

Modernity and the Matrix of Family Ideologies: How Women Compose a Coherent  
Narrative of Multiple Identities Over the Life Course

Dissertation

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## Abstract

The rise of individualism, historians and social commentators have argued, has been one of the master trends in the development of western society over the past few centuries. In the past several decades, gender roles and norms have arguably undergone more transformation than in several preceding centuries. This seismic gender upheaval, coupled with the increasing pervasiveness of individualism in the familial realm, has set the context for a fragmentation of family forms and meanings.

This dynamic has several repercussions, such as the blurring of once clearly demarcated and linear stages in the life course, the need to exercise agency in realms that were until recently firm cultural mandates, and the profusion of familial ideologies which are no longer necessarily complimentary, and may even be contradictory. Thus, the modern experience of marriage and family has become an exercise in selecting among an array of family ideologies with the ultimate purpose of crafting a coherent personal narrative and sense of self.

Drawing on the symbolic-interactionist perspective, and analyzing qualitative data from a diverse population of divorced mothers, I explore how women make sense

over the life course of the multiple identities of mother, wife, worker and “ideal self,” and investigate whether and how the divorce transition engenders a reordering of the prominence hierarchy of identities.

I find that most mothers find the identity of mother far more salient than that of wife, due primarily to a sense of both greater control and permanence. Participants stated that they were reluctant to embrace the identity of wife and unwilling to compromise in this role; yet, for them, “mother” was gladly all-consuming and the work involved a “labor of love.” The resolution to this dissonance, for the vast majority of mothers, was divorce. Divorce, however, calls into question one’s “good mother” credibility. Resolution is achieved in framing the divorce as entirely compatible with the intensive mothering ideology, with most respondents stating that their divorce either made them a better mother, or best served their children’s needs.

Ultimately I find that though the maternal identity is more salient and takes a higher rank in the identity prominence hierarchy than marriage, the primary identity is the “real self,” to which the maternal identity is subservient. In fact, as individualism is a master trend in society, so it is the master trend, or underlying theme, of all the contested, interrelated familial ideologies: marriage and divorce, marriage and individualism, individualized marriage and intensive mothering. It would seem that Americans choose from their cultural tool kit those cultural models that best facilitate a coherent, “good” sense of self above other identities.

## Dedication

To Izzy and Ava, Whom I Mother Intensively

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### Introduction

This research addresses family ideologies, focusing specifically on how women make sense over their life course of the multiple identities of mother, wife, worker and ideal self. The unsettled context of a lack of compatible meta-ideologies, such as the oppositional dynamic of waning gender norms coupled with waxing secular individualism, invites such an endeavor.

Because the aim of the study is to learn about women's own understanding and their experience of ideologies and attendant identities, symbolic interactionism informs both its methodology and its theoretical analysis. Symbolic interactionists believe that in order to glean an accurate understanding of human behavior, one must query those engaging in said behavior "so you can understand what meanings they attribute to it." (Sandstrom, Martin and Fine 2010: 21). From this perspective, meanings and identities emerge from social relations:

As meanings and identity are understood in processual terms and as being sustained in and through social relationships, the perspective is particularly suited to the study of changes in meaning and identity as social relationships change, as they do when a woman becomes a mother (P.16)

Thus a qualitative approach — namely, in-depth, semi-structured interviews — is employed to learn women's subjective experience of contemporary ideologies and the

means of choosing among them, and how a linear life course and coherent sense of self are crafted.

I analyze the ways in which aspects of contemporary marriage prevent women from living up to the cultural and internalized ideal of intensive mothering, specifically in the context of the ideologies of intensive mothering and individualized marriage. Particular attention is paid to the impact of divorce on this process. I also explore how theoretically contested family ideologies influence these processes, and how navigating these ideologies contributes to the composition of a coherent biography. Lastly, I analyze how the foregoing results are altered by the factors of class, socioeconomic status and age.

The overarching finding of the study is that marriage, rather than enabling mothers to live out the dominant mothering ideology of intensive mothering, is in fact in lived experience an impediment, and that women find marriage a barrier to being a good mother rather than a means to achieving it.

I find that the cultural importance of developing the self, and the contemporary salience of the motherhood identity for women, engenders an interpretation of divorce as evidence of good mothering — despite the cultural hegemony that a two-parent, biological family is the ideal environment in which to raise children. Despite variation in women's demographic characteristics, marriages and lived practices of intensive mothering, women use the intensive mothering ethic to make sense of their divorce by presenting and perceiving it as evidence that they are “doing the right thing” by their children. This protects their self-identity as a “good” mother in the face of the dominant cultural ideal of

the two-biological-parent family being the ideal environment for children, and also from cultural attitudes and perceptions that unmarried mothers are “bad” mothers.

That is, I find that initiating mothers reframe divorce as entirely compatible with the intensive mothering ideology, and aver that divorce made them better mothers and was beneficial for the children. Thus, the “good mother” identity, the integrity of the self and a coherent narrative of the life course are preserved. Finally, I find that there is greater perceived control over and permanence of the status of mother than that of wife, which contributes to both the tenuous state of American marriage and to diminished outcomes for American children.

Prior research has established that the state of the American family is one of flux, or a “marriage-go-round,” with detrimental results for children (Cherlin 2009). Americans couple, uncouple and recouple faster than those in any other western country — and the higher the number of transitions, the greater the likelihood of negative outcomes for children. Evidence suggests that detrimental effects result at least partially from the number of transitions alone; that is, sequential instability produces negative outcomes — not heritable traits or the social skills or psychological predisposition of the parents (Amato and Cheadle 2008; Cherlin 2009). It is a veritable sociological truism that divorce has negative consequences — unless under circumstances of extreme duress — for children and families. Numerous studies evidence the lesser well-being of children of divorce (see Amato 2000; Amato and Booth 2002; Amato and Cheadle 2008; Neale 2001; Smart and Neale 2001; Wallerstein 2000). A wealth of research also documents the hardships that most divorced mothers face (see Arendell 1986; Kurz 1995; Steiner 2007).

Unsurprisingly, numerous scholars aver that a stable two-parent home is the ideal context for raising children and ensuring positive outcomes (Cherlin 2009; Amato 2000). Thus, a study of the impact of contemporary marriage on mothering is warranted, as greater understanding may lead to prescriptions for more family stasis, and, thus, for more positive outcomes for children and families.

### *Ideologies*

Ideology, fundamentally, is a cultural framework, or model, through which we interpret and give meaning to phenomena. Glenn describes ideology as "...a conceptual system by which a group makes sense of and thinks about the world. It is a collective rather than individual product" (1994:9). According to Hattery, "Ideology is the medium through which consciousness and meaningfulness operate" (2000:19).

The dominant American family ideology of a "good" family, that to which the vast majority of Americans aspire and value most highly, is a life-long marriage as the context for raising children. (Cherlin 2009, Edin and Kelafas 2005; Thornton and Young-Demarco 2001). Even though Americans have a high tolerance for single parenthood, cohabitation and pre-marital sex, they feel that marriage is the gold standard of relationships, and that "marriage should last forever and divorce should be avoided" (Cherlin 2009:25). Further, despite the high rates of partnering, un-partnering and re-partnering, the vast majority of Americans expect their own marriages to last forever (Cherlin 2009; Hopper 2001).

Cultures, however, have multiple ideologies that do not always cohere. Numerous family scholars have studied the interplay of different ideologies. Cherlin (2009) examined the repercussions of our simultaneous, deeply valued “competing cultural models” of the institution of life-long marriage and “individual freedom”. Hackstaff (1999) examined *Marriage in a Culture of Divorce*, involving “the contesting ideologies of a marriage culture and a divorce culture in contemporary American society.” (Cherlin 2009:25) And Hays (1996) explored *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, namely the persistence of “intensive mothering,” the dominant mothering ideology, in light of the capitalist work ethic that pervades American society. The present study, examining the interplay of intensive mothering and individualized marriage, contributes to this body of literature.

It should be noted that all of the aforementioned ideologies and dynamics are deeply and historically gendered. The template for the institutions of marriage and the ideal family has been embodied as a male head of the household and a submissive wife, the degree and kind of submission or deference varying according to historical era. Until the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, laws codified and enforced gender norms that denied women much autonomy in marriage or any real ability to leave one. Only then were the final vestiges of coverture, or the absorption of a woman’s separate legal existence upon marriage — at least concerning property rights — finally eradicated. Only then was domestic violence seriously addressed (Cherlin 2009). Only then was the legal distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children broken down, weakening the institution of marriage and ensuring that mothers and their children born out of wedlock enjoy full

parental rights and diminished social stigma. (Coontz 2005). And only then were women admitted into legal and medical schools at the best universities, thus allowing women to attend college in numbers approaching parity with men (Twenge 2006). This enabled women to have meaningful, lucrative careers and take leave of the pink collar ghetto; and to be able to meaningfully afford to exit marriage — or to avoid marriage entirely. Due to all these legal and ideological changes, for arguably the first time in history, marriage, maternity and divorce are a meaningful choice— and women can exercise purposeful agency among them and the dominant cultural marital and maternal ideologies.

### *Ideology and Identity*

Regarding the existence of multiple, contesting ideologies, and how women make sense of and choose among these ideologies in order to craft their biographical narratives and identities, “...ideologies may differ and be in competition in telling us who we are”

(Hattery 2001:21). Hattery (2001) continues:

...humans are able to qualify ideology. Thus, if their social position is such that their subjectivity is defined by contrary ideologies, they may choose how to react to this contradiction. ...For example, they may accept ideological restraints or reject them... Many mothers may view competing ideologies and their respective interpellations. When these interpellations are in conflict, cognitive dissonance may arise. In an effort to reduce cognitive dissonance, mothers will necessarily respond to the interpellations of these ideologies. (P 20-1.)

The relationship of ideology to identity is as such: by framing certain phenomena and values as important, ideology guides us to rank certain identities as more salient, and toward the enactment of roles and behaviors that conform to ideological beliefs.

Throughout the course of this research, pertinent questions will arise; for instance, if these ideologies are indeed incongruous, how are they to be reconciled? Moreover, what are the implications for children, families and the larger society? What will provide a consistent, dominant narrative to one's life? According to Maushart, "... with the multiplication of choice for women has come, no doubt inevitably, the fracturing of coherence" (1999:xvi). What might the effect of this incoherence be on family dynamics?

The "motherhood mandate" has lessened in American society in recent decades, with women becoming more receptive to childlessness than men. Studies reveal that more women than men feel that a life without children is not necessarily meaningless and that children are not the primary reason for marriage (Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007) "Women were also more likely to view parenthood as restrictive...and to intend to remain permanently childless" (Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007:899). And in both academic and popular literature, many authors have documented the strain of "identity loss" when women become mothers, due to having to place the needs of another before their own — likely for the first time in a culture that emphasizes individualism in every other realm. (Hanauer 2002; Maushart 1999; Orenstein 2000; Whitehead and Popenoe 2006).

"Compared to fathers, mothers' more intensive involvement in parenting may offer more emotional gratification and emotional closeness, but at greater personal cost in terms of responsibility, sacrifice, stress, time commitment and social scrutiny (see Arendell 2000; Crittenden 2001)." (Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007:900). Thus, while women still highly value children and expect to be fulfilled by the maternal relationship, the maternal

identity is seen as more of a choice than an obligation, and one that conflicts with the self — and is not dependent on the spousal identity. Indeed, notable for the present study, Koropecyk-Cox and Pendell find that “women may be less optimistic than men about the benefits and permanence of marriage” (2007:913).

And yet, coexisting with the idea of motherhood as restrictive and denying of self is the testimony of many mothers in various studies and across social classes that motherhood is a key aspect of women’s self-development and one of their most salient identities (Edin and Kelafas, 2005; Hays 1996; Kielty 2007).

### *The Evolution of American Family Ideologies*

In the past several decades, gender roles and norms have undergone “rapid and at times traumatic transformation. In fact, the relations between men and women have changed more in the past 30 years than they did in the previous three thousand...” (Coontz 2005:7). This seismic gender upheaval, coupled with the increasing pervasiveness of secular individualism in the familial realm (Bellah et al 1996; Popenoe 1993) has set the context for a fragmentation of family forms and meanings.

A coherent moral order no longer structures our family lives. This loss has several repercussions, such as the blurring of once clearly demarcated and linear stages in the life course, the need to exercise agency in realms that were until recently firm cultural mandates, and the profusion of familial ideologies which are no longer necessarily complimentary, and may even be contested. Thus, the modern experience of marriage and family has become an exercise in selecting among an array of family ideologies with

the ultimate purpose of crafting a coherent personal narrative and sense of self (Beck-Gernsheim 2005; Cherlin 2009).

The crux of the present argument is that, unlike the past, when family ideologies cohered, contemporary ideologies often do not cohere in an analogous way, and may even be contrary.

Family sociologists and cultural theorists have named the consumption-based marriage, or those based on personal compatibility and shared interests, the individualized marriage. The criterion for success in such marriages is the extent to which the relationship facilitates the growth and nurturing of self. The marriage is legitimately dissolved when it no longer meets one's needs. Unlike the gendered nature of love and marriage of previous eras, such a union can be characterized as androgynous, in that in the modern ideal of love both men and women are "both equally responsible" for monitoring and maintaining the quality of a relationship (Cancian 1987:8). Additionally, the ideal self is becoming more androgynous; "...someone who combines feminine intimacy and emotional expression with masculine independence and competence" (Cancian 1987:8).

The individualized marriage, being the contemporary marriage ideal, involves the transition "from role to self." Popular acceptance of this form of marriage accelerated notably in the late 1960s and 1970s, within the cultural context of other social movements — civil rights, feminism's second wave, sexual liberation — that strove for greater individualism and were critical of established institutions, such as the family (Cancian 1987).

The preceding form of marriage was known as the companionate marriage (historians also note the “companionate family”). Traditional gender norms and economic constraints ensured that husbands and wives still “needed each other” to achieve a middle-class lifestyle and to establish and maintain a culturally legitimate context for sexuality and raising children. This form of marriage itself evolved in response to the Victorian ideal of “sexual repression, patriarchal authority and hierarchical organization...” (Mintz and Kellogg 1988: 113). The companionate marriage, the cultural prominence of which peaked from roughly the 1920s through the mid-1960s, mandated that “...husbands and wives would be ‘friends and lovers’ and parents and children would be ‘pals’”(Mintz and Kellogg 1988:113). Companionate marriage is “based on the importance of emotional ties between wife and husband — their companionship, friendship, romantic love, and sex life.” (Cherlin 2009: 68). However, husbands were still expected to be the family heads and primary, if not sole, wage earners. Women could have jobs — if her income was seen as supplementary to that of her husband, and if her job did not interfere with housework and childcare. (Coontz 2005; May 1988; Weiss 2000).

Specialization, both economic and emotional, was encouraged among spouses. Prominent sociologists advocated that the key to harmonious marriage was for men to specialize in instrumental roles external to the household and for women to focus on expressive, emotionally nurturing internal roles, thus ensuring harmony both inside the household and in the larger society (Coontz 1992). Put simply, “The husband does the market work, the wife does the emotion work, and the family functions better.” (Cherlin 2009:78).

Thus the husband, “whose higher wages are taken to mean that he is better at earning money, trades his earnings for the domestic services his wife performs” (Cherlin 2009:79). This model suggests that opposites should attract, that someone with strong market skills should be attracted to someone with strong domestic skills, allowing each to maximize the benefit of their expertise. Empirical data suggest that this was indeed the case in the 1970s, when couples were more dissimilar “along a range of characteristics, such as education and income, compared with couples today” (Stevenson 2008:142).

This concept of the family as a site of production, or of “production efficiencies” (Stevenson 2008) has become less relevant in the intervening decades. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technology has evolved — from the introduction of refrigerators and washing machines to microwaves and home-delivery dry-cleaning services — such that housework takes far less time than it did for women only a few generations ago — in spite of rising standards of cleanliness (Cancian 1987; Coontz, 2005; Cowan 1983). Thus, women were better able to get a job or pursue a career. Additionally, the “shift towards technological and market substitutes substantially reduced the value of such (housekeeping) skills” (Stevenson 2008:142). Consequently, the opportunity cost, in lost income and career development, increased for a stay-at-home spouse.

Many cultural, legal and demographic changes have altered the reason for and meaning of marriage today. With the family now a site of consumption, not production; with rising opportunity costs and personal financial risk for stay-at-home mothers, and with women a significant part of the work force, marriage has been irrevocably transformed. The qualities sought in potential mates have changed accordingly, from opposites to

increasing similarity. “Most notably, those who marry are now more likely to have similar education and employment backgrounds than at any other time in the past” (Stevenson 2008:142). Yet, herein lies the paradox of such modern marriages: consumption-based marriages may be weaker than the earlier production-based families, “...because they involve less investment specific to that relationship and are easily abandoned if the shared interests dissipate.” (Stevenson 2008:143).

Evidence for a culture and lived experience of greater individualism comes from many sources, with varying levels of focus. The American Religious Identification Survey (Kosmin and Keysar, 2009) indicates that the United States population identifies less with established organized religion, and increasingly claims no religious identification. Bellah et al (1996) argue that this secularization of society, coupled with a decline in civic identity and participation, converge to set a context for historically unabated individualism, tantamount to crises on both a social and personal level. Young Americans at record levels claim to be “spiritual,” but not “religious,” cobbling together an individual spiritual belief system buffet-like from established religions and philosophies; this of course precludes one from participating in any communal worship or religious community (Twenge 2005). Putnam (2000) provides evidence that Americans, to our individual and collective detriment, are growing more socially isolated from one another personally and are increasingly disengaged from the public sphere. On a more individual level, Americans’ personal social networks have declined considerably over the past few decades, with almost half the population at risk of being at “marginal or inadequate counseling support” (McPherson et al 2006). Americans are marrying at record-high

ages, and seem to be opting out of marriage entirely at greater numbers (Pew Research Center 2007), Amato et al even find spousal interaction within a marriage decreasing, and characterize modern marriage as a state of being “alone together” (2007).

Contemporary marriage exists primarily in the realm of the emotions; it is, in an “ideal-typical” sense, “free-floating,” independent of institutions and not bound by or obligated to external criteria “such as criteria of kinship, social duty or traditional obligation” (Giddens 1991:6). Self-fulfillment is the reason for marriage; lack thereof a legitimate criterion for unilateral dissolution.

Individualized marriage is arguably a more significant shift in women’s lives than for men, as women have not historically had the time or luxury to be self-focused, to put self above other identities, and to meaningfully act on such preferences and inclinations. Yet, the individualized marriage would seem in some aspects to work better in theory than practice, because women still earn less than men, and should they mothers choose to leave a marriage, they experience a lower standard of living than divorced fathers, who conversely enjoy a higher standard of living (Clarke-Stewart and Brentano, 2006).

The cultural ascent of intensive mothering, the dominant mothering ideology, roughly parallels that of individualized marriage. Hays asserts that this ideology “can be understood as a combination of three elements – all of which interfere with a mother’s commitment to her job and “all of them in contradiction to the ideology of the workplace and the dominant ethos of modern society” (1996:8). First, the mother is the central caregiver; second, proper mothering is child-centered, expensive, guided by experts, and both time and emotionally consuming; and third, mothering and “work” exist on entirely

different ethical and moral planes and are thus incompatible (1996:8). Intensive mothering endures, Hays argues, despite the cultural contradiction with capitalism and the logistical and emotional difficulties their incongruity engenders, because the mother-child relationship is the last human bond unsullied by cold, calculating market logic. Without such a selfless relationship and refuge, humanity would find itself in an “unbearable moral solitude” (Hays 1996:175).

According to Douglas and Michaels, intensive mothering obligates mothers to take subject position of their children; that is, climb into their heads, anticipate their wants and preferences, “what they will need to make them feel loved, cherished, bolstered, stimulated...” (2004:19). Referring to the “bible” for intensive mothering, Dr. Spock’s *Baby and Child Care*, Thurer suggests that “In the end, (Spock) constructs a “good” mother who is ever-present, all-providing, inexhaustibly patient and tactful, and who anticipates her child’s every need. Mother has become baby’s servant” (Thurer 1994:258). Such a sentiment was voiced by several mothers in the present study, exemplified by the following mother:

Amy (36): But I try to – even just sit down with Julia, and I’ll say, you need to tell me – look at our relationship – do you need more of something? Do you need more of me in certain parts of your life – do you need me to back off a little bit? What do you need? You know, ask her her needs.

