Good Mothers, Bad Mothers, Other Mothers: Making Sense of Child Care

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Abstract

In this exploratory study of thirty-two employed mothers of different racial ethnic groups and occupations, the researcher asked "How do employed mothers make sense of having others take care of their children?" At the time of their interviews, all mothers were employed and residents in a Northern Californian County, and had at least one child not yet in the first grade. The mothers used a variety of different kinds of child care arrangements. The findings are that mothers' perceptions of child care vary: some mothers viewed child care as custodial care, a few mothers viewed it as relinquished care, and another group perceived it as coordinated care between the mother and child care provider. These perceptions of child care were shaped by their ideologies of motherhood and their definitions of how and by whom the responsibilities of motherhood were being carried out.
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In the last three decades, declining economic circumstances for families and less constrictive dominant cultural messages about women's employment options have created conditions that push and pull mothers of young children into the labor market. The research on how employed mothers balance work and family has proliferated. The evidence shows that employed mothers of young children are stressed by the lack of time, resources, personal energy and support to comfortably meet the multiple demands on them (Hochschild with Machung 1989).

Contradictory images of motherhood abound in U.S. society as we enter the last decade of the 20th century. One of the most enduring images of this century is that of the happy nurturing full-time stay-at-home domestic mother whose mission is to socialize and ensure the well-being of her children. At other times, the domestic mother is presented as frustrated, bored and up to her elbows in dirty dishes, laundry and toilet bowls. Another frequent image is that of the employed mother with a briefcase in one hand and a child on the other. Sometimes she is shown smiling, confident, and capable. Other times, she is stressed and torn between the demands of family and the desire to carry out the responsibilities of her job.
All of these images and messages share the assumption that mothers are still the primary social group responsible for the emotional, social and physical well-being of their children.

Yet the objective reality is that when mothers of preschool-aged children are employed outside of their homes, much of the day they are not physically available to care for their children. The child of a full-time employed mother may spend more of her waking hours with her child care provider than with her own mother. However, neither the images of domestic mothers nor career mothers acknowledge that mothers may not be the ones rearing their children. The images of employed mothers barely acknowledge that there are child care providers who regularly care for the children in their mothers' absences.

Recent scholarship on the experience of mothering reveals that the stay-at-home, child-devoted, self-sacrificing, mother is and has been a myth for most women living in the United States (Thurer 1994). In 1963, Betty Friedan's classic work The Feminist Mystique challenged the authenticity of the golden opportunity of suburban motherhood. Furthermore, the reality is that many mothers have always worked to contribute to their families' economic needs even though dominant cultural messages told them to be stay-at-home mothers (Glenn et al. 1994; Zavella 1987; Collins 1991). Bonnie Thornton Dill (1988) has pointed out that only some families have historically had access to single earner family wages and are able to carry out their lives according to this ideology. Many women whose jobs lack meaning dream of a time when they are able to quit their
jobs and stay home with their children. Yet the dominance of an ideology of full-time domestic motherhood has obscured this reality.

There are few clear messages about how mothers who combine employment and parenting should feel about this experience. For those whose mothers stayed at home, their own combination of employment with motherhood is a radical change from their expectations for their adult lives. For those whose own mothers were employed while they were growing up, the strategies that might have worked and the supports that were available then, may no longer be part of their support systems for combining work and family. Kathleen Gerson (1985) notes in her book *Hard Choices: How Women Decide about Work, Career, and Motherhood*, that societal supports for mothering and domestic responsibilities have been eroded by the rise of alternative non-domestic life paths for women and the ways in which industrial capitalism devalues childrearing and homemaking. Gerson states, "The socially reinforced norm has shifted its center of gravity as new alternatives have gathered momentum. Old patterns persist, to be sure; but as new options have become more viable, they have undermined the supports for traditional ones as well (p. 212)."

Work and family research has yet to pay much attention to the role of child care providers in how people balance work and family. How do women live with this contradiction between the multiple cultural messages and their everyday life realities? If women indeed seek out paid employment because they have to and/or because they want to, how powerful is this ideology of domestic motherhood in their lives today? Has this recent scholarship had an
impact on the everyday decisions and practices of women in the United States yet? This paper begins to examine how employed mothers define sharing the care of their young children with other people. This study examines how the reality of practice is reconciled with the cultural imperative that mothers are supposed to be the primary social agent in their children's lives. I found multiple definitions of motherhood and child care expressed in how mothers constructed what it means to them to have others take care of their children.

