

## **Qualitative Descriptions of Middle-Class, African American Mothers' Child Rearing Practices and Values**

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**RUNNING HEAD: Child Rearing in Married African American Families****Qualitative Descriptions of Middle-Class, African American Mothers'****Child Rearing Practices and Values**

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**RUNNING HEAD: Child Rearing in Married African American Families****ABSTRACT (150 words)**

During qualitative phone interviews, middle-class, mostly married African American mothers (N= 25) describe their child rearing responsibilities, practices, and values. They explain: (1) why they decided to stay home or take work leave to attend to child rearing, (b) how they divided child rearing responsibilities with their husbands/romantic partners, (c) whether they faced unique parenting challenges raising African American children, and (d) whether they identified as feminists. Responses revealed the decision to stay home or take work leave comprised values about gender roles, concerns about the cost and/or quality of child care, and the availability of family-friendly workplace policies. Most couples shared child rearing responsibilities, although mothers admit to doing more. Their unique parenting challenge was protecting their children from racism, stereotyping, and discrimination. Only one-third of the mothers identified as being feminists. These results have implications for furthering our knowledge about African American co-parenting from a positive, strength-based perspective.

**KEYWORDS:** African American families, middle-class, parenting, work-family balance

**Qualitative Descriptions of Middle-Class, African American Mothers' Child Rearing Practices and Values**

American society's dominant norms and expectations for mothers, especially those who are middle-class and White, are based on an *intensive mothering philosophy*, which suggests that “good mothers” are innately suited to be primary caregivers who devote extensive time, energy, and resources to childrearing. In this way, they forego a strong commitment to the paid labor force and rarely rely on child rearing support from professionals or family members (Newman & Henderson, 2014). Notably in her research, however, Blair-Loy (2003) has explained how upper middle-class professionally employed White mothers can still hold values related to the intensive mothering philosophy but ultimately learn to accommodate their work experiences with motherhood for practicality reasons. For example, these mothers created part-time, flexible work options and delegated child rearing tasks to others, including their romantic partners. Other researchers have also found that working mothers deeply internalize the value-based norms and expectations related to intensive mothering (Damaske, 2011)—particularly those related to the time commitments and gender role expectations involved in being primary caregivers—even as they make such practical accommodations due to their paid labor force participation.

Overall, then, Blair-Loy has asserted, “Women’s devotion to the family trumps all other commitments. Even if they also do paid work, their primary duty lies in giving the children absorbing and time-consuming care” (2003, p. 52), which Blair-Loy called the “devotion to family” schema. In contrast, most middle-class African American mothers adopt a “work-family integration” schema in which they see the dual roles of mother and worker as complementary, with only a small segment of this group adopting the traditional view of intensive mothering

(Dean, Marsh, & Landry, 2013). Others have also found that many African American mothers do not ascribe to the intensive mothering philosophy (Christopher, 2013).

The primary reason why African American mothers are more likely to disavow the devotion to family schema is because of their long history and high prevalence of participation in the paid labor force. Due to the history of slavery and the ensuing legacy of institutional discrimination, African American women have consistently worked for pay at higher proportions than White women, even while shouldering child rearing duties (England, Garcia-Beaulieu, & Ross, 2004; Landry, 2002). Longitudinal trends from 1994-2005 reveal that African American mothers consistently have had the highest rates of employment as compared with White and Hispanic mothers (Cohany & Sok, 2007). Given their unique employment history, African Americans typically do not see a conflict between mothering and employment the way that White mothers do. In fact, African American mothers express more positive attitudes toward combining work and motherhood relative to White mothers (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995).

Although all mothers from all ethnicities are more likely to exit the paid labor market after the birth of child, African American mothers are less likely to do so (Landivar, 2013). As a result, there is only a small percentage of African American mothers who stay at home. In fact, in 2009, African Americans accounted for 5.3% of the five million married mothers with at least one child under the age of 15 who stayed at home (Kreider & Elliott, 2010).

Despite the African American mothers' divergence from the traditional definition of intensive mothering, there are still aspects of the philosophy that resonate with this cultural group. For instance, the view that children are priceless, vulnerable, and require extensive caregiving are congruent with Hill's (2001) explanation of how children are at the heart of the African American family. Children are nurtured via child rearing practices that reflect the

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

practicality of performing daily duties related to children's care (e.g., cooking meals, bathing, taking to and from school/child care, putting to bed). Child rearing practices are also reflected in value-based norms, such as how parents prepare their children to deal with racism and the gender ideologies and beliefs held by parents.

### **Present Study**

In this current research, we examined middle-class, mostly married African American mothers' descriptions of mothering in relation to both the practical aspects and value-based aspects of child rearing. The two practical aspects of child rearing we explored were (1) why the couple decided that the mother should be the one to exit (or later re-enter) the labor force as a result of child rearing responsibilities, and (2) how the couple divided daily child rearing duties. The two value-based child rearing aspects we examined asked mothers to reflect on racism and gender ideologies, specifically, (1) how they prepare their children to survive racism, and (2) if/how they construct their identities as feminists.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Determining Who Will Exit/Re-enter the Labor Force***

While the research on mothers deciding to exit/re-enter the paid labor force on their own is extensive (Stone, 2008), very little is known—and even less so for African Americans—about how *couples* decide who will either take extended time off from work or stay at home with their children. While the limited research includes very few African American couples, literature from studies with White samples reveals several themes that emerge as couples embark on this decision-making process. One common theme couples cite for making the decision as to who will enter/exit the workforce due to child rearing responsibilities relates to their beliefs about gender roles. Mothers frequently express a desire to stay at home rather than fathers due to their

traditional religious beliefs and/or their strong commitment to family (Zimmerman, 2000). Simultaneously, society expects fathers to be breadwinners (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). A second theme could be related to an external event, such as a job loss, that forces partners to address their future of coordinated caregiving as a team (Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley, & Scaringi, 2008). A final theme relates to societal acceptance or rejection of their arrangements. Mothers who stay at home can receive public approval for their actions or castigation for not “fulfilling” their career-oriented potential (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). African American mothers who stay at home in particular might be subject to more negative scrutiny as they traditionally have had to work for pay (Giele, 2008). We investigated how/why mothers made the decision to take extended work leave or stay at home to care for their child(ren).

