

Invisible Mothers: A Content Analysis of Motherhood Ideologies and Myths in Magazines

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The purpose of this study is to identify prevalent motherhood ideologies and myths in contemporary women's magazines. The results indicate that contemporary magazines promote a traditional motherhood ideology, yet perpetuate motherhood myths that undermine mothers who stay home. Traditional motherhood, which excludes Women of Color and employed mothers, is promoted. Mothers are almost exclusively presented in the domestic, rather than the public or integrated domestic-public, contexts. Myths that employed mothers are busy, tired, and guilty, and that employed mothers neglect and are unattached to their children, are not upheld. However, negative myths that at-home mothers are confused, overwhelmed, and interested only in superficial topics are upheld in the magazines analyzed. The implications of these results on the perpetuation of patriarchy are discussed.

KEY WORDS: ideology; magazines; motherhood; women; myths; media; content analysis.

In the last century, American culture promoted a romanticized ideal to which all mothers are supposed to aspire. The ideal is the full-time, at-home, middle-class White mother fully engaged and fulfilled in the private sphere (Boris, 1994). Yet, at the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of motherhood ideologies compete for ascendancy. Research on the sources of motherhood ideologies has led to the historical analysis of self-help literature (Zimmerman, Holm, & Haddock, 2001), child-rearing manuals (Dally, 1982; Eyer, 1996), and expert advice (Ehrenreich & English, 1978). Other researchers have explored the role of socialized gender roles (Chodorow, 1978; Johnson, 1988) and cultural expectations (Dally, 1982; Maushart, 1999; Rich, 1976) on the construction of motherhood. Relatively little attention has been paid to the role of the media in constructing motherhood ideologies (Keller, 1994). The purpose of this study is to explore the portrayal of employed and at-home

mothers in current women's magazines as a source of cultural myths and ideologies that define contemporary motherhood.

MOTHERHOOD IDEOLOGIES

To explore ideologies of motherhood, it is useful to recognize that motherhood is not biologically determined or socially ascribed. Motherhood is a social and historical construction (Bassin, Honey, & Kaplan, 1994; Glenn, 1994; Risman, 1998). Coontz (1992) argued that the "traditional family" with a wage-earner father and a stay-at-home mother is an historical and cultural aberration. Culture tells us what it means to be a mother, what behaviors and attitudes are appropriate for mothers, and how motherhood should shape relationships and self-identity.

Jayne Buxton (1998) described the adversarial climate of competing ideologies as the "mother war." She documented how stereotypical characterizations of the Superwoman (who efficiently manages her household and children with the same cold-hearted equanimity she employs in the business world) are pitted against the Earth Mother (who, barefoot and wearing kaftans, feeds her children

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home-grown organic foods with an everpresent beatific smile). Each motherhood camp justifies its own ideology by co-opting the values of the other: “I am a better mother if I work”; “I am resisting the dominant culture and exercising my free choice and power as a woman to stay at home with my children.”

A dominant ideology supports the cultural hegemony by creating social expectations for a social group. For example, a patriarchal ideology of mothering denies women identities and selfhood outside of motherhood (Glenn, 1994). Feminist scholars have explored how current motherhood ideologies sustain patriarchy (Rothman, 1994), perpetuate the economic dependency of middle-class women and the economic exploitation of working-class and migrant women (Chang, 1994), and project White, middle-class mothers’ experiences as universal and ideal (Collins, 1994). Culture defines and rewards “good mothers,” and it sanctions “bad mothers.”

There are many mothers who fall outside the club of “good motherhood” as defined by dominant motherhood ideologies. A number of scholars have noted the relegation of teenage mothers (Bailey, Brown, & Wilson, 2002), older mothers, single mothers, and lesbian mothers (Lewin, 1994) to the bottom rungs of the hierarchy of motherhood (DiLapi, 1989). A number of researchers have addressed both the historical and contemporary exclusion of African, Asian, and Latina American mothers from the cult of domesticity that defines American motherhood (Collins, 1994; Dill, 1988; Glenn, 1992).

There are clearly racial and class biases in the social construction of good and bad mothers. Solinger (1994) found that whereas Black single mothers are labeled deviant by the dominant culture, White single mothers are considered “troubled” but “redeemable.” Although the conventional motherhood ideology maintains that mothers should not work outside the home, economically or financially privileged mothers continue to hire working-class women, and Women of Color, who are often mothers themselves, to perform the more arduous childcare work (Blair-Loy, 2001; Chang, 1994). Thus, the construction of motherhood, particularly in the form of dominant ideologies, may have little correspondence to the lived social realities of mothers.

MOTHERHOOD MYTHS

The building blocks of ideologies are myths. Barthes (1972) defined a myth as an uncontested

and unconscious assumption that is so widely accepted that its historical and cultural origins are forgotten. As such, myths of motherhood are presented as “natural,” “instinctual,” and “intuitive” as opposed to “cultural,” “economic,” “political,” and “historical” (Hrdy, 2000). Ideologies are born when myths are combined into coherent philosophies and politically sanctioned by the culture.

