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Mothers in contemporary American society are bombarded with images and stereotypes about motherhood. Dominant cultural discourses of motherhood draw from essentialist and socially constructed ideologies that are oppressive to women. This study uses autoethnographic research methods to explore the author's experiences becoming a mother. Feminist theory is utilized to analyze the themes, the silences, and the absences in the autoethnographic stories.

Using a feminist theoretical lens allows the author to deconstruct the hegemonic ideologies that shape the experience becoming a mother. I examine the role of dominant ideologies of motherhood in my own life. I explore the practices of maternal gatekeeping paying particular attention to the role of attachment theory in shaping the ideology of intensive mothering. I argue that autoethnography as a research method allows writers and readers to cross borders so long as they practice deep reflexivity and allow themselves to be vulnerable. This research is similar to Van Maanen's (1988) confessional tale, where the researcher writes about the process that takes place behind the scenes of the research project. In this project, I write an autoethnography and then I describe the process of analysis, vulnerability, and reflexivity while examining the themes and silences within the data.

“BECOMING A MOTHER IS NOTHING LIKE YOU SEE ON TV!”:  
A REFLEXIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY EXPLORING  
DOMINANT CULTURAL IDEOLOGIES  
OF MOTHERHOOD

by

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*To my husband and family for their unwavering encouragement and support.*

*For my son, Noah who I love with all of my heart.*

*This journey would not have been possible without you.*

APPROVAL PAGE

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Introduction and Overview of the Chapter .....	1
Statement of the Research Problem .....	2
Feminist Theoretical Framework .....	11
The History of White Middle-Class American Mothering .....	13
“Are You Mom Enough?": Media Messages and My Decision to Write an Autoethnography .....	18
Overview of the Chapters .....	21
II. CULTURAL IDEOLOGIES OF MOTHERHOOD: DOMINANT DISCOURSE & A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	25
Introduction and Overview of the Chapter .....	25
Situating the Research.....	27
Ideological Formations, Hegemony, and Social Construction .....	29
Ideology of Patriarchy, Ideology of Technology, and Ideology of Capitalism as Central Threads of Motherhood .....	33
Feminist Theories of Motherhood .....	37
Motherhood as Institution .....	40
A Philosophical Perspective: Maternal Thinking .....	43
Care-Focused Feminism: Motherhood and Mothering.....	47
Essentialism, Natural and Medical Discourses of Motherhood.....	50
The Ideology of Intensive Mothering .....	52
New Momism, the Media and the Good Mother .....	56
Cultural Scripts, Mediated Mom Labels, and Consumerism.....	59
Diverse Perspectives: Non-White Mothers, Lesbian Motherhood, Adoption, and Women Who Choose Not to Become Mothers .....	63
The Mask of Motherhood: What Research Reveals When the Silence is Broken.....	70
The Mommy Wars: Motherhood and the Workplace .....	75
Double Bind Messages and Cultural Contradictions .....	77
Motherhood, Graduate School, and the Ivory Tower .....	79
Mothers and Technology .....	81
Implications of the Research on Motherhood.....	83
The Need for More Research: Filling the Gap with an Autoethnography of Motherhood .....	84

III. REFLEXIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: THE RESEARCHER AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL NEXUS .....	86
Introduction and Overview of the Chapter .....	86
What is Autoethnography?: Defining the Hybrid Term .....	88
Methodological Approaches, Principles, and Goals of Autoethnography.....	90
Reflexive Autoethnography and Critical/Feminist Epistemology .....	93
Storytelling and Personal Narratives: The Process of Doing Autoethnography and Writing Stories as Witnessing and Sharing Testimony .....	96
Evaluative Criteria for Autoethnography: Effective Autoethnography as Empirical Research .....	100
The Role of Autoethnographic Stories in Cultural Foundations and Educational Research .....	102
Reflexivity, Trustworthiness, and Generalizability in Autoethnographic Methods .....	105
A Study of Motherhood through Autoethnographic Research Methods: The Process and the Product.....	108
Conclusion .....	113
IV. AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STORIES & REFLECTIONS: MY JOURNEY BECOMING A MOTHER .....	115
Introduction and Overview of the Chapter .....	115
Setting the Stage for Becoming a Mother: My Background.....	116
Finding out I Was Pregnant with Noah: An Unexpected Surprise .....	118
A Boy or a Girl: The Ultrasound .....	122
Pre-Baby Rituals .....	123
Noah’s Birth Story: “No pain medicine! ... Please give me the epidural!” .....	126
Breastfeeding: A Love-Hate Activity .....	138
Writing a Dissertation and Raising a Baby: Graduate School and Being a New Mom .....	140
Noah’s Head Injury and Mommy’s Guilt .....	141
I’m a mom! Noah is here! Why is no one around to help?.....	144
Mothering Alone? .....	146
Tuesdays with Nana.....	149
Showers and Sleep .....	151
Intentional Buying: Mommy as Responsible Consumer .....	153

Facebook Mommies: Sharing Your Status .....	154
A Few of My Favorite Things .....	155
Naptime, Schedules, and Efficient Mothering.....	156
My Career Status: Stay at Home Mom or Part-Time Worker? .....	159
The Preschool Experience.....	163
“I Hate Stay at Home Moms”: Working vs. Being a Stay at Home Mom .....	167
I’m Ready to Go Back to Work Full-Time: Questioning My Beliefs about Motherhood .....	170
From Preschool to Daycare: Choosing Education for Noah.....	172
Sharing the Decision with Family: Dealing with Approval and Disapproval.....	182
Making the Transition: Switching from Preschool to Daycare .....	184
Changing Career Directions: High School Teacher with a PhD.....	185
I Want another Baby: Trying Again, My Miscarriage, and Hope for the Future .....	187
Conclusion .....	193

V. THEMES & REFLEXIVE THEORETICAL ANALYSIS .....195

Introduction and Overview of the Chapter .....	195
Journaling Motherhood: My Day to Day Life .....	200
Epiphany #1: Motherhood Expectations Shaped by the Media and My Background.....	201
Self-Reflexivity and the Disconnect Between Expectations and Experience .....	211
Writing to Discover or Writing to Guard Secrets? Peeling Back the Mask.....	212
Epiphany #2: Disclosing My Vulnerabilities: Depression and My Fear of Failure .....	216
Depression’s Impact: Theorizing the Silence .....	219
Epiphany #3: The Intersectionality of Gender, Whiteness, Privilege, and Power in My Experience .....	222
Gender Role Ideology/Theory .....	227
Epiphany #4: Essentialist Beliefs and Obeying the Experts .....	229
Essentialism and My Missing Maternal Instinct.....	230
Deferring to Medical Experts.....	234
Epiphany #5: Maternal Gatekeeping and Support .....	241
Maternal Gatekeeping and Spousal Support.....	243
Antecedents and Results of Maternal Gatekeeping .....	252
Limiting Entrance to the Maternal Garden to Experienced Mothers .....	253
Mothers Mothering: Advice from Mom and Nana.....	258

Epiphany #6: Attachment Theory and Intensive Mothering .....	260
Epiphany #7: Out of Pocket Costs of Motherhood .....	275
Epiphany #8: Graduate School Mommy.....	282
Epiphany #9: Internal Mommy Wars, Loss of Identity, and the Power of Intensive Mothering Ideology.....	286
Epiphany #10: Technology as a Double Bind for Mothers .....	291
Epiphany #11: Surveillance of Other Mothers .....	296
Summary of the Research Findings .....	299
Lessons Learned: Reflections on the Process of Doing and Writing an Autoethnography on Motherhood .....	301
<b>VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR MOTHERS &amp; SOCIETY .....</b>	<b>304</b>
Introduction and Overview of the Chapter .....	304
Theorizing the Silences in Autoethnography: Motherhood, Vulnerability, and Reflexivity.....	305
Essentialism and Social Construction of Gender: Internalized Ideologies Working Together to Oppress Mothers .....	307
Attachment Theory and Feminism.....	308
Diverse and Authentic Media Images: Redefining Parenting.....	310
Ending the Mommy Wars through Policy Changes: Restructuring the Workplace, Improving Educational Options, and Funding Healthcare.....	311
Expanding the Concept of Maternal Gatekeeping: Future Research Suggestions.....	315
Autoethnography as Performative: The Reflexive Researcher Crossing Borders.....	316
Removing the Mask of Motherhood through Storytelling: The Call for More Autoethnography.....	318
Final Thoughts: Continuing the Research.....	319
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>324</b>

## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The decision to have a child or not is not a private one, but it takes place, in America at least, in a culture that often equates womanhood with motherhood.

-Lauren Sandler, "*None is Enough*"

#### **Introduction and Overview of the Chapter**

The past two years of my life have been filled with many changes, experiences, and challenges as I became a mother to my wonderful child, Noah. My research uses autoethnographic methods and a feminist theoretical framework to explore the dominant cultural discourses and ideologies of motherhood. This research draws from my own life experiences of becoming a mother and it examines the struggles and challenges I faced while trying to mediate between my expectations of motherhood, which were greatly shaped by dominant mothering ideologies, and my actual lived experiences. The intersectionality of my race, class, and gender influenced my experiences. My study creates meaning and elucidates greater understanding of one mother's journey and transition to motherhood while calling attention to the dominant discourses that frame and shape mothering. The findings from this research project illustrate the hegemonic power of dominant discourses in my own life. My study shows that despite my attempts to challenge patriarchal ideologies of motherhood, the explanations of my decisions tended to re-inscribe the dominant discourse. At times when I thought I was subverting

ideologies of intensive mothering, I was actually negotiating within the current cultural discourse. This reflexive autoethnographic research is important because it seeks to disrupt cultural hegemony by revealing the often hidden experiences of motherhood. This research examines current dominant mothering ideologies and uses autoethnographic data including stories and journal entries to explore the extent to which my own thoughts and experiences reflect, challenge, question, and/or subscribe to the dominant cultural discourses of motherhood. In reflexively analyzing my accounts, or the explanations I gave for making decisions, I focused on the way I navigated within existing discourses even when I claimed to be challenging them.

This chapter provides an overview of the research project and explains my personal interests in the research. I start off by explaining the research problem and the goals of the research project. Then I describe my personal interest in the topic of motherhood and my reasoning for using autoethnographic methods which focus on the telling of personal stories. I present an overview of each chapter in the dissertation.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

The transition to motherhood is experienced in diverse ways by women. New mothers coming from all backgrounds and walks of life have reported “shock” and ambivalence associated with having a baby in contemporary society (Buchanan, 2003).

Franzblau (1999) argues that women living in contemporary industrialized societies are

saturated with overwhelming propaganda idealizing the heterosexually-constructed, patriarchal nuclear family. Central to this notion of family is the idea that the woman, as primary care giver, is solely responsible for protecting the fetus before birth and the child during the first years of its development. (p. 23)

The experience of becoming a new mother is shaped and informed by dominant cultural discourses of motherhood. These discourses have been produced and influenced by patriarchal ideologies. Dominant cultural discourses about motherhood include Hays' (2006) concept of the *ideology of intensive mothering*, discourses about *natural childbirth/motherhood*, *medical discourses* (the tendency to defer to the medical experts), and media discourses of the *good mother*, *supermoms*, *soccer moms*, the *mommy wars*, and *alpha moms* (Miller, 2007; O'Brien Hallstein, 2010). The ideology of essentialism and its descendant attachment theory deeply shapes the way that women mother and care for their children. These cultural discourses portray and institutionalize motherhood in ways that are oppressive to women. Kawash (2011) suggests that "despite several decades of feminist critique, it appears that new mothers continue to be surprised at the gap between idealized depictions of blissful maternity and the more complicated and exhausting reality, akin to running a marathon every day" (p. 984).

Despite the fact that feminist theory is widely available as a resource to assist, theorize, and explain the everyday experiences most people do not read it or utilize it in this way. Buchanan (2003) argues that new mothers go through stages of adjustment similar to the emotional dislocation of culture shock. Buchanan (2003) suggests that a mother's cultural shock, what she terms as "mother shock" characterizes the first year of *new* motherhood arguing that this transition period is the "clash between expectation and result, theory and reality" (p. xiv). Why after decades of critique by feminists are the experiences and the institution of motherhood still informed by patriarchy and mythical ideals of the good/ideal/perfect mother?

Women have erroneously allowed the dominant discourse to convince them that feminism is akin to anti-parenting. Rittenour and Colaner (2012) argue that research shows “female resistance to feminism” ranges from “women’s personal experience-based perceptions of gender equality” (Renzetti, 1987), “the belief that equality is not entirely ideal” (Swim and Campbell, 2003), and “regardless of agreement with feminism’s core principles—a general distaste for the term ‘feminist’ and its negative connotations” (Toller et al., 2004)” (p. 352). Specifically, Liss and Erchull (2012) found that feminists are commonly portrayed in the media as “anti-family and anti-motherhood” (p. 131). They further maintain that the archetype of feminists as anti-parents has been subjugated by mainstream conservatives who blame feminists for destroying the nuclear family (Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Faludi, 1991; Feder, 2006). Liss and Erchull (2012) found that these stereotypes are unsupported by research findings.

