

Hegemonic Motherhood:
Deviancy Discourses and
Employed Mothers' Accounts of
Out-of-School Time Issues

*Teresa Arendell, Ph.D.**

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Teresa Arendell is a Senior Postdoctoral Researcher at the Center for Working Families and Professor of Sociology at Colby College, Waterville, Maine.

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Abstract

Contemporary mothers combine parenting and paid employment, and most childraising activities are mothers' responsibilities. Mothers care for children within a particular cultural milieu; in the US, this ideological context holds an *intensive mothering* ideology. Institutionalized in social arrangements and practices, this ideology constitutes a *hegemonic motherhood*. This paper sets forth a notion of hegemonic motherhood, and argues that maternal deviancy discourses are its product. I draw on narrative accounts obtained from mothers of elementary-school aged children, aimed at investigating issues of out-of-school time, and situate, briefly, school-aged child care in both a local and national context. I, then, show how mothers participate rhetorically in the maternal deviancy discourses.

So I got called into the principal's office [with no advance notice]. So I went there immediately, without even thinking to change my clothes. I showed up at his office wearing my sweat clothes, my hair not washed yet, and no make up on. I looked just like a welfare mother. I never go out looking like that, a welfare mother. But there I was.

- 42-year-old, Latina, full-time employed, married mother of two

The care and raising of children is largely the responsibility of mothers. This remains the case despite several decades of feminist attention to the gender gap in parenting, wives' calls for greater father involvement in children's lives, and extensive social and demographic changes altering the lives of women.¹ Contemporary women are engaged in a new model of motherhood – *modern motherhood* – in which they combine family care work with paid wage work (Leira, 1990, 1992, 1998), even while, in large measure, men's model of fatherhood has changed little. More specifically, although the gender gap in parenting work seems to be declining some,

mothers spend more time caring for and doing things with their children on workdays and days off than fathers among dual income, married parents. Mothers spend nearly an hour more than fathers each workday caring for and doing things with their children (3.2 vs. 2.3 hours). On days off from paid work, the difference grows to nearly two hours per day, with mothers spending 8.3 hours and fathers 6.4 hours. (Bond et al., 1998:38-39)

The relational and logistical work of child rearing is labor-intensive: “Children require physical care, nurturance, material provision, protection and supervision, and logistical support for handling both the routine and the unfamiliar. They need guidance and encouragement in their development . . . [and] the young need direction in skill development [Small and Eastman, 1991:457] (Arendell, 1997:2). Child raising requires time. And although employed mothers commit longer hours to paid work than they did 20 years ago, time spent with their children has not decreased (Bond et al., 1998:40). Fathers' time investments with children are not affected by either their own employment (or unemployment) or that of their wives (Bond et al., 1998:39; Teachman, 1991).

The social psychological import of mothering is reiterated continually in contemporary American society. Mothering is recognized as “the main vehicle through which people first

form their identities and learn their place in society” (Forcey, 1994:357; see also Chodorow, 1993). Mothering is symbolically laden, representing what is often characterized as the ultimate in relational devotion, affection, and importance. Interpretations and meanings of mothering are viewed as being deep-seated in the individual psyche, the outcome of relationships formed in early infancy (Benjamin 1990, 1994; Chodorow 1989, 1990; Phoenix et al., 1991; Vegetti-Finzi, 1996). Mothering involves not only social and psychological activity, but also cultural beliefs, values, and norms. The character of the practices of and understandings about mothering is culturally specific and variable (Glenn, 1994).

Mothering and motherhood are the focus of an expanding body of research and theorizing (see Arendell, forthcoming), if not of more progressive social policy. Recent theorizing about mothering and motherhood has progressed along two broad tracks. One entails efforts to develop a model of mothering that offers breadth and universality and delineates common activities and their significance (see Ribbens, 1994; Ruddick, 1980, 1994). Much of the emerging work on care, closely related with that on mothering, assumes a universalistic model. The other track in the motherhood literature involves the construction of explanatory frameworks aimed at specifying and accounting for particular maternal practices and objectives. Inherent in this work is a push for greater attention to matters of diversity and class variation (see Baca Zinn, 1990, 1994; Collins, 1991, 1994; Glenn et al., 1994; Stack and Burton, 1993). This latter enterprise often responds explicitly to the efforts to theorize a general model of mothering. Where the conceptual tracks – the more universalistic and the more particularistic – converge and, at times, intersect and even twine together is with respect to the view that mothering is ideologically laden, shaped, and dictated. Each recognizes the presence of a preeminent cultural ideology of motherhood that is powerful, pervasive, and persistent.

Intensive Mothering Ideology

The ideology of mothering and motherhood is multifaceted and complex, drawing on tradition, religious teachings, and social science knowledge. As sociologist Hays (1996) articulated, the dominant motherhood ideology in the modern United States is that of *intensive mothering*. The *good* mother is focused exclusively on mothering her children and is child

centered, committed to her children in time, energy, and affection (see Benjamin, 1990, 1994; Berry, 1993; Tuominen, 1992, 1994). Self-sacrificing, such a mother is “not a subject with her own needs and interests” (Bassin et al., 1994b:2). The *good* mother ideology presupposes the traditional model of motherhood, with its roots in the transition to an industrial capitalist economy and the consequent separation of productive paid labor from the home (Chodorow and Contratto, 1982; Ladd-Taylor, 1994; Reese, 1996; Stacey, 1996). Intensive mothering ideology both assumes and reinforces the traditional gender-based division of labor (Fineman, 1995; Hartsock, 1998).

Mothering ideology is inextricably linked to notions about and structures of gender (Chodorow, 1990). Womanhood and motherhood are treated as synonymous identities and categories. Nurturance is linked to femininity which, in turn, is tied to biological capacities to reproduce. Although gender is being contested and challenged (Lorber, 1995) and the related practices and arrangements of mothering transformed, mothering ideology endures.