### ***Division of Child Rearing Labor***

More than twenty-five years ago, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1989) documented the “stalled revolution,” indicating that despite women’s increasing labor force participation, gender inequity in child rearing responsibilities within the home persisted. Even more current national data from 2010 showed that women continue to contribute more hours to household labor than their male partners, especially in tasks such as cooking and cleaning (Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012). Shelton and John (1996) proposed several explanations for this persistent trend. First is the “relative resource” theory whereby women, who on average have earned less than men, trade domestic labor for their spouses’ more substantial financial contributions from formal employment outside the home. Second, gender beliefs have also been proposed to explain the unequal division of labor: Men with more egalitarian ideas toward gender equality contribute more to household labor than men with more traditional views about women’s roles in the family. Some researchers have found more egalitarian views toward gender equality within

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

the home among African American men and women, including shared responsibility for parenting and household chores related to child rearing (Kane, 2000; Orbuch & Eyster, 1997). In addition, cross-ethnic studies have reported stronger egalitarian attitudes and practices among African American husbands as compared to their White male counterparts (Glauber & Gozjolko, 2011). In sum, then, African American men's heightened egalitarian gender roles could also contribute to higher involvement in child rearing responsibilities. Of course, women's participation in the labor force can complicate how married (or romantically-involved cohabiting) parents negotiate child rearing with their partners. We thus were interested in investigating how couples divided the daily practical duties related to child rearing.

### ***Preparing Children to Face Racism***

Turning now to the value-based aspects of parenting, mothers and fathers from all ethnic and/or heritage groups adopt a cultural model of child rearing that includes the goals, ideology, values, and beliefs of people within their particular cultural group (Super & Harkness, 1986). A unique child rearing cultural value that African Americans intentionally instill in their children is how to survive, and thrive, in a racist society. There is a plethora of both quantitative and qualitative research that illustrates how African American parents engage in a cultural model of child rearing to prepare children to confront racism, and these child rearing practices are referred to as racial socialization (Authors, 2011; Hughes et al., 2006). The ultimate goals of racial socialization are to prepare children to deal with racial bias and discrimination and to instill pride about their cultural heritage. Hill (2001) explained that this child rearing practice dates back hundreds of years to times when Africans were enslaved in the United States, and repeated research has shown this practice to be protective, especially for African American boys. Parents who use child rearing strategies designed to prepare their children to endure racism have children



with more positive outcomes, such as stronger cognitive skills (Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, & Nickerson, 2002), a more positive sense of self (Tatum, 2004), and fewer behavioral problems (Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2004). Since this cultural model of child rearing is value-based and unique to African Americans, we were interested in understanding how mothers described this parenting challenge.

### ***Feminist Identity in Relation to Motherhood***

The final value-based child rearing aspect we wanted to explore with this group of mothers was whether they considered themselves to be feminists. Lindsay-Dennis (2015) argued that the two theoretical frameworks for analyzing African American women's gender identity, Black Feminist Thought (Collins, 1999) and Womanism (Phyllis, 2006), both emphasize the importance of motherhood and mothering. Black Feminist Thought provides a lens for African American women to interpret and define their identity within the intersectionality of race, gender, and class. Womanism also stresses the importance of African American women's intersectionality; in addition, it provides a lens for the importance of ending oppression for all people, for achieving balance between people and nature, and for spiritual connections.

Furthermore, the Womanist framework emphasizes African American women's desires to uplift marginalized African American men and boys and to improve the lives of African American families and communities as a whole (Cooper, 2009). Based on these theoretical distinctions, Cooper noted that scholars often frame African American women's caring (i.e., mothering) as Womanist rather than feminist. In fact, Wallace (2009), who conducted a study specifically to explore Black feminist consciousness, found that all 15 African American women in her sample refused to self-identity as "feminists." Instead, Wallace described the African American women she interviewed as having strong spiritual faith and being self-empowered and self-determined.

She also explained that the women described themselves using complementary dualities (e.g., being strong as well as nurturing), with the need to have balanced, nurturing relationships with men. For this child rearing topic, we wanted to investigate how African American mothers described their identity as feminists and how this conceptualization was related to global aspects of their caregiving and nurturing within their families and communities.

## **Method**

### ***Overview of the Larger Study***

The second author conducted a large-scale, multi-method study of mothers involved in five membership-based organizations that meet in person and are located across the United States (Author, 2013). The data collection process took place from April-June 2009. The five groups were as follows: MomsRising, Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS), Mothers & More, the National Association of Mothers' Centers (NAMC), and Mocha Moms.<sup>1</sup> This large-scale study surveyed a random sample of the first two largest groups' membership and the entire population of last three smaller groups' membership, asking questions on issues such as reasons for organizational participation, attitudes toward work/family balance and workplace flexibility policies, opinions on the role of the government in promoting family-friendly workplaces, and sociodemographic characteristics. Each organization agreed to share its membership list in order to execute the survey via the internet. Mocha Moms, the focus of this research, is an organization that calls itself a voice and an advocate for mothers of color. It attracts mothers who stay at home, as well as mothers who work for pay, and therefore served as a critical population to understand in this

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<sup>1</sup> MomsRising is centered on internet activism, but does hold some in-person meetings that enabled it to qualify for this study. The NAMC changed its name to Mom-mentum in October 2014 as a way to indicate its proactive position on motherhood-related issues in the United States. Since the time of the data collection, Mothers & More has ceased operations.

study. A total of 2,853 Mocha Moms mothers were eligible for the survey, and 620 completed it. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked to participate in a one-hour, semi-structured telephone interview. A total of 259 Mocha Moms agreed to be interviewed, and we then used computer-generated random sampling to select the 25 mothers that comprise our present analytic study group.