New mothers are speaking out in the form of blogs and motherhood memoirs, sometimes called “mommy memoirs” or “mommy lit”, and these contemporary mothers are very angry at the “high standards, competitive parenting, and impossible expectations of mothering that make them feel guilty or like failures when they fall short, which is always” (Kawash, 2001, p. 985). Why are the expectations of new mothers vastly different than their lived experiences after having a baby? Maushart (1999) argues that mothers deceive each other by wearing a “mask of motherhood...an assemblage of fronts—mostly brave, serene, all-knowing—that we use to disguise the chaos and complexity of our lived experience” (p. 2). This mask of motherhood makes it hard for mothers to learn from each other’s experiences of being a mother. Maushart (1999) says

that the experiences of becoming a new mother tend to “remain socially invisible” (p. 106). By socially invisible she means that the oppressive and challenging aspects of motherhood are not discussed—they remain hidden or private. The collective silence about the challenges associated with the process of becoming a mother in the mainstream media suggest that there is more at work than women keeping their experiences private.

The conflicted and negative aspects of motherhood are hidden behind the “mask of motherhood” which keeps maternal ambivalence concealed to non-mothers...The negative aspects, doubts, or anger associated with mothering are culturally represented as a deviance or an illness...The mask of motherhood thus obscures the full spectrum of the mothering experience, leaving new mother to face the discrepancy between the idealized expectations and the harsh realities of motherhood. (as cited in Brown, 2010, p. 53)

This contributes to maternal ambivalence which is defined by Brown (2010) as the “coexistence of conflicting and opposing thoughts or feelings” about motherhood (p. 122). Brown (2010) suggests that “as social actors, mothers may experience ambivalence because of conflicting social norms and expectations about what it means to be a mother” (p. 123).

How are new mothers’ ideals and expectations about motherhood shaped by dominant cultural discourse and mothering ideologies? Miller (2007) found that the “personal experiences of mothering and motherhood are largely framed in relation to two discernible or official discourses”: the medical discourse and natural childbirth discourse both of which focus on “optimistic stories of birth and mothering and underpin stereotypes of the good mother” (Miller, p. 338). Maushart agrees with this assessment and argues that the process of becoming a mother is “still considered by many women to

be an instinctive, natural, and essential quality of mothers” and that in “societies where myths about motherhood are prevalent mothers and others in society will internalize these myths” (as cited in Green, 2010, p. 692). Oakley (1980) argues that expectations of motherhood are most influenced by notions of instinct, nature, and “experts know best” discourses.

Hays (1996) argues that high expectations and cultural contradictions have shaped the *ideology of intensive mothering*, an ideology that is pervasive among mothers and demands that mothers be solely responsible for raising their children. Douglas and Michaels (2004) found that the *ideology of new momism*, a set of norms that portray an idealization of motherhood is promoted and perpetuated by the media. Johnston and Swanson (2003) argue that mothering ideologies are constructed and reproduced in mothering magazines and that four maternal contradictions characterize the dominant discourse of motherhood: *selfish/self-less* double-bind messages, *mother-child independence/dependence* double-bind messages, *success/failure* double-bind messages, and *natural/unnatural* maternal double-bind messages (p. 245). Double-bind messages refer to the fact that mothers are presented with contradictory messages that “affirm a particular mother role and simultaneously condemn a mother for achieving it” (p. 243). Double-bind messages are shaped by cultural ideologies and have the effect of undermining confidence and creating guilt among mothers. For example, mothers who stay home to raise their children are labeled as good and self-sacrificing but are also seen as powerless because they are dependent on others for economic support. The double-bind becomes apparent when we see that mothers who work outside of the home are

portrayed as bad and selfish because they choose careers over caring for their children in the home. These are two contradictory messages that create the double-bind situation (Johnston and Swanson, 2003).

Given the literature on how new mothers experience the transition to motherhood, combined with the fact that I am a new mother myself, I decided to focus my study on my personal experiences becoming a new mother. This research is concerned with my personal experiences of becoming mother and how this transition to motherhood is understood and described through stories and journals. I focused on my shock and how my expectations diverged from my reality. The lived experiences of a new mother versus the societal expectations are of key interest in this research. I want to know how the myths and cultural discourses/constructions of motherhood informed and influenced my *own* experiences becoming a mother. How did I experience motherhood in relation to dominant discourses and ideologies of mothering? Did I challenge or resist idealized notions of the good mother? How was my identity as a new mom informed and transformed by the lived experience of becoming a mother especially in relation to dominant discourses that idealize motherhood? How did mothering ideologies shape and inform my experience, identity, and choices as a new mom?

There is always a gap between our expectations and our actual lived experiences but more is at stake when motherhood is socially constructed in certain ways that affect the actual experiences of becoming a mother in negative and harmful ways. By examining the contradictions between socially constructed expectations and depictions of motherhood in relation to lived experiences, the ideologies themselves can be challenged.

This study is concerned with how my expectations were shaped by the media and dominant patriarchal discourses in society. I am interested in how my personal expectations of motherhood were reconciled with my lived experiences of becoming a mother and the ways in which I responded to the contradictions. As a new mother, did I challenge the dominant mothering ideologies or did I subscribe to them? How did this process take place and influence my decisions?

Prior to becoming a mother, I considered myself a feminist. I had pushed back gendered expectations of household labor in my own home. I had written lots of papers about feminist theories and their application in graduate school. But only after I became a mother did I start to apply feminist critique and theories to the experience of motherhood. My beliefs and expectations about motherhood remained largely unquestioned and unanalyzed prior to having a baby despite the fact that I considered myself to be a feminist. For the most part I held onto views of motherhood as stereotypical and essentialist. Only after having my son was I forced to confront these patriarchal assumptions about motherhood that I had internalized. I explore these issues in this research project.

My personal experiences may not make connections to other new mothers' realities. As personal realities and lived experiences are shaped by cultural discourses, my hope is that the research will speak about the larger cultural beliefs about motherhood and explore how power, patriarchy, and gender roles play a part in this socialization. This study is focused on the experience of one mother and how that was shaped by cultural discourses in society. This research expands the work of feminist sociologists and

explores the “different ways that women draw on, weave together, and/or reject aspects of the dominant discourses that configure contemporary constructions of good mothering and motherhood” (Miller, 2007, p. 338). Miller (2007) found that as new mothers experience motherhood as different from dominant discourse, they experience confusion. The confusion new moms experience “can work as a catalyst” and create spaces for mothers to challenge, question, and resist dominant and patriarchal discourses that “do not fit with their own experiences” (p. 350). This study looks at the ways that I interpreted my confusion and how I understood and responded to the confusion experienced when my personal expectations did not match up with my lived experiences. The idiosyncrasy between my expectations and experiences led me to the use of feminist theory in my research. The use of a feminist lens to analyze the productiveness of my resistance to dominant discourses of motherhood was especially significant.

Through the telling and analysis of personal stories, I hope to remove the mask of motherhood and share with readers lived experiences of a new mother while examining the ways in which cultural and patriarchal discourses were a mediating or influencing factor in my decisions and my assessment of my own mothering abilities. There have been research studies conducted about the ways patriarchal discourses influence the institution of motherhood including studies by Miller (2007), Lupton (2000), Oakley (1979), Hays (1996), and Maushart (2000). All of these studies utilize narrative research through the interviewing of new mothers about their experiences. However, these studies are not told from the perspective of the authors (who are mothers themselves) and the research is not based on autoethnographic stories. There is little to no research written by

mothers using reflexive theoretical analysis to explore their own experiences and the ways that dominant discourses shaped them. The autoethnographic research and popular motherhood literature works that already exist do not reflexively analyze dominant mothering ideologies.

My study of motherhood advances the research because it provides a reflexive autoethnographic account of becoming a mother which is almost unheard of in academic publications and scholarly work. I have been unable to locate any reflexive autoethnographies about motherhood. There is no existing research that uses reflexivity to interrogate the author's own positionality and how that makes connections to dominant motherhood ideology. This research, based on the sharing of autoethnographic stories and journals, breaks the silence that characterizes the mask of motherhood. In sharing my stories, I create spaces to discuss the ways that patriarchal expectations negatively affected my understanding about the meaning of being a good mother. Having honest discussions about how hard it is becoming a mother physically, socially, and emotionally provide a way to challenge dominant discourses that portray mothers as always happy and able to selflessly attend to all the needs of their child without any social support. The reflexivity piece of this research made me more aware of the ways in which dominant discourses and ideology functioned in my own beliefs about my mothering abilities. As more mothers write about their experiences as they are, more people will become aware of the cultural influences over motherhood. Women may become better mothers as they realize the influences of motherhood stereotypes in their own views of themselves.

## **Feminist Theoretical Framework**

In this section of the chapter I will explicitly lay out the feminist theoretical framework that grounds my study of motherhood. I will discuss the ideologies and theories that will be used as an analytical lens through which to view my own lived experiences becoming a mother. Villaverde (2008) argues that “theory is a comprehensive explanation of any phenomenon or of the relationship between phenomena that facilitates more profound understanding of any condition” (p. 52). Theory shapes the way we view the world and in turn Villaverde (2008) suggests that it “provides keys to analysis and further inquiry in solidifying or challenging one’s mission or project” (p. 52).

I utilize a feminist theoretical lens in my research focusing on “exposing gender inequity, politics, and rights” and by examining “relationships of power” (p. 52). Flax (1979) suggests that feminist theory is based on the following assumptions: “men and women have different experiences; that the world is not the same for men and women” and “the oppression of women is part of the way the structure of the world is organized” (p. 21-22). Flax (1979) argues that a task of feminist theorists is to explain the difference between the experiences of women and to explain how patriarchy evolved and functions (p.21-22). Flax (1979) believes that feminist theory is “rooted in human experience” and as such it has three main goals:

1. To understand the power differential between women and men.
2. To understand women’s oppression.
3. To overcome oppression through action. (p. 23)

Feminist theory seeks to critically analyze the world based on these assumptions and disrupt or change the conditions that shape oppressive experiences. Lather (1988) argues that “feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principle which profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives” and that feminist research involves putting the “social construction of gender at the center” of one’s project (p. 571). It is important to utilize feminist theories when conducting a study of motherhood since the issue of gender is a central concern. Flax (1979) argues that within feminist research an area that is “particularly undeveloped” is the “necessity to understand the family, because it is one of the central mediating structures between all other structures of oppression” (p. 23). Harding argues that feminist research methods are different from other research because of the problems that spawn the research, the feminist frameworks and the lens used to view the data, and the way that research data is produced and utilized (as cited in Díaz, 2002, p. 251).

Reus et al. (2005) argue the terms *difference*, *identity*, and *intersectionality* hold specific meanings for feminist theorists.

*Difference* in this context refers to the distinctions made between and within groups based on socially constructed categories such as class and family...A person’s or family’s identity is embedded in difference; in this context *identity* refers to socially constructed self-definitions or labels applied by others...*Intersectionality* refers to the process by which social phenomena such as race, class, and gender at the individual (identity) and family (difference) levels co-construct one another (Crenshaw, 1993). (p. 448)

In my study of motherhood, I argue that gender and other positionalities such as race, class, and sexuality greatly inform and shaped my understandings of myself as a mother.

I assert that the aspects of my identity are fluid and dynamic instead of fixed. I question the role of power as it relates to gender and how that affected my experiences. I use my personal stories to examine how the three spheres of production, reproduction, and my internal life intersect at the site of the family (Flax, 1978). DiQuinzio (1999) argues that key concepts within feminist theory are relevant to the experience of mothering (p. xi). Due to the centrality of gender in the mothering experience, DiQuinzio (1999) suggests that mothering is an “important location where crucial concepts of feminist theory can be elaborated, challenged, and reworked” (p. xi). As Villaverde argues (2008) “feminism is about locating yourself, about creating your agency through theorizing” (p. 10). My study attempts to create my own agency as I use feminist theories and a feminist theoretical lens to reflexively analyze my own experiences becoming a mother.

### **The History of White Middle-Class American Mothering**

Exploring a brief history of mothering is important to understanding the context and the changing nature of motherhood over time. I am focusing on middle-class White motherhood because contemporary dominant discourses of mothering are primarily constructed and shaped by these experiences. Ishii-Kuntz (2007) suggests that

In the United States, women's primary role shifted from being a good wife for the domestic patriarchal husband in the colonial period to a full-time homemaker for the bread-winning husband and his children in the mid-twentieth century, and then to a balance between paid work and family life in the late twentieth century. (p. 1035)

Plant (2010a) argues that motherhood has shifted in radical ways as “American women have gained greater control over reproduction, enjoyed increased longevity, and benefited

from technological developments that have eased the difficulty of housekeeping” (p. 507). Plant’s (2010a) research focuses on the transformation of motherhood in modern America. Plant (2010a) found that white, English, religious colonists viewed motherhood as a wife’s “God-given role” and most colonial women married in their early 20’s and had six to nine kids (p. 507). Wealthier women had more children than poorer women and the nuclear family was hierarchical and patriarchal with fathers being in control of the family.