An important explanation for the persistence of motherhood ideology is its overlap with the dominant ideology of family (see Cheal, 1991), which is institutionalized in marriage and family arrangements, practices, and laws (Fineman, 1995), social policy and programs (Abramovitz, 1996; Boris, 1994), and the capitalist economy (Michaels, 1996). Further, mothers as caregivers, or violators of caregiving, and as pivotal figures in the maintenance of family life, are represented in various forms of popular culture, including literature, film, and other media (Gillis, 1997; Hirsch, 1994; Kaplan, 1992, 1994). Inevitably, motherhood ideology reaches deeply into the lives of individuals and family processes. Rhetorically proclaimed, it shapes women’s very identities and activities. Even when resisted, mothering ideology forms the backdrop for action and assessment.

The *good* mother is heterosexual, married, and monogamous. She is White and native born. She is economically self-sufficient, which means, given the persistent gender gap in earnings, largely economically dependent on her income-earning husband (unless she’s independently wealthy and, in that case, allows her husband to handle the finances). She is not employed.

The ideology of intensive mothering and its institutionalization in social arrangements and practices constitutes a hegemonic motherhood. It produces ways of defining and viewing mothering and excludes explorations of alternatives as well as concerted critiques of the ways in which it contributes to the reproduction of gender inequities. Hegemonic motherhood is a patriarchal construction: it ties women's identities to their roles as child raisers and nurturers of others, more generally. Motherhood, no matter how closely conducted in accord with the ideological dictates, does not elevate its performers to the social and economic status experienced by men collectively. Rather, hegemonic motherhood remains subordinated to and under the force of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987, 1992; see also Arendell, 1995). The ideology of intensive mothering and its institutionalization define women and promote standards by which they are judged, both as mothers and not-mothers, in a gender-stratified society. Hegemonic motherhood regulates and controls women's lives. One avenue for such control is the construction and operation of deviancy discourses (Fineman, 1995; Rothman, 1994; Teghtsoonian, 1996, 1997).

Deviancy Discourses

Discourses of maternal deviancy are targeted, albeit differentially, at mothers who do not conform to the script of full-time motherhood and who violate the dictated social characteristics, for whatever reason or reasons. Thus, deviancy discourses serve as a means of social control, stigmatizing and punishing women who violate the norms of hegemonic motherhood. Significantly, the discursive claims of maternal deviancy are neither internally nor comparatively consistent. The subjects of deviancy, or concern, discourses of motherhood vary by race and class, reflecting the intersecting systems of gender, class, race and ethnic stratification in the U.S.

In one discursive motif are poor mothers, especially mothers of color, who are unmarried and not engaged in paid work, but dependent on public assistance to support their children. Indeed, unmarried or low-income racial ethnic and immigrant mothers are expected to prioritize employment, not mothering (Abramovitz, 1996; Boris, 1994; Chavkin, 1999; Sidel, 1996). Poor women have long been stigmatized and subject to control on the basis of their economic status (Abramovitz, 1996) and unwed mothers characterized and commanded

by the twin discourses of morality and reform, the latter emphasizing the welfare of infants and children (and not mothers) (Gordon 1994:28-29).

In contrast, married working- and middle-class mothers are to be engaged in full-time mothering, not employment *and* mothering (see Coontz, 1997; Hays, 1996; Presser, 1995; Stacey, 1996). To be a working mother – one working for pay, that is – is to fall short of the standards of the *good* mother and to be the subject of a particular deviancy discourse. By their employment, mothers, unless they are poor, violate intensive mothering ideology. Devotion, commitment, and competent parenting skills are insufficient. Moreover, women with children are subjected to secondary status and discriminatory treatment in the employment sector, seen to be not wholly committed to their work because of their loyalties to mothering and the demands and needs of their children. They are targeted as inadequate, then, in both realms, parenting and paid labor (Fried, 1996).

That employment leads to a mother's classification as deviant, unless she's poor and single, is paradoxical. A mother's employment typically is financially necessary (Zill and Nord, 1994) and so advantages children, especially in a country that offers no children's or family allowance aimed at ensuring children's economic well-being (Chavkin, 1999). Poverty harms children (e.g., Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997). Families' primary access to benefits, such as health and disability insurance and Social Security, is through a parent's paid labor. Children benefit from mothers' paid work in other important ways as well. Given even a bare modicum of supports, employment enhances mothers' well-being (see Duxbury et al., 1994; Hughes and Galinsky, 1994; Mirowsky and Ross, 1995; Roxburgh, 1997), improving the quality of parenting and, thus, enhancing children's overall well-being. Moreover, as autonomous citizens, women, like men, are guaranteed the protection of basic rights and freedoms, including the freedom of association, which may include participation in income-producing activity. That is, mothers may choose to work. However, these positive employment-related factors pale against the force of hegemonic motherhood, leaving employed mothers to be classified as deviant.

An acceptable contemporary strategy for ameliorating one's deviancy as an employed mother is to attempt to be a "supermom." As Hays (1996:132) observed, "If you are a good

mother, you *must* be an intensive one. The only ‘choice’ involved is whether you *add* the role of paid working woman.” So *good* mothers can be traditional mothers, engaged in full-time motherhood and homemaking, or can be “supermoms,” employed *and* able to mother with the attentiveness and involvement comparable to that of full-time mothers (Hays, 1996:132). Ideology counters reality: no woman, no matter how well intentioned or organized, can be in two places at once. But the simultaneous images – the full-time homemaker mother and the supermom – point to the cultural tensions about maternal employment and cultural ambivalence about mothers’ behaviors, more generally (Hays, 1996; Luker, 1996). This ambivalence impedes a concerted challenging of the maternal deviancy discourses.