Myths of employed and at-home mothers abound in the culture. A cursory glance at the motherhood section of a bookstore is revealing. Employed mothers are tired, busy, and guilty (e.g., *The Third Shift*, Bolton, 2000; *Motherguilt*, Eyer, 1996). At-home mothers live in a state of bliss (e.g., *Home by Choice: Raising Emotionally Secure Children in an Insecure World*, Hunter, 2000; *Mitten Strings for God*, Kenison, 2000). On the negative side, at-home mothers suffer from “mommy mush brain” due to lack of intellectual stimulation (e.g., “I told one man, ‘I’m a mother at home,’ and was greeted with the sight of his back as he wandered off to find someone more important to talk to”—from the book jacket of *Staying Home: From Full-Time Professional to Full-Time Parent*, Sanders & Bullen, 1992). Employed mothers neglect their children, or at the very least have difficulty meeting children’s basic needs of adequate food, clothing, protection, supervision, and security (e.g., *Parent by Proxy: Don’t Have Them If You Won’t Raise Them*, Schlessinger, 2000). Employed mothers put their family relationships at risk and jeopardize mother–infant bonding (cf. *Bad Mothers*, Ladd-Taylor & Uamnsky, 1998; and *Mother–Infant Bonding: A Scientific Fiction*, Eyer 1992, that challenge the veracity of these myths). In contrast, at-home mothers are bonded and attached to their children, to the point of being overinvolved, controlling, and enmeshed (e.g., *When Mothers Work: Loving Our Children Without Sacrificing Our Selves*, Peters, 1997). On the positive side, at-home mothers are ever present and therefore competent in protecting and supervising their children (e.g., *Children First*, Leach, 1995).

Scholars have sought to identify the underlying causes of maternal myths (Chodorow, 1978; Hays, 1996; Mauschart, 1999; McMahon, 1995; Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1983, 1989; Thurer, 1995; Trebilcot, 1983). These scholars agree that the primary cause of maternal myths is the perpetuation of patriarchy. The maternal bliss myth—that motherhood is the joyful fruition of every woman’s aspirations—perpetuates systems of patriarchy by attributing any maternal unhappiness and dissatisfaction to failure of the mother.

A good mother is a happy mother; an unhappy mother is a failed mother. This myth attributes responsibility for the conditions of motherhood to the individual, not the system.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

Although there are a number of popular press claims that women's magazines promote feminism (Wolfe, 1991), political involvement (Crabtree, 1996), and a liberal agenda (Media Report to Women, 1997), empirical studies of magazine content are consistent in their assessment that women's traditional representation in women's general interest magazines has changed relatively little over the second half of the twentieth century (M. Ferguson, 1983; Keller, 1994; Murphy, 1994; Walsh, 1999).

Murphy (1994) identified four themes in traditional general interest women's magazines: (a) the normal world is White and middle to upper-middle class; (b) women are domestic; (c) women are expected to be beautiful; and (d) consumerism is a focus of women's lives. Murphy compared the traditional women's magazines with the content in magazines that targeted the "new [non-traditional] woman": *Ms.*, *New Woman*, *Working Woman*, and *Lear's*. Murphy concluded that "It may now be acceptable to be independent, politically involved, sexually active, committed to a career; even to be over forty. But it's only acceptable if you look right and have the necessary accoutrements" (p. 126). The White, middle-class, beauty-obsessed, consumerist images are prevalent in three of the four alternative magazines analyzed (Murphy, 1994). Walsh (1999) also reported a lack of political, social, economic, and nondomestic content in 10 popular women's magazines: *Ladies Home Journal*, *Glamour*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Working Woman*, *Redbook*, *McCall's*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Family Circle*, *Women's Day*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*. As such, the messages in women's magazines may be less a reflection of society than a means for perpetuating social myths of gender.

If, as research suggests, women's magazines persist in promoting a traditional gender ideology, what mother ideology is being promoted? Kaplan (1990, 1992) found that popular culture images of mothers in the 1980s present women as career-oriented, or as mothers, but seldom as both. Female sexuality and work are still constructed as antithetical to motherhood, according to Kaplan.

In another study of magazine content, we (Johnston & Swanson, 2003) found that mothers are subjected to double-bind communication—that is, contradictory messages that promote a particular behavior or identity and simultaneously condemn a mother for enacting it. For example, at-home mothers were lured with motivations for domestic success but were presented as incompetent in achieving this success. The same mothers that are lauded for staying home full-time and fulfilling their biologically guaranteed maternal instincts are the targets of magazine messages that undermine their natural abilities as mothers by making them dependent upon expert advice for the most simple mothering decisions. Double-bind communication undermines both mothers' ability to mother and mothers' ability to change the conditions of motherhood.

Keller's three-decade historical theme analysis of women's magazines specifically addressed mothering ideologies (Keller, 1994). Keller suggested a traditionalist ideology in the 1960s, a feminist ideology in the 1970s, and both a neotraditionalist and economic nurturer ideology in the 1980s. Although current research on motherhood further explicates these ideological themes, no recent studies have assessed the prevalence of these mothering ideologies in women's magazines.

The traditional mother paradigm is characterized by hierarchical control, expectations of maternal sacrifice, and delegation of childcare and domestic responsibilities to the mother (Schlessinger, 2000). The traditional mother is White, educated, married, middle-class, and does not work outside the home (Keller, 1994). The traditional mother ideology incorporates the "Strict Father Model" (Lakoff, 1996), which is founded on the premise that to combat the evils of the world, children must develop a strong moral character through self-discipline, self-restraint, and self-control. This model of parenting presumes proprietary or possessive control of children and the parental right to exclude outside interference (Smith, 1983).