Plant (2010a) argues that “fathers, not mothers, held primary responsibility for educating children and overseeing their moral development” (p. 508). Grant (1998) suggests that because “fathers were thought to possess the reason and authority that mothers lacked, they were regarded as the principal educators” of their children (p. 21). Ulrich argues that colonial American women practiced “extensive” mothering, meaning that “mothering meant generalized responsibility for an assembly of youngsters rather than concentrated devotion to a few” (as cited in Grant, 1998, p. 15). Because women gave birth to so many children there was a need for mothers to practice extensive mothering. In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, motherhood became linked to female citizenship. Republican Motherhood called on mothers to nurture patriotic citizens for the nation. Grant (1998) argues that in the nineteenth century “good mothering—as defined by the white middle class—became the paradigm for the maintenance of society in general” and that mothering became “viewed as a uniquely feminine responsibility” (p. 21). The nineteenth century characterized motherhood as a calling.

Plant (2010a) argues that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw two significant developments that affected American mothers: “the rise of what historians have termed scientific motherhood and the proliferation of maternalist reform movements” (p. 512). Plant (2010b) describes maternalists as those who link motherhood with civic duty and anti-maternalists as those who equate motherhood with essentialism and biology. Plant (2010a) argues that maternalist ideology “allowed middle-class women to once again redefine their traditional maternal role” in ways that allowed them to participate in civic and government activities, spheres where they have previously been restricted because of their gender (p. 512). In linking their mothering activities to civic duty to the country, women were able to gain some political power and influence within the government and the Children’s Bureau despite the fact that they had not yet secured the right to vote in elections.

Grant (1998) argues that after 1900 white women were having fewer children and with fewer children to share their resources of care and affection, middle-class mothers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries increasingly engaged in “intensive parenting—that is, they concentrated their attention on the physical and emotional nurture individual of children. (p. 15)

Grant (1998) found that the “increase in published advice to parents” and the nature of that advice serves as “evidence for the shift from extensive to intensive mothering” (p. 15). Grant (1998) argues that America in the 1920’s witnessed middle-class families adopting “behaviorist child-rearing practices” (p. 45).

Mothers of the 1920s were enjoined to allow their infants to “cry it out,” to avert the “spoiling” and unruly behavior that might follow if babies were picked up whenever they cried. Informed parents were to approach problems of eating, sleeping, and elimination with impersonal objectivity. (p. 45)

After World War II most women and men married and had children leading to an unprecedented baby boom and a pronatalist climate. Plant (2010a) argues that the postwar era saw child rearing experts including Benjamin Spock reject the “behaviorist emphasis on strict schedules” (p. 513). In the 1950’s middle-class women reacted against scientific motherhood and the medicalization of motherhood by forming the La Leche League to support and encourage breastfeeding and sparking the growth of the natural childbirth movement (p. 513). In the 1950’s, British psychoanalytically-trained psychiatrist John Bowlby argued that “selective attachment to the mother provides emotional security and creates the basis for later social relationships” (as cited in Franzblau, 1999, p. 28). By the 1960’s Bowlby’s attachment theory was popularized all over the country despite the lack of research to support his ideas (Franzblau, 1999).

Plant (2010a) argues that in the early 1960’s divorce rates increased and the birth rate dropped as women waited until later in life to get married and have children. Plant (2010b) argues that after Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* (1963) was published, white middle-class women appeared to occupy two distinct spheres—the public sphere where they could seek careers while being chastised for not staying at home to raise children and the private sphere where could stay home and mother but were disparaged for being dependent on their husband’s labor.

White middle-class women in the 1970's and 1980's "sought to deconstruct motherhood as a patriarchal institution" by distancing themselves from the "culturally constructed role of mother" (Plant, 2010a, p. 514). In contemporary America, mothers experience tensions between balancing their family and work life as the majority of women work outside of the home. Women that are mothers continue to suffer economic disadvantages because they have children. Motherhood in the twenty-first century is very different from past centuries. In today's American society women are waiting until they are older to have children. Elite and wealthy women with access to fertility treatments contribute to the increase in the birth rate for women that are closer to 40 year old. There are also increasing numbers of unwed and single mothers in our culture. Affluent white women contribute to an increasing rate of childlessness as more and more highly educated women are choosing not to have children at all. Plant (2010a) suggests that this reflects the difficulty of combining work with motherhood.

This brief history of white middle-class American motherhood illustrates the intense changes of mothering throughout history. This history shows that gender, race, and class shaped the experiences of becoming a mother for white middle-class women in the United States. Mothering went from being an extensive practice to an intensive practice over several centuries. I argue in this project that role of mothers and motherhood in contemporary culture has been expanded and intensified for white middle-class mothers.

## **“Are You Mom Enough?”: Media Messages and My Decision to Write an Autoethnography**

I was writing my dissertation proposal last year and I took a break to go check the mail. As I opened my mailbox I saw the most recent issue of my *Time* magazine subscription. I was shocked and offended by the cover. In bold red capital letters read the caption, “ARE YOU MOM ENOUGH?” The cover featured a photograph of a young mother who was white, very skinny, and had blonde hair. This mother had on a trendy outfit wearing skinny jeans, flats, and a tank top. She looked like most media representations of a white middle class mother. This mother’s 3-year-old son was standing on a small chair and he was looking at the camera while he was breastfeeding from his mother’s breast which was exposed from her tank top. The photograph was clearly intended to shock readers and entice them to read the article about how attachment parenting can drive some mothers to extremes (Schoeller, 2012). The caption “Are you mom enough?” really bothered me. I had a 1-year-old son and I constantly felt like I was not “mom enough” and I couldn’t really figure out why. The moral judgments associated with choices mothers make had really started to bother me. The way this mother was portrayed on the cover and along with the caption seemed to send a message about what was expected of mothers; what mothers *should* do. I felt affirmation that my study of motherhood and the role of dominant discourses in shaping expectations and experience were definitely needed.

The recent cover of *Time* illustrated the need for this study and showed that discussions of motherhood are commonplace in popular culture. The title of the cover

“Are you mom enough?” exemplifies how women are bombarded with messages from society and the media about dominant mothering ideologies. Since I was a new mother, I wanted to explore how all of these messages functioned in my own life. I was constantly feeling overwhelmed and like I wasn’t measuring up to the standards of the “good” mother. I wondered, “*Why* don’t I feel mom enough?” I wanted to analyze how ideology functioned in my own life.

I decided to use autoethnography as my methodology because I have always loved stories. From the time I was a little girl, my parents always told me stories and read books to me. I remember my dad reading Tolkien’s stories including *The Hobbit* and stories by C.S. Lewis like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. My dad read me Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time* and *A Wind in the Door*. When my father read stories to me every night before bedtime, I listened intently and my imagination would actively construct the story in my mind adding my own personal touches. My love of hearing and reading stories came from these early life experiences. As I grew older, I enjoyed telling stories. When I became a psychology teacher, I was known for the personal stories I would tell my students. I loved telling stories to illustrate a point and to build relationships with my students. In turn they would share stories with me and a sense of community would develop in the classroom.

When I was deciding what methodology to use for my research project, I decided to write an autoethnography. I wanted to deeply and rigorously analyze my own experiences and explore the ways that *cultural stories* had impacted my decisions and my experiences becoming a mother. My favorite stories were always stories that surprised

me at the end. I enjoyed the stories where I couldn't tell what was going to happen or what was to be discovered. When I started writing my autoethnography, I thought that my stories would serve a counter-hegemonic function. I thought my story would describe the ways that I challenged dominant discourses of motherhood illustrating how I was different and didn't care about the images of the good mother. But like any good story, the end turned out to surprise me, even though I was the author. I was surprised to find the extent to which I had internalized and subscribed to the dominant discourses of mothering. Even at times when I thought I was pushing back and challenging, I found that on a deeper level I was simply negotiating with the current ideological structures available to me.

The process of doing and writing this reflexive autoethnography about motherhood has changed my life. I have been deeply impacted by the work of sociologist Laurel Richardson. Richardson (2001) argues that "what you write about and how you write it shapes your life, shapes who you become" (p. 36). My reflexive autoethnography was influenced by language, experience, subjectivity, and memory. Throughout the process of writing about my personal experiences, I have kept Richardson's (2001) words in my mind.

Language constructs one's sense of who one is, one's subjectivity. What something means to individuals is dependent on the discourses available to them...Experience and memory is thus open to contradictory interpretations governed by social interests and prevailing discourses. The individual is both site and subject of these discursive struggles for identity, and for remaking memory. Because the individual is shifting and contradictory, not stable, fixed, rigid. What we know about the world and what we know about ourselves are always intertwined, partial, and historical. (p. 36)

My subjectivity and social positionality has shaped the research and my writing in this project. The reader's experiences will shape their understanding of the stories told. The next part of the chapter provides an overview of the chapters in the dissertation.

### **Overview of the Chapters**

Chapter One serves as an introduction to the research project. Chapter Two is a review of the research literature about dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood. This chapter provides a review of the scholarly literature relevant to the main themes found in the study. I begin by situating the research problem amongst current scholarship in various academic disciplines. Then I discuss ideological formations, hegemony, and social construction. I summarize and utilize feminist theories of motherhood as a critical analytical lens. I move on to discuss the research literature covering the dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood including the ideologies of patriarchy, capitalism, technology, the ideology of intensive mothering, and essentialist discourses. I discuss the research on media discourses and portrayals of the good mother through television broadcasting. I look at cultural scripts of motherhood and describe the way that consumerism functions to exploit mediated mom labels. I present diverse perspectives including research about non-white mothers, lesbian mothers, mothers who adopt, and women choosing not to become mothers. I present research findings from studies describing the experiences of new mothers and the challenges they face. I pay special attention to motherhood and the structure of work, mothers in graduate school, and the impact of technology in mother's lives. I close by describing the need for additional research on motherhood and address how my study will fill the gap in the research literature.

Chapter Three describes the research methodology used in the study. I describe the background behind autoethnography as a research method and explore the process and the product of doing and writing an autoethnography. I explore different methodological approaches, principles, and goals of autoethnography. I describe the intellectual frameworks of reflexive autoethnography and critical/feminist epistemology used in the research. I discuss criteria for writing an effective autoethnography and I argue for the use of autoethnographic research methods in cultural foundations and educational research. I discuss reflexivity, trustworthiness, generalizability in autoethnographic methods. Then I outline the specific parameters I used in my study detailing the writing methodology and the process of doing the research.

Chapter Four details my background and sets the stage for my experiences becoming a new mother. Chapter four includes autoethnographic stories starting from the time I discovered I was pregnant to my decisions to go back to work full-time. This chapter describes my experiences becoming a mother chronologically through the telling of descriptive stories. Most of the stories are based on specific experiences that deeply impacted my experiences as a mother.

Chapter Five focuses on the themes found in the research analysis. I start off by describing the process of journaling about motherhood. Specific journal entries and excerpts are then used to theoretically analyze the themes. I discuss my expectations about motherhood and how these were shaped by the media and my background. I describe my social positionality and the specific ways that this positionality impacted the study and my own personal expectations and experiences. I examine the presence of

dominant discourses of motherhood in my own experience as evidenced in the data. I describe the ways that I subscribed to and negotiated within dominant ideologies. I look at the level of social support I received from my spouse and my family. I look at the financial costs of motherhood including my experiences with healthcare/ health insurance.

I examine my subscription to intensive mothering ideologies, attachment theory, and essentialism and how these beliefs affected my decisions. I theoretically analyze the silences and absence for in the data focusing on the invisibility of maternal gatekeeping practices and the ways that privilege shaped my beliefs and choices. I discuss parts of my background that were left out of the autoethnographic stories and how my battle with depression shaped my experiences. I analyze my experiences becoming a mother while also being enrolled in graduate school. I examine the role of technology and educational decisions for my son in the analysis. I explore the ways that mothers policed my mothering choices through seemingly friendly conversations about each other's children. I close the chapter by discussing the lessons I learned throughout the process of doing and writing an autoethnography. I touch on some of the challenges I faced when writing and sharing my personal stories.

Chapter Six concludes the research project by describing the implications for mothers and society based on my findings. I describe how my own experiences illustrate the hegemonic power of mothering ideologies. I discuss potential weaknesses in using autoethnography as a research method. I argue that autoethnographies can be important to advancing research so long as they are deeply reflexive. Autoethnographic analysis

should use theory and the author's vulnerability to analyze the themes and silences in the writing making connections to dominant discourses in society. I discuss the ways that essentialist and social constructivist discourses functioned in oppressive ways through the idealization of the mother role. I call for feminists to redefine attachment parenting separating the theory from essentialist ideas about mothers and caregiving.

I issue a call for diverse and authentic media images of parents, both mothers and fathers, and families, as a way to create debate about the actual lived experiences of parents in contrast to traditional depictions on television. I argue for specific policy changes from employers, the government, and insurance companies to create more equitable conditions for families and mothers in particular. I suggest directions for future research calling for feminist scholars to expand the concept of maternal gatekeeping to better explore the ways that mothers limit the support they receive in helping to raise their children. Lastly, I describe how the process of doing and writing an autoethnography was similar to a process of crossing borders. I conclude arguing that storytelling and autoethnographies are necessary in the fight to raise consciousness about challenges faced by mothers and families in our culture.

**CHAPTER II**

**CULTURAL IDEOLOGIES OF MOTHERHOOD: DOMINANT DISCOURSE &  
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Mothers operate under the gaze of society – a society that has adopted clear characterizations of the ‘good mother’.