### ***Characteristics of the Analytic Sample***

On average, the mothers in our sample had been involved with the organization for 4 years, ranging from as little time as 6 months and up to 8 years. All the mothers described themselves as Black/African American with the exception of one who described herself as Black/Chinese. The vast majority of the mothers (92%) were college educated: one had a medical degree, 8 had master's degrees, 13 had bachelor's degrees, and one had an associate's degree. The remaining two mothers had high school diplomas only. Nearly all mothers described themselves as Christian (N = 22) and two described themselves as Spiritual. Only one mother described herself as not religious at all. Seventeen of the mothers were working for pay; the remaining 8 were not. More than 75% of the sample was married (N =19), with the range of years of marriage spanning between 4 to 17 years. Three mothers were divorced, two had never been married, and one was cohabitating with her child's father. Nearly all the husbands'/partners' occupations can be classified as white collar jobs, such as advertising executives, salesmen, engineers, or government auditors; the one exception was a husband/partner who was a construction superintendent, which would be considered a managerial blue collar job. More details about the mothers and their families are presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1]

***Procedure***

***Semi-structured Telephone Interviews.*** There were a total of 27 questions in each semi-structured telephone interview conducted by the second author. While some questions required only a brief response, others were designed to afford members the opportunity to expand upon their thoughts. In addition, the second author also gave respondents wide latitude to fully express themselves by asking detailed follow-up questions as the conversations progressed, which sometimes generated new lines of inquiry (Patton, 2002).

Other research on Mocha Moms' responses during these interviews has been published by the Authors (2011), and their work describes the benefits that mothers receive for participating in the organization and their unique parenting challenges related to raising African American children. However, the focus of this particular study was to understand mothers' perspectives on how families determine and perform the roles and responsibilities related to parenting. To investigate this, we examined mothers' entire transcripts and extracted comments related to the following topics: (1) How/why they decided to stay home [or take time off from work] to care for the children; (2) How they divide household chores/responsibilities/tasks in the family<sup>2</sup>; (3) If they describe any unique parenting challenges related to raising African American children; and (4) Whether they considered themselves to be feminists. The first topic was addressed by the interview question, "Did you ever talk with your [husband, live-in partner, or focal man in general] about his staying home? How was that decision made?" The second topic was investigated using the question, "Do you ever get angry or frustrated with your [husband, live-in partner, or focal man in general] with respect to his not doing enough to help raise the children? Tell me how you came to divide the child care responsibilities as to who does what in

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<sup>2</sup> Those mothers who were not married had no remarks related to this topic.

your household.” For the third topic, the interviewer asked, “Do you feel there are unique parenting challenges you face because you are African American?” Lastly, for the fourth topic, the interviewer asked, “Many supporters of the women's movement during the 1960's called themselves *feminists*, but that label is less popular today. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?”

**Coding.** Each of these interviews was recorded and then professionally transcribed. Next, a trained research assistant then compiled all the comments from the transcriptions that related to the four topic areas. A second transcription with just the compiled comments was created, and it was used as the data source for the present study.

The first author read all the transcripts with the compiled comments (i.e., the second transcripts), and used open-coding procedures with the assistance of the software program Atlas.ti to organize the data using grounded theory methods (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). First, we created thematically-based categories based on our questions of interest (i.e., Decision to Stay Home or Take Leave, Division of Parenting Responsibilities, Parenting Issues Related to Racism, and Feminist Identity). Within these topical categories, we then created subcategories as guided by the mothers’ responses, which permitted dynamics of family processes to emerge. In many ways, this is a modified type of grounded theory analysis whereby established concepts are employed in the analysis but also are permitted to develop on their own (Charmaz, 2014). Often mothers’ responses to the interview questions were detailed and multi-faceted, which resulted in several respondents reflecting or discussing multiple sub-thematic categories. From this process, we developed the final substantive storyline that emerged from the analysis in its totality. To establish the reliability of our coding scheme, nearly 30% (N = 7) of the transcripts were randomly selected and double coded independently by the first and third authors. Across

the total of 7 transcripts, there was 90% perfect agreement. Any disagreements were resolved through active discussion.

In the presentation of our results that follows, it is important to note that every individual in this study was given a pseudonym to protect her identity. We also present the words of the mothers as they describe their life experiences. This is also known as “thick description,” where societal actors are given the opportunity to interpret the world around them (Geertz, 1977).

## Results

### *Decision that Mothers Should Stay Home (or Take Time Off Work)*

Four sub-thematic categories emerged from mothers’ responses to the question of how/why they decided to stay home [or take extended time off from work] to care for the child(ren), or the first practical aspect of parenting. Nearly all mothers described at least two sub-themes within their responses, which demonstrates that the decision is multi-faceted. The decision blends values/beliefs about *traditional gender roles* within families and child rearing as well as real-life practicality issues like *concerns about child care, utilizing workplace flexibility and the Family and Medical Leave Act*, and/or *work-related stressors* that make it difficult to manage a family. Each sub-theme is described below.

The first subtheme can be described as traditional gender roles (e.g., husbands/partners as primary breadwinners, view of mothers as primary caregivers), as mentioned by 18 of 25 mothers. For instance, Maria, a mother of two with a master’s degree, described the rationale for her decision to take time off work as follows:

Well, I think their [children’s] first teacher of course is their mother and I think the best situation is for their mother to be at home. It was something my husband and I had agreed on when we first started attempting to have children. . . . [F]inancially, he is the chief breadwinner of our household. And we, from the very beginning of

our marriage, always said that I would stay home when we had children. Also, we believe the traditional perspective that the children should be raised by their parents, their mother, a mother and a father, but the mother in the early years plays such a crucial role. (Maria, married mother of 2)

Susan, who has a bachelor's degree in education, also described how it made better sense financially for her to stay home instead of her husband who was an advertising executive:

[H]e had the ability to make 10 times the amount of money that I could ever make, even if I had been teaching for twenty years. (Susan, married mother of 4)

Often mothers' talk of finances was directly linked to the belief that mothers and fathers have different roles within the family:

He wouldn't want to stay at home anyway. . . I think in his experience, he feels like the man should be the provider. (Lisa, married mother of 1)

These women's responses demonstrate their views that they are critical for the daily caregiving of children and that fathers have the traditional gender role of breadwinner.