Similarly, Stone (2007) found that many women who left lucrative, prestigious careers to mother full-time framed mothering in professional rhetoric as their new “career” or “job,” such as the following former lawyer, yet fully embodied the tenets of intensive mothering:

“(My) job now, which is to be a mother, make my child happy, content, pick him up when he cries — he doesn’t sleep and neither do I.” All too familiar with sleepless nights from her days as an associate at a top New York law firm, Lily faces them again in her demanding job as a mom, attuned to and meeting her child’s every need, as current childrearing practices require of good mothers. (P.169).

Thus, “contemporary motherhood now threatens contemporary marriage” (Whitehead and Popenoe 2006:¶ 41) That is, the reasons for marriage, the qualities of a good marriage, and the time and “work” involved in maintaining modern marriage conflict with the requirements of “good” motherhood. The emotional work – and particularly the time – involved in nurturing an adult partnership centered around a quasi-spiritual, sexual and romantic best-friendship is curtailed, likely drastically, as the focus shifts from marriage to motherhood - and to a role that many place on an equal plane with or above their spouse. This is a new and unique historical phenomenon. Prior to recent decades, women married at far younger ages, rarely lived alone for extended periods of time as college students or single career women, and generally did not experience an early adulthood as many men do today, one focused on developing the self, professionally, romantically, and with a self-conception as an extended adolescent, one not ready psychologically or materially to assume adult responsibilities, such as marriage and motherhood (Arnett 2004; Furstenberg et al 2005; Whitehead and Popenoe 2006). Thus, whereas most women historically transitioned from the parental to the married home, from teenager to wife, with few if any intervening years spent in college or in pursuit of a meaningful career, today women may enjoy many years, sanctioned by society, as a single woman without children, pursuing a career and leisure activities, generally focused

on self-development. Thus, maternity often means radically curtailing self-focus to being largely consumed with care for a child. “Victorian brides were shocked by their first experience of sex. Contemporary wives are shocked by their first experience of motherhood” (Whitehead and Popenoe 2006: ¶39).

I find that the cultural elevation of “mother,” diminution of “spouse” and the perceived lack of control and permanence in the lived experience of marriage leads women to leave difficult marriages in the name of becoming better mothers and doing what is perceived as best for their children.

### *The Present Study*

Much of the recent sociological literature on motherhood, maternal ideology and marital status focuses on a specific maternal demographic. In *Promises I Can Keep*, Edin and Kelafas (2005) describe and analyze *Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*. The authors interviewed low-income urban women in Philadelphia to glean the meanings of marriage and motherhood identity and salience. In *Engendering Motherhood*, McMahon conducts a “study about the meaning of motherhood in the lives of a sample of white, middle- and working- class Toronto women who have preschool children and work full-time outside the home.” (1995:3) In *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood Without Marriage and Creating the New American Family* (2006), Hertz draws from interviews with middle-class women who have children outside of marriage. Most recently, in *Opting Out? Why Women Really Quit Careers and Head Home*, Pamela Stone interviews “white, married women with

children who had previously worked as professionals or managers and who were married to men who could support their being home” (2007:15).

In comparison to previous research, my sample is more diverse with regard to race, age, class, income and transition into marriage and motherhood. Thus, I am able to examine the trajectories and interplay of the meanings of “wife” and “mother” over several decades and to discern whether individualism is ascendant and whether familism and traditional gender roles are in decline. I am also able to compare meanings of marriage and motherhood across class and racial boundaries. Furthermore, I have the self-assessments of mothers with adult children, who use different evaluative criteria than the mothers with young children who have so often been the focus of prior literature. Finally, I am able to compare and contrast marital and maternal meanings among women at opposite poles of the socioeconomic spectrum – from GED to PhD; from those who presently reside in half-million dollar homes to those who are formerly homeless; from college deans to event planners to discount chain hairdressers. They range in age from 26 to 82. About one quarter are non-white.

Chapter Two lays the theoretical and historical foundation for this research. I give the historical context for modernity — the ascent of individualism and the decline of tradition and familism — and I frame in this context the role of individualism and changing gender norms in the current fragmentation of family ideologies. The contemporary ideologies of marriage and motherhood — individualized marriage and intensive mothering, respectively — are detailed. I explain “accounts,” that is, the narratives in which divorcing persons engage. I set forth how these accounts are shaped

by dominant familial ideologies and how the conflicting ideologies may render a coherent account more difficult. Finally, I pose the question of whether intensive mothering is an ideology that jibes, or makes sense, with today's familial demographic reality, a reality that includes high rates of divorce and stepfamily formation.

Chapter Three introduces the participants in the study, and elaborates on their demographic characteristics. The qualitative methods utilized in the study, from recruitment to data analysis, are presented.

Chapter Four presents the findings. I find that, in contrast to Hays' (1996) assertion that "mother" and "worker" delineate two separate identities and ideological camps, employment is not a useful metric for assessing the internalization of and commitment to the intensive mothering ideology. I also find that the internalization of the "Mommy War" rhetoric endures, and arguably has deepened. Regarding Arendell's question of whether mothering complements or conflicts with other identities, I observed that most mothers find the identity of mother far more salient than that of wife, due primarily to a sense of both greater control and permanence. The resolution to this dissonance between the marital and the maternal identity, for the vast majority of mothers, was divorce. Divorce is then framed as entirely compatible with the intensive mothering ideology, with most respondents stating that their divorce made them a better mother, and best served their children's needs. Unlike Lareau (2003), who argues that lower- and working-class parents have adopted a different parenting ideology and attendant practices than the middle-class parents who subscribe to intensive mothering, I find that the ideology of intensive mothering pervades all social classes.

Chapter Five presents a summary discussion of the findings. The utility of an ideology so discordant with others within the family rubric, and the reckoning it engenders, is questioned. I conclude that this dissonance will accelerate the decline of marriage as an institution.

## Chapter 2: A Matrix of Family Ideologies

### *Modernity and Modern Family Ideologies*

Modernity may be defined, in a broad, historical sweep, as the waning of tradition coupled with the ascendance of secular individualism. Self-identity, once dictated by culture and tradition, is now a reflexive composition of a sustained narrative among various cultural and identity options. (Giddens 1991).

Peter Berger and Anthony Giddens have theorized about the impact of modernity on both the societal and individual level and have concluded that modernity necessarily engenders a profusion of choice and a resultant individual agency.

Berger, when speaking of globalization and religious pluralism, posits that modernity is a “gigantic transformation from destiny to choice,” hallmarked by both liberation and burden (Speaking of Faith 2006). Giddens (2000), writing more specifically of the impact of globalization and pluralism on the family, writes:

Among all the changes going on in the world, none is more important than those happening in our personal lives – in sexuality, marriage, relationships and the family. There is a global revolution going on in how we think of ourselves and how we form ties and connections with others. ...The family is a site for the struggle between tradition and modernity, but also a metaphor for them. (P.69-70).

Historian Stephanie Coontz (1992, 1997) writes of the difficulty in coping with the “loss of the taken-for-granted status” of which Berger speaks in clarifying what Americans “really miss about the 1950s:” “...there was a coherent moral order in their community to serve as a reference point for family norms. Even people who found that moral order grossly unfair or repressive often say that its presence provided them with something concrete to push against” (1997: 33).

In the 1950s, several family ideologies coexisted under the rubric of “coherent moral order”— which might be called familism (Popenoe 1993) — the glue for which was, to a considerable extent, the contemporary, highly pervasive and omnipresent gender norms (Coontz 2005). Many contemporary social scientists deemed the male breadwinner/female homemaker marriage “a necessary and inevitable result of modernization” (Coontz 2005). Cancian (2005) and May (1988) argue that during this era spouses derived greatest satisfaction from fulfillment of their familial roles — or were at least exhorted to do so from a chorus of various authoritative voices, such as popular magazines that dispensed marital and familial advice, social workers, and Talcott Parsons, to name a few. Thus, for women, fulfilling the role of a good spouse and parent trumped self-fulfillment. Such was the case for men as well; however, seeking fulfillment in work was also an option. Also noteworthy is the imperative of marriage during this era; not only was fulfillment of spousal roles a paramount way to happiness, it was the only societally accepted route to adulthood. It should also be noted that at this time, if love waned, role satisfaction and fulfillment was enough to sustain a marriage. (May 1988; Furstenberg, 2004)

Gender norms permeated the dominant family ideologies of the era, and rendered them compatible. The dominant marital ideology of the era was the companionate marriage, structurally embodied in the breadwinner/homemaker dynamic. It mandated that spouses be “pals.” (Mintz and Kellogg 1988; Cancian 1987). Yet, the friendship was qualified by hierarchy, as men were breadwinners, heads of the household and wielded ultimate decision-making authority. Weiss terms this era “contested egalitarianism:” “Equality and sharing constituted the postwar ideal, but an ideal superimposed over continuing and complimentary and distinct gender roles” (2000:16)

Complementing the contemporary ideal and practice of the companionate marriage, the dominant mothering ideology, beginning in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century — and accelerating and morphing in the early 1980s into what Douglas and Michaels (2004) call “the “new momism” — is that of intensive mothering. (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996, 2007; Thurer 1994).

A “highly influential” bestselling book on mothering in the 1940s, Philip Wylie’s *Generation of Vipers* drew from Freud to blame American mothers for creating a generation of young “sissies” tethered to their mothers’ apron strings, and bemoaned a “...society gone soft, ruined and shriveled by hordes of predatory, castrating moms became as much a part of 1940s and 1950s dialogue as happy homemakers and caretaking mothers.” (Thurer 1994). The greatest sin a mother could commit was “smothering” her sons, creating “sniveling weaklings” unable to fight for and defend their country (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Wylie, in his critique of the “American Matriarchy,” asserts that “Your children will think that you were an evil person – which you were.” (Wylie 1942: 316).

The ideal mother who emerged in the 1950s, however, was a radical departure from the demonized, smothering viper and so quickly became the norm “that it could make a mother’s head spin,” with mothers even parenting their own eldest and youngest children differently, according to different ideological dictates (Thurer 1994:247-8). Its origin is dated by historians as 1946, with the publication of Dr. Spock’s enormously influential *Baby and Child Care*, wherein Dr. Spock decrees that intensive mothering now mandated that the child’s needs are paramount, and that their own rhythms, personalities and preferences dictate the mother’s routine. Thurer (1994) names her “the empathic mother,” her “heyday” spanning the 1950s. “Thus, American history’s most intensive model of mothering emerged shortly after World War II and, if Spock’s continuing popularity is any indication, has maintained its dominance ever since.” (Hays 1996: 49)

Both companionate marriage and intensive mothering, then, obliged women to take the subject position of others and jibed with prevailing and pervasive gender roles, with the roles of wife and mother a synchronous embodiment of the dominant gender ideology. Wives were to be subservient pals to their husbands, and mothers’ schedules were to be dictated by their children’s rhythms and desires — and they were to find the latter to result in immense emotional fulfillment (Thurer 1994).

However, the ascent of individualism, combined with secularization and the decline of familism, has arguably ushered in an era of differing criteria for the lived ideal of modern marriage and motherhood. Berger’s description of modernity, “a giant transformation from destiny to choice,” both liberation and burden, meshes well with recent assessments of the modern experience of marriage and family. Cancian (1987) describes this shift as one “from role to self.” According to McMahon “we seem to be witnessing a significant

transformation in the basis of self-conception in modern society: a shift of locus of experience of “real self” from institutional role to impulse, from role to feelings and sentiment” (1995:3). Cherlin (2004) claims that the modern state of marriage is “deinstitutionalized,” that social change has rendered established norms and institutions obsolete. Contemporary adults create and negotiate their life courses anew, with little established or traditional guidance. Beck-Gernsheim (2005) describes the experience of family as that of “do-it-yourself biography”, the main human enterprise being the composition of this narrative.

Giddens argues that the middle class relational ideal is the “pure relationship:” an intimate partnership entered into for its own sake and legitimately dissolved when the relationship ceases to be a vehicle for one’s needs or self-fulfillment. The pure relationship is independent of institutions or economic obligations and “exists primarily in the realm of emotion and self-identity” (2004:853).

Finally, Hackstaff (1999) asserts that the expansion of choice in our personal and familial lives begets a perpetual state of personal and relational assessment. Even if one is married, the existence of viable options and alternatives to marriage (divorce, cohabitation, living alone) mandates that one constantly monitor the value of a marital union and whether an alternative might be preferable.

Contemporary marriages are self-serving and therefore legitimately dissolved if one’s needs and growth potential are not being met (Cherlin 2009). Marriage has become a relationship centered on the adult couple, with fidelity and sexual fulfillment seen as the most critical elements of a successful marriage. The importance of children to marriage,

however, has declined precipitously, falling 24 percentage points in recent years: 41% of Americans consider children to be very important to a successful marriage, compared to 65% in 1990 (Pew Research Center 2007). Yet, parents state that children are extremely important to personal fulfillment, with spouses ranking children even higher than their husband or wife as a source of happiness (Pew Research Center 2007). Americans by a significant majority (69%) also feel that a child needs both parents to “grow up happily” (Pew Research Center 2007). Thus, the adult-oriented, self-focused marriage is considered the ideal context for, and must jibe with, all-consuming intensive motherhood in the minds of most Americans.

Though discord between intensive mothering and individualized marriage may flow through the course of a marriage, their oppositional characteristics are brought into sharpest relief during the divorce process. While it may be argued that divorce might ease tensions between intensive mothering and marriage because the needs of husbands and demands of marriage are removed, the divorce removes a mother’s means of fully engaging in intensive mothering — full-time, stay-at-home devotion to young children — by necessitating that she work to support herself and her children. Of course, being an at-home mother is not a viable option for all. Additionally, initiating a divorce — which is most often done by wives and mothers (Amato and Previti 2003; Brinig and Allen 2000) — poses a contradiction between the dictates of the “pure relationship” and “deinstitutionalized marriage” on the one hand, and those of intensive mothering on the other. How can one be a self-denying “good mother” yet choose self-fulfillment and the active dissolution of one’s child’s family?

## The Meaning of Marriage and Mothering: An Oppositional Dilemma

The ideology of intensive mothering has been contrasted to ideologies external to the family realm, most notably by Hays (1996). It has also been examined internally, framed as a “matrix of tensions” within itself, comprised of several continuums such as “loss of self/expansion of self; omnipotence/liability; life-destroying/life-promoting behavior.” (Oberman and Josselson 1996:341).

Douglas and Michaels (2004) document the ever-escalating criteria for intensive mothering and its insinuation into the American collective consciousness over the past several decades via media representations of motherhood. They further note that the insidiousness of its hegemonic hold occurs at a time when fewer women are able to achieve this ideal of a stay-at home mother, as fewer married couples are able to financially succeed on a single income and as fewer mothers are married.

Through an analysis of child-rearing texts and interviews with mothers of very young children, Hays (1996) contrasts the primacy of self-interest in the bottom-line ethic of the workplace/public sphere with the diminution of self inherent for intensive mothers in the home/private sphere. She argues that intensive mothering serves as a counterpoint to the amoral emotional void of capitalism.

However, a more germane ideological contrast to intensive mothering is that of the “individualized marriage” (Cherlin 2004). Its ascendancy is roughly parallel to the recent intensification of intensive mothering (beginning in the 1960s and accelerating in the 1970s) and involves the transition “from role to self” (Cancian 1987). The criterion for success in such marriages is the extent to which the relationship facilitates the growth and nurturing of self. The relationship may be legitimately and unilaterally dissolved when it

no longer facilitates the development, needs or wants of one spouse's self. Paradoxically, this self-enhancing union is the relationship on which the self-negating intensive mother depends in order to realize the cultural parenting ideal, as the ideal mother remains in the public consciousness one that stays home, at least during a child's younger years, to fully implement intensive mothering. This, of course, assumes having the time and financial means to do so, likely obtained through the support and income of a spouse.

Hays alludes to this as a component of her overall argument that "mothering is one of the central practices meant to provide a crucial counterpoint to the corruption, impersonality, and individualistic competition of the larger society" (1996:174) — and the opportunities for such a refuge are dwindling. As we ostensibly live in a divorce culture, with relationships between spouses, among friends and within the community increasingly tenuous, more emphasis is placed on the mother-child dyad. Indeed, "the traditional mother's role has actually supplanted marriage as a source of romantic fantasy for many young single women, and many speak of maternal love in "romantic" terms (Orenstein 2000:39; McMahon 1995). Hertz goes so far as to assert that "the mother-child dyad has become the core of family life" and that what men now offer to this family is "obsolete"(2006:196).

The latter suggests that intensive mothering may be compatible with self-fulfillment. There is ample evidence that Americans view children as one of life's greatest pleasures, yet intensive mothering undoubtedly taxes mothers' time, economic well-being and other familial relationships more than alternative mothering practices. Maternal joy can and does coexist with maternal angst.

Several recent studies, targeting single and married mothers from a range of socioeconomic classes, find that the “mother identity” is more salient than wife (Edin and Kelafas, 2005; Hertz 2006; Kielty 2007; Orenstein 2000). Evidence also comes from time diary data that married and single mothers value the maternal role over others and are stealing time from other areas of their lives to focus on it; married and single parents spend more time caring for, teaching and playing with their children than parents 40 years ago. (Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie, 2006). This is noteworthy because far fewer mothers were in the workforce four decades ago, and the assumption was that as maternal work hours increased, time with children would necessarily decrease, given the fixed number of hours in a day. However, just the opposite has happened, with contemporary mothers spending more time with their children than the Donna Reed archetypal good mother figure mentioned by several mothers in this study as the measure against which they inevitably came up short. In fact, the time mothers spend with children has increased since 1960. To be sure, this is a dynamic shared by fathers as well, as they spend even relatively more time with their children relative to their fathers (Bianchi et al 2006). The time spent with children today is siphoned mostly from hours previously spent on housework, but also from time spent on self-care and leisure, sleep and time spend with spouses (Bianchi et al 2006).

### Accounts

Divorcing persons go to great lengths to develop an “account.” Walzer and Oles “identify the kind of talk that is meant to bridge a gap between actions and expectations as an ‘account’ or a ‘statement’ made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior”(2003:332).

Reckoning with ambient family ideologies is evident in qualitative studies that do not directly address the divorce process. In *Homeward Bound*, May (1988) analyzes longitudinal interview data to discern how married couples in the 1950s created marital meaning and happiness; dominant contemporary family ideals clearly infuse the couples' responses. Like May, Hackstaff (1999) also draws from pre-existing longitudinal interview research, and from her own as well, in order to understand how couples defined marital ideals and how they strove to achieve them in both a culture of marriage (roughly prior to the mid-1970s, as this was the first time "divorce overtook death as the primary means of marital dissolution." p. 3) and a culture of divorce. And Hays avers that mothers engage in "ideological work: People...select among the cultural logics at their disposal in order to develop some correspondence between what they believe and what they actually do (2007:61)."

Divorce, to use the language of Walzer and Oles, remains very much both unanticipated and untoward (Hopper 2001; Walzer and Oles 2003). It is the time during which people are acutely aware of the family ideologies from which they must choose in order to craft an account or compose larger biographical narratives. According to family therapists White and Epston, "In striving to make sense of life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them" (1990:10) This is the aim of the present research: to understand the synergism of the maternal, marital and other related ideologies in crafting a coherent biography over time.

## Divorce and Remarriage

While I suspect that the incongruity between individualized marriage and intensive mothering is a primary and defining source of stress during divorce, the literature suggests further fault lines of ideological discord.

Hopper (2001) describes divorce as a “retroactive nullification,” a complete historical revision of a marital relationship, very often “wrong from the start.” It may be difficult, then, to reconcile the compelling drive to both frame an entire marriage as a mistake and to excise one’s former spouse from one’s life (and even memory) with the intensive mothering mandate to view one’s children as the emotional apex of one’s life, “the best thing that ever happened to me.” Do the children born of an erroneous union bear the taint of the marital mistake? Is there a parallel historical revision of their origin and existence? Are they an irrevocable tether to a difficult and best forgotten past? Or might they become the redemption of time otherwise considered “wasted?”

Further, our high divorce rate and the attendant probability that another person is likely to “mother” one’s children in a stepfamily render potentially problematic the dictates of intensive mothering, which mandate a massive emotional, time and identity investment. As the middle class post-divorce norm is now that of shared parenting, or joint custody, rather than that of primary custody given to the mother with the father having visitation rights, the loss of time with children and control to the father, and possibly to a stepmother as well, are worth exploring.

Like all family ideologies, motherhood should be considered not in isolation, but within a matrix of other ideologies – primarily of marriage, but divorce and stepfamilies as well.

