

## **Strictly for Evangelical Parenting Support? The Case of Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS)**

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## **Strictly for Evangelical Parenting Support? The Case of Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS)**

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## **Abstract**

Parenting poses a unique set of opportunities and challenges for both mothers who work for pay and for those who stay at home across the United States today. Specific types of "work-family" mothers' groups have thus emerged as a way for these parents to provide support, information, and advocacy to one another in friendly communities. This study analyzes the boundary work undertaken by one national Christian mothers' group, Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS), to maximize its membership base and distinguish it from other work-family mothers' organizations. In this article, I first probe how MOPS engages in a particular presentation of self that I call "open evangelism" to market its organization. Open evangelism combines both an open (nonreligious) and evangelical philosophy to appeal to a diversity of mothers across the country. I then use data collected from 25 in-depth interviews with MOPS members in 2009 in order to assess if and how this open evangelism is, in fact, experienced by members at the chapter level. I find that both open and evangelical themes emerge when members describe the benefits that they receive from joining the group and the challenges presented by parenthood, thereby suggesting that MOPS is successful in its self-presentation. I conclude with MOPS' prospects for survival and growth in the competitive world of both religious and nonreligious mothers' organizations.

Over the past forty years, mothers have been entering the labor force in greater numbers than ever before. These changes have been quite dramatic. In fact, in 1975, less than half of all mothers with children under the age of eighteen were engaged in paid employment, at 47.4% (BLS 2011). By 2010, that number had risen to 71.3% (BLS 2011). Even mothers with young children ages six and under were becoming more involved in paid work, rising from 39% to 64.2% over the same time period (BLS 2011). There were a variety of reasons propelling these changes, including women's need for self-fulfillment in terms of pursuing a career and declining male wages that pushed them into the labor market in order to make financial ends meet. Yet, even despite these sizeable shifts, a significant percentage of mothers still remained at home, citing numerous explanations for their choices, such as their belief in this being the best possible arrangement for their children or the prohibitive costs of child care if they were to work for pay.

Interestingly, research has consistently demonstrated that both sets of mothers--those working for pay and those staying at home--have reported difficulties with their decisions. Those mothers working for pay, whatever their initial reason for seeking employment, frequently articulated conflict over whether they were making the right decision by entering the labor market, fearing that they may somehow be neglecting their children (Hays 1996; Hattery 2001). Even while their husbands, if they were married, were doing more child care and housework than in the past, mothers were still shouldering the majority of the responsibilities in these areas (Hochschild 2003; Moen 2003; Bianchi et al. 2006). These employed mothers therefore were struggling "to do it all." Mothers who stayed at home also described fears concerning their life arrangements (Peskowitz 2005). They, too, wondered if they were being the best possible role

models for their children as they matured through their developmental stages and hoped that they themselves were living up to their fullest potential.

To cope with these new work-family dilemmas, many mothers began seeking out a variety of mothers' organizations that would enable them to meet the challenges of parenting in their lives. These special "work-family" mothers' groups tend to have distinct goals related to supporting paid work, with some undertaking small initiatives in this area and others offering members many resources. They therefore attract differing percentages of mothers who work for pay versus those who stay at home. In addition, the majority of these work-family organizations are nonreligious in nature; however, Christian-based groups, especially local ones that are directly affiliated with one specific church, are not uncommon. Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS), the group that is at the center of study here, is different from these local-only religious groups in that it has Christian-affiliated chapters all over the country. While Christian women have been entering the labor market in close to the same percentages as non-Christian women over the past several decades (Putnam and Campbell 2010), many evangelical families report mixed feelings related to women's labor force participation (Bartkowski 2001; Glass and Nash 2006; Ammons and Edgell 2007). In the case of MOPS, the majority of its members stay at home, at 65.6% (Crowley and Weiner 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Mothers thus have many choices if they want to join a work-family organization for support. These groups, therefore, are actually competitors for these mothers as members. So how does MOPS, as a religious organization, make itself appealing to the maximum number of mothers, and is it effective in this regard? In this article, I argue that MOPS engages in boundary

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<sup>1</sup> Another reason why the majority of MOPS members are stay-at-home mothers is the meeting time scheduled by the chapters. Many chapters hold their meetings during weekday mornings, which would preclude many mothers who work for pay from attending.

work as it markets a particular organizational philosophy. In this case, boundary work refers to the ways in which MOPS attempts to define what it wants its organization to be, while excluding ideas that do not meet its ongoing vision of a mother-based community. I more specifically argue that MOPS embraces "open evangelism" as its organizing philosophy. This means that MOPS is open or nonreligious in certain aspects of its self-presentation in order to draw in the "unchurched," while simultaneously advocating evangelical principles to appeal to its base members. Finally, I maintain that this hybrid image can be considered successful and as a model for similarly situated groups in that different members of the organization at the grassroots level identify the benefits of joining and the challenges of parenting from both open (nonreligious) and/or evangelical perspectives.

### **THE NATURE OF BOUNDARY WORK AND MARKETING**

Creating boundaries, or boundary work, is of considerable significance to groups as they attempt to establish exactly who they are in relation to others (Gieryn 1983). In the past, scholars have distinguished between symbolic and social boundaries (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Symbolic boundaries involve images, places, material goods, words, ideas, and the like that help categorize different sets of individuals and set them apart from others (Swartz 2011). These sets of individuals are then often thought of as occupying distinct social boundaries. Social boundaries reify distinctions among these groups and tend to reinforce differential access to power, equality, and privilege in the United States. For example, social boundaries divide individuals by race, gender, sexual orientation, class, and religion, among many other characteristics and beliefs.

Over the past several decades, scholars have noted that boundary work is critical to the formation of collective identities (Jenkins 1996). Boundary work can be accomplished politically by social movements to unify individuals working on behalf of a common cause. For example, social movements can adopt shared cultural rituals for those advocating on behalf of gay and African-American civil rights. But boundary work can also be employed to establish clear distinctions among seemingly-like groups. For instance, within the women's rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, women frequently divided themselves by ideology, age, and race (Echols 1989; Whittier 1995; Roth 2004). In this case, these women were united by an overarching common cause, but self-segregated themselves into smaller factions so that each could pursue its own independent interests.