The feminist model of motherhood promotes parent-shared child and domestic responsibilities, rewarding employment, and empowering familial relationships (Ehrensaft, 1983; Held, 1983). The feminist model presumes public sphere and community involvement in raising children (Valeska, 1983), a child-centered culture in which children and motherhood are valued (Kittay, 1983), and accessible support services to help mothers provide the best care for children and themselves (A. Ferguson, 1983). A mother

with a sense of self-efficacy acquired through the pursuit of outside or personal interests and rewarding work is likely to be, according to this model, a better mother (Barnett & Rivers, 1998; Hanson & Sloane, 1992; Peters, 1997).

Neotraditionalists are mothers who resign from the workplace and return to the hearth (Dagnan, 1999). Neotraditionalists co-opt feminist values by justifying their decisions in terms of personal fulfillment and empowered choice (Keller, 1994). Child-centered reasons are used to rationalize, and even to romanticize, staying home full-time (Hunter, 2000). In neotraditionalist families children receive intensive attention and mother involvement, and their development is carefully monitored according to the latest child-raising books, magazines, and websites (e.g., www.mom.com—feminist stay-at-home site; www.bizymoms.com—at-home business ideas; www.stayhomemom.biz—everything for the stay-at-home mom; www.mochamoms.org—stay-at-home Mothers of Color).

According to the economic nurturing ideology, motherly love is demonstrated in part by providing additional goods and services to children (Keller, 1994). Although working-class mothers have historically comprised the majority of women in the workforce, economic justifications for working are now being adopted by middle- and upper-middle-class mothers who seek to buy experiences for their children. Financial rationalizations for working imply that mothers would stay home full-time were it economically feasible. Economic nurturers are more apt than other employed mothers to balance competing work–family demands by compromising their career aspirations (Keller, 1994). Economic nurturers are more likely to fit Gilbert’s conventional and modern dual-career family patterns in which mothers retain primary responsibility for domestic duties (Gilbert, 1994).

Women’s magazines are but one source of identity information for mothers in our culture, yet their importance, as a source of motherhood ideologies, should not be underestimated. Indeed, the sheer pervasiveness of the medium—in grocery store check-out lines, doctors’ offices, and the home—warrants its analysis and attention. It matters little whether mothers model these performances or use them as sites of resistance to the dominant ideology of motherhood—either way, according to Corrigan and Sayer (1985), discursive practices distort and constrain our perceptions of reality, and even our perceptions of the plausible and the possible. Women’s magazines are one

enactment of what Bakhtin (1981) calls “ideological performance.” Magazine discourse presents concentrated and highly seductive images and text that communicate cultural expectations for women’s maternal roles.

Content analysis of media is a way to uncover cultural meanings (Thomas, 1994). Ideologies and myths are assumed, often unconscious, highly valued, and rigorously defended. As such, they are not always identifiable in behavioral practices or able to be articulated by individual informants (Thomas, 1994). The lack of current research on the representation of mothers in women’s magazines, and the current climate of competing motherhood ideologies and contradictory myths (Buxton, 1998; Maushart, 1999), prompts us to explore the following research questions.

RQ1: What motherhood ideologies are promoted in women’s magazines? Is there a dominant motherhood ideology?

RQ2: How are maternal myths within the dominant ideological frame, or competing ideological frames, portrayed?

METHOD

Magazine subscription data was obtained from *Mediamark Research Inc.* (1999) magazine audience estimates. The two highest subscription magazines for women of childbearing age are *Good Housekeeping* and *Family Circle*. *Parents* magazine is the highest subscription parenting magazine. Although *Family Fun* and *Working Mother* could not compete with the subscription rates of the traditional women’s magazines, they are the top magazines ranked by composition of employed mothers (*Mediamark Research Inc.*, 1999). Composition refers to the percentage of total readers of the publication who have a particular attribute. These five magazines were selected for analysis to represent the highest subscription traditional women’s magazines, the highest subscription parenting magazines, and the magazines with the highest composition of employed mothers.

One issue per quarter over the 12-month period of the study (September 1998, December 1998, March 1999, and June 1999) was selected for analysis. The entire content of each publication was analyzed for mother representations. A mother-related text unit was defined as an article, advertisement, shortie (i.e., short take-out box or an article less than one full

page), letter/testimonial, or question-and-answer column that contained mother references. The entire text unit (e.g., article) was the unit of analysis for coding. Twenty percent of the sample was used to assess unitizing reliability. Three coders, who worked independently, achieved high unitizing reliability ($U = .99$) for what constituted a text unit that represented mothers (Guetzkow, 1950). The analysis of the 20 issues that comprised the sample for this study yielded 1,139 mother-related text units.

In addition, to compare the portrayal of mothers and nonmothers in magazine content, all advertisements were coded. Two hundred forty advertisements portrayed women with no reference to motherhood. Nonmother ads included no identity images or text that depicted the women in relation to children or maternal status. Unless otherwise noted, analyses were conducted on the sample of mother-related text units ($n = 1,139$). When specifically indicated, follow-up analyses of mother and nonmother comparisons in advertising ($n = 692$) was useful in some cases to determine if a particular trend in representation was typical of all women in magazines or uniquely targeted to mothers.