The cultural ambivalence about maternal employment is coupled with a gap between attitudes and practice (Hartmann and Spalter-Roth, 1996; Leira, 1990, 1992, 1998). Mothers’ employment remains a flashpoint, a topic that evokes strong feelings and dissension, even as women’s employment nearly parallels men’s.ⁱⁱ Attitudes regarding working mothers fall out along gender lines. For instance, the recent National Study of the Changing Workforce (NSCW) shows that employed women are more likely than employed men (73 compared to 62 percent) to agree with the statement “A mother who works outside the home can have just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work” (Bond et al., 1998:55).ⁱⁱⁱ

Maternal employment is a subject eliciting dissension throughout much of the world, and gender differences in attitudes toward maternal employment are not uniquely American (Knudsen and Waerness, forthcoming). In their examination of international survey data, Knudsen and Waerness (1999:46) concluded that “there is a general tendency for women to be more positive (towards gender equality) than men, and for young people to be more positive than old.” Young women are the most positive about employed mothers and their abilities to be good mothers. Well educated women are more positive than their less well-educated counterparts; women, generally, are more positive than men about women’s changing roles; and men’s attitudes are correlated directly with their spouses’ level of education and their own histories of mothers’ employment (Knudsen and Waerness, 1999, forthcoming). Women, even young and well educated women, are not free of ambivalence

about maternal employment, however. And in the U.S., unlike the other advanced industrial societies, employed mothers must balance the competing demands of paid work and parenting largely on their own.

Central to the deviancy discourses of motherhood are processes of mother blame. These involve long-standing social processes in which mothers are held accountable for such things as children's behavior, mental and physical health, school performance, character, and developmental outcomes (Barnard and Martell, 1995; Caplan, 1998; Garcia Coll et al., 1998; Phoenix et al., 1991). Sweeping a wide swath, "mother-blame assumes that mothers are impaired or inadequate in their childrearing and that their influences on children are determinative and damaging [Thurer, 1993]" (Garey and Arendell, 2000). Underlying mother-blame is the fantasy of the perfect mother and the assumption of maternal omnipotence (Chodorow and Contratto, 1982). These contribute to the neglect of the vast array of influences on children and child outcomes.

The centering of women's mothering role and the readiness to hold women responsible for all child behaviors and outcomes highlight fundamental cultural contradictions about motherhood. That is, even as mothering, in the abstract, is rhetorically celebrated and centered, mothers, as persons, are not assured of the basic rights of citizenship on the basis of their child raising commitments and activities. This is the case even though such labor is crucial for the caring for and preparing of the future workforce (among other things) and even though women's mothering roles are elevated and expected.

The burden of disproportionate responsibility for child rearing is assigned to mothers in a sociocultural context that fails to assure adequate economic and social supports. In practice, mothering activities are devalued and neglected by society at large. For instance, nearly a quarter of American women and over one-third of single mothers are poor. The ending of AFDC (the Aid for Families with Dependent Children program) and the instituting of TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) discarded any public pretense of the safety net for poor women and their children. Of those mothers who are married when they become mothers, 60 percent will experience divorce, and most will experience a significant decline in their standard of living. If challenged, even if they've been the primary child

caretaker, mothers may well lose custody of their children. At particular risk for loss of custody are women who acknowledge being, or are *even* just accused of being, lesbian. Male genetic ties to offspring are given primacy in disputes involving assisted reproductive technologies (Callahan, 1995). The legal category of illegitimacy is being considered by some state legislatures, ostensibly in efforts to dissuade women from entering motherhood unmarried. Mandatory paternity reporting requirements (for low-income women) are in place. In sum, the social and economic vulnerability of a significant proportion of mothers works to regulate all women's lives. Especially those who opt to parent alone, outside of or after marriage, or who reject heterosexuality in favor of lesbianism, for example, risk poverty, stigma, and uncertain futures. But few mothers are immune from classification as deviant, as the ambivalence and negative judgments about maternal employment indicate.

Women who engage in mothering also participate actively in the discourses of deviant motherhood. Mothers, like all persons, are active social agents. It is some mothers' narrative participation in maternal deviancy discourses that I consider in what follows. After describing the participants and, briefly, the community in which they live and in which their children are schooled, I investigate mothers' uses of deviancy discourses as they reflect on their own and others' mothering. I consider how mothers are not only the subjects of hegemonic motherhood, but also are players in its discursive aspects. They are carriers and conveyors of cultural ideologies as well as the objects of them. I argue that mothers' uses of normative dimensions in their accounts and observations about and comparisons to other women's mothering are reflective of the larger cultural context, with its unresolved contradictions, tensions, and time lags regarding maternal employment.

Mothers in the Middle

The participants, all volunteers, in this exploratory study of parents of school-aged children, are employed and parents of at least one child aged 5 to 12. Of the 26 mothers interviewed 21 are married. All 5 of the single mothers are divorced from the fathers of their children. Two of these mothers live in marital-like arrangements with their children and the men whom they characterize as their fiancés. The mothers range in age from 24 to 48. Four are Asian American (one foreign born), 5 Latina (one foreign born), 3 African American, and

14 White. Eight of these women are in interracial marriages. All of their families are *employed-mother families* (Leira, 1992); that is, the women engage in paid labor as well as unpaid family caretaking work. With one or both residential parents having some college education, all the families are middle class. Several women's family economic situations are such that they have only a tenuous toehold in the middle-class income range, having annual incomes of about 45,000 dollars. In contrast, several have family incomes reaching into six figures, over 400,000 dollars in one case. Most have family incomes falling into the high moderate to higher income brackets, ranging from approximately 72,000 to 95,000 dollars.