In the same way, boundary work can be very important for groups not necessarily involved in social movements but that have similar, broad-based goals. In these cases, they somehow want to distinguish themselves from other groups. For example, while sharing some goals, these groups might have divergent public relations plans or unique leadership structures. Because individuals have options at their disposal, these organizations must carefully strategize as they attempt to compete for members. More specifically, these groups must skillfully consider the boundaries that they wish to create that will attract the widest set of members while at the same time maintaining their organizational integrity and principles. In this competitive arena, marketing becomes one of the key ways these types of organizations engage in boundary work.

In studying the marketing of religious organizations such as churches, sociologists have long been concerned with the differences in the costs of participation for potential members. These costs include, for example, the investment of time and the adherence to strict codes of

behavior (Kelley 1986; Iannaccone 1994). But this one-sided focus on the costs of participation misses the second fundamental way individuals think about joining groups: namely, the availability of rewards (Sengers 2010). More specifically, when individuals consider participating in a church, they reflect on both the costs *as well as* the rewards or benefits of participating. Benefits can be marketed to potential participants in a variety of ways, such as the highly stylized and entertaining services promoted by the evangelical Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois that are specifically designed to attract "seekers" or the "unchurched" (Pritchard 1996; Sargeant 2000). In this case, Willow Creek, in efforts similar to those of other evangelical churches (Allner 1997; Vokurka and McDaniel 2004; Einstein 2007), combines the use of music, various forms of media, and on-stage sketches demonstrating Biblical principles in order to persuade the unchurched to join. Mainline churches can adopt the same techniques if they have the marketing savvy to establish clearly defined products and activities (Shawchuck et al. 1992; Stevens and Loudon 1992).

Perhaps most importantly for this analysis, marketing strategies can also be effective in attracting members into non-church, religious organizations. There are, of course, clear differences with respect to the primary goals of churches and non-church, religious organizations, the most important of which is conversion. Churches, especially those in the seeker tradition, have as one of their most fundamental missions the conversion of non-believers into believers, while non-church, religious groups place relatively less emphasis--or none at all--on this goal (Miller 1997; Watson and Scalen Jr. 2008).<sup>2</sup> Otherwise, however, non-church,

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<sup>2</sup> It is important, however, not to overstate the extent to which non-church, religious groups tend to attract persons from completely different religious traditions (or none at all) into their membership bases. These groups have clear, faith-based philosophies. Individuals at least open to these views--including those without a religious preference but still holding some type of spiritual beliefs (Hout and Fischer 2002)--are probably more likely to self-select into their membership bases than atheists, agnostics, or adherents to relatively small religious traditions.



religious groups look remarkably like their church counterparts in terms of their marketing techniques. Aglow International (formerly Women's Aglow Fellowship), for example, is the largest interdenominational mission organization in the United States. While the group chapters clearly impose high costs on their members in terms of strict rules, codes of conduct, and discipline, they also offer benefits in the form of therapeutic meetings where individuals can share their common problems and concerns (Griffith 1997). In a similar way, the Promise Keepers, a ministry that focuses on the spiritual needs of men, encourages its members to form small Accountability Groups in order to support God-focused goals in front of one another. However, the group also encourages men to come together, reaching across denomination and racial lines, to offer praise to God in expansive, uplifting atmospheres (Bartkowski 2004).

To be most viable, therefore, these types of non-church, religious organizations need to be aware of both the costs and benefits that they offer to potential participants. According to Finke (2004), this means groups must strike a careful balance between marketing core teachings (costs) and marketing innovation/adaptation to new circumstances (rewards). Applying this concept in what I have defined as open evangelism, groups such as MOPS need to engage in boundary work that markets a strong commitment to their core principles of promoting conservative Christian values ("evangelical"), as well as ideals and activities that are more nonreligious in nature ("open").

But what can be said about its effectiveness in this regard? That is, a critical issue is whether MOPS' efforts to promote open evangelism are reflected in the views of its members. Evidence of success in this transmission of this organizational philosophy would be a diversity of member viewpoints--both evangelical and nonreligious--on the two issues of inquiry here: benefits of participation and challenges of parenting. If, however, MOPS fails to communicate

the open evangelical philosophy and instead only focuses on the "open" or the "evangelical" component, then we should observe members articulating views on these topics primarily infused with *either* openness or conservative Christianity.

### **MOTHERS' GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES: BACKGROUND, MEMBER BENEFITS, AND CHALLENGES OF PARENTING**

MOPS is not alone in the work-family organizational arena. Indeed, there are currently four national, nonreligious work-family mothers' groups with centralized lists of their members in the United States.<sup>3</sup> First, MomsRising, created in 2006, is an online advocacy group dedicated to promoting family-friendly workplaces and employment-based flexibility. It therefore attracts mostly mothers who work for pay. The other large work-family mothers' organizations meet on an in-person basis. More specifically, the National Association of Mothers' Centers (NAMC), begun in 1975, provides community-based resources for mothers experiencing parenting challenges and attracts both stay-at-home and mothers who work for pay. Mothers & More, established in 1987, helps women who are transitioning in and out of the workplace as their children move through different developmental stages. Mocha Moms, Incorporated, established in 1997, offers resources for mothers of color who have elected not to work full-time outside the home while their children are young; many of its members, however, have at-home businesses.<sup>4</sup>

As the fifth and only major religious mothers' group with a national presence, MOPS was founded in 1973 when Maxine Shideler, a woman interested in parenting issues, read a magazine article on the typical problems mothers face in raising small children (Eastis 2004;

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<sup>3</sup> MOPS is the only national, religious mothers' group with a centralized list of members; it is Christian in orientation. There are no national, non-Christian religious mothers' groups with a centralized membership list in the country today.

<sup>4</sup> The respective percentages of mothers who stay at home in MomsRising, NAMC, Mothers & More, and Mocha Moms are 26.2%, 47.3%, 47.7%, and 48.2% (Crowley and Curenton 2011).

Crowley 2012). This prompted her to put out a call to all interested mothers who wanted to share their common experiences in a group setting. Initially meeting with seven other mothers in a community room of the Trinity Baptist Church in Wheat Ridge, Colorado, Shideler encouraged the women to articulate the challenges that they confronted as they raised their toddlers. All of the women agreed that they wanted their group to have a strong Biblical dimension as they focused on offering peer-to-peer support, but that they also desired a strong teaching leader to engage the group on a diversity of topics of discussion as they met on a regular basis. From these initial beginnings, the organization grew until it established a Board of Directors in 1981 and incorporated first as MOPS Outreach and later as MOPS, Incorporated. MOPS instantaneously struck a nerve with the needs of Christian mothers and therefore expanded astronomically in its early days. With publicity from such champions as James Dobson, head of the international ministry group Focus on the Family, the number of chapters across the country grew to 400 by the late 1980s. To continue its growth, one can argue that MOPS has actively embraced open evangelism, that is, presented nonreligious and religious principles in marketing itself. The first research question that this article poses is, in what ways does MOPS' open evangelism specifically address the two issues related to motherhood at the center of analysis here, which are the benefits of joining such a group, as well as approaches to parenting challenges?