-Jean-Anne Sutherland, “*Mothering, Guilt and Shame*”

**Introduction and Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter discusses the dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood in the contemporary United States. Since this is an ideological study it is important to provide a framework of the ideologies in American culture about motherhood. This chapter also provides a review of the research literature about motherhood and its relationship to culture. A key theme in this chapter is the focus on the cultural contradictions of motherhood and the double bind messages that characterize dominant cultural views of mothers. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the audience with an overview of the dominant discourses of motherhood and an understanding of the ways that cultural contradictions and expectations shape the experience of mothering while at the same time framing that experience within existing systems of patriarchy.

The chapter starts out situating the research. The chapter continues with a discussion of ideological formations and the role of hegemony and social construction in creating and maintaining dominant discourses of mothering.

Next, three intensely rooted ideologies that shape the “central threads of motherhood”: an ideology of patriarchy, an ideology of technology, and an ideology of capitalism are explored (Rothman, 1994, p. 139). The way that these discourses function in society is examined. A brief discussion about feminist theories of motherhood follows. I examine motherhood as an institution and discuss philosophical perspectives of motherhood including a focus on maternal thinking and care-focused feminism.

This discussion is followed by more specific attention given to the dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood. The dominant discourses of motherhood include the ideology of intensive mothering, ideas of the good mother and new momism, the mommy wars, mediated mom labels and cultural scripts, medical discourses of motherhood, and essentialism and natural ideologies of motherhood. Diverse perspectives are examined including research about non-white, lesbian, and adoptive mothers. Attention is also paid to women that choose not to become mothers. After a lengthy conversation about the dominant cultural discourses of motherhood, Maushart’s (1999) concept of the mask of motherhood is explored. I share what research reveals when the silence is broken and mothers speak about their lived experiences. Major themes in the research literature about the transition to motherhood including the personal experiences of becoming a new mother, the expectations versus the reality of motherhood, and levels of social support are explored.

After reviewing the literature on dominant discourses of mothering, I focus on the ways that these ideologies function and impact society. Double bind messages and cultural contradictions of motherhood are discussed. I provide research on the costs of

motherhood focusing on the workplace and institutions of higher education. I look at how these ideologies shape institutions and influence mothers trying to navigate within them. I draw attention to structural problems within the labor force and how the gendered workplace affects mothers. The impact of mothering ideologies in society is further discussed paying special attention to the mother as good consumer, the educational choices of mothers, and the ways that recent technologies have impacted motherhood. The chapter concludes discussing the ways in which the current study fills the gap in the research literature about motherhood.

### **Situating the Research**

There has been a great deal of research conducted on motherhood in a wide range of disciplines. The majority of motherhood research has come out of the academic disciplines of education, sociology, women's and gender studies, psychology, human development and family studies, and the newly emerging discipline of motherhood studies. Kawash (2011) argues that in the past decade feminist engagement with motherhood has been "fragmented with three primary strands emerging: scholarly work on motherhood; a popular mothers' movement plus, related literary and cultural work; and O'Reilly's efforts to create an autonomous academic field of mothering studies" (p. 973). Academic peer reviewed journals publishing scholarly work on motherhood in the past decade include: *Signs*, *Gender & Society*, *Gender & Education*, *Journal of Sociology*, *Sociology Compass*, *Academe*, *Frontiers*, *Women's Studies Quarterly*, *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering (JARM)*, and the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*.

Philosophical work on motherhood is characterized by two main schools of thought: care focused feminism or care ethics and French feminism. Ruddick (1995) attempts to philosophically describe maternal thinking, or the thinking that grows out of the work that mothers do. Care-focused feminist philosophers including Noddings (1984), Gilligan (1988), Kittay (1999), and Held (2006) have made connections between a feminine ethic of care and mothering behaviors. Tong (2009) argues that care-focused feminists have continually linked caring to mothering. The focus for these theorists has been on caring and relational ethics instead of motherhood although they do stress the centrality of motherhood in creating a just society. Noddings (1992) and Monchinski (2010) also discuss caring in educational contexts. Philosophical French feminists have focused on maternal subjectivities and have argued that the experience of motherhood is greatly affected by patriarchy. French philosophers particularly De Beauvoir (1953), Irigaray (1993), and Kristeva (1987) have paid attention to the ways that patriarchy and culture shape motherhood and have used psychoanalysis to analyze the experience of mothering.

Educational scholars have researched motherhood focusing on schools, teachers as mothers, and maternal pedagogy. Grumet (1988), Collins (1998), and James (2010) have theorized and researched the relationships between teaching and mothering. Educational theorists have described maternal pedagogy and linked it to critical and feminist pedagogies arguing that maternal practices can be used to resist and recast traditional patterns of domination and subordination in schooling environments (Byrd & Green, 2011). Other scholarly topics in education that make connections to mothering

include discussions of mothers as educational activists for their children including Cooper's (2009) concept of critical educational care.

Scholars in the academic disciplines of cultural studies, women's and gender studies, motherhood studies, and sociology have been very active in discussing how the experiences of mothers have been shaped by culture and dominant discourses. A major focus of this research includes the ways that images are produced and transmitted by popular culture and how this process is informed by patriarchy. Other topics of scholarly study within these disciplines include: motherhood ideologies and discourses, the institution of motherhood, power relationships inside and outside of the home, the importance of gender, sexuality, race, and class in experience, and the tensions between work and family life.

The academic field of human development and family studies has explored transitions to motherhood from a developmental perspective. These scholars have focused on different stages of mothering and the importance of social support for maternal health and well-being. Social support consists of four categories: emotional support, instrumental or direct support, informational support, and appraisal support (Cooke et al., 1988; Mercer, 1986). Human development scholars have explored motherhood through developmental psychological theories especially those that focus on life transitions in stages, the role of social support, and maternal attachment theory.

### **Ideological Formations, Hegemony, and Social Construction**

Before discussing the dominant ideologies of motherhood in contemporary American society, it is important to first define what an ideology is and how it can

operate in society. Glenn (1994) defines an ideology as “the conceptual system by which a group makes sense of and thinks about the world” (p. 9). Ideologies are collective and tend to be developed by groups. Glenn (1994) goes further to suggest that a “dominant ideology represents the view of a dominant group; it attempts to justify this domination over other groups, often by making the existing order seem inevitable” (p. 9). Rothman (1994) argues that ideology is the “way a group looks at the world, the way it organizes its thinking about the world” and it can “let us see things, but it can also blind us, close our eyes to our own lived reality, our own experiences” (p. 139).

DiQuinzio (1999) understands ideology as a “discursive formation or set of ideas deeply connected to and dependent on each other for their coherent articulation” (p. 2). A defining feature of ideologies is that they tend to be hegemonic, meaning they are seen as “natural” or simply as “the way things are” (DiQuinzio, 1999, p. 2). Ideologies that are hegemonic operate as a form of social control or monitoring as they define and relate what is seen as the norm (Hallstein, 2010, Condit, 1994, and Grossberg, 1993). Althusser (1984) argues that men and women in society are consumers and producers of ideological formations. While contradictions within ideological formations often remain masked and cloaked from consciousness, contradictions can be recognized and theorized and thus ideological formations can be deconstructed, analyzed, critiqued, and rearticulated (DiQuinzio, 1999). DiQuinzio (1999) suggests that ideological formations are overdetermined and are produced and maintained by specific material conditions and cultural beliefs that tend to re-inscribe hierarchy.

Ideological formations are effective—they bring about and sustain the material conditions, social relations, structures, institutions, and practices that they claim to describe. Ideological formations thus also determine the material and social conditions they produce. (p. 3)

Power and hierarchy play a key role in the development and sustainment of ideologies as these formations produce “subjects of power” that seek to use the dominant discourse to further their own privileged position (Foucault, 1977). While DiQuinzio (1999) accounts for the fact that there is no possibility of taking a position outside of an ideological formation, she argues that there is room to maneuver within it and to critique it especially by way of examining and challenging the “tensions, oppositions, and contradictions” within an ideology while at the same time realizing that this critique and deconstruction is always partial and incomplete (p. 3-4). Similarly, Johnson and Swanson (2006) argue that though “we are not fully aware of the extent to which we internalize ideologies; we do employ ideological schemas to describe and characterize each other” (p. 510). Freeden suggests that in studying ideological formations, the “enterprise of decoding, of identifying structures, contexts, and motives that are not readily visible” are of utmost importance (as cited in Johnson and Swanson, 2006, p. 510).

DiQuinzio (1999) suggests critiquing ideologies by looking closely at “ideological work” and “ideological moments”. She defines ideological work as the “work of containing or managing contradictions within an ideological formation” (p. 4). This ideological work serves to maintain the status quo and prevents any critique of the ideology. In locating ideological moments, “moments where significant ideological work occurs,” DiQuinzio (1999) argues that ideological critique can effectively take

place and the contradictions produced and determined by the ideological formation can be critiqued (p. 5-6). Foss (2009) suggests that ideological criticism involves the analysis of “the beliefs, values, and assumptions” in texts (p. 209).

These definitions and explanations of ideology point to the fact that motherhood and dominant discourses about mothering are socially constructed and are maintained by men and women in society. In addition to being socially constructed and maintaining systems of power and hierarchy in society, it is important to note that ideologies also “shift over time”, they are ever-changing, and they are frequently negotiated within subjects that are over-determined by that ideological formation. Johnson and Swanson (2006) argue that there are a “number of mothering ideologies that compete for ascendancy” (p. 509). Within ideological formations, actors in society struggle with their own experiences and the contradictions produced and re-inscribed by that ideology. Notions of selfhood are also subject to shifting over time and with experience. Lupton (2000) argues that “subjectivities, or notions of the self, are not unitary or fixed but rather are dynamic and responsive to shifts in discourses, including resistance to as well as acceptance of dominant discourses” (p. 53). Ideologies shape and influence actors within society by establishing expectations that affect gender relations, politics, institutions, economics, and individuals’ self-concepts. Sutherland (2010) argues that “cultural ideologies often work as a kind of roadmap for life choices” (p. 313). The ideologies of patriarchy, technology, and capitalism shape these cultural discourses in a variety of ways that are oppressive to mothers.

## **Ideology of Patriarchy, Ideology of Technology, and Ideology of Capitalism as Central Threads of Motherhood**

Rothman (1994) argues that ideologies of motherhood are part of complex ideologies that are shaped by the dominant discourses of patriarchy, technology, and capitalism. Rothman (1994) suggests that these three ideologies deeply influence ideologies of motherhood because they are infused with strands of dominant thinking that support and reinforce male dominance over females, the tendency to privilege mind and the rational over the body, and the belief that capitalism is the best economic system despite the fact that it is a system of exploitation that separates the domestic from the work sphere. Understanding the ways that these three ideologies function and affect society is crucial to understanding ideologies of motherhood.

Lerner (1986) defines patriarchy as a “historic creation, formed by men and women in a process which took nearly 2500 years” arguing that the “basic unit of its organization was the patriarchal family, which both expressed and constantly generated its rules and values” (p. 212). Patriarchy literally means “the rule of fathers”. However, Rothman (1994) suggests that in practical usage patriarchy “refers to any system of male superiority and female inferiority” (p. 140). The ideology of patriarchy shapes all of our thinking and the way that we see and expect relationships to function. Male dominance and a male-centered culture are characteristics of patriarchal systems but the *ideology* of patriarchy “permeates all of our thinking” and “provides us with an understanding not only of the relations between men and women, but also of the relations between mothers and their children” (Rothman, 1994, p. 143). Green (2010) argues that a patriarchal

system “draws upon a dominant ideology that attributes male dominance to inherent and natural differences between men and women” (p. 970). Lerner (1986) argues that the system and ideology of patriarchy operates with the “cooperation of women” (p. 217). Lerner (1986) suggest that women’s cooperation in the system of patriarchy is gained through

gender indoctrination; educational deprivation; the denial to women of knowledge of their history; the dividing of women, on from the other, by defining ‘respectability’ and ‘deviance’ according to women’s sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women. (p. 217)

The socially and historically constructed system of patriarchy permeates dominant discourse and shapes the public realm, the family, institutions, our economic system, and government. As we will see, male superiority and female inferiority shapes dominant discourses of motherhood in many complex ways. Feminist theorists argue that patriarchy is socially constructed and is maintained to benefit those in power instead of a result of biological differences between men and women. Green (2010) suggests that motherhood is “proscribed and controlled by patriarchy” and that under this oppressive system biological mothers are assigned “the sole responsibility of mothering without the power to determine the conditions under which they parent” (p. 971).