### Chapter 3: Data and Methods

A strength of the symbolic interactionist perspective is the illumination that human agency, and free will, are qualified and guided by cultural norms and ideals (Sandstrom et al 2010). Such is the nature of the present study, to understand how women navigate among various identities in light of the contemporary constellation of family ideologies. Qualitative methods lend themselves to research endeavors that aim to grasp people's experiences, perceptions, and how they interpret and "act toward the "realities" that constitute their everyday worlds" (Sandstrom et al 2010: 13; Weiss 1994). Thus, semi-structured interviews were conducted to ascertain women's interpretation of and actions stemming from dominant family ideologies.

#### *Recruitment and the Interview Process*

Participants were initially recruited through a snowball sample (Weiss 1994: 25). I asked the divorced mothers I personally knew if they would participate, and asked that they in turn ask others if they would be willing to do so, and so on. I also asked colleagues at a local community college to help solicit participants by distributing flyers in their classrooms. I questioned my own students if they knew of any as well. When personal networking began to yield fewer leads, I posted a flyer at various locations within the community college stating in big, bold print: Divorced Mothers Earn \$25. Up to this point the interviewees had not been compensated for their participation; I paid those

recruited by the flyer out of pocket. The flyers proved effective in reaching a population of women I likely would not have found through the snowball networks. Many were not students and were referred by college employees, cafeteria workers and custodians, and were low-income, unemployed or impoverished, for whom \$25 was a relatively substantial amount of money. This offered a welcome counterpoint and balance to the affluent women who had already participated in the study.

Interviews were conducted in a variety of locales. Most of the initial interviews were at my residence or at the interviewees' homes. As the snowball networks became more far flung to include absolute strangers, or were generated by the flyers, more of the interviews were conducted in less intimate quarters, such as offices, empty classrooms, Panera Bread cafés, Starbucks, an elementary school teachers' lounge and a rural McDonald's.

The length of completed interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two- and-a-half hours. One interview was aborted at 26 minutes due to the interviewee becoming distraught. This was the only instance of a prematurely concluded interview; I completed the interview schedule for all others.

Interviews were both open-ended and semi-structured. In order to give the interviewees some parameters, or a framework for their narrative, and drawing from divorce accounts literature (Hopper 2002; Reissman 1990; Vaughan 1986), I initially stated to the interviewees

In my research I am studying different family ideologies, such as the meaning of marriage, the meaning of motherhood, what is a "good" marriage, a "good" wife

and mother, and so on. I am also looking at how these ideologies interact with each other.

Today I would like you to tell me the story of your divorce. I am interested in the feelings and emotions you experienced at the time, so I may stop you at certain points while you tell your story to ask for more details.

I would like you to start at the point in your marriage when you feel things started to go wrong. You are welcome to give me any information about your marriage prior to that, if you like, to give me some context if you think it is important.

None of the interviewees needed more than a few moments to collect her thoughts and begin her story — which is to be expected, as developing one's account, or explanation, for the demise of the relationship is an integral element of coping with a divorce and easing the transition into post-marital identities (Reissman 1990). When the narratives were complete, I asked a series of prepared questions from an interview schedule (provided as an appendix hereto); I strove to ask these questions whenever possible at relevant points in the narrative so as not to ask repetitive or redundant questions after the story. I sought to address topics as they were brought up by and on the minds of the interviewees, and to minimize direct questioning overall. I recorded the interviews on an iPod and transcribed them verbatim.

Using grounded theory methods, I analyzed the transcripts in search of emergent themes that were pertinent to the research questions. For example, some of the most relevant and insightful themes to emerge, relating to marriage and motherhood, were those of greater power and control in the maternal role than the marital role; these and others will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

First, I repeatedly read each interview transcript in its entirety. Then when certain themes became apparent across participants, I would cut and paste the relevant excerpts from the interviews into a Word document, grouped together under a particular theme, to form an excerpt file (Weiss 1994). Sometimes particular and specific words could function as a theme. For example, the use of the word “spiritual” and its derivations was made only by the wealthiest women among the interviewees and constituted its own, albeit relatively small, theme. Some themes, such as “Violence,” emerged not from a single word that was used by multiple respondents, but from the commonality of their stories and specific depictions of it. Few respondents actually used similar words or language to describe their violent encounters, whether from verbal abuse to rape; however, all experiences and stories of violence could be thematically unified.

Themes that emerged in response to direct questions were more easily quantified, and outliers more clearly identified. For example, taking cues from early participants’ unprompted revelations of motherhood being easier than wifedom, I began to specifically ask interviewees which role they felt was easier. Such generally straightforward answers lent themselves to quantification, and outliers were readily apparent.

As I present the data, when possible, I quantify it to illustrate the prevalence of a response among the respondents. Additionally, I provide any contrary or outlying responses to the dominant themes presented, to illustrate the variation in responses.

Data are reported in detailed and extended transcripts where necessary to more fully express the sentiment of the interviewee, and “so the readers can, to a much greater degree, see the stories apart from their analysis. The selves of storyteller and analyst then

remain separate” (Reissman 2001: 701). Thus, though I have selected the quotes I feel to be best illustrative and most powerfully representative of the dynamics that emerged in the interviews, the data are filtered through my interpretative lens as little as possible. The quotes that appear in the text were selected to be representative of the dominant theme or themes that emerged from the data.

### *Determinants and Repercussions of Divorce*

The psychological and emotional distress of divorce has been extensively documented (Amato 2000; Booth and Amato 1991; Lorenz, Simons, Conger, Elder, Johnson and Chao 1997). Moderators that are known to mitigate the magnitude of this distress begin at the individual level and include self-efficacy, coping and social skills. They also encompass areas such as interpersonal relationships (social support), structural roles (employment) and cultural beliefs.

When giving reasons for initiating divorce, women most often cite infidelity, followed by incompatibility, drinking or drug use, “growing apart,” personality problems, lack of communication and physical and mental abuse. Divorcing mothers, however, report more instances of “abuse and substance abuse as causes of divorce (Amato and Previti 2003:622)”. Children likely increase a woman’s motivation to leave an abusive or addicted husband.

A finer distinction is made by socioeconomic (SES) status. Amato and Previti (2003) report that

...high SES individuals, following divorce, were more likely to complain about lack of communication, changes in interests or values, incompatibility, and their

ex-spouses' self-centeredness. In contrast, low SES individuals were more likely to complain about physical abuse, going out with the boys/girls, neglect of household duties, gambling, criminal activities, financial problems, and employment problems. (P. 606)

Such was the case in the present sample, with Gwen and the other wealthiest women being the only ones to use the word "spiritual" when explaining their reasons for divorce.

Gwen (50): So then around the middle of my son's senior year, I was like, I can't live this way, I'm done. I'm dying emotionally, I'm dying spiritually, there's no love in this marriage.

Jennifer: (42) I continued to go out most days with my head held high because I knew that I was a good mother, and I was doing the right thing – I was, I was doing the right thing. I was going to be ok, my kids were going to be ok, I had to get away from – I'd be dead today if I was still there – I would - not exactly physically dead, but most certainly spiritually dead.

Carrie (42): We had babies right away – see, the typical thing. I'm looking to have babies, I meet a man that's responsible, dependable – I'm attracted to him in the beginning, physically – but that didn't last long for me. Didn't last long. Because – I know me, I need more – it would have lasted longer if he was more physically attractive to me – but that just doesn't do it for me – you have to have the whole package.

Interviewer: What is the whole package for you?

For me – I want a lot. There has to be some sort of connectedness that you almost can't explain – but it's basically the spiritual connection, the respect, the mutual respect, the – sure, you want to like the same things – I look for humor in a person – and a positive person – but I want someone that is self-reliant. Someone that is ok to be alone – that likes themselves enough that he's – he's cool with going to a restaurant by himself – he doesn't need anyone to tell him how to do things, or what to do – he's his own person. That's what I want. Because that's what I want in myself. And I think when you are whole – and you come together – as a couple – that's the ultimate kind of relationship to me.

Financial security thus affords the luxury of self-awareness, in-depth introspection of and indulging in one's spiritual needs. Moraga (1979), quoted by Collins, states, "When we are not physically starving we have the luxury to realize psychic and emotional starvation." (1994:49) Many middle class women in the present study mentioned reasons

for divorce that were grounded in the emotional realm, particularly love having faded, or never “really” being in love at all. More instrumental reasons were paramount at lower income levels, such as adultery, physical and emotional abuse and unemployment.

### *Interviewee Traits*

*Interviewee Demographics.* Interviewees range in age from 26-82, with a median age of 50. Three have acquired PhDs: one a professor, one a college dean, one a retired psychiatrist. Another is a lawyer. Some have acquired bachelor’s degrees, some master’s degrees. Many are working toward various degrees: associates, bachelors, paralegal. Two dropped out of high school and later received their GED. 31 are white; eight are African American and one is Ethiopian.

Individual annual income levels range from \$85,000 annually to unemployed; the average is \$41,000. When queried about incomes, middle class women answered with precision: “75,000.” “36,000 with great benefits”. However, vagueness reigned at the poles of the income continuum, possibly due to tactful decorum at the high end and resignation or denial at the low. Prior research has demonstrated that interviewee income reporting varies by socioeconomic status (Turrell 2000). Two women — one a part-time children’s yoga instructor , one engaged in volunteer work — are remarried to affluent men, and responded, respectively, “We do very well,” and “I don’t know — six figures?” when queried about income. Lower income or impoverished women responded, “16-19,000,” “Student loans and food stamps,” “10-15,000 a year, if that” — the last a day care employee and mother of three, all under 15 and living at home, the eldest child a mother herself.

Interviewees are at differing stages in the life course. 11 are grandmothers, one is a great-grandmother, and one is not a biological mother (she is a step-mother to her third husband's son from a previous marriage). 24 women have been married once and are currently divorced and living with their young children or living alone without their grown children. Of these women, some are dating and are in relationships which vary in degree of seriousness. Three are cohabiting, one with a wedding date tentatively set. Four are on their second marriage, one of whom is seriously contemplating divorce. Seven have been married and divorced twice; one to the same man, one who became pregnant to another man while her first husband was incarcerated. She married the father after the child was born (Ohio law prohibits divorce during pregnancy), recently divorced the second husband, and is now rekindling the relationship with the first husband. Two women have been married three times: one is in the process of divorcing her third husband, presently incarcerated for cocaine possession; the other is widowed.

*Non-normative Paths to Motherhood.* Eleven of the women in my sample fell into marriage and motherhood through a variety of non-normative routes rather than a conscious, planned path – or otherwise deviated from the historically traditional sequence of the Western life course. According to Levin (2008), until about 1970, there was a normative, sequential pattern to the life course consisting of four phases occurring in quick succession: marriage, forming a joint household, sex, and children. Non-marital births began to increase in 1975, and constitute approximately four in ten births in the United States today (Capser and Bianchi 2002; Pew Research Center 2007). However, while non-marital childbirth has become somewhat destigmatized in recent years, "...a substantial majority (of Americans) believe that marriage is the appropriate institution for

childbearing and only a very small fraction believe that unmarried childbearing is a worthwhile alternative lifestyle” (Thornton and Young-Demarco 2001: 1031). A considerable majority (71%) of Americans take a “dim view” of the “delinking” of marriage and parenthood (Pew Research Center 2007). Thus, deviation from the traditional life-course may be statistically normative, but is tolerated at best, and certainly deviates from the ideal which clearly remains firmly entrenched in Americans’ minds.

Six married under circumstances described in the vernacular as “shotgun;” all were white and most grew up in a rural area, like Faith:

Faith (42) Well, first I have to say, times were different back then, it was the mid-80s, and I was pregnant, and not married to the father, and we lived in a small town, and — the expectation was, at that time, in 1985, if you were pregnant, you were probably going to marry the father. So – we got married. And – I think both families had some pretty serious reservations about whether or not the marriage was going to last. They – hoped for the best. And I would say, I was about 4 months pregnant when we got married, had a baby obviously about 5 months after we got married, and – his family was – very clannish, very dysfunctional, resentful of outsiders, possessive of one another, and – they immediately, after we got married, started creating tension between my husband and I. And it – got to the point where – I didn’t want to be around them, I allowed my husband to take the baby to see his grandmother and see his uncles, I didn’t have anything to do with them, they made me very nervous, I was having anxiety attacks when I was around them.

Of the five who had children out of wedlock, four are African American, one white. The latter, Lauren, gave her baby up for adoption when she had him at age 14 in the 1960s. Bonita had her eldest son out of wedlock; when the second of her three sons was born, she and their father married. Marion had her 3 children out of wedlock to 3 different fathers – none of whom she ever married. Jackie had a daughter out of wedlock after her divorce.

### *Initiator and Partner Identities*

The identities of initiator, or the spouse who “ultimately declared the marriage over,” and that of partner, or simply, the one who was left, have implications for how successfully one weathers the divorce process and the transition into post-divorce identities (Hopper 2001; Reissman 1990; Vaughan 1986).

*Initiators.* Women initiate the majority of divorces in the United States. (Brining and Allen 2000; Amato and Previti 2003). “Today, with some variation among states, it remains slightly above two-thirds.” (Brining and Allen 2000:127).

It is striking that women initiate the majority of divorces, in light of the many studies documenting women’s and mothers’ objective financial hardship and decline in standards of living after divorce (see Arendell 1986; Kurz 1995). It is also noteworthy because it arguably goes against the dictates of intensive mothering, in that it likely necessitates the dissolution of children’s’ homes which are replaced by a shared-parenting schedule, in which mothers will likely live apart from their children half the time, and possibly take on more work than they previously had, in order to support an independent household.

As will be elaborated upon in the next chapter, the stigma of the “bad mother” identity seems powerful enough to generate an account of divorce entirely compatible with the tenets of intensive mothering, thus preserving the “good mother” identity.

Of the 40 women interviewed, 26 said unambiguously that they had initiated their divorces.

Interviewer: Were you the initiator?

Faith: Yes.

Interviewer: What led you to do that?

Faith (42): I – was preached at, preached at, preached at by my mother. “You’ve got to stay home with your child until they get into first grade – you don’t want to leave the child with a babysitter.” And I guess she was well-meaning. She said the child won’t develop properly if it doesn’t get enough attention from you... So I stayed in this marriage, which was pretty miserable, for – 8 years. And – the summer after he finished first grade I took him and left and went back to live with my mother. I was the initiator.

Sarah (37): Me. Totally me. Because I remember – I just did not love him anymore. And truthfully, I don’t know if I truly loved him at the beginning. I cared for him, but – I’ve only been in love really twice in my life – and that was high school and now. And I mean – truly, deep, heartfelt – “I can be in love with this person for the rest of my life no matter what.”

Jane (32): I was (the initiator) – in every sense of the term. I – mulled it over for years beforehand – I even told him years before the split that it would be fine with me if he got a girlfriend, that we both knew we were together just for the kids. I was the first to get a lawyer, and unfortunately I had to file for divorce. No – he did not want it at all – and was in denial for a long time – but he wasn’t married to him.

*Initiator Qualified.* A second category, comprised of seven women, I named “Initiator Qualified”, because the initiators were reluctant, qualifying their initiation by framing it in terms of selfless reaction as opposed to selfish action. This squares with previous research examining gendered accounts of divorce (Kurz 1995; Reissman 1990). Quoting Ahrons (1990), Walzer and Oles state “that women frequently describe their divorce as an action to which they are finally led by husbands’ behavior: ‘Stories of years of abuse, betrayal or absenteeism by their ex-husband are rife.’ (2003:47) All of these elements are present singly or in concert in the following women’s accounts: adultery, drug abuse and abandonment.

Charlotte (45): I would say I was the person who made the decision to get out of the marriage. I think that he initiated – by his actions, he started the wheel turning.

Bethany (26): I would say he left me no other choice. I would say that I had been and I was still actively working on our marriage, but his decisions and his choices left me with no other choice 'cause my kids and my life were in danger. And that's how I feel.

Bonita (39): Um – he initiated *emotionally*, I went ahead and put it into physical – you know, because emotionally he was tearing me up, I mean, the things he was *doing*.

Amanda (56): They do things – they force us to do it.

Aisha (44): Um – that's a good one. I would – I would say me, and also the one who took the initiative, but – you could also say *he* was – in the action that he took when he left – but I really didn't think – that he thought I was going to go the divorce route – I really thought he did that to get back – at me. Make it hard, make her struggle. She'll call me – I'll be back over there.

Altogether, 33 women, comprising 83% of the sample — slightly above the national average — are either initiators qualified initiators.

*Partners.* Six women were non-initiating partners: four were left for other women; the other two were just abruptly “left.” Whether they were blindsided by their husband's announcement of a departure, believing their lives harmonious until that point, or were left after years of unhappiness and turmoil, the majority of the partners expressed a sense of profound surprise, or shock.

Amy(36): My first marriage started to go wrong — I believe it was late August, September, 2000, when my husband came downstairs – we were living in a little townhouse, and he said – he didn't think he loved me anymore – he – wasn't sure what was going on with himself – so I —

Interviewer: Did that take you by surprise?

Amy: Completely –completely – cause I thought we were happy up until that point – then the next day I went to get an appointment with a counselor – he was completely against it but by the following night we were sitting in the counselor's office – he was outraged that we were there – he said he was not going to not show up because he didn't want to be disrespectful to me. The whole session he was holding the arms of the chair - white knuckles and everything – and he was just irate that we were sitting in a counselor's office – how dare I get us into counseling when he's just going through things in life and he needs time. So – we

left the counseling that night - he admitted that he had been having thoughts of other women, that maybe we should separate so he could see other women.

Interviewer: How long had you been married?

Amy: 7 years – our daughter had just turned 4.

Interviewer: Were you the initiator of the divorce then?

Susan (49): No – he left. He just packed and left. I would have stuck through anything. And did.

Miranda (41) - He's the one that did eventually leave – and I probably would have never left, as miserable as I was: that's what I chose, so – that's what I get. Which is really stupid, but, that's how I felt.

I knew things were horrible, obviously, but, I just didn't think he was really going to leave. I don't know why. I just wanted him to change, really. So even saying things like, "If you're that unhappy, why don't you just go ahead and leave" I really meant, "Could you just do what I need you to do? Could you just help?" It was horrible. It was the worst feeling in the world. I would say that divorce is so bad I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy, it's so miserable. Especially those initial feelings.

### *Infidelity*

Prevetti and Amato frame infidelity as a complex phenomenon, describing it as "both a cause and a consequence of relationship deterioration" (2004:217). Infidelity is certainly a complex issue in the present study. 16 women (40% percent of the sample) reported that their husbands had committed adultery; two women confided that they had been adulterers themselves.

Adultery on the part of the husband was not, however, universally reported as a cataclysmic and maritally irrevocable phenomenon – though for some women in this study, its discovery, whether through a confession, accidental stumbling upon or deliberate sleuthing, surely was. Eleven women (28%) framed adultery as a "breaking

point” in their marriages, whether they were the initiators or partners. This dovetails with the findings of Amato and Prevetti (2003), who observed that of all respondents’ causes given for divorce, infidelity was most often mentioned, with 25% of women stating it a factor in their own divorce.

Sally (79): Actually I didn’t get divorced until we had been married for 45 years. But – toward the end there was a great deal of unhappiness – I was working two part-time jobs and he was sort of – not working very much –and he was perfectly happy with that arrangement and I was not. Then he began to see another woman – and that was kind of the breaking point.

Charlotte (45): His jealousy just got more and more intense, and I just grew angrier and angrier – it just got to the point where I really couldn’t take it anymore. I had finally asked him to move out, and I was sick and in bed – ok, here goes: I was sick and in bed – and he came home to tell me that – he had been to the doctor, that he had – been with other women and he had caught an STD. And I really loved him and trusted him – I mean, I cannot tell you how much faith I had in this man – when he was golfing, and he’d come home really late, and I would think, is he using car headlights? Is he night golfing? I just never, ever would have expected – completely blown away.

That was absolutely it. And then – the girls would come home and talk about the nice cat lady. I had no idea what they were talking about – so there was a total of 3. Yeah. That was what was really hard for me – he ended up going to a friend of his who was a gynecologist – and he ended up calling me, and yet I was treated as if I had it – I mean, I was never tested, but the medicine made me extremely ill – just – the side effects were horrible – and just to go, you know, for AIDS, HIV, and all of the STDs – was really very humiliating.

After a lot of it happened, I thought, I want to get back together – and, you know, but every time we had sex we had to use a condom at that point – I mean, everything changed. And it was a constant reminder. And I just couldn’t do it.

Bonita (39): So, I’m like, ok. Ok. So I talked to him about it one more time. And he said I’m sorry, he apologized for it up and down, and like a good Christian wife, I said, ok. But the last straw was when I came in one night, I had to go to the doctor, and I came in, and I told him, the doctor said I had sleep apnea.