In addition, there may or may not be convergence between an organization's self-presentation and the perceptions of those members at the grassroots level regarding the group's philosophy in these two areas of benefits and parenting challenges. Interestingly, the specific benefits that mothers themselves report receiving from nonreligious work-family groups and groups like MOPS have received very little attention in the scholarly literature. In one study of

Mocha Moms members using interview data, researchers reported two primary benefits for members: adult friendship and child-centric activity ideas (Crowley and Curenton 2011). In a similar study using interview data, Eastis (2004) found that Mothers & More and MOPS members again echoed anecdotally the importance of nonreligious benefits such as adult friendship and a shared mutual purpose as their primary reasons for joining. However, these latter interview responses were not reported systematically by theme, and therefore these descriptions might be incomplete, especially as they pertain to members' potential religious motivators. The second research question for this study is as follows: are members' perceptions of the benefits that they receive from joining MOPS at the grassroots level consistent with MOPS' top-down organizational philosophy of open evangelism, where nonreligious and religious principles are valued?

Finally, women who join mothers' groups obviously have worries in their roles as parents, as any set of mothers would. In the nonreligious arena, parents across the United States have concerns about issues such as breastfeeding, their children's educational advancement, and their sons' and daughters' mental and physical health (Halfon et al. 2002). By way of contrast, the literature on Christian parenting suggests that one of the most important issues for these mothers is teaching their children critical values that are consistent with a God-focused world (Boggs 1983; Wilcox 1998; Bunge 2008). Another key theme that emerges in this scholarship is that Christian parents struggle with helping their children resist the influences of the material world, such as sex, drugs, and luxury goods (Wilcox 1998). In addition, Christian parents also strive to insure that their children receive significant instruction pertaining to respecting authority and heeding the bounds of discipline (Mahoney 2005; Petts 2007). For those with strict Christian leanings, the primary disciplinarian is the father as the head of the household, but

mothers still have a clear role in correcting their children when necessary (Bartkowski and Wilcox 2000; Wilcox 2002). A final key issue raised in the literature on the special challenges faced by Christian parents relates to financial accountability. In the Christian perspective, God's word shows individuals that they must be responsible for properly managing the financial resources that they are given, in honor of the Almighty Father. The third research question thus explored here pertains to members' perceptions of the types of challenges that they face related to parenting. Are the challenges that MOPS members cope with at the grassroots level consistent with how the organization frames these same issues through its philosophy of open evangelism, where nonreligious and religious values are promoted?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The analysis presented here is based upon the collection of data from two sources. The first source involved obtaining information to identify MOPS' own presentation of self through its marketing on its website, [mops.org](http://mops.org).<sup>5</sup> From this website, I identified three pieces of textual data that explain MOPS' organizational philosophy. These include the following: (1) The MOPS "Welcome Message"; (2) The International Faith Position Statement; and (3) Ministry Values.

The second source of data includes interviews with MOPS members, a rich source of information in qualitative research (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006). The selection process for the in-depth interviews began as part of a broader research project where I conducted a random sample, web-based survey of MOPS members from April-June 2009. The total number of survey-eligible respondents was 84,584. The survey-eligible population was lower than the total number of member-contacts delivered by the national MOPS office (104,982) due to a variety of

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<sup>5</sup> These data were collected from the MOPS website on April 26, 2012.

reasons; those omitted were mothers without valid email addresses, those living outside the United States, those without a chapter affiliation, and those who had left the group prior to the survey's execution. From this set, I randomly selected 5,000 members to participate in the web-based survey. This survey probed a variety of topics related to group participation, attitudes toward paid work and workplace flexibility, and political behavior. At the end of the survey, which was completed by 762 MOPS members, respondents were asked if they would be willing to participate in a one-hour, in-depth interview on the issues covered in the survey. A total of 167 members agreed, from which I randomly selected 25 final interviewees. While there are limits to the small sample size of those interviewed, especially with respect to the generalizability of the findings, the interviews are valuable in that they provide a richness of experience that cannot be found within the survey data.

There were a total of twenty-seven questions included in the interviews. All of the interviews were conducted over the telephone, recorded, and professionally transcribed. This analysis focuses on the members' responses to two particular questions in the interview protocol that can be compared to the organization's presentation of self in its own marketing efforts. First, to understand how they conceptualize participation, all MOPS members were asked, "What are the benefits that you receive from being a part of a group like this?" Second, to map out their approaches to parenting, the MOPS interviewees were asked, "Do you think that Christian mothers face any unique challenges, versus other mothers in American society? If so, what are they?" In order to protect the identity of all participants, each was given a pseudonym in the Findings section.

In analyzing the responses, I used the qualitative software program Atlas.ti to first approach the data with standard open coding procedures. Through repeated readings of the

interview transcripts, I coded all responses to the relevant questions based on anticipated themes drawn from the literature, but also permitted new themes to emerge more organically from the data. This is a type of modified grounded theory analysis that is especially useful when some information—but not all—is available on a particular topic of research interest (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

I initially divided the codes between those that pertained to the benefits of participating and those that involved challenges regarding modern parenting. For those related to the benefits of participating, I identified seven themes. For those codes related to parenting challenges, I located six themes. However, many of these themes were linked with only a handful of respondent quotes. In order to qualify as a theme in the Findings section of the paper, I therefore determined that at least 20% of MOPS members had to identify it as such (5 out of 25 respondents). This cut-off point resulted in three themes emerging for participation benefits and three themes related to parenting challenges.