The ideology of technology refers to the application of ideas about machines and technology to people expecting them to operate like the process of production. Rothman (1994) argues that the ideology of technology views people and their labor as resources

and focuses on efficiency, productivity, and rationality (p. 144). This influences the medical and natural discourses of motherhood in many ways because it is based on the premise that there is a mind-body dualism and that the body is a “machine” which can be “programmed” or “managed”. From the medicalization of pregnancy and delivery to the tendency to defer to expert medical knowledge and parenting techniques, technological ideology affects dominant ideologies of motherhood. Rothman (1994) argues that the body is not the only thing affected by the ideology of technology, “rather than seeing society as an organic, deeply interconnected whole, technological ideology encourages us to see society as a collection of parts” (p. 145). The ideology of technology is directly linked to the concept of individualism. Rothman (1994) argues that the “basic themes of order, predictability, rationality, control, and rationalization of life” characterize the ideology of technology. In addition to the mechanization of motherhood experience, Green (2010) argues that motherhood has been “professionalized by Western science, psychology, and medicine” and that this process ensures that motherhood is an “area of expertise” and reinforces “the belief that mothers need assistance of such experts” (p. 971). Rothman (1994) suggests that through the ideology of technology, “motherhood is perceived as work, and children as a product produced by the labor of mothering” (p. 149). The ideology of technology makes connections to the ideology of capitalism which shares many of the same characteristics.

The ideology of capitalism is based on the market and the profit motive.

Rothman (1994) argues that “what is essential to capitalism is the accumulation and investment of capital, of wealth, by people who are in a position to control others” (p.

149). The market drives the valuation of different types of labor and values what is viewed as profitable and devalues what is viewed as unprofitable. Over time mothering, raising children, and the education of children along with all caring endeavors have been devalued. The power and rights of mothers are devalued under the ideology of capitalism despite the recognition of some ownership rights over their bodies. The ideology of capitalism has also created separate spheres for domestic work that is often expected of women and public work that is reserved for men. Domestic work is usually done by women because they are seen as naturally caring while paid work, or valued work is done by men who are seen as more rational. Individualism, another feature of capitalism, reinforces the idea of meritocracy, or the belief that everyone who works hard will succeed and those who fail do so because of personal shortcomings instead of differences of opportunity and class structures. Capitalism is a thread that is deeply woven into the fabric of all motherhood ideologies.

Rothman (1994) argues that the ideologies of patriarchy, technology, and capitalism create the “fabric for the strange patterns” of motherhood and can explain almost all issues pertaining to motherhood including but not limited to “genetic testing,...minimum wage for child care, the ‘mommy track’, and the simultaneous commercialization and politicization of abortion” (p. 152). The cultural contradictions and power inequities created and maintained by these ideologies shape the dominant discourses of motherhood in overlapping ways. A major problem (among many) with these dominant discourses is the tendency to ignore differences in experiences among mothers. The patriarchal ideology of motherhood is based on certain “assumptions that

are generalized to all parents and children” and these are usually centered on the experiences and expectation of white, middle class, educated, heterosexual, married mothers with non-disabled children who subscribe to the dominant ideologies of motherhood (Green, 2010, p. 971). Green (2010) argues that dominant ideology prescribes the ideal circumstances for parents as

being a heterosexual couple over the age of 20 but not older than 40 years, being married before the children’s birth, and staying together for the duration of their childhood. Parents take on a gendered division of labor, with mother staying at home with her children and father employed outside the home earning enough money to adequately provide for his wife and children. Although cohabitation, same-sex union, chosen lone parenting, and dual working parents are increasingly common, the patriarchal ideology has not made these revisions. (p. 971)

The next section of this chapter focuses feminist theories of motherhood including a focus on motherhood as an institution.

### **Feminist Theories of Motherhood**

Theorizing about motherhood and mothering has been an important and contentious subject for feminists throughout history. Women have written about their diverse experiences with motherhood and the expectations and requirements of society regarding mothering. DiQuinzio (1999) argues that

The central concepts in feminist theory, including sex, gender, embodiment, desire, consciousness, experience, representation, oppression, equality, freedom, and liberation are all relevant to understanding mothering and are regularly invoked in feminist analyses of mothering... Thus, mothering is both an important site at which the central concepts of feminist theory are elaborated, and a site at which these concepts are challenged and reworked. (p. xi)

Hansen (2007) suggests that since the 1960s feminist thinking about motherhood has three distinct periods: repudiation, recuperation, and a critique of recuperation (p. 434). Snitow (1992) argues that the first period of theorizing about motherhood, repudiation, took place from 1963-1974 and was characterized by what she labels as “demon texts,” or texts that established harsh questions about motherhood and were read or perhaps *misread* as mother-hating books. DiQuinzio (1999) states that the period of repudiation featured works by early second-wave feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan “who point out a strong link between women’s oppression and women’s naturalized position of mothers” (p. 434).

Hansen (2007) argues that the second period in feminist thinking about motherhood, recuperation, was a time when “many feminists sought to reclaim and reinterpret motherhood and revalue difference” (p. 434). Snitow (1992) dates the period of recuperation from 1975-1979 and this is the time when “feminism tried to take on the issue of motherhood seriously, to criticize the institution, explore the actual experience, and theorize the social and psychological implications” (p. 34). Feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and Dorothy Dinnerstein wrote during this period.

The final period of feminist thinking about motherhood is described by Snitow (1992) as a critique of recuperation. The third period includes all work published after 1980. Snitow (1992) characterizes this period as one of flaccidity and division. This period begins with Ruddick’s work which she describes as “threshold” work. Snitow (1992) further believes that women are discouraged and heartbroken due to the failure to “get day care, child support, fair enough custody laws, changes in the structure of the

work day and a typical work life, and finally any reliable, ongoing support from men” and that this accounts for the lack of more recent theorizing in this period (p. 41). Snitow (1992) maintains that most theorizing about motherhood now leaves “out the down part of the mother’s story – her oppression, fury, and regrets” (p. 42).

Kinser (2010) found that the majority of feminist theorizing about motherhood is concerned with

how to improve the conditions in which women mother; how to increase the cultural value of motherwork, particularly given the vast majority of women do mother and that such work comprises a sizeable portion of their lives; and how to reconfigure the institutions of family, work, and government so that women and their motherwork, in all their variety, are supported. (p. 404)

Kinser (2010) argues that the goal for first-wave feminists were primarily political in nature with feminists fighting for the right to vote and the right to “control the marital sexual relationship” (p. 404). In second-wave feminism, Kinser (2010) suggests that feminists demanded abortion rights and access to affordable childcare while at the same time pointing out that motherhood could be oppressive and women should be able to choose whether or not to become mothers (p. 404). Third-wave feminists demanded more societal support for mothers focusing on labor rights for mothers and new challenges to essentialist views of motherhood (p. 404).

Kinser (2010) suggests that there are three major categories of feminist theories about motherhood: “motherhood as institution or ideology; mothering as experience or role; and mothering/motherhood and identity or subjectivity” (p. 404).

When researching institutions and ideologies that affect motherhood, feminists “question

and challenge beliefs and practices that are normalized and taken for granted about women, mothers, families, and children” (p. 404). Feminists focusing on mothering as experience or role note the ways that the private sphere of the family is affected by the public sphere including education, government, the media, and medical institutions (p. 405). Feminist scholarship on identity and subjectivity examine the ways that the mothering experiences shapes mothers’ identities and the way that mothering affects children’s identities (p. 405). What follows is a review of the scholarly literature on feminism and motherhood.

### **Motherhood as Institution**

In *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich (1976) argues that motherhood is an institution that has been socially constructed within the oppressive system of patriarchy. Rich (1976) says, “To have borne and reared a child is to have done that thing which patriarchy joins with physiology to render into the definition of femaleness” (p. 37). Rich’s (1976) discussion of motherhood was groundbreaking at the time and she justified the need for an exploration of motherhood arguing that, “we know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood” (p. 11). Rich (1976) distinguishes

between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control. (p. 13)

The institution of motherhood has the effect of keeping mothers and women in their place and should not be confused with the process of mothering, or nurturing and caring for children. Rich (1976) argues that mothering is something that must be learned and it is not something that is natural or instinctual to women.

Rich (1976) believes that the institution of motherhood is a hallmark of most social and political systems throughout the world. Rich (1976) argues that throughout history, “motherhood as an institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities” (p. 13). Rich (1976) uses her own experiences raising her three children along with excerpts of literature and historical and social research to situate women’s experiences becoming mothers within the socially constructed institution of motherhood. Rich (1976) focuses on how her experiences of motherhood were shaped by the institution of patriarchy instead of a broader study of the ideologies of motherhood. She discusses the ambivalence she experienced as a mother and the alternating feelings of anger and tenderness she felt towards her children. Rich (1976) believes that the “unexamined assumptions” of the institution of motherhood have been shaped by patriarchy and were constructed to benefit men. Women internalize these patriarchal assumptions. Rich (1976) describes some of these unexamined assumptions.

First, that a “natural” mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being home all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; that the isolation of mothers and children together in the home must be taken for granted; that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless; that children and mothers are the “causes” of each other’s suffering. I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is “unconditional”; and by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded identity. (p. 22-23)

Rich (1976) argues that being a mother is frustrating and is both physically and emotionally draining. The patriarchal assumptions that characterize the institution of motherhood serve to reinforce stereotypical gender roles and keep women isolated in the home. Rich (1976) describes the roles that women are expected to fill: the “part of the Victorian Lady of Leisure, the Angel in the house, and also of the Victorian cook, scullery maid, laundress, governess, and nurse” (p. 27). Any “help” that was offered by her husband was understood as an “act of generosity” or a gift that she should be grateful for (p. 27).

Rich (1976) discusses her struggles with her identity after her children were born. The institution of motherhood tells women that their identity is now tied to their children. In responding to someone who once asked her if she ever writes poems about her children, Rich (1976) responded, “For me, poetry was where I lived as no-one’s mother, where I existed as myself” (p. 31). Rich talks about trying to give birth to herself or her own identity after having children and how difficult this was for her. Rich (1976) believes that “motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is *one part* of female process; it is not an identity for all time” (p. 34).

Rich (1976) maintains the institution of motherhood has an ideology and this ideology is essential to the patriarchal system. Rich (1976) argues that the “power-relations between mother and child are often simply a reflection of the power-relations in a patriarchal society” (p. 38). Rich (1976) reflects that the institution of motherhood as constructed by the patriarchal system allowed her “only certain views, certain

expectations” (p. 39). Rich’s (1976) contribution to feminist scholarship on the topic of motherhood as an institution led to an increased interest in the topic and set the stage for other feminist scholars to question and subvert the traditional patriarchal views of motherhood.

### **A Philosophical Perspective: Maternal Thinking**

Ruddick (1995) attempts to describe from a philosophical perspective the thinking that develops from the work that mothers do. Her work describes the relationship between mothering, thinking, and practice. Ruddick (1995) argues that “to be a mother is to take upon oneself the responsibility of child care, making its work a regular and substantial part of one’s working life” (p. 17). Ruddick (1995) acknowledges that this definition allows the possibility that men can engage in mothering. Maternal work and practice is characterized by three demands: preservation, growth, and social acceptance and “to be a mother is to be committed to meeting these demands by works of preservative love, nurturance, and training” (p. 17). Ruddick (1995) suggests that mothers must consciously *think* and that this maternal thinking is a “discipline of maternal thought” (p. 24). Kinser (2010) points out that for Ruddick “maternal thinking is a discipline that is consciously practiced” as opposed to a biological maternal instinct (p. 405). Ruddick (1995) argues that “caring labor gives rise to a rationality of care, exemplifying many of the alternative ideals of reason recently formulated by feminists” (p. 46). Ruddick (1995) believes that caring and mothering are not synonymous and that while caring is an aspect of motherhood, it requires different types of thinking in different situations (p. 47).

Ruddick (2004) suggests that maternal voices have been silenced, distorted, and censored by professional theory throughout history.

Women's and mother's voices have been silenced, their thinking distorted and sentimentalized. Hence it will take sustained political and intellectual effort before maternal thinking is truly heard. (p. 161)

Ruddick (2004) believes that maternal thinking has both an epistemological and political base and that it is a "subjugated knowledge" that has been "regarded with disdain by intellectuals as being either primitive or woefully incomplete yet likely to become insurrectionary" (p. 163). Ruddick (2004) argues the central part of caring labor is composed of maternal practices (p. 163). Ruddick (2004) suggests that dominant masculine discourse and ways of thinking could be transformed by maternal thinking as a "revolutionary discourse" (p. 166).

Ruddick's (2007) contribution to the research on motherhood is unique because it is concerned with the thoughts and thinking that mothers engage in. Ruddick (2007) argues that mothers engage in a discipline or certain way of thinking and this is the topic of her philosophy. Ruddick (2007) is concerned with "a mother's *thought* – the intellectual capacities she develops, the judgments she makes, the metaphysical attitudes she assumes, the values she affirms" (p. 96). According to Ruddick (2007), maternal thinking and practice arises in response to a social reality that appears as a given and presents certain demands on mothers (p. 97).

Ruddick (2007) philosophizes that there are three main interests that govern maternal practice in satisfying the demands perceived as givens in society: demand for

preservation, growth, and acceptability (p. 98). Mothers have an interest in preserving the lives of their children and maintaining their health. Ruddick (2007) argues that mothers develop an attitude called “holding”, “an attitude governed by the priority of keeping over acquiring, of conserving the fragile, of maintaining whatever is at hand and necessary to the child’s life” (p. 99). In preserving the lives of their children in a cruel world, Ruddick (2007) suggests that mothers develop virtues such as humility, cheerfulness, and humor and that while these virtues are often developed in conditions of subordination and devalued by dominant society, they “increase and assist the power of maternal action” (p. 100-101).