**IDEOLOGIES OF MOTHERHOOD**

Throughout time, the definition of what constitutes a good mother has changed. According to Shari Thurer's (1994) reading of historical relics, maternal devotion has come in many different forms. Egyptian mothers nursed their babies lovingly at their breasts, whereas as Phoenician mothers regularly handed their children over for religious executions. Hebrew mothers gave up their beloved children to save their lives. The historical fluidity of the meaning of motherhood is often masked by whatever ideology of motherhood currently dominates.

The current dominant ideology of motherhood in the United States defines the primary responsibility of mothers--whether they are employed or not--as attending first to the nurturing, caring, and socialization needs of their children. This particular conception of a good mother originated in the 18th century in Europe when home functioned as a sanctuary in a harsh world (Thurer 1994).
Urbanization and wage labor transformed the home from a site of household production to one that provided workers for the factory. Earlier definitions of motherhood were less child-focused. Instead, European and U.S. societies before the 1800s evaluated mothers by their ability to be obedient, subservient wives whose fertility provided heirs and whose primary household responsibility was to uphold their husbands' parenting authority (Thurer 1994). The definition of a "good mother" shifted to mother-as-primary-parent and "instead of the earlier view of children as little adults, the nineteenth century parent saw the child as malleable and perfectible" (Theriot 1983, 33). As the U.S. became more industrialized, urbanized, and ethnically and economically heterogeneous, it also became "women's mission to shape the child in the proper mold so that salvation, happiness, and success would wait the child-as-adult" (Theriot 1983, 33). At the same time, child labor laws separated children from the workplace and served to segregate mothers whose families could afford it from the public world (Dally 1982).

The thirty years preceding and the decade following World War II was a period of heightened idealization of this particular image of motherhood. Motherhood and the raising of children became defined as a full-time career for women in U.S. society (Dally 1982). A dominant ideology of nuclear family structure in which mothers' economic dependence on wage-earning fathers limited their activities to the domestic arena further buttressed the ideology of domestic motherhood. Mothers were solely responsible for the birthing and physical care of their children--feeding, dressing,
health care, their emotional care, and socialization--discipline, values, and schooling, and expected to do this all on a full-time basis (Chodorow and Contratto 1980; Bernard 1974).

This dominant ideology of domestic motherhood is problematic for several reasons, but particularly because it has existed in spite of the contradicting realities of women's everyday lives and the social relations of wage-based subsistence. In the 20th century, many working class women earned income because their husbands' wages were not enough to provide for their families' subsistence (Dill 1988; Lamphere 1986; Hareven 1982) even though the rhetoric of trade unionists promoted the family wage and some unionized workers received family wages (May 1982).

Feminist social historians have identified that this ideology of domestic motherhood has its origins in the lifestyles of a particular group of middle-class Anglo Saxon Protestant heterosexual families (Theriot 1983). This orientation does not account for different ways of mothering and organizing family structures (Theriot 1983). Recent empirical studies of African American and Mexican American women also reveal how this dominant ideology overlooks contemporary sociocultural variations in mothering ideologies and practices. For example, Mexican American mothers in California defined their employment as part of their mothering responsibilities in order to resolve competing cultural and economic demands on them as mothers and as contributors to the families' economic base (Pesquera 1985; Zavella 1987; Seguera 1992).

A communal understanding of mothering is common in African American communities (Stack 1974; Collins 1991). Patricia Hill
Collins (1991) states that sharing motherhood is a strategy for survival:

African American communities recognize that vesting one person with responsibility for mothering may not be wise nor possible. As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood (1991, 119).

The fluidity of mothering practices of different racial ethnic groups is evident in the variability of the empirical forms of mothering. For example, low income, multi-generational African American families in the southern United States shared childrearing in order to allow young parents to temporarily migrate North for jobs (Stack and Burton 1994). Furthermore, we often fail to consider how the practices of economically privileged woman have historically displaced their mothering responsibilities onto wet nurses, mammies, and nannies (Palmer 1989; Dally 1982; Thurer 1994).

Alongside feminist academic scholarship and political activism, the media of the last twenty-five years has reflected the liberal feminist position as one that views motherhood as oppressive to women and undesirable. Women who are full-time mothers are put on the defensive to justify their non-employment status. Also evident in the media's coverage of the women's liberation movement and in magazines such as Working Mother and research institutes on work and family issues, is the message that women can combine their mothering responsibilities with
employment and non-familial interests. This perspective actively encourages women's participation both as family members and members of the labor force. The message promoted by this perspective is that a good mother continues to pursue her own interests after children are born.

Not surprisingly, multiple contradictory messages coexist. On the one hand, the dominant ideology of domestic motherhood pushes women into the home. At the same time, an increasingly visible ideology of employed motherhood purports that mothers can and should be working mothers. We might say that the cult of domesticity is being challenged by the cult of employed motherhood.