I was telling him about it, and he said (to Bonita, whispering) “Wait wait wait wait I’m on the phone.” So he’s talking to this woman on the phone for two hours. So I say, ok, I’ve got to go to the doctor’s appointment. So I leave, come back, and he’s *still* talking to this woman on the *phone*. And she must have asked him a question, and he said, “You know I do, but I really can’t say anything right now.”

After that I said, “Get out. We’re done.” That was it – that was it – cause when I heard him say – that – cause we all have a trigger phrase. All women have a trigger phrase. All women have a trigger – I don’t care what you go through with a man, how much you love him, as soon as he says – it’s just something that he says or does that you just snap out of it and say, “*I am done*. I am completely done with this.” And when I heard him say that, I said, ok. And he said, well, you forgave me for Sister Nicky, Sister Shelly, and how many more times are you going to forgive me? And I said, never again, I’m done. I’m done.

Four women stated that their husbands had committed adultery, but that it was not a significant factor in the demise of their marriage. For Samantha, in fact, it was a welcome event.

Samantha (55): Uhhh – it’s funny, because when he did move out – and bless his heart, you know, I gotta hand it to him, he finally moved out – cause it was real clear I was never going to – you know- if we’re going to get out of this hideous, painful place, you’re going to have to leave – and I think he found another woman, and that finally booted his butt out.

### *Violence*

In light of several studies reporting that approximately 25% of American women are likely to be victims of domestic violence over the course of their lives, the amount and range of violence among participants in this study is, sadly, relatively high (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence 2009; American Bar Association 2009). 15 women, 38% of the sample, reported violence in their former marriages, ranging from verbal abuse to rape.

In such cases, there is no need to speculate about why women initiate divorce or wrangle among various family ideologies. It was simply too stressful and likely dangerous for themselves and their children to continue in their marriages.

Sarah (37): I needed to get out. Basically what I got out with – the one thing that caused me to leave was the yelling and the screaming that continued – that started

when we were first married, just continued – but with the yelling and the screaming came like more of an emotional – it got more – when I was going through my depression it was more like, why can't you do anything? What's wrong with you? And that started it and kind of over the years – went on. That type of stuff grew into – when he would get mad, he would not only yell, but he decided that he was going to throw whatever was closest to him. I don't know why – there were so many things that were thrown – but the one thing that sticks out in my mind where it was pretty much the end – was, I had just folded the clothes, I had worked on papers, I was trying to get done, I was trying to care for Joey, I had the clothes folded on the coffee table ready to go to where it needed to. He got mad about something, swiped it all off, and told me that I needed to refold them.

Monica (40): Um – so at that point, I had put the kids in counseling, and my attorney gave me the name of a counselor – who I think is probably a decent counselor, but I don't think that he really understands domestic violence. And, um, I didn't get the feeling that he really understood the fear involved – that there was honest fear that I wouldn't live, that the kids might not live, I mean, I had a bag packed for years with – every time the kids' sizes would change I'd put new clothes in there, new diapers, you know – I had a bag packed in case I needed to leave. I had a friend who gave me her garage door opener so that I could go to her house whenever I needed to. You know, I mean it was, it was really serious.

Jackie (49): Well, I was going to church at the time, and you know how they say you shouldn't get a divorce, and all that stuff, and plus, from reading my Bible, you know, I felt like – that God – didn't want me to divorce him. And I kept praying about it – just to see, but, when it became where I felt like I couldn't deal with it anymore I finally left. Now that I'm older and more mature, I understand that, I believe personally that God, you know, of course, he approves the marriage, he established marriage, and – but He does not approve of physical or verbal abuse, or violence, and, so, I don't feel guilty – at all.

### Insights of a Diverse Sample

As mentioned in the first chapter, previous studies of motherhood, maternal ideology and marital status have focused on a specific maternal demographic. By casting a wider net, and interviewing women varying in age, socioeconomic status and race, I am able to gain insights the prior studies, with their narrower focus, may have missed.

## *Age*

Six of the participants were over age 60 and married prior to 1965 – prior to the second wave of feminism, to our heightened sense of individualism, to women (especially mothers of small children) working in large numbers, and to the era of individualized marriage. They can provide insight into whether dynamics were different prior to the era of intensive mothering and individualized marriage. Reflecting the younger age at marriage and the much stronger norms against unwed motherhood, four married as teenagers; two already pregnant (and one believing she was pregnant). While the number of initiators in the sample overall was 83%, 50% of these women were initiators, possibly reflecting a lesser willingness to dissolve a marriage, or abandon the role of wife. All three of the partners were left for other women. Of the women who did initiate divorce, one deliberately waited until her children were grown and out of the house – the marriage lasted 45 years – until she ended her marriage. The other two were in abusive situations. The last straw for Leslie came after she was strangled over a pot of boiling water; Rose was “verbally and emotionally abused” for the duration of her marriage, yet she waited until the youngest two of her five children were in high school before ending it. Most of the younger initiators in the study had children living with them in the home and spoke of their concern about the impact the decision to divorce would have on their children – and far more about leaving a marriage for emotional reasons, such as falling out of love, never really having been in love with from the start, sexual attraction having faded or housework issues. The older mothers either removed the children from the equation or left an abusive situation.

As will be elaborated upon in the following chapter older mothers' perspective on making children the center of one's life, or one's "purpose in life," as one mother put it, lends insight into repercussions of intensive mothering and will be discussed in the following chapter.

*Socioeconomic Class, Employment History, Race/Ethnicity*

As will be elaborated upon in the following chapter, there was wide variation in employment history among the women in my sample, with no notable differences over the range of socioeconomic status. Some of the wealthier women worked full time jobs; some worked part-time or engaged in charity work, some were at-home mothers; their employment status changed over the course of their lives as well. Such variation existed among working-class and poor women as well. A notable finding, as will be expanded upon in the next chapter, is that the wealthier initiators, who were able to realize the ideal of intensive mothering — that of stay-at-home mother in their children's' early years — left their marriages as well, exclusively for emotional reasons, the only group to mention "spirituality" lacking in their marriages. Marriage, or the quality of their marriages, was seen as an impediment to their ability to be a good mother — even if divorce meant seeing their children less often (to be specific, half the time, as all entered into shared-parenting agreements) and may have had to move into apartments or much smaller homes than they lived in when married.

Previous studies, notably Lareau in *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), have noted that different social classes have adopted different parenting philosophies and practices. Middle class parents have been said to "engage in a process of concerted cultivation," in which parents

actively guide their children's' upbringing through perpetual conversation and negotiation, considerable money and time spent on private lessons, sports and extracurricular activities, and generally explicitly enable and empower their children to deal successfully with institutions. Concerted cultivation and intensive mothering share many fundamental tenets.

Working- class and impoverished parents are said to adopt the philosophy of natural growth, in which parents generally take a less active role in their children's' lives – even sometimes disdaining middle-class parenting as oppressive for children. Such parents are said to issue blunt directives instead of engage in lengthy conversation, be more predisposed toward corporal punishment as discipline and generally take less of a role as an advocate for their children with various institutions. Parents let their children develop naturally (Lareau 2003).

The working-class and poor mothers in this sample , into which all but one African-American woman fell, all seemed to embrace intensive mothering as an ideal, or at least could not be cleanly categorized as adhering to the tenets of natural growth, such as Marion, who also framed good mothering as almost every mother in the study does:

“being there”

Interviewer: Are you a good mother?

Marion (46): Yes. For my kids, I talk to them about life. I talk to them about keeping your room clean. About hygiene, I talk to them about – the do's and don'ts of life, you know what I'm saying? I tell them about the streets. You have friends that, you know, they ask you to go to the store with them. And they might have a little change. And my son's 13, his little friend's about 11 or 12. He says, Mom, my friend wants me to go to the store with him. I'm like, mmm-mmm. He's says, Why not? I'm said, I really don't

know your friend, I don't know the parents very well, you just met him, and he wants you to go to the store with him. How do you know he doesn't steal? How do you know he's not gonna go in that store, and steal something, and you're with him, and you don't have any money, and he's stealing, and he walks out the store, and the police get you *and* him. I be telling my kids, you have to think. If your friend wants you to go to the store with him, tell him you're not allowed. I don't let my kids do a lot of stuff. I can't – trust anybody. So I think that being a good mother is talking to your kids about life, telling them you love them, every day - and *staying on them*. About life, about their room, and about their education – and just being there for them. That's what I think a good mother is.

## Chapter Four: Findings

### Introduction

This research explores how women make sense over their life course of the multiple identities of mother, wife, worker and “ideal self.” Also, I have studied how potentially dissonant family ideologies contribute to this process and how they impact the crafting of a coherent biography.

Four major themes emerge from the data, the first regarding maternal employment and the tenacity of the “mommy wars.” I find that employment is not a useful metric for assessing the internalization of and commitment to the intensive mothering ideology.

Nothing resembling a clean dichotomy of “stay-at-home” and “working” mothers emerges from the biographies of the women in this study. Perhaps the pervasiveness of women in the workforce and the necessity of a mother’s employment to maintain a middle class lifestyle have significantly reduced anxiety about work compromising a “good mother” identity. However, I find that the internalization of the “Mommy War” rhetoric endures. I explore reasons for the persistence and increasing acuteness of the intensive mothering ideology and for the heightened salience of the status of mother.

The second theme is the greater salience of motherhood over wifedom. I find that most mothers consider the identity of mother far more salient than that of wife, due primarily to a sense of both greater control and permanence. Participants stated that they were reluctant to embrace the identity of wife and unwilling to compromise in this role; yet, for

them, “mother” was gladly all-consuming and the work involved a “labor of love.” Mindful of the claim by Koropecj-Cox and Pendell (2007) that women are less certain of the benefits and permanence of marriage — and of the high rates of mother initiators in this and other studies — should a mother find herself in a troubled marriage, the identity of wife seems to be what is abandoned, in order for the mother to focus on the more permanent and salient identity of mother. I also find that the lack of control and permanence that mothers ascribe to marriage also colors the relationship they have with their stepchildren and the relationship they have with their own children who are “mothered” by someone else.

Divorce, however, calls into question one’s “good mother” credibility — “Bad Mother” is a powerful stigma (Orenstein 2000:112). It is a paradox: how can one be a self-sacrificing good mother, yet willfully dissolve her own children’s nuclear family? Resolution is achieved in framing the divorce as entirely compatible with the intensive mothering ideology, with most respondents stating that their divorce either made them a better mother, or best served their children’s needs.

This gives rise to the third major theme, that of retroactive nullification. There is another paradox in the divorce/intensive mothering dynamic to be resolved. Many researchers have documented the process of “retroactive nullification” (Hopper 2002; Reissman 1991; Vaughan 1986) that occurs after divorce, in which divorcing persons engage in a complete psychological revision of their marriage, often labeling it “wrong from the start.” I find ample evidence of this among my participants. However, contrast this with the mandate of intensive mothering that children are the emotional apex of one’s life, the

“best thing that ever happened to me.” Is there a parallel emotional revision regarding one’s children, or are they seen as a saving grace of otherwise “wasted” or negative time?

Hays argues that the ideology of intensive mothering endures as a haven of humanity and selflessness in an inhumane capitalist culture. I find that it serves several more direct purposes in the context of divorce: it facilitates the continuity of a lifetime narrative and it salvages the integrity of what McMahon names “the real self.” Initiators in this study are not in violation of the tenets of intensive mothering, but rather are in compliance, by divorcing their children’s fathers. What may be viewed as self-serving can be reframed as self-sacrifice, thus preserving the “good mother” identity. In the modern world of choice, characterized by infinite options and impermanence, intensive mothering offers a psychic protection against the counterfactual — or imagined alternatives — of arguably the only truly irrevocable: one’s children.

The fourth and final theme that emerges from the data is that of a transition of the cultural meaning of children. In possibly the next chapter of the progression of children from “economically worthless” to “emotionally priceless,” I find that children — particularly daughters to mothers — are expected to be their mothers’ “best friends.”

Ultimately I find, as I elaborate in the concluding chapter, that rather than marriage experienced as something that facilitates intensive mothering, the lived experience of marriage is framed as a deterrent to being a good mother, due to a lack of permanence and control. I will explore how the dissonance within the matrix of family ideologies may be driving society toward individualism and lone motherhood and away from marriage and community, and perhaps toward negative outcomes for children and mothers.

## I Diffusing the Mommy Wars

Among the mothers in my sample, nothing remotely resembling a dichotomy regarding women's work experience, motives and biographies emerges. What does surface is a loose, imperfect continuum, with a mother who stayed at home for the first 10 years of her child's life at one pole and a mother who returned to full-time work just weeks after the birth of her son at the other. Neither pole captures the experience of the vast majority of mothers, who cobbled together a work history in their children's early years, dictated by an amalgam of economic circumstance, spousal support, job opportunities, personal predilection and sheer fortuity: accidents, death, job loss, inheritance. Prior research has established that exigencies of daily life influence employment trajectories more than orientation to one's career or early adult plans (Gerson 1985).

Thus, work history does not strongly reflect motives, preferences or identity salience. A mother's work history does not reflect the extent to which "mother" is her primary identity nor is it a measure of her devotion to her children. Desires and intentions to stay at home were often thwarted by economic constraints and, particularly among older mothers, lack of spousal support. McMahon (1995) notes that one may assume that the maternal identity may be less salient for (particularly full-time) working mothers, as the time spent at work may "preclude the invocation of maternal or family identities among employees. But this does not necessarily mean such identities are less central to these women's more enduring sense of self or identity prominence hierarchy" (p.19). Attempts to enact identities high in the salience hierarchy are thus thwarted by external and practical concerns.

Adding to the calculus of maternal employment decisions are changing ideals regarding what constitutes a good childhood and what children need. Children across the age spectrum, from the toddler years through and beyond college, are thought to need more extracurricular activities and supplemental lessons — all of which have an economic impact. It is acceptable, if not expected, for even at-home mothers to place their young children in preschool, where they ostensibly acquire socialization skills through their interaction with other children, an aptitude not likely developed at home in today's smaller families (Bianchi 2000). Lareau (2003) argues that concerted cultivation, the parenting practice and ideology of the middle class, mandates children's involvement in an array of after-school and extracurricular activities, such as music lessons and sports — often at considerable parental financial cost and time commitment. More adult children attend college, where tuition is perennially increasing and student debt rising, thus necessitating greater and longer-lasting financial help from their parents, in the form of an allowance, housing or payment of bills and loans. It follows, then, that a “good mother” is one who provides materially and financially as much as possible for her children, further casting the work-home duality in a shade of grey complexity.

In the present study, some mothers wept while speaking of still feeling bitter, “cheated,” for years after their divorce:

Joyce (42): ...and then after I had my daughter — I realized that — I kind of held her in my arms and I went through this whole thing where — I realized that one of my goals was to be — I really wanted to be a full-time parent and homemaker — after I had her — and that my career was just not something that was as high on the priority list. But I wasn't able to do that for economic reasons. He was not able to support my goals in wanting to be a full-time parent and homemaker. I actually was the main source of income — so not only was there an unequal — we weren't equal in our wages — I was making a lot more money than he — I felt like my job was a lot more stable, also — than his . So I felt like my working was something

that – it was integral to our family’s well being – to our economic functioning – it was just very important that I work. Because, if I had quit working, it would have put us at a very low standard of living.

I was fortunate enough to take the maximum of time off with the Family Leave Act - which I think is, what, 12 weeks? So I was fortunate enough to be able to do that – although for me that wasn’t enough. Because I wanted even more time with her. I would take her (to day care) and I would drop her off and I would sob all the way to work – so I was emotionally devastated that I wasn’t able to be with her when she was really young like that. I still feel cheated, to this day. I’ve always felt cheated. Since the day that I had her I’ve felt cheated cause I couldn’t stay home with her.

In contrast, this stay-at-home mother and ex-wife of a mutual funds broker, in the immediate aftermath of the divorce process, is rather placid when discussing her at-home experience:

Carrie (42): I stayed at home right away – that’s a dynamic in and of itself, because you’re giving up your life – and – mind you, I was looking at it as a new chapter. I was excited to do that for a while – I knew that I would never like be the kind of mom to stay home forever – but, I knew that while they were young that’s what I wanted to do, and we had the financial capability to do that. Oh – I felt like I could see that once they were off in elementary, middle school, you know, I wasn’t sure – I just kind of left it open. And I started getting anxious around – it happened sooner than later.

Interviewer: Oh – you pursued outside interests?

Carrie: Oh yeah – I started – I mean 9 months after Laura was born I started running half marathons – and I was like, oh – I’m gonna start doing full marathons, and mind you that’s no career – but it was like, I’m looking. I’m searching.

Jane (32) found stay at home motherhood immensely fulfilling:

Oh God I loved it. We lived in a modest house in a neighborhood that was – let’s say, beneath my aspirations for myself and the girls – but I look back on those days and – my heart was just filled with love – just - sick with love - lovesick. It was such a sensual time, you know? I mean, our days were dictated by the weather: long lazy days in the sandbox or the park if it was sunny, home or the library if it was raining. Hours of tricycles and Legos. I remember being shocked when my former sister in law said that the first six weeks of her daughter’s life were hell. It was jarring to me – I mean I understand that “goo goo gaa gaa” can drive some strong women and good mothers crazy – but I loved it. It really was

the only time in my life where I felt I was “doing the right thing,” and – that brings a certain - calm...

But today – from this vantage point – I don’t care if my daughters love their own children so much it makes them nauseous – I’ll do everything I can to encourage them to at least have a foot in the door in a career or graduate school – the financial risks are too great...

This mother somewhat reluctantly stayed home with her young daughter, but was soon driven to pursue outside work:

Barbara (50): When I married my late husband, Kristen had just turned a year – and I stayed home – I managed to stay home, I think it was, two months? Like I said, he was older than me, and he had that ideal that mothers should stay at home with their children – and I thought, oooh, yeah. I managed, like, 2 or 3 months before I just went to him and said, “I’ve got to go to work, I’m going *crazy* – my vocabulary has regressed to the point of a two-year-old, and – I need – adults.”

Interviewer: So it was never your intention to be a full-time, stay at home mom.

Barbara: Uh-uh.

The preceding statements jibe with the sentiments of Gerson’s (1985) mothers from a generation ago. There is neither an occupational and moral bifurcation among mothers nor a linear ideological trajectory guiding the alleged work/home life course. And also with Bianchi’s (2000) research, which illustrates that the majority of mothers are not entrenched in either largely non-existent camp. Mothers with the luxury of choice will often work less than full-time and craft a schedule around that of their children. Johnston and Swanson note that women perpetually navigate and assess the work-at-home choice, and that mothers are “ambivalent about their worker-parent identities” (2004:499).

Prior research and the present study provide empirical data which demonstrate that the “sides” are amorphous and fluid, and don’t necessarily reflect mothers’ wants or identity salience. The Mommy War does not reflect lived reality, but is rather a media manufactured “controversy.” Stone (2007), Bianchi (2000) and Gerson (1985) reframe

the alleged conflict as not reflective of women's empathy for other women, make explicit the reality that women's career choices are greatly constrained by the lack of options and flexibility in the workplace, and illuminate that the War is a consciously plotted diversion, channeling mothers' attention and energies into mutual enmity, instead of collective consciousness of and uprising against the true maternal enemies: workplace and policy inadequacies that plague all mothers: a dearth of part time work, lack of paid sick leave, and the paltriest maternity leave in the post-industrial world.

Many of the older mothers in my sample spoke of needing husbands' permission or support to get a job, or to be sure that their work did not conflict with their wifely or maternal obligations, such as Rose:

Interviewer: So the first child was about 1950?

Rose (82): Um – yes – and the next child was about 1953 – oh – he started to teach immediately when we were married – we had a brief courtship – it was a 9 month courtship – after two years he got a fellowship from the University of Chicago to do a study in St. Petersburg with migrants – aging migrants – retirees – to um, do much of what you're doing now – so that's when I had my second child while we were living in Florida and living on next to nothing – on a post-doc stipend – and um – somewhere in there – I'm getting lost in all this history – I was allowed to work one year when we went back to Chicago so he could do his dissertation – um – do his research –

Interviewer: He allowed you -

Rose: He allowed me to have a job.

Interviewer: Did you want to have a job?

Rose: Oh – yes – well, I mean I was thrilled that I could do it – “No wife of mine will ever have a job” – he was given to mandates of many sorts. Not a very nice person.

If there was any such objection by husbands in younger wives' marriages, it was far more muted. While working may have conflicted with an ideal embodiment of motherhood, it was never mentioned as an impediment to being a wife — perhaps reflecting the greater salience of mother as an identity, and reflecting greater cultural acceptance of working wives and mothers by husbands and of working mothers overall (Axinn and Thornton 2000; Thornton and Young-Demarco 2001).