These women can be sketched, with a broad and thick brush, as being "mainstream." That is, none is under the supervision of social service agencies; none receives welfare assistance; each is situated in an economically self-sufficient family; no one has a child being monitored by the criminal justice system or a spouse in the system. These are "middle-class" mothers who openly *care for* and *care about* their children (Tronto, 1995, 1996). By overt measures as well as self-reports, these mothers are competent, knowledgeable parents who are committed to their children and to child rearing.^{iv} Their children are wanted. One mother, an African American health care professional married to a government worker, reflected the value of her children in this pithy, memorable remark: "These children are diamonds, are our diamonds. We let no one, no one, tarnish them."

Without exception, these women are responsible for the locating, arranging, and monitoring of their children's care and supervision during out-of-school time (see Berry, 1993; Teghtsoonian, 1996; Tuominen, 1992, 1994). This responsibility is a continuation of that held during children's preschool years. Fathers "help out" by handling some of the dropoffs to and pickups of children after their care arrangements and extracurricular activities.

With respect to the coordination of work and family, nearly all of the mothers are engaged in what Becker and Moen (forthcoming) describe as "scaling back strategies." That is, these employed persons take, and are able to describe explicitly, very deliberate and conscious actions to buffer their family lives from the demands of paid work and the workplace. Further, with only a few exceptions, the women who are married and their husbands have relationships to the workplace that can be described as "one-job/one-career."

But even those women engaged in careers rather than jobs attempt to maintain distinct boundaries between their work and home lives in order to better accommodate family needs and demands (see Becker and Moen, forthcoming; Hertz, 1997; Herz and Ferguson, 1996; Thorpe and Daly, forthcoming). Like most American mothers, these women must rely on their own resources and innovations in managing paid work and child supervision (see Garey, 1999; Hertz, 1997; Hertz and Ferguson, 1996). Carrying primary responsibility for their children's home and extrafamilial care arrangements, mothers do most, although not all, of the scaling back (Arendell, forthcomingb).

The Local Context

The northern California suburban community in which these women live (with several living outside the town but within the county) prides itself on being a model city. Yet the number of child care spaces available to school-aged children is minimal. Most child care slots are for preschoolers, and some are for infants and toddlers (Children's Network of Solano County, 1999). Other than the use of family members or private babysitters, child care options for parents working nonstandard hours are nonexistent. Spread out over a large geographical area, the community operates nearly 20 elementary schools. Remarkably few of the children are eligible for school bus service, the result of the school district's efforts to cope with the state of California's economic assault on the public school system over the past several decades. Children either walk to and from home, school, and care arrangements or are provided transportation by their families or care providers. The length of school days varies, with kindergartners spending less than four hours daily in school. Depending on their grade levels, children begin classes between 8:00 and 8:30 a.m. (with an afternoon kindergarten program also offered) and are released between 1:30 and 2:20 p.m. On Wednesdays, all children are excused from school an hour earlier than on the other days. These schedules pose serious dilemmas for most employed parents (Arendell, forthcomingb).

Additionally, nearly half of all employed persons, men and women, in the community commute to their workplaces. The average travel time is more than 45 minutes; on days in which there are traffic problems, the commutes can last much longer (Commute Profile, 1998). Among the participants, some three-quarters either commute to work or have

husbands who do; in over a quarter of the families, both parents commute more than 25 miles to work. Two of the single mothers commute. Fewer than half of the mothers have relatives in the vicinity on whom they can call or rely upon in emergencies. Most participants and their spouses work standard workday hours, but several of the women's husbands work excessively long workweeks. Three of the married women work split shifts in order to have *split parenting* (Waerness, 1996, 1999), and two of the divorced mothers, one of whom is a commuter, work nonregular hours.^v

All of these women worked or attended school while their children were preschoolers, though some increased their work hours when their youngest child entered school. In contrast, three scaled back at that time: married mothers with careers, they found the coordination of two careers and their children's schooling and activities to be too much. They argued that their children actually needed them more at this point in their development. Leaving their professions, these women developed home-based businesses related to their training and work experiences.

Some mothers reported that their feelings of guilt about holding paid employment had diminished as their children became older and entered the formal, taken-for-granted schedule and routines of schooling. But nearly all reported still feeling conflicted about working. Formal schooling for children ages five and older is normalized and expected. Maternal employment is not. Moreover, their school-aged children often present more child care dilemmas than they did as preschoolers. Younger children could be placed in one care arrangement – preschool, family day care, or relative care – that covered the span of the mother's workday. But older children's care typically involves multiple arrangements and a patchwork of structured activities, supervision, and informal care (Miller et al., 1996; Rosenthal and Vandell, 1996).

Increasingly, modern American childhoods, particularly for children in families having some discretionary income, consist of overlapping activities. (This is the case in Europe and the United Kingdom, as well [Petrie, 1996]). Middle-class childhoods are *modernized*; that is, children's daily lives entail a combination of formal schooling, extracurricular lessons and enrichment activities, leisure participation in sports activities, homework, and organized play

events (Hofferth and Sandberg, 1998; Miller et al., 1996). Many of these activities overlap with or constitute child care and supervision handled by adults other than parents or relatives. This *collectivization of childhood* has come in tandem with the shift to the modern motherhood model (Leira, 1992) and creates another level of work for mothers (Arendell, forthcomingb).

A number of mothers reported that as their children had become older, usually around age ten, they began to lobby actively for more independence and less extra-familial supervision (see Petrie, 1996). With development, children often brought additional negotiating demands to the mother-child relationship and more arrangements to manage. The care and supervision of their children during out-of-school time is a constant challenge, for many a constant struggle, that evolves and takes on different shapes as children develop (Arendell, forthcomingb).