Maternal practice is also governed by the interests in fostering the child’s growth. Ruddick (2007) maintains that this requires mothers to respond to change and as such “be simultaneously a changing mother” in response to a changing world (p. 101). In fostering her child’s growth, Ruddick (2007) believes that a mother must be “committed to two philosophical positions: she is a mentalist rather than a behaviorist, and she assumes the priority of personhood over action” (p. 101). In response to societal and personal interests, mothers try to meet the demand that they raise an acceptable child. Ruddick (2007) suggests that there is often conflict between what mothers deem as acceptable and what society deems as acceptable.

“Acceptability” is defined in terms of the values of the mother’s social group – whatever of its values she has internalized as her own plus values of group members whom she feels she must please or is fearful of displeasing. (p. 102)

Maternal thinking “becomes contradictory – that is, it betrays its own interest in the growth of children” because mothers often raise their children in the beliefs and dominant values of society which often render them in subordinate and powerless positions. Mothers are often judged as “good” or “bad” based on how well they have raised their children to buy into the dominant discourse of subordination and obedience. Ruddick (2007) describes mothers that “fail” as mothers that “insist on their own values and will not remain blind to the implications of dominant values for the lives of their children” (p. 104). Ruddick (2007) argues that feminist consciousness will have to transform maternal thought and demand that mothers teach and raise their children in opposition to the dominant systems of oppression. Ruddick (2007) suggests that men should participate equally in childcare thereby requiring them to “relinquish power and their own favorable position in the division between intellectual/professional and service labor as that division expresses itself domestically” (p. 108).

Ruddick (2007) believes that by bringing a transformed maternal thought into the public sphere, the preservation and growth of all children could become a “work of public conscious and legislation” (p. 108). Snitow (1992) argues that Ruddick’s work “provides one of the best descriptions feminism has of why women are so deeply committed to the mothering experience, even under oppressive conditions” (p. 40). However, Snitow (1992) questions whether Ruddick’s work implies the universality of motherhood and wonders whether motherhood’s “special features are capable of translation into women’s public power” (p. 39). Care-focused feminist scholars have repeatedly linked caring practices to mothering behaviors.

### **Care-Focused Feminism: Motherhood and Mothering**

Care has been defined in many different ways by theorists in various disciplines including Gilligan (1988) in psychology and Noddings (1984, 1992) in education. Martin (1992) argues there are three Cs of care, concern, and connection that should be central to family life and school environments (p. 37). Fisher and Tronto (1990) offer a relevant definition of care given the current topic as they address the political nature of caring and how caring can impact and renew our world.

Caring can be viewed as a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, or selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (p. 36)

Fisher and Tronto (1990) argue that taking care of another person involves assuming responsibility for “maintaining caring activities” and being held “accountable for the consequences” (p. 42). Fisher and Tronto (1990) believe that judgment is the “central skill involved in taking care of” and it involves access to resources and assumptions about power (p. 42-43). One cannot take care of anything or anyone without access to resources (p. 43). Caregiving, according to Fisher and Tronto (1990), is the “concrete (sometimes called hands-on) work of maintaining and repairing our world” (p. 43). Time, knowledge, skills, and resources are needed for adequate caregiving (p. 44). Fisher and Tronto (1990) maintain that there are many contradictions in the processes of caring especially for women and mothers.

Fisher and Tronto (1990) argue that “all caring activities entail the political dimensions of power and conflict” and that caring is a social process “because caring efforts speak ultimately to our survival as a species rather than as isolated individuals” (p. 39). Fisher and Tronto (1990) refer to mothering as household caring. They suggest that feminism has “encouraged women to understand the character of household caring, to explore its traditional norms, and to reconsider the social structures that limit its functions” (p. 51). Tong (2009) argues that “care-focused feminists expend considerable energy developing a feminist ethic of care as a complement of, or even a substitute for, a traditional ethic of justice” (p. 163). Gilligan (1988) suggests that women’s moral thinking differs from men’s as they tend to emphasize relationships and connections to others rather than a more logical or rational reasoning that men utilize. Noddings (1984) also argues that women think and speak in different moral languages than men. Noddings (1984) suggests that women’s style of moral reasoning is more linked to a feminine ethic of care instead of a masculine ethic of justice.

There have been many critiques of care-focused theorists’ work including a major critique by Bartky arguing that “linking women with caring may promote the view that women care by nature” or that women “should always care, no matter the cost” (as cited in Tong, 2009, p. 174). Bartky (1990) maintains that while many women may feel a sense of empowerment in their caring for men, they may in fact be reinforcing their own oppressed position in society. Hoagland is critical of Noddings’ (1984) description of care arguing that it demands too much from carers and suggesting that “there are times in life when ethics demands we not care” (as cited in Tong, 2009, p. 180). Noddings’ (1984)

myopic conceptualization of caring as one directional creates a situation where the only way to combat patriarchy in this endeavor is to withhold care.

In spite of Bartky's (1990) concerns about linking women to natural caring (and the maternal), Tong (2009) argues that care-focused feminists have continued to link caring to mothering.

Despite the critics' serious reservations about invoking the mother-infant or parent-child relationship as the paradigm for caring human relationships, care-focused feminists nonetheless continued to claim that the concepts, metaphors, and images associated with such relationships are precisely the ones to use. (p. 181)

Maternal thinkers such as Ruddick, Held, and Kittay view caring as a practice and strongly argue "caring practice, work, or labor should be performed in the public domain as well as the private realm" (Tong, 2009, p. 181). Held (2006) contends that care is a "truly universal experience" and that care is "probably the most deeply fundamental value" (p. 3, 17). Held (2006) also suggests that caring relationships are "relational and interdependent, morally and epistemologically" (p. 11). While society and dominant ideology is focused on competition and independence, Held argues that maternal ethics or ethics of care relations could revolutionize society.

Instead of seeing law and government or the economy as the central and appropriate determinants of society, an ethic of care might see bringing up children and fostering trust between members of the society as the most important concerns of all. Other arrangements might then be evaluated in terms of how well or badly they contribute to the flourishing of children and the health of social relations that would certainly require a radical restructuring of society. (as cited in Tong, 2009, p. 189)

Held (2006) believes that mothering persons can be men or women and that the survival of our society may very well depend on our ability to teach and cultivate caring practices through parenting and education. Feminists who advocate an ethic of care advocate that a culture of caring should characterize the private as well as public realms. Care-focused feminists have been criticized for re-inscribing essentialism and natural ideologies of motherhood since they link caring practices to women. The essentialist discourses of motherhood have negatively affected women for many reasons which are discussed in the following section of the chapter.

### **Essentialism, Natural and Medical Discourses of Motherhood**

Essentialism and natural ideologies of motherhood are “powerfully rooted in assumptions of biological determinism and the inevitability of women’s destiny to become mothers” (Miller, 2005, p. 55). Miller (2005) argues that central to these ideologies is “the notion that mothering is instinctive and therefore universally experienced and constant” (p. 55). These discourses assume that women are naturally good care givers and they possess innate, biological characteristics and skills that drive them to become mothers and selflessly attend to domestic duties. Coulter (2010) argues that the discourse of essentialist thought subscribes to the assumption that women are genetically and biologically predestined to be mothers and by extension responsible for childcare (p. 358). DiQuinzio (1999) argues that

at the center of essential motherhood is the claim that what it means to be a woman is fundamentally a function of female embodiment. From this perspective, the fact that women play a specific role in the physical reproduction of the species means that to be a woman is to fulfill this role. The ideological elaboration of this

claim further argues that, not only are women meant to become pregnant and give birth, but also that women are meant to do the work of childrearing. Women are expected not only to want to become pregnant and give birth but also to have a certain bond with or connection to the children to whom they give birth, perhaps as a function of experiencing pregnancy and childbirth or of a maternal instinct that all women possess. (p. 89)

Essentialism views women as naturally caring and uses phrases like “maternal instinct” to describe a mother’s knowledge and abilities involved in loving and caring for a child. By positioning heterosexual women as the only natural mothers, essentialist thinking marks women that choose not to become mothers, lesbian mothers, and adoptive mothers as deviant, abnormal, or unnatural.

Essentialism and the ideology of natural motherhood make explicit connections to the ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism. These ideologies reinforce the beliefs that women are natural caregivers and should stay in the private domestic sphere to raise their children. The assumption is that men are not natural caregivers and should work in the public rational realm. In this process, the work of caring for children is devalued because it is done by women and it is unpaid labor. Firestone (1970) argues that natural and biological motherhood are a major cause of the oppression of women under a patriarchal system. Rich (1977) argues that patriarchal societies have taught women that being a mother should be their sole job and fulfillment in life. This is one reason why biological motherhood as it has been constructed is oppressive to women. Essentialism and natural ideologies of motherhood set mothers up to fail by telling them that they should naturally and instinctively know how to care for their children. Miller (2007) argues that

internalized beliefs that mothers' abilities are natural and essentialist make it "hard for women becoming mothers to resist" the dominant myths of motherhood (p. 338).

Cosslett (1994) argues that in addition to ideologies of natural motherhood, another official discourse is the medical discourse which is shaped by assumptions of truth and science and the belief that childbirth and motherhood should be medically expert guided (p. 4-6). Miller (2007) suggests that the medical discourse underpins "stereotypes of the good mother" (p. 338). Medical discourses of childbirth and motherhood make connections to the ideology of technology because childbirth, labor, and mothering has become an industry for managing these processes usually by male experts. This ideology rests on the belief of essentialism and assumes that women's natural mothering capacities and instincts are important but that women need to rely on expert male dominated medical knowledge to make good decisions about child rearing.

The dominant ideologies of patriarchy, capitalism, technology, essentialism, and medical discourses of motherhood all shape what is known as the ideology of intensive mothering. This ideology is the dominant mothering ideology in contemporary America. The next section of the chapter discusses in detail Hays' (1996) research and findings about the ideology of intensive mothering.

### **The Ideology of Intensive Mothering**

Hays (1996) argues that the "contemporary model of socially appropriate mothering takes the form of an ideology of *intensive mothering*" (p. x). Feminist scholars have shown and agree that intensive mothering is the dominant contemporary ideology of motherhood in mainstream American culture (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Garey, 1999;

O'Brien Hallstein, 2010; Hays, 1996; Johnson & Swanson, 2006; O'Reilly, 2004). The ideology of intensive mothering is internalized by mothers of all races and classes whether they subscribe to this discourse or not, they are still judged and held to this standard of mothering (Hays, 1996). O'Brien Hallstein (2010) argues that feminist scholars (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Garey, 1999; O'Brien Hallstein, 2010; Hays, 1996; Johnson & Swanson, 2006; O'Reilly, 2004) have "established intensive mothering is a hegemonic ideology that functions as a form of patriarchal social control of women" (p. 6). In the 1970's, intensive mothering ideology and feminism were competing discourses according to Douglas and Michaels (2004) and as a result of the media's obsession with selling idealized images of motherhood in the 1980's, feminist ideas became more integrated with intensive mothering beliefs instead of competing with them.

Hays (1996) used cross-cultural and historical accounts of mothering, dominant child-rearing and parenting manuals, and semi-structured interviews with 38 American mothers as her sites of research. She found that intensive mothering beliefs are pervasive and emerged over time as children came to be seen as sacred and inherently good. Hays (1996) believes that confidence in scientific solutions greatly influenced the "development of scientific child-rearing techniques" and that it was no coincidence that these cultural changes accompanied an increase in immigrant populations migrating to the United States and having babies (p. 41). These expert guided ideologies about becoming a mother and properly raising children were a deliberate attempt to control women and the ways they brought up their kids. Many of the expert guidelines and suggestions for raising children are based on psychological theories of attachment.

Hays (1996) defines intensive mothering as “*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*” (p. 8). Mothers are expected to meet the sacred child’s needs at the expense of their own needs. Hays (1996) indentified three domains of ideology: *sacred children/sacred mothering, the responsibility of individual mothers, and intensive methods of childrearing*. These mothering beliefs rest on three core principles:

1) children need and require constant and ongoing nurturing by their biological mothers who are single-handedly responsible for meeting these needs; 2) in meeting those needs, mothers must rely on experts to guide them, and 3) mothers must lavish enormous amounts of time and energy on their children (as cited in O’Brien Hallstein, 2010, p. 5)

The ideology of intensive mothering assumes that motherhood is sacred and this role is the most important role a woman can have in life. Children are believed to be sacred, pure, and innocent. Mothers have the role of protecting children from the evil world. How good a mother is depends on how good her children turn out to be. Mothers are blamed if their children are unhappy or get into trouble. Intensive mothering ideology reinforces the belief that mothers should stay home with their children providing constant care and nurturance for them at all costs. A mother who stays at home with her children is seen as providing the best environment for young children. Full time employment is not an option for mothers who subscribe to intensive mothering beliefs because being a stay at home mother is an all consuming endeavor. In order to engage in intensive methods of child rearing which are “*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*” mothers are expected to become selfless and put all

aspirations aside until their children are older (Hays, 1996, p. 8). The ideology of intensive mothering directly shapes the ideas about what constitutes a good mother and the media has played an active role in promoting these views about contemporary motherhood.