*The Persistence and Increasing Acuteness of Intensive Mothering and the Escalation of the Identity of Mother*

Stephanie Coontz (2005) frames the “erosion of the male breadwinner family” as an “overdetermined event,” meaning that no single cause, but rather multiple factors - such as real wages for women rising, real wages for men declining, and a host of “economic, cultural, demographic and legal changes”- converged in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to irrevocably transform the institution of marriage (p.262). Amato et al (2007) “assume that the average level of marital quality in a population is a product of a large number of forces, each having a relatively modest effect. Given the complexity of marital relationships, it is unlikely that any single explanatory factor can account for more than a small proportion of any observed aggregate-level shifts in marital quality.”(p.18)

It stands to reason, then, that similar to marital ideology, the endurance and entrenchment of the intensive mothering ideology is due to multiple factors.

*Changes in the Nature of Marriage.* Marriage has long been thought of as “the bedrock of society,” the institution that integrates adults into the larger community and imbues in them a sense of civic responsibility – or at least encourages engagement with extended family. In practice, however, modern marriage is a “greedy” institution, obliging spousal

withdrawal from social connections. Today's spouses are expected to be confidants and one's main source of emotional support, so the married are less likely than singles to avail themselves of siblings, parents or friends for practical or emotional assistance. 94% of unmarried young adults say their primary goal in marriage is finding a "soul mate;" this means turning inward, pushing aside other relationships (Cherlin 2004; Gertsel and Sarkisan 2006). At the same time, marriage is becoming divorced from other institutional purposes it once had; most notably from child-rearing, but from other economic, social and public purposes as well. Whitehead and Popenoe suggest that "the role of marriage as a religious institution seems to be fading" (2001¶ 25). Young adults desire a spiritual union with their partners, but not necessarily one based on a shared institutional faith. To the contrary, it is arguably because of the secularization of society that spiritual fulfillment is sought in a spouse. Thus, modern marriage has taken on more of the contours of Giddens' deinstitutionalized, free-floating, emotional union. According to Whitehead and Popenoe (2001),

Taken together, these findings paint a portrait of marriage as emotionally deep but socially shallow. While marriage is losing much of its broad public and institutional character, it is gaining popularity as a Super Relationship, an intensely private spiritualized union, combining sexual fidelity, romantic love, emotional intimacy and togetherness. Indeed, this intimate couple relationship pretty much defines the sum total of marriage. Other bases for the marital relationship, such as an economic partnership or parental partnership, have receded in importance or disappeared altogether. (¶ 28)

Coupled with the trend toward social isolation, we have the twin and intertwined processes of a marital dynamic that diverts spouses out of the social realm, and a social realm that pushes people inward into the marital dyad. Amato et al (2007) report that, paradoxically, rather than spouses spending more time together in recent decades, which

seems to make intuitive sense if spouses are indeed “soul mates” and “best friends,” they are spending less: “...the decline in marital interaction was pervasive, encompassing leisure activities as well as task-oriented activities” (p.54). One of the activities with the steepest declines is visiting friends together, although engaging in leisure activities together, eating together and jointly doing home projects declined as well.

Even within the marital dyad, individualism and social isolation are increasing, arguably elevating the salience of the maternal role and identity.

*The “Good Mother” is Inherently Elusive.* That highly educated mothers, who are, in theory, those most likely to internalize and practice intensive mothering, are the least likely to self-identify as good mothers, speaks to the inherent unattainable nature of the ideology.

Mothers across the social class spectrum in my sample spoke of the innate imperfection of intensive mothering. They were reluctant to call themselves “good,” and qualified it or used non-committal language if they did:

Interviewer: How would you describe yourself as a mom?

Kelly (39): That’s a hard one, because good is one of those words - you never can say “I’m good.” I could say, I was the best mother I could be in both situations. Was I a good mother? Well, you know, I don’t think my mother would say I was a good mother – I would think she would say I was too detached – as a parent – but I think that I would say – in a modern reality – I think I do pretty good – and I think – I could say today – those are the things kids need to know – they need to be independent, and be able to make judgments for themselves, cause that’s what they’re expected to do. It’s not the best world – but it’s the world they live in – so...

Samantha (55): Hmmm. Our culture gives so many mixed messages now – I mean, you’re damned if you do, damned if you don’t – if you stay home, well then – you were LAZY, taking advantage and riding on your husband’s income – if you go to work, oh my God, you’ve traumatized your kids – WE CAN NOT WIN – and I tell women this: by the way – you can’t win. When you’re at work you’ll be feeling inadequate at home, and at home you’ll be feeling inadequate at work, and there IS. NO. SOLUTION. You can’t. You can’t. There is no way to do all this work and do it - you can’t keep your house half clean, you can’t be at every school open house, or whatever, and you have to forgive yourself for that, so, I think the messages that society gives women about motherhood are everywhere – you know, from stay at home, you know, submit to your husband – from like the Promise Keepers, all the way to put your kids in day care six weeks after birth and get back to work!

Interviewer: Are you a good mother?

Bonita (39): Mmmmm. People say I am but you’re more critical of yourself. You know, people see the sacrifices that I make for my kids, and they were like, that’s good, because this day and age people don’t sacrifice for their kids that much, you know. Especially my generation, and the younger generation, you don’t see that much sacrifice for their kids, you know. There’s a lot of selfishness. This is like the “Me” generation, you know, and I sacrificed *so* much for my kids. I sacrificed relationships, um – money, better jobs, so, yeah, people always say that, but I always feel like I could do something better, like, “I could spend more time with Tyler on the homework.” Or – and, then if it’s to the point where you try and over-accommodate, it gets to the point where you over-spoil them, so, I have to be careful not to fall on that line. People are like, “No, no, no. You have really good kids. You have kids that’s never been to jail, you know, you have kids that’s never – stole anything, you have kids that never – have problems in school anymore. I guess so. I’m doing what I need to do.

It’s really hard to say that *I am a good mother*, because you see so many things that you need to improve on, like – this is just a place (their apartment), but I would love for him to have his backyard again, and his dog again, and – you know. So, I don’t see myself as a good mother, I see I’m doing what I need to do. But I can do better.

That was a tough question! (Laughs) You see June Cleaver’s picture in the dictionary when you look under “good mother” – coming in with the heels and the skirt and the little napkins – “Dinner’s done!” And it’s only 3:00 in the afternoon. We don’t eat til 7 or 8! Lunch? McDonalds! It’s hard to say you’re a good mother.

Kristin Van Ogtrop writes, in an oft-quoted passage from *The Bitch in the House*, “This, I fear, is how it will be: I will love my children, but my love for them will always be imperfect, damaged by my rigid personality and the demands of my work.” (2003:169) Also of note is the popularity of *the imperfect parent* website: “a place for real parents” ([www.imperfectparent.com](http://www.imperfectparent.com)). It makes sense that an ideology in which guilt, imperfection and failure are inherent would engender competition, rather than camaraderie, among its adherents.

*The “other” mothers are the counterfactual.* Choice is inherent in all modernity, including family life. Marriage and motherhood are not cultural mandates, and for those with the luxury of choice, maternal employment is an option as well. For every choice made there is that which was not, that which Giddens names the “counterfactual.”

According to Giddens (1991):

In a post-traditional social universe, an indefinite range of potential courses of action (with their attendant risks) is at any given moment open to individuals and collectivities. Choosing among such alternatives is always an “if” matter, a question of selecting between possible worlds. Living in circumstances of modernity is best understood as the routine contemplation of counterfactuals. (P.29)

With mothers assessing other mothers along the lines of “like me=good; not like me=bad, it would seem that one factor in maternal assessment is that the other mother, whether at-home mother, full or part-time worker, represents the counterfactual, or choice not taken, and that the self-doubt is projected onto the “other” mother. It makes sense that mothers for whom the option to stay at home for a significant amount of time is viable, might feel the weight of their choice and, akin to Hackstaff’s perpetual marital assessment in a

culture of divorce (1999), might be more acutely self-critical when confronted with the counterfactual working mother.

The aforementioned factors contribute to the increasing salience of both the maternal identity and the ideology of intensive mothering.

## II The Paradox of Intensive Mothering and Individualized Marriage

### *“It’s Easier to be a Mother than a Wife:” Permanence and Control*

Though I did not, early on, explicitly ask, a variation of the following was stated by the initial interviewees on several occasions: “It’s easier to be a mother than a wife”:

Jennifer (43): I think that’s still an ongoing battle, because I think it’s harder to be a wife than it is to be a mother – and – I knew that I would be a better mother if I left.

Monica (40): I think it (marriage) still is a partnership, but I think I’m more aware of how much work it takes – and it would be a partner – as opposed to a wife – when I think of wife I think 1950s – you know, with the little apron and the dress – “Here’s your martini honey” as you walk in. That word – has all those connotations to me – um, and I know I would never ever want to do that – maybe that’s why I’m not sure about getting married – but it is so much work. It’s hard work to be a mom – and be a good mom – and I’m concerned about parenting well – but I think it’s like REALLY hard – to have like - to get along – and I don’t feel like compromising – and, and you have to compromise all the time when you’re a partner with somebody – which is why I don’t ever think I’ll be a partner with somebody while my kids still need parenting. I don’t want to compromise on parenting.

My sister’s marriage is a really good one – they work so hard at it – and I don’t know if I want to work that hard. I mean – I’m willing to work that hard at being a parent – you know, I’ll read books, if I don’t get what’s going on, I’ll ask other people – I try hard to *get along* with my kids – I don’t know if I want to try that hard to get along with someone else. So I’m thinking, a dog looks better.

I began, then, to explicitly include the question of ease, and almost invariably the answer would be “mother”:

Interviewer: Is it easier to be a mother or a wife?

Barbara (50): Probably a mother – I think – mentally, you know your kids are always going to be there – regardless of what you do or say, good or bad. Marriages, on the other hand – they’re not as permanent as children. Maybe that’s why being a mom’s easier – cause you know they’re never going to go anywhere!

Interviewer: Is it easier to be a mom or a wife?

Charlotte (45): A mom. It’s because you love them *so much*. They’re just somebody that’s there for you to take care of, they don’t, you know, question where you’ve been or how much money you’ve spent or, “Why didn’t you go to work today?” There’s no questioning, there’s just love. And that’s – I don’t mind questioning – but I refuse to be interrogated. You just love them – so very much. I’m amazed that – I went from – really never even considering or planning a child to – just being so deeply, madly in love with these kids.

Interviewer: Is it easier to be a mother or a wife?

Bonita (39): That’s another good question. I’d say it’s easier to be a - ooh, mmm, that’s a really good question. I would really have to say a mother. I would have to go with being a mother. Because with a – wife, you still have to meet someone’s expectations. And – love can change, you know, you can be in love with your husband for years, and then all of a sudden you fall out. Your children – that love is unconditional, that’s something that – came from you. And – you have to really, really *screw up* – I mean, *seriously screw up* – in order for your child not to love you. And I’m talking, like, *Jeffrey Dahmer* screwed up, you know, you would really have to do that, because they’re an extension of who you are, so, if you love yourself, then, you’re going to love your kids. And that person (husband) was just somebody that was added to your life at any given time – they can leave. And you’re stuck by yourself. But your kids are – ever. You know, it’s kind of scary to say that – they’re like, *forever*.

They don’t go anywhere. You know – they move out, they’re still here. I don’t think too many women, if they loved their children, would say wife. A mother really kind of defines – it helps you define who you are. A wife doesn’t.

Interviewer: Is it easier to be a mother or a wife?

Marion (46): I think it’s easier to be a mother. Yeah. I think it’s easier to be a mother. And - also, I know my kids love me, so...

Kate (39): I firmly believe that being a single mom is easier than being married to someone that doesn’t do anything.

In addition, with one exception, the interviewees stated that, in comparison to their role as spouse, their identity as mother is paramount.

Miranda (41): Certainly becoming a mom changed my identity more than becoming a wife.

Kelly (39): That's, that's – being a mother is something that never goes away – that was actually what hit me the most when I had a child – is that – no matter if you're with your child, if you're not with your child, you're always a parent. You're always worried about them. Like all of a sudden, you realize that there's this other life in the world that I have to be worried about – and no matter what, it's there - and you can't separate yourself from that reality – no matter what you're doing – if you're out with friends at a club, dancing, or you're at your job teaching – doing whatever – you're still – that mother – and you still – you know at any minute something could happen and I need to be on call as a mother. I might need to leave, I might need to go, I might do something else.

Interviewer: Are you always a wife?

And no –and that was something that was very different for me – I was not always a wife. And I think that was really a part of the problem in my marriage – that I didn't define myself as a wife – I defined myself as being a mother – I never really got to that point of being a wife – and maybe that was part of this – real detached feminist attitude that I had learned as part of my experience in college and as a graduate student - and I never really thought of myself as that – until I was confronted with that: am I a wife? And I denied that role – as much as I possibly could.

Why is it easier to be a mother than a wife, if, using the definition of intensive mothering, maternity is self-sacrificing and all encompassing, while marriage according to the ideology of individualized marriage is supposed to be a self-fulfilling partnership?

As illustrated by the preceding quotes, the primary themes that emerged from the answers of those for whom the identity of mother is stronger than of wife are greater control and permanence.

### *What the Ideal Looks Like*

Here I present what the participants described as the ideal mother, wife and marriage; I do so to provide as a measure and a contrast to the lived reality of the maternal and spousal roles.

As for what a “good mother” looks like, or what an “intensive mother” does, among the participants in this study, the two themes that emerged most consistently are “putting your children first” and “being there.”

### *Putting Your Children First*

Interviewer: What’s your idea of a good mother?

Aisha (40): A good mother. Oh, wow. Again – your children are first. When you have children, you are now in the background. Your – your wants, needs, whatever, come second. You take care of the child – the children come first.

Faith (42): A good mother. A good mother puts her child first, always, until they’re – oh I’d say, about 15 or 16, when they’ve developed some level of independence. Um – a good mother, if possible, doesn’t give into all the cultural pressures to spoil the child, and buy them things they don’t really approve of, and, go along with the crowd, go along with what other parents are doing, but someone who has more of a – a mind of their own, and knows how to stick to traditional values, and raise the child right.

Samantha (55): He did feel that I put the kids first – and – and to me — of course, they’re kids, they’re babies, you’re an adult – take care of yourself, you know, who am I supposed to be taking care of here? Ah – When I had kids EVERYBODY moved down a rung – because until then - I thought that what I felt for my husband or for my dog – and I’m not trivializing my love for my dog, I love my dog – but what I felt for them – they all moved down a notch in terms of my caretaking responsibility and all that kind of stuff.

### *Being There*

Interviewer: What’s the ideal relationship you would want to have with your daughter?

Aisha (44): I would like her to – know that – and I believe she knows this – that I am there for her. That she can talk to me about anything. Like – make sure that the child knows that you care for them, that you love them, that – whatever she may need, come to me. Whatever’s going on in your life, come to me. Mom’s there.

Wanda (44): Just be there for your children – just be honest and understanding – that’s 99.9% of being a mother.

Katie (50): Being there for your children – being present at the activities they find that are important.

Charlotte (45): Somebody who is always there for their children.

That “being there” is such a central component of the contemporary ideology of intensive, “good” mothering is evident by the stories of non-residential mothers. Kielty (2008) found that non-residential mothers are so “acutely aware of the stigma attached to their position” that they are reluctant to reveal their situations and are an isolated and potentially at-risk population, in that they hesitate to discuss their “social taboo” with anyone or seek help in coping with their stigmatized identities (p.35). In Goffman’s terms, non-resident mothers attempt to “pass,” to conceal their stigmatized identities and meet societal expectations of the “good mother.”

### *A Good Wife*

When asked what a good wife was, there emerged a duality of a traditional wife oriented toward domesticity and service, and a more contemporary ideal of a partner.

Interviewer: What’s your idea of a good wife?

Aisha (44): A good wife – um – a woman that – is there for her husband, help where she can, support him where she can, just *be there* for him. Not the – what somebody would say, the “Stepford Wives” – not that robot-type thing. You have a say-so in the decision. And I also believe that no decision should be made, whether yes or no, unless both agree. If there’s – if you’re not agreeing, then whatever’s going on should not take place. No. Either two yeses or two no’s. Just be there and supportive of one another.

Leslie (60): A happy wife (laughs). A good partner – an equal partner.

Gwen(50): Initially my thought of what a good wife was you keep your mouth shut and take care of the family. I realize that that’s not so. You have as much of a voice as your husband – your partner

The only striking racial difference in the study emerged in the description of a good wife. A small minority of white mothers mentioned doing housework or of being subservient in some way as an aspect of ideal wifedom; yet 77% of African-American women did:

Interviewer: What is your idea of a good wife?

Jackie(49): Uhhhhhh – someone who’s committed to the relationship, and of course in love with the husband, and, um, being supportive, and of course, the usual things, being willing to cook, clean, iron clothes, of course I feel that that should be a *joint* thing, that the woman shouldn’t be a slave, but, um, yeah, to be willing to do those things – whether they’re actually done or not, just the willingness – mainly I think the support.

Marion (44): A good wife is – loyal to her husband, if he needs anything she’s there, she runs the bathwater, I mean, that’s just the type of person I am, like, if I have a husband, I know he comes home from work, I’ll have his food ready, his house will be washed, ironed, whatever, the house will be clean, if he needs a massage, you know what I’m saying? Or we can talk, I’ll ask him how his day went. I think that’s a good wife. I think that if a man comes home – a lot of husbands come home, they say the house is dirty, they say, my wife is good, but she doesn’t clean. Who wants to get off work 12 hours and come home to a dirty house? Or not have anything to eat or not have anything good to say? So I think that’s – part of a good wife, that’s just a part of it – being a good wife. That’s how I was – I tried to be.

### *A Good Marriage*

The description of a good marriage had the most consistent emergent themes among all women, across the socioeconomic spectrum and for both African-American and white women. The emergent themes were heard almost invariably, and consistently: a good marriage is a partnership, has good communication, and spouses are to be best friends.

Aisha (44): A good marriage – The spouses being there and being supportive of one another. Communication, communication, communication. If there’s, you know, problems going on, talk to one another, don’t take it out to the street or to other family members – it’s none of their business. When you start getting other opinions in there that starts other problems. And just that – that commitment – you ought to be committed to each other –and be your spouse’s best friend.

Nancy(51): A good marriage is, uh, having a best friend, even though that's your husband, having a best friend, never being afraid to talk to them about anything, being in there for that person, and being loyal. I think that's a good marriage. The reason I think that is because of the communication gap with my husband – we didn't have communication like that. If the other person doesn't want to – tell you stuff, and you know something's going on, what else can you do? So, I think communication is a key too.

Barbara (50) - Happiness. Enjoy doing things together. Being partners – a 50/50 type deal. I mean, I realize that – you can't be that way all the time – but a majority of the time would be nice. Just – again, willing to do whatever it takes to make the marriage work – if there are problems, not escape into la-la land. And – whatever it's going to take to make the other one happy – or try to make the other one happy.

Jackie is the singular exception, as her definition of a good marriage did not include at least one of the major emergent themes:

Jackie (49): Where both people are – there for each other – and stay together no matter what, that's the thing I didn't do, but just to stay together no matter what – as long as there was no abuse, you know, just have to put up with what the other person's faults – and to be in love, you know, and marry for the right reasons.

#### *Areas in Which Wives Lack Control*

*Professionally* Perhaps the ability to control and influence the maternal relationship to a greater extent than the spousal one contributes to the ease and dominance of the maternal role. This is evidenced by the stories of professional, high-earning mothers who left prestigious careers to return home full time. According to Stone (2007)

While women may have differed with regard to ownership of the stay-at-home identity, they were unanimous in their rejection of being called or self-identifying with that other domestic appellation, “housewife,” unequivocal in finding the more traditional and subordinate appellation of “housewife” particularly objectionable...Identifying as a housewife would have meant defining themselves explicitly with reference to a subordinate role whereas identifying themselves as mothers emphasized their relationship to their children, their subordinates (P. 159).

Such mothers were more “pushed” home by corporations inhospitable to meaningful part-time work or flexible schedules more than “pulled” by the desire to stay home; thus the lack of control over their careers. They also lacked control over their husbands, most of whom were not willing to give up their own prestigious, lucrative, demanding careers to work in tandem with their wives in a more flexible schedule for both (Stone 2007).