Mothers Talk, Mothers' Talk

Recounting the logistics and management of their everyday lives, a majority of the women I interviewed articulated a normative strand in which they evaluated their mothering. Their pride in their organizational skills – “we’re all managers, managers,” said one mother in a commonly made remark – and the valued high quality of their relationships with their children were countered by self-deprecating remarks. With multiple time demands, incredibly complicated logistical arrangements, and deep commitments to their children’s well-being (Arendell, forthcomingb), these mothers nonetheless reflected critically on their choices and activities as they detailed them. Repeatedly, I heard from women such remarks, in reference to their mothering and home lives more generally, as “*If only* I were ‘more organized,’ ‘less emotional,’ ‘more consistent,’ less overburdened, ‘less stressed,’ ‘less frantic,’ ‘more patient,’ or ‘took more time to be more loving,’ I would be a better mother.” Yet, to my listening ear, these women are highly skilled managers; they are heroes of their everyday lives for whom *time binds* are all too real and present (Hochschild, 1989). One married White mother of two explained explicitly, as did others, the strong organizational abilities shown by mothers, “It’s just a skill, this being organized and knowing what’s happening this hour, this day, tomorrow, next week,” she said in reference to her managing of her children’s schedules in relation to

her work schedule, “a skill we [mothers] have to acquire in order to survive.” She paused, then added, “No one else is going to do it. There’s no one to turn to as a backup. It’s up to us. If it’s going to work, it’s up to us.”

A 24-year-old White woman is the mother of a child who’s nearly seven. Raised in a working-class family, this woman turned to AFDC at varying times during her earliest years of motherhood. She is now situated in the middle class, mostly as a result of her live-in fiancé’s high income as a computer programmer. She works as an office manager (earning an hourly rate just over minimum wage). “I work full-time. I support us. We have a nice home, a nice apartment. She [my daughter] has the things she needs, and she’s a ‘clothes-horse.’ . . . I’ve done a year and a half of college and doing a course right now.” Her early mornings and evenings are rushed, as is the case for millions of mothers across the country. She explained that she had very few friends, that her concerns were mostly in other areas.

I’m just too busy. It’s work and my daughter. And, really, I don’t share very much with other mothers. But I’m trying to connect with some of her friends’ mothers, friends at school. I really want my daughter not to have to think of me as a teen mother, a welfare mother. I’m working really hard so she won’t have to see me that way. I hate it when I have to let people know I’ve been on welfare. I’m not that kind of person, that kind of mother.

This young mother very clearly had internalized a deviancy discourse of mothering: she’d not only been a teen mother and divorced early on, but had relied on welfare. Now she is faced with demonstrating that she is a *good* mother, meaning, in her case, economically self-sufficient. She realizes that shifting from cohabitation to marriage will improve her standing as a mother.

Mothers in the study frequently compared themselves to other mothers. Two-thirds of the mothers in the study used critical references to other mothers’ choices about child raising and child care and supervision in explaining or justifying their own actions and values. Their accounts were not without expressions of respect and appreciation, but their disparaging comments were especially striking. The point is not that these mothers failed to appreciate the mothering work other mothers do. It is that their accounts are mixed with ambivalence and critical comment.

Often the two evaluative processes – self-denigration and denigration of others – went hand in hand. For example, this White mother of three described her family situation and choices. Marginally situated in the middle class, she’s married to a college-educated oil refinery worker. She summed up the consequences of holding only part-time employment until recently, when her youngest child turned ten:

We’ve lived in a house that’s too small and is really pretty run down, run down in a run down neighborhood, all these years because I decided [that] if I’m going to have these kids, then I’m going to raise these kids. I’m not leaving them to my neighbors or some other woman who won’t love them, after all, you know, the way I would. So we’ve never had a surplus nickel, not a nickel. . . . I don’t get it: how can these mothers leave their kids to have their own careers? Who’s raising *their* kids?

Like others in the study, this mother justifies and defends her own actions, in this case, her decision to restrict her employment, by reference to other mothers who, in working full-time, supposedly sacrifice the care of their children. The focus is on those who face similar dilemmas, responsibilities, and untenable choices – mothers – rather than, for example, the workplace, social policy, or even husbands who contribute too little to the daily work of family life.

Another woman, solidly middle class as a result of her husband’s high earnings, works a reduced schedule of 30 hours a week in order to keep her children out of after-school child care and under her supervision during the afternoons. She discussed at length her views that public education is disintegrating and said, in part,

It’s because, though I regret having to say this, of the numbers of kids with divorced mothers. They’re, those mothers are, not keeping their eyes on their kids. They’re too busy working full-time. They’re too strung out, fighting with their ex’s, dating, staying out all hours. Their kids are being neglected. That’s why they act out so, are so out of control. That’s why teachers can’t control their classrooms. So they become cops, not teachers. Schools are social service agencies. And *my* kids suffer.

Participants referred both to mothers known to them specifically and to mothers more generally.^{vi} Most of the indictment of mothers was to a collective abstract. But sometimes the very mothers they were reproving were women on whom they relied for assistance in managing their own busy lives, especially the unexpected event, such as a child becoming ill

at school and needing immediate pickup or a missed child pickup, due to a meeting running overtime. The woman expressing disdain for divorced mothers, for example, was helping a divorced friend, about whom she was explicitly both critical and appreciative, by having her two children over to her home, under her watch, to play with her own children several afternoons a week. In turn, on occasion and when possible given the other's full-time work schedule, she turned to her friend for emergency child care backup. This mutual exchange is common: overwhelmingly, it is other women to whom mothers turn for assistance.

Mothers were not unaware of the lack of social supports available to working families with children. Most described programs and policies that would ease their daily situations (Arendell, forthcomingb). And most criticized men, generally, and their husbands, more specifically, for their seeming lack of appreciation for the complexities of mothers' daily lives. They commented negatively upon their respective husband's lack of adequate assistance and support. Yet it was themselves and other women whom they held responsible for child care and family functioning.