The second most often discussed sub-theme was concerns about child care, mentioned by 17 of 25 mothers. In these responses, there were 8 mothers who expressed a desire to stay home full-time to care for their children:

And then I get the question, . . . "Oh, you still stay at home?" And then I get, "Well, I know you're planning to go back once such and such is in school." And it's like, well, no, not really. God willing, I can stay [home] as long as I possibly can. I don't stop being a mom once they're in school. (Nancy, married mother of 3)

One mother based her decision to stay at home on her concerns about formal child care. On this point, Donna, a mother of 3 who is a high school graduate, described her experience looking for child care:

I called [my husband] at work, and I was crying, and I told him --- and I had been visiting various day cares out where I worked, because I worked about 45 minutes away from home. So I did not want my child near the home because I wanted her near me at work. So, I visited

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

various day cares, and they all were clinical and just, nothing was exciting to me at all, and no home environment. You know, when you're thinking [about] a baby, you want a home environment. . .When you're taking a two or three year old, then you want it kind of clinical. But I wanted a home environment. So I couldn't find that, and I called him crying, and he said, "Well, why are you crying? You don't have to go back to work." So, that was all he had to say to me, and I just stopped looking. (Donna, married mother of 3)

Melissa, who has her bachelor's degree and works full-time at the YWCA as a program coordinator, also agreed that after having her child, she evaluated the quality of child care more stringently.

So I went and checked with the day care provider and [it] could take her earlier. It was just the day care did not look the same to me as it had before she was born. It just did not look good enough anymore. (Melissa, married mother of 2)

Donna also went on to explain her concerns about the cost of child care, a sentiment shared by several other mothers as well:

When we weighed out the cost of child care, it wasn't worth it for me to work, because pretty much, more than half of my pay would go towards child care, so it really wasn't worth me going to work. It is what would work better. It would work better for us. (Donna, married mother of 3)

Although he was in kindergarten, I had after-school for him and I had a baby basically in day care and I was paying maybe like \$270.00 a week for day care. It was just...it wasn't balancing out. It was like I was basically somewhat working to pay day care. (Kimberly, married mother of 3)

The cost of infant child care is very steep, and it was actually more than I made in a year at my job. So [laughter] it didn't make sense to pay more than I would make for care for him. (Deborah, married mother of 2)

Mothers' responses about child care concerns represented a sub-theme that was repeatedly mentioned by both stay-at-home and mothers who worked outside the home. Because the majority of the mothers in our sample were employed at least part-time outside the home, they needed to make child care arrangements to support their work schedules. Many of these mothers



relied on family members and their husbands to provide child care rather than enroll their infants in formal child care:

The main conversation piece issue for us was we did not want . . . our son to go into day care. [This was] because I wasn't willing to put him in day care no matter what the cost was when he could stay home with [me] or stay home with my mother-in-law, which when I started going back to work, he did. He was at home with my mother-in-law. (Betty, married mother of 1)

My father is retired. He was helping and so was my husband and sister. They were helping me as much as they could. My father. . .[was in] his 70s and the children [were] so young at the time. My daughter was barely one. When I started working at the news station, she was like just barely born. She was like six months. And then my son, he was like one. So, it was really hard for my father to keep up with them. (Dorothy, married mother of 2)

Those mothers who elected to use family members clearly reveal how this choice was based on both their concerns about child care costs and quality.

Fourteen mothers also described actively utilizing workplace flexibility and Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) policies that enabled them to take time from work to care for their young children, a third sub-theme that emerged. For instance, Margaret described how FMLA made it possible for her to stay home to care for her daughter:

I was scheduled to go back after twelve weeks, because I had a C-section and chose the Family and Medical Leave Act. At that time, though, probably at the beginning of [the state's] economy going down, my company was downsized and they chose to let anyone that was out on medical or maternity or what have you, they discharged our positions. So I had the opportunity to stay home for eighteen months. I just took it as an opportunity and a Godsend that, okay this is my first time not having a job, but also I have a new baby and this is an open door that was left for me. (Margaret, married mother of 1)

When the interviewer followed up to ask if Margaret's husband had ever considered staying home, her response illustrated the connection between gender values and practicality when families are making this decision, as she explained:

He probably did [think about staying home] but didn't look into it. There was no need because my mom was there and then his mom was there

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

so he didn't do it. He continued working. I think maybe he took a week off when I first came home, but after that there was no need. No, no, he was just kind of like, you know, traditional, the man goes back to work after [the baby is born]. (Margaret, married mother of 1)

Flexible work schedules and telecommuting were other employment policies that mothers utilized to their advantage. For example, Deborah, who has two boys, discussed the flexibility in her job:

It's primarily a position where I work primarily from home. I don't do a lot of office hours. So it does have quite a bit of flexibility in that way, like not having to commute. (Deborah, married mother of 2)

In many ways, then, flexibility helped mothers in both completing their paid work responsibilities and in taking care of their children.

Lastly, 11 mothers mentioned work-related stressors (e.g., high-stress jobs with long demanding hours, layoffs, etc.) that were incompatible with raising a family.

And when --- You know, fast forward to when I was working and I got laid off, we were kind of like, "Well, we were planning to start our family anyway." So we kind of moved forward with starting our family because I was already at home. (Sharon, married mother of 3)

Often the work-related issues highlighted the conflict between long work hours or commutes and mothers' ability to spend enough time with their children.