The contested meanings of motherhood are also evident in the debates over abortion (Luiker 1984), responses to reproductive technologies (Rothman 1986), and the political statements of women of the New Right (Klatz 1987). Legislative support by both feminists (who support women's employment opportunities) and conservatives (who align with the ideology of domestic mothers) is further evidence of these currently contested definitions of motherhood.

EMPLOYED MOTHERS & CHILD CARE

Today, not only poor and working class women are employed out of economic necessity. Since 1973, the median family income has declined. Many middle class and working class families have maintained their standard of living only by having more than one wage earner. Women's rates of employment have steadily increased across all socioeconomic classes, particularly for mothers of very young children (Shank 1988). The majority of women can be
employed only when they can transfer the care of their children to others while they work. As the employment rate of mothers continues to rise, mothers increasingly transfer the daily functions of mothering and responsibility for the physical and emotional care and socialization of their children to other people. Caring and raising children becomes a more obviously shared activity between mothers, fathers and child care providers, especially when mothers are employed. Yet even for groups who have historically had more communal definitions of mothering, childrearing is moving away from extended family- and community-based networks to market-based sources of child care.

Childrearing is a complex activity composed of teaching skills and values to children while at the same time caring for their physical and emotional well-being. Transferring some of these childrearing functions to others is a necessary characteristic of mothers whose employment takes them away from their children. Types of child care arrangements vary greatly from formal institutional forms of child care such as daycare centers and family daycare homes to the most informal arrangements such as a partner or older sibling watching younger siblings. Across all types of child care, the quality of that supervision and what functions of childrearing get transferred from mothers to child care providers vary tremendously.

It is within this troubled context of difficult economic times, contested definitions of motherhood, and increasing employment rates of mothers, and the difficulties of making and maintaining child care arrangements that mothers delegate the care of their
children to others. Past research on child care has focused on the type of care in which children are placed and the maternal characteristics that predict the use of different kinds of child care arrangements (Lajewski 1959; Low and Spindler 1968; Grossman 1977; U.S. Bureau of the Census 1987; Hofferth et al. 1991). These same scholars have also explored mothers’ levels of satisfaction, yet how mothers make sense of having others take care of their children is a new area of investigation.

Previous research focused on identifying the maternal characteristics that predicted the use of different kinds of child care and assumed that each type of child care offers a qualitatively different kind of care. In this paper, I identify three perceptions that mothers hold of having their children cared for by others that exist separately from the particular type of child care they use. I categorized these perceptions as custodial care, relinquished care and coordinated care. These perceptions are shaped and have implications for how the women define themselves as mothers. I discuss how mothers’ perceptions of child care go far beyond what type of child care they have. Finally, I argue that what it means to their sense of motherhood to have others care for their children is a critical part of their perceptions of child care.

METHODS

This is an exploratory study conducted in 1990-1992 based on topic-specific in-depth interviews in a small Northern California county with 32 employed mothers who had at least one child not yet in first grade. In order to develop an understanding of transferring
care of one's children to others which included how race and class influence the social relations of child care, I used maximum variation sampling (Lincoln and Guba 1985). I sought out employed mothers who were members of different racial ethnic groups and occupational statuses by referrals, posting notices, and approaching strangers. Twenty-eight of the respondents were total strangers to me prior to their interview.

I conducted topic-specific indepth interviews with 8 Mexican American, 7 African American, and 17 Anglo American employed mothers. Eight were professionals, 14 were in administrative/managerial positions, 4 were clerical workers and 6 were in service/manufacturing occupations (See Table 1).

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<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
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This study is specific to a county in Northern California. In 1990, the county population was 229,734. The northern part of the County is more affluent and predominantly Anglo American (85%
White, 10% Hispanic, 1% Black). In contrast, the southern part of the County is less affluent, more racially diverse (43% White, 51% Hispanic, 5% Asian American, and less than 0.5% Black). Much of this demographic difference is due to the organization of the county's economy. As a whole, the dominant economy of the region is agricultural production. However, much of the actual growing of crops occurs in the southern part of the County, and high technology and educationally based businesses are more common in the northern county (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990).