Divorce is a cautionary tale for some of these women (see Hochschild, 1989). This African American mother of three, a bank executive, put it this way, after reflecting on her view that she was carrying the family with very little assistance from her husband and expressing her marital discontent. At the same time, she blamed other women for divorcing in disregard for their children.

Sometimes I think I have four children here, not three. Sometimes I think that just having the three actual kids would make more sense. Then I look at women around me. Their struggles. It's the money thing. They struggle so much. And in a pinch, he helps out, if I tell him what to do. Like if I need him to pickup the kids, he'll do it. I just have to tell him, remind him. Or I can run to the store when he's here and leave them here, or leave the ones who want to stay home. Divorced women, I don't know how they do it. What makes them think they can do it all: act like men and raise children too? So I think about divorce, lots of times. But I keep working to make this work. He's a good man, a good father.

In their expressed concerns about divorce, especially in terms of economic vulnerability, as well as in their overall descriptions of their situations and activities, the women pointed to a cultural ideology related to that of intensive mothering. That is, *good* mothers – or women intending to become *good* mothers – marry men who are *good* providers.

Thus, a mother's employment suggests that her choice of spouse had been less than optimal. *If* he were the good provider whom she was to have married, according to conventional, and persistent, cultural scripts, then she and her family would not need her earned income. She might "dabble" in the work for which she's trained, as one woman, a nutritionist, put it, but her employment would be very limited "with family *always* coming first." To marry well is to secure a good standard of living. The ideology of the good provider, and its correlate, the family wage, persists even though contemporary economic reality requires most two-parent families to have two incomes in order to achieve and maintain a middle-class standard of living.

An underlying belief in the ideology of the good provider as a correlate of the good mother extends across racial ethnic groups and generations. This mother, a Latina woman married to an African American man and employed as an office supervisor on a swing shift, lowered her voice when she discussed her husband's job and earnings. (We were meeting in a conference room at a public facility.)

Now that my daughter is in school and needs me more, I'd really really like to work just part-time, day shifts and part-time. But we can't afford it. My husband doesn't make enough to support us. He's, what should I say, he's just not the *most* ambitious person. He works steadily at his job, doesn't miss work or anything. He keeps his job [as an electrician], don't get me wrong. But he hasn't changed jobs, improved himself. We took out loans a couple of years ago so he could go to technical school and train for something better. He didn't even finish the second semester. We still owe that money, and now the school's gone out of business. . . . My mother tries hard not to comment on his lack of effort. It's a sore subject between us. She's from the old school, believes I should be home, with my kids. Period.

Speaking from a different social position, but also pointing to the influences of different generational views and implying the ideology of the good provider, was this White mother of two children. She had scaled back from her occupation as an attorney and begun a legal research enterprise out of her home. Discussing how disappointed she knew she would be if her daughters, after advanced education, were to return to the home, as she had, she said, "My family wasn't disappointed, though, when I left my practice. They weren't disappointed.

After all, I'd married *the* doctor. That's what mattered to them: I married a doctor. Not only that, [but] he's a highly trained specialist!"

Nearly half of the mothers in the study were engaged full-time or nearly full-time (30 hours or more a week) in the professions. Primary parents, they were typically highly engaged in and pleased with their work. They, too, used other mothers as comparisons for their own mothering; this strategy of explanation crossed the class and occupational variations. A Filipina mother, a director of a social services agency, for instance, described her arrangements for her two children, ages five and seven:

We [my husband and I] both work long hours. It's important to be able to provide as well as we can for our children. I pay extra to have them in family home care. They go from their schools directly to the child care provider's home; she'd provided family day care when they were preschoolers. It's a home environment. It's better for them, though it costs us more. She gives them home-prepared snacks; checks on their homework; helps them with it if they need it – she's a certified teacher; takes them on field trips; lets them rest when they want to, when they need to. I've made sure their lives are enriched. They don't just sit around watching afternoon soap operas with me or some babysitter, eating cookies, eating junk food. But lots of parents, lots of *mothers*, just let that happen. Sure [speaking as if in dialogue with herself as she spoke to me], I wish I had more time with them. But it takes money to bring children up.

Various mothers stressed their children's school successes. These remarks were especially similar among the racial ethnic women employed full-time or nearly full-time. Children's successful school performance is indicative of their committed mothering and their children's probable opportunities for upward mobility and adult success in a state rife with the politics of race and immigration. One Latina mother, well educated with an advanced degree, proudly told me six different times during our two-hour conversation that both of her children are enrolled in their respective schools' gifted programs. She asked me early on in the discussion how my own son had done in school. Carefully supervising their children's homework activities, these mothers pay for tutorial assistance when they believe it's needed. They make available home computers and provide frequent and regular trips to the public library. Several indicated that their children complain that their friends have more freedom and fewer educational demands placed on them. One African American woman offered her views on such remarks from her children, saying,

One day my children will be very glad that I was a mother to them, not a friend. I'm the adult; it's my role to make sure they learn what they need at this stage of their lives. I see those mothers dragging their children along with them while they're shopping or letting them just hang out in the parks and wonder what they're thinking. What's going to become of *those* children?

Homework was a common topic, discussed at length by a majority of the mothers, irrespective of their positioning in the middle or upper middle class or racial ethnic identity (see Balli et al., 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995). Mothers, with some exceptions, believe that their children are receiving steadily increased amounts of schoolwork, some of which is "busywork" – "just stupid, stupid work," one White mother said – and some of which is so challenging that it requires parents' help. Projects, which are assigned routinely from first grade on, especially demand assistance. Numerous mothers said that children's school assignments often carry a note to parents indicating that parental involvement is needed, and expected, for successful completion of the work. "I don't get it. Do these schools really believe mothers are *still* home and available to do this homework, do these massive projects?" Mothers who have reduced workweeks insisted that it was simply impossible for parents who work full-time, especially if they commute to work or have younger children, to put in the time required to aid their children with this work. Those working full-time complained at length about the time pressures created by excessive and overly demanding homework assignments. And they described the negative effects these had on their evening interactions with their children.