I wasn't finding I was a very good mother to both because it was just long days. . . .I wasn't really spending a lot of time with them except on the weekends because by the time you get home, it's like 6:30 or 7:00. You've got to feed [everyone] dinner; it's like okay, you have to start getting bathed and they're going to bed. . .[You] just start that whole thing over again. (Sarah, married mother of 3)

In fact, Shirley articulated how this work-related issue was connected back to her concerns about child care:

Well, once I started looking for day care centers and traveling the route that I would have to go to work, well, the time added up to be, I don't [know] 11, 12, 13, or 14 hours total with drop off, pick up, working, lunch, back to pick up, and then counting in traffic time, the total day care time was between 11 and 14 hours. So I told my husband that doesn't make sense to me. That doesn't make sense that we would

have to leave our children somewhere for that large amount of time.  
(Shirley, married mother of 2)

Again, it is important to emphasize that mothers discussed who should stay home or take extended time off from work in a multi-faceted way, perhaps best illustrated by Linda's detailed description regarding how her family made the decision. Linda has a bachelor's degree and is a stay-at-home mother with five children:

We wanted more children and Lindsey was our only child at the time. I had a very high demanding job; you know, it was very stressful. It was demanding for Lindsey, [too]; she was in school. At that point, we had a nanny and we'd had help with her. . . She was in a private [Catholic] school [during preschool and kindergarten] and I took her downtown with me. [When] she was going into first grade, she was going to go to a regular, traditional school.

So we thought about, you know, what is the time frame going to be and the hours? Literally I was leaving the house at 6:30 and getting home at 7:30 or 8:00 and there was no time with my child. And so my husband as well, he was an engineer and so we decided that at least if both of us were going to have demanding careers, we had to make a decision.. .And the decision was [that] we wanted more children. . .I was the woman. I came home because we were going to have more children. So logically having more children, I would be the one to come home. . .And so we didn't want to get pregnant and then go right back to work. And adamantly, he and I both agreed we didn't want the baby to go to day care. (Linda, married mother of 5)

Linda's story thus exhibits the complexity of decision-making that takes place regarding structuring the best possible arrangements for children when they are young.

### ***Division of Child Rearing Responsibilities***

The decision as to which parent should stay at home was complex and so was the second practical aspect of parenting: how each couple would divide child-oriented tasks and chores. For those 23 mothers who responded to the questions concerning how the couple divided child care responsibilities, they again elaborated upon multi-faceted sub-themes. These sub-themes can be described as *sharing and coordinating responsibilities*, *mothers doing more*, and *seeking outside*

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

*help.* Overall, the vast majority of mothers (N = 19) detailed how the couple shared parenting responsibilities by coordinating schedules and dividing duties.<sup>3</sup>

I don't know if it's because I have a boy, but my husband is very hands-on. . .He does bath time, dinner time. I mean, of course, I keep the schedule. But if I ask him to do it, it's not a problem. He's on it. The haircuts, that's all my husband. Potty training . . .I think it was like 60/40 him. . .I was just the one . . . keeping them on a schedule. But he showed him, you know he took time and they [had] their own little discussions about it. But I was there, too. My husband is really hands-on. I always say my husband is a great dad!  
(Betty, married mother of 1)

We basically just had an understanding and a unique sense when he was off. He was doing his internship and then, you know, he also worked nights and his schedule would vary. So, you know, my schedule didn't vary as much, but whenever he was home, he chipped in and did whatever needed to be done. He took responsibility and would make sure that she was bathed. Sometimes he'd even cook dinner or we'd go out, which was also nice. But it was just a really give-and-take type of a relationship, and it still is that way when it comes to raising our child. (Angela, married mother of 1)

Despite the fact that almost all mothers described how the couple shared responsibilities, some mothers (N=12) still described themselves as doing more.

You know, he works in the day and I work at night. Right, so I watch the kids in the day and he watches the kids at night. Now I bathe the kids and I give them dinner and all of that. . .That's a point of contention because I think he gets them at night, like such and such hour comes, and they're yours. You give them a bath, you prepare them for night, you know, and you get them dinner and in the morning, I get them ready, I feed them breakfast, make their lunch, and I take care of them all day. (Brianna, married mother of 4)

So, I want[ed] to do everything and then it just reached a point where I was like, "Okay, this is how you do this. And, can you help me with this?" And just as he [became] more comfortable with things, he did more. Now, he can do everything. I think I still do more of the stuff than him, but maybe like 60/40. (Lisa, married mother of 1)

Some mothers (N = 7) reported having to seek additional help for household responsibilities if

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<sup>3</sup> Responses from divorced mothers were based on their descriptions of these processes during their marriage to the child(ren)'s father. The two mothers who had never been married had no remarks for this question.

their husbands did not keep up their end of the bargain. For example, Nancy explained, “but, you know, I always have to call in reinforcements and that’s our mom” (married mother of 3).

Susan also talked about how she decided to hire a professional to help them with household chores:

What happens is then he just has to pay somebody to come and do it. You know, someone comes in to [help]. . .I mean like there’s a lot. When I had one baby and we lived in a small apartment, it wasn’t too bad. But the more children we [had] and the bigger our house got, [it became harder]. . . And there’s like other things that I’m doing. It’s a lot. And then to expect me to clean and do all of this other stuff, too, [it is a lot]. I mean, he’s pretty fair when it’s that. I like [to] look good, so he has no problem with having someone to come in to help. (Susan, married mother of 4)

Overall, then, the responses from the mothers indicate that the vast majority of husbands (or partners) were contributing to the daily responsibilities related to child rearing, even though some mothers still admitted to having to shoulder slightly more of the burden. In those families where husbands did not share the workload, mothers sought help from family or hired help.