Most of the interviews were 2-3 hours in length. I initially began my research to learn about how mothers made child care arrangements, what issues were of concern to them, and how child care was related to their efforts to balance work and family responsibilities. I started my interviews with the broad inquiry: "Tell me about your history of child care arrangements." In the first wave of interviews, I allowed the respondents to carry the interview to whatever topics they raised. In the second wave, I began to focus interviews on three topics which I had identified as the focus of my research: first, how do employed mothers make, maintain and change child care arrangements? Second, how do employed mothers make sense of having others take care of their children. A third question was how did employed mothers and child care providers negotiate their relationship? In this paper, I focus on the second of those three questions, how do mothers make sense of having others take care of their children? In the third wave of interviewing, I also asked respondents to respond to my developing analysis.
I was able to establish a very good rapport because I am an insider to this particular group in that I fit the interview candidate criteria (an employed mother with children not yet in first grade living in the same county). Yet I self-consciously took care to not assume that our experiences were identical or to interpret what they told me through the lens of my experiences because I was also different from every one of my respondents in that I was raised and currently live an academic middle class lifestyle, and I am biracially Japanese American and Russian Jewish, characteristics not shared with any of my respondents. Although our paths and perceptions of child care occasionally coincided, these interviews were cross-class and cross-racial ethnic interactions.

In my study, the time children were in the care of someone other than their mothers ranged from 20 to 70 hours per week. Only two of the mothers I interviewed kept their child with them part of the time that they worked. All but seven mothers worked more than thirty hours per week and the average number of hours worked by all mothers was 36 hours per week. All the employed mothers except two worked daytime hours.

THE MEANINGS OF CHILD CARE

From these interviews, I identified three categories of how mothers perceived child care: custodial care, relinquished care and coordinated care. Mothers who perceived child care as custodial care, viewed their child care providers as providing temporary supervision or supplemental enrichment activities, but not impinging on their self-definitions or responsibilities as mothers.
They did not define what child care providers did as mothering, but as "babysitting" or "teaching". This perspective left their perceptions of themselves as mothers fully intact. It also allowed mothers to continue to perceive themselves as "good mothers."

Mothers who perceived child care as relinquished gave up the perception of themselves as being the primary person to parent their children. Instead, they perceived their child care providers as giving their children the "real mothering" that children should get.

Finally, some mothers viewed child care as coordinated because they perceived themselves as sharing mothering with their child care providers. This perception defined the child care provider as their child's "other mother," and both the provider and mother were perceived to be "good mothers." I will discuss each of these orientations more fully below.

In this exploratory study, there were no obvious racial ethnic patterns such as any particular racial ethnic group is more likely than another to perceive care in a particular way. Yet it is premature to conclude that there are no racial ethnic or class differences. The analysis in this paper represents the first step of identifying the categories of how employed mothers made sense of their child care arrangements. There is preliminary evidence that in the process of making child care arrangements, the routes to these different categories of perceptions of child care may systematically vary along certain racial ethnic or social class experiences. For example, African American mothers may have viewed child care as coordinated because of cultural understandings that mothering is a shared responsibility, whereas middle-class
Anglo mothers came to view child care as coordinated because their children were in daycare centers which expected it of them. The routes to these different perceptions of care are complex and will not be analyzed in this paper. I will identify respondents by social class and racial ethnic group even though this is not a race and class analysis of child care in order to subtly remind the reader that women of diverse experiences share these different perceptual categories of child care, but not to claim that the experiences of the women in this study are identical across race and class.

References to mothering were frequent throughout out the interviews. In talking about child care, mothers often referred to mothering in order to make the distinction between childrearing and child care or to use mothering as an analogy to explain what their child care providers did to "mother" their children. When speaking about the criteria they used to choose child care providers, it was particularly common for mothers to mention that they wanted someone who took care of their child "like a mother," or who would love their child "as if they were their mother."

Mothers also spoke about their own mothering. Their self-reflective discussions of mothering were distinct from feminist analyses of motherhood. They rarely discussed how motherhood defines women's status in society. Instead, their discussions of mothering were about the contradictions of what it means to mother when they shared that responsibility with others in very concrete ways.

1 Patricia Hill Collins' discusses motherwork as the work which mothers do to promote physical and psychic survival of children, particularly those who are members a collective of people that have been devalued by society at large (Collins 1994).
The three identified orientations reflect mothers' beliefs about whether mothers of young children should be employed or not. The mothers in this study reported both the beliefs that mothers of small children should not be working (themselves included) as well as to put forth that they did not want to be full-time stay-at-home mothers. While most of the mothers expressed strong interest in being employed, the majority of employed mothers also expressed the desire to work fewer hours per week.

Custodial Care

When mothers defined child care as custodial care, it left their perceptions of themselves as "good mothers" in tact. For example, Cathy Perry,² an Anglo American mother of three children all under 5 years of age, worked as a security dispatcher four nights a week from 4:30 pm to 12:30 am during which her husband cared for the children. And while she worked her second job as a bookkeeper during the day at home, her six and four year old children were in preschool and kindergarten programs five days a week from 8:30 to 1 p.m. She spent at most 5 hours per day with her two older children during the week.