As well as presenting concrete time and energy demands, homework carries powerful symbolic dimensions. Once in school, children move to a stage more public than preschool or early child care and are subject to more careful and regular scrutiny. Mothers believe they are being judged by teachers and other school personnel: children's behavior, activities, performance, decorum, appearance, and apparent levels of happiness or unhappiness and security or insecurity are all taken as indicators of the quality of mothering children receive.^{vii} Even though about a third of these mothers' children also receive some homework assistance from their fathers, the women argue that the schools hold them, not fathers, responsible for their children's performance. (This gender difference with respect to homework prevails in

Europe and the U.K. also [Petrie, 1996]). Homework is an element in the grabbag of maternal evaluation.

Schools are perceived as being unsupportive by some mothers in other ways as well. The family-unfriendly school timetable – whether traditional or year-round calendars; the weekly schedules with changing school day lengths and very short days relative to the typical parent workday, let alone additional time for commuting; the school day lengths that vary by grade so that individual families have children on an assortment of schedules – makes coordination of employment and child care additionally burdensome. The gap between children’s hours in school and a parent’s workday can run between 20 and 25 hours (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1998) (significantly higher than the gaps that prevail in the European and U.K. countries [Petrie, 1996]). A few mothers insisted that they perceived a distinct anti-working mother bias among teachers at their children’s schools. “It’s okay to be a teacher because the hours fit their kids’ hours, but anything else is child neglect,” said one White corporate executive mother who commutes to her workplace. Another mother, Japanese American, married, with two young children, recounted how her second grade daughter’s classroom teacher, at a parent-teacher conference, informed her that her daughter wished her “mommy would quit work and spend more time with me.” The teacher had asked each child the day before her parent(s)’ conference what the child would like her to tell the parent.

I couldn’t believe it, couldn’t believe she was saying this to me. I got mad, actually. Here I am, juggling all of these things and what do I get? I *need* to work: my child *needs* shoes every few weeks, *needs* food, *needs* clothes, *needs* a roof over her head, *wants* things, *needs* to see the dentist, *needs* opportunities. We need both [of] our incomes [my husband’s and mine]. Besides, this is a family matter, a personal matter. I have really good communication with my daughter. She knows what my work is. She likes to go to work [as an office manager in a large setting] with me. She just spent the day there with me on Tuesday; there was no school. I hardly need her teacher to tell me what she wants. Besides she’s, this child is, seven years old. She might well say tomorrow that she wishes “mommy was [sic] a lion tamer in a circus.” Do you know what I mean? Would her teacher tell me that, too? I think the teacher is biased against working mothers. That worries me. Will she be fair to my daughter? Then, again, she’s a mother, too. But her child is still in preschool. And she has these great hours. Most of us can’t get those, but wouldn’t *that* be nice?

Participation in children's schools was an especially touchy issue for most of these employed mothers. Illustrating her argument that full-time mothers treat her rudely and as a "second-rate mother" because she is employed, this White mother of three said, "They're just so snotty to me." She mimicked one who had commented on her presence the week before at a school function, using a high-pitched voice intended to be sardonic, "I didn't expect you here today. Don't you have to be at work?' It's like that all the time. Snotty. Just snotty.'

Not all references, of course, to other mothers and their choices and situations were derogatory. Many were simply details in these women's explanations of their own behaviors or implicitly reflective of an awareness of different values held about child rearing and family life. For instance, a college-educated, White mother of six children gave a detailed, upbeat account of her close supervision of her children. Her primary objective is to protect them from the lures of the secular world in accord with her husband's and her religious beliefs and practices. She'd settled on cleaning as a private enterprise in order to ensure and increase her high parental involvement from what it was when she was an employee of a high-tech company. Working during the hours the children were in school, and sometimes taking the youngest two children with her to her jobs, she cleaned during school and evening hours. She shared dinner, which she prepared, with her family and assisted with the children's homework before leaving to clean offices. Her husband, an administrator for a public agency, worked 10- to 12-hour days routinely. She repeatedly stressed that at the core of their family was a commitment to resist the values of materialism, to resist the pressures of a consumer society (see Schor, 1998). "These are *our* family values," she said laughingly. The pivotal figure in the family solidarity, she noted that she volunteers routinely in her children's classrooms, more than she would prefer:

I'm there, first, because it's a way to keep my eye on things and to let my children know that I value their schooling and the social environments they're in. It lets the school know that I know what's going on there. But, second, I'm there because I get asked: other mothers just aren't available. They're at work. There's just almost no one else to call on.^{viii}

A recently divorced White mother of two spoke mostly with admiration about the mothers in her immediate neighborhood. "But they do seem to have different ideas. I just don't feel

these kids at these ages are old enough to be walking to school on their own yet. It's just not safe. Or going to the park [alone either].”

Conclusion

In sum, I'm suggesting that one way to understand mothers' critical references to their own and, especially, others' mothering are as elements of a hegemonic motherhood. Mothers respond in their discussions of their children's out-of-school time to the deviancy discourses of mothering abroad in the culture. They both judge and defend their own mothering according to dominant cultural themes. These women are not passive victims: they actively direct and shape their live, bringing up their children and managing and providing their care and supervision. At the same time, however, they are not free agents, but are situated in a specific cultural milieu. Even as they consciously rewrite the scripts of femininity *and* motherhood – they are *employed* mothers, after all – they do so within the constraints of a powerful cultural context. Having internalized the values and dictates of the dominant ideology, mothers – the very subjects of the discourse – carry and participate in it; they contribute to their own policing, consenting to its dictates and judgments, mostly without reflection.