### ***Unique Parenting Challenges***

Practical aspects of parenting are an important part of child rearing, but so are value-based aspects of parenting. In this latter category, first mothers were asked if they felt that there were unique parenting challenges they faced because they were Black/African American. For this topic, mothers relayed three sub-themes: *feeling isolated/alone, protecting children from racism/stereotypes, and general fatigue/frustration.*

The sub-theme of feeling isolated/alone was mentioned by 7 out of the 8 mothers that stayed home. These women felt that they faced a unique challenge because in the context of African American culture, it is more common for mothers to work than to stay home. For example, Sharon, the married mother of three boys, noted:

I think I'm the only stay-at-home mom in my [extended] family, I think

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

on my side and my husband's side. They're kind of like, "Oh, wow." And it's so funny, because there's the myth that you have so much money, [laughter], like, "Oh, well, you don't work. You guys must have lots of money," and I'm like, "Well, we have a budget that we have to stick to just like everybody else." (Sharon, married mother of 3)

Other stay-at-home mothers in the sample discussed how they felt isolated, proceeding to explain that factor as the primary reason they joined Mocha Moms.

Half of the mothers (N=12) described the unique parenting challenge of having to prepare their children to survive in a racist society.<sup>4</sup> The breadth of mothers' comments related to issues of racism and discrimination; they captured the sense of fear mothers have that their children will be unjustly killed or persecuted, especially their sons given the prevalence of police murders of unarmed African American boys. For example, several mothers explained:

As the mother of an African American son, I mean, you just have to look at the news, you know? The African American boys are either getting arrested or getting killed at an alarming rate. So your concern is: What do I need to do to protect my child? (Sharon, married mother of 3).

One of the things is that I have to be mindful of the fact that when they are out in the streets or outside of my home, they are not always going to . . . be in the safest environment--no matter where they go, or what they are doing. And it's not just violence, it's like words because words hurt just as much. Just stereotypes about Black men and I have to raise my son with that in mind. Well, I'm very fortunate, my husband has seen it all, done it all, and been through it all, so he has an excellent role model in my husband. So I know my husband is going to guide him in that respect and . . . teach him things like . . . he knows the police are there to help. They are there for information purposes as well. But when he gets older, he's going to have to understand [not to] say [anything] if he gets stopped. He's not to say anything. And he's to ask to make a phone call to his parents. That's within his rights. So you have to be, as an African American mother raising an African American son, you have to prepare them for these things. (Betty, married mother of 1)

Margaret, and seven other mothers, also described their attempts to overcompensate for this fear

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<sup>4</sup> Authors (2011) describe this parenting process as racial socialization, and they detail comments from these mothers; therefore, we refer to their prior article for additional responses about racial socialization.

by raising African American boys who would excel socially and academically in order to defy negative stereotypes:

African American women or Black women have to raise their sons differently than White women raise their sons. . . First, you know the [general] standard is each of us raise kids either [White or Black] to be respectable and to follow directions and all of that. But then later on . . . we kind of have to instill in them that they have to do it a little bit more. They have to achieve more, achieve at school, and have a good work ethic. It's just kind of believing in the Black community that the Black children have to work harder to get where they need to go. (Margaret, married mother of 1)

The racial fears that mothers portrayed were not just anticipation of their future worries; two mothers described scenarios in which their young children had already been the victims of racism.

Well, I mean [there are issues] when you deal with skin color. You know, one of her friends, this is a kindergartener, told her that no brown people can ride in their car. She didn't understand what that meant. You know, of course, the other parent didn't know supposedly where that came from. But that's not something a White parent would have to deal with. (Angela, mother of 1)

My little boy, he is 4, and he had a couple of issues this year in preschool that just broke my heart. There was a little boy in the class who has some issues of his own. . .It started out the first time he told Malcolm that [he] could not go to a series of birthday parties because they were only for people with White skin. (Melissa, married mother of 2)

Unfortunately, the parenting and child development literature is filled with studies in which African American mothers describe such fears and report that their children have been the targets of racism. Therefore, it is rational and prudent for these mothers to express these concerns and to talk about how they actively attempt to protect their children from the harsh treatment brought on by racism.

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

Finally, four mothers described a sub-theme relating to overall fatigue/frustration associated with the general role of being a mother. The comments from these mothers spanned from sage advice related to achieving balance to quips where mothers poked fun at themselves:

Basically [we have to] understand that we are ourselves, first, and then a mom, second. So the better we take care of ourselves, the better mom we can be. Because oftentimes we get so wrapped up in our children and their activities and making sure that they have everything that we're so worn out [and] it's like, what can I do for myself? And then you have the schedule with your work and then also finding the time to make sure you're spending with your family because you don't want the work schedule to overflow into family time either. (Michelle, divorced mother of 1)

We are not super mom[s] but we try to be or we are trying to give off this sense that we are, but in reality, we are not. You know, some things do fall through the cracks. . . One thing that I just absolutely laughed at because I do the same thing, this one lady said that, "I admit, some days I do not comb my daughter's hair." I laughed because that is me, too, and my children are biracial and I am like, "I do not comb my daughter's hair (laughter)." Sometimes she will be growing dreads and looking like Bob Marley but, you know. Just when I see it get to that point, I am like, "Okay, we need to comb your hair now." (Dorothy, married mother of 2)

It is common for mothers from all racial and ethnic groups to talk about feeling tired and frustrated with their mothering role (Hattery, 2001). Thus, the need to find balance and have realistic expectations for themselves is an important aspect of healthy parenting for all mothers.

### ***Feminist Identity***

Lastly, we asked mothers to indicate whether they considered themselves to be feminists, a final value-based aspect of parenting. Only two sub-themes emerged for this question, and they are categorized by women who responded no because they *disagreed with the definition/stereotypes associated with the term* and those who replied yes and commented about *equality/empowerment for women*.

Eighteen of the mothers explained that they did not identify with the term 'feminist' due to the stereotypes associated with the label. For example, Maria explained:



Well, I think the traditional perspective of being a feminist is the bra-burning . . . woman who does not look at the family and the husband. I guess I am more traditional, and it has something to do with my religious background and so forth. But I do believe it is the responsibility of the husband and the wife to jointly raise a family and to run a household. (Maria, married mother of 2)

Others noted that they did not agree with the feminist label because they viewed feminists as being self-centered in their desires to strive for equality in the workforce at the expense of their family lives. Lisa, who has her master's degree in journalism and works full-time, observed:

I am really uncomfortable with that term. . .It is like it is skewed. It is like, 'All about me, me, me going for it. My husband and my child are secondary to what I need out of my career.' That is what I feel like the message is. I bought into that and, . . .it was just a big shock to me that I could not have it all. I grew up thinking that . . . is how your attitude should be: You go after your education, career. You put everything on hold until you get yours. [But] it does not make you complete as a woman. [There are] women who are pushing back from their careers. They want to be more nurturing at home. I call it being more 'domesticated.' I mean, if you were to go on my Facebook page, I could just show you so many women who were on the up and up, [and then] they had that baby and they were like, 'I am gone.' I think I know for sure [that for some it] was that it just got to be too much. But, I would say most of them, it just felt like the right thing to do. (Lisa, married mother of 1)

On the other hand, Susan explained that even though she agreed with some of the principles of feminism, she could not adopt the label because she felt it was limited only to women's issues rather than global issues of inequality:

I want women to have equal pay and . . . the things that we deserve and be equal in society, just like I want the same for African Americans. So I couldn't call myself a feminist. First, I'm African American because I know that one, being African American and then two, being a woman, that's technically two strikes against me. So I can't be a woman first and then African American second. So I couldn't necessarily call myself a feminist...Because I know it's just like with the Civil Rights Movement, if all people are free, people, period, then that's going to affect women, too. So it's like if we all push towards being equal, period, then all of us are going to benefit [regardless of] whether I [were] a feminist or if I [were] homosexual or lesbian. You know what I'm saying? (Susan, married mother of 4)

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

Both Maria's and Lisa's responses reveal that they disagree with the term because they associated it as being alien from the central role they play as mothers. Susan's comment is an example offered by those women who thought the term was too narrowly focused on women's rights rather than the rights of any groups that are oppressed.

Lastly, there were 7 women who adopted the label, and they explained their reasons why. Notice that mothers who agreed with the term were careful to make sure that "they" were defining the term and what it meant to "them" as opposed to how they thought the term was used in larger society:

Yeah, I would [say I am a feminist]. . .I always think of it in terms of the saying, "You educate a woman and you educate her whole family. You give a woman an opportunity to work, you will have a better living situation for her family." . . .You cannot NOT be a feminist and believe in that! (Betty, married mother of 1)

Um, I would say I probably am. . . .I just feel, when I say feminist,-- and hopefully this is the same definition, [it] is that women have the right to choose, and [that] we have the ability to do anything we set our minds to, and that there . . . really should be no ceiling. Technically, I don't believe a woman could not be a Commander In Chief. I really believe we could! I believe that we could walk on the moon! We could write legislation, we could build rocket ships, and we can fly planes. We can do all of that, but we can also mother. We can birth, we can breastfeed, and we can give life and we can take life in war. I feel like there is no limit to what we can do. (Linda, married mother of 5)

Even those mothers who ascribed to the label of feminist expanded the term to include a broader definition that incorporated a woman's role as a mother and as a professional. In addition, this description of women as competent, strong active agents and sources of empowerment for their families and communities was consistent across nearly all of the mothers' interviews.

### **Discussion**

In this study, we used qualitative interviews to examine middle-class, mostly married African American mothers' descriptions of mothering as they relate to different aspects of child rearing.

We asked each mother four questions: (1) why she decided to stay home (or take work leave) to care for her child(ren), (2) how she and her husband/partner divided child rearing responsibilities, (3) whether she faced unique parenting challenges as an African American, and (4) if she identified as a feminist. Our goal was to understand how families describe both the practical aspects of child rearing (e.g., routine daily duties) and the value-based aspects of child rearing, such as how they navigate the challenge of racism in their parenting and their own gender ideologies. Our results revealed a variety of in-depth responses that demonstrate that family decisions around daily child rearing responsibilities and mothers' personal values were multi-faceted; nevertheless, there were still strong themes evident across the sample's responses. Results for each of the aspects of child rearing are discussed in turn.

### ***Practical Aspects of Parenting***

In terms of their responses about why they decided to exit/re-enter the labor force after extended leave, most of the mothers described their beliefs about gender roles (e.g., that husbands were breadwinners who earned more and that women were the ideal caregivers). Like the mothers from other studies who adopt the intensive mothering philosophy, these mothers made the assumption that "mothers parent best" as evidenced by their gendered expectations of mothers being naturally better suited to be the caregivers and fathers better suited to be the breadwinners. Contrary to national statistics indicating that on average African American women and men have similar median weekly earnings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011), many women in this study reported that their husbands were actually higher wage earners. In fact, it was this income discrepancy that fueled many of their decisions to leave the labor force rather than their husbands. These responses are strongly aligned with the literature on intensive mothering (Blair-Loy, 2003; Damaske, 2011), and this could be due to the fact that this sample, like Newman and

### Child Rearing in Married African American Families

Henderson's (2014), was middle to upper middle-class and college educated with husbands who earned substantial incomes that would allow them to stay at home or work part-time hours.

Mothers also explained that their reasons for exiting the labor force, or taking extended leave after child birth, resulted from their hesitation to enroll their child in formalized child care settings. The hesitation in this present sample is atypical to what is found in the wider African American population because most African American mothers place their young children in center-based child care (Fuller et al., 1996). African Americans prefer a child care setting that is licensed/accredited, safe, and sanitary, and where children receive significant levels of individual attention and planned instruction from warm and experienced caregivers (Radley & Brewster, 2007). Some mothers reported a problem with how they perceived the quality of child care, but many also described the cost as a deterrent, which is similar to Kimmel's (1996) findings that high child care costs deter married women from participating in the labor force.