Hays (1998) suggests that attachment theory has greatly influenced the ideology of intensive mothering especially its focus on child-centeredness. Bowlby's (1951, 1969) maternal attachment theory argues that mother-child attachments are the basic foundation for healthy and normal human development. Ainsworth's (1967) findings about secure and insecure infant attachments and the importance of maternal bonding expanded Bowlby's findings. Hays (1998) argues that attachment theories are based on "essentialist, biologically determinist, and fundamentally gendered assumptions" (p. 783). There have been many criticisms of attachment theory research including Eyer's (1992) discussions of the social implications of attachment theory—namely that good mothers would choose to stay home with their children instead of working to maintain a healthy and secure attachment with their infants. In a recent *Time* article titled, "The Man Who Remade Motherhood", Pickert (2012) argues that Dr. Sears has become the expert authority on attachment parenting and how to be a good mother. Pickert (2012) suggests that the three basic tenants of attachment parenting are: "breastfeeding (sometimes into toddlerhood), co-sleeping (inviting babies into the parental bed or pulling a bassinet alongside it) and 'baby wearing,' in which infants are literally attached to their mothers via slings" (p. 34). *The Baby Book* (1992) by Dr. Sears and his wife, Martha Sears has

greatly bolstered the beliefs in attachment parenting and the ideology of intensive mothering in recent years.

### **New Momism, the Media and the Good Mother**

Cultural ideologies of motherhood have been transmitted and homogenized through the medium of the media including television programming, advertising, magazines, and movies. Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue that the idealization of motherhood has undermined women's power and agency in their own lives and in broader society. Douglas and Michaels (2004) completed a study on motherhood and how it is portrayed in the media and they found that

mothers are subjected to an onslaught of beatific imagery, romantic fantasies, self-righteous sermons, psychological warnings, terrifying movies about losing their children, even more terrifying news stories about abducted and abused children, and totally unrealistic advice about how to be the most perfect and revered mom in the neighborhood, maybe in the whole country. (pg. 3)

Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue that there has been a rise in the media of "new momism" which is a "set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection" (p. 5). They suggest that women buy into this ideology of new momism while at the same time many mothers are aware of how oppressive these standards really are. Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue that the rise of intensive mothering beliefs which they refer to as the "ultimate female Olympics" creates a competition among mothers to see who can be the best mother along with the media obsession with motherhood particularly policing motherhood and putting it under

surveillance since the mid-1980's has contributed to the rise of new momism (p. 7).

Douglas and Michaels (2004) suggest that the rise of new momism especially through the television medium has been an effort to re-domesticate women through the idealization of motherhood (p. 9). Another reason for the increase in new momism is the fact that in the mid-1970's mothers in the workplace became a market for a whole range of consumer items. Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue that because of this "new market of consumers", there was a "sheer increase in output and target marketing" and then "mothers were bombarded as never before by media constructions of the good mother" in order for corporations to sell products and make a profit (p. 11).

Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue the idea of the good mother became tied to a woman's market choices and what items she chose to buy to "stimulate, protect, educate, and indulge" her children (p. 11). These ideological beliefs are filled with contradictions of course because while the media was championing the good mother as the stay at home mom, mothers needed income to purchase these advertised goods. Mother blaming has been a result of this intense scrutiny of mothers. There has been increasing polarization of ideas about what and who represents to good mother and the bad mother. Good mothers increasingly became associated with being good consumers in the marketplace.

Kinnick (2009) argues that media depictions, stories, programs, and advertisements reinforce the same moral caricatures of the good mother which all work to undermine the power of women in society. In her study of the media and portrayals of motherhood, Kinnick (2009) found three central "stories" told by the media about mothers.

First the media idealize and glamorize motherhood as the one path to fulfillment for women, painting a rosy, Hallmark-card picture that ignores or minimizes the very real challenges that come along with parenthood. Second, media narratives often cast motherhood in moral terms, juxtaposing the “good mother” with the “bad mother,” who frequently is a working mom, a lower income mom, or someone who does not conform to traditional gender roles of behavior, ambition, or sexual orientation. Third, media frame the issues, suggesting how the public should think about them. In particular, by focusing on the individual level rather than the societal level, media stories frame problems facing mothers as “personal problems” rather than problems needing systematic, public policy solutions. (p. 4)

The good mother is idealized as a white, middle-class or upper-class heterosexual woman who is married to the father of her children and who chooses to stay at home and selflessly care for her children. The media romanticizes this idealization of motherhood and reinforces and re-inscribes this representation of mothers. Women who do not fit into this mold are considered to be deviant or bad mothers. This includes working mothers, mothers who are not white, unwed mothers, women who adopt their children, low income mothers, gay and lesbian mothers, and women who chose not to become mothers at all.

Caplan (2010) argues that myths about mothers “shape the beliefs of mothers and others about what mothers are like” and that these “myths about mothers are frequently used to demean mothers” (p. 885). Caplan (2010) suggests that there are four perfect mother myths: “the measure of a good mother is a perfect child; mothers are endless founts of nurturance; mothers naturally know how to raise children; and mothers don’t get angry” (p. 886). The good mother or perfect mother myths set mothers up to fail because it is impossible for women to meet the high standards. These mother myths are based on the ideology of intensive mothering and are reinforced through the media and advertising in the form of new momism. These myths and ideologies dupe mothers into

thinking that they are not good mothers unless they meet these unattainable standards. In response to these images and advertisements mothers buy more consumer goods for themselves and their children as a way to become good enough. Instead of working together and uniting in political action that might guarantee more power for mothers in the form of new workplace policies for example, mothers are often too preoccupied with trying to juggle so many different responsibilities and trying to live up to these impossible standards.

### **Cultural Scripts, Mediated Mom Labels, and Consumerism**

The dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood can also be understood by examining mediated mom labels and cultural scripts. These labels are used by the media and other actors in society to describe mothers. The fact that these labels are understood by many illustrates their power and influence in society. O'Brien Hallstein (2010) argues that mom labels have served to re-inscribe "mothering as the most important part of femininity, while re-entrenching mothering and family life as only a private sphere and not a public sphere concern" (p. 8). Willard (1988) argues that "cultures provide a script or a rather specific cultural set of ideas about how events should take place so that members of that culture can be guided through major life events" (p. 226). Cultural messages about the right or correct way to be a mother are transmitted through cultural scripts that then become internalized by many mothers. Willard (1988) suggests that the scripts for mothering in contemporary U.S. culture are "increasingly divergent from new realities of the lives of the women who mother" (p. 227). Willard (1988) argues that there are two main cultural scripts for mothers: the selfless wife/selfless mother and the

superwoman. These cultural scripts can often “drown out the woman’s own voice” or her own beliefs as mothers try to live up to the impossible idealized images (Willard, 1988). In addition to cultural scripts, mom labels also convey cultural expectations of what a good mother should be and do. O’Brien Hallstein (2010) argues there are two main components of mom labels.

First, the mom labels are mediated images of contemporary mothering, developed for and by advertisers to sell products and, as such, these labels are being applied to women rather than created by women. Consequently, the labels are deeply entrenched in an ideology of consumerism that equates mothering with consumption. (pg. 9)

Mom labels send powerful messages to women in our society. Douglas and Michaels (2004) suggest that the increased use of the term “mom” sends the message that being a mother is the most important aspect of femininity because it positions a woman’s role as a mother from a child’s perspective (p. 19). Two of the most recognized mom labels are the supermom and the soccer mom. The supermom label refers to the “ability” of women and mothers to “have it all”—that is the home life and work life. The rise of the supermom image coincided with increasing numbers of mothers entering and remaining in the workforce. The supermom label suggests that mothers not only can have it all but *should* be able to manage it all. Sociologists Hochschild and Machung (2003) have challenged these assumptions in their pioneering work *The Second Shift*. The illusion of the supermom label and the idea of “having it all” makes it seem like mothers have the right to choose whether or not they work and it fails to address the struggles and difficulty that arise from trying to have it all.

Peskowitz (2005) argues the soccer mom label has its history in “electoral politics and strategy” and that this should “help us to realize the falseness, the thinness, of the major motherhood images around us” (p. 28). Peskowitz (2005) found that in the 1990’s the term soccer mom was used as a political tool to gain voter support among certain types of women who had become increasingly active in elections. O’Brien Hallstein (2010) argues that the label soccer mom “refers to married, middle-class suburban women with children” but that “metaphorically, a soccer mom is viewed as a mom who is devoted first and foremost to her family’s needs and, as a result, puts her children’s desires and activities above her own” (p. 12).

Vavrus argues that while the soccer mom label acknowledges the work/life struggle or the conflicting demands of the public and private spheres for mothers, the solutions suggested by the media to these struggles are framed in terms of individual choices and solutions that are rooted in consumerism (as cited in O’Brien Hallstein, 2010, p. 13). The larger structural problems inherent in the soccer mom label were neglected by the media while the solutions were posed as individual in nature simply requiring mothers to make “good consumer choices in the private sphere” (as cited in O’Brien Hallstein, 2010, p. 14). Mothers became defined by their consumer choices and what activities their children participated in, re-inscribing the belief that a woman’s identity is synonymous with her role as a mother. Mothers were encouraged to buy consumer items to lessen any difficulty they had moving between the public and private spheres. For example, a soccer mom could buy an SUV to help her efficiently get kids and equipment where they needed to go in less time. Making specific consumer choices makes a woman

a better, more efficient mother. This process began in the 1950's as many commercial products were created to make women more efficient at their predefined and socially constructed gender roles. As the focus shifted to women and mothers being efficient housekeepers and caregivers, products such as TV dinners, washing machines, automated solutions, and processed foods for quicker cooking became the norm. These notions of women and mothers becoming more efficient through their purchasing power of modern automated goods continues today and has changed as new products have become increasing technological.

Another popular culture label used to describe mothers is the term alpha mom. This label has been used negatively to describe mothers because alpha moms are focused on control and efficiency. O'Brien Hallstein (2010) argues that alpha moms believe "they are leaders of the pack of moms—which continues to pit women against one another—in control, and making deliberate and efficient choices" (p. 19). Since the alpha mom is efficient, deliberate, strong, and in control, she is on the top of the hierarchy of mothers—she is the best—and the other mothers are beneath them (p. 20). The use of this label by the media suggests that there are no structural problems with life/work balance instead mothers have a personal choice about how they mother and if they become an alpha mom they can get everything done. O'Brien Hallstein (2010) argues that cultural scripts and mom labels are "participating in a complex ideological and hegemonic... form of intensive mothering" (p. 22). The cultural scripts and mediated mom labels of superwoman/supermom, soccer mom, and alpha mom reinforce the dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood that are pervasive in society.

## **Diverse Perspectives: Non-White Mothers, Lesbian Motherhood, Adoption, and Women Who Choose Not to Become Mothers**

The majority of research, literature, and theorizing about ideologies of motherhood are rooted in the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual mothers. Sutherland (2010) argues that “motherhood occurs within the intersecting structures of race, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality” and that while research suggests that “the notion of good mothering does appear to cross” these categories, mothering does not “look the same across all of those intersecting identities” (p. 312). It is important to examine a diversity of views of motherhood looking at how it is experienced by different groups. Hooks (2007) argues that black women’s views on motherhood have been systematically ignored and that their views on mothering are fundamentally different from the experiences of white women. Hooks (2007) maintains that if black women had voiced their opinions on motherhood, “it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women” (p. 145). Hooks (2007) explains that while many white women write about motherhood as an isolating experience and one that is characterized by resisting patriarchy, black women historically “have identified work in the context of family as humanizing labor, work that affirms their identity as women, as human beings showing love and care, the very gestures of humanity white supremacists ideology claimed black people were incapable of expressing” (p. 145).

Hooks (2007) argues that the feminist movement disregarded the voices of poor and nonwhite women “who find parenting one of the few interpersonal relationships where they are affirmed and appreciated” (p. 146). Hooks (2007) believes that

motherhood and parenting should be studied and critiqued inclusive of diverse voices and she criticizes the way that motherhood has been romanticized by bourgeois white women. She suggests that there is a “continual need for the study and research of female parenting” (p. 146).

Female parenting is significant and valuable work which must be recognized as such by everyone in society, including feminist activists. It should receive deserved recognition, praise, and celebration within a feminist context where there is renewed effort to re-think the nature of motherhood, to make motherhood neither a compulsory experience for women nor an exploitative or oppressive one, to make female parenting good effective parenting whether it is done exclusively by women or in conjunction with men. (p. 147)

Hooks (2007) argues that revolutionary parenting is when fathers, mothers, and the community participate in raising children. Shared parenting by fathers and mothers cannot be realized until society teaches that “fatherhood has the same meaning and significance as motherhood” (p. 148). Hooks (2007) maintains that “childcare and childrearing will continue to be primarily women’s work” so long as women are viewed as better caregivers and natural nurturers (p. 148).

Hooks (2007) criticizes Ruddick’s work on maternal thinking arguing that it “romanticizes the idea of the maternal and places emphasis on men becoming maternal” (p. 149).