In spite of the large quantity of time that Cathy was not with her children, she did not believe in having other people raise her children. She believed that child care providers can "become substitute mothers...Plus if you bring someone into your house, you're introducing them even more so as a substitute mom. Because

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²Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the respondents' confidentiality.
they're coming into your house, replacing you." She fearfully said, "It's just that if my kids ever called someone else "mom" now, I mean...that's terrible." Although her husband watched the children in the evenings, it was clearly not what she considered to be quality care or good mother care. She confirmed her primacy as mother in numerous ways. Before she left for work, she childproofed the house by closing all the safety gates and double locking all the doors. In addition, because her husband cared for the children in the evenings and at night when they were asleep most of the time, she believed that they were unaware of her absence. She also ensured her motherhood status by regularly calling from work and providing instructions over the phone. Thus, her authority and authenticity as a mother was in tact even though she was often physically absent.

Furthermore, Cathy's sense of herself as her children's "good mother" was not threatened by the care of others when it was for educational purposes. Even though her four year old son and six year old daughter were in other people's care, her sense of herself as mother was not threatened because she defined their preschool activities as enrichment. She said:

Teachers have genuine affection for the children, but they're not threatening. The kids' teachers love the kids, and there are big hugs, they talk to them and really enjoy the kids, but it's not the same. They're just what they are and it's a substitute relationship versus a supplemental parent. They are not there as a parent or trying to take the place of a parent. They are there to do a job. A teacher is more structured, a teacher has
certain things to do at a certain time, a time for talking, cuddling, or whatever, the time for art. The teachers have all loved the kids, because my kids are real affection-giving, but I've never felt threatened by them.3 She defined a rigid distinction between parent/child and teacher/child relationships. "School" was not meant to substitute for her as a parent. She also made a clear distinction between preschool and child care when she said that "[Child care is] substitute parenting, it's not there for a purpose."

Maria Hernandez, a Mexican American woman who worked full-time as an office manager of a small private business worried that her four year old child would think of his caregiver grandmother as his mother. Before she had her own child, she had cared for her niece and recalled the child often thought of Maria as her mother. Because she did not want her son to do that, she made sure her son knew who his "real mother" was. She said:

I think some kids are with their sitters so long that they start to see their sitters as their parents. I know a lot of kids who call their babysitters their mama, or mommie, and to me, it's real important that they know who their mother is. I'm always telling him, I'm your mom, she's your grandma.

It was important to her, she said, "Just knowing that you're the one and main provider and caregiver and that the other person is there as a substitute."

3Quotes have been edited for readability.
Some mothers also defined child care as custodial when the care was viewed as temporary or only providing minimal supervision. Maria described how she, as the mother, had to make up for what her mother-in-law did not provide. She said:

When I'm at home, now that I'm home one day a week, I try to do art and other stuff [with him], because I know that at his grandmother's, he watches TV, eats well, plays outdoor, but he doesn't do anything academic.

Similarly, Lois Powell, an African American schoolteacher and the mother of a six month old perceived her child care provider as providing primarily physical care. This was acceptable to her because she did not want to share her child's love with her child care provider. She said, "I always felt there wasn't a real kind of relationship going between them. That doesn't make me feel badly or anything. I mean it's a mixed feeling, in a way I don't want my baby to love her caretaker."

According to previous dual earner research, employed mothers often claim that even though they spend less time with their children than stay-at-home mothers, they believe that the quality of time makes up for the lesser quantity of time they spend with their children when compared to non-employed mothers (Hochschild with Machung 1989). For example, they claim that the time they spend reading and playing with their children after work is more valuable than the time spent by a mother who is cleaning and cooking while the children play nearby. At the same time, these discussions are laced with expressions of guilt because mothers do not feel that they are fully meeting their mothering responsibilities.
Each of these mothers varied considerably in what they defined as the roles and responsibilities of the provider. Yet their definitions of the boundaries of responsibilities clearly distinguished providers' care from mothers' care. In Cathy's case, the time her children spent in child care was for educational reasons only. In Maria's case, the lack of providing social and educational opportunities was what led her to perceive her child care as custodial because she as the mother had to ensure that her son got the rest. Lois defined the distinction between mother and provider care by perceiving the child care as physical care without any meaningful emotional attachment between child and provider.

In all cases, neither Cathy, Maria nor Lois perceived the child care provider as replacing them as "mothers," therefore they maintained themselves as "good mothers" in spite of their extended absences due to their jobs. In Cathy's and Lois' case, they did not have any plans to work less and they perceived their work-family balance as fine. In Maria's case, she wanted to cut back or quit work and stay at home with her child, but economic circumstances prevented her from doing so at this time. Given her circumstances, she perceived herself as a "good mother" because she made up for the deficits of her child care situation.