Text units were coded for motherhood ideologies and maternal myths. Initial attempts to employ Keller's coding scheme for motherhood ideologies (e.g., traditional, feminist, neo-traditional, and economic nurturing; Keller, 1994) proved ineffective. Discussions regarding justifications for working (e.g., feminism or economic nurturance), or justifications for moving into or out of the workforce (e.g., traditionalist or neotraditionalist) were so rare that Keller's coding scheme (Keller, 1994) was collapsed to reflect the more simplified distinctions between traditional and nontraditional motherhood ideologies. Traditional/nontraditional ideology was defined by mothers' race, employment status, and representation in public and/or private spheres. The literature review of motherhood ideologies suggests that the traditional "good-mother" ideology is associated with being White, unemployed, and involved only in the private sphere (Collins, 1994; Coontz, 1992; Glenn, 1994).

Race was analyzed using the subsample of advertisements. Advertisements were used for this analysis because race information was typically conveyed in photos rather than text. Moreover, the advertising sample allowed for comparisons of the racial representation of mothers and nonmothers in magazine content. It is important to determine whether a racial bias is associated with all representations in a mag-

azine or is unique to the representation of mothers. Race was coded as follows: (a) one or more Women of Color; (b) White women only; or (c) no race identity information provided.

Employment status was determined by references to employment in the text and/or inferred from the portrayal of women in uniforms, business suits and briefcases, or in an office context. Text units were coded as representing at-home mothers if no employment information was presented.

Public/private sphere was coded as public sphere, private sphere, both public and private sphere, or neither sphere. Public sphere was coded as anywhere outside the home, yard, or car. Domestic sphere was coded as home, yard, or car. Both public/private sphere context included any reference to working at home, taking children to work, any representation of a mother in a public setting, or engaged in any public issue.

Maternal myths perpetuate expectations of maternal bliss, selfless interaction with children, and fulfillment of aspirations through private-sphere interests (Maushart, 1999; Ruddick, 1989; Thurer, 1995; Trebilcot, 1983). Text units were coded for the portrayal of mothers' emotional states, mothers' interactive roles with children, and topics of interest targeted to employed and at-home mothers. The coding categories were derived using a Q-sort technique. Five independent coders sorted text units into piles reflecting similarities and differences in emotional state, mother role, and topic. Consistent piles were used to construct coding categories as described below.

Mothers' emotional states were coded as happy/unhappy, proud/not proud, busy/not busy, confused-overwhelmed/not confused-overwhelmed, guilty/not guilty, tired/not tired, and angry/not angry. Emotional states were not represented in every text unit; "not relevant" was a coding category for each emotional state.

Text units were also coded for the dominant mother role presented: (a) necessity provider—providing food, clothing, transportation; (b) protector—protecting child from disease, accidents, strangers, bad influences; (c) playmate—providing entertainment, one-on-one interaction; (d) innovator—creating new child-raising ideas; (e) teacher—challenging the child intellectually and experientially; (f) loving nurturer—demonstrating affection, emotional support, comfort; (g) worker—volunteering or reflecting an employment role; (h) disciplinarian; (i) spiritual/moral advisor; and (j) other/no reference/mixed-role presentations.

Text units were coded for topic focus according to the following categories: (a) fun/entertainment/luxury—entertaining tips, recreational activities, and promotion of consumer luxury items; (b) food/home/practical necessity—promotion of economical and practical home products, information and instructions regarding home, food, and domestic duties; (c) health; (d) relationships; (e) body and beauty topics; (f) psychological improvement; (g) employment issues; (h) social, political, or educational interest; and (i) other.

Three coders, who worked independently, achieved high intercoder reliability (Scott's pi = .86 averaged over 37 variables). Scott's pi (1955) was used to assess intercoder reliability because it corrects for the number of categories used and for the expected frequency of categories used (Krippendorff, 1970; Scott, 1955). Group discussion among the coders and the authors was used to further refine coding categories and resolve discrepancies.

RESULTS

Motherhood Ideology: Traditional versus Untraditional

One indicator of traditional motherhood ideology is race. Of all advertisements in the 20 magazines analyzed, 12% ($n = 64$) represented one or more Women of Color, and 88% ($n = 470$) presented White women only. The remaining 158 advertisements included no race identity information.

Employment contexts, however, reflected greater diversity—at least for nonmothers. When employed nonmothers were depicted with race identity in advertising, 60% ($n = 21$) were White, and 40% ($n = 14$) were Women of Color. Yet when we looked at mothers only ($n = 363$), Women of Color disappeared. A crosstabulation of mothers' work status by race in magazine ads revealed that 89% ($n = 23$) of working mothers and 95% ($n = 120$) of mothers in the home were White, $\chi^2(4, N = 363) = 26.30$, $p < .001$. There is no significant difference in the representation of race in advertisements by magazine, $\chi^2(4, N = 534) = 6.43$, $p = .169$. Yet, motherhood, as represented in magazine advertisements, appears to be the exclusive domain of White America.

The results further indicate that employed mothers are grossly underrepresented in women's mag-

azines. Employed mothers were presented in 12% ($n = 140$), and at-home mothers were portrayed in 88% ($n = 999$), of all mother-related text units.

The representation of employed mothers significantly varied by magazine, $\chi^2(8, N = 1,139) = 163.55$, $p < .001$. A comparison of standardized residuals revealed that *Working Mother* magazine incorporated significantly more representations of employed mothers than did other magazines (see Table I). Forty percent ($n = 56$) of the employed mother portrayals appeared in *Working Mother* magazine. The representation of mothers in the other four magazines varied from 9% ($n = 12$) in *Family Fun* to 19% ($n = 27$) in *Parents* magazine.