I used three techniques in order to establish the trustworthiness of the data, each of which is a critical component of qualitative data analysis. These techniques include triangulation, peer examination, and thick description. First, in terms of triangulation, I compared the textual information and interview responses with the data collected in the survey and with one other data-generating part of the project: observational research. More specifically, in November 2009, I attended a local MOPS chapter meeting in an urban location and took notes on the numerous issues, worries, and concerns of all participants who attended. By examining the data from all of these sources independently and collaboratively, I was able to verify the importance and relative salience of the textual data and statements being made by all of the MOPS members who were studied. Second, I used peer examination to help me hone in on the most important

themes emerging in the textual data and in the interviews; this was accomplished by having a graduate assistant who both studied the group in detail and who conducted numerous interviews with mothers as part of the larger research project read through the final analysis. Third, I present actual quotations from the MOPS website and the mothers interviewed in the Findings section as embodied by the concept of “thick description;” this enables the organization and the mothers to let their words speak for themselves as they present the complexities of American parenting (Geertz 1973).

### *The Interview Sample*

Of the 25 MOPS members in the sample, 14 were staying at home with their children at the time of their interviews and 11 were working for pay. They were 36-years-old on average, ranging in age from 24 to 60. They had from 1 child to 6 children, averaging 2.7 children each. In addition, they belonged to their local MOPS chapter for an average of 4.3 years. All were married; the mean duration of these marital unions was 7.6 years.

The MOPS members who were interviewed for this study were highly advantaged in terms of certain sociodemographic characteristics. More specifically, with respect to education, they were all at least college-educated. One had a doctoral degree, 13 reported earning a master’s degree, 9 had a bachelor’s degree, and 2 had an associate’s degree. They were fairly racially homogeneous as well, with 23 reporting being white/Caucasian, 1 multiracial, and 1 African-American. They also were on the conservative side of the spectrum in terms of partisan identification, with 13 Republicans, 6 Democrats, 4 Independents, and 2 expressing no party preference in the sample.



When probed as to their religious identification, the majority reported that they were simply non-denominational Christian (n=13). The remainder were Catholic (n=5), Baptist (n=2), Southern Baptist (n=1), Presbyterian (n=1), Methodist (n=1), and Episcopalian (n=1). The final MOPS member identified herself as agnostic (n=1).

## FINDINGS

### *Organizational Presentation of Self: Textual Analysis*

MOPS engages in boundary work through marketing itself on its website, mops.org, in a variety of ways. First is its MOPS "Welcome Message," or the central greeting potential and ongoing members see upon visiting the site. It reads as follows:

So, what is this whole "MOPS" thing?

MOPS stands for "mothers of preschoolers" - but don't let that confuse you. MOPS is about meeting the needs of every mom of a child from conception through kindergarten. Whether you're urban, suburban, rural, stay-at-home, working, teen, adoptive, special-needs, single or married, MOPS is for you!

Being moms is what brings us together and allows us to build a community. The early years of being a mom are just as foundational to you as they are to your baby, and those years are filled with unique needs that other moms instinctively understand.

So what are you waiting for? Find a group near you and tell them you want a community of mom friends!

This "Welcome Message" can definitely be characterized as nonreligious and therefore clearly "open" as a component in the overall group philosophy of "open evangelism." More specifically, the group encourages mothers from all perspectives to join to reap the benefits of participating. This includes mothers from different geographical regions, working for pay or staying-at-home statuses, age backgrounds, adoptive or special needs categories, and marital statuses. The advice that it promises to offer regarding the challenges of parenthood is equally open and nonreligious.

The website promises that "being moms" is what brings members together so that they can help each other with the unique issues that other mothers "instinctively understand."

Once one delves further into the website, however, the evangelical component of "open evangelism" also becomes apparent. Organizationally, the group is completely non-denominational; however, all MOPS chapters must be affiliated with a local church or parachurch group. All chapters also must promise adherence to MOPS' International Faith Position Statement, which articulates how the group views the role of Jesus Christ in its members' lives; this International Faith Position Statement constitutes the second piece of textual data drawn from the website that demonstrates how MOPS markets itself. The core principles of this International Faith Position Statement are as follows:

- (1) There is one God eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17, Matthew 28:19). We believe Jesus Christ was begotten by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, and is true God and true man (Matthew 1:18&23).
- (2) The Bible is the foundation for these truths. It is God's Word, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, and is authoritative on all matters on which it speaks (II Peter 1:20-21, II Timothy 3:16-17).
- (3) Jesus came into this world to redeem us by offering himself as the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins; he died for us; and he demonstrated his victory over sin and death by rising physically from the dead and ascending to heaven (Romans 5:8-9, Romans 6:23, I Corinthians 15:1-4).
- (4) The result of this saving work of Christ is that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9, Galatians 2:16).
- (5) We further believe that the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption will begin with the visible personal return of Christ to judge the world and separate believers and unbelievers forever, and will culminate in a new creation (Acts 1:11, I Thessalonians 4:16-17, Acts 24:15, Revelation 20:15, Romans 6:23).
- (6) We believe that God chooses to work through the believers in his church and that we are called to evangelism and discipling of believers within the fellowship of the church (Matthew 28:19-20, I Peter 2:9).

This articulation of faith principles is quite strict in nature; that is, beliefs 1-5 offer a perspective of Christianity that is consistent with evangelical views. These principles can shape how members come to understand the benefits of group participation. They also can mold how these individuals view the challenges of modern day parenting, especially through belief 6, which calls upon members to express God-centered perspectives in leading their own lives in front of others, including children.

The organization also highlights its Ministry Values, which are offered as a framework to guide all chapters' work in helping mothers across the United States. MOPS' Ministry Values, the third piece of textual data, are as follows:

- (1) Dignity: The dignity of each human life and of each individual mother of preschoolers, no matter where she has been, what she has done or how she is choosing to live her life today, embracing both believers and nonbelievers and all ethnic and socioeconomic groups.
- (2) Women: The equipping of women to become all that God has designed them to be.
- (3) Mothering: The value of mothering for its contribution to individuals, children, society at large, future generations and eternity.
- (4) Relationships: Relationships including the male/female marital relationship, the parent/child relationship, and the ultimate fulfillment of all needs through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- (5) Lifestyle Evangelism: Lifestyle evangelism as expressed through Christ-like relationships in an environment for growth and spiritual development as faith shared through actions and words.
- (6) Leadership Development: The equipping of women to gain confidence in their leadership skills and guide others through lifestyle evangelism.