Perceptions of child care as custodial allowed the child's mother to maintain her symbolic status as "good mother" even though the time she was actually with her children was far outweighed by the time they were in the care of others.
Relinquished Care

In contrast, some mothers perceived their child care providers as having become their child's "real mother." For example, a Mexican American woman, Linda Molina, defined her cousin as her child's "real mother" because of the amount of time her baby spent with her cousin as well as how attached the baby had become to this caregiver cousin. Linda worked forty hours a week as a warehouse supervisor out of economic necessity and her decision to maintain some financial independence from her partner. She was disturbed by the degree of attachment that her 11 month old had to his caregiver. She said, "[My child] never looks for me. When my cousin is here, I don't exist." She said that she was "sometimes sad because he knows that I'm his mother, he loves me, but for everything he looks for her. Everything. When he's hungry, when he's bored, just for everything, he prefers her." The fact that she believed her baby preferred someone to her was significant in her own perceptions of herself failing to be a "good mother."

Kathryn Ercolini, an Anglo American mother of a 2 year old girl, worked forty plus hours a week as a city administrator. She perceived her child care provider, whether it was her unemployed husband, Paul, or Rosita, a woman whose home she took her daughter to, as her child's "real mother." She felt replaced by her child care providers because she felt that her provider and her husband were more competent "mothers." Kathryn told me,

Sometimes I felt inadequate. Sometimes I felt that even if I were to be here with Danielle more, I wasn't as good at it as Paul. It was mostly because I was feeling that I
wasn't doing my, you know, my motherly duty or something like that. I would ask him to do things, like cutting the fingernails or the toenails, when she was a little infant. I was always afraid to do those sort of things. And I guess what it all boils down to is this feeling of inadequacy or lack of commitment or something that I should just always be doing something more than I am. And she shouldn't probably even be in daycare at all, I should have her home, but I'd go crazy and I know that. I know that I could not happily be a full-time child care provider for my own child.

Later, she added, "I've probably transferred that onto Rosita now. Now I feel like SHE does a much better job than I do."

Though Kathryn and Linda both perceived their providers as their child's "real mother" and themselves as not mothering their children (therefore "bad mothers"), their situations are very different. Linda was pulled by economic necessity away from her child. She desired to be home with her children and wanted to quit her job. On the other hand, Kathryn was pulled away from mothering by her desire to maintain a high power career trajectory and pushed away by her sense of inadequacy to mother.

Mothers who believed that the child care provider was being the "real mother" expressed that they were not the ones who were spending the time caring and raising their children on a daily basis. They acknowledged their provider as the "good mother" who provided their children with what they would be doing if they were being "good mothers." Whether they cannot be there or have chosen not to
be there, the definition of the child care provider as the "good mother/real mother" reconciled the objective reality of these women's lives as full-time workers with their perceptions of what a "good mother" should be. The catch was that in order to ensure that their children were getting "good mothers," they passed not only the responsibilities but the status of mother to their child care providers.

In both custodial and relinquished perceptions of child care, mothers adhered to a traditional notion of domestic motherhood. They defined mothering as being carried out by a single person who has primary responsibility for a child. These custodial and relinquished perceptions, however, did not leave the ideology of domestic motherhood in tact. Though neither challenged the notion of a single woman's responsibility and authority for mothering, custodial care challenged the assumption of time—that this position was defined by constant presence. Relinquished care challenged the assumption of biology—that a child's biological mother could be the only one who provides what constituted "good mothering." Mothers who perceived their child care as custodial or relinquished defined having their children cared for by others as an either-or situation, meaning "I'm the real mother" or "she's doing the real mothering."

Coordinated Care

In contrast, mothers who perceived their child care as coordinated, saw themselves as "sharing mothering," and the provider was perceived as the "other mother." They refer to mothering in their discussions of child care as one step beyond "like
a mother to my child" to "is a mother to my child." For example, Sally Trainer, an Anglo American office assistant and the mother of a 4 year old girl, described how she felt she shared parenting with the family daycare provider who cared for her child full-time:

It's definitely more than a business association. I can't imagine just having a business type association with a person that was caring for my child that much. The people who have cared for Susie are her family. They're her extended family. They're closer to her in essence than her aunt, her blood aunt. She sees the people that care for her more than she does her. You know, these people are part of her life, a daily part of it. I mean you become family.