Mothers were presented in traditional contexts in the magazines. Mothers were most often portrayed in the domestic sphere (84%, $n = 927$). Fifteen percent ($n = 172$) of mothers were portrayed in both public and domestic contexts, and only 1% ($n = 10$) of mothers were portrayed in the public sphere. Three percent ($n = 30$) of all text units contained no reference to either a public or domestic context.

The representation of mothers in traditional contexts significantly varied by work status, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,109) = 170.96$, $p < .001$. The results reveal dramatic differences: 89% ($n = 863$) of at-home mothers were typically presented exclusively in the home, car, or yard, compared to 45% of employed mothers ($n = 63$). Thirty percent ($n = 42$) of employed mothers were presented in the public sphere, compared to less than 1% ($n = 7$) of at-home mothers. Fifty-three percent ($n = 74$) of employed mothers were portrayed in both public and private spheres, compared to only 10% ($n = 99$) of at-home mothers. Thirty text units contained no information regarding private/public sphere context.

Mothers were seldom presented in the public sphere. An example of employed mothers in an integrated public-private context is the article text: "Our jobs help us expand our minds, take pride in our achievements—and pay the bills. They also help our children learn. Here, readers share the important things that they, as working moms, can teach their children." An example of at-home mothers in an integrated public-private context is a side bar entitled "Expert Tips for Quitting," which recommended that women at home with children volunteer, stay informed about developments in their field, stay connected with former colleagues, developed new talents, and take classes. Public sphere representations of at-home mothers were rare. Even articles that at first glance seemed to reflect a woman's involvement in

Table I. Chi-Square Cell Standardized Residuals for All Variables by Magazine

Ideology variables	GH	FC	P	FF	WM
Race					
White	0.0	-0.8	0.2	0.1	0.3
Women of Color	0.0	2.5	-0.5	-0.2	-1.0
Work status					
Work	2.6	3.1	-4.4	-3.6	7.8
Stay-home	-1.0	-1.2	1.6	1.4	-2.9
Setting					
Domestic	-0.8	-0.9	1.4	0.8	-2.1
Public	-0.1	-0.8	-0.2	0.4	0.4
Integration	1.8	2.3	-3.1	-1.9	4.7
Emotional states					
Happy	-0.5	-0.1	-1.7	3.1	-0.3
Not happy	0.8	0.2	2.5	-4.7	0.4
Proud	-0.6	0.5	-1.6	3.1	-0.9
Not proud	0.8	-0.6	2.1	-4.1	1.1
Confused	1.1	-0.2	2.6	-5.1	0.8
Not confused	-0.7	0.1	-1.7	3.4	-0.6
Busy	0.9	0.1	-0.7	-2.9	3.7
Not busy	-0.4	0.0	0.3	1.3	-1.7
Guilty	0.9	-1.2	2.0	-2.0	-0.9
Not guilty	-0.2	0.3	-0.5	0.5	0.2
Tired	0.7	0.3	1.3	-2.5	-0.2
Not tired	-0.2	-0.1	-0.3	0.6	0.1
Angry	1.7	-0.5	0.7	-1.0	-1.2
Not angry	-0.4	0.1	-0.2	0.2	0.3
Mother-child interactive role					
Necessity provider	1.7	0.9	1.6	-3.1	0.9
Protector	-0.1	0.9	3.5	-4.1	-1.4
Playmate	-2.3	-2.2	-0.35	8.1	-0.7
Innovator	-1.1	-0.6	-1.5	5.7	-3.3
Teacher	0.4	0.2	-0.2	-1.4	1.6
Loving nurturer	1.2	-0.3	0.0	-2.6	2.5
Disciplinarian	0.2	-0.9	2.1	-2.5	0.0
Worker	0.2	1.2	-2.2	-2.6	6.0
Spiritual/moral advisor	-0.2	2.5	-1.3	-1.6	2.6
Other	0.4	-0.7	-0.4	1.3	-0.9
Magazine topics					
Fun/entertainment	-3.7	-3.6	-4.7	12.0	-1.3
Food & home/ practical necessities	2.3	1.5	0.7	-2.6	-1.0
Health	0.5	-0.9	4.8	-4.7	-2.3
Relationship	0.6	2.8	0.0	-4.5	3.2
Work issue	0.4	0.1	-2.7	-3.0	8.1
Psychology/self-improvement	2.4	1.1	1.2	-2.4	-1.7
Body beauty	-1.2	2.0	1.5	-1.8	-0.7
Other	0.4	0.6	2.1	-2.7	-1.1

Note. Standardized residuals are used to determine the location and magnitude of variance within a significant chi-square table with numerous cells (Kennedy, 1992). Standardized residuals can function as z statistics with a residual greater than 1.96 reflecting a significant source of variance (Kennedy, 1992).

public issues, upon further inspection, revealed that the woman involved is an employed mother. For example, “Why You Should Be in Your Child’s School” and “Women Who Make a Difference: Saving Lives

on the Road” are magazine articles that target employed, not at-home mothers.

The representation of mothers in public or private spheres significantly varied by magazine (see Table I). *Working Mother* magazine, not surprisingly, was most likely to present women in integrated public-private sphere settings, followed by *Family Circle*. *Parents* magazine was least likely to present women in integrated settings.

Maternal Myths

Maternal myths frequently reflect expected emotional states of mothers. Five hundred ninety-seven mother-related text units were coded for emotional state. Information regarding emotional state of the mother was not apparent in the remaining text units ($n = 542$). In general, magazine content portrayed mothers as happy (70%, $n = 416$), proud (63%, $n = 377$), not busy (82%, $n = 409$), and not confused (69%, $n = 411$). Portrayals of mother as guilty (6%, $n = 35$), tired (6%, $n = 38$), and angry (5%, $n = 31$) were not prevalent.

However, a series of crosstabulations of mothers’ work status by dichotomous emotional states (see Table II) revealed that employed mothers were significantly more likely to be presented as happy, busy, and proud, whereas at-home mothers were more likely to be depicted as confused-overwhelmed. There were no significant differences in the depictions of working mothers and at-home mothers as guilty, tired, or angry.

Most of the significant differences in emotional state by magazine were between *Family Fun* and *Parents* (see Table I). *Family Fun* was more likely than *Parents* to present mothers as happy, proud, and not confused. *Parents* was more likely to present mothers as not happy, not proud, confused, and guilty. *Working Mother* was most likely to present mothers as busy.

A second indicator of maternal myths is mothers’ interactive role with children. In order of frequency, mothers were portrayed in the role of (a) necessity provider (28%, $n = 310$); (b) protector (18%, $n = 200$); (c) playmate (17%, $n = 193$); (d) innovator (14%, $n = 153$); (e) teacher (9%, $n = 101$); (f) loving nurturer (6%, $n = 64$); (g) volunteer or employed worker (5%, $n = 51$); (h) disciplinarian (3%, $n = 34$); (i) spiritual/moral advisor (1%, $n = 11$); and (j) other/no reference/mixed-role presentations (2%, $n = 22$).

There were significant differences in the mother roles associated with at-home and employed mothers

Table II. Mothers' Emotional State by Mothers' Work Status

	% Employed mother	% At-home mother	% Total
Happy ($n = 416$) ^a			
Row	25.5	74.5	100
Column	84.8	65.8	
Not happy ($n = 180$)			
Row	10.6	89.4	100
Column	15.2	34.2	
Busy ($n = 107$) ^b			
Row	50.5	49.5	100
Column	43.2	11.2	
Not busy ($n = 490$)			
Row	14.5	85.5	100
Column	56.8	88.8	
Confused ($n = 185$) ^c			
Row	12.4	87.6	100
Column	18.4	34.4	
Not confused ($n = 411$)			
Row	24.8	75.2	100
Column	81.6	65.6	
Guilty ($n = 35$) ^d			
Row	14.3	85.7	100
Column	4.0	6.4	
Not guilty ($n = 562$)			
Row	21.4	78.6	100
Column	96.0	93.6	
Proud ($n = 377$) ^e			
Row	27.6	72.4	100
Column	83.2	58.0	
Not proud ($n = 219$)			
Row	9.6	90.4	100
Column	16.8	42.0	
Tired ($n = 38$) ^f			
Row	13.2	86.8	100
Column	4.0	7.0	
Not tired ($n = 558$)			
Row	21.5	78.5	100
Column	96.0	93.0	
Angry ($n = 31$) ^g			
Row	16.1	83.9	100
Column	4.0	5.5	
Not angry ($n = 565$)			
Row	21.2	78.8	100
Column	96.0	94.5	
Total	100	100	

^a $\chi^2(3, N = 597) = 16.89, p < .001.$

^b $\chi^2(3, N = 597) = 68.67, p < .001.$

^c $\chi^2(3, N = 597) = 11.80, p < .001.$

^d $\chi^2(3, N = 597) = 0.99, p < .32.$

^e $\chi^2(3, N = 597) = 27.07, p < .001.$

^f $\chi^2(3, N = 597) = 1.50, p < .15.$

^g $\chi^2(3, N = 597) = 0.46, p < .34.$

(see Table III). Employed mothers were depicted most frequently in the mother roles of worker, necessity provider, and loving nurturer. In contrast, at-home mothers were depicted as necessity providers, protectors, and playmates. Few employed mothers

were depicted in the protector and playmate roles, and few of the at-home mothers were presented in the loving nurturer role.

There were significant differences in mother roles by magazines (see Table I). *Family Fun* emphasized the playmate role and de-emphasized the necessity provider, protector, loving nurturer, and worker roles. *Parents* was most likely to present the protector and disciplinarian roles. *Working Mother* was most likely to present the worker, loving nurturer, and spiritual/moral advisor roles.

The topics addressed in the magazines also reflect myths about mothering. The most prevalent topics in mother-related text units were as follows: (a) fun/entertainment/luxury (31%, $n = 351$); (b) food/home/practical necessity (26%, $n = 291$); (c) health (18%, $n = 201$); and (d) relationships (16%, $n = 180$). Categories of body and beauty topics, psychological improvement, employment issues, and other facts/tidbits were collapsed as they comprised less than 3% ($n = 39$) of the total mother-related text unit topics. No mother-related text units were found for social, political, or educational interest.

There are significant differences in the topics associated with employed and at-home mothers, $\chi^2(7, N = 1,139) = 252.718, p < .001$. Twenty-seven percent ($n = 38$) of all employed mothers representations were concerned with relational maintenance, compared to 14% ($n = 140$) of all at-home mothers. Examples of relational maintenance text units include "Don't let work get between you and your marriage" and "Out of Control: Suddenly a normally happy preschooler throws a tantrum a day." Twenty-four percent ($n = 34$) of all employed mother representations referenced work or volunteer issues, compared to 1% ($n = 5$) of at-home mother representations. An example of a work issue text unit that targets both at-home and employed mothers is "The Zig-Zag Woman: She's a stay-at-home mom when the kids need her most, a working mom when it works for her family." At-home mothers were referenced significantly more often than employed mothers in association with having fun (33%, $n = 329$ vs. 16%, $n = 22$), food/home/practical necessities (27%, $n = 269$ vs. 17%, $n = 24$), and health (19%, $n = 189$ vs. 5%, $n = 7$). An example of a food/home/practical necessities text unit that targets at-home moms is headlined: "The healing power of housework. Stressed out? On the edge? About to lose it? Do a load of laundry."

The topics more than any other variable seem to be driven by the particular magazine (see Table I). An analysis of standardized chi-square residuals

Table III. Mother–Child Interactive Role by Mothers' Work Status

	% Employed mother (<i>n</i> = 139)	% At-home mother (<i>n</i> = 984)	% Total
Necessity provider (<i>n</i> = 310)			
Row	9.0	91.0	100
Column	20.1	28.7	
Protector (<i>n</i> = 200)			
Row	4.0	96.0	100
Column	5.8	19.5	
Playmate (<i>n</i> = 193)			
Row	5.2	94.8	100
Column	7.2	18.6	
Innovator (<i>n</i> = 153)			
Row	12.4	87.6	100
Column	13.7	13.6	
Teacher (<i>n</i> = 101)			
Row	9.9	90.1	100
Column	7.2	9.2	
Loving nurturer (<i>n</i> = 64)			
Row	23.4	76.6	100
Column	10.8	5.0	
Disciplinarian (<i>n</i> = 34)			
Row	5.9	94.1	100
Column	1.4	3.3	
Worker (<i>n</i> = 51)			
Row	80.4	19.6	100
Column	29.5	1.0	
Spiritual/moral advisor (<i>n</i> = 11)			
Row	45.5	54.5	100
Column	4.0	1.0	
Total	100.0	100.0	

Note. χ^2 (9, *N* = 1123) = 263.200, *p* < .001. Nineteen text units contain no information on mother–child interactive role.

indicated that *Family Fun*, as the name of the magazine suggests, overwhelmingly covered topics related to fun and entertainment. *Parents* magazine covered health issues but did not cover issues of fun or work. *Good Housekeeping* covered topics related to food, home, and self-improvement, whereas *Family Circle* covered relationships and body/beauty issues. *Working Mother* featured work issues, but also relationships; it was least likely to cover health issues.

DISCUSSION

Motherhood Ideologies

It is clear that women's magazines persist in the promotion of traditional constructions of motherhood. The results of our study indicate that mothers are presented in magazines as White, at-home mothers, who seldom venture outside the domestic sphere.

In regard to race, the results are compelling. In advertisements, Women of Color are represented in employment contexts, but in the realm of motherhood

they disappear. The exclusion of Women of Color from representations of motherhood and family perpetuate myths and stereotypes that only Whites value family, home, and involved parenting. Moreover, the lack of diversity in mother representations privileges White middle-class hegemony. Glenn (1994) wrote that the social construction of motherhood differs by race, ethnicity, and class such that "White, middle-class children have the highest value, and are deemed worthy of full-time, stay-at-home mothers to nurture them to their full potential" (p. 20). Marketing justifications for the absence of Women of Color are not valid. Dates (1995) found that the African American market is very savvy; they "spend a higher percentage of their money on consumer goods than their White counterparts, showed a preference for top-line merchandise, and demonstrated a willingness to try new products . . . Yet, at many levels the advertising industry continues to act as if this market does not exist" (p. 132).

When we turned to the employment status of mothers in women's magazines, we found that

employed mothers were absent. Despite the fact that Census data confirms that 44% of mothers work full-time and another 18% work part-time (T. Lewin, 2000), only 12% of the mother representations in the magazines we analyzed referenced employed mothers, and only 3% of the mother-related topics made reference to employment issues.

The results also reveal the confinement of mothers to the domestic sphere. At-home mothers in particular were not associated with knowledge and influence outside the home; indeed, they were not even seen outside the home. There are plenty of opportunities to portray mothers involved in social and political change in their communities, yet the magazines focused on introspective, self-related content, to the neglect of social and global issues. Walsh (1999) reported that the content categories that receive the least attention in women's magazines are economy, media, conflict, children, poverty, and the environment. These topics should be of paramount concern to mothers.

Although employed mothers were presented in integrated public-domestic sphere contexts, their presence in the public sphere was presented in conjunction with their pursuit of domestic success. In other words, the employed mother must be represented as being an exemplary mother to justify her employment. These images give the impression that mothers cannot achieve real leadership roles in the public sphere. Men can be very involved fathers, yet appear in media representations exclusively on the merits of their public sphere success, with no reference to their paternal roles. These depictions prevent us from affirming women in leadership roles without assurances that they are also fulfilling their domestic duties.

Maternal Myths

The emotional portrayals of at-home and employed mothers at first seem oddly paradoxical to the traditionalist bias of women's magazines. The representations of at-home mothers as unhappy, not proud, and confused are not consistent with the myth of the blissful at-home experience. Magazines imply that at-home mothers would be happier if they were more competent mothers. This obviously fuels dependence on magazines for expert advice, but it also has potentially damaging effects on the psyches of at-home mothers. Employed mothers are portrayed more positively, as proud and happy. The myth that employed

mothers are tired, busy, and guilty is not upheld in their representation in the women's magazines we analyzed.

Differences in the mythical construction of employed and at-home mothers were further exemplified in mothers' interactions with children. At-home mothers were most frequently portrayed as necessity providers, protectors, and playmates. The prevalence of the necessity provider role is consistent with traditional beliefs that love and nurturance is conveyed instrumentally through provision of food. The fulfillment of relational connection through food is pervasive in the magazines: "For not insisting bunny slippers are shoes. For leaving Blankie behind. For actually getting out of the car. I'll risk spoiling your dinner. Welcome Home Chocolate Bars" (advertisement for condensed milk).

The focus on protection from the scary world is consistent with Lakoff's "Strict Father Model" in which patriarchal authoritative methods are employed to teach children the self-discipline and moral virtue they need to conquer the evils of the world (Lakoff, 1996). The focus on the protector role may perpetuate the myth that at-home mothers are overly protective and enmeshed with their children.

The playmate role has probably evolved from the neotraditionalist ideology that embraces much of the traditionalist ideology but positions the children, rather than the father, as the *raison d'être* of the family. The playmate role is also consistent with the myth that at-home mothers are always accessible and intensely involved in the development of their children.

Employed mothers were portrayed in nurturing roles more frequently than were at-home mothers. Lakoff (1996) associated the "Nurturing Parent Model" with more politically liberal families. The Nurturing Model focuses less on parental authority and more on the development of children's esteem, empathy, capacity for caring, and interpersonal and social responsibility as a means to a fulfilling and happy life. The nurturing roles associated with employed mothers also serve to debunk the myth that employed mothers have difficulty bonding with their children. The portrayal of employed mothers in necessity provider roles counters the myth that employed mothers neglect the needs of their children. Moreover, the portrayal of employed mothers as workers interacting with their children depicts mothers modeling employment and public sphere involvement for their children.

Neotraditionalist constructions of motherhood are apparent in the topical content associated with

mothers. The association of employed mothers with relational topics perpetuates the myth that employment jeopardizes family relationships and bolsters the neotraditionalist “go home and save the children” justification for quitting employment. Predominant targeting of at-home mothers with “how to have fun” topics simplifies the lived experience of at-home mothers and is consistent with the neotraditionalist romanticizing of the return to the hearth. “Fun” topics sharply contrast with the negative emotional portrayals of at-home mothers noted earlier.

Increased interest in maternal feminism has given prominence to the contention that feminism has essentially ignored women’s roles as mothers (Fox-Genovese, 1996). This study contributes to scholarship focusing on mothers and identifies one way in which detrimental cultural ideologies and myths of motherhood are perpetuated. Future research is needed to explore how mothers internalize or resist the myths perpetuated in women’s magazines, and how these myths affect the construction of their own mother identity. How does the constructed “ideal” of White, unemployed mothers, solely fulfilled by domestic sphere pursuits (in their homes, cars, and yards) affect mothers’ perceptions of mothers, or themselves, who might not be White, or who might be employed and have multiple roles and identities outside the home, car, and yard? Do mothers who are not represented in women’s magazines perceive themselves to be in the minority?

CONCLUSION

Glenn (1994) noted that one of the powers of ideologies is their ability to embrace contradictory “myths”: “Mothers are romanticized as life-giving, self-sacrificing, and forgiving, and demonized as smothering, overly involved, and destructive” (p. 11). Contradictory expectations create double binds (Bateson, 1972; Johnston & Swanson, in press). Double binds, in turn, generate feelings of guilt and inadequacy (Bateson, 1972; Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). The findings of this study show that although the women’s magazines we analyzed support a traditional motherhood ideology, negative myths associated with traditional mothers are upheld. In contrast, nontraditional mothers were presented more positively; the negative myths about employed mothers’ negative emotions and mother–child attachment issues are not upheld. However, the myth that

employment jeopardizes family relationships persists. Frequent but negative portrayals of at-home mothers and infrequent but positive portrayals of employed mothers likely have the effect of undermining the confidence of both groups.

Let us first examine the case of employed mothers. The magazines we analyzed are depicting employed mothers in positive ways that debunk many of the negative myths associated with employed mothers. Given the fact that the majority of mothers do work outside the home, the lack of representation of employed mothers in these magazines is curious indeed. Employed mothers represent a viable market in numbers and income.

At-home mothers represent a minority in society, but an overwhelming majority in the magazines analyzed. If magazines want to capitalize on the at-home mother market niche, why perpetuate negative myths of at-home mothers? Are magazines attempting to identify with the stress of at-home mothering by portraying negative emotional states? Or, are magazines seeking to undermine the confidence of at-home mothers thereby making them more dependent on the information and expert advice offered in the magazines?

Foucault (1978) argued that hegemonic power creates expectations that can be fulfilled by the dominant group and can ensure the failure of the subordinate group. Our data reveal that mothers’ representations in the magazines may serve to undermine the confidence of mothers, through either negative portrayals or an overall lack of representation. The magazines depict at-home mothers confined to the domestic sphere and portray all mothers with limited public–sphere involvement. One interpretation of these findings is that this effectively limits mothers’ ability to engage the public sphere where social change occurs. A dominant traditional motherhood ideology is thereby preserved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the editor and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. The authors also thank Elizabeth Anderson, Ann-Marie Champion, and Katie Jen, undergraduate students at Hope College, for their work on data collection. This research was funded by grants from the Hope College Frost Center for Social Science Research and the Ruth M. Peale faculty development fund.

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