time would you say that you spend reading these?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Do you think of these as &quot;experts&quot; on childrearing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Are you able to follow their advice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• When you are not able to follow their advice, how does this make you feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How does reading them make you feel?</td>
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### Accessing the experience of mothering on the meso-societal level.

1. How do women internalize messages of mothering from other women in their communities?
2. How do the communities in which they live impact their construction of selves as mothers?
3. Do they compare themselves to other mothers in their community?
4. How does the community in which they live contribute to their experiences of guilt and shame?

### Now, I want you to think about other people in your community. Think about the people in your neighborhoods, or people you encounter at your child’s school, or at the park.

- Do you think other mothers worry about being a “good mother”?
- Do you ever find yourselves comparing yourself to other mothers?
- If you have compared yourself to others, what do you then feel about yourself?

### Accessing mothering experiences at the micro-level.

1. How do women internalize messages concerning motherhood, specifically from their families of origin?
2. To what extent does the family of origin impact the mothers’ sense of self-as-mother?
3. Does guilt and shame result from these relationships?

### Lets shift now to your families, starting with the family you grew up in…

- Do you think you learned how to mother from the people in your family? Who specifically?
- Are your ideas about mothering different from your mothers’? If so, how?
- In terms of your role as a mother, how does your family make you feel?
- Have you ever felt guilt or shame as a resulting from these relationships?
4. How do women internalize messages concerning motherhood, specifically from their families of procreation?
5. To what extent does the family of procreation impact the mothers’ sense of self-as-mother?
6. Does guilt and shame result from these relationships?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Let’s talk now about your family at home – your (spouse/partner) and children.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• If your child’s father is actively involved in parenting, how do you divide parenting duties?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• (probe for division of labor in the home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you perform the primary duties in the home – childcare and taking care of the home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you work outside of the home in addition?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you ever have trouble balancing these things?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you think he (partner) has ideas of what a “good mother” should be?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are some of these things?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you feel you meet his expectations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do you think your children have ideas of what a “good mother” is?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Can you talk about the guilt or shame you might feel as a result of your situations at home?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

Name (first name only): ________________________________
(Held completely confidential and separate from tape recording of today’s focus group)
Age: __________________
Marital Status:  
___ married  
___ separated  
___ divorced  
___ never married  
___ widowed

Race/Ethnicity:  
___ Black/African American  
___ White/Caucasian American  
___ Asian American  
   What is your ethnicity?  
   ___ Chinese  
   ___ Japanese  
   ___ Vietnamese  
   ___ Other  
___ Hispanic American  
   What is your ethnicity?  
   ___ Mexican  
   ___ Cuban  
   ___ Puerto Rican

Name (first name only) and age of spouse: ________________________________

Your yearly income:  
___ 0 to 9,999  
___ 10,000 to 19,999  
___ 20,000 to 29,999  
___ 30,000 to 39,999  
___ 40,000 to 49,999  
___ 50,000 to 59,999  
___ 60,000 to 69,999  
___ 70,000 to 79,999  
___ 80,000 to 89,999  
___ 90,000 to 99,999  
___ + 100,000

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Your partner’s income:

- 0 to 9,999
- 10,000 to 19,999
- 20,000 to 29,999
- 30,000 to 39,999
- 40,000 to 49,999
- 50,000 to 59,999
- 60,000 to 69,999
- 70,000 to 79,999
- 80,000 to 89,999
- 90,000 to 99,999
- + 100,000

Occupation: What do you do for a living?

________________________________________

If married/partnered, what does your spouse/partner do for a living?

________________________________________

Highest grade completed:

- Less than High School
- High School
- Some college
- College degree
- Some post-graduate school
- Graduate Degree
- Other ________________________________

Number of children living at home: ______

Do you have (check all that apply):

- Pre-school aged children Number: _____
- Elementary aged children Number: _____
- Middle School aged children Number: _____
- High School aged children Number: _____

Do you have other children who are not presently living with you?  ___ No  ___ Yes
If so, what are their ages and with whom do they live?

________________________________________

What was your age at first birth? ______

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APPENDIX F

PEARLIN’S MASTERY SCALE

How strongly do you agree or disagree that:

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. There is no way I can solve the problems I have</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I sometimes feel I am being pushed around</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have little control over what happens to me</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I can do just about anything I really set my mind to</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What happens in the future mostly depends upon me</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. There is little I can do to change the important things in my life</td>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>