Her child care provider was more than "just a babysitter" or "a substitute mother." Like mothers who perceived child care as relinquished, mothers who perceived care as coordinated acknowledged that child care providers were carrying out mothering functions. For example, Diane Gomez, a Mexican American receptionist, whose three year old child was cared for in a family daycare home said:

I understand that I am the mother and she's the care provider, but at the same time I never feel jealous because she's taking more care of Grego than I do. I don't feel that way. I feel that she's helping me in some way through my problems, and I appreciate that a lot from her. Time that I don't have for Grego, somebody else will do it for me. It's not easy, but life is not easy. And I had to let
go my feelings in a way [by] saying let go, let this person help Grego to grow. And both of us will probably do a good job.

She recognizes their joint responsibility for rearing her son.

Perceptions of coordinated care evolved out of different circumstances. For Frances Trudeau, an African American lawyer, and the mother of two young children, coordinating care was a matter of choice in locating a child care provider whose values were synchronized with her own. Frances visited, evaluated and selectively chose what she considered to be the best child care setting she could find. In contrast to those with relinquished care perceptions who transferred the responsibility to child care providers including how things were done, it was important that there was a sense of sharing beliefs by the child's mother and the child care provider. For example, Frances described how she expected her child care provider to socialize her child in her absence:

It would be what I'd do if I were taking care of him. It's what I really believe in and so I'm looking for someone who's going to be taking care of him in lieu of me. I also really believe that kids learn that stuff very early on and unfortunately if I'm not going to be in the position for one reason or another to interpret the world for him in that way, to reframe sometimes situations in order for him to see that there's a better way of doing things, then I want someone else to do that.
Coordinating care was a conscious philosophical decision on Frances Trudeau's part about what she perceived the responsibility of her child care provider to be. In contrast, Julie Johnson, an African American social worker whose life had been an economic roller coaster talked about how sharing mothering of her four year old daughter with her teenage daughter, house mates and daycare center providers was a survival strategy for her. Reflecting on how she had relied upon other people, she remarked:

"It's been a survival game to this point. I know the only way we would have made it this far, is to have extended family. But blood doesn't even come close to what I call [family]. I mean, I have a friend who doesn't even live here and one or two days she'll pick up Maggie. It's just how it is. It's our method of survival."

Unlike Frances, she did not define the underlying assumption of coordinated care to be synchronized beliefs and practices, but rather came to understand it as a network of people who made sure a young child was being cared for at all times.

As long as there was a shared sense of agreement about childrearing values between caregivers, Lisa Garni, an Anglo American administrative assistant of a small company and the single mother of a three year old boy, felt comfortable if childrearing practices differed. Her son was watched by her parents two days and her sister-in-law, Sarah, the other three days a week. She described how they handled the same behavior differently:

"I can give you a concrete example, let's say, he's going through the terrible twos. Let's say he's taking you
through a tantrum. Sarah would try to take the focus off what was throwing the tantrum and say, "oh, look at this, look at that," thus the tantrum would stop. Me, I would say "Samuel, you go to your room and have quiet time, I'll be back in two minutes," and he'd be screaming, "mommy, mommy, mommy," and I come in and say, "are we finished?" and give him a hug. If that was my father he'd say, "stop your tantrum. Stop it right now. You don't need to do that. I love you. I don't want to hear it anymore." And my mother would probably just pick him up and hold him. So that's [four] different ways of how we would handle something like that.

Lisa expected that the adults would communicate and have a shared sense of agreement and consistency.

We talk about...how all [four] of us, my grandparents, me or Sarah, how we all probably handle it all differently. Differently but consistent, not so differently that it's confusing, but differently in the fact that we're [four] different people and number one, I'm the mom, number two, that's their grandparents, and grandparents are just different. They probably raise their grandchildren or help raise, do things differently than they did with their children, and then Sarah, being a third party. Yes, we do talk about it. Most of the time the point that we're trying to get at is the same, [but] our methodology, sometimes all [four] of us might be a bit different.
In spite of differences among mothers, what categorized their perceptions as coordinated care was that these mothers maintained their perceptions of themselves as "good mothers" by working in alliance with their child care providers whom they also believed were "good mothers."

As an employed mother, Diane did not have to view her child care provider as "not mothering" in order to maintain herself as a "good mother." Like the mothers with relinquished care perspectives, Frances acknowledged the enormous delegation of mothering responsibilities to her child care providers who were acting as "mothers" to their children. Yet unlike mothers who relinquished care, Sally could acknowledge her child care providers without having to abdicate her perception of herself as a "good mother." In short, mothers who perceived their child care as coordinated care viewed their providers as their children's "other mothers."