Hegemonic motherhood diverts attention away from mothers' actual circumstances – their disproportionate responsibility for child care and rearing, relative isolation, and social and economic vulnerability. It maintains a focus on mothers when less than ideal child outcomes or conditions are gleaned, and it promotes the processes of mother-blaming. Hegemonic motherhood channels discussion away from the limited extent of change in parenting involvement by fathers, generally (see Presser, 1995). The development of policy aimed at redressing gender inequities in parenting is impeded. And hegemonic motherhood suppresses a rethinking of how we raise children and obstructs our consideration and exploration of alternatives.

The picture is neither entirely bleak nor static, however. The discriminatory and inconsistent stances, especially based on race, class, and marital status, evident in American hegemonic motherhood reveal inherent internal cracks. These cracks offer a site for entry. Additionally, as these systems of stratification become challenged further, the hegemonic

cracks will inevitably broaden, further shaking its solidity and opening the possibility for a rescripting, even dismantling. Recent scholarly trends are promising: the work on the racial ethnic variations in women's lives and mothering activities and goals presses us to value women's lives in their own terms, in *our* own terms (see Baca Zinn, 1990, 1994; Bassin et al., 1994a; Collins, 1994; Glenn et al., 1994; Lamphere et al., 1993). Scholarship that offers illuminating portrayals of mothers' daily lives also highlights the negative aspects and costs of hegemonic motherhood (e.g., Hochschild, 1989, 1997; Kurz, 1995; Walzer, 1998). This work can be especially useful when it reaches a popular audience. Together, these bodies of scholarship, which are often interrelated, call attention to the continued need to investigate women's inner experiences, outer realities, and struggles with the contradictions and tensions of their lives.

Child care issues in contemporary society serve as a mirror, reflecting the status of women in society and the discontinuities between the social institutions of family, the workplace, and education. Such cultural contradictions led in the 1960s and early 1970s to women's "consciousness raising" activities and demands for social change. Perhaps the coming decade will witness a revival of such grassroots activism. Working to empower all care providers, refusing to participate in the processes of mother-blame, and acknowledging and respecting the heroic work of women who mother will result in dislocating and replacing the ideologies and institutions of hegemonic motherhood. Despite its force, it is not an immutable ideology. We have only to look at other advanced industrial societies to witness concerted, open, and effective challenges to the traditions of maternalism and gender inequities. Universal child care is essential for all mothers' social and economic security. Only when women are empowered and, in the process, come together and demand the dismantling of hegemonic motherhood will the tensions between women, derived from the dominant motherhood ideology, dissolve.

Notes

i. Changes directly impacting women's lives include declining fertility and birth rates, high rates of voluntary marital dissolution, increased longevity, and, importantly, the dramatic increases in maternal employment.

ii. About 40 percent of U.S. employees, both men and women, believe that it is much better if men are the breadwinners and women take care of the home and children (Bond et al., 1998). Nearly 42 percent of the respondents in the 1994 Norwegian Social Science Data Services survey indicate that family life suffers when a woman works full-time, findings which are, again, strikingly similar to those of the National Study of the Changing Workforce in the U.S. (Kundsén and Waerness, 1999a). A Wirthlin Group survey in 1995 asked the question, "To what extent do you feel that mothers working outside the home have contributed to the problems today with American families?" Answering on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 meaning no change at all, the mean response was 9. Employed (outside the home) mothers had a mean of 6.7.

iii. These findings are strikingly similar to those of the 1994 Norwegian Social Science Data Services survey. Thirty-one percent of respondents answered that they disagreed or strongly disagreed that a working mother can establish a relationship to her children as close and as good as a mother who stays at home (Knudsen and Waerness, 1999:16, 19).

iv. I am not suggesting that all mothering is of a high quality. As several mothers in this study who work with children noted, some families are, indeed, "dysfunctional." Some children are neglected, some are abused – physically and/or emotionally. And some children's needs simply are not met. But, not surprisingly, such mothers did not self-select to participate in this study (nor do they for other studies). And hegemonic motherhood discourse, in large measure, is heedless about the quality of actual parent-child relationships or parenting skills.

v. In California, only 2 percent of child care centers and less than one-third of licensed family child care homes provide care during evenings, weekends, or overnight. Further, in a survey of AFL-CIO members, 56 percent of working women with children younger than 12 indicated that child care is very important to them, but only 11 percent have jobs that offer child care (AFL-CIO Fact Sheet, 1999).

vi. The study involves 26 interviews with mothers and also numerous conversations with various personnel involved in family services, child care programs, and other social services. I inquired not only about the arrangements parents make for their children and parents' experiences and perspectives on combining employment and child rearing and the options available to them, but also about the community context.

vii. See Altschuler (1999) for a provocative discussion about lice among elementary school-aged children. Clearly, mothers handle the management and treatment of lice and are the parent expected to do so by health care and school personnel.

viii. Not only are fewer mothers available for volunteering in children's schools due to their full-time employment, but unless more flexible work schedules become available and are utilized, women's volunteering is likely to decline with the shift from part- to full-time work. Presently, mothers who work part-time are more highly involved in school activities (on site) than those who work full-time, though variations by education, income, and racial ethnic identity are also factors. Still, "a solid majority of U.S. elementary schoolchildren have parents who describe themselves as at least moderately involved in school-related activities such as attending PTA meetings, class plays, sporting events, and science fairs, and acting as volunteers or serving on school committees" (Zill and Nord, 1994:53).

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