In contrast to the Welcome Message and the International Faith Position Statement, MOPS' Ministry Values represent a complex merger of both the "open" and the "evangelical" in its

philosophy of "open evangelism." The values of Dignity and Mothering are open and nonreligious in nature, encouraging mothers to take pride in their roles as caretakers, whatever background (religious or nonreligious) that they might possess. The values of Women, Relationships, Lifestyle Evangelism, and Leadership Development, on the other hand, represent clear evangelical perspectives on these complex topics. Here, MOPS emphasizes the nurturing of mothers as spiritual beings, especially in their relations with others. Overall, both the open and evangelical positions in the Ministry Values have the power to shape mothers' reasons for joining, as well as their views on parenting challenges in modern America.

In sum, the textual data drawn from three key components of the MOPS website indicate that the organization, indeed, embraces open evangelism in terms of conducting its boundary work and resultant self-presentation. The next pivotal question, of course, is to what extent do members experience and reflect this open evangelical philosophy as they describe the benefits of joining as well as the challenges that they face as parents in the modern world.

### ***Members' Perceptions of MOPS: Benefits of Participating***

MOPS members draw from their groups many benefits and are invigorated through their organizational participation in a variety of ways. Previous research on MOPS and similar groups suggests that adult friendship (with a common purpose) and child-centric activities are the most important motivators for mothers to join these types of work-family groups. However, while adult friendship was reported here, child-centric activities were not mentioned. Instead, in addition to adult friendship, MOPS members described information about parenting and spiritual

strength as their central reasons for participating.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly for this analysis, while the majority of MOPS members outlined these benefits in terms of their evangelical values, others viewed these benefits in more open (nonreligious) terms.

By far, the most frequently mentioned benefit that MOPS members located through participation in their group was the friendship and fellowship that they received from other mothers in their local chapters. For some mothers, this support was essential and had significant evangelical overtones. Nia was a 32-year-old mother of two young daughters, ages six and two. Married for over ten years, she was currently staying at home with her children after pursuing two consecutive careers, one in industrial engineering and the second in college counseling. She made this decision to be at home with her daughters after witnessing a close co-worker struggle with managing paid work while raising her children. Nevertheless, she still had difficulties parenting her children because of the stress that they often created in her family's daily life, which she described here.

If you ever get the blessing of children, it is the most wonderful, rewarding experience, and yet is the sole experience that is the most exhausting, consuming job of your life. It's on both [ends of the] spectrum and it just brings you to the end of yourself... You know, your child getting into a spoiled diaper in the crib and rubbing it all over and just all the crazy things toddlers do. [But] you go to MOPS and other moms are experiencing the same thing and you know you are not going crazy. I think there has been a serious lack from generation to generation, with so much career orientation in our mothers' generation, that our generation of [women] have gotten good jobs and college degrees but nobody ever taught us how to run a home and how to mother. We don't know what to do with a screaming toddler or we don't have a lot of role models to look around and say, "Honey, it is all right. [The age of] two does not last forever."... There are days, with mothers of preschoolers, that you think you might just lose your mind... [But] when you are around a group that has a vision of lifting mothers

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<sup>6</sup>As described in the Research Methodology section of this analysis, as part of the larger project on mothers' groups in the United States, I also conducted a random sample survey of MOPS members. While the challenges of parenting question was not asked in the survey, the benefits of participation question was asked, with members able to select up to two benefits. In the survey, MOPS members identified "emotional support" and "friends for me" as most important. It should be noted, however, that a "spiritual benefit" was not an option on the survey since the instrument was designed to query the preferences of mothers in multiple groups, including nonreligious ones (Crowley and Weiner 2010).

up, you know, [you can] live in impossible chaos...[We want] to [give] most of those mothers confidence to be constructive with their children, discipline, and activities. [We want them] not just to get through each day, but to have a vision to guide their children into striving, productive citizens. I don't know if you might ever see this, like written down anywhere in MOPS [material], but I would imagine you could probably see through the heart of MOPS as the desire for mothers and their children and families to know the Lord.--Nia

While Nia stressed the day-to-day support that she received from her group in coping with the challenges of motherhood, Jean, 29-years-old, remarked on how fellowship came to her from the supportive community of mothers who transformed her into a more evangelical person within the context of her own family situation.

Well, the fellowship certainly [is important] and the particular MOPS group I am a part of is very supportive and nurturing [of] mothers in their faith. I really feel like it helps me, too. I am a better mom for it and I am a better wife for it. In particular, I find that I am encouraged by the women around me and by the teaching [that] I receive, and that really improves my relationships with the whole family...I [now] am surrounded by so many Christians because I've entered a community of women and I spend more time with other Christians than I had in the past. [God is] on my mind more and I spend more time in prayer. I spend more time reading the Word.--Jean

For Jean, having spiritual time was very important. She used to be employed as a schoolteacher, but left that job for an opportunity in independent sales after the birth of her now 3-year-old boy. Especially with the most recent addition of her 9-month-old daughter, she maintained in her interview that she was making the best choices for her regarding the balance between her work and her family life. However, one significant drawback was that since she now worked independently from home, she frequently found herself isolated from other mothers. Fortunately, MOPS gave her a chance to socialize with other like-minded women of faith, all of whom enriched her own relationship with God.

While building common spiritual ties was frequently a fundamental part of the fellowship MOPS members expressed, not all mothers described the friendship that they received from the

organization from an evangelical perspective. Instead, they viewed this fellowship through an open or nonreligious lens. Judy, for example, was a 37-year-old MOPS member whose husband was in the military. Due to his demanding and nomadic career, the couple was constantly relocating throughout the country with their 5-year-old girl and 3-year-old boy. As she reflected on the benefits that she received from MOPS, she was quick to observe how the organization provided her with "ready-made" friends that she might otherwise have difficulty finding if it were not for the meetings that she regularly attended.

I have made some really good friends through MOPS and actually, my MOPS friends are probably my closest friends here. We live 30 miles from the [military] base-- the farthest I have ever lived from the base...It is hard being a military wife because we are only ever anywhere for two to three years. Sometimes [in finding] a friend [there is a question as to whether it is] really worth it to get very close because you are going to be hurt when you leave [her] and sometimes things do not come together until your very last year. You can be in the same place for three or four years and it is not until your last year that you are actually really comfortable in that location that you really start to think of it as home. You then have to uproot and leave again...[But since I] have joined MOPS, I have found some really great friends who I know I will keep in touch with when I leave.--Judy

Like many other mothers in the study, Judy had logged a compelling history of paid work experience. She was with the Air Force for a period of time, followed by a stint in the corporate world as an environmental specialist. She also relocated to help her parents with their health needs at one point in her life. After she got married, she and her husband decided that she would stay at home because of the active duty requirements of his job. While she enjoyed this new role at home, she also strongly desired adult companionship and found in her MOPS group a circle of women on whom she could consistently rely for emotional sustenance.

Mothers also described another important benefit that they received from their local MOPS group: parenting information. As a highly educated group overall, these mothers seemed naturally inquisitive about enriching their lives as well as those of their children. Interestingly,

however, when describing this benefit, not one MOPS member cited an evangelical component related to the advice that they gained from other members. Instead, they reflected on the open or nonreligious daily nuts-and-bolts of child care as where they needed the most help. As many members described, mothers are not automatically born knowing the intricacies of taking care of infants and later children. Instead, they need the assistance of others who can provide them with the most important types of guidance, whether this be in the areas of childhood physical, developmental, or emotional well-being. For some members, this information came in the form of formal speakers that MOPS leaders would invite to chapter meetings to offer presentations on various child-oriented topics. Cheryl, a 30-year-old member with four children, ages six and under, described the impact of these educational speakers in the following way.

The fellowship/support of other moms is just unbeatable. [But] another benefit that I always walk away from [the group happy to have experienced is that]...we have speakers in at least every other meeting or every meeting. The educational benefits that I walk away with are great. I always learn something new, whether it is about making sure my car seats are installed the right way, or maybe I have been having a tough time with a strong-willed child and I need some discipline help.--Cheryl

While Cheryl found these invited speakers to be incredibly helpful in terms of teaching her parenting skills, other mothers, like Judith, aged 25 with a 3-year-old boy and a 6-month-old boy, argued that the most important source of wisdom for them came from other MOPS members. This type of peer-to-peer learning was made possible through a MOPS-run program called MOPPETS, which provides free or low cost child care for members' children at the church while the adult MOPS meetings are being simultaneously run. By utilizing this program, members can devote all of their meeting time to discussing adult issues related to parenting without having to supervise their children.

[With MOPPETS, you get a] short break from the kids but [they are still] in very close proximity so you do not have to worry because you can hear them. They are in the



room next door...MOPS also has mentor moms, older mothers, who have also raised their children. I really enjoyed getting to know “the been there and done that” women who I can look up to and get advice from.--Judith

Many mothers like Judith had strong praise for the "mentor moms" in MOPS, who were prevalent across numerous chapters. In the life of women with preschoolers, these mentor moms provided the guidance that they often needed in order to meet the never-ending demands of motherhood.

The last benefit MOPS members identified as emerging from group participation involved spiritual guidance; this, of course, was an overt, evangelical reward. For some mothers, this was direction aimed at helping their children be the best individuals possible in terms of character development. Joan was a 30-year-old mother of five children, ages seven and under. While Joan indicated that she would not necessarily join the church with which her local MOPS chapter was affiliated, she found MOPPETS to be an invaluable jumping off place from which one of her daughters could then seamlessly move into a more structured child ministry program.

MOPPETS was all so wonderful and the church also had a preschool that eventually I enrolled my 3-year-old [and other children] in. [The preschool] was three days a week--half days--and they were getting Bible teaching. They were in the children’s building. [Before enrolling them in preschool, I would] literally walk past their [future] preschool classrooms to take them to the MOPPETS classrooms. When I eventually enrolled my daughter in [preschool], her teacher already remembered her face since she used to work with her at MOPPETS. That part, that was really wonderful.--Joan

Other members looked at MOPS for the religious teachings it could offer to themselves as mothers. Ashley, 33-years-old and mother of a 7-year-old boy and a 3-year-old girl, described the benefit that she received from MOPS as one of a spiritual linkage with other mothers facing similar circumstances in raising their children.

So now the number one benefit for me is the fellowship and the spiritual connection to other women going through the same...phase of their life. And we may all be doing it with different challenges, but we're all there...with, you know, relatively the same aged

children, and the same family struggles to some degree...It's an opportunity for me to find a spiritual connection without somebody pulling on my leg and talking to me for a couple hours a month, so that's why [I enjoy the group].--Ashley

Ashley's comments were reflected in the words of many other MOPS members when they discussed the spiritual dimension of the group that offered them the most solace. Primary in their analyses of this benefit was that the group was able to present to them the gift of uninterrupted time, without the demands of childrearing, so that they could concentrate on their personal relationship with God in a group setting. These peaceful moments, they argued, were especially rewarding since the lives of mothers with preschoolers can easily be overwhelmed by the details of mundane, caretaking responsibilities.

### ***Members' Perceptions of MOPS: Challenges of Parenting***

As the above discussion demonstrates, mothers report multiple benefits from their participation in their local MOPS chapters. Their own words also truly reflected the open evangelical philosophy offered by the group in its self-presentation. That is, some members described these benefits in the context of an open or nonreligious world view, while others described their participation benefits in much more evangelical terms. Also fundamental to the structuring of their lives for a significant number of mothers in this study was confronting what they viewed as critical challenges as they attempted to parent from a Christian perspective; for many, this is where the strong sense of evangelism in the organization's open evangelical philosophy emerged. Indeed, the two most commonly cited themes here involved raising children with a robust sense of faith and values and helping their children resist the temptation of material goods, both of which had previously been described in the literature as strong concerns of Christian parents. Interestingly, however, respecting authority and financial stewardship did

not emerge as critical themes as they had in earlier scholarly work. Finally, a last set of mothers did not report any challenges when it came to Christian parenting; these mothers reflected the more open or nonreligious view that all parents confront similar difficulties in raising their children in the modern world.

By far, the most common obstacle MOPS mothers articulated in nurturing their children related to the installation of faith and values; they, of course, framed these views from an evangelical perspective. For some mothers, this meant establishing in their children a different definition of success than that which may exist among their non-Christian peers. Jane, 37-years-old and the mother of a 6-year-old boy and a 3-year-old girl, put her thoughts on the matter in the following context.

I think that Christian mothers are not just concerned about how to raise their children well. If they are successful or not, that matters, but I think Christian mothers want to raise their children in a Godly way. [We want to raise them in] a way that is pleasing to God, and not only do we want to mother that way, but we also want our children to become strong in their faith as well. That is just an added component of the mothering process. Every mother wants her children to be successful, but I want both of my children to be successful but yet Godly.--Jane

Jane noted in her interview that most mothers in the United States face a significant amount of guilt. This is because they constantly worry about whether or not they are providing the best possible care for their families. Not surprisingly, therefore, a certain set of mothers find that a Christian community is one special spiritual space whereby they can comfort and reassure each other as to the merits of their mutual parenting goals.

While Jane emphasized how Christian mothers must establish certain standards of goal achievement that might be different from those instilled by non-Christian mothers, Nicole stressed how important it was for her 2-year-old daughter to have positive, Christian influences in her life. This evangelical idea of faith and values surrounding their children in the form of

Christian peers was critical to many MOPS members.

[Christian mothers] would of course be concerned about...having [their] children exposed to the right types of...religious information...[You would also] want them to have friends who are --I mean, not that you have to have only friends who are Christians--but you know, [you want them] surrounded with people who have the same values and beliefs. I would say that's the biggest thing...especially if you don't send your kids to a Christian school...I think it is important to expose children to all different faiths and have them learn and get to know different kinds of people. But, you know, you don't want them to get influenced the wrong way.--Nicole

Finally, other mothers echoed this theme of instilling faith and values in an evangelical way, but focused much more heavily on answering children's "life-related" questions from a Christian perspective than on insuring positive peer group effects. Kelly, 41-years-old and the mother of a 2-year-old daughter, offered insight on this point in the following way.

I think that creating the need and value of Christ and trying to be an example to your children as walking a Christian life is one challenge. I think another challenge is incorporating so many of the holidays that are related to Christ and the importance of that, and doing our best as parents to instill faith within your child. [I also think that] answering those questions that come up, and you know, and answering them thoughtfully and [in a] Christian way [is essential]...I think that kids may ask similar questions and yet, I think, there's a little bit of unique, not pressure, but a unique slant on how a Christian would answer those same questions.--Kelly

Kelly went on in her interview to emphasize the common stresses that all parents face and that all mothers, in particular, want to do their best in raising their children with a proper code of conduct. The difference for Christian parents is that their code of conduct is religiously-inspired and God-centered.

Another challenge faced by MOPS members in the area of parenting related to helping their children resist the enticements of the material world; they most frequently accomplished this task by proclaiming and adhering to their evangelical principles. For some mothers, this was simply a matter of insuring that all religious holidays retain their spiritual meaning. Wanda, 45-years-old and the mother of five, ages sixteen and under, elaborated on how it is difficult to keep

children focused on the true meaning of religious celebrations when there are so many material distractions competing for their attention.

I think keeping your kids Christians in a material world, especially kids that go to public school, [is one of the most difficult challenges Christian parents face]. Everywhere you go, people are trying to take religion out of your daily life and I think keeping the faith is very important. I think teaching children that even though the stores have all of these Christmas trees and Santa Claus, Christmas is certainly a much deeper thing; it is much bigger, and has a greater meaning than a pine tree. I think those are the kinds of things that MOPS moms kind of talk about and share...Keeping Christ in Christmas or Easter in your daily lives, or teaching simple Biblical lessons to your children and Bible verses and all that kind of stuff--[that is what is really important].--Wanda

For Wanda, combating the lure of material goods by infusing God into religious holidays was a central focus of her parenting goals. Other mothers, however, stressed the need to overcome materialism by fighting the temptation to overschedule their children in non-evangelical activities. Kathy, 37-years-old and the mother of three girls, ages five and under, put it in the following way.

There seems to be a pressure kind of in society and from other mothers just in general that you've got to keep your kids busy. You've got to have them in this and that, even from a young age. And I feel like that pulls from family time, which we as Christians really value. I feel like we need that family time and time to really teach our kids about the Bible in our home.--Kathy

Kathy's position on the challenges of parenting was particularly strong due to her firmly-held belief in a traditional family structure. Her husband was a Baptist pastor, and although she worked as a teacher for a period of time, they decided as a couple that eventually she would stay at home to raise their children. This was consistent with her belief "that the Bible teaches that the mom is more the nurturer for the kids and the husband is the provider for the family and the leader in the home." In her view, both the mother as the nurturer and the father as the leader have an obligation to spend quality, Bible-focused time with their children, even if this means

defying the mainstream societal pressures to enroll them in as many extracurricular, non-evangelical activities as possible. God-centered time was simply more important.

While the majority of MOPS mothers definitely believed that Christian parents face challenges that non-Christians do not, a small minority argued that Christian parents *do not* face any unique obstacles in terms of raising their children. These MOPS members subscribed to the open or nonreligious view that parents of all faiths struggle to raise their children in the modern world; Christian parents do not necessarily have a harder job. Katherine, 43-years-old and a mother of a 9-year-old daughter and a 4-year-old son, described her perceptions accordingly.

Do Christian mothers have unique challenges? Unique in, are their challenges any greater or less than any other denomination? No. I think every mother who has a faith to which she belongs is going to struggle with meeting the requirements of her faith and try to promote the qualities of her faith, whatever that may be, in today's society that does not really want to promote religion...[The] issues I face are trying to find clothes that are modest and do not make my 9-year-old look like a teenaged hooker. I would think that that is not unique to me as a Catholic Christian. That is something that any other mother might be finding problems with if that is something that is important to her. [It does not matter] whether she is Jewish, Baptist, Buddhist, or whatever...I certainly think promoting my faith to my children is important, and having them grow up in a faith-filled lifestyle [is important], but that to me is something I see as my job as the parent to provide. I am providing a school environment, a church environment, and a family home environment that are promoting those kinds of beliefs that I have and that I think are important. I would expect and anticipate that other people of faith would have those same kinds of things, although they may be a little different. They might not have a statue of Mary in their house or crucifixes, or whatever, but they would have their own thing.--Katherine

Other mothers agreed with the perspective that Christian mothers do not face unique challenges, but did so using a different line of open or nonreligious reasoning. According to these mothers, challenges specific to Christian mothers do not emerge because all mothers tend to select their own like-minded communities of women with whom to associate and receive equally valuable support, regardless of each mother's religion. Janice, a 37-year-old mother of a 7-year-old boy and a 2-year-old girl, described the process by which mothers confront parenting obstacles in the

following way.

I don't think [that there are unique parenting challenges for Christian mothers because] I think being a mom is hard for everyone. And it is hard in terms of that it creates a challenge you're never prepared for until you're a mom...And so you have to choose how to approach it. And some women, you know, reach out to prayer for the support. Some women reach out to friends. Some women, you know, don't have any support at all and they just do it because they are called to be a mother...And so I don't think your religion has any influence on whether or not, you know, you love being a mother or it's hard to be a mother or, you know, any of that.--Janice

As she reflected on this theme further, Janice acknowledged that in her view, mothers need to remain open to other mothers' suggestions as to how best parent their children. Unfortunately, mothers might differ in their relative receptivity to these various opinions, and these differences are likely to be based on personality, cultural, or religious traditions. Yet, if mothers are flexible in receiving external advice, according to Janice, then they will have a much easier time parenting.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Undoubtedly, research on homophily in social organizations argues that religion plays an important role in drawing people together into common associations (Smith 2003; Wuthnow 2003; Adamczyk 2009). This is true because individuals naturally want to be with others who share the same life goals, philosophy, and other spiritual rituals in their daily lives (Kalmijn 1998). Indeed, this desire for both commonality and community is what makes religious organizations thrive in such great numbers across the country today.

But attracting and retaining members is not such an easy task. How does MOPS, one particular Christian mothers' group, do so? The analysis presented here argues that the organization engages in a specific form of boundary work through marketing that maximizes its appeal to the most mothers while excluding those who do not fit within its organizational culture.

More specifically, through its Welcome Message, International Faith Position Statement, and Ministry Values, MOPS embraces an open evangelical philosophy. This means that while its core religious tenets are clearly evangelical, it also presents itself at times as having an open and even a nonreligious approach to interacting with the outside world. Notably, this particular form of organizational self-presentation is also reflected in the experiences of its members. That is, as a result of this particular philosophy, while many members are clearly attracted to the organization due to its evangelical character and corresponding beliefs, others cite more open and nonreligious reasons for participating. In addition, while some MOPS members cite their evangelism when they describe the unique parenting challenges that they face as Christians, a small minority of members do not view the parenting problems that they must handle as distinctly different from those facing non-Christian parents. Instead, they view their problems from a more open perspective. Overall, this tight match between MOPS' organizational self-presentation and grassroots members' experiences highlights MOPS' successful ability to reach its target audience.

What is the outlook for MOPS in terms of its future growth and vibrancy? That is, what can this group (and others like it) as well as its leadership learn from this analysis? We can think of all voluntary organizations in the United States as potentially competing with one another for members (Iannaccone 1988; McPherson and Rotolo 1996). This competition occurs because one individual can only be in one place at one time; organizations recognize this and aim to highlight their strengths to the largest possible potential audience. There are two particular types of groups with which MOPS competes for members: other religious work-family mothers' groups and secular work-family mothers' groups. While MOPS is the largest religious work-family mothers' group in the United States and has both a national office as well as local chapters, as described



above, there are many other grassroots, work-family mothers' groups with a religious orientation that also might be striving to achieve maximum membership participation (Finke and Stark 1988). In this entire pool of religious work-family groups, purely evangelical or "strict" groups are frequently viewed as stronger because members are often more attached to their institutional well-being (Iannaccone 1994; Olson and Perl 2005; Scheitle and Finke 2008). Researchers analyzing strict churches, for example, note that members tend to be more committed to these groups as signaled by their offering of greater levels of physical, emotional, and material support (Chaves and Miller 1999; Finke et al. 2006). On the other hand, groups such as MOPS that embrace open evangelism also have highly potentially attractive features. Because they cast a wider net in terms of their organizational philosophy, they might be able to draw greater numbers of participants than the purely evangelical groups over the long run (Scheitle and Adamczyk 2009).

What are MOPS' chances for competing with nonreligious work-family mothers' groups, such as MomsRising, Mocha Moms, Mothers & More, and the National Association of Mothers' Centers? One way to understand this competition is that they each have their own goal profiles (Stolz 2010). For example, recall that MomsRising tries to attract members by setting forth a platform of redefining the workplace to be more mother-friendly through workplace flexibility initiatives, improved child care options, and health care reforms. In addition, Mocha Moms is specifically designed to meet the networking needs of mothers of color who have chosen to stay at home to take care of their children during this part of their lives. In a much more flexible way, Mothers & More opens its membership to help mothers through all stages of their children's lives, while the National Association of Mothers' Centers describes its recruiting efforts as serving all mothers who believe that carework is an activity that should be more highly valued in

modern society. Future research should compare and contrast whether these different types of group philosophies--such as those based on public policy preferences or satisfying the needs of certain racial groups--operate in the same way as the open evangelical philosophy of MOPS. In other words, are these other approaches as relevant or as powerful as the open evangelical philosophy for potential members when they join?

In addition, nonreligious and religious organizations also might compete on the types of services or "products" that they can offer their members. Stolz (2010) argues that there are some categories of services called transcendent goods that only religious groups can provide. In the case of religious organizations like MOPS, an example of a transcendent good might be spiritual growth. If a mother really desires this transcendent good, she will *have* to seek out a religious group to join; no nonreligious group can serve as a substitute. However, there are other goods that both nonreligious and religious groups can offer--called immanent goods--and this is where the real competition for mothers as members resides. Examples include the offering of feelings of peace and well-being, a perspective on the meaning and interpretation of the world in general, and a positive social identity. These immanent good "products" can be successfully delivered by both religious groups such as MOPS, as well as nonreligious groups, including MomsRising, Mocha Moms, Mothers & More, and NAMC. Personal preferences then determine whether a mother will choose a religious or nonreligious group to obtain these immanent goods. Understanding how these preferences emerge for mothers and are shaped by environmental/contextual circumstances is a compelling issue that scholars must work to understand in mapping out the complex intricacies of intergroup competition.

Finally, it is important to note that MOPS represents only one religious organization of mothers in the United States. It is Christian in orientation, a religious perspective that dominates

all others in the United States. Whether Jews, Hindus, or Muslims--as religious minorities--would express the same benefits of participating in similar groups and report the same challenges of parenting in their religious traditions is unclear. Moreover, MOPS members are highly advantaged in terms of their socioeconomic characteristics. Mothers from more diverse backgrounds might express different experiences in conjunction with their group affiliations. Lastly, this study reflects the perspectives of MOPS members at this moment in historical time, where the majority of its members stay at home. Other mothers' groups cater to women with more fluid or even strong relationships to the paid labor market. As the demands of the economy continue to change, and as women continue to reevaluate their positions to paid work once they have children, a MOPS affiliation might generate very different meanings for those who join in the future.

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