The perception of care as coordinated offers some challenges to the ideology of domestic motherhood, as well as to the ideology of employed motherhood. First, it suggests that mothering is not an isolated activity or the sole responsibility of a child's mother, but that mothering can and is being shared. This sharing is more than a logistical matter of shuffling children from one attending adult to another to ensure for their physical care, but extends to sharing the responsibility for the socialization and moral development of the children. This may be what extended families have long known and practiced, but as increasing geographical mobility (as found among many mothers in this study) makes maintaining kinship networks
more difficult, employed mothers create fictive kin networks for child care needs.

Furthermore, the notion of coordinated care challenged any notion that child care is simply a parking spot for children while their mothers work. Instead it demonstrates how the quality of that child care and how the adults coordinate their care of a child is important. While some employed mothers find coordinated care by hiring people who share their values, others will coordinate care by making sure even if their providers have different practices, the child's best interests are kept in mind.

CONCLUSIONS

Study after study has examined how women are combining parenting and employment. Attention to individual juggling acts or the redistribution of household responsibilities between spouses neglects to understand how employed mothers delegate care of children to others. When mothering practices are shared, these practices are assumed to be particular to a culture (e.g., extended families in African American and Mexican American communities) or a response to bad economic times which force women to rely upon others to care for their children. While these particular communities may offer structures (such as kin networks) which encourage sharing mothering, the findings of this research demonstrate that sharing care is not limited to kin and friendship networks, but is also being practiced by women who buy their child care in more formal, commodified arrangements such as daycare centers and choose to be employed.
In this research, I found that employed mothers do not define mothering as the constant presence and/or sole responsibility of a child's mother for the child's physical and emotional care and social and moral development. The employed mothers I interviewed perceived motherhood in ways that both reinforced some of the components of this definition of motherhood, but also challenged it. Critical to these definitions or redefinitions was how these employed mothers made sense of what it meant to have others take care of their children. While mothers with custodial perceptions of their child care providers viewed themselves as the "real mothers," they challenged the notion that a mother must be constantly with her children. Similarly, mothers with relinquished care perceptions did not challenge the notion that a single person provides "real mothering" to a child, but they did contest whether the person who provides this care has to be the child's biological (or legal) mother. Finally, mothers who viewed their child care as coordinated presented a double challenge: first, that full-time presence is not the major criteria of being a good mother, and moreover that childrearing can be carried out by several people who share a concern for what is in a child's best interest. This stance allows for existence of "other mothers" and multiple "good mothers".

Furthermore, this research demonstrates that mothers are not uniform in their definitions of the meaning of child care. In particular, it shows that their individual understandings of motherhood need to be considered in order to understand how they do make sense of having others take care of their children. The existence of multiple perceptions of child care also suggests that
the ways in which mothers make sense of child care are more in line with their daily experiences than any single ideology of motherhood, particularly one predicated on historically middle class, Anglo Saxon culture.

A logical question which follows from the identification of these three categories of care is whether one is superior to another. Since this research did not assess the quality of care for the child, I will tentatively suggest that the quality of child care depends on the nature of the particular mother's child care needs. It may be that it is more dangerous for child care to be treated as custodial if children are in that care for long extended hours. It may be less healthy for children and mothers to not acknowledge the contributions of their child care providers simply because they need to maintain themselves as the "real mother." On the other hand, if children are in care part-time or occasionally, the perception of child care as custodial may not be problematic.

The most problematic of these three perceptions of care is possibly relinquished care. The sense of non-mother status whether due to a sense of inadequacy, economic necessity or even disinterest is problematic because it entails an abdication of mothering responsibility to a child care provider who does not have any real power or control over the child's trajectory of care.

For full-time care, coordinated care promotes a positive alliance between parent and provider which may be beneficial for all parties involved: mothers are able to maintain themselves as important in their children's lives in spite of their extended absences. The contributions of child care providers are explicitly
acknowledged and encourage mothers and providers to communicate about the child whose care they share. And finally, children may benefit from this parent-provider communication. The possibilities of a shared parenting approach between mother and child care provider may be a positive strategy to address the increasing employment rates of mothers with young children and the increasing lack of community in U.S. society. It suggests a strategy for creating an alternative to the declining kin-based and neighborhood-based communities which used to support mothers and childrearing. However, this paper does not assess the type of care, but how mothers make sense of what it means to transfer the care of their children to others, regardless of what type of care is used.

In conclusion, mothers' perceptions of their child care arrangements are complex matters shaped by historical, ideological and their contemporary empirical experiences with mothering. In order to create a real resolution to stressful work and family balancing acts, we need to also consider not only whether child care is available and how much it costs, but also how mothers make sense of what it means to have others take care of their children. Their perceptions of child care are shaped by their ideologies of motherhood and their definitions of by whom and how the responsibilities of mothering were being carried out.
REFERENCES


