

## Unpacking the power of the Mommy Wars

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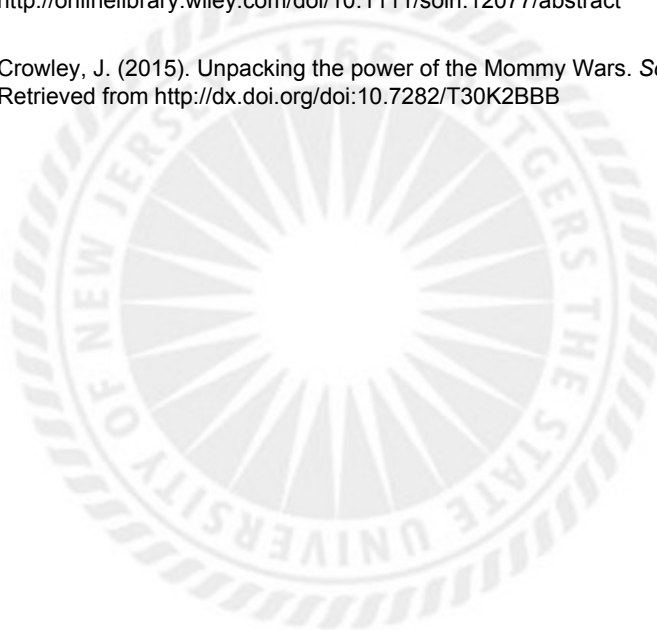
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## UNPACKING THE POWER OF THE MOMMY WARS

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**Abstract:** In recent years, Mommy Wars discourse, or an expressed judgment between mothers who work for pay and those who stay at home with their children, has emerged as a significant part of American culture. Yet knowledge about both its substantive underpinnings as well as the breadth of its influence across sociodemographic groups is limited. On these points, some research has suggested that racial differences regarding adherence to particular mothering ideologies will drive Mommy Wars discourse among white, middle-class mothers but not among African-American, middle-class mothers. This study investigates 125 middle-class yet racially diverse mothers about the content and prevalence of Mommy Wars discourse among their peers. Contrary to expectations, Mommy Wars discourse, although based on strong beliefs regarding appropriate maternal practices, was limited in its scope. In addition, Mommy Wars discourse was a minority perspective among white, middle-class mothers but a plurality perspective among African-American, middle-class mothers.

**Keywords:** mothering ideologies, maternal discourses, Mommy Wars

On April 11, 2012, Democratic strategist Hilary Rosen began discussing Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney's qualifications to understand the complex array of issues facing women in the United States today. Live on CNN, Rosen declared that Mitt Romney's self-proclaimed reliance on his wife and mother of his five boys in mapping out his views on women's issues was ill-informed, since, as Rosen declared, "Guess what, (Romney's) wife has actually never worked a day in her life."<sup>1</sup> In the firestorm that followed, Rosen quickly apologized, but her comments unleashed a new round of debates on maternal roles in American society. Media images and discussions framing the "Mommy Wars"--or discourse battles between mothers working for pay and those who stay at home--immediately proliferated across the country.

As the Hilary Rosen-Ann Romney example illustrated, through television programs, print material, the internet, and film, the media frequently presents women--mostly white, middle-class women--with carefully formulated ideals of what it means to be a model mother (Peters 2008).<sup>2</sup> In many of these representations, parenting practices that place extraordinary demands on these mothers to meet all of their children's needs are offered as the only way to raise sons and daughters (Zimmerman et al. 2008). In addition, commentators in the public arena often employ the rhetoric of "choice" when describing how this particular set of mothers comes to decide whether to work for pay or stay at home (Peskowitz 2005; Vavrus 2007). But because there is no clear, singular prescription for these mothers over what arrangement is best, these "choices" have been carefully scrutinized, and in many cases criticized, over decades.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2012/04/12/democrats-comment-about-ann-romney-creates-firestorm-on-twitter/>. Accessed on April 28, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> As will be described later, in this analysis, middle-class will be operationalized through educational attainment.

Within this context, it is critical to note that Mommy Wars discourse does not simply emerge without an intellectual foundation among the white, middle-class; instead, it is derived from a specific set of beliefs about maternal practices, or intensive mothering ideology (Newman and Henderson Forthcoming). Intensive mothering ideology is a philosophy of parenting that requires mothers to be consistently attentive to their children's needs and demands and by doing so, frequently sets women's own interests aside (Hays 1996). But intensive mothering ideology is not the only belief system regarding maternal practices that is available to mothers. In fact, race can drive attachment to other mothering ideologies and thus diminish or extinguish Mommy Wars discourse in direct ways (Collins 2000; Hattery and Smith 2007; Coontz 2008). More specifically, middle-class African-Americans, due to their background of racial oppression as well as their long histories of paid work, have often been linked to collective mothering ideology. This belief system stresses the interdependence of need among mothers, a web of mutuality that ultimately discourages the emergence of competitive Mommy Wars discourse.

But exactly what intensive mothering beliefs underpin Mommy Wars discourse? And how hegemonic is Mommy Wars discourse, as fueled by this intensive mothering ideology, among white, middle-class women? Similarly, do mostly all African-American, middle-class mothers reject Mommy Wars discourse due to their suspected attachment to collective mothering ideology? This study examines these questions by first reviewing how research on both the media as well as in studies on daily interactions among women has focused on white, middle-class mothers as the key perpetrators of Mommy Wars discourse. I then link this discourse back to white, middle-class beliefs in intensive mothering ideology; I also argue that the lack of attention thus far to a similar discourse among the African-American, middle-class may be due to their presumed identification with collective mothering ideology. This analysis then explores

the nature and content of Mommy Wars discourse through interviews with 125 middle-class, racially diverse mothers. In particular, I investigate whether and how respondents' perceptions of their peer groups' interactions include Mommy Wars discourse. In the aggregate, I find that Mommy Wars discourse is limited in scope; in addition, it is present only in a minority of whites' peer groups, but is a plurality perspective among African-Americans' peer groups. That is, rather than finding a strong bifurcation of distinct mothering ideologies and thus discourses between the races, I report much more diversity along these dimensions within the peer groups of white and African-American, middle-class mothers. I conclude by discussing the importance and future of Mommy Wars conflicts as they define middle-class women's lives.

### **Mommy Wars Discourse: In the Media and Everyday Life**

The media has been an important force in both reflecting and promoting ideas about Mommy Wars discourse. Over time, scholars have noted these portrayals to include primarily white, middle-class women. Within this context, one line of academic inquiry has described media patterns that involve one set of white mothers operating within one arena--working for pay or staying at home--without acknowledging the existence of other arrangements (Kaplan 1990; Kaplan 1992; Keller 1994).

Another more common body of scholarship has highlighted the media's negative portrayal of *both* types of arrangements--working for pay and staying at home--thus setting the stage for competition between the groups. For example, common stories on working for pay, for example, have featured the high costs and low quality of day care options facing white, middle-class families (Smith 2001). Echoing this point, white, middle-class mothers who opt-out of the workforce after having high-paying, professional careers receive accolades from the media, a

positive response that focuses on their family-centric priorities and their ability to make seemingly independent “choices” that benefit their children (Kuperberg and Stone 2008). Mothers who stay at home also receive significant negative scrutiny from the media. For example, Johnston and Swanson (2003a), in their content analysis of five magazines from the late 1990's related to women's and parenting issues highlighted mothers who are white, middle-class individuals providing constant, selfless service to their children, with poor women and women of color completely excluded. But, regardless of all of this self-sacrifice, these stay-at-home mothers are still presented as inadequate. Overall, then, in many of these representations, mothers who work for pay *and* those who stay at home are each deficient in some way, thereby setting up potential debates between the two groups (Johnston and Swanson 2003b).

Media accounts present Mommy Wars discourse as a white, middle-class phenomenon. But how do white, middle-class mothers think and behave in everyday life? Do they echo these media presentations? Most significantly for this analysis, research has demonstrated that Mommy Wars discourse does emerge in a powerful way among this group of women in their daily lives. These judgments indicate that mothers have mild to decidedly negative views of mothers who have a different paid work status than themselves.

Scholars who use in-depth interviews to understand the Mommy Wars generally divide women into those who work full-time for pay, those who work part-time for pay, and those who stay at home. Overall, they find that some subset of each of these groups does express Mommy War discourse toward one another, but they do not specify the prevalence of these views. More specifically, using 98 in-depth interviews of white, middle-class mothers with at least one preschooler at home, Johnston and Swanson (2004) have noted that stay-at-home mothers possessed the strongest judgments against other mothers, and, in particular, toward those who

work full-time for pay. Employing Mommy Wars discourse, these stay-at-home mothers described mothers who work full-time for pay to be constantly on the go, frazzled, and incapable of properly taking care of their children. Many mothers who worked part-time for pay used the same discourse when describing full-time workers. Mothers who worked full-time for pay, on the other hand, used some of the same discourse regarding the arrangements of others, but in a less judgmental way. For example, they typically refrained from any criticism of their part-time counterparts. To the extent that they judged stay-at-home mothers, they stated that at-home mothers lacked ambition; however, they balanced this perception by noting that stay-at-home mothers did an extraordinary job of taking care of their children.

Blair-Loy (2003) reported a similar type of Mommy Wars discourse based on her analysis of 81 life histories of mostly white, middle-class women with a range of paid work and stay-at-home experiences.<sup>3</sup> In her research, Blair-Loy observed again that while part-time and full-time workers were not judgment-free, stay-at-home mothers held the strongest views against other sets of mothers, particularly those who worked full-time for pay. More specifically, she noted that stay-at-home mothers often stated that mothers who worked full-time for pay were actively refusing to nurture their children's needs, abandoning them when they went to work, and neglecting to establish appropriate disciplinary rules to guide their sons' and daughters' behavior. In its totality, then, research of this type suggests that Mommy Wars discourse permeates every day conversations among white, middle-class mothers about how they should arrange their paid work and family lives.

### **Affiliations with Mothering Ideologies and Discourses**

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<sup>3</sup> All women in her study had at least a bachelor's degree, and only one was African-American.

As described earlier, Mommy Wars discourse, or a framework of understanding the maternal role in American society, is most commonly thought to be derived from much deeper cultural ideologies of motherhood (McPherson et al. 2001; Wall 2001). The primary ideology in American society is intensive mothering, which is built around highly individualist notions of parenting (Hays 1996). This philosophy mandates that mothers channel all of their energies toward rearing their children, even at the expense of their own professional and personal interests (MacDonald 1998; Arendell 2000; Hattery 2001). In addition, this ideology requires that mothers invest significant physical, emotional, and financial resources into satisfying their children's needs instead of their own (Christopher 2012). In this way, their children will have the best possible advantages in competing with other children in their pursuit of the highest quality activities, educational experiences, and ultimately, careers. From this perspective, then, the work of motherhood involves each mother striving for the best possible starting point for her children in the race of life. For some, this may be predicated on staying at home, and for others, this involves working for pay (Crowley 2013; Crowley 2014). In either case, intensive mothering efforts consume extraordinary resources. It therefore is associated most strongly with more advantaged white, middle-class mothers and thus fuels Mommy Wars discourse within this sociodemographic group.<sup>4</sup>

However, other mothering ideologies--specifically those that do not promote Mommy Wars discourse--are, in fact, possible and associated with other racial and ethnic groups (Lamphere et al. 1993; Segura 1994; Thornton Dill 2008; Christopher 2012). Perhaps the most

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<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that the pressure to adhere to intensive mothering ideology does not emerge in other socioeconomic classes--see Webber and Williams (2008) and Williams (2010) for evidence of the influence of intensive mothering on parenting across classes--but is heightened within the middle-class as it is more attainable for its members.



fully theorized competing paradigm is "collective mothering", a communal-oriented perspective on maternal practice that focuses on interrelationships with other women as critical in the joint parenting of children (hooks 1984; Glenn et al. 1994; O'Reilly 2008; Ott 2011). It is derivative of the practice of other-mothering in African-American communities, whereby the legacy of slavery forced mothers to rely on collective responsibility for the well-being of their children as their own daily emotional and physical fates were unknown (Collins 1994; Collins 2000; Edwards 2000; Christopher 2012). In addition, because primarily of their more precarious economic circumstances, historically, African-American mothers have always had stronger ties than whites to the labor market, even within the middle-class (Damaske 2011). In this way, collective mothering ideology represents a world view that promotes the interweaving of women in the practice of parenting and still remains most commonly associated with African-Americans. And most importantly for this analysis, since paid work is uniformly assumed in collective mothering, it is typically *not* associated with Mommy Wars discourse.

In summary, research suggests that intensive mothering ideology is primarily internalized and adopted by white, middle-class women, who then defend their beliefs in working for pay or staying at home through Mommy Wars discourse. The principle of homophily suggests that individual white women would experience Mommy Wars discourse among their peers (McPherson, Smith-Lovin et al. 2001). In contrast, collective mothering ideology, with its assumption of paid work, emanates from African-American women, who accordingly do not participate in Mommy Wars discourse. Here, too, homophily suggests individual African-American women would be significantly less likely to experience the presence of Mommy Wars discourse among their peers.

However, it is important to note that while these are suggestive associations among ideologies, discourses, and race, there might be several mediating factors that limit these relationships. First, it is important to note that mothers in this study are reporting on their peer group experiences. However, their peer group experiences do not provide any information about the mothers' own personal ideologies and discourse usage. For example, an African-American mother could describe collective mothering ideology (and thus no Mommy Wars) within her own peer group, while she personally subscribes to intensive mothering ideology. Second, and perhaps more importantly, not all white mothers will identify the presence of intensive mothering ideology within their peer groups, nor will all African-American mothers identify the presence of collective mothering ideology within their peer groups. This might be especially true if mothers have racially diverse sets of friends or if other factors besides race structure peer group experiences.<sup>5</sup> With these important qualifications in mind, we now turn to better understanding mothering ideologies and how are they expressed in American society today.

### **Methodology**

This analysis is based on a larger research project that involved the collection of data from five national mothers' groups located across the United States. In order to qualify as one of the five groups, these organizations had to meet three criteria: (1) their central group mission had to involve assisting mothers in either their paid labor market and/or in their stay-at-home roles, and each group had to be open to recruiting each type of mother; (2) they had to have members across multiple states; and (3) they each had to have centralized membership lists so that a

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<sup>5</sup> Lareau (2003), for example, found that class influences parenting practices. This study, however, holds class constant across racial groups.

random sample, web-based survey could be executed. With these criteria in place, the five groups that qualified included MomsRising (an online, politically active group with 168,786 survey-eligible members<sup>6</sup>); Mocha Moms (an in-person group designed for mothers of color with 2,853 survey-eligible members); The National Association of Mothers' Centers (NAMC) (an in-person group based on establishing community networks with 885 survey-eligible members); Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS) (an in-person group that stresses Christian values with 84,584 survey eligible members); and Mothers & More (an in-person group that serves mothers transitioning in and out of paid work with 5,534 survey-eligible members).

The first part of the project involved a random sample, internet-based survey of 5,000 members in each of the largest groups, MomsRising and MOPS, and a census of the membership of the remaining three groups. This was conducted from April-June 2009, and the overall response rate was 19.3 percent (3,327 total members), a rate considered robust for web-based surveys (Porter and Whitcomb 2003; Kaplowitz et al. 2004).<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked a variety of questions including their level of involvement in their group, their attitudes toward mothers working for pay and those staying at home, and their opinions regarding public policy on workplace flexibility. At the conclusion of the survey, each respondent was asked if she would be interested in participating in a one hour, in-depth phone interview on these same topics. From the 1,141 respondents who agreed to participate in the interview, I randomly selected 25 members from each group. The 125 interviews in total were conducted in 2009 with the

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<sup>6</sup> Survey-eligible means that the respondent's data record was complete and that she met more specific criteria for inclusion, such as living in the United States, being a mother, having a chapter affiliation (except in the case of MomsRising), and being a member at the time of the survey's execution.

<sup>7</sup> As each organization only delivered its members' names and email addresses, I am unable to determine the presence of nonresponse bias.

assistance of a graduate student and covered many of the same topics as the survey. All of the interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed.

With respect to the area of inquiry that is the focus of this analysis, all respondents were asked the same question concerning their peer groups' perspectives on Mommy Wars discourse: "The media makes a huge deal out of the "Mommy Wars"—pitting mothers who work for pay against stay-at-home mothers. Do you experience "Mommy Wars" among the people that you know, or do you think that this is more of a media creation?" If they answered that Mommy Wars discourse was simply a media creation, they were asked to explain why they held those beliefs. If the interviewees answered that they actually experienced Mommy Wars discourse within their peer groups in some way, they were similarly probed as to what they thought prompted and shaped these judgments. I used the software program Atlas.ti and open coding procedures to map out each mother's response as guided by the literature. However, I also remained willing to consider alternative themes not yet identified by previous scholarship in understanding mothers' relationships to Mommy Wars discourse; this is a modified type of grounded theory analysis, whereby aggregate categories emerge as themes as they relate to the primary research questions (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Finally, in order to count as a viable final theme in this analysis, at least 15% of the total number of respondents had to identify it as such.

## **Findings**

As discussed above, there were a total of 125 mothers' group members interviewed in this study, with 25 drawn from each group. As the descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate, the average age of mothers was 37.37 and they had a mean of approximately two children each. At the time of the interview, about 60% of the sample reported working for pay, with 40% staying

at home. In terms of other sociodemographic characteristics, over 90% reported being married, with the remainder divorced, separated, living with a partner, or never married.

The two most important descriptive variables in this study are education and race. All of the sample were middle-class as defined by each respondent having at least some type of college education. More specifically, all were high school graduates, with 4% attending at least some college. About 3.2% had an associate's degree, and a full 41.6% reported obtaining a bachelor's degree. Finally, 3.2% had some graduate training, and 48% held some type of graduate or professional degree. With respect to race, a full 73.6% of the sample was white (totaling 92), and 20.8% was African-American (totaling 26). The remainder identified with other races (5.6%) (totaling 7).

[Table 1 about here]

With respect to their answers regarding Mommy Wars discourse, two distinct communities emerged. A plurality of mothers, 45.6% or 57/125 argued that Mommy Wars discourse was not present within their peer groups, while a smaller set of mothers, 39.2% or 49/125 maintained that Mommy Wars discourse did exist within their peer groups. A total of 15.2% or 19/125 were unsure and/or had no opinion.

### ***Mommy Wars Not Represented in their Peer Groups: The Collective Mothering Ideology***

A plurality of mothers in this study--57--denied the existence of Mommy Wars discourse within their peer groups. Notably, as Table 2 demonstrates, these ideas emerged from *both* the white and African-American, middle-class, at 46 and 8 of the total with this view, respectively (3 reported a different racial affiliation). Mothers mostly commonly cited reasons related to collective mothering ideology in making their case. First, these respondents articulated beliefs

related to collective mothering ideology whereby reaching out to other mothers in need, making an effort to understand each others' lives, and appreciating the commonality of purpose that all mothers face were primary values. Second, mothers who reported these views among their peer groups also argued that the media has an independent agenda that gives special consideration to extremists; for these women, these outliers are not at all representative of most mothers living together with a unified parenting purpose across the country today.

[Table 2 about here]

The most common theme that emerged from those discounting Mommy Wars discourse that was based in collective mothering ideology was the idea that regardless of the messages contained on the internet, television, movies, and print, mothers with diverse work/life arrangements most often support each other. They do this in many ways, including reaching out to those in need. Carolyn, a 58-year-old white mother of three (two adult daughters, ages 23 and 24, and a 4-year-old son) had a bachelor's degree; she also had an unusual type of work history. Before she had her daughters, she worked in a variety of jobs, such as teaching, banking, and social services. Her husband started his own custodial business during this same time period. However, after she had her daughters, she and her husband decided that she would stay at home with the children but do accounting for their family business. She continued this practice after they decided to adopt their 4-year-old son together (technically their grandson), because the child's biological parents were unable to raise him. Throughout these working for pay and stay-at-home experiences, Carolyn stressed that Mommy Wars discourse never emerged in her world because mothers with different work/family arrangements frequently listened intently to one another and sought to meet each others' needs. She noted this dynamic most prominently when she discussed her role as a leader of her daughters' Girl Scout troop when they were young.

[The Mommy Wars] never happened with me. You know what I always did?...We had so many...well, we had a few mothers [who] would go on camping trips [for the Girl Scouts] and they [wore] high heels. [To fix this problem], I always made sure I sent home [a note] and e-mailed them. [I would say], "You need to have sensible clothing and shoes."...You know what I found? Extend your hand. Shake it. Give a hug. Tell the mom that her daughter is wonderful and that you value her. And that worked for me...I had 16 kids in my kindergarten troop, and they were fat, skinny,...[and] from divorced families...But I loved them all. And [I] embraced the moms. And you know what it takes?...It just takes love and listening.--Carolyn

Carolyn discovered that by working with all types of mothers, she could identify those who might need more assistance than others in terms of specific parenting guidance. All she needed to do was offer advice and affirm their worth.

In a slightly different way, Cheryl, a 30-year-old white mother with a bachelor's degree, maintained that Mommy Wars discourse was not common in her peer groups. To Cheryl, this was because most mothers recognize that while one arrangement might work well in one family, it might not work well in another. In other words, most mothers remain open to understanding each others' lives. Cheryl undertook the difficult task of parenting as she herself was a mother of four: a 6-year-old girl, a 4-year-old boy, a 3-year-old boy, and a 5-month-old boy. After she graduated from college and got married, Cheryl worked for her university's alumni center and then in its event planning office. She had her first baby and returned to paid work after a short maternity leave. However, she felt that she was struggling too much in balancing paid work with raising her daughter, and with the support of her husband, who at the time was earning a solid income as a financial loan officer, decided to resign from her job and return home. At the time of her interview, Cheryl maintained that while technically she worked for pay in that she earned a small amount of money each week taking care of her two nephews, she considered herself to be a stay-at-home mother. Here, Cheryl expressed her belief that most women have a very real openness toward mothers in different circumstances.

I think [the Mommy Wars] are more of a media creation...You know, sometimes I wonder if a mother could afford to stay at home why [she] would choose to work; however, then I think back to my sister who would be a much better mom working than she is staying home. In my experience, with my friends and moms who do not [stay at home], nobody is criticizing the others for making the choices that they did...I do not think that I am a better mom because I chose to stay home.--Cheryl

Interestingly, Cheryl did express some judgment initially as to why some mothers might choose to work if they could afford not to be employed. However, upon considering her own family's circumstances, Cheryl noted that her sister was a teacher and loved her job. Cheryl most importantly observed that by being employed, her sister had more energy and patience with her own children than she would without working for pay.

Finally, Betty, a 32-year-old African-American mother with a master's degree, denied the existence of Mommy Wars discourse among her peers by describing her view that whether working for pay or staying at home, all mothers have the same concerns and united purpose in raising their children to be happy. Betty, with a 4-year-old son, was currently working for pay but had friends who stay at home.

I really don't think the Mommy Wars exist [because I have so many friends with different arrangements]...I was just with one [friend] who has been at home for five years. And we talk about [my] work; she listens to me talk about [my] work all the time. [She] never judges me. And [she helps me by giving] me examples of when she was in the workforce, five years ago...I mean she doesn't envy me because I'm at work...And I don't envy her because she is still at home...[We have mutual respect]...and we still do things together. We took our sons to Six Flags Tuesday.--  
Betty

Betty explained that she received training in speech therapy and loved her job. However, after she became pregnant, she decided to stay at home for the first several months of her son's life. Because her husband was a well-established attorney, the couple could afford to make such arrangements. Gradually she started working for pay one day a week when her son was eighteen months, and then moved on to two days per week when he turned two. Through all of these



experiences, she came to appreciate the wide range of challenges that mothers face whether they are staying at home or while working for pay. She ultimately concluded that mothers face more commonalities than differences and that most mothers recognize the unifying features of parenting that bind them all together.

The second most common way mothers discounted the Mommy Wars through their adherence to the collective mothering ideology was by identifying the profit-driven orientation of the media. In other words, by their very nature, television, magazines, and the internet provide platforms for isolated, often money-hungry extremists who attract attention--not real mothers bound in commonality with other mothers--to express their views. Some mothers pointed explicitly to the proliferation of new media types, such as the internet, as the primary generators, in their view, of Mommy Wars discourse. Catherine, a 36-year-old white mother of a 2-year-old boy and a 4-month-old baby girl, held a master's degree. Her husband was a geographic information services technician and she worked part-time as a children's librarian. With her previous employment both in a university library and in a major library in a central city, she had gained enormous experience in her field. When her family moved to a smaller city, she wanted to have the opportunity to continue working but also spend more time with her children. Becoming a children's librarian was thus a perfect match for her. Notably, it also required that she spend a significant amount of time on the internet while at work, since she was in charge of ordering new books. It was primarily in the online world that she encountered Mommy Wars discourse.

I do read a lot of [shocking] things because it makes good copy...You know,...it makes for interesting reading...It seems to me that...most people are somewhere in the middle [in their thinking about mothers working for pay or not]...But of course, there are always people on one end of the spectrum or the other...I know on the internet you read blogs and it's very easy for people to hide [their identities]. Nobody knows who they

are and they...can be as extreme as they wish...You still read [things] like women should be at home with their children and shouldn't be working at all...So, I think that...most people are kind of somewhere in the middle, but there are the extremes on either end...And I think that's the same with...these quote unquote "Mommy Wars."-- Catherine

Whereas Catherine cited the importance of the internet in spreading Mommy Wars discourse that was not held by the majority of mothers "in the middle," Annie, a 44-year-old white mother with a master's degree, had a slightly different view. She was a remarried, stay-at-home mother of three. At the time of her interview, she had two sons, ages 15 and 12, and a 3-week-old daughter. Although she was now at-home with her daughter because she could afford to do so with her second husband's income, she had worked continuously as an engineer or as a librarian while raising her two sons in her previous marriage. This diversity of experiences gave her the perspective that she possessed on Mommy Wars discourse, which, in her view, was not in any way rooted in the reality of life that she shared with other mothers.

I think that overall, [the Mommy Wars] are a media creation. It is real easy [for the media to do this]. My mom called me because Dr. Phil had a show recently [on the Mommy Wars. It must have been really easy for the show's producers when they are] interviewing people on the phone and trying to pick them. [It is easy to] just pick people on the ends [of an issue]. There [are] always going to be your liberals and your conservatives. Having a panel of moderates is not very exciting...So [shows like that] are going to do that. I do think [shows like that] tend to hype up [the Wars] because I do not see women bickering in the store or the church because of their different work statuses.--Annie

Overall, Catherine and Annie each argued that the media was somehow complicit in the creation of Mommy Wars discourse, but they did so by stressing slightly different mechanisms through which they argued this conflict is sensationalized. Catherine maintained that the shock value of new media such as the internet was the primary engine in these battles, whereas Annie focused on the ratings incentives in the field of daytime television as the key motivator. In both cases,

however, this community of women emphasized that Mommy Wars discourse is not reflective of mothers who are doing the real work of parenting in the United States today.

***Mommy Wars As Represented in their Peer Groups: The Intensive Mothering Ideology***

As discussed above, a plurality of mothers reported that Mommy Wars discussions were not a part of their peer experiences, most commonly due to the presence of collective mothering ideology. However, a sizable number of mothers--49--disagreed; they maintained that Mommy Wars discourse has developed within their peer groups. Notably again as demonstrated in Table 2, these ideas again emerged for *both* white and African-American, middle-class mothers, at 34 and 12, respectively (3 reported a different racial affiliation). These statistics mean that a minority of white mothers held this view, while a plurality of African-American mothers reported this perspective. They most commonly identified intensive mothering ideology as expressed in extreme self-sacrifice, competitiveness, and isolating behaviors as the source of these views.

Some respondents citing intensive mothering ideology operating within their own peer groups saw Mommy Wars discourse emerge when mothers engage in excessive self-sacrifice on behalf of their children. Sharon was a 31-year-old African-American with a bachelor's degree. At the time of her interview, she was staying at home and raising her three children: a 5-year-old boy and two girls, ages 3 and 1. As many mothers do, she had joined a variety of online groups to assist her when she had questions about her children's behavior. However, she often found that many women in these settings used strong Mommy Wars discourse as they offered one another parenting advice.

[On one listserv where I participate], somebody [wrote] something about, "I'm going to be returning to work soon. I really feel guilty about it." [This woman] was kind of

looking for support, like, "Well, we understand, but you're doing the best thing that you can for your family. If you are going back to work, if that's what you need to do, [then] that is fine." I think that's what she was looking for. But it's not really what she got. She kind of got, "Well, you know, isn't there something else that you can do to stay at home?" And then that set off into everybody kind of rattling off their opinions, and it got pretty ugly...And the [listserv] moderator had to ask them to [stop arguing].-- Sharon

Other mothers perceiving intensive mothering ideology among their peers also reported observing notions of extreme self-sacrifice in the production of subsequent Mommy Wars-related attitudes and behavior. Grace, a 30-year-old white woman with a master's degree, was thirty-seven weeks pregnant and also mother of a 2-year-old daughter, expressed this idea in the following way.

There are a lot of value judgments and emotions related to people's decisions about [what they should give up in] raising their own children. So when it is not just a social standard--like moms stay at home and dads work--like it was fifty years ago or whatever, and people can actually make choices, I think their emotions get wrapped up in it. I can really see people getting pissed at each other and they probably don't mean it on a personal level, but they feel so strongly about the decisions they made for themselves and their family. This can mean that they can lash out at people individually or say things that can be kind of broad-sweeping.--Grace

Grace was a part-time social worker who coordinated her work hours with her husband's schedule so that they could maximize the time that they would be able to directly care for their own children. To Grace, other families can and should have different arrangements, but often they become so emotionally invested in their own particular values about extreme self-sacrifice that they openly critique others.

Still other mothers witnessing intensive mothering ideology among their peers maintained that Mommy Wars discourse emerges from women wanting to compete with each other over providing the best possible lifestyles for their children. Marie was a 33-year-old white mother with a bachelor's degree; she had two young girls, ages 6 and 2. At the time of her

interview, she did freelance product design work. She described where she resided as a walking community where people generally congregate when they pick up their children after school. She found these daily "pick up the children" events to be relatively difficult to get through as mothers' views on paid work noticeably bubbled across the surface of multiple conversations.

Nearly all of the parents would stand outside the school and wait to pick up their children after school...The Mommy Wars are incredible...You just [start] talking about your day. You know, you just start talking about whatever. And they say, "Oh, you were at home all day?" or "Oh, well, you can't do that because you work?" "Why aren't you going to the zoo on a field trip?" "Why can't you just take off?"...Oh, [it goes] both...ways...I wonder if the Mommy Wars are so bad here because there's almost this feeling of, well, you live in an affluent community, shouldn't one of you make enough money to stay at home?...So that's the "pro-stay-at-home" side of it...[Also,] our community is split into three sections and the central section is where the multimillionaires live. And it's the section that you aspire to: bigger homes, bigger properties, and things like that. So on the "pro-paid working side" [of the Mommy Wars], it's almost like, well, why aren't you working two jobs to move into [the central section]?...Don't you value the Porsche? Or the BMW?--Marie

In this sense, according to Marie, the competitive compulsion to provide a life better than those of one's neighbors represents the most important force in driving Mommy Wars discourse.

In addition to identifying competitiveness, other mothers observing intensive mothering ideology among their peers pointed to isolation as central in producing Mommy Wars discourse. Robin was a 30-year-old white mother with a bachelor's degree; she had two boys, ages 4 and 1. Prior to her current position as a stay-at-home mother, she worked in the field of child protective services on the west coast. When her husband obtained a medical residency in a different state, the entire family moved and she gave up her career. With this wide-ranging background, she maintained that Mommy Wars discourse emerges when women are defensive simply due to the disconnection from others that they experience in the context of intensive mothering.

I remember my best friend and I worked in the same office, so we would often go out on house calls together. We would be going down the street and we would see a mom pushing a double jogger at 9 a.m. with her Starbucks, and we just say, "It must be nice

for her.” Then all of the sudden, the shoe was on the other foot and I am like, “Oh my God, now I know. She was just getting out of the house before she lost her mind at 9:00 in the morning.” I think a lot of [this debate rests on the idea] that the grass is always greener [on the other side]...[I mean, isn't it] human nature to take apart something that is not what you have?--Robin

Overall, although there were many benefits to staying at home, Robin also reported loving working for pay. She believed that she had a unique vantage point with these dual experiences to note that mothers often made assumptions about other mothers' lives because they are isolated from one another and thus ill-informed about the realities of alternative work/life arrangements.

### **Conclusions**

In April 2013, cable news channel MSNBC was in the process of running a series of promotions as part of its "Lean Forward" advertising campaign. Melissa Harris-Perry, a high-profile African-American political analyst and host of her own weekend show on the network, participated in the campaign by releasing a video where she stated that communities must start to think about children in a collective manner and that "we have to break through our kind of private idea that kids belong to their parents or kids belong to their families, and recognize that kids belong to their communities."<sup>8</sup> Her words sparked an immediate opposing outcry from some white, middle-class mothers, with one accusing Harris-Perry of implying that the government has a right not only to control and regulate children, but also to even supersede all parental rights.<sup>9</sup> In response to these critics, Harris-Perry took to her MSNBC blog and in a piece entitled "Why Caring for Children is Not Just a Parent's Job," she wrote,

I venture to say that anyone and everyone should know full well that my message in that ad was a call to see ourselves as connected to a larger whole. I don't want

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<sup>8</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/13/melissa-harris-perry-promo-children-msnbc\\_n\\_3076195.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/13/melissa-harris-perry-promo-children-msnbc_n_3076195.html). Accessed on May 8, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/msnbc-host-children-belong-to-whole-communities-not-their-parents>. Accessed on April 21, 2014.

your kids, but I want them to live in safe neighborhoods. I want them to learn in enriching and dynamic classrooms. I want them to be healthy and well and free from fear. I want them to grow up to agree or disagree with me or with you and to have all the freedom and tools they need to express what they believe.<sup>10</sup>

What, then, can we make of this particular clash of views on the responsibilities of motherhood? Is this clash typical of these battles in general, which have presupposed that African-American, middle-class mothers will support a belief in collective mothering ideology and thus not engage in Mommy Wars discourse, while white, middle-class mothers will remain aligned with intensive mothering ideology and thus actively participate in Mommy Wars discourse?

Contrary to these expectations, this study provides evidence that Mommy Wars discourse is not a hegemonic belief system in American society; here, it was only a minority framework of maternal practice across 125 mothers. In addition, although the sample size is small, less than half of the white, middle class mothers in the sample observed Mommy Wars discourse within their own peer groups. Perhaps most surprisingly, a plurality of African-American, middle class mothers did report Mommy Wars discourse within their personal networks of friends and acquaintances.

How can we account for these unexpected findings among whites and African-Americans? Other factors besides race might structure the development of these ideologies and discourses. In her work, Lareau (2003) found that class was more important than race in predicting parenting techniques. Since class was held constant in this study with all respondents being middle class, other factors might influence adherence to one ideology over another. Stay at home Does not get us further. As suggested earlier, mothers in this study could have more racially diverse sets of friends,

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<sup>10</sup> <http://tv.msnbc.com/2013/04/09/why-caring-for-children-is-not-just-a-parents-job/>. Accessed on August 7, 2013.

leading to different patterns of mothering ideologies and thus Mommy Wars discourses among them.

One key variable might be stay-at-home versus paid work status, especially among African-American mothers. A key assumption behind collective mothering ideology among African-Americans is the presumption of paid work, even among middle class and upper middle class women (Christopher 2013). However, this study included 20 African-American mothers with an opinion on the Mommy Wars, 6 of whom were stay-at-home mothers. Just like their white counterparts, some of these stay-at-home mothers reported experiencing the Mommy Wars, and some did not.

Although this study dispels the notion that Mommy Wars discourse in the aggregate is an inevitable feature of American family life, sizeable number of mothers still did identify it as influential. In doing so, they most commonly cited different manifestations of intensive mothering ideology as the source behind these Wars. Notably, across both races in the middle-class, intensive mothering ideology puts a lot more pressure on mothers to "hyper-parent" than collective mothering ideology. Given this effort, why then, does intensive mothering ideology emerge so strongly among some middle-class mothers? Ruddick (2007) offers one compelling argument. In her view, mothers are driven to protect their children as a central component of maternal practice. But there can be a tension between the desire to enrich the lives of one's own children versus the desire to improve the quality of life for other people's children, especially among the middle-class. In fact, according to Ruddick (2007, 121).

The more individualistic, hierarchical, and competitive the social system, the more likely that a mother will see the good of her child and her group's children *as opposed to* the good of children of another mother or another "kind." (my italics)



In this analysis, the middle-class mothers--regardless of race--who reported Mommy Wars discourse among their peers used language reflective of intensive mothering ideology, as expected. Put another way, these mothers see their peer groups as operating in a world that indeed is characterized by Ruddick's "individualistic, hierarchical, and competitive" social system. Consistent with this view, then, these mothers would seemingly be more inclined to stand opposed to one another in order to defend their own children's needs against the needs of others.

What can be done across the races to reduce the pressures of intensive mothering ideology that are associated with Mommy Wars discourse? Two observations are particularly relevant to this discussion, one based on intra-family dynamics between couples, and a second focused on the structure of paid work. First, although the diversity of family forms has been rising in the United States, the balance of home responsibilities between heterosexual, married couples is still unequal. While clearly fathers have been engaging in more child care and housework than in any other period in American history, on average between 2007-2011, married mothers working full-time were doing 5.74 hours of housework and 8.96 hours caring for and helping household children per week, versus 1.82 and 6.02, respectively, for married fathers who also work full-time (ATUS 2012). If fathers were to do more in these areas, mothers would be freer to explore diverse avenues of self-fulfillment and be less confined by the binaries of the home versus the work worlds.

Beyond these changes within the context of the family, workplaces can also be redefined to help all employees, and especially mothers. In their research on how mothers manage the conflicting demands placed upon them by work and family, Johnston and Swanson (2007), drawing upon the earlier scholarship of Baxter (1990), have noted that employed and stay-at-

home mothers often engage in one of four strategies to cope with the perpetual paid work versus family obligation battle: (1) the selection of one identity (paid work or stay-at-home), completely excluding the alternatives; (2) separating each set of responsibilities so they do not overlap; (3) neutralizing all tasks by meeting each of their demands without succeeding at any one fully; and (4) reframing the status quo by choosing new ways to organize their lives. The last option, reframing, is the most extreme in that it challenges the way that individuals think about family and work in the United States today. One way to accomplish this would be for jobs to be more flexible. These initiatives could involve flexible work arrangements regarding the timing/location of work, time off options, and the ability to accelerate or decelerate the path of one's career as life circumstances change. Choices such as these would reduce the stress women face in their trying to be both a good mother and good worker.

This study, of course, is not without its limitations. First, the sample size was small; it was also taken from mothers' organizations whose members have self-selected into various types of support and/advocacy groups. Their opinions might, therefore, be heightened on the issue of Mommy Wars discourse because they have joined groups that at least in part aim to help them navigate paid work and stay-at-home issues. Second, by design, the sample in this study was middle-class as defined by each respondent's level of educational attainment. Clearly, mothers in the general population with fewer resources do not have as many opportunities to work for pay while funding expensive day care or to stay at home without an income stream, and therefore would likely have different attitudes on Mommy Wars discourse as well. But overall, this analysis is nonetheless suggestive in that it shows, across races, that Mommy Wars discourse is not absolutely dominant or hegemonic among the middle-class. Moreover, to the extent that Mommy Wars discourse does exist and is fueled by intensive mothering ideology, it may be

possible to reduce pressures on mothers by modifying the structure of obligations both within the family unit as well as within workplace organizations. With these changes, perhaps the divisions between mothers who work for pay and those who stay at home will have a much greater chance of dissolving over time.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Interview Sample

<b>CHARACTERISTIC</b>	<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>NO MOMMY WARS DISCOURSE</b>	<b>MOMMY WARS DISCOURSE</b>	<b>UNSURE</b>
<b>Average Age</b>	37.37	36.14	36.55	43.16
<b>Total Average Number of Children</b>	2.09	2.02	1.96	2.47
<b>Percentage Working for Pay</b>	60.0%	61.4%	53.1%	73.7%
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Married	90.4%	93.0%	85.7%	94.7%
Divorced	4.0%	5.3%	2.0%	5.3%
Separated	.8%	0%	2.0%	0%
Living Together	1.6%	0%	4.1%	0%
Never Married	3.2%	1.8%	6.1%	0%
<b>Educational Attainment</b>				
Less than High School (Grade 11 or less)	0%	0%	0%	0%
High school diploma (including GED)	0%	0%	0%	0%
Some college, but did not graduate	4%	3.5%	4.1%	5.3%
Associate's Degree	3.2%	3.5%	4.1%	0%
Bachelor's Degree	41.6%	45.6%	40.8%	31.6%
Some graduate training	3.2%	5.3%	2.0%	0%
Graduate or professional degree	48%	42.1%	49.0%	63.2%
<b>Race</b>				
White (non-Hispanic)	73.6%	80.7%	69.4%	63.2%
Black (non-Hispanic)	20.8%	14.0%	24.5%	31.6%
Other	5.6%	5.3%	6.1%	1.8%
<b>Total Sample Size</b>	125	57	49	19

**Table 2. Mommy Wars in Peer Group by Race**

<b>PRESENCE OF MOMMY WARS DISCOURSE AMONG PEERS</b>	<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>WHITE</b>	<b>AFRICAN-AMERICAN</b>	<b>OTHER</b>
No Mommy Wars	57 (73.6%)	46 (50.0%)	8 (30.8%)	3 (42.9%)
Mommy Wars	49 (20.8%)	34 (36.9%)	12 (46.1%)	3 (42.9%)
Unsure/No opinion	19 (5.6%)	12 (13.1%)	6 (23.1%)	1 (14.2%)
<b>Total Sample Size</b>	125	92	26	7

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