Seeing men who do effective parenting as “maternal” reinforces the stereotypical sexist notion that women are inherently better suited to parent, that men who parent in the same way as women are imitating the real thing rather than acting as a parent should act. There should be a concept of effective parenting that makes no distinction between maternal and paternal care. (p. 149)

Ruddick and hooks are at odds over the concept of “maternal” and whether this is inherent to women. Hooks (2007) also argues that Ruddick’s ideas about maternal care which place an emphasis on attention and attentive love are more relevant to upper class women who do not work all day because of their elevated economic status. Hooks (2007) argues that the feminist movement should be concerned with the “right of children to effective childcare by parents and other childrearsers” and “the restructuring of society so that women do not exclusively provide that care” (p. 150). Hooks (2007) advocates a revolutionary form of parenting whereby “childcare is a responsibility that can be shared with other childrearsers” including those that live outside of the home including community members and teachers (p. 153). She suggests that many children in black communities are raised using “community-based childcare” and that this idea is revolutionary because it is in opposition to the stereotypical (white) belief that parenting should be done by mothers in isolation in the home. Hooks (2007) believes that collective and community based parenting is the best way to raise children.

Collins (2007a) argues that there are three main Eurocentric or white perspectives on motherhood:

On one pole lies a cluster of women, the traditionalists, who aim to retain the centrality of motherhood in women’s lives. For traditionalists, differentiating between the experience of motherhood, which for them has been quite satisfying, and motherhood as an institution central in reproducing gender inequality, has proved difficult. The other pole is occupied by women who advocate dismantling motherhood as an institution. They suggest that compulsory motherhood be outlawed and that the experience of motherhood can only be satisfying if women can also choose not to be mothers. Arrayed between these dichotomous positions are women who argue for an expanded, but not necessarily different, role for women – women can be mothers as long as they are not *just* mothers. (p. 275)

Collins (2007a) maintains that the assumptions in Eurocentric views of motherhood are problematic for non-white women. White assumptions that women are responsible for child care within nuclear families do not reflect black women's experiences with mothering in part because "racial oppression has denied black families sufficient resources to support private, nuclear family households" (p. 275). Collins (2007a) also argues that black women's experiences of motherhood are not shaped by the belief that women must exclusively stay home to care for children and not work in the labor force. The idea that home and work are separate spheres and that women are best suited for the home and men are best suited for the labor force are uncharacteristic of black maternal experience (p. 275).

Collins (2007a) argues that historically in black communities there have been "women-centered networks of community-based childcare" and "fictive kin" that have supported African American mothers and children (p. 278). Othermothers have played a major role in parenting and childrearing in black culture.

African American communities have recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, "othermothers," women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood. (p. 278)

This is in stark contrast to the white cultural views that a good mother should raise children by herself and is weak if she must accept help from others. Collins (2007a) argues that for black women, working outside of the home is seen as another function of motherhood and not as participating in the male domain as it is viewed in white culture.

These experiences of black women working together to mother children are in opposition to Ruddick's (2007) assertion that many white mothers are in competition with other white mothers and their children so that their child is the best. Lastly, Collins (2007a) suggests that motherhood is a symbol and source of power for black women "primarily because of their contributions to the community's well-being through their role as community othermothers" (p. 282).

Collins (2007b) argues that white feminist theorizing about motherhood typically minimizes the importance of race and class and "assumes that male domination in the political economy and the household is the driving force in family life, and that understanding the struggle for individual autonomy in the face of such domination is central to understanding motherhood" (p. 311). Collins (2007b) suggests that the "locus of conflict" for black women lies outside of the household while it is described as inside of the household for white women. To further theorize this difference Collins (2007b) uses the term "motherwork."

Women of color have performed motherwork that challenges social constructions of work and family as separate spheres, of male and female gender roles as similarly dichotomized, and of the search for autonomy as the guiding human quest...I use the term "motherwork" to soften the existing dichotomies in feminist theorizing about motherhood that posit rigid distinctions between private and public, family and work, the individual and the collective, identity as individual autonomy and identity growing from the collective self-determination of one's group. (p. 312-313)

Collins (2007b) believes that in focusing the discussion of motherhood on white middle and upper class experience, "authentic standpoints of subordinated groups" are left out of

the conversation (p. 314). In doing so, Collins (2007b) suggests that certain themes are not included because most white women have a “relative degree of economic security” and the luxury of seeing themselves as “individuals in search of personal autonomy, instead of members of racial ethnic groups struggling for power” (p. 313). Collins (2007b) argues that while feminist theorizing about motherhood from a white middle class perspective tends to focus on themes such as maternal sexuality, maternal isolation, gender oppression, and the fight against patriarchy, the inclusion of maternal voices of color brings attention to themes such as motherwork, othermothers, and themes of survival, maternal empowerment, and identity (p. 314). Collins (2007b) theorizes that motherwork for black women “involves collaborating to empower mothers and children within structures that oppress” (p. 321).

Researchers have also conducted studies that focus on gay and lesbian families and the challenges and choices they face concerning motherhood. Technological changes and shifts in gay marriage laws and family/custody laws have led to both advancements and setbacks for gay and lesbian couples. In *Mommy Queerest*, Thompson (2002) argues that both ideological and structural factors have excluded lesbians from motherhood. Thompson (2002) suggests that the mainstream media either characterizes lesbian mothers as “unreal” or as a threat to the traditional family. Thompson (2002) compared articles about lesbian motherhood from popular press outlets to articles in the lesbian press noting that in contrast the lesbian press has portrayed lesbian mothers as the vanguard of radical feminism or as betrayers of the lesbian nation. Ryan-Flood (2009) studies the ways that lesbian motherhood challenges essentialism and biological

explanations of gender while at the same time contesting heteronormative ideals. Ryan-Flood (2009) interviewed lesbian couples embarking on parenthood finding that they faced many struggles while building their families in our culture that privileges heterosexual families.

Media portrayals have focused on separating not only good and bad mothers but also “real” and “non-real mothers”. Biology and the ideology of essentialism and natural motherhood are at the heart of these critiques. Scholars have pointed out the traditional views of the good mother focus on white, middle and upper class, heterosexual, married women. Lesbian mothers, teen moms, and adoptive mothers are often situated as deviant or “non-real” mothers in society. Solinger (2001), Berebitsky (2000), and Fessler (2006) have studied the ways that adoption impacts motherhood and the ways it challenges ideologies of the good mother. Adoptive mothers are often viewed as either deserving of becoming a mother or as undeserving of another mother’s child. Many adoptive mothers also feel like that have missed a big part of mothering since they do not experience labor and delivery. Some adoptive mothers have started to challenge dominant ideologies of motherhood arguing that they are real mothers despite their diverse circumstances and experiences.

The scholarly works cited in this section illustrate how the contexts of race, class, and sexuality have a significant influence on understanding and experience of motherhood for women with different social positionalities. While white middle and upper class mothers have experiences of motherhood that largely revolve around patriarchy and resistance to it, the experiences of non-white and lesbian mothers illustrate

the importance of racism and oppression in shaping their roles as mothers. The lived experiences and struggles for mothers of different social classes, races, and sexualities are vastly different as they are shaped by differing contexts.

There are more and more women choosing not to have children. Sandler and Wittemann (2013) argue that a 2010 Pew Research report shows that “childlessness has risen across all racial and ethnic groups, adding up to about 1 in 5 American women who end their childbearing years maternity-free, compared to 1 in 10 in the 1970s” (p. 40). These trends are not just unique to our country. World-wide there has been a dramatically lower birth rate and this has been attributed to more than the recent economic recession. Women who decide not to have children are often judged by others as selfish. Last (2013), a writer for *The Weekly Standard* argues that low birth rates will lead to economic destruction of our country with fewer taxpayers. Mezey (2008) argues that the motherhood mandate extends to all women now including lesbian mothers. Sandler and Wittemann (2013) suggest that many women are deciding not to become mothers because of economic costs and the high expectations associated with the rise in attachment parenting beliefs. Motherhood continues to be a cultural expectation for women despite the fact that fewer women are becoming mothers.

### **The Mask of Motherhood: What Research Reveals When the Silence is Broken**

Maushart (1999) argues that mothers wear a mask that conceals the true experiences of motherhood from men and other women. She suggests that mothers lie to one another to perpetuate the myths of motherhood and that this leads to unrealistic expectations by new mothers and shock at what the motherhood experience is actually

like. Maushart (1999) found that “women without children seem disturbingly unprepared for the challenges of motherhood, and that women with children seem disturbingly unprepared to discuss these challenges” (p. xxi). The mask of motherhood keeps women silent about their experiences. Maushart (1999) argues that we see the mask of motherhood in:

- The values of a culture that glorifies the ideal of motherhood but takes for granted the work of motherhood, and ignores the experience of motherhood
- Media images of Supermom, complete with briefcase, “serious” hair, and a pair of designer-clad preschoolers scampering happily to help with the dishes
- The tolerance of women for the selective deafness of fathers at 3:00 am, especially in the belief that “a man needs his sleep” so he can “go to work in the morning”
- Debates about child care that pass judgment on “what’s best for the child” as if a child’s needs were separate from those of its mother, father, and siblings
- The smugness of the mother at-home who looks with disdain on her sisters in the workforce
- The smugness of the mother in the workforce who looks with disdain on her sisters at-home. (p. 3)

Maushart (1999) argues that this mask of motherhood is dangerous to new mothers because they are caught completely off guard as they become new mothers. The expectations of new mothers are vastly different from their lived experiences. Maushart (1999) suggests that women are more concerned with maintaining the current ideals of the good mother and acting like they have lived up to the ideal instead of being honest with other mothers about the realities and impossibilities of motherhood. Maushart (1999) argues that women are complicit in masking their experiences as mothers.

Research studies have been conducted exploring the divide between women’s expectations and their actual experiences of becoming a mother, the findings support

Masushart's (1999) argument. After interviewing pregnant women prior to giving birth about their expectations, Miller (2007) found that "the language of nature and instincts and medical expert discourses" were woven throughout the women's expectations (p. 343). Miller (2007) argues that

Even though they are not yet mothers, most of the women position themselves discursively as preparing appropriately and responsibly, already conforming to the ideals of the good mother. (p. 343)

In her study, Miller (2007) found that these women drew on strands of intensive mothering discourses and were concerned with mothering the right way (p. 347). In an additional study of mothers' expectations, Lupton (2000) found that most women in her study subscribed to a child-centered discourse and stated that breastfeeding is an "essential practice of good mothering" since it is "natural" (p. 54). These essentialist views also shaped childbirth.

Miller (2007) describes one woman who felt she had failed at maintaining control during her birth process because she required an epidural for pain relief (p. 348). Miller (2007) found women were surprised that they had to *learn* to be mothers because there was an absence of innate mothering knowledge. Lupton (2000) suggests that after giving birth and becoming a mother, new mothers found it impossible to live up to the ideal of the good mother, the ideal that had easily articulated pre-baby. Lupton (2000) found that many women "felt tension between wanting one's 'old life' and also subscribing to the selfless child-centered discourse" (p. 56). Miller (2007) suggests that as women

transition into becoming a new mother, they start to realize the lies that they have been told.

Individual, everyday mothering experiences come up against the tenants of dominant discourses, and confusion results. Yet this period of confusion can work as a catalyst, prompting women to begin questioning the “optimistic” good mother stories that do not fit with their own experiences. (p. 350)

As women gain confidence in their own mothering abilities through personal experiences, they can begin to question the dominant discourses that shaped their expectations. Miller (2007) found that even as women attempted to challenge intensive mothering ideology, the women were brought “back to locating experiences in the context of good mothering discourses” (p. 353). When one mother appeared to be challenging the idea that women must stay home with their child, and decided to return to work she remarked, “I feel guilty because I don’t feel guilty” (p. 353). Miller (2007) argues that this quote illustrates “how pervasive discourses around mothering are” and that there is no “escaping the discourses that circumscribe mothering” (p. 353). Other major research findings in sociological research are the divergent parental/caring responsibilities between mothers and fathers. Lupton (2000) found that fathers were viewed by new mothers as “helpers” and that the mothers themselves performed a majority of the child care and household responsibilities. The inequality of child care and household work has been well documented in many studies and these findings reinforce the dominant ideologies of motherhood (Doucet, 1995). Lupton (2000) argues that motherhood can be considered

“both as a source of self-fulfillment (if all goes well) and as a significant constraint up self-actualization” (p. 62).

There has been extensive research in the area of human development and family studies that documents the importance of social support to new mothers. Bost et al. (2002) argue that new parents, especially mothers are at a higher risk of depression and anxiety. Bost et al. (2002) suggest that “close family members serve as the primary sources of support during the postpartum period including women’s own mothers and their spouses” (p. 519). Given Maushart’s (1999) contention that mothers wear a mask of motherhood and are not honest about their own experiences of motherhood it is important for researchers to further examine the role of women’s own mothers during their process of becoming a mother. Mothers and mother-in-laws that subscribe to dominant mothering ideologies based on essentialism may not offer support to new mothers because they don’t perceive that they need help.

Research studies conducted with new mothers illustrate the disconnect between the expectations of women and the actual lived experiences of motherhood. Maushart (1999) maintains that women wear a mask of motherhood that allows dominant discourses of motherhood to remain unchallenged. The mask and the expectations of dominant mothