THE “GOOD” MOTHER: IDEOLOGY, IDENTITY AND PERFORMANCE

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The purpose of this study is to understand the power and influence of the institution of motherhood and how it is shaped by culture. More specifically this research explores the ideology that shapes our understanding of the good mother in the contemporary United States; how this ideology affects the way mothers view their identity; and how both the ideology and identity shape actions and performance.

Twenty women were interviewed in North Texas and the results were: first, this group of mothers recognizes the ideology of the good mother, but does not accept all components of this ideology; next, the identity of mother is the primary identity for most of these women; and, last, performance is most greatly influenced by socio-economic status and the support system that mothers have in place.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I have been asking questions about motherhood ever since I found out that I was pregnant nearly twelve years ago. Prior to that time, I had not given motherhood too much thought, but the moment I saw the plus sign appear on the screen of the home pregnancy test, I did not feel joy—I felt panic. My mind was teeming with more specific questions, but the overarching question (and the one most difficult for us all to answer) was “Can I be a good mother?”

When I read Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976) a few years ago, I was struck by her writing and by an experience that she had one summer with her 3 sons when they left the city and spent several relaxed weeks in Vermont, in what she described as “a delicious and sinful rhythm” (p. 194). She expressed her joy in the situation, writing: “We had broken together all the rules . . . rules I myself thought I had to observe . . . or become a ‘bad mother.’ We were conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood; I felt enormously in charge of my life. Of course the institution closed down on us again, and my own mistrust of myself as a ‘good mother’ returned, along with my resentment of the archetype” (pp. 194-5). As I continued to study motherhood, I wanted to both explore and question the components that shape the institution of motherhood. Rich pinpoints the idea that there are notions of both the “bad” mother and “good” mother in our society. But I wondered what was shaping these ideas. How do we know what makes a good mother?

Though we may not be able to quantitatively define what makes a good mother, we can explore how our culture delineates the qualities of a good mother in terms of the ideology surrounding motherhood and how this ideology affects a woman’s identity and performance. The purpose of this study is to understand the power and influence of the institution of motherhood
and how it is shaped by our culture. More specifically this research explores the ideology that shapes our understanding of the good mother in the contemporary United States; how this ideology affects the way mothers view their identity; and how both the ideology and identity shape actions and performance.

The current social expectations for mothers have continued to hold sway regardless of increased “rights” for women. It has been nearly half a century since Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) setting off the catalyst (perhaps one of many) for Second Wave feminism and the women’s movement in the United States. But though it has been nearly fifty years, Ann Crittenden (2007) argues that despite the progress made by the women’s movement, women (overall) still choose “traditional” lives. She writes: “For whatever reasons—biology, social conditioning, institutional inertia, choice, or no other choice—children’s lives are still overwhelmingly shaped by women, and children are still the focus of most women’s lives” (p. 601). In other words, she is highlighting the obvious—that with regards to the institution of motherhood, not much has changed. She concludes that the myths about motherhood, specifically those that encourage the “resurgence of [traditional] gender roles” (p. 609) continue to be reinforced, not just among those who are economically or educationally disadvantaged, but among women who are most prepared to act to encourage change to the institution of motherhood, among “the nation’s most educated women—ones who had the best shot at having it all” (p. 611). Though I disagree with Crittenden that there is a specific way to “have it all,” I think her point is valid. We know that more women are working outside the home, that mothers (regardless of employment status) are spending more time with their children overall (as are fathers), but that does not change the fact that women still spend more time than men on childcare and maintaining a household. While we can recognize and applaud shifts and progress
for mothers as a result of the women’s movement, we also have to acknowledge that much has remained the same in terms of our expectations about what makes a good mother.

Even with our shifting notions of the value of children (as discussed in Zelizer, 1985), we still have the ideology of the good mother and the idea that a woman’s primary identity should be that of a mother. Perhaps what has changed over time is our understanding of motherhood performance? Maybe we have become more accepting of mothers who choose to perform differently? Feasibly the ideology has really been the same since the Industrial Revolution when women became in charge of the domestic sphere and a woman’s identity became synonymous with motherhood—not just “being” a mother, but ACTING as a mother, realizing that the work of mothering was most important part of her identity. Even though the ideology has remained the same over the past few centuries, the performance may be different (Ruddick, 2007; Hager, 2011, p. 38).

This research included interviews with 20 mothers. Although the research (and my own experience as a mother) led me to believe these ideas about ideology, identity and performance—that motherhood was an institution that really defines women—it was important for me to ask these questions of other people—of mothers who perhaps had not been consumed with studying motherhood from an academic perspective. I wanted to ask these questions: Do women recognize the force of the good mother ideology in the United States? Do they see their motherhood as their primary identity? In terms of performance, what does a good mother do? What does she look like? I want to know the context for our current ideology, identity and performance surrounding motherhood.

This introduction gives but a small taste of the vast body of literature that outlines and demonstrates the relevance of motherhood performance within the context of contemporary
motherhood and further shows that the “ideal” mother continues to be re-created in our culture and over time (Thurer, 1994). As a result of the power of the institution of motherhood and the ideology of the good mother, both of which have continued to be formidable forces, this subject remains worthy of and pertinent to scholarly attention. Though there has been some previous research has included which has included qualitative analysis (i.e. Hays, 1996; Edin, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Hochschild, 1997), much of what is written about motherhood relies upon content analysis (such as Douglas and Michaels, 2004) or, most often, personal narratives (i.e. Hager, 2011). Continuing to study motherhood and the small contribution of this research to the body of motherhood research that already exists will hopefully further lead to social research that can turn a critical eye to the pressures mothers feel to perform their roles within parameters outlined by the good mother ideology.
Our notion of what makes a good mother in the contemporary United States is both historically and socially situated. Part of this is due to our changing ideas about children, but other times it is influenced by historical reproduction of culture. Ladd-Taylor and Umansky (1998) contend that the definitions of “good” and “bad” mother are intertwined and that maternal behaviors that we take for granted today have only developed over the past two centuries. They argue that “Vestiges of the Victorian ideal of motherhood persist: the ‘good’ mother remains self-abnegating, domestic, preternaturally attuned to her children’s needs” (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky, 1998, p.6). What has been added to this ideal (in the early 20th century) is the expectation that mothers must also practice “scientific motherhood” (Ladd-Taylor & Umansky 1998, p.9) in that mothers should become scientific experts of sorts in the field of mothering—keeping up to date on current research by scientists that will help them nurture their developing children. Our current understanding of the institution of motherhood is shaped by both of these historical shifts in our cultural understanding of the institution of motherhood. Or as Sarah Ruddick wrote: “Maternal practice responds to the historical reality of a biological child in a particular social world” (as qtd. in Hager, 2011, p.38).

But social scientists’ understanding of institutions has also undergone a shift. As Douglas (1986) explored institutions in her book *How Institutions Think*, she recognized that past social scientists (such as Durkheim) felt that “the present day is like no other period, and that a great gulf divides us now from our past, we get a first glimpse of a shared classification” (p. 98-9). Nevertheless, she argues that we know that we are unable to develop independent classifications
because these categories are so entrenched in our society (Douglas, 1986, p. 99). In other words, our understanding of the institution of motherhood today cannot stand in isolation of merely looking at contemporary motherhood in the United States, it must be placed within historical context. While reconstructing her journey into motherhood, Hager (2011) reflects on the historical context of Western motherhood and recognizes “in effect every society or culture in every era creates its own norms” which led her to think “that perhaps the total love for children which we now take for granted proves that we have experienced effective socialization which has turned us into part of the existing order of things” (p. 39). As discussed below, this “existing order of things” is reproduced in many ways—through the influence of other institutions, the media, and even within the examples of mothers in our own families.

Part of understanding the institution of motherhood, is recognizing how it is shaped by the culture surrounding it. Swidler (2001) argues that the culture of the U.S. is most strongly shaped by the ideals held by the middle-class and that “The difficulty of studying culture begins with the problem of finding it. . . . [It] comes not in finding cultural stories and symbols, but in discovering how culture in this sense . . . affects culture as lived, the meanings that shape people’s day-to-day lives” (p. 11). This is especially applicable to motherhood in the way that mothers’ lives, shaped by the ideology of the good mother, shape not only their own lives, but also the lives of their children and families.

Ideology

I gave a presentation on this research about half-way through this project and someone challenged me on my use of the word “ideology.” He argued that it was over-used in academia—a sort of generic term that we give to things that we cannot figure out how to identify in another
way. While this may be true (and may even apply to my own research), I still chose to pursue the idea that there is a “good mother ideology” and that it is something that influences the lives of mothers in the contemporary United States. He further questioned me about how we “know” what the good mother is. How can we define her (or her characteristics)? Ideology is intangible, so how can it be measured? I am not sure I know the answer to his questions. Perhaps it could be compared to faith (for those who are religious)—it is something we know, even though we cannot see it. Hager (2011) wrote that she “realized that even when I do not obey the dictates of the good mother image, this does not mean that I am not affected by them, that they do not cause me to act in one way and not in another, or alternatively, cause me to feel guilty” (p. 40). Such pervasiveness that influences thoughts and decisions large and small must surely be recognized as an ideology.

Though good motherhood ideology was not developed by some one person with an agenda or political philosophy (such as Marx’s philosophy and its children—communism and socialism), or someone with ideas about religious reformation (like Luther and his theses), the good mother ideology is something that permeates the lives of mothers everywhere. Swidler (2001) writes that ideology is a “modality of culture” (p. 95) . . . “an articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action” (p. 96). This belief and ritual system then acts as a cultural frame that all women must confront, embrace or challenge (or any variation of these three actions) at some point when we are mothering. Arendell (2000) writes “mothering and motherhood are viewed as dynamic social interactions and relationships, located in a societal context organized by gender and in accord with the prevailing gender belief system” (p. 1193). As women negotiate their performance in their everyday lives within the contexts of these social interactions, the ideology of the good mother is
something that we must decide if we are willing to accept in full, in part, or not at all. But, because we live in a culture that chooses to define us, mothers have to wake up every day and look in the mirror and realize the good mother ideology permeates every part of their lives. It affects decisions as small as “What am I going to wear today?” (i.e. if my kid gets a stain on my shirt, will it show and will people think that I am not ‘put together’ as a mother?) to larger decisions like “If I take this job, how will it affect my children?”

The ideology associated with motherhood contributes to the strength of the institution of motherhood, shapes identity, and affects motherhood performance. This ideology tells us what makes a “good” mother and often perpetuates essential motherhood as well as unrealistic standards for contemporary mothers. The maintenance of this “good” mother ideology is cyclical and widely accepted, which is part of the reason that it is so difficult to challenge.

But what are the origins of this ideology? Motherhood ideology does not stand on its own, was not created out of nothing in the contemporary United States. Not only are there historical influences, but also there is the influence of other ideologies. Barbara Katz Rothman (1994) outlines three entrenched ideologies that influence motherhood: the ideology of patriarchy, the ideology of technology, and the ideology of capitalism. These all shape how we view motherhood, and how women feel they are expected to act once they become mothers. Rothman believes that we need to push against these ideologies, but not necessarily by focusing on rights (which really only fight the ideology of patriarchy under the law), while ignoring needs of individual mothers (p. 403). As mentioned in previous discussions about the women’s rights movement, just because women (and mothers) are given greater rights, this does not ensure the decline of an institution and the ideologies associated with it. Like Rothman, Nancy Chodorow (1998) acknowledges that the source of ideology is both varied and oppressive and understands
that “women’s mothering and the sexual division of labor are also structurally linked to other institutions and other aspects of social organization” (p. 284). Swidler (2001) also emphasized the connection between competing ideologies in our contemporary culture. She wrote:

Ideologies—highly articulated, self-conscious systems of belief and ritual—claim unified sway over the actions of their adherents. But the intense demands of ideological cultural systems mask the fact that these ideologies are in competition for their adherents’ loyalties. In conflict with other cultural models, ideological cultures are coherent because they are defined against existing worldviews, assumptions, and habits. (p. 101)

According to Rothman, Chodorow, and Swidler, we must recognize that the ideology of the good mother is not segregated from other ideologies and institutions. It is influenced by the current economic climate, our understanding and acceptance of gender roles, and is in both competition with and shaped by other ideologies.

Though other ideologies influence motherhood, at the heart of this ideology are several specific ideologies of the good mother. One is the concept of essential motherhood. In her book *The Impossibility of Motherhood: Feminism, Individualism and the Problem of Mothering*, philosopher Patrice DiQuinzio (1999) introduces the reader to “essential motherhood,” which she defines as “an ideological formation that specifies the essential attributes of motherhood and articulates femininity in terms of motherhood so understood” (p. xiii). These attributes are specific and privileged, acknowledging the “good” mother in stark contrast to the “bad” mother and they reinforce motherhood in the larger picture of acceptable social norms because “In the United States, ‘bad motherhood’ is also conflated with race, class, and sexuality: poor mothers of color and lesbian mothers have become the repository for social anxiety about changing gender roles and family dynamics” (Orleck, 1997, p. 225-6). Holding on to this entrenched ideology serves the purpose not only of strengthening the institution of motherhood, but also other social norms associated with gender roles and the family.
Another specific ideology that contributes to the ideology of the good mother is that of intensive mothering. Sharon Hays’ *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996) explored the notion of the good mother through examining the history of ideas surrounding motherhood and mothering; textual analysis of contemporary parenting books; and in-depth interviews with thirty-eight mothers of two to four year olds. Arendell (2000) cited Hays’ work and argued:

The prevailing ideology in North America is that of *intensive mothering*. This motherhood mandate declares that mothering is exclusive, wholly child centered, emotionally involving, and time-consuming (Hays, 1996). . . . Motherhood ideology is entwined with idealized notions of the family, presuming the institution and image of the idealized White, middle-class heterosexual couple with its children in a self-contained family unit. (p. 1194)

So the ideology of the good mother affects not only our understanding of mothers, but also of how the family is viewed in the contemporary United States.

Of course, even though the father (when he is present) may still be seen as the de-facto head of families according to cultural norms, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) suggest that the “Perfect Mom” has become the new cultural icon in the United States. In their book *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women*, they recognize that more than just social factors are encouraging women to embrace the “New Momism,” which they define as a “set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach” (pp. 4-5). Lopez (2009) writes:

It is no wonder that women are afraid to embrace the identity of mother—the entire concept of being a mother is overwhelming and imbued with failure. Once women become mothers, their lives are taken over by society’s strict sets of rules and expectations. In an examination of the way that daughters write about their mothers, Kristi Siegel writes that “what we view as some sort of innate ideal model of motherhood is always a social construct, an invention rather than a given.” (p. 732)
The ideology of what makes a good mother is a powerful force that can intimidate mothers and make them feel as if they cannot possibly live up to the unattainable standards. During the interviews conducted for this study, it was obvious that the mothers recognized that they were constantly negotiating and re-negotiating their performance and identity within the constructs of the rules and regulations for good mothering.

This motherhood ideology and its unrealistic standards continue to be perpetuated in many ways over time and through generations. Douglas and Michaels (2004) point to how popular culture (in all forms of media) makes it difficult for mothers to “[escape] the standards of perfection, and the sense of threat, that the media ceaselessly atomize into the air we breathe” (p. 3) and in “Stabat Mater,” Julie Kristeva (2007) outlines the influence of this “good” mother (which has existed for centuries) and the “feminine psychosis [that] is sustained and absorbed through passion for politics, science, art . . .” (p. 183). Closely related to Kristeva’s theories, Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung (1998) acknowledge the practical way in which this ideology plays out. They write of the transition of women from domesticity to paid employment and acknowledge that “many women of every social class and in every kind of job are faced with a common problem: how shall I preserve the domestic culture of my mother and grandmother in the age of the nine-to-five or eight-to-six job?” (p. 784). In other words, another way that this ideology is maintained is in the images of mothers and grandmothers (as well as other women who have mothered us) and their own focus on domesticity. Though Chodorow (1978) is often criticized for the emphasis she puts on the “exclusive” mothering done by the mother, there is no denying her argument that “Being a mother, then, is not only bearing a child—it is being a person who socializes and nurtures. It is being a primary parent or caretaker. . . . Women as mothers are pivotal actors in the sphere of social reproduction” (p. 11). Chodorow also
highlights “the way women’s mothering is reproduced across generations” (p. 3). In other words, she looked at the “cyclical” process of mothering—specifically how it is passed from mothers to daughters. The good mother ideology, then, is perpetuated in the media, through politics, science, art, by the examples set by our own mothers and grandmothers.

Though motherhood ideology is influenced by other ideologies and institutions (such as patriarchy, technology and capitalism) and perpetuated in media, politics, pop culture and by other mothers, the widespread acceptance of elements such as essential motherhood serve a singular purpose of its continuation. As a result, this ideology seeps down from influencing the society in the United States at large, which provides the cultural framework of motherhood, to changing the lives of individual mothers and shaping their understanding of their identity.

Identity

At the root of the dilemma of understanding the institution and performance of motherhood is the issue of identity. Honneth (2008) argues: “What one comes to realize about oneself is that one’s own person is constitutively dependent on the recognition of others” (p. 48). This recognition by others is in no way more pronounced than a mother’s identity, which exists only because of another (or others), which exists only because of children. With regard to maternal politics, Ruddick (2007) put it best when she wrote: “the self . . . is preoccupied not with herself but with another” (p. 376, emphasis added).

This feature of identity does not easily shift, or go away. From the time a woman becomes a mother—whether she defines this at conception or after she is holding a child in her arms (or anywhere in between), her primary relationship is no longer with herself or a family member or a partner. Beck notes:
The child is the source of the last remaining, irrevocable, unexchangeable primary relationship. Partners come and go. The child stays. Everything that is desired, but not realizable in that relationship, is directed to the child. With the increasing fragility of the relationships between the sexes the child acquires a monopoly on practical companionship, on an expression of feelings in a biological give and take that otherwise is becoming increasingly uncommon and doubtful. Here an anachronistic social experience is celebrated and cultivated which has become improbable and longs for precisely because of the individualization process. (as qtd. in Bailey, 1999, p. 336)

Though Bailey disagrees with Beck’s perspective because she thinks that Beck is “overstating” the extent of the change that a mother experiences, I tend to support Beck’s ideas on the way that the mother-child relationship shapes a mother’s identity. As multiple women responded in this study, all other roles may shift in importance, but the role of mother never goes away as the most significant force that shapes choices and actions.

Aside from the fact that motherhood is an identity appropriated to women as a whole (which is a topic for another paper), a significant area of conflict is the transition from “womanhood” to “motherhood”. Women learn and ascribe to certain gender roles, then they reach a moment of divergence when they need to learn the new role of motherhood. The root of this tension is evident from the quotations above—the mother’s identity becomes dependent on another. But when women become mothers (or are recognized as mothers) do they lose their gender identity for a motherhood identity?

Women are accustomed to performing (and negotiating) gender. However, when motherhood comes, women have to perform something new—something unscripted—and they take on a new identity. The identity they have been performing for years (gender) may be something that is discarded. But does this new identity trump the old one? In her study of self-identity and the transition to motherhood, Bailey (1999) found that “the process of individualization which dominates the rest of these women’s lives receded with the imminence of motherhood” (p. 344). Likewise, somewhere in between our understanding of our identity as
women and our identity as mothers, we are forced to recognize “crucial implications for both a sense of self and presentation of self as a mother” (Miller, 2005, p. 14). In her study of first time motherhood narratives Miller (2005) underscored that: “over time, a new social self as mother has to be learned” (p. 15).

No matter how a woman performs motherhood and whether or not she embraces the ideology, the identity of “mother” becomes the definition that surpasses other identities. These “lifestyle options are thus often decisions to become immersed . . . at the expense of possible alternatives” (Giddens, 2008, p. 357). By choosing motherhood, one might be foreclosing not only future choices of how to act as mother, but also one’s future identity as a woman. Copper (2007) struggles with this and says: “I face the assumptions that my motherhood somehow defines my life, instead of being a small but important part of it” (p. 187), while Adrienne Rich (1976) found a way to escape this identity (if only temporarily). She writes: “For me, poetry was where I lived as no one’s mother, where I existed for myself” (p. 31). While mothers may notice the new way that they must negotiate their identities as they transition from “woman” to “mother,” this change is not necessarily something intrinsic. As Swidler (2001) noted “The focus on a personal identity that contemporary Americans take for granted results from social codes and practices that define us to ourselves and others, not from anything inherent in individual personhood” (p. 87). In other words, the cultural frames related to the institution of the family and the institution and ideology of the good mother shifts primarily because of the way that others view us. This focus that shifts the way mothers see themselves in terms of their identity is largely noticeable because of the way they practice their motherhood, or their performance as mothers.
Performance

Theories of performativity were originally explored through speech and language in the works of John Austin and Jacques Derrida (Alexander and Seidman, 2008). Eventually theorists and philosophers such as Judith Butler and Jeffrey Alexander applied performance theory to social identities. Though performativity is usually applied to gender (and often sexuality), it is really applicable to any social identity—whether it is race, class, or gender . . . or motherhood. The essential element is that truths gain their power through actions and these “visible performances rely on invisible and only temporarily stable social texts” (Alexander and Seidman, 2008, p. 12). In this case, the social text is the good mother ideology.

By accepting the identity of mother, what performance is expected? Women may “choose” to become mothers—they accept that identity at some point, but they do not choose the good motherhood ideology appropriated to them, nor the performance that is expected. How do we discuss motherhood without suggesting how a mother should act, what a mother should be? As Butler (2008) writes: “Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes” (p. 166). Motherhood is no exception to this regulation. In fact, if one’s performance as mother does not follow these regulations (especially motherhood ideology), mothers are subject to negative repercussions. Butler (2008) wrote the following about gender, but it can also be applied to motherhood: “It is a compulsory performance in the sense that acting out of line with . . . norms brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence” (p. 174). In other words, if we do not follow the rules established by good motherhood ideology, including embracing essential motherhood (DiQuinzio, 1999), intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), the motherhood religion (Warner, 2007), and the new momism (Douglas and Michaels, 2004) we may be labeled “bad” mother.
This image of “bad” mother performance is shaped not only by media but also, unfortunately, by other mothers. The script of an individual mother’s performance is often learned from other women: from her own mother’s performance, but perhaps most extensively her peers—play dates, church groups, recipe and book clubs, co-workers, and “moms’ night out” can all play a part in writing a woman’s script on how she should mother. As mentioned above, this ideology is also cyclical and learned from mothers and other women who “mother” women. Though learning from other women can be a source of strength for mothers, often mothers may try to learn a script that does not suit them. In *Undoing Gender* Butler (2004) (though in relation to gender, not motherhood) argues that this has to stop. “What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain from proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some” (p. 8). This particularly applies to mothers who are not privileged. Because even though women of color, or disabled women, or non-heterosexual women, or economically disadvantaged women do not necessarily ascribe to this performance, they are still held to this standard of essential motherhood and have had to negotiate their motherhood performance. Garey (1998) acknowledges: “People are ‘doing motherhood’ in the same way . . . people are ‘doing gender’—they are managing their conduct in interaction with dominant-culture conceptions of mother-appropriate attitudes and activities. Differences in resources, however, lead to differences in the strategies used to actualize or represent these norms” (p. 710). The “dominant-culture” conceptions in the United States are often represented by the middle class (see Swidler, 2001).

Legislating how a mother should act creates expectations about what kind of mothers we *should be*. Feminist author Ariel Gore (2007) wrote: “The world tells us all—in a thousand ways—that we are not enough for our children. The world tells us that we are too young, too old,
too poor, too extravagant, too permissive, too controlling, too urban, too rural, too eccentric, too square and everything in between” (p. 758). Essentially she argues that we are told who we should be as mothers . . . in other words, we are handed our scripts and told how we should act. In Anita Garey’s (1998) study of mothers employed in a hospital, she observed the way the mothers attempted to construct their activities in a way that would show their “mother-ness” and found that these activities acted “as a symbol that represents cultural meanings about the value of that activity and about the identity and worth of the person performing it” (p. 714). Garey points to a significant aspect of motherhood performance because the activity is not considered a performance unless there is an audience. How are the actions of mothers viewed by the audience/critics? “Actions are performative insofar as they can be understood as communicating meaning to an audience. . . . What matters is how others interpret actors’ meaning” (Alexander, 2008, p.179). This leaves those mothers who do not or cannot embrace motherhood ideology (or essential motherhood/intensive motherhood/the new momism) at a particular disadvantage. They remain powerless to fight against the scripted performance assigned to them with a push to assimilation (which is never truly possible) (Hill Collins, 1994, p. 57).

In conclusion, the culture of the United States, with its history, media, politics, and generations of mothers who came before us, has created the current ideology of the good mother, as well as our understanding of motherhood identity and motherhood performance. This “culture often has powerful causal influence on action when it is structured and given force by other processes—such as codes, contexts, and institutions—that organize culture meanings and bring them to bear” (Swidler, 2001, p. 101). What has been brought to bear is that though it may be impossible to define what a “good” mother is, the institution of motherhood and the ideology of the good mother creates meaning for the mothers who participated in this study.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Overview

The data for this study comes from twenty in-depth interviews that were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011. The sample consisted primarily of mothers residing in the greater Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas, Metroplex. Eighteen of the twenty women live in Denton, Texas, which is on the northern outskirts of Dallas/Fort Worth. Denton is a city with just over 100,000 people, with a population that has grown rapidly over the past decade. The city is home to two universities and is a city unto itself. In other words, it does not necessarily act as a suburb to a larger metro area.

The purpose of my study was twofold: First, as stated in the introduction, I sought to understand the power and influence of the institution of motherhood. More specifically this research explores the ideology that shapes our understanding of the good mother in the contemporary United States; how this ideology affects the way a mother views her identity; and how both the ideology and identity shape performance.

Specifically, I wanted to answer the following questions:

- Identity: How do mothers see themselves? Is the most dominant part of their identity motherhood?
- Ideology: What are the cultural norms of good motherhood in the U.S.? Do mothers recognize these norms?
- Performance: How does a woman’s understanding of her identity as a mother and the ideology surrounding motherhood affect her performance? Does a dominant identity as mother and the pressures of the ideology surrounding the “good” mother influence women as they make decisions about how they will mother?

Generally, the research question for this study is very basic: What makes a good mother? More specifically, the purpose of this research is to explore how our perceptions of identity, ideology,
and performance shape the way we define a good mother in contemporary U.S. society. At the root of the dilemma of understanding the ideology and performance of motherhood is the issue of identity. How does a woman’s identity shift when she becomes a mother and does this identity change over time (i.e. as her children grow or circumstances in her life change)? How important is the identity of “mother” to women? Next, ideology continues to perpetuate ideas of what makes a good mother. This ideology is shaped by media, politics, pop culture, religion and even other mothers. It promotes the widespread acceptance of essential elements of motherhood. This research will ask participants to define their perspective on these ideals. In other words, asking the subjects to define what a good mother looks like. In addition, this study will question how the identity and ideology of motherhood shape performance. Are there rules for performing motherhood? Do mothers who reject the norms of motherhood identity and ideology become ostracized or are they at a disadvantage? Finally, this research should also question whether or not mothers embrace or reject the social norms of motherhood identity, ideology and performance.

The second purpose of this study was to reflect upon the academic approach to studying motherhood. In other words, as sociologists, psychologists, family scientists and those in women’s studies (as well as other fields) study motherhood as an institution and cultural frame in women’s lives, we need to ask ourselves if women outside of our position as researchers are thinking about motherhood in the same way. This can best be done by interviewing and speaking with women outside of the academic climate. In her article highlighting and investigating a decade’s worth of scholarship (the 1990’s), Terry Arendell (2000) notes the importance of further research giving “more attention to the lives of particular mothers—to mothers’ own voices and to the lives and voices of diverse groups of mothers. . . [This may help us to] secure
far more realistic and less normative portrayals of mothers’ lives than those afforded by
sweeping images” (p. 1202). Researchers such as Sharon Hays (1996), Annette Lareau (2003)
and Arlie Hochschild (1997) have done this, as well, in their extensive studies on motherhood
and families. Though I do not profess to be a researcher of their caliber, I hope that this research
will reflect the voices and sentiments of the women that participated in this research. I hope that
it will remind researchers that “mothering is neither a unitary experience for individual women,
nor experienced similarly by all women. It carries multiple and often shifting meanings”
(Arendell, 2000, p. 1196). I am optimistic that the results of this study will reflect the
individuality of these women and their multiple voices as mothers.

Development of the Interview Guide

I developed the interview guide (see Appendix B) based on my research questions and
specific ideas promoted in the current literature. The interview guide was divided into four
sections: introduction/warm-up/identity; ideology; performance; and conclusion. The first
section focused on the woman’s background and her understanding of her roles. The second
section revolved around where she gets her ideas about motherhood and to what sources she
looks for guidance when mothering. The next part of the interview emphasized performance and
gave the woman a chance to reflect on her own performance as a mother in addition to critically
viewing other mothers’ performance based on different influences such as employment, marital
and economic status, age, education, race/ethnicity, ability, and religion. The final section of the
interview guide invited the participant to contemplate the previous topics we had discussed in the
interview, putting her own performance as a mother into a larger context, including examining
the position or status that motherhood holds in the United States.
The Sample

As mentioned above, the sample consisted of 20 mothers. Several methods were used to recruit participants. The first was convenience sampling through the University of North Texas Child Development Laboratory (CDL) preschool. After contacting the director of the preschool and obtaining permission, letters were distributed to each family inviting the mothers to participate (see Appendix D). Letters were distributed during two different terms—the Spring 2011 and first Summer 2011 sessions. I chose to recruit at the CDL because the families are often asked to contribute to studies affiliated with the university and I hoped that would increase participation. In the end, only 6 of my 20 participants had children who attended the CDL.

The other method I used was a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. I sent an email to 7 mothers that I know who have children who attend, or have attended, the elementary school that my own children attend. Two of the mothers agreed to participate in my study and others shared information about my research with their own friends and family via email and facebook. In addition to this, several other mothers invited family and friends to participate after they, themselves, had participated. Twelve of my participants were enlisted via snowball sampling.

As a result of these recruiting techniques, some of the participants knew me personally. One of my own children attended the CDL and the other 2 attended the same elementary school as the children of several participants. On 2 occasions, when I arrived at the interview, I also realized that one of my children had attended a different preschool with which the women were affiliated. Therefore, I did not always have the convenience of the role of an objective researcher when conducting the interviews. Some of the women knew my area of study as well as my family situation. However, I did not know any of the participants well enough that they knew
specifically about this research project before they participated. In other words, previous to their participation in the interview, none of the women knew me socially well enough to know the objectives of my research or my research questions beyond what was laid out in my recruiting letter.

The sample of mothers ranged between the ages of 28 and 55, though most of the participants were in their early to mid-thirties. The majority were married, Caucasian (though some grew up in different countries), and well-educated. Half of the women work full-time in various fields, not all of which are traditionally women’s fields. The group was homogeneous in the sense that most of them have an established middle-class or upper-middle class socioeconomic status. With the exception of one participant, all of the women are mothers to children age 10 or younger. A detailed table of demographic information is located in Appendix A. Table 1 lists the basic demographic information for participants.

Table 1

_Basic Demographic Characteristics_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Number of Children</th>
<th>Paid Employment</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married (17)</td>
<td>26-30 (1)</td>
<td>Some College (1)</td>
<td>One (6)</td>
<td>None (2)</td>
<td>African (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated (2)</td>
<td>31-35 (11)</td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree (12)</td>
<td>Two (8)</td>
<td>Part-time (8)</td>
<td>Caucasian, non-U.S. (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced (1)</td>
<td>36-40 (3)</td>
<td>Master’s Degree (6)</td>
<td>Three (4)</td>
<td>Full-time (10)</td>
<td>Hispanic (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41-45 (3)</td>
<td>PhD (1)</td>
<td>Four + (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Caucasian (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>46 + (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conducting the Interviews

After receiving the recruiting letter or learning about my study through a friend or family member, the participants contacted me to set up an interview via phone or email. The time and location of the interview was chosen by the participant. Interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, at their place of work, or in public locations such as a library or the university.

I chose to digitally record the interviews because I wanted to be able to focus on conversing with the mothers and not be distracted by note-taking. It was also important for me to be able directly quote the participants. Not only did I want to make sure that I was able to accurately convey their perspectives, but also I did not want to lose their voice. In other words, I wanted to be able to let them speak in my research. This became particularly important as my portion of women not born in the U.S. grew. The way the mothers articulated their thoughts was important to me and I knew I could not capture it with note taking—no matter how copious my notes. For the most part, I followed my interview guide to direct the conversation during the interviews. Along with follow-up questions that I asked at the time of the interview, I felt as if my guide provided me with the information I was seeking to obtain.

Overall, the women who participated in this research were very willing to discuss motherhood and they spoke openly with me. Several times women would stop themselves to filter their thoughts or responses, or they would apologize for giving their honest opinions, but, for the most part, my perception was that these women were speaking candidly. They were speaking with truth about their lives and sharing very personal details about their lives and how that shaped the way they mother and their view of motherhood. I felt, as Swidler (2001), that “Most of my interviewees recognized the social formula that established the meaning and
purposes of the interview as ‘serious’ ones, and their answers reflected the desire to give the interviewer a reasonable picture of their own lives, thoughts, experiences, and so forth” (p. 242).

At the conclusion of the interview, I asked the women to fill out a personal information form (Appendix B) which would give me their demographic information. I left this form very open-ended because I wanted them to define their own identities.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identity

I began the interviews by discussing questions of identity with these mothers. Although I think that these women’s perceptions of the ideology of motherhood shape both their identities as mothers and the way they perform motherhood, I felt it was the most natural course of a conversation to begin with general questions about their backgrounds. In other words, I hoped that it would help them relax to respond to questions that had straightforward answers before engaging in topics that might be more unfamiliar or uncomfortable for them.

Background

We began by talking about where these women were raised. Though the sample for this study was small, the women who participated had varied backgrounds. A handful of women are mothering in the U.S., but were raised in different cultures: One mother was raised in Kenya, two grew up in France, one was from Bolivia, and another grew up in Mexico City. For the rest of the women in this study, many were from all over Texas (with a higher concentration in North Texas), one from a border town of Texas, one grew up in Louisiana, another in Wisconsin, one was from Iowa and the last was an American raised in Western Europe. Nearly half of these women made their way to North Texas as adults—either to study or when they moved here with spouses (or former spouses) for employment.

Mothers

After a conversation about their homes and childhoods we shifted toward discussing their
mothers. As examined in the literature, mothers often shape their daughters’ ideas about motherhood and that was definitely the case with this study. Not only did we discuss their mothers’ personalities and employment, but we also talked about whether or not they believe that they mother similarly or differently than their mothers.

Overwhelmingly, these women had mothers who stayed at home with them for at least portions of their childhoods. In fact 17 of the 20 identified their mothers as stay-at-home mothers, often when they were young. But this frequently shifted as children got older and their mothers either chose to work, or had to because of various circumstances. In Irene’s\(^1\) case, her mother was at home raising 7 children between the ages of 8 and 18 in Nairobi, Kenya. But, when Irene’s father died, her mother took over the family business as a fruit and vegetable supplier. She remembers watching her mother struggle with this transition, but feels that she is similar to her mother in the way that she has a:

> passion to give [her] kids the best. . . . [It did not] matter [that her mother] had to come from work to home, but her passion of making sure ‘You know I’m a single parent but I will put my kids through college—7 of them, no matter what. . . .She’s the kind of parent that has a first grade education that is why because of the culture [in Kenya] the girls didn’t really go to schools. So that is as much education [as she had], but she had the passion to put all of us through college.

Likewise, Shannon, Karri, and Christy’s mothers began working outside the home when they were in elementary school as a result of divorce. Karri, though, felt as her mother did—that she wanted to stay home when their children were young because they “would never have this time again” to really shape their children’s lives. Today, Irene, Shannon, and Karri all work full-time and Christy works part-time outside the home. (See Appendix A).

For the women whose mothers worked outside the home, their mothers worked in the traditionally gendered fields of education and healthcare. Judith’s mother was often in and out of

\(^1\) Names have been changed to protect confidentiality.
the workforce as a nurse (sometimes part-time, sometimes full-time), depending on what was going on with the family. Traci’s mother worked as an elementary school teacher the whole time she was growing up. Likewise, Caroline’s mother worked full-time as a teacher. As a result of this, Caroline spent a great deal of time with her grandmother. Her grandmother and mother “had very different styles and very different approaches. So very early on [she] kind of had to figure out which way I wanted to [mother].”

Just as Caroline’s life was shaped by a woman other than her mother, so was Kaye’s. Kaye’s mother died when she was nine years old. As she was growing up, Kaye watched and admired her best friend’s mother as well as other women around her. This did not, though, undermine the significance of her mother in shaping her ideas about motherhood. While Kaye and her mother have made different choices with regards to working (Kaye works full-time, whereas her mother left her job as a teacher when her children were born), from speaking with family members and friends, reading journals and baby books, Kaye knows of their similarities: they both nursed their children for a long time, they love to make everything an adventure for their kids, and they love to smell their babies’ breath.

Some of the women who participated in this study noted that their mothers stayed home because of the time-demanding and variable jobs of their fathers: Lynn’s father’s job moved the family all over Western Europe as they were growing up; Lucy’s father was in the military; Jessica’s dad also traveled a great deal for work.

Women whose mothers stayed at home the entire time they were growing up noted the significance of this choice in their lives. Paola mentioned several times how much she always felt loved and that she “had a beautiful childhood.” Likewise, Marie remembers doing many projects with her mother (who stayed at home with her four daughters): sewing, knitting,
gardening, beloved family dinners and traditions were a part of her upbringing. Lucy’s mother had sixteen children, but remembers that her mother always took the time to pursue her own goals. At the same time, she always wanted to make time to have a personal connection with each of her children.

Most of the women in this study will admit that their own mothers have shaped how they themselves mother. Lynn notes that she is similar to her mom in terms of discipline and structure. Likewise Shannon feels that she has a similarly strict, but fair, parenting style. Traci is affectionate, like her mother, but says that her mom was “more fun” than she is.

Traci also thinks that she perhaps does not feel “as guilty” as her mother did about working. On the other hand, Jessica’s mom stayed at home, but had a hard time reconciling it. Jessica feels much different from her mother because she “always wanted to be a mom. [She] saw what it ‘could be’” but does not feel that her mom ever really embraced that potential. Paola probably best sums up how most of these women felt about their mothers when she said: “I guess I just try to pick the best [of what] my mom did and try to combine it with the changes [that I think I need to be a good mom].”

Roles/Identity

At the heart of this study is identity. How do these women view themselves? I asked them to tell me about different roles in their lives and discuss the importance of these roles. What is the primary way that they think of themselves and is there any intersection in these roles?

Overwhelmingly, the mothers most strongly related with the identity of motherhood. Three-fourths of the women in this study said that it was the main way that they view themselves—employment and marital status, nor any other demographic feature of identity such
as race or religion did not affect the way that women answered. Even the five mothers who did not specifically mention motherhood as their primary role, discussed the intersection of work and family life. Of this intersection, Irene questioned: “Do we have a choice, really?”

But because most of these mothers work outside the home and strive for balance, it also makes many of them really question what they want for themselves, as women, as individuals. They feel it makes them put a little bit of the focus back on themselves. Patricia felt that ever since she became pregnant with her now 5 year old daughter, her primary role has been mother, but mentioned that “It’s really hard sometimes to divide yourself because you’re a person. You’re just a person. Your child wants you just to be his or her mommy, but you’re a person.” Patricia was not the only mother who expressed the struggle that she felt between trying to juggle multiple roles and to distinguish her identity as an individual.

For some women, though, it was more clear cut. Brenda (who is an elementary school librarian) spoke of it this way: “Working is secondary. Family is first.” This idea was repeatedly articulated by the women who participated in this study, most of whom work at least part-time (See Appendix A). Traci’s profession as a professor and rehabilitative audiologist where she spends time helping people helps her feel that “her heart is in it at work, but her heart is at home.”

Several women noted how this identity can shift over time. Tara is in a time of transition in her life. Her children, ages 9 and 5, are getting older and Tara is transitioning to working more as a teacher. There are also changes in her personal life. She and her husband are separated and will likely divorce. She has been questioning how she feels about her identity frequently. She mentions that

Five years ago, I would say #1 mother and #2 wife and that would be about it. But because of that I got really burnt out because of concentrating on just being those two
people and I’ve been really reevaluating what it really means to be ‘me’ and I’m trying to have a better balance. I’d probably still say mother first, but I’m trying to get myself to say that I’m just Tara first.

Jessica, who is predominantly a stay-at-home mom, also discussed the different phases of life and how identity can shift over time. Growing up, she always felt like a daughter, then her primary identity was wife, but now when asked about her identity she says:

I think as a mother, I feel very strongly about it. I definitely feel defined by that, like if somebody said, ‘Oh, what do you do?’ I would say ‘I’m a mother.’ That’s how I define myself and I try to find the balance between being a wife and a mother and not just a mom. And not just a mom [but] not a woman. I struggle with ‘What do I want?’ and putting their needs before mine. I enjoy what I do, but I need to remind myself to find balance. . . . I feel the most balanced when I’m covering all my roles.

Though work-life balance will be discussed while exploring motherhood performance, it is important to note here how, regardless of the way these women recognized the need for balance, their primary form of identity was that of mother. Christy was not alone when she captured her emotions regarding roles this way: “I could lose every other role and still be ok, but not the role of mother.”

Ideology

After the women had begun to relax in the interviews, I pressed them on ideologies surrounding motherhood. I questioned them on their sources of advice on mothering and about mothers that they admire.

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2 As a researcher I recognize that perhaps these women were more inclined to indicate that their primary role was mother because of the nature of this study—they knew that they were going to be discussing what makes a good mother during the interview. But, all indications were that these women were being transparent with me. Based on the entire body of the interviews, which lasted dozens of hours, and the questions that followed, I have no doubt that this is really how these women primarily identify themselves. Similar to Swidler’s (2001) study, the role of mother is central to these women’s lives, which makes this study relevant because motherhood matters to these women (p. 219).
Seeking Advice

As discussed in the literature, it is difficult to determine exactly what shapes our culture’s ideology surrounding motherhood. From looking at these mothers’ notions of identity, we know that their mothers influence their ideas, so ideology is influenced at a micro-level. But there are pervasive ideas about what makes a good mother that influence us from a more macro-level. Do we get our ideas about motherhood from mommy blogs or other online groups; parenting magazines and websites; the media; parenting books; religion?

I asked these women about their sources of advice because I think when we struggle as mothers, when we feel as if we are failing, when we feel least like a “good” mother, that is when we try to re-orient ourselves in the “right” direction. The sources of advice that we seek tend to show where we place our trust to guide us back to “good” mothering.

I was somewhat surprised by the sources of advice sought out by these women. Fourteen of the twenty mothers who participated in this study sought parenting advice from friends or other moms (including via social media, such as Facebook); the same number sought advice from their mothers (especially if they felt close to them), mothers-in-law or other mother figures. A few sought advice from sisters or husbands. One took a parenting class at church for a while, but felt that her model of parenting was so different from the prevailing norm of the community, which she did not find it helpful.

For this group, although some mothers sought out advice in the traditional forms of parenting books or online articles or from parenting magazines, they predominantly avoided these (however these had been references when they were new moms or had infants). Caroline said that she often experienced “some kind of weird phenomenon” similar to Murphy’s law—

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3 Our notions of “good” motherhood are shaped by more than just the sources to which we look for advice. In no way am I inclined to underestimate the pervasive influence of news media, television, movies, other institutions and ideologies, etc. as well as other influences discussed in the literature.
that “getting the book makes the problem go away.” The exception to this was two mothers who had children with special needs. In these cases, they relied much more on online communities as well as research in print and online for advice.

Several mentioned, that they sought advice primarily for the sake of having a “sounding board” . . . someone to listen to their situation so they could think about it differently or someone to empathize or sympathize with their struggle. In the end, though, most thought it was important to synthesize or process advice from other sources, but trust their own instincts. As Laura said: “I just find that it brings you further away from your ‘gut’ on a lot of those things and I found that sometimes I do better just to go with what I feel is right, kind of that intuition. . . . Mothering can come naturally if you just let it.” Another mentioned that sometimes with all the noise, she could not hear her own instincts.

So if these women are not seeking advice from “traditional” methods such as parenting books, how is the ideology of the good mother being perpetuated? I think there are several possibilities. First, if their mothers are one of the strongest influences in their lives and they are also still seeking their advice, it is passed from mother to daughter. Second, perhaps these women who seek advice from their friends are surrounding themselves with people who have similar notions about what it means to be a good mother, so this helps shape their ideology (which in turn will be passed on to and implemented by their children over the next few decades). Last, our culture is pervasive. No matter that a third of the women in this study come from other cultures. They have been in the United States long enough to understand and feel that this cultures shapes mothers—even if we push back against it. It is difficult to be an “outlaw” of the motherhood. If these mothers are stepping outside of expected norms, they will feel it and it can be lonely.

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4 To quote Adrienne Rich (1976) again.
As discussed previously, this group was somewhat homogeneous in the fact that most would identify as middle-class. Most of these women are solidly in the middle-class in terms of income, education and perspective. Their friends, the ones to whom they turn for advice, are probably also middle-class like them. For the most part, their peers are also residing in the contemporary United States. The community (especially the community of mothers) with which they surround themselves, and to which they turn for advice is shaping their understanding of our culture’s ideology of the good mother. “An ideology usually defines a community” (Swidler, 2001, p. 97). Defining community in this way can help us understand how women in smaller social groups can influence the overall cultural understanding of the ideology of the good mother in the United States.

Though very few of the women in this study sought advice from mommy blogs, they are still a force for shaping the ideology of motherhood, with mommy blogs having sponsors, lucrative advertisement deals and their own national conferences. However, Lynn finds seeking advice from mommy blogs irrelevant because “you could find anything to support your own ideas.” In other words, if you are a big advocate of breastfeeding, you can find blogs and groups of women that support that as well. But Lopez (2009) believes that “mommy bloggers are creating a different picture of motherhood to what we see in the mainstream media” (p. 732). She further argued that “mommy bloggers are developing their own voice for discussing motherhood, and [that] it is distinctly different from the radiant image of the good mother that has dominated our media, with its impossible demands and assumptions.” (p. 743) Overall, though, mothers in this group expressed distrust for mommy blogs and viewed them, for the most part, as merely a source of entertainment.
Admiration

I asked these women about mothers whom they admire and their characteristics. Perhaps the mothers that we esteem are the ones shaping our ideology of what makes a good mother? Irene had specific ideas about the qualities of a mother that she admires. She looks up to “Mothers that strive to give their kids the best. I admire that—no matter what kind of life you had, just try[ing] to offer or to give your kids the best life you can.” Other women venerated the following qualities: availability/being “present” for your children; discipline through providing boundaries, leading with a gentle, but strong, hand; patience; organization (because, as Anna said, “The organization brings peace”); stability; calmness; graciousness and gentleness; compassion; being able to endure/persistence and perseverance; recognizing the individuality of each child and striving to stay connected with them through quality time; mothers who raise successful, independent children and make education a priority; creativity and fun; a positive attitude; and mothers who sacrifice and are selfless, who are willing to put motherhood before other things. This list of admired qualities will be contrasted with data that came from later in the interview when I asked the mothers about performance. Even though this list has been somewhat compressed, it is no wonder mothers feel the pressure of the good motherhood ideology. It is a tall order to be all of these things at once—and for people other than yourself. Indeed, as Christy said, “There’s no way to be a good mother without being pretty selfless.”

Nevertheless, what these women admire may shift over time. Tara mentioned that she: has a cousin that she’s always really looked up to in terms of [admiration]. [I’m] kind of amazed she’s been able to keep a really nice balance. . . . It’s funny because I actually used to look down on it because I was like ‘I have to be “mommy” all the time. I can’t go out, I can’t have friends etc. I have to be here all the time. In hindsight it’s important to have balance and that balance is different for everyone.

Again, when discussing performance, this topic will be revisited.
It is important to note here that the women who we admire as “good” mothers are only showing us portions of our lives. Though the ideology tells us all what we “should” be, we know that we cannot be what we are “supposed” to be all the time. Though not precisely on point with this topic, something in Lopez’s (2009) discussion about mommy blogs relates to this. Lopez acknowledges that blogging relies on “fragmentation” (p. 738). I think of Judith and her admiration of mothers who look perfect, who look like they are “put together.” But if we are only seeing the fragments of other mothers’ lives—by admiring through their blogs or even observing them in “real” life, is our understanding of what makes a good mother skewed? It is just this fragmentation that contributes to the establishment of the ideology and formation of identity. When I think about what one of the mothers I interviewed said about reading blogs, she said that from a distance, at least, these women seem like they have it all (and have it all together). This can create further fragmenting. Not only are readers seeing the fragmenting of their lives (focusing only on motherhood since it is a “mommy blog” and often diminishing other parts of the blogger’s identity), but also fragmenting in the sense that they are seeing the best or the “good” mother (instead of the not good mother). Even when these bloggers are highlighting their weaknesses, there is a sense that by acknowledging their shortcomings that it makes them better mothers. Lopez (2009) says that we “are beginning to expand our notion of motherhood . . . [by] in this sense, showing the ugly side of motherhood [which] has the potential to be liberating and beneficial for all women” (p. 744), but even through the struggles overall you can tell that these women are succeeding or still striving to be the “good” mother.

And really, are we not all just seeing fragmented parts of other mother’s lives—even those with whom we are close? Half of the women who participated in this study said that they admired their mothers. Half also mentioned admiring their mothers in law, close friends and
sisters or other female relatives. Even women who admired their own mothers had a fragmented perspective influenced by the lens of memory. Really we cannot know how these mothers are mothering ALL the time. Like the mommy blogs, we only see fragments of their lives—and often what they choose to show us through scheduled play dates and activities, church meetings etc. may not be truly indicative of their mothering. Their outward performance may just be reinforcing the good mother ideology.

Performance

But motherhood is not purely cerebral. It is not just what we think, but what we do—it is our performance. Though the ideology of the good mother may shape our identities, does it have an effect on our actions? More specifically, I wanted to know what these women thought about motherhood performance in terms of employment, marriage, economic status, age, education, ethnicity and race, (dis)ability, and religion.

Employment/Balance

The idea of obtaining some sort of balance between work and family life was prevalent throughout most of my interviews and has been minimally discussed as it relates to both identity and ideology. Half of the participants work outside the home full-time (See Appendix A). During the interview, most of the women were reflecting on their own experiences rather than making some sort of judgment about maternal employment in general. When I asked Lynn (a stay-at-home mother) to describe the ideal balance for mothers in terms of working (full-time or part-time) or staying at home, she answered: “I think that’s probably the greatest mystery of
motherhood. . . It’s a struggle because you have this guilt. You wanna go back to work because you just want to get some distance sometimes. And it’s hard to get that distance.’”

But it is not just the cognitive struggle to figure out the choice of working or staying at home. It begins to take a physical toll on mothers as well. When we were previously discussing identity, one mother mentioned that she constantly struggles with being stretched too thin and feeling overwhelmed. Karri also mentioned:

mothers put too much on themselves when they’re working—that they have to be a perfect stay-at-home mom in addition to being a working mom at the same time. I’ve had to learn to ease up on myself on these ideas like having a home cooked meal that I make every night. . . . There’s just no way. It’s just too exhausting and it compromises personal happiness. . . It’s hard to work [outside the home] and be a mom and I think sometimes we just have unrealistic expectations.

Sometimes it also depends on the flexibility of the partner’s job, if there is indeed a partner in the relationship. Most of the mothers thought it was about finding the right balance for their families. Lucy said: “I don’t want moms to ever be resentful. I don’t want them to be resentful that they have to work and I don’t want them to be resentful that they’re staying at home. They need to figure out ‘what makes me happy’ and how can I make that work without sacrificing my kids’ needs or my spouse’s needs.”

In this study, 7 of the women mentioned that part-time employment would be best, but two other women talked about having flexibility with their employment (and employer) or balance between work and family life. One mother was not as hopeful: She says that no ideal balance exists. A quarter of these women felt as if this was a personal, family decision and that each mother and family has to figure out what is right for her family. Likewise 5 women thought that the most “ideal balance” for mothers was the mother’s sense of self and what she finds most fulfilling. Only 2 women mentioned that staying at home was ideal (and this came from two mothers who work outside the home).
One of the mothers (who actually had one of the lowest household incomes in my sample) stated that “being home is the best luxury.” It is important to address this. Though most of these women stated the need for paid employment for their families, in some ways, many of them had the choice to work—and multiple options for employment as a result of their levels of education. Only 3 of the women in my sample were divorced or separated; therefore, the majority of the women had another income on which they could rely. In addition, many of the spouses of these women have jobs that pay quite well and would allow the families to remain in a middle class income bracket, though their lives might certainly be less comfortable. It might be said, then, that although none of the women in this sample are of an elite economic class, that they still come from a place of privilege. It is important to acknowledge this within the greater discussion of motherhood performance related to employment because there are many mothers that greatly differ from this sample, mothers who have no choice—who must work or their families will go hungry, or have no place to live; mothers who are the only source of income for their families. This is a shortcoming of this study and will be discussed in more depth in the conclusion.

Marital Status

Most of the mothers felt that relationship status makes a difference for mothers in terms of support. A support system is necessary. But, the responses were somewhat mixed on whether or not this needs to be a husband, or if it could be a committed partner or other friends or family members. Shannon, who was previously a single mother and who has since remarried, acknowledged the difficulty of single motherhood and feels that motherhood is so much easier if you find the right person. Further, she feels that marriage makes a difference for kids. Several
other married women felt that mothers needed a partner or that having a partner was ideal and mentioned that mothers are not meant to (and they could not imagine) mothering alone. They further felt that a marriage was key because they would question the level of commitment of a partner who was not a spouse. Though Caroline (who is married) did not think that marital status necessarily mattered she thought “having a partner or a husband is great. It brings two perspectives all the time to the child, although it’s also challenging—especially when it comes to discipline and things like that.”

But not all the married mothers thought that marriage was essential to good mothering. Three married mothers acknowledged that many times they feel like single mothers because they carry the bulk of the burden when it comes to childcare and other household matters (including housework). One married woman thought that cohabiting couples might be more supportive. Another married woman thought that marital status did not matter because “You’re either an involved mother or not. It might change things in terms of responsibility, though.”

Tara, who is separated from her husband, also acknowledged the importance of support—whether it comes from a group of other moms, or family members, or a partner or a husband. She felt that mothers need someone that they can count on for unconditional love and support, which means not just verbal support, but also emotional and physical support. She said: “I think just saying that you’re married, doesn’t mean anything . . . just having a ring on my finger doesn’t mean that that man is helpful and supportive and that he’s going to be there. There could be a couple who’s not married but living together, might be more supportive.” Karri and Juleen, who are both either divorced or separated, also shared similar sentiments. Though they both liked the idea of parents staying together, they acknowledged that it is not a good example to model an unhealthy relationship.
In the end, most of the mothers agreed that the most important issue was that the mother had some sort of help or support, that she was stable. They felt that if the mother is happy (and happy with her identity) and if family situation was working for them, that is the most important thing (no matter what the mother’s marital status).

Financial Stability

As established by researchers such as Annette Lareau (2003) and Kathryn Edin (2005), economic status affects family life and the way that a woman mothers. But does having stable finances make a woman more prepared to mother? Does it change the way a woman mothers? Many of the women who participated in this study felt that “There’s a balance. You need to be able to provide and be financially secure and have a life, but if you’re worried about putting food on the table, there’s a strain.” A quarter of the women mentioned how financial stress could cause a significant amount of stress for the mother, therefore affecting her performance. As Lucy said:

When a mother is experiencing financial hardship, that’s an enormous stressor on the marriage, on how she mothers, on her patience levels, on everything, because when you’re in survival mode you don’t have the extra emotional energy to focus on your children. You’re trying to focus on ‘How do I feed my children?’ and ‘How do I keep a house over their head?’ You’re not focusing on ‘How are they doing with their emotional and social development?’

Christy, who works part-time as a preschool teacher also thought that unstable finances negatively influenced all parts of mothering:

It threatens those basic needs of food and shelter and clothing and those are the things that you know it’s up to you to provide for your kids. . . . I think just the fear of not having your basic needs met or your kids’ basic needs met kind of inhibits you from doing much beyond that. I think it’s pretty hard to really sit and listen to your child talk about their day and help them with their homework and be totally present with them and read them a story and play with them when you don’t know how you’re going to get your next meal.
Whereas financial stability could make it easier to deal with the other stressors that come with mothering, Caroline thought it might affect the way a woman mothers making it a “lose-lose” situation—that if a mother had more money, she might have less time with her child because she is working more. Likewise Lynn observed that it could change a mother’s parenting style because mothers with less money might be more involved with their children, whereas mothers with more money might “outsource” time with their children by providing more activities outside the home for them.

But several mothers (most at the higher end of the incomes represented in this sample, and some at the low end) also believed that if a woman knew how to live within her means that a family’s financial situation would not affect a woman’s ability to mother. Anna recalled growing up in Mexico City and some of the poverty that surrounded her. She believes “If you base your motherhood on whether you have money or not, you’re going to fail.”

As acknowledged above when discussing employment status, the perspectives of these women are shaped by the privilege that they now enjoy. Though some discussed periods of financial strain and hardships in their lives, for the most part, they have their needs met in a way that they can choose to focus their attention on their children in ways that many poor and underprivileged women in the United States cannot.

Age

When I asked the women if there was an ideal age to be a mother, there really was not much of a consensus. I think the “right” age to become a mother is part of the entrenched ideology of the good mother that is more open to variability and it has experienced the greatest shift over the past few decades. Most of the mothers in this study acknowledged that a woman
needed energy to be a good mother. They also highlighted the need for a woman to be ready to be selfless and realize that her life would be different. Very few of the women actually said an age that they thought was ideal but the few that did mentioned anywhere from a woman’s mid-20’s to early 30’s as being a good age to become a mother. Kaye stated: “Becoming a parent is a shocking situation. You have no idea what you’re in for until you’re in it, so as much as you prepare financially and emotionally and take the classes and read the books. It’s totally different when you actually have [a child] and you have to be fluid.” Although most of these mothers acknowledged that there was not really a “formula” for the right time to have a child, there was a general consensus that although it is easier to be a mother at a younger age in terms of the physical stress of mothering, that perhaps women who are a bit older might be more prepared because they are more mature.

Most of the women in this sample had their first child when they were in their late twenties or early thirties. With a larger sample size, perhaps age would be a greater part of the discussion of performance within proscribed motherhood ideology.

Education

Unlike other aspects of performance, when it comes to education there was a correlation between the occupation of the mothers participating in this study and their views on the level of education of the mother. Marie, who is a lecturer at a university, says: “It’s important. People who are open to learning, who want to learn . . . it’s a big benefit. They’re not just going to learn about history or languages, they’re going to want to learn about their kids. They’re going to want to learn things about how to be a better mom. I think they’re also going to want to teach things to their children.” Shannon, who is a high school teacher, says that a mother’s level of education is
“profoundly” important. Christy, a preschool teacher, felt that relationships can matter as much as education, but that “Education just seems to make a lot of other things easier. And when some other things are easier, it frees up your attention to focus a little more on being a parent.” Laura is a minister’s assistant, but works with a congregation that serves university students. She thinks “love is love, but you learn critical thinking skills when you’re educated. So, though it may not affect your ability to mother, it may affect the way you mother.” Traci said something similar in that it can help a mother prepare to mother. As a music educator, Holly believes education is important because it can give a woman confidence in herself. Lastly, Juleen, a lecturer at a university, said that it makes a “significant difference” because mothers learn to see things from multiple perspectives when they are educated.

Apart from some of the educators who had strong feelings about a woman’s level of education and a woman’s ability to mother most of the other participants felt that education might be most helpful for mothers because they might know what resources were available when they encountered problems when mothering. They also acknowledged that education might not necessarily be tied to formal education, but more of a mother’s desire to seek out knowledge. Again, this was a very privileged group in terms of education. Nearly all of the women had at least a bachelor’s degree.

Race/Ethnicity

As a result of the way I asked questions about race and ethnicity in the interviews, I do not know that my responses were very measurable. The flaws of this question will be addressed in the conclusion, but a basic discussion will be conducted here.
When doing the interviews, I tried to have smooth transitions from topic to topic. To do this, sometimes I tried to connect questions with previous queries that I had posed. To lead into this section on race and ethnicity, I attempted to associate it with earlier questions about level of education and economic status. But what this did was direct the respondents to make this connection as well. In other words, as an interviewer, in some ways I encouraged them to equate race and ethnicity with economic and educational disadvantage. Though I let these mothers define their own race and ethnicity in the demographic information sheet, I was inadvertently defining it for them during this portion of the interview. Consequently, I am not really sure how to interpret the results of this portion of the interviews.

Despite my shortcomings as an interviewer, some of these women still had a perspective on the relationship between race and/or ethnicity and motherhood. Nearly half of the sample thought that race and/or ethnicity made a difference because culture affects the way one mothers and because different cultures parent differently, mothers are going to start from that point where they see mothering behavior modeled in the culture with which they most strongly identify. As a Mexican-American\(^5\) and a bilingual educator Patricia feels frustration at certain aspects of Hispanic culture. She acknowledges that Hispanics have a lot more kids, even when it is difficult for the families. She says: “I don’t understand \textit{why} they do things a certain way [just] because culturally it’s ok for them to do it.” Likewise Karri, who is Caucasian and a breastfeeding educator at a WIC office, observed that within each group’s culture there are norms and it is good when we see some of those norms change when they are something positive for mothers and children (she was specifically discussing breastfeeding here). Similarly Shannon, who is a

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\(^5\) The racially descriptions given in this portion of the paper were taken from demographic data obtained from the participants. I used the racial/ethnic identity that these women assigned to themselves, as discussed in the Methods section of this paper. Detailed descriptions of the race/ethnicity identities of the women in this sample can be found in Appendix A.
white high school teacher in a racially diverse school, says “If a parent is willing to break out and kick against the inertia of that culture, they can do whatever they want.”

On the other hand, Irene, from Kenya, believes that “There are barriers and you probably have to work a lot harder, you have to do a lot of extra, just to overcome. . . . but that should not be an excuse.” She believes perceptions of women of color as mothers might be different from the way people perceive a white mother, but that “women can’t let this affect them.” Kaye, a Caucasian raised in South Louisiana was less optimistic, “As the rest of the world saw during Katrina, . . . Those mothers [of economic and educational disadvantage] don’t feel like there’s any hope and they’re just trying to get through the day. There’s no long term strategy. No hope that their children’s lives will amount to much.” In a way, Kaye’s sentiments were similar to several other mothers who expressed the idea that socio-economic status was perhaps a greater influence in mother’s lives than race or ethnicity.

Anna was raised in Mexico City and formerly worked as a social worker in schools in Dallas where she spent time teaching mothers the importance of education. When she spoke with mothers about the educational disadvantage that their Hispanic children faced, most of the mothers acknowledge cultural barriers. But, Anna thinks it goes beyond this. She said:

They said cultural, but I would say historic. The Anglo, the white race, historically has been more advanced. They have the first civilization and they invented a lot of stuff first. And we as Hispanics [are] a mix of a lot of cultures. [Our ancient] people were so civilized and they had a lot of that knowledge and when we got conquered all that came down . . . Our self-esteem as a culture came down because we were the ‘failers.’ And I think we have been bringing that generation to generation and I think it’s hard to change the way of think[ing]. I think when we realize and educate ourselves ‘Ok. It doesn’t matter what the color of your skin is, you can be a winner.’ But for years and generations for a lot of people it’s hard to change. And we as a culture have to work on ourselves to change that idea. And I think in other cultures too, in other African-Americans or blacks, these people who have been oppressed [experience this too].
Though some of these women felt that mothers of color could become “bound” by their culture as mentioned above, several felt very strongly that education could help change negative patterns—but they all recognized a difference between the way women in different racial and ethnic groups mother. As a Caucasian, Holly felt that perhaps the stakes are higher for racially and ethnically oppressed groups. She said: “The demands are even greater—the things that I think about and worry about are different for minorities.”

Ability/Disability

When I asked the women in this study about the effect of mental and physical disabilities on a woman’s mothering, many of the women had a very difficult time answering this question. I wondered if it is because we do not often see representations in media and popular culture of women of various abilities mothering. In fact, very few of the mothers interviewed could think of any mothers that they personally know who had disabilities and mothered. Most thought it was very different from other influences (such as socio-economic status or level of education) because it was something more difficult to change. Though some thought it was admirable, one expressed that if a woman does not have the ability to care for herself, then she “should not be bringing another person into the world.”

Overall there was a consensus that a woman with physical disabilities might be able to mother more easily than a woman with mental disabilities. Some thought that a mother with mental disabilities might need to be “checked on” more frequently. Juleen mentioned a friend that she had who was bi-polar and the stress and instability that it caused for their family because they “never knew who they were going to get when they came home.”
Religion

The last area of performance that I wanted to explore was religion. As a significant institutional force in the region of the country where these interviews were conducted, this topic had to be addressed. Half of the women in this study indicated that religion had a significant influence in their lives—some of the women directly mentioned their religion or the importance of God in their lives during the interview, while others opened up about their religiosity when this was brought up in the interview. Laura, a Methodist who works as a minister’s assistant for a congregation that serves university students, felt that religion and spirituality are two different things, but made a connection between mothering and God. “It’s hard not to see God or a God in the process of birthing and caring. There’s a divine strain in mothering,” she said. Lucy, who is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) and a doula, echoed some of Laura’s ideas in the following way: “When you become a mom you’re trying to find meaning and you’re trying to find a bigger picture and you’re creating this life that I think it makes everybody seek something. I think everybody innately realizes it’s a spiritual experience and they start to out seek meaning and connection with that.”

Some women were not exactly sure about the influence of religion and thought that it could be either good or bad. Many of the women echoed Marie’s thoughts: “If the religion for the woman is a source of comfort and spiritual opening or education or support, it can be an advantage. But, if forced, it’s not a good thing.” Several were particularly concerned about religions that breed hate. Lynn, who is not religious, expressed exasperation with the religious climate of this region of the country and concern that people rely on religion to shape values that should “come from within.” She said: “I find it extremely frustrating to think that people ‘give’ (building houses on mission trips) because they have to believe in God. But, for me, these good
values and the desire to help people should come from within. . . . I find it detrimental because people become close-minded. There’s a lack of tolerance.”

Though a quarter of the mothers articulated the importance of good values or “being a good person” that they did not necessarily associate with organized religion, others felt that religious institutions offered support for mothers that they might not find otherwise. Despite the fact that Caroline is not religious she thinks that religion can help at a practical level—especially for mothers in underprivileged groups. She was raised in France, where the government plays a much different role in supporting mothers and feels “Churches can make up for the so little that’s offered by the city, state or government” in the United States in terms of activities and support for communities, families and children.

Karri was part of a religious cult for 14 years and her feelings about religion are more mixed. She knew she had to break away from the cult after becoming a mother and dealing with post-partum depression. Part of the religious teachings of the cult included total submission to her husband, but she realized if she did not take care of herself that she would not be able to mother her children. As she slowly took steps to care for herself, she recognized that she would never be happy in her marriage which led to her being kicked out of the cult with her 3 young children. Karri sees this as a blessing in disguise, however, and sees the positive role that religions can play in terms of creating community and teaching and guiding children, if the religion is one that is positive for the mother.

Although several women mentioned the importance of prayer as a source of peace when mothering, Lucy, who is a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) talked about receiving direct inspiration. She said that there have been times when she did not
know exactly how to help her children, but that she received answers and guidance from God that she would have never thought of herself.

Even though my small sample of women had a good mix of religious and non-religious women, the religions represented were not very diverse—all of these women came from a Judeo-Christian background. If women with non-Western religious backgrounds were represented in this study, there might be a shift in the perspectives represented.

Conclusion

As we neared the end of the interviews, I wanted the mothers to really think about what we had talked about over the course of our discussion. As they reflected upon and synthesized the topics that had been addressed, I asked more empirical questions: Is motherhood valued in the United States? How would you describe a good mother and have your ideas about this changed? What do you do that makes you a good mother?

The Value of Motherhood in the U.S.

Though the ideology of the good mother is presented to us in many ways (i.e. through intensive mothering, essential motherhood etc.), and the standard to which a mother is measured is well established by good mother ideology. In very stereotypical terms, we hear that: mothers are undervalued, only stay-at home mothers are valued, only working mothers are valued, mothers are put on a pedestal etc. that I wanted to know how these women views the way motherhood is valued in the United States.

Although the results were mixed, nearly all mothers thought that motherhood is undervalued or underestimated. Caroline, from France, felt that there was not enough
government support for mothers and families, but she was not the only one to mention this. This idea was also discussed by Arendell (2000, p. 1200) who pointed out that our social policies reinforce our notion of what makes a good mother.

Even within different jobs, though, the support for mothers and families, which most of the mothers thought was indicative of the value placed on motherhood, is different. Marie, who is currently a lecturer at a university felt that she had much more support when she was working in the private sector and thinks that what we value in the U.S. may be misplaced:

I think that by and large being a mom sometimes people don’t realize, and some mothers don’t either, I think it’s not appreciated to the fact that it’s a big job. And I think that the consequence of not doing your job . . . You know if tomorrow I start doing a crappy job at teaching, well my students won’t learn French. Ok, well there may be some consequence to this one day, but it won’t be the end of the world. But as you do your job as a mom, and as a dad, as parents, if you mess up, the consequences are huge.

Tara echoed some of these sentiments as well. Similar to Marie’s thoughts on the consequences, and she recognizes:

There’s so much pressure on moms to almost produce these well-educated, well-mannered, well-balanced children, but the value that’s put on motherhood is not very high in terms of the support that moms get for maternity leave or breastfeeding. I feel like there’s all this pressure, but then there’s not this support and I think moms then put that pressure on themselves to get these positive results of successful children.

Holly thought that this perspective on mothers as workers is the nature of the value on fierce individualism in the United States. Although she thinks that this individualism is sometimes a positive force in our culture, she worries that it makes us forget that we are a society and that mothers are doing the real work of shaping the future of our country. Patricia spoke about the value of motherhood from an economic perspective as well. She says that motherhood is “marketed” to us—that in terms of success, being a mother is second best to a college degree and a successful job—that we are failing as individuals when we leave the workforce to spend time

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6 Just these thoughts from these three women could yield enough for a feminist-Marxist analysis of mothering in the United States. But, this is a topic that will need to be explored in another paper.
with and raise children. These 4 women seem to really underscore the idea that even though motherhood is marketed as a role of reverence for mothers, the support for them to succeed in accordance with the good mother ideology does not exist in terms of economic or social policies.

The last idea surrounding the value of motherhood that will be addressed here is that a mother’s own perspective is what can make the most difference. Lucy shared the idea that we can surround ourselves with a community where motherhood is valued and where women practice passionate motherhood. As a primarily stay at home mother, Jessica also chooses to believe that motherhood is valued. She shared a story about her husband walking their children down the street to a garage sale. Everyone was impressed that he had taken the time to do something with his children, but Jessica has noticed when her kids are acting up in the grocery store, everyone wants to know “Who’s their mother?” She chooses to ignore the noise and the negativity, though and focus on what she does that makes her a good mother.

What Makes a Good Mother?

As I was nearing the conclusion of the interviews, I asked these women the question that is at the heart of this study. I asked them: What makes a good mother? In some ways, their answers were similar to the way that they responded to the previous question about mothers that they admire and their characteristics. But, with this question, they also talked about how their ideas about what makes a good mother have changed over time.

Nearly all the mothers who participated in this study agreed that their ideas about mothering have evolved as their children have grown. Shannon, who had never really planned on being a mother, found that mothering came naturally to her as her son grew. She said:

No one can possibly prepare you for motherhood. . . . My ideas changed radically once the baby came. . . . It’s kind of like being a teacher—when you start out you’re trying to
do everything right, everything perfect. But, the reality is that it’s not possible. My ideas didn’t change about parenting, but my ideas changed about what I was able to do without going crazy.

She learned that what was essential was to love her child unconditionally and teach him the right way and support him in who he is but recognized that “Not everybody has their child as their number one priority. That doesn’t mean they’re not good parents that just means that some people, their ambitions are really important to them and they want to move up. . . . You can still be a good parent, I think.”

Several other mothers discussed the balancing act that mothers feel when it comes to their priorities. Lucy is a mother to 6 children under the age of 9. She homeschools and works part-time as a doula, but she emphasizes:

A good mom has to recognize that being a mom is just one of her roles and when your children are young it’s going to be the most demanding role physically and emotionally because they are so little and they deserve so much attention at that stage. But I think a mom has to be her own person first and try to have a stable partnership with her spouse and have her own personality and goals and things that she’s excited and passionate about and that ‘Mom’ is part of that. And that it’s a role that stays forever, but the kids have to realize that their mom is a person, not just ‘I’m mom and I’m here to be your personal chauffeur and handkerchief.’ I think [my ideas about motherhood have] evolved in [questioning] ‘How do I find that balance?’”

Like Lucy, Caroline underscored how mothering has changed for her as her son has grown:

An infant is very easy in a way. It’s challenging . . . but in a way it’s very easy. It’s when they actually become a little person and they need reassurance and they need structure and they need discipline and all that—that’s when all the thinking has to start. Then I think it made me realize that being a good mother is not just covering your kid with kisses and hugging them . . . But it’s just kind of figuring out what to do in all sorts of circumstances and trying to do the right thing without completely losing yourself in it either, without it taking over your life entirely.

Paola stressed something which almost all of the mothers said was essential to good mothering—love. Although love may seem straightforward, several mothers thought that a way to show love was by showing their kids that they are not perfect, that they are “human” too.
Jessica said she thinks it is important that her kids “know that I’m human and that I make mistakes and that I’ll admit when I’m wrong. As my children get older and it’s terrifying and exciting and evolving. . . . I think I knew these things when I was younger, but I don’t think I could voice it. I’ve mellowed and I’m more realistic.” Lynn also realized that she’s become more “realistic” and “human” for her children. She feels that “There has to be some sort of self-preservation as a mother. If it is turning the TV on and that’s what you have to do to get through the day because you’re not having a good one, then that’s what you have to do. That’s really what’s changed the most for me is realizing that just because you’re a mom you don’t have to lose your identity. It’s ok to be angry still, or frustrated or sad or any of those negative emotions.”

Along with finding balance and “being human”, these mothers have learned that flexibility is essential. Christy notes: “As soon as you think you have it figured out, you probably need to take a stop back because you probably have it less figured out than you thought.” Holly also recognizes that she has had to be adapt as her twins have grown older: “Before they were born I had all these ideas of what I was going to be and what I was going to do and how I was going to raise them and what they were going to be and now it’s a process of giving up control. I would never have suspected how little influence you actually have—how much they are hard-wired to be a certain way.” Though these women have motherhood as their central or primary identity, they realize that this identity shifts over the years, as their children grow and as the children become less physically dependent on them.

Becoming a Good Mother

Though Holly believed that there were times when she had very little influence over her
children (and she was not the only mother to articulate this thought), this does not stop these
women from striving to become a “good” mother. The last question that I asked all the mothers
was: “What do you do that makes you a good mother?” Most of the time this question was met
with a nervous laugh or an expression of exasperation about me saving the hardest question for
last, or even a few women rolling their eyes at me. Despite the fact that these women had spent
anywhere from forty minutes to an hour and a half previously giving me details about their lives
and defining what makes a good mother for other people, most were extremely uncomfortable
evaluating their own performance.

Very few were able to say what they “do” that makes them a good mother, but most
discussed what they “try to do” to be a good mother. A handful of mothers talked about how they
try to be better every day for their children. Patricia said that she asks herself everyday what she
is doing to be a good mother and answers:

   I try my best. I try my best at being a mother and I start over every day. I’m always
thankful for the Lord giving me a new day to start over. And even if I did something
wrong yesterday or the day before yesterday . . . [I have a] willingness to start over every
day. . . . I would never say ‘This is what I do that makes me a good mom’ because I’m
trying to figure how to be a good mom. I think when people start thinking ‘Oh, I’m a
good mom,’ I think you forget and you’re not anymore. I think there’s always room for
improvement—there’s always room to grow.

Along with starting over every day, nearly half of the mothers mentioned something about
knowing the needs of each of their children—about knowing their children as individuals.
Caroline said one of the things she does to try to be a good mother is paying attention to details:

   It’s little details. I can think of one thing when we went to his grandparents’, my
husband’s parents’, for Christmas, I had the feeling [my son] was going to think that the
room was too dark, so I bought a night light that I brought in my suitcase, just in case.
And sure enough two days into it he said ‘It’s too dark. I wish I had a little light’ and my
husband said ‘You’re such a good mother. You had anticipated the whole thing.’ And I
was like well, first of all that’s kind of nice to hear, and in a way I thought well I guess
that’s the kind of thing that makes the difference . . .
CHAPTER 5  
CONCLUSIONS

My conclusions based on both the literature and these interviews are that we do have a standard of motherhood, an ideology that shapes our identity and drives our performance. Though the women who participated in this study certainly still feel the pressures of the ideology of the good mother, they both accept and seem to reject some components of this ideology. Sharon Hays’ (1996) study of the “intensive mothering” model which introduces the idea of the mom who is completely child-centered seems to be rejected by this group of mothers. Other philosophies influencing ideology such as DiQuinzio’s “essential motherhood,” which most speaks to a woman’s identity as a mother is more readily acknowledged. Last, Douglas and Michaels’ (2004) concept of the “New Momism” which sets high, yet unattainable, expectations for motherhood performance is also recognized as an ideological influence, but not in a way that oppresses these women (for the most part).

Weaknesses of the Study

There were several weaknesses to this study and most related to the questions I was asking about performance. The first was briefly addressed in the results and relates to questions I asked about race and ethnicity. I should have been more straightforward in my questioning and I should have asked: “Does race and ethnicity matter for mothers? In what ways does it matter?” instead of introducing it in relation to socio-economic status. Those who were uncomfortable discussing race clearly avoided answering this question in a candid manner because they were able to just rely on talking about socio-economic status with the way I phrased it in the interview. I admit that I was probably afraid to ask this question for fear of being uncomfortable myself—
especially when interviewing women of color. How would they view me—white and privileged (at least in terms of education and as an authority figure as the interviewer) if I asked directly about race? Perhaps some opportunities were missed here, including the chance of introducing the “motherwork” perspective which acknowledges the importance of “women’s social locations—the intersections of regional and local political economy with class, ethnicity, culture and sexual preference” (Arendell, 2000, p. 1195). I lost the chance to explore how well, or if we are challenging the universalist models of motherhood/mothering/mothers.

Another oversight related to contesting universalist models was that I should have asked more directly about sexuality and lesbian/queer mothers. Although some conversations related to marriage or single motherhood led to brief conversation about this topic, a more thorough discussion might have been facilitated by re-wording my questions on the structure of marriage and family by introducing the idea of a “partner” when asking the question (though not all people interpret the label of partner as same-sex). I think I was afraid of veering the conversation off course and it would become a discussion about homosexuality or queerness instead of the focus being on motherhood (though there is definitely intersection and these concepts are not mutually exclusive).

An additional weakness of the study was the lack of variation in my sample. Thirteen of these mothers had preschool aged children (though not all of these women were recruited from the CDL). By using so many preschool mothers, I run the risk of women who are in the phase of more “intensive” mothering (not to be confused with Hays’ intensive mothering) in terms of the physical demands (as Lucy discussed). As most of these mothers recognized, mothering changes as children get older. It is easier to become a bit more flexible and to embrace mothering in a
different way—learning to be less “intense.” Closely related to this is a further limitation—that all of the women (with the exception of one) had children under the age of ten.

One last characteristic of my sample that may or may not be a weakness was that all of these women were solidly middle-class. This was somewhat discussed in the results section related to economic and financial stability. Though these mothers share similar traits, I agree with Swidler (2001) who writes: “When we deal with a culture that is all too familiar, as middle-class American culture is for most of us, then the challenge is to develop more powerful theoretical ways to interpret patterns of cultural appropriation and rejection, cultural continuity and change” (p. 23). While I agree with Swidler that middle-class American culture effectively shapes the ideology of the good mother, thereby making these mothers particularly qualified to discuss this topic, the perspectives of women from other economic statuses would have enhanced this study.

Directions for Further Research

Further research within this topic would seek to fill the void of the weaknesses of my study—incorporating the perspectives and voices of a more diverse group of women. In addition, it would be good to know if men/fathers and women who are not mothers are aware of and think about the ideology of the good mother.

This research could also be explored through the lens of just one aspect of motherhood (either ideology, identity, or performance). I found the results related to identity yielded the most interesting perspective. Perhaps just focusing on the nature of a mother’s identity could be a direction for further research.
Providing Ends, Constraining Means

In conclusion, as we try to understand the way that culture is a “multiform repertoire of meanings” (Swidler, 2001) and that these meanings shape our lives, we recognize that these multiple meanings may be used to frame and reframe people’s experiences. This study, which explores how twenty mothers negotiate and explore these meanings in relationship to motherhood, shows that these various forms of meanings are not always clearly delineated. One of the ideas that was largely agreed upon is that to be a good mother, a mother must constantly be negotiating and re-evaluating her performance and her understanding of the ideology of the good mother. In a sense this goes along with women who are constantly learning and re-negotiating what it means to be a good mother—it relates to their flexibility. Swidler (2001) further expanded on this when she wrote: “People know much more culture than they draw on in any one instance, and they slip frequently between one reality and another, switching the frames within which they understand and experience” (p. 40). This also relates to the balance that most of these women express a desire to have or the balance for which they are striving. In her book Talk of Love: How Culture Matters, Swidler frequently discussed the way people “integrate culture and experience” (p. 53). Several times she suggests “that people vary also in the ways they integrate culture with life experience, and that they may change over time and across life spheres in the ways they draw connections between culture and the lives they actually lead” (p. 70). I think this relates most to the way these mothers have sought advice as their children have grown. When their children were younger, it was mostly shaped by an established culture of baby books and research advice, but now most say that they trust their “gut.” In some ways this shows a rejection of parts of the ideology of the good mother, which historically lies in embracing the scientific mother (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky, 1998). On the contrary, these
contemporary mothers “gain strength from their democratic spirit: instead of learning about parenting from experts or institutions, this generation of parents prefers to garner wisdom from those who are striving alongside them” (Lopez, 2009, p. 743). I think the women who participated in this study would agree with this. Mothers today are not getting reinforcement about motherhood performance from so-called “experts,” but ideas about performance are being influenced by other mothers.

After understanding culture and institutions and their impact on the ideology of the good mother, even with its reduced power over the women in this study, we can then look at the historical impact of these things on identity. One thing that I learned from the women in this study that does not seem to depart from the literature, is that motherhood becomes the central identity for women. “Adrienne Rich describes the image of a good mother as a person without identity except for her motherhood” (Hager, 2001, p. 36). Perhaps this has changed in the past few decades—from the 70’s when the women’s rights movement was still relatively new and people were negotiating identity, to the 80’s when women tried to hide their motherhood to be seen only as a “working” woman, to the 90’s with the divisive uprising of the mommy wars, and in the first decade of the 21st century when there was a shift from mothers who wanted to “have it all” (embracing all aspects of their lives), to now an era when mothers (who have the choice) feel the need to find balance in their lives. Most of the women who participated in my study acknowledged this balance, but most also believed that it was different for every mother. Though Hager’s (2011) article is very recent, she still writes about this struggle of ceasing to care for one’s self, the lurking threat of the good mother and the idea that once a woman becomes a mother that she is a mother only (p. 36).
What I learned most from these women is that they are trying to do their very best to anticipate the needs of their children, while guiding them to the end result of being happy and well-adjusted adults. Their performance in this quest is not to receive the praise of an audience, but because it is how they define a good mother. They may be aware that sometimes culture works against them in ways which traces its lineage from Max Weber’s work on the social effects of ideas, suggest[ing] that culture influences action by shaping the goals or ends people seek and the means they think will get them there. . . . In this formulation, human beings are goal-oriented actors, pursuing their interests as they understand them. But their culture shapes the ends they seek and the means that they think will attain their ends. Thus culture affects action by providing its ends and constraining its means (Swidler, 2001, 79).

Though at times the women who participated in this study feel the constraining pressures of the ideology of the good mother and its singular identity, the end provision of raising happy, well-adjusted children keeps them on their paths to becoming the good mother that they define.
APPENDIX A

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Paid Employment</th>
<th>Occupation of Spouse</th>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Ages of children</th>
<th>Income</th>
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<td>Irene</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Software Developer</td>
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<td>Caroline</td>
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<td>White/French</td>
<td>Administrative Coordinator</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Professor</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>Hispanic/Bolivia</td>
<td>PhD Student/Graduate Assistant</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>PhD Student--Computer Engineering</td>
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<td>Judith</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Teacher, Doula, Part-time Nursery Worker</td>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Law Enforcement</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Master's</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>School Librarian</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Service Manager at Auto Shop</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Working on Master's</td>
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<td>Full-time</td>
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<td>Advisor</td>
<td>Messianic Judaism</td>
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<td>Musician, Teacher</td>
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<td>Caucasian/ Raised Abroad</td>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>Executive Bar Manager</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<td>FT</td>
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<td>Part-time</td>
<td>Manager of Pilot Scheduling</td>
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APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE AND PERSONAL INFORMATION FORM
Intro/Warm-up/Identity

This is a study that seeks to answer a very basic question: What makes a good mother? The purpose of this research is to understand motherhood and it will contribute to social research that seeks to understand the traditions of motherhood. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Feel free to be honest in your responses.

Have you always lived in Denton? Where were you raised?

Tell me a little about your mother. When you were young, did she work? Stay at home? What was her profession? Would you say you mother in a similar or different way than she did (or does)?

Tell me a bit about your different roles and how important these roles are. How do you see yourself? (Or, what is the primary way you think of yourself?) For example, do you identify most strongly as a woman, mother, wife, daughter, or in terms of your race/ethnicity or religious background? Or do you identify in terms of your employment? Is there any intersection of the ways that you define yourself?

Ideology
What would you say are your primary sources of advice on how to mother? Do you seek out the advice of friends? Do you read mommy blogs or participate in online groups (composed predominantly of mothers)? Or do you refer to parenting magazines/parenting books? What about church leaders or ecclesiastical teachings? What do you find most helpful?

Who are some mothers that you admire? Anyone well known? What are some of their characteristics?

Performance
How would you describe the ideal balance for mothers in terms of working (full time or part time) or staying at home?

We know there have been significant changes in the structure of marriage and family over the past few decades in terms of more people cohabiting instead of marrying, as well as more single mothers. Do you think marital or relationship status makes a difference for mothers? In what way?

Some of these changes in marriage and family are closely connected to the economy. How do you think a woman’s financial stability affects her mothering? Do you think a woman with stable finances is more prepared to mother? Do you notice any difference between women who are more financially stable having a different parenting style than those whose financial situation is more unsteady?
Often women who become mothers at an older age are more financially established (though this is not always the case). Do you think there’s an ideal age to become a mother? How could age affect the way a woman mothers?

How do you think a mother’s level of education affects her ability to mother?

We know that some racial and ethnic groups in the United States are more likely to be financially and educationally disadvantaged. Does this change the way women in these groups mother? In what ways?

Some women may have mental and physical advantages or disadvantages. Do you think this affects the way a woman mothers?

How does religion factor into mothering? Do you think it helps a woman mother?

Conclusion
How would you describe a “good” mother? Would you say your ideas about this have changed? In what ways? Over time? With each child? As your children have grown?

Do you think motherhood is valued in U.S. society? Do you think men/fathers are more likely to value motherhood or women and/or other mothers? What aspects of motherhood are praised or looked down upon?

What do you do that makes you a good mother?

Information Form

After your interview, please complete the following information:

Age: ______ Relationship Status: _________________________________________________________________
Race/Ethnicity: ______________________________________________________________________________
Occupation & Hours Worked (i.e. part-time/full-time): ___________________________________________
Occupation of Spouse or Significant other (if applicable): _________________________________________
Religious Affiliation: __________________________________________________________________________
Years of School or Highest Degree Completed: ___________________________________________________
Age(s) of Child(ren): __________________________________________________________________________
Average Yearly Household Income (optional): ______________________________________________________
APPENDIX C

IRB MATERIALS
**Expedited or Full Board Review Application**

University of North Texas Institutional Review Board
OHRP Federalwide Assurance: FWA00007479

Save this file as a Word document on your computer, answer all questions completely within Word, and submit it along with all supplemental documents to the IRB Office as described in the Electronic Submission Checklist on page 5.

Type only in the yellow fields, and closely follow all stated length limits. Handwritten forms will not be accepted.

1. **Title of Study**
   - Must be identical to the title of any related internal or external grant proposal.
   - The “Good” Mother: Ideology, Identity and Performance

2. **Investigator Information**
   - Must be: (a) a UNT faculty member; and (b) the same person as the Principal Investigator named in any related proposal for external or internal funding.
   - Michelle Poulin
     - First Name: Michelle
     - Last Name: Poulin
     - E-mail Address: Michelle.Poulin@unt.edu
     - UNT Department: Sociology
     - Building: Chilton
     - Room Number: 390 H
     - Office Phone Number: (940) 565-4880
     - Fax Number: (940) 369-7035

3. **Co-Investigator Information**
   - Must be a UNT faculty member or a faculty member at another university.
   - Rudy Seward
     - First Name: Rudy
     - Last Name: Seward
     - E-mail Address: Rudy.seward@unt.edu
     - UNT Department: Sociology
     - Title: Professor

4. **Key Personnel**
   - List the name of all other Key Personnel (including students) who are responsible for the design, conduct, or reporting of the study (including recruitment or data collection).
   - Jennifer Vigil

**NIH IRB Training**

Have you, any Co-Investigator, and all Key Personnel completed the required NIH IRB training course (“Protecting Human Research Participants”) and electronically submitted a copy of the completion certificate to untirb@unt.edu?

*Yes [x] No *

If “No,” this training is required for all Key Personnel before your study can be approved. This free on-line course may be accessed at: http://phrp.nihtraining.com
5. Funding Information (If applicable)

Provide the proposal number or project ID number for any external funding or the account number for any internal funding for this project.

6. Purpose of Study

In no more than half a page, briefly state the purpose of your study in lay language, including the research question(s) you intend to answer. A brief summary of what you write here should be included in the Informed Consent document.

The purpose of this study is to understand the power and influence of the institution of motherhood, which is a force that affects the way a woman understands her identity as a mother; the ideology (or cultural and social notions) surrounding motherhood; and the way that she performs motherhood (or performs her role as a mother).

Generally, the research question for this study is very basic: What makes a good mother? More specifically, the purpose of this research is to explore how our perceptions of identity, ideology, and performance shape the way we define a good mother in contemporary U.S. society. At the root of the dilemma of understanding the ideology and performance of motherhood is the issue of identity. How does a woman’s identity shift when she becomes a mother and does this identity change over time (i.e. as her children grow or circumstances in her life change)? How important is the identity of “mother” to women? Next, ideology continues to perpetuate ideas of what makes a good mother. This ideology is shaped by media, politics, pop culture, religion and even other mothers. It promotes the widespread acceptance of essential elements of motherhood. This research will ask participants to define their perspective on these ideals. In other words, asking the subjects to define what a good mother looks like. In addition, this study will question how the identity and ideology of motherhood shape performance. Are there rules for performing motherhood? Do mothers who reject the norms of motherhood identity and ideology become ostracized or are they at a disadvantage? Finally, this research should also question whether or not mothers embrace or reject the social norms of motherhood identity, ideology and performance.

7. Previous Research

In no more than half a page, summarize previous research leading to the formulation of this study, including any past or current research conducted by the Investigator or key personnel that leads directly to the formulation of this study (including citations and references.)

Previous research suggests that motherhood identity, ideology and performance has continued to influence mothers’ lives, making this a subject worthy of and pertinent to scholarly attention. Although numerous studies have focused on the ideology of motherhood (Rothman 1994, Chodorow 1978 & 1998, DiQuinzio 1999, Orleck 1997, Douglas & Michaels 2004, Hochschild & Machung 1998), many have looked directly at the ways in which mothers are portrayed in the media or have problematized the ideology itself from a theoretical approach. This research differs in that it will explore and question the perceptions mothers have of this ideology; their attitudes toward it; and its relationship to identity and performance. Continuing to study motherhood will lead to social research that can turn a critical eye to the pressures mothers feel to perform their roles in specific ways as well as living up to the standard of “good” mother.

Please see attached for references to be included in this research.

8. Recruitment of Participants

Describe the projected number of subjects.

Approximately 20

Describe the population from which subjects will be recruited (including gender, racial/ethnic composition, and age range).

Mothers of various ages who represent a variety of racial/ethnic backgrounds will be recruited for this study.

Describe how you will recruit the subjects.
Mothers will be recruited via snowball sampling technique. Some will also be recruited for participation from the UNT Child Development Laboratory. I have spoken with Dr. Carol Hagen, director of the Child Development Laboratory, about the research. She is familiar with the study and methods and has granted permission to recruit mothers of children enrolled at the school.

Have you attached a copy of all recruitment materials?

☐ Yes    ☐ No

9. Vulnerable Populations
Please identify any vulnerable populations who will be targeted for participation in this study:

☐ Children (under 18 years of age)  ☑ Pregnant Women  ☐ Mentally Impaired or Mentally Retarded

If any boxes are checked, describe any special precautions to be taken in your study due to the inclusion of these populations.

Though pregnant women will not specifically be targeted for this study, it is possible that some mothers participating may be pregnant. I will assure that they are physically comfortable during the interview process.

10. Location of Study
Identify all locations where the study will be conducted.

The interviews will be conducted at the UNT Child Development Laboratory, the homes of the participants, or at another neutral location. The location of the interviews will be decided by the individual participants. The interviews will be conducted by Jennifer Vigil, but Dr. Michelle Poulin will receive a record of all interview times and locations. If the interviews are conducted at the participants' homes, Dr. Poulin will act as a third party who is aware that the interview is taking place. Jennifer Vigil will also have access to a cell phone during all interviews in case of emergency. If the interview is conducted at a location other than the UNT Child Development Laboratory or the participants' homes, management will be obtained before conducting the interview.

For data collection sites other than UNT, attach a signed and dated letter on the cooperating institution's letterhead giving approval for data collection at that site.

☐ Yes    ☐ No

11. Informed Consent
Describe the steps for obtaining the subjects' informed consent (by whom, where, when, etc.).

Consent will be obtained at the time of the interview by Jennifer Vigil via Informed Consent Form.

12. Informed Consent Forms
Written Informed Consent Forms to be signed by the subject are required for most research projects with human participants (exceptions include telephone surveys, internet surveys, and other circumstances where the subject is not present; an Informed Consent Notice may be substituted). Templates for creating consent forms are located on the IRB website at [http://research.unt.edu/ors/compliance/human.htm](http://research.unt.edu/ors/compliance/human.htm). All informed consent documents you plan to use must be submitted before IRB review can begin.

13. Foreign Languages
Will your study involve the use of any language other than English for Informed Consent forms, data collection instruments, or recruitment materials?

☐ Yes    ☑ No

If “Yes,” after the IRB has notified you of the approval of the English version of your forms, you must then submit the foreign language versions along with a back-translation for each. Specify all foreign languages below:
### 14. Data Collection

Which methods will you use to collect data?

- **Interviews**
- **Surveys**
- **Focus Groups**
- **Assessment Instruments**
- **Internet Surveys**
- **Review of Existing Records**
- **Observation**
- **Other – Please list below.**

The interviews will be recorded by digital recorder.

Have you attached a copy of all data collection instruments, interview scripts, and intervention protocols to be used?

- **Yes**
- **No**

Provide a list of all data collection instruments below. Attach a copy and label each instrument.

The following instruments will be used: Interview script (to be followed by interviewer) and demographic information form.

What is the estimated time for a subject’s participation in each study activity (including time per session and total number of sessions)?

**Subjects will participate in one interview session which will last approximately 30 minutes.**

### 15. HIPAA

Will your study involve obtaining individually identifiable health information from health care plans, health care clearinghouses, or health care providers?

- **Yes**
- **No**
- **Not Applicable**

If “Yes,” describe the procedures you will use to comply with the HIPAA Privacy Rule. (For more information about HIPAA, see the HIPAA Guidance page on the IRB website at [http://research.unt.edu/ors/compliance/hipaa.htm](http://research.unt.edu/ors/compliance/hipaa.htm).)

### 16. Compensation

Describe any compensation subjects will receive for participating in the study. Include the timing for payment and any conditions for receipt of such compensation. If extra credit for a course is offered, an alternative non-research activity with equivalent time and effort must also be offered.

**The subjects will receive no compensation for participation in this study.**

### 17. Risks and Benefits

Describe any foreseeable risks to subjects presented by the proposed study and the precautions you will take to minimize such risks.

**There are minimal risks for participation in this study. However, the subjects may feel some discomfort.**
when answering questions about personal values and beliefs. If they feel uncomfortable answering a particular question and wish not to answer, they are invited to ask the interviewer to move on to the next question or withdraw their participation.

Describe the anticipated benefits to subjects or others (including your field of study).

This study will not directly benefit the subjects, but they will help contribute to important social research that seeks to understand the ways in which motherhood identity, ideology and performance continues to be a formidable force in women’s lives.

18. Confidentiality

Describe the procedures you will use to maintain the confidentiality of any personally identifiable data.

The confidentiality of individual information is very important and will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study. The signed consent forms will be kept separate from the interview recordings and/or transcripts, and the personal information form. The digital recordings of interviews will be saved in a separate file maintained and accessed only by the principal investigator and key personnel (Jennifer Vigil). The recordings and other collected research data will be maintained by the principal investigator, Dr. Poulin, on the UNT campus for three years following the end of the study. Portions of the transcriptions of the interview will appear in a Master’s thesis and may appear in other publications or presentations. In such cases, the participants’ anonymity will be carefully maintained.

19. Publication of Results

Please identify all methods in which you may publicly disseminate the results of your study.

- Academic journal
- Academic conference paper or public poster session
- Book or chapter
- A thesis or dissertation for one of your students
- UNT Scholarly Works Repository
- Other - Please list below.
  (E.g. website or blog)
Investigator Signature
I certify that the information in this application is complete and accurate. I agree to conduct this study in accordance with the UNT IRB Guidelines and the study procedures and forms approved by the UNT IRB. I understand that I cannot initiate any contact with potential human subjects until I have received written UNT IRB approval.

Signature of Investigator ____________________________ Date _______________________

Electronic Submission Checklist

1. Print and sign this page and then scan the signed document.

2. Attach all supplementary documents, including:
   a. Copies of all NIH IRB Training completion certificates not previously submitted to the IRB Office;
   b. A copy of any proposal for internal or external funding for this study;
   c. A copy of all recruitment materials;
   d. A copy of the approval letter from each data collection site (other than UNT);
   e. A copy of all informed consent forms; and
   f. A copy of all data collection instruments, interview scripts and intervention protocols.

3. E-mail the application (including this Signature Page) and all supplementary documents to untirb@unt.edu. Please insert “Expedited or Full Board Review” in the subject line of your email.

Contact Shelia Bourns at Shelia.Bourns@unt.edu for any questions about completion of your application.
Before agreeing to participate in this research study, it is important that you read and understand the following explanation of the purpose, benefits and risks of the study and how it will be conducted.

**Title of Study:** The “Good” Mother: Ideology, Identity and Performance

**Principal Investigator:** Dr. Michelle Poulin, University of North Texas (UNT) Department of Sociology.

**Key Personnel:** Jennifer Vigil, Graduate Student, University of North Texas (UNT), Department of Sociology.

**Purpose of the Study:** You are being asked to participate in a research study that seeks to answer a very basic question: What makes a good mother? The purpose of this research is to understand the power and influence of the institution of motherhood, which is a force that affects the way a woman understands her identity as a mother; the ideology (or cultural notions) surrounding motherhood; and the way that she performs motherhood (or performs her role as a mother).

**Study Procedures:** You will be asked to participate in an interview and complete a short information sheet that will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. The interview will be digitally recorded.

**Foreseeable Risks:** There are minimal risks for participation in this study. However, you may feel some discomfort when answering questions about personal values and beliefs. If you feel uncomfortable answering a particular question and wish not to answer, you are invited to ask the interviewer to move on to the next question or withdraw your participation.

**Benefits to the Subjects or Others:** This study may not be of any direct benefit to you, but it is expected that the information collected from interviews will help contribute to important social research that seeks to understand the ways in which motherhood identity, ideology and performance influences women’s lives.

**Compensation for Participants:** You will receive no compensation for your participation in this study.

**Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality of Research Records:** The confidentiality of your individual information is very important and will be maintained in any publications or presentations regarding this study. Your signed consent forms will be kept separate from your interview and personal information form. The digital recordings of this interview will be saved in a separate file maintained and accessed only by the principal investigator and key personnel (Jennifer Vigil). The recordings will be held for approximately 5 years and then will be destroyed. Portions of the transcriptions of the interview will appear in a Master’s thesis and may appear in other publications or presentations. In such cases, your anonymity will be carefully maintained.

**Questions about the Study:** If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Dr. Michelle Poulin, Department of Sociology, at (940) 565-4880. You may also contact Jennifer Vigil.
Review for the Protection of Participants: This research study has been reviewed and approved by the UNT Institutional Review Board (IRB). The UNT IRB can be contacted at (940) 565-3940 with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects.

Research Participants’ Rights:
Your signature below indicates that you have read or have had read to you all of the above and that you confirm all of the following:

- Jennifer Vigil (for Dr. Michelle Poulin) has explained the study to you and answered all of your questions. You have been told the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study.
- You understand that you do not have to take part in this study, and your refusal to participate or your decision to withdraw will involve no penalty or loss of rights or benefits. The study personnel may choose to stop your participation at any time.
- Your decision whether to participate or to withdraw from the study will have no effect on your standing at the UNT Child Development Laboratory.
- You understand why the study is being conducted and how it will be performed.
- You understand your rights as a research participant and you voluntarily consent to participate in this study.
- You have been told you will receive a copy of this form.

________________________________________________________________________
Printed Name of Participant

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Participant                                      Date

For the Principal Investigator or Designee:
I certify that I have reviewed the contents of this form with the subject signing above. I have explained the possible benefits and the potential risks and/or discomforts of the study. It is my opinion that the participant understood the explanation.

________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Principal Investigator or Designee               Date
Michelle Poulin
Department of Sociology
University of North Texas

Re: Human Subjects Application No. 11218

Dear Dr. Poulin:

As permitted by federal law and regulations governing the use of human subjects in research projects (45 CFR 46), the UNT Institutional Review Board has reviewed your proposed project titled "the Good Mother: Ideology, Identity and Performance." The risks inherent in this research are minimal, and the potential benefits to the subject outweigh those risks. The submitted protocol is hereby approved for the use of human subjects in this study. Federal Policy 45 CFR 46.109(e) stipulates that IRB approval is for one year only, May 2, 2011 to May 1, 2012.

Enclosed is the consent document with stamped IRB approval. Please copy and use this form only for your study subjects.

It is your responsibility according to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regulations to submit annual and terminal progress reports to the IRB for this project. The IRB must also review this project prior to any modifications.

Please contact Sheila Bourns, Research Compliance Analyst, or Boyd Herndon, Director of Research Compliance, at extension 3940, if you wish to make changes or need additional information.

Sincerely,

Patricia L. Kaminski, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Psychology
Chair, Institutional Review Board

PK:ab
APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT LETTER
What Makes a Good Mother?

You are invited to contribute to a research study that seeks to answer a very basic question: What makes a good mother? I’m currently seeking mothers of children at the UNT Child Development Lab (CDL) to participate in a study to complete my Master’s thesis. The purpose of this research is to understand the power and influence of the institution (or traditions) of motherhood in the United States, which affects the way a woman understands her identity as a mother; the ideology (or cultural notions) surrounding motherhood; and the way that she performs motherhood (or performs her role as a mother).

Participation in this study will include a 20-30 minute interview scheduled at a time and location convenient for you. The interview can be conducted in your home or in Matthews Hall (which houses the CDL) or at another neutral location.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and in no way affects your (or your child’s) standing at the Child Development Laboratory. Even if your child will no longer be enrolled in the CDL after this term, you are still invited to participate. You will receive no compensation for your participation, but you will help contribute to important social research that seeks to understand the ways in which motherhood identity, ideology and performance continue to influence women’s lives.

Please contact me no later than May 18th via phone or email if you are willing to participate.

Thank you for your consideration,

Jennifer Vigil
Graduate Student
Department of Sociology
University of North Texas

Graduate Advisor: Dr. Michelle Poulin, Department of Sociology, Michelle.Poulin@unt.edu
REFERENCES