There were also work-related reasons as to why mothers changed their workforce participation after child birth, such as access to FMLA and workplace flexibility policies, or needing to rid themselves of a demanding, time-consuming, and stressful job. Because the women in this sample had substantial social and economic capital, many were able to create more flexible work roles that were not in direct contradiction to their child rearing goals (Ray & Braboy Jackson, 2013).

When asked about how the couple divided daily child rearing responsibilities, nearly all the mothers said the two shared and/or coordinated responsibilities. The fact that the majority of these men were "hands-on" and involved with daily child rearing provides a positive view of African American fathers and complements responses from residential fathers in Doyle and colleagues' (2014) sample in which the fathers talked about the importance of compromising.

However, there were still some mothers who admitted to taking on more of the burden of daily child rearing chores, and a few mothers stated that they had to seek outside help to manage the chores.

### ***Value-based Aspects of Parenting***

In terms of the value-based aspects of child rearing, we asked mothers to reflect on racism and gender issues by inquiring about the unique challenges they faced as African American parents and how they construct their identities as feminists. Many mothers agreed about the biggest parenting challenge they faced, i.e., protecting their children from racism. Numerous mothers mentioned the parenting challenge of having to shield their children, especially their sons, from racism, stereotyping, and discrimination. The fact that so many of these middle and upper middle-class mothers mentioned this confirms Coard and Sellers' (2005) view that all African Americans, regardless of class, have to grapple with issues of racism. Furthermore, these fears related to raising African American boys have been articulated in other samples of middle-class, African American women when they have discussed mothering (Author, 2011; Fouquier, 2011).

The other value mothers discussed related to whether or not they personally identified as being a feminist. The majority of mothers refused to describe themselves as feminists because they disagreed with the definition or stereotypes related to the term, even though many of these same women went on to explain how they actually did support women's rights and empowerment. In these cases, they simply preferred not to adopt the term. Those women who did affirm themselves as feminists were still sure to describe exactly what they interpreted the term feminist to mean. Overall, more of the mothers' responses could be described as adopting a Womanism perspective (Phyllis, 2006) more so than the traditional feminism perspective as they

### Child Rearing in Married African American Families

stressed aspects of empowerment for all oppressed people, not just women, and they focused on the need for nurturing and healthy relationships with men.

#### *Limitations, Implications, and Future Directions*

Results from this work are informative because they provide insight into how married or romantically involved cohabitating African American couples negotiate daily child care responsibilities and their values and beliefs around these practices, particularly as they relate to race and gender identities. However, there are some limitations to this work. First, because only mothers were interviewed, we have no information about fathers' perspectives or their voices on such child rearing matters. Secondly, our sample was homogenous (i.e., middle-class and married), which limits the scope of our findings. On this point, African American women are far more likely to be single mothers and low-income than are Whites (Child Trends, 2015).

However, our research is significant in that it serves to capture aspects of parenting from a broader scope of African Americans. For instance, to the extent that samples like ours have been studied, Ray and Braboy Jackson (2013) found that middle-class, single African American mothers had a narrower scope of options than middle-class, White married mothers in the quest for work-family life balance. To this, we add our analysis of married, middle-class African American families, which are rarely depicted in research about families. We believe this work makes a substantial contribution because it has implications for furthering our knowledge of African American parenting using a sample of families who do not display socio-demographic risk factors related to poverty and single-parenthood. Our research also has implications for understanding how these women construct their identities of womanhood within the context of the family, specifically their feminist identity.

Future quantitative research could focus on examining the association between mothers' and fathers' gender identities and equality related to the division of child rearing labor. Moreover, it would be compelling for future studies to qualitatively examine fathers' points of view about unique parenting challenges in order to investigate whether the same racial socialization issues are presented. Additional studies should be also attuned to understanding more deeply how the intersection of race and social class (in addition to marital status) matters for mothers. Overall, continued research, both quantitative and qualitative, on African American couples' child rearing practices can offer a deeper vantage point from which to view parenting and thus create a more well-rounded view of African American families.

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**Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of Mocha Moms Sample, 2009**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Currently work for pay?</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Age (Gender) of Children</b>	<b>Length of Marriage</b>
CYNTHIA	No	2	3 (girl), 1 (boy)	4
SARAH	No	3	9 (boy), 4 (girl), 1 (boy)	13
SHARON	No	3	5 (boy), 3 (girl), 1 (girl)	9
LINDA	No	5	14 (girl), 7 (girl), 4 (boy), 2 (boy), 1 (boy),	10

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

SHIRLEY	No	2	8 (boy), 4 (boy)	11
DOROTHY	No	2	5 (boy), 4 (girl)	5
KAREN	Yes	2	5 (twin girls)	Never Married (living with extended family)
RUTH	Yes	1	1 (boy), 6 (stepd aughte r)	Living with son's father (3 years)
MELISSA	Yes	2	8 (girl), 5 (boy)	15
LAURA	Yes	1	5 (boy)	Divorced (living with extended family)
SANDRA	Yes	2	14 (girl), 9 (girl)	17
BETTY	Yes	1	4 (boy)	5
MICHELLE	Yes	1	2 (boy)	Divorced (living with mother)
KIMBERLY	Yes	3	5 (girl),	6

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

JESSICA	Yes	1	3 (boy), 1 (girl) 2	Never Married (lives alone)
MARGARET	Yes	1	(boy) 7 (girl)	10
CAROL	Yes	3	7 (boy), 4 (girl), 2	11
BRIANNA	Yes	4	(boy) 7 (boy), 4 (boy), 2 (girl), 8 month s	10
NANCY	No	3	(boy) 12 (girl), 5 (boy), 1 (girl)	7
MARIA	Yes	2	7 (boy), 10	15

## Child Rearing in Married African American Families

LISA	Yes	1	(girl) 4	11
SUSAN	No	4	(boy) 7, 5, 3, 20 month s (all girls)	8
DEBORAH	Yes	2	5 (boy), 3 (girl)	5
ANGELA	Yes	1	5 (girl)	6
DONNA	Yes	3	6, 4, 3 (all girls)	8

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