There is no empirical basis for an argument, nor does one arise from any reasoned or informed source, that women are inferior to men. The gender gap in receipt of bachelor’s degrees has not only been eliminated, but reversed (Goldin, Katz and Kuzuimeko 2006). Women now make up almost half of law and medical school graduates (Stone 2007). Yet, there is a dearth of women in managerial positions and the income differential between men and women remains: “...progress in closing the gender gap in earnings has slowed and the number of women at the top remains stubbornly few” (Stone 2007:13). The reason for the “leaky pipeline” of women from the entry level to the top, in part, is inadequate workplace policy and intractable professional husbands. Professionally speaking, women still have not “come a long way,” and arguably do wield more power, and have more control, in the home and over their children.

*In the Home* Almost a third of the women in the sample mentioned that their husband’s lack of participation in housework was an aggravating factor in their marriages. This inequity is to be expected, as even in full-time dual earner marriages, and across social classes, women do twice the amount of housework as men (National Survey of Families and Households 2008). In contrast to the precipitous decline in Americans’ perception of the relevance of children to a good marriage, equitable participation in household chores has risen considerably — 15 percentage points since 1990 (Pew Research Center 2008).

While in theory a marriage should be a “50/50 partnership,” in practice it falls short. The following quotes are, respectively, from a working-class African-American woman and an upper middle-class white woman living in an affluent suburb:

Wanda (44): So just stuff that he should have been doing all the time from day one when we met – he never – one day I asked him to take the garbage out – “I don’t take garbage out! That’s your job.” He never would do anything to help me around the house – he never would – I mean nothing – nothing out of the norm that he would do in his normal everyday life. He was very verbally abusive – I mean, if I was kind of woman that would just crush under the least little – I probably would have been blowing my brains out, because he made me feel, like, so many times, that – you’re an ant – crawl back in that little hole you came out of – you don’t talk to me.

Samantha (55): I started to stop talking – and I realized that I had been carrying the conversation for 20 years, so I had been putting all this into it and making sure he knew when the kids were doing this and that – and by now I was working full time – since ‘98 – but I still carried on every single chore and role I had before I got a full-time job you know.

This quest for control in the maternal realm is also reflected in the tenacity of maternal gatekeeping, defined as “mothers’ beliefs and behaviors that inhibit greater father involvement in family work (Allen and Hawkins 1999:199).” According to Orenstein,

“*In When Mothers Work*, journalist Joan Peters found that even when women work full time, perhaps especially when they work full time, they cling to maternal control. Micromanaging their children’s lives...is what makes them feel they are Good Mothers...Holding tight to the small stuff can also make a woman feel, more generally, in control. (P. 111)

In *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991), Anthony Giddens quotes Janette Rainwater’s book *Self Therapy*:

People who fear the future attempt to ‘secure’ themselves – with money, property, health insurance, personal relationships, marriage contracts. Parents attempt to bind their children to them. Some fearful children are reluctant to leave the home nest. Husbands and wives try to guarantee the continuance of the other’s life and services. The harsh psychological truth is that there is no permanence in human relationships, any more than there is in the stock market, the weather, ‘national security,’ and so on...(P.73)

The participants in the present study fully expected to have, and seemed to derive considerable pleasure from, a sense of control over their own children. Most, in contrast, defined marriage as fundamentally of a transitory nature. A lack of control over one's husband is also evidenced by the main reasons women give for initiating divorce, such as infidelity, addiction and abuse.

Perhaps the inability to control a spouse, coupled with the ephemeral nature of modern marriage, leads women to withdraw from marriage. They focus more emotional energy on a relationship one can control and depend on. It may well be that the greater identity salience and perceived permanence of the maternal identity is contributing to the fragility of marriage. Cherlin (2009) notes that Americans couple and recouple faster and more often than those in any other Western nation. Perhaps our ride on the "marriage-go-round" is fueled by the quest for permanence in human relationships juxtaposed against the tenuousness of the individualized marriage and the elevation of the maternal role and perceived permanence of children (Giddens 1991). Perhaps emotional currency is finite; the more spent on children, the less available for a spouse — or for investment in that relationship?

As stated above by Bonita, marital love is ephemeral; maternal love unconditional: your children are an "extension of you." Responses such as this are evocative of Shulamith Firestone, who "saw the desire for children less as a natural liking for children than a displacement of ego-extension needs" (Glenn 1994:10). While perhaps falling on the cynical end of the spectrum, this is not too far removed from Lareau's (2003) framing of the middle class parenting philosophy as a "cult of individualism." The greater permanence and control of motherhood is more attractive to women than the likely

transient, contentious role of wife. Thus, their weakening commitment to marriage and the spousal identity, and their elevation of the maternal identity.

### *Marriage as an Impediment to Intensive Mothering*

In fact, it could be argued that rather than enabling the enactment of intensive mothering, marriage might now serve as an impediment to being a good mother – at least, this is a logical extension of the participants’ reasons for divorce and meanings of marriage and motherhood. One of the major components of “doing” intensive mothering is “being there.” Yet, many of the more privileged mothers, and some of the poorer ones, were already literally “there,” that is, physically present in their children’s’ lives on a daily basis, perhaps even as a stay-at-home mother. Initiating divorce would then limit the ability to “be there” in two ways: first, she might need to take on more work to support herself; second, she would see her children less due to some form of shared-custody arrangement (at least those in the middle- or upper-middle- classes did — more of the working-class or unemployed mothers had primary if not sole custody of their children; however, this was not universally the case).

The quality of a marriage, however, and the tension, loneliness or spiritual emptiness it generated, seems to supersede the functional purpose of marriage in enabling mothers to “be there.” Whether due to emotional reasons such as lack of true love, physical attraction or spiritual growth, or more tangible, practical reasons such as adultery, unemployment or abuse, the stressors of marriage were seen as an impinging on the ability to be a good mother. The ballast of an unsatisfying marriage was let go, even if

this meant less time with children and a likely compromise of their quality of life, to better realize intensive mothering ideals.

*Intensive Mothering and Demography: Stepmothers – A Lack of Control, and Concomitant Distance*

“Mothering one’s own biological offspring rather than stepchildren brings greater maternal satisfaction.” (Arendell 2000:1197).

Prior research has established that the biological maternal relationship is more gratifying and longer-lasting than the step-maternal relationship (Arendell 2000). This is supported in the present study. As Weaver and Coleman (2005) found, stepmothers and mothers whose children had stepmothers both spoke of a lack of control leading to dissatisfaction in these relationships. This echoes the mother’s lack of control and permanence in their former marriages and sentiments about marriage as an institution generally:

Interviewer: Has the mothering ideal changed?

Charlotte (45): Well, I am now a stepmother to a 12-year-old girl, who doesn’t live with us, she just visits, and it’s really hard for me because I feel like I can’t discipline her the way I would *my* kids – and it’s VERY difficult because she’s – very messy – and it’s hard to keep my mouth shut and to see what I consider – I don’t see respect for her father, I don’t see anything like that, I just see it going down a path of negativity, so...it’s hard being a stepmom.

Interviewer: How is it different being a stepmom than being a mother?

Just not having – it’s just my relationship, I should say, I cannot talk for everybody, but my relationship – because at times my husband is just – a real ass – and, he pretty much said, you can’t discipline, you can’t do that type of thing. So, I’ve taken a complete hands-off approach.

Interviewer: How do you feel about your kids having a stepmom – how does that affect your identity as a mom – and how do you feel about them being – “step-mothered”?

Jennifer (43): Well – that is an interesting question. That has taken a lot of — (siren goes off in the background) Exactly. That has taken a lot – of – I’ve really had to just – I have no control over that situation – I have to – I don’t know. What can I do? – Um, I feel fortunate that she didn’t bring other kids into the marriage

with it – I feel fortunate that she’s age appropriate – um – you know, she’s not some 20-year-old hussy – hate to be derogatory – but – um – you know, they’re not gonna have kids, she doesn’t have kids – I know that she tries really hard – can she replace me? No – and I’m not threatened by that.

Interviewer: How do you feel about someone else mothering your son?

Kelly (39): Oh – I – I don’t know her well – I have a lot of interaction with her, but I don’t *know* her well, so there’s kind of this – unknown factor – but I just kind of have to trust that my ex has good judgment – and he’s a good person – you know, I’ve never thought he was a bad person, or that I’ve thought he had bad judgment, so I just have to trust that he’s a good judge of character and things are good there, and that he would choose a partner that was a good – figure – a good mother figure – but still – it seems, there’s a part of me that I think there’s a little bit of jealousy or rivalry that there’s this other person there that has this interaction with him that I don’t have in part of my life.

While the ideology of intensive mothering may be at odds with the divorce dynamic, because choice is an integral part of one and not the other, it may at least serve a constructive purpose in that context, in that it can help to preserve a coherent narrative, and sense of self. However, it seems to have only a negative effect on the step-mothering relationship. With stepfamilies now outnumbering biological, nuclear families in the United States (Census Bureau 2008), and step-mother dissatisfaction contributing to the high incidence (two-thirds) of stepfamilies expected to fail (Gierveld 2004), perhaps a maternal ideology is needed that accommodates the realities, such as distance from stepchildren and lack of control, that are part of most stepfamily dynamics.

### III: Intensive Mothering and Divorce – Retroactive Nullification and the Priceless Child

I have argued that the ideologies of intensive mothering and individualized marriage are incongruent, in that the permanence and control expected and actively cultivated in the maternal relationship are absent in marriage.

I now turn to the relationship between the ideology of intensive mothering and the experience of divorce, with the question of the agency of the mother initiators paramount in this dynamic.

Hopper (2002) argues that divorcing persons experience a retroactive nullification — a psychic annulment — redefining their failed marriages as “not real.” Many participants in the present study voiced such feelings about their former marriages.

Gwen (50): Um, I knew, the night of our rehearsal dinner that I had made a mistake. But I thought, you know, I’m not going to raise another child all by myself – I’ll do what I have to – I can make this work. And, um, I knew I was in trouble when he was 45 minutes late for our rehearsal dinner. All our friends and family were there from out of town –and he told me it was none of my business where he was. Um – so I knew that I had my work cut out for me.

Interviewer: And you had known each other for how long?

About a year – um – which, it was only a year after my other divorce. So in hindsight, it was definitely a rebound – and in hindsight I look at both my marriages as acts of more desperation – of wanting to be what everybody thinks I should be – also that wanting to be a wife and a mother. For me, being a mother was what I wanted to do more than anything in life, you know, didn’t matter what college degree I had, didn’t matter that I ever had a master’s – what I wanted to be was a mom – and do all the things that moms do.

I would like to get married again – because I don’t think either one of my – I can’t count them as even – my first marriage certainly wasn’t even a marriage. Um – and then my second one certainly wasn’t one either – but I hope I have learned – to take a look at myself and what *my* weaknesses are.

Jennifer (43): Um, and you know, hindsight is so much clearer than when you’re in the middle of it – um, you know, I think that my marriage was doomed pretty much from the beginning – well, of course, I didn’t start out thinking that my marriage was doomed from the beginning...

Carrie (42): I would say the problems started even before we were married. We would fight a lot – there always seemed to be conflict in the simplest of things sometimes. We started counseling very early on in our relationship.

Interviewer: Before you got married?

Yes... And – I think at the time, looking back, that it was doomed from the very beginning... In the back of my mind I think I always knew it was going to be this way (divorced). My sister kindly reminded me that I had said to her shortly before my wedding, “Am I doing the right thing?” That’s not good. That’s not a good sign.

As with Vaughan’s participants in *Uncoupling* (1986), often interwoven with the psychologically voided marriage were thoughts of animosity towards the former spouse.

“I had the death fantasy”

Miranda (41): I wasn’t really thinking of leaving – I just wanted him to disappear. Or change. Either one would have been fine. I used to have the death fantasies. Some of my friends, we’ve talked about it, where, early in the marriage, if he’s late coming home, you’re worried. Well, at this point, if he’s late coming home, you’re like, “Hey! Maybe there’s a car accident!” – and you’re excited! It’s really sick, but you can’t help it.

I had the death fantasies. It’s an accident! He’s dead! And I actually still have it sometimes – I don’t get as excited as before, but when I see, on the news, there’s a car accident, I’ll be – what part of town? Still I feel my life would be yet easier if he wasn’t around.

Jane (32): I remember distinctly looking out the kitchen window at night over the sink as I was doing dishes – and seeing my reflection – and I would be watching the clock and it would get later and later – and I would realize that I was feeling – lighter, and – hopeful – I caught myself and berated myself and said – “No! I don’t want anyone to get hurt!” I mean, truly, I wondered if I were a monster for thinking such morbid thoughts – I even talked about it with my therapist who reassured me about this. So I would modify my “fantasy” and make it: “Please let there be another woman. Please come home and say you’re in love with another woman so I won’t have to be the bad guy.” And so no one gets hurt and everyone’s happy.

I had a friend at the time who had the same – “fantasies,” I guess you could say – though she would flat-out gleefully speculate about what to do with the insurance money. And if she were awake when he finally, inevitably came home – ‘cause she was awake watching the clock, of course – she’d pretend to be asleep so she wouldn’t have to have sex. I remember thinking, in my very little world, if someone else is having these feelings – my God, what is the state of marriage in the world?

Marilyn (65): We were keeping a sawed-off shotgun on the dresser in the bedroom for my brother...and I just remember looking at it and thinking, “I don’t

care about the consequences, I don't care what happens to me, I just want to go in there and blow his head clean off."

Women generally had a range of feelings towards their former husbands, ranging from regret, to hatred, to ambivalence, to gratitude, to, in one case, lingering love.

"I could have done better"

Nancy (51): Sad to say, I kind of feel sorry for him. I do. I feel sorry for him, and – there are times when I feel sorry for my children because – I look at their father, and I say, Lord, could I have done better? At the same time, I try to thank God, because I try to be a strong example for them. It's not like no parents have no – spiritual direction.

Interviewer: How do you feel about him being the father of your children?

Monica (40): Oh. I'm not proud of that. I mean that's just - I wish they had a different father – I want the same children with a different person.

"I'm grateful"

Samantha (55): Like I said he's not a BAD person – he's not a violent or – says the right things, does the right things, he's still a big white tall male doctor – it would take a bigger man than him to eschew all that privilege. But – I don't resent it, that he's their father – I mean – I'm GRATEFUL. I'm grateful. That's how I feel about it. I really loved these kids –so – that was wonderful to me and I'll always appreciate my husband for us for creating these kids.

Barbara (50): He will always hold a special place in my heart because he is their Dad. I care about him – I don't love him – but I do care about him as a person.

Leslie (60): I feel that our children got the best of both of us – is the way that I look at it, that I see it.

With one exception, however, every mother's description of their feelings for their children had a quasi-euphoric tone:

Samantha (55): And what I discovered, by having kids, is that these are the people that I can attach to. I have like all kinds of attachment disorder from a dysfunctional childhood, and I have a lot of self-diagnosed problems and been in therapy and all these things. But what I know about myself is that I don't attach to humans very well - in the way that I see other humans can do. And I think that it has to do with childhood abuse, and things, but what I discovered is that I can attach to my kids – I can really commit and love my kids unconditionally – and that opened up a whole new emotional field for me – you know, for the first time I

wasn't being false about what I felt – I really felt this for these kids, you know, I wasn't pretending – I wasn't faking the orgasm – I really loved these kids –so – that was wonderful to me.

Joyce (42): All I can say is, when I have had the opportunity to be with my daughter – I find it immeasurably fulfilling and satisfying, worthwhile – I don't know what other adjectives I can use to describe it - maybe it's emotionally based – I never really thought about it – like why – it's fulfilling. It's more fulfilling than anything I've ever done.

Interviewer: What do your children mean to you?

Marion (46): Oh, everything. They mean everything to me, my kids do.

Sarah (37): And I wouldn't trade being a mom for the world.

Rachel (49): Not for all the tea in China.

Aisha (44): My blessing.

Wanda (44) is the singular exception in this regard:

Moving here was the highlight of my life – you know, people say — oh having kids — my daughter – that was not the highlight of my life – having kids was not the highlight of my life – getting married was not the highlight of my life. Just knowing, the day I drove away from that place – I'm driving down the interstate and all of a sudden I start screaming in the car – I just start screaming – my daughter's like, "Ok momma, what is wrong with you?" I say, "I'm leaving it behind." I say, "All of the pain, everything that I've felt for so many years – I'm leaving it behind." And that was the best thing. And I've been here for years – I have not been broke one day since I've been here. I could not *keep* money in my pocket back home. It was a jinx – like having money was a jinx – everybody around me was doing the same thing – nothing.

The potential tension, then, between the psychological dynamic of divorce and the ideology of intensive mothering, is this: how does one reconcile the marriage that never was with the children born of the discredited union who are still here, and who are the apex of one's emotional life and, ideally, one's best friend?

Jane: (32) Have you ever seen *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*? It's a movie about a device that you get hooked up to while you sleep and it erases unwanted memories of a previous relationship. I just thought – yes. That is exactly what I need. I would pay I don't know how many good American dollars just to get *THAT MAN* out of my mind. But here's the thing: so many of those

memories are intertwined with the kids – can we refine the technology so I can keep them and get rid of him?

Perhaps the glowing terms used when speaking of children are a protection against the counterfactual.

Jane actually uses this term when musing about her own “road not taken.”

Jane(32): Have you ever heard the term “counterfactual?” Um – historians often use it to – explore an alternate reality or outcome – you know, what if the south won the Civil War? Or – what if Superman landed in the Soviet Union and worked for the KGB? Sometimes I think about – *my* alternative reality. What if – I’d never met him? And again – ah - in those alternate realities the kids – by definition, aren’t there. Is that an indictment against me as a mother? Because I feel horrible – should I even be telling you this?

I do know that it ultimately isn’t healthy. And I know one alternate reality is that I could have been hit by a bus 10 years ago. But – it still feels really good sometimes...my friend told me that it’s “Stinkin’ Thinkin’” – which I found out later is an AA phrase. And she’s right, I know, she’s ultimately right...

Crittenden (2001) states on the cover of *The Price of Motherhood* that motherhood is “The Most Important Job in the World,” and on page one that “the very definition of a mother is selfless service to another.” Hochschild defines “emotional work” as “requiring one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” (2003:7) Arendell states that “Modern mothering entails extensive, ongoing emotional work.” (2000:1196). If being a mother is “work” then the attendant emotional script is absolute and cuts to the core of one’s self and identity as a woman. Indeed, Edin and Kelafas say of poor unmarried mothers, “ — the way in which a young woman reacts in the face of pregnancy is viewed as a mark of her worth as a person. And as motherhood is the most important social role she thinks she will play, a failure to respond positively to the challenge is a blot on her sense of self”(2005:43)

After a divorce, to engage in the counterfactual regarding one's children — that is, imagining such taboo scenarios as one's life with different children, one's life with no children — involves entertaining emotions that run flagrantly counter to the emotional script of motherhood, yet is what most women do regarding their ex-husbands, and they do it without stigma or mental self-flagellation.

This is exactly what both the heightened level of maternal agency and the stratospheric emotional expectations of modern mothering dictate. The more significant the choice, the more time one puts into it, the greater the risk, and the greater likelihood of entertaining counterfactuals. (Schwartz 2004).

If children are a choice, as prevailing ideologies suggest they should be, and as contemporary mothers are practicing, then this choice will engender more risk, more counterfactuals and more depression (Schwartz 2004). Combine this with the high reciprocal emotional expectations and time investment made in children today, and the attendant emotional script that is practically absolute.

Whether and whom to marry is just as much a choice as whether and when to have children – but one can get out of the marriage in a socially and psychologically acceptable way.

Ambivalence and qualification are entrenched, socially accepted and sanctioned attributes of modern marriages. Prenuptial financial agreements in anticipation of divorce are common, and the concept of “starter marriages” is widespread, in theory if not in practice. These aspects sound utterly alien in a discussion of attitudes toward our children.

To be divorced does not threaten one's core gender or self identity as disliking or regretting one's children does. One can't "take it back" as one can a marriage. Nor can one get out of it. To have those emotions is tantamount to maternal treason. It is in stealth tones that women even admit that the labor of motherhood is hard – and women avoid altogether expressing maternal ambivalence (Mashuart 1999). And women, historically and presently, have had more of their identity entrenched in "mother" than men in "father."

One can get out of a marriage without being psychologically or emotionally threatened. However, we cannot, realistically, get out of our children. Entertaining myriad counterfactuals about former spouses, or even malicious fantasies, does not make one a bad person; but even the most remote engagement of regret or counterfactual about children strikes at the core of one's self-concept of a good, or "intensive" mother. And likely more so for mothers than for fathers, as there has historically been more complexity allowed for the paternal role (incorporating the "good provider" aspect of the role) than for mothers (May 1988). That such imaginings can be had with other intimate relations, yet not mother, is illustrative of the greater prominence of mother in the identity hierarchy and the deep aversion to stigmatization of that identity.

Thus we have developed in our society an ideology and practice for marriage that allows for choice. Yet we maintain an ideology of motherhood that precludes it.

I am not suggesting that an ideology of choice regarding children should arise as a logical counterpart to the ideology of choice inherent in modern marriage. To even imagine what this would look like in practice seems ludicrous. It is, however, instructive to highlight

the discord between the two ideologies, along with their problematic interplay during and after divorce.

While intensive mothering may serve as the last bastion of human relations dictated by selflessness and love instead of self-interest and rationality (Hays 1996), it also serves as a psychic protective barrier against the taboo counterfactual, or regret, of the enduring children of a dead marriage.

*Modernity, Narrative, and a Happy Ending: I am a Good Mother, or Self Trumps Role*

Shame bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which an individual sustains a coherent biography... The other side of shame is pride, or self-esteem: confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self-identity. A person who successfully fosters a sense of pride in the self is one who is able psychologically to feel that his biography is justified and unitary. (Giddens 1991: 66-7)

As previously noted, prior research has shown that women initiate the majority of the divorces in the United States (Brining and Allen, 2000; Prevetti and Amato, 2004). Such is the case with the present study: a sizeable majority of the mothers in this sample are divorce initiators. If the intensive mother is “wholly child centered...devoted to the care of others... self-sacrificing and ‘not a subject with her own needs and interests’” (Arendell 2000:1994), then some considerable cognitive dissonance should be engendered by the willful dissolution of a mother’s marriage and family. Unilaterally breaking up her children’s home should be antithetical to the intensive mother.

Hopper argues that divorcing persons engage in a “retroactive nullification” of their past marriages (Hopper 2001). This “substantive and thoroughgoing reinterpretation” of one’s marriage as flawed from the start, doomed from “day one” — thus never a “real” marriage to begin with — serves the purpose of reconciling the failure of one’s individual

marriage with the cultural ideal of marriage as forever. Thus, the integrity of one's self and the coherence of one's narrative are preserved.

Very much akin to the process of retroactive nullification, the mothers/divorce initiators in this study draw on the ideology of intensive mothering to preserve both their sense of pride and the coherence of their narrative/biography. Like reconciling a personal divorce with a larger cultural ideal of lifelong marriage, divorcing mothers must reconcile initiating divorce — which has been extensively documented and widely discussed in mainstream media as being detrimental for children (see Amato 2000; Amato and Booth 2002; Amato and Cheadle 2008; Neale 2001; Smart and Neale 2001; Wallerstein 2000) — with being a “good mother.” To reconcile this tension, the psychological “save” performed in order to maintain the intensive mothering status is for divorcing mothers to frame divorce as being beneficial for their children, as the following mothers do.

According to Goffman, “Shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual's perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing” (1963:7). With “mother” occupying such an exalted status in the identity salience hierarchy, and “bad mother” a deeply stigmatized identity, to be ashamed of one's performance of mother would likely be an unbearable burden; thus, mothers actively cultivate an interpretation of events such that this identity, and biographical continuity, are preserved, and a sense of pride fostered.

Such an effort is evident in the following quotes.

*Divorce made me a better mother*

Interviewer: As divorce seemed like more of a reality, how did that affect your sense of yourself as a mom?

Sarah (37): It made me stronger because – I knew that what I was doing I needed to do for myself and (my son). And no matter what we were gonna survive it – even if that meant food pantries, three jobs – whatever.

Jennifer (43): I think that's still an ongoing battle, because I think it's harder to be a wife than it is to be a mother – and – I knew that I would be a better mother if I left.

*Divorce was good for my child*

Sarah (37): It was definitely the right thing – even though we've struggled —

Interviewer: For both you and your son?

Sarah (37): We've struggled, yes – but in different ways. I think he was more tossed between mom and dad – who do I please – who am I supposed to be with – that's how he struggled. My struggle was – who am I? I need to survive.

Joyce (42): If anything, I think we got closer – because – we started to do more things together – play together – maybe color together – I got – not that I wasn't involved with her school before – but I think I became more in tune with her homework – making sure she got her assignments done – I think it's really important for her to have friendships – I've taken her to movies with friends... so, if anything, I think we got closer.

Interviewer: Do you think they are better off for the divorce?

Barbara (50): Yes – because I think that they would have been – raised in a home with the alcoholism – it would have had a more negative impact than dealing with a single mom.

Interviewer: So do you think the divorce was ultimately good for the kids?

Charlotte (45): I would say yes. As far as where I'm concerned. As far as – me being happy, me being a good mom – emotionally, I guess, because I was always distracted by him – you know, he would walk in the back door, and he would immediately — who did you talk to today? You know – what were you wearing? The hairs on the back of my neck would stand up as soon as he would walk in the door –and I just couldn't take the pressure – it was just unhealthy. Literally, going through the divorce, I got down to 89 pounds. It was very very stressful.

Kate (39): My view of motherhood was you look out for your kid first – you always think about what’s in the best interest of the kid – um – and I left the relationship – and, I don’t know – maybe this is just a justification for it - um – when I left, I felt like I was in such emotional turmoil in the marriage that she would be better off with two happy parents who were separated than two miserable parents who were together. So – I looked at that in terms of what would Macy – and it was weird because she was only 20 months old when I left – and she was depressed – she was a depressed baby – she would rarely smile – and as soon as I left – she started smiling again – and you could see it in her pictures – it’s almost an immediate change – so I know that the tension in the house was having an immediate impact on her.

Interviewer: Do you think the divorce was a good thing for your children?

Monica (40): I do. I’ve heard people doing that – you know – we stayed together for the kids – um, I don’t think it would have been – that was not the right decision for me - I’m not sure that’s not the right decision *ever* – um, because I don’t think kids are necessarily better off with people who can’t stand each other.

Joyce is the only mother who said that divorce was bad for her children – but, as evidenced by her quote in the preceding section, found something redeeming from the break-up.

Interviewer: How did your daughter factor into your decision?

Joyce (42): It wasn’t good. It wasn’t good. She was devastated. And still is. Still is. This part makes me cry. (Cries) She still prays with me today that we’ll get back. That’s like her prayer to God – that we’ll get back. And it’s so heartbreaking. Cause it’s never gonna happen. I have a lot of guilt because I broke up the relationship. I explain it all to her. I’m really honest about it. I don’t think I should hide – I let her know how much she’s loved – and how much she was wanted – and I think that’s critical – I try to reinforce – she wasn’t an accident – she was wanted more than anything. And I think – I hope – that comforts her – to some extent. But – she was devastated by the divorce.

### *My Experience of Mothering Changed for the Better After Divorce*

All but one of the mothers interviewed - Florence - stated that their experience of mothering changed for the better after the divorce; hers is the last quotation:

Interviewer: Did your experience of mothering change after the divorce?

Jackie (49): Yes – it got – I would say it got better – because I could devote all my time to my son, and I did not have to divide my time between my husband and my son. So it got better.

Faith (42): Yeah, I was a better mother after we split up. Because I wasn't under the psychological pressure and the psychological abuse of living with him. So – I enjoyed being a mother more, and I was more relaxed – and in that five years that I had custody, more and more I began to get myself together psychologically, my self-confidence improved, and it was tragic, right at the point when I was really starting to feel good about myself I got hit with that custody battle – and lost. It was really, really tragic.

Divorce changed my experience of motherhood for the worse:

Florence (55): I feel like now I'm being used cause I don't have help. I feel like I'm doing everything by myself, like gosh, I need a husband to help me – keep this all together, cause I feel like I'm doing everything by myself, you know? And I'm so used to having a man take charge, and to help – take that burden. You know what I mean? And then now, it's like I'm doing everything at the same time – sometimes it just seems so overwhelming.

Thus, it can be argued that intensive mothering facilitates the continuity of a lifetime narrative and it salvages the integrity of what McMahon names “the real self.” Initiators in this study are not in violation of the tenets of intensive mothering, but, rather, are in compliance, by divorcing their children's fathers. What may be viewed as self-serving can be reframed as self-sacrifice, and the “good mother” identity is preserved.

### *Toward Motherhood, Away from Marriage and Community*

Akin to the process of retroactive nullification regarding the meaning of one's individual marriage, most participants in this study indicated that they had been transformed by their divorces, and that they now had different, less traditional and negative ideas about marriage in general and as an institution.

Both Kate and Miranda feel that their lives were made easier on a practical level after obtaining a divorce.

Kate (39): The minute I moved out, my life got easier. I was back to having one child, and cleaning up after only myself instead of my child, me and my husband. You know – obviously it was devastating – to have to leave a marriage - because you think, this is it, this is going to last forever – and to not be able to work it out is just horrible – um – but – my life was so much easier that it was that much of a relief that it sort of made up for the devastation of it not working out.

Miranda (41): The weird thing was, the next day — and I remember this vividly — my life was better. I still cried all the time, but my life was better – already. I mean, I didn't come out at night and get mad at someone for not picking up the toys, cause there was no one to get mad at. So that whole stress was gone. His clothes weren't everywhere, cause he never picked up his clothes or anything like that. He would just – take them off and leave them wherever he took them off. So just – that level of stress, from dealing with someone, who from my perspective was doing nothing, was completely gone. And that was great.

The following participants say they will never marry again; in fact, Kate is actively steering her daughter away from marriage.

Interviewer: What do you think of the institution of marriage now?

Monica (40): Hm. Well, you know when I got married I thought, living together was wrong – you shouldn't do that. That's um – it's a moral issue – but I think at this point, I don't think I would get married again, and I think I probably would be happy just living with somebody – um – if I ever found somebody I wanted to do that with – I think that when you live with somebody there's a commitment there – but perhaps there's also a way out – it's not going to cost you – you know – everything – and that's a pretty cynical way of looking at things, but I also think that maybe when you're living together there's more freedom to be not bound by convention, and, so if I want to go do things with my friends that should be ok, and if you want to go do things with your friends that should be ok, and - I don't want to be defined by who that other person is.

Kate (39): I just say don't get married. And if you want a kid, artificial insemination's a good idea – my daughter says that's what she wants to do when she grows up. Because – I complain, and she hears me complain to my mother on the phone, and stuff like that – I hope that she doesn't repeat the mistakes I made. Hopefully I can trump things like the Disney Channel, and the princess: find your Prince Charming and get married and live happily ever after.

Charlotte (45): And – if my marriage doesn't survive this time will I marry again? Never. Will I date – yes. *Never* will I marry. Never. And the weird thing is, my dad left when I was one – so I was raised by my mother. I had a step-dad for a little while. But, I can remember, I would cry at times, like, why wouldn't she remarry, why doesn't she have somebody to take care of her? And now I know. It's just – hard. And I think that, she'd been through it twice, and that was enough for her. And I get it now.

Samantha and Kate now feel that marriage has become an obsolete institution.

Interviewer: *What do you think about the institution of marriage?*

Samantha (55): Well, I think young women today are still in that romantic, you know, get the diamond ring – and I see both up here – I see the radical feminist, shave your head, dye your hair pink women – and I also see the very traditional, I'm so excited, I want to talk about my six bridesmaids women – and, once again, I think it's a choice, but, I think that young women today are still a lot invested in the romantic idea that *this person's going to complete me, there's only one true love – we found each other, our love will never die* – and to me, all that is *romantic nonsense*. That gets you to the table – and then kids keep you there. So, if you don't want to have kids, I see zero reason to get married. ZERO. To me it is an institution to make adults responsible for their offspring.

Interviewer: Your thoughts on marriage?

Kate (39): Before I got married – that's just sort of the cultural goal – that's what you do – you grow up, you get married, you have kids – you live happily ever after – that's what my parents did – and they've been married for 46 years – I thought that would be me too – and now – my view of marriage has changed – there's absolutely no way I would ever get married again – absolutely no way – um – marriage was an institution invented when peoples' life expectancy was 35 – so you could – you could stand somebody, stand to be around somebody every day when you're 35 – when you're going to live to be 84 – that's a little different. You know, people tell me they're getting married, and I'm like, *why?* You can do everything with a marriage – that you need with a marriage – with contracts – you don't need a wedding – so – I um – I used to have a bumper sticker on my car that said, support gay marriage: why should only straight people suffer?

The institution of marriage is eventually going to become obsolete – I don't see marriage as a necessity anymore – and especially as women become more independent – I know most divorces are filed by women – and women aren't economically dependent on men anymore – and why should they put up with their crap?

The preceding quotes suggest that the mother-child dyad is supplanting the spousal dyad – but perhaps not to the exclusion of individualism or the highly salient self.

#### IV From Aries to Zelizer to the Gilmore Girls

In *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* Phillipe Aries (1962) presents the case that childhood, as a separate and distinct stage in the life course, was “discovered” in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. As “family” began to take on greater importance, children became “special.” Zelizer (1985) asserts that, between the 1870s and the 1930s, the social value of children changed from “economically worthless” to “emotionally priceless.”

I believe, as evidenced by the interview data here and buttressed by other studies and sources, that we are witnessing another transition in the cultural meaning of children. With marriage vows tenuous, husbands transitory, and social networks weakening if not disappearing, children — particularly daughters to mothers — are fully expected to be their mothers’ “best friends.”

Stephanie Coontz (1992; 2005) contends that in a culture such as ours, where we define and “do” family as an almost entirely private phenomenon, the almost voyeuristic experience of watching families on television is powerful. For the viewer, the internal family dynamics of the television family, and how that family presents themselves collectively to the outside world, is seen as “normal,” or as a frame of reference. That many of the mothers in this study made reference to “Donna Reed” and her contemporaries attests to the endurance of such TV mothers as ideal types.

According to Coontz,

The most common reaction to a discordance between myth and reality is guilt. Even as children, my students and colleagues tell me, they felt guilty that their families did not act like those on television. Perhaps the second most common reaction is anger - a sense of betrayal or rage when you and your family cannot live as the myths suggest you should be able to do (P.6)

The *Gilmore Girls* is a popular recent television show – one of the top-10 selling DVD television series of all time - centering on a multigenerational mother-daughter relationship. The main character, mother Lorelai, often states her maternal philosophy and practice: “I am a best friend first, mother second.” It is arguable that this or any television show would not be successful if it did not resonate with larger cultural themes (Coontz 1992; Jennings-Bryant 2000).

There is evidence that Lorelai’s maternal creed is representative of an emerging new rubric with which to measure the quality of a maternal relationship. Life-course scholars (Arnett 2004; Settersten, Furstenberg and Rumbaut 2005) categorize closer parent-child relationships as one element of the emerging stage in the life-course, early adulthood, fueled by fewer children in the household, technology that facilitates frequent communication, the lengthening of the time it takes to achieve markers of adulthood, such as marriage and financial and residential independence, and the blurring of age norms overall.

This also echoes findings that maternal fantasies have eclipsed or replaced marriage fantasies among young women. Orenstein (2000) states

In her interviews with a racially diverse group of women in their 20s, sociologist Kim DaCosta found that the traditional mother’s role has actually supplanted marriage as a source of romantic fantasy for many young single women. Instead of the disparity that they anticipated between the ideal and the actual that they anticipated in their relationships with men, women expected motherhood to be exactly as they anticipated it: a source of self-nurturance, permanence and

unconditional love – all the things they doubted they could, in a marriage, find with a man. (P.39)

Permanence and unconditional love, as evidenced in the participants' preceding quotes, are major reasons why women in the present study, such as Charlotte, find it easier to be a mother than a wife, and celebrate their "best friend" status with their daughters.

Charlotte (45): The girls and I – we grew up together, we're best friends, we're an amazing family unit as far as I'm concerned. I don't want to use the word benefitted, but I will, because I think I'm a much better person coming out of that divorce, a much stronger, confident person, and I think I instilled a lot of that in the kids.

I'm blessed by that relationship – the girls' friends compare their relationship with their moms to the relationship we have, you know - "That's something I always wanted, you're so lucky" – and the good part is that the girls recognize it. That means the world to me.

I would have to say our relationship is just about ideal, because when my girls were growing up, I think the best thing that I did, was, I was never a perfect mother, if I made a mistake, I told them – and yeah, they saw me drunk, which was a bad thing, but – you know, that was just – *life*, and I had been through a difficult relationship and the ending of it, and I was just a human being that was their mother and loved them dearly. We're all best friends.

The older mothers' criteria for defining maternal self-worth were their children's character and whether or not they had achieved financial stability and independence. Today the primary criterion is the quality of one's relationship. Are the mother and child the best of friends? This new measure is even less tangible or objective than a child's character or academic or professional achievements. But it has greater repercussions for the mother's personal social networks and well-being.

Intensive mothering contributes to a mutually reinforcing cycle of lack of permanence in marriage and a winnowing of adult friendship networks leading to a reliance on our children for that friendship. Young women still fully expect to find in their husband a "best friend" and "soul mate." (Cherlin 2004; Gertsel and Sarkisan 2006:17) However,

with greater marital impermanence and non-marriage — in 2006, married households became a minority in the United States (Census Bureau 2008) — children are being redefined as their mothers' best friends as well.

How many best friends can one accommodate? And what are the repercussions of mother-daughter best friend dyads?

While Arnett (2004) sees no negative repercussions to this trend, Orenstein differs: “By envisioning motherhood as such a powerful extension of the self, however, young women risk damage to their relationships with their future husbands and children, as well as their own financial well-being.” (2000:39)

The risk of the maternal identity as exclusive emotional role, outlet and sustenance is considerable, as evidenced by the self-assessment of the mothers of adult children in the present study. Your measure as a mother depends on the outcomes of your children. Their success confirms maternal vindication; lack thereof, failure (Thurer 1994).

The following quotes are from mothers whose maternal careers are deemed victorious, and that they themselves are good mothers, based on the outcomes of their adult children.

Wanda (44): My parents raised me and the one thing they instilled in my mind – I saw my mother wear shoes to the point where the soles were completely rubbed off – she just had – there was no sole left on the shoe anymore – the woman went without. I’ve seen her sit in a corner with a little plate – and just – whatever was leftover she scraped onto the plate –that’s what she would eat – her and my dad would eat. We had everything – they would go without shoes on their feet, food in their stomachs, to make sure all of us had what we needed. And that’s what was instilled in me – you go without blood if you have to make sure your kids are surviving. And – I always said, if I had children, I would want my children to have a life – I just want them to have a good life – and, it’s been easy, on that part, instilling in them the importance of family, and the importance of being a good mother. My daughter has two children, and she’s so much into these kids it’s amazing. She’s really a great mom – and one night me and her was talking and

she say – (starts to cry) she say, “Mom, I just remember so many times I seen you just sit in the corner and just cry – and I wondered why – why would you just sit in the corner and cry – and she say, it was hard for you raising us, wasn’t it.” And I say, “Yeah, it really was”. She say, “I used to think the best thing I could do for my mom was stay out of trouble and do good in school.” And she graduated valedictorian of her school and my son graduated valedictorian of his school. That part right there – I knew beyond everything I had been through, it was still worth it. No matter what had happened, no matter how much I had to go through, no matter how many tears I shed, it was all worth it to see her stand up there and I cried through the whole entire thing because I was so proud of her.

Interviewer: Are you a good mother?

Leslie (60): Yes – I believe so.

Interviewer: What makes you say that?

Because of where my children are today – and where our relationship is today – and who and what they are – as the saying in West Virginia goes: the proof is in the puddin’.

Interviewer: Are you a good mother?

Barbara (50): Yes – I mean, I raised two kids – by myself – and they turned into good people. So I’d say yes.

Interviewer: Do you feel like you have been a good mother?

Gwen (50): I’ve been the best that I can be in the circumstances that I’ve been thrust in my life. (Starts to cry) I’m gonna start crying, but this is all positive though – my son has turned into this incredible young man – he’s finally found – the woman he’s married - very mature for 24 – everybody’s like, oh my God they just got married – they’re so young! – They’re both extremely mature – but here he’s got a great job – they just bought their first house – in essence, they’ve got everything I ever wanted. But instead of being jealous of it I’m just completely – just in awe of it – that I, this – sometimes fucked-up woman – created this wonderful, loving man, and to have a daughter in law who has thanked me on numerous occasions for this wonderful man – and as a mother that’s just the best – I mean, that’s it for me. And if I can do half the job with his sister – then I’ll feel that I have accomplished, really, what I think my life purpose is.

In contrast, Dot wonders whether she should ever have had children at all, in light of her son’s difficult life.

Interviewer: What does it mean to you to be a mother?

Dot (70): It's interesting. Sometimes when you go through some really difficult times, and you wonder, what did I do wrong – like with my poor son, who's had so much trouble, and grief – where did I go wrong? I think sometimes, you think – because I *couldn't* have any children, *should* I have had any children? Maybe is there a plan – that some people shouldn't have children. Um – and maybe I was one of them – I don't know. When you're going through a rough time, you wonder, maybe I shouldn't have had any children – maybe I wasn't supposed to have any children. Maybe I wasn't a very good mother. But – ah – kids don't seem to think that – and I don't think that really – but, I'm awfully glad I have them – most of the time (laughs). I mean they're – they're really my only accomplishments, when I come right down to it.

Where are women left in life if their “only accomplishment” or life purpose is perceived as a failure? This undoubtedly puts mothers at considerable emotional and psychic risk. It also reflects a certain degree of hubris in that mothers believe they have such overwhelming if not singular influence on their children's adult outcomes and discount any genetic predispositions or the influence of generational cohort, or peer group, or of the larger culture entirely. Women would be emotionally fortified if maternal impact were seen in a larger context, as one of many socializing agents, and if other roles and emotional outlets were elevated and cultivated.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare wrote, “Good wombs have borne bad sons.” I doubt this sentiment would resonate in today's cultural climate, though it likely should, to alleviate the relentless cultural and self-mother blame, and to allow mothers the psychic freedom to pursue and value other relationships.

The modern expectation of the nature of the mother-child relationship — that is, of a “best friend” — elevates the maternal identity over the spousal, and diminishes the importance of a husband and marriage.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

### *Findings*

With a keen eye toward the interplay of the ideologies of intensive mothering and individualized marriage, I have explored how women make sense over the life course of the multiple identities of mother, wife, worker and “ideal self,” and have investigated whether and how aspects of contemporary marriage prevent women from living up to the ideal of intensive mothering.

The major contribution of this study is the insight that marriage, rather than being a relationship that facilitates the enactment of ideal mothering, is seen instead as a hindrance, or an impediment to being a good mother. A good marriage, that of an equitable best-friendship with good communication, is both the cultural norm and what the vast majority of mothers in this study claimed to be the ideal and that to which they aspired. However, the lived experience of marriage involved a lack of permanence and control. A lack of control over husbands was evidenced by the prevalence of housework difficulties mentioned as marital stressors; also by the reasons women gave for divorce, such as adultery, alcoholism, abuse and spiritual longing. A lack of permanence seemed to be a defining quality of modern marriage: love is transitory, marriages ephemeral. Relationships with children, however, are permanent, maternal love eternal, and it is more logical to invest time and energy in a person who will always be in your life rather

than one on whom you cannot depend to remain. It is striking that even the mothers in the middle class or higher framed the stressors of their marriages as impediments to being a good mother, as divorce compromised such mothers' ability to "be there" for their children – one of the main tenets of intensive mothering. The relief of liberating oneself of a difficult marriage seems to free women to be good mothers – even though they likely spend less time with their children and have a compromised standard of living.

Additionally, I find "worker" to be a relatively weak and fluid identity, and to have a lesser status in the prominence hierarchy of identities. Also, unlike Lareau (2003), who argues that lower- and working-class parents have adopted a different parenting ideology than intensive mothering, I find it pervades all social classes. However, risk of divorce varies widely by socioeconomic status; therefore middle-class mothers are far more likely to be able to manifest the ideology in lived experience (Furstenberg 2006). I also find that in terms of identity salience, mother trumps wife, and the decision to initiate divorce is framed as being a "good mother" so as to preserve both the intensive mothering identity and a linear, cohesive narrative of a "good" self. The primary identity, however, is the self, which the intensive mothering identity ultimately serves. Choices are made among ideologies — or at least rationales for these choices are developed — that buttress the self, which is at the apex of the identity hierarchy. Thus, the rise of individualism, which many scholars have noted as a major transformative dynamic in family life over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and continuing today (see Cancian 1987; Cherlin 2004; Giddens 1991; Popenoe 1993) finds further substantiation and support in this study. Ultimately, the utility of intensive mothering —an ideology so discordant with others

within the family rubric — and the reckoning it engenders, is questioned. This dissonance will further hasten the waning institutional weight of marriage.

### *Limitations*

One limitation of this study is that the participants consist entirely of divorced mothers. It is entirely likely that married mothers may have given the role of wife a greater salience, found marriage to have facilitated the enactment of intensive mothering, had helpful, attentive soul mates for spouses, or were just more tenaciously dedicated to maintaining a biological, nuclear family for their children. Future research may focus on a complementary study of married women, how they navigate contested ideologies and interpret the lived experience of individualized marriage and intensive mothering. Additionally, future researchers may want to interview the husbands of the divorced mothers, to understand their perceived role in facilitating both the ideal marriage and intensive mothering.

### *Implications*

*For Children's and Mothers' Well-Being* Rosanna Hertz argues that “the mother-child dyad has become the core of family life,” and that what men now offer to this family is “obsolete” (2006:196). This is not borne out in the empirical research on the well-being of children and mothers. Numerous studies evidence the lesser well-being of children of divorce (see Amato 2000; Amato and Booth 2002; Amato and Cheadle 2008; Neale 2001; Smart and Neale 2001; Wallerstein 2000). A wealth of research also documents the hardships that most divorced mothers face (see Arendell 1986; Kurz 1995; Steiner 2007).

Perhaps because Hertz interviewed only middle- and upper-middle- class single mothers, the struggle of most single mothers is absent from her assessment of fathers' value and contribution to families. However, even if the considerable financial hardship were taken out of the calculus of most divorced children's and mothers' well-being, to say that fathers are "obsolete" seems myopic and jaded. Numerous studies document the greater well-being not only of children from two-parent homes, but of those children who enjoy strong relationships with their fathers (see Coltrane 1996, White and Gilbreth 2001).

From the perspective of a concern for children's and mothers' well-being and positive outcomes, then, the discordance of family ideologies, grounded in a heightened salience of individualism or the "self" as the apex of the identity hierarchy, is a discouraging phenomenon. What can be done to better ensure positive outcomes for children, mothers and families in general?

Though not a direct focus of this study, it must be noted that the high level of domestic violence in this and other studies suggests that in many instances marriage is stressful, if not dangerous. Often it is best for mothers' and children's' safety and well-being for a divorce to be initiated, with no ideological gymnastics or rationalization necessary to create an account or salvage a coherent sense of self.

Mindful of the aforementioned data which implicates non-marriage and divorce as causing hardship for mothers and children, an obvious suggestion would be to increase marriage rates. Indeed, marriage promotion was a major component of welfare reform in the Bush administration. However, the countries in which marriage rates are lowest (Finland, Norway and Sweden, among others), "...all have consistently good outcomes

on all indicators of child well-being” (Kamerman et al 2003:6). Thus, marriage is not the singular route to children’s well-being. These countries, however, have a far more public conception of the family, with far greater governmental assistance. For example, “economic equality between women and men” and “an equal distribution of unpaid care and household work,” are national objectives recently adopted by the Swedish parliament (Sweden 2008).

However, absent the sudden adoption of a more socialist philosophy in the United States, the well-being of children and families will remain the province of individuals in the private sphere.

Marriage as an institution, as a major benchmark structuring the life course and as a primary means of conferring adulthood and creating legal and culturally legitimate families, is on the decline in our society, with no signs of abatement. The number of births to unmarried mothers continues to climb to ever-higher record levels (Eckholm 2009), while the national marriage rate declines to further historic lows (Roberts 2006). The participants in this study offer no indication that this will change any time soon.

Yet, there is a growing consensus that children fare best when their lives are stable. Children do best in married-couple families; however, a stable, single-parent home is preferable to a ride on the marriage-go-round of divorce and remarriage. (Cherlin 2009; Kamp Dush 2009). If mothers were primarily driven to create a context for their children’s best positive outcomes, empirical evidence suggests that either more women stay married, or that single mothers stay single – unless there is absolute certitude that a recoupling won’t end in divorce or another uncoupling. For married mothers, this would

involve either women remaining in dissatisfying marriages – or, more hopefully, men better facilitating wives’ sense of “control” over their marriages, by contributing to the housework, the emotional quality of a marriage and facilitating women’s career goals. Certainly refraining from abuse, adultery and addiction would be helpful and advised under any circumstances.

*For Community* I have argued that intensive mothering may be detrimental to mothers’ psychological and social well being because other relationships and roles are neglected in favor of the maternal identity. In addition, intensive mothering may have detrimental effects on the larger society as well.

McPherson et al (2006) find that Americans’ social networks dwindled dramatically from 1985-2004, with the modal respondent reporting no confidant at all with whom to discuss important matters (p.353). Amato et al (2007) report a decline in social participation in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though not as dramatic and alarming as McPherson et al, with respondents’ mean number of close friends dwindling from 6.0 in 1980 to 5.4 in 2000 (p.188). McPherson et al find Americans retreating from the public realm — community and civic involvement — and moving inward into the private, nuclear family: “We find a remarkable drop in the size of core discussion networks, with a shift away from ties formed in neighborhood and community contexts and toward conversations with close kin (especially spouses).” With our national divorce rate at 50%, to collapse one’s vital social network into one’s spouse with the state of marriage so tenuous is a considerable risk to one’s social and emotional well-being. It makes intuitive sense, then, that instead of investing in the likely transient role of wife in a temporal

marriage, one would invest more emotional effort in a relationship thought not so easily severed: mother. This has been borne out in the present study.

According to McPherson et al (2006), the most “substantively interesting” factor that accounts for increasing social isolation is the taxation on Americans’ time due to significant shifts in work/family patterns and commitments:

Families, especially families with children, may face a time bind that comes from longer commutes and more work time (Hochschild 1997). As more women have entered the labor force, families have added 10 to 29 hours per week to their hours working outside the home. The increase has been the most dramatic among middle-aged, better-educated, higher-income families – exactly the demographic group that fuels the voluntary association system. (P.373)

Structural factors, then, such as working mothers, long work days and longer commutes siphon time away from community and social networks. Parental, specifically maternal ideology also contributes to these anti-social trends. “Good” mothering is far more time consuming today than a generation ago; intensive mothering, the middle class norm, requires a devout commitment of time and emotional energy (Sayer et al 2004).

Lareau (2003) argues that there is a significant class-based division in parenting philosophies and approaches. “Concerted cultivation”, the middle-class parenting norm, is highly similar to intensive mothering, in that it obliges considerable time and monetary commitment from parents who intensely and actively “develop” their children. Working-, lower-class and poor parents are said to practice the “accomplishment of natural growth”, which is a more hands-off approach, in which the provision of basic necessities (food, shelter, clothing) is seen as sufficient parenting, and the concerted development of children is seen as unnecessary, perhaps even detrimental.

I find no such class division among my interviewees, as evidenced by the testimony of the following working-class and unemployed mothers:

Bonita (39): For the first five years I stayed home – for each of my kids, the first five years, I stayed at home, to make sure that – that they were just taken care of. As soon as they hit preschool or hit kindergarten, I was off to work.

Interviewer: Did you want to stay home for a longer period of time, or did you want to -

I felt it was right to do because – um, I put my son in Head Start, and that was like a little half-day, that little Head Start program they had, and that gave him such a head start in school, and in life, because he was always a step ahead, you know, of the other kids, he was always just a very smart – and that's because I stayed home, and I put the time and effort into doing the alphabet. The TV didn't watch him, you know. Now he would watch the little, the Sesame Street, and the letters, and all that stuff, I would take him to the zoo, to the park, you know, just so he can touch and feel things – I used to take him around to my grandfather, and he used to just listen to my grandfather, cause he liked the way he talked, he was from Georgia, so he had that whole accent, just always had – wisdom, you know. And I took him around older kids, and even though he was the smallest one he went out and played, so when he went to Head Start, when he went in he knew everything – he knew his colors, he knew how to write his name, he knew the letters in his name. And then when he went to kindergarten, there were kids who didn't even know colors, so he was always like, right there. So I was really proud of that. And I did that with my middle son – and he just – the same thing, just kind of took off, then with Tyler, he's above in reading right now, cause I took the time to do that. So I don't regret those decisions at all.

Interviewer: What's your idea of a good mother?

Aisha (44): A good mother. Oh, wow. Again – your children are first. When you have children, you are now in the background. Your – your wants, needs, whatever, come second. You take care of the child – the children come first.

In fact, Edin and Kelafas (2005) argue that not only are poor mothers just as child-oriented as middle-class Americans, but they are also driven to have children in part due to acute social isolation:

Indeed, many mothers tell us they cannot name one person they would consider a friend, and the turmoil of adolescence often breeds a sense of alienation from family as well. Thus, mothers often speak poignantly about the strong sense of relational poverty they felt in the period before childbearing and believe they have forged those missing attachments through procreation, a self-made community of care. (P.174)

Lareau's (2003) middle class families, who feel obligated to engage their children through conversation and negotiation in perpetuity, not to mention attend sporting events, school activities and recitals, are so swept up in the hectic and tightly scheduled pace of their lives that there is no time for extended family, let alone community. In recent classic texts which lament the decline of community and civic engagement, neither Putnam (2000) nor Bellah (1996) suggest that intensive mothering contributes to the retreat from public life. With a lack of time to cultivate other roles, especially those which might engender a sense of purpose, or contribution, such as civic participation or volunteer work, the maternal identity becomes dominant.

*For the Modern Family* Hays's contention that motherhood is the last bastion of selflessness in a cynical world where profit is the prime motivator is a romantic fallacy and a false dichotomy. As the authors in *Consuming Motherhood* assert, motherhood has always been permeated by market forces: "The tension between love and money is one that many women experience, in their own lives, as a problem. The vision of motherhood kept pure of the taint of consumption is one that many women value but few if any are able to realize in their own lives" (Taylor 2004:3). Coontz has repeatedly and successfully argued that the public-private distinction is relatively new in Western cultures. She contends that family ideologies and practices have always been crafted by larger social forces, such as the economy, gender, individualism and the capitalist ethic

(see Coontz 1992, 1997, 2005). If there is a wall between the public and private, it is permeable. Family and motherhood have always been subject to many outside forces: gender roles, deference to professional and expert advice, the geopolitical state of the world, economic forces, and individualism. There is no historical evidence that the family is impervious to its larger political/cultural/economic context.

Dr. Spock's *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*, originally published in 1946, has sold more than 50 million copies worldwide, second in non-fiction sales only to the Bible (Douglas and Michaels 2004). In it, Spock advocated stay-at-home, intensive mothering. He "...imposed a psychic workday on top of the physical workday, presuming a two-parent family, where the mother has nothing to do but care for one child" (Thurer 1995: xviii) and he demanded that mothers take the psychological subject position of their children (Douglas and Michaels 2004). 1946 marks the prelude to the "...long decade of the 1950s, stretching from 1947 to the early 1960s in the United States" (Coontz 2005:229). This era featured a demographic, economic, geopolitical and gender context for families the likes of which we will never see again. It fostered a powerful cultural mandate to marry and have children at a young age. It cultivated a concept that marriage was the only culturally legitimate context for parenthood, sexuality and adulthood. Furthermore, within this era, a single wage-earner could attain a middle-class lifestyle for his family on one paycheck and there was significant government support for young families (GI and home loans, for example). And throughout this era gender roles were defined, distinct and polarized.

In light of the many demographic changes since the publication of *Baby and Child Care*, such as the skyrocketing number of working mothers with young children, high rates of divorce, the considerable rise of stepfamily formation, a revolutionary upheaval in gender roles, and, of course, the historically unprecedented choice of if and whom to marry and if and when to have children, a new mothering ideology is needed to mesh with a radically different familial context.

Stephanie Coontz is so fond of the following story that she uses it (albeit in slightly differing versions) in three of her books (1992, 1997, 2005)

..the Jesuits set out to institutionalize the married-couple nuclear family, based on the "correct" roles for husband and wife. They could not understand why Indian men were so reluctant to assume their authority as "heads of family." After many frustrating attempts to convince them, one Jesuit recorded in his journal that he pulled out his strongest argument against allowing wives so much liberty. If you do not keep your women at home, he explained to one Indian, you will never know for certain which one of the children your wife bears actually belongs to you. But the man was horrified rather than impressed by the Jesuit's logic. "Thou hast no sense," the Nakapi replied. "You French people love only your own children; but we love all the children of our tribe." This is one traditional value that doesn't get much attention in today's political and cultural debates. (1997, P.120)

She has argued for over 20 years for a more expansive, liberal concept of the family. Yet, in that time, marriage has become more inward turning and "greedy" – if people marry at all; and spouses have become more isolated within marriage. Children are expected to be our best friends — which precludes other adults from fulfilling that role. Meaningful social ties are fewer, and communal associations are dwindling.

In light of such monumental change, it is little wonder that mothers are strengthening their grip on the maternal identity and extending their grasp of it. Most mothers in this

study said maternity gave them a sense of control that was absent in marriage. And with all family roles and stages in the life course a choice instead of a given, and fewer choices seen as permanent, it makes sense that one would amplify and cling to that over which we feel we have a sense of permanence and control.

Yet, this sense of control over our children strikes me as odd and/or misplaced. There is no cultural obligation for adult children to live with, or even near to, their parents. There is no promise that children's and parents' personalities will mesh, that they will have shared interests, and, considering the high rate of divorce and dissolution of cohabiting families, that they will even live under the same roof. It is culturally acceptable to jettison marriages we cannot control. And it is understandable that we withdraw from stepchildren we cannot control, since "having control is of crucial importance to psychological well-being." (Schwartz 2004: 204) It makes intuitive sense that we should grasp for control over our children when it is lacking in so many other areas, both familial and beyond.

A mothering ideology that meshes better with modern family reality would be one that frees mothers to cultivate other identities and roles, such as spouse, friend and neighbor. It would be better for her psychological well-being to relinquish control and not to anoint her children as the be-all, end-all measure of her life. Considering the likelihood that her children will be "mothered" in some capacity by another mother, and that she may well "mother" other children herself, relinquishing total focus on and control of her children would likely benefit everyone involved. Instead of framing this loss of control of one's children as a lesser relationship with them, this can be viewed as a gain of love and

concern for all children and the larger community. This may be hard to envision in a country where so much resistance was engendered by the mere title of Hillary Rodham Clinton's *It Takes A Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*, but it is not hard to imagine that we are near a social-psychological tipping point where the majority of our population is lonely, isolated and of "marginal or inadequate counseling support" (McPherson et al 2006:371). What is the tipping point when the village is empty or dysfunctional and all that remains is the mother-child dyad? A mothering ideology broadened to focus more on children in general and less on the singular, biological tie would not be a loss. On the contrary, it would be a significant gain for mothers, children and community.

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## Appendix: Interview Schedule

In my research I am studying different family ideologies, such as the meaning of marriage, the meaning of motherhood, what is a “good” marriage, a “good” wife and mother, and so on. I am also looking at how these ideologies interact with each other.

Today I would like you to tell me the story of your divorce. I am interested in the feelings and emotions you experienced at the time, so I may stop you at certain points while you tell your story to ask what you were thinking and feeling at the time.

I would like you to start at the point in your marriage when you feel things started to go wrong. You are welcome to give me any information about your marriage prior to that, if you like, to give me some context if you think it is important.

Toward the beginning of the story:

Did you experience any “pre-wedding jitters”?

Did you always want to get married?

Did you always want to be a mother?

What is your idea of a good wife?

What is your idea of a good mother?

What is your idea of a good marriage?

How much of your identity was that of a wife?

How much of your identity was that of a mother?

Were you a stay at home mother? Why (not)?

Were there any housework or child care issues with your husband?

Did you and /or your husband go to therapy? When the divorce becomes imminent:

How old were the children at this time? How did their age factor into your thoughts at this time? Was there a “last straw” that made you realize the marriage was over?

Whom would you say made the decision to end the marriage?

If you were the initiator, what kinds of things were on your mind as you were weighing your decision?

What was the relationship between the “wife” part of yourself and the “mother”?

How did your idea of a good wife/mother factor into your decision?

After the physical separation:

What kind of physical arrangement did you have with the children?

How did your children do?

Has your experience of mothering changed since the divorce? How you experience the kids, what you get out of it?

How do you feel about your ex being the father of your children?

Are you a good mother?

What do you think about the institution of marriage now? Have your ideas about it changed since before your divorce?

How would you describe the level of stress your divorce has caused you?

Is it easier to be a mother or a wife?

Was your divorce good for the kids?

What do your children mean to you?

If interviewee is a stepmother or her former husband has a partner:

How do you feel about your child’s stepmother?

How do you feel about being a stepmother?

How does it affect the relationship between you and your children?

Tell me about your schedule/the rhythm of your schedule.

Do you have any final thoughts you would like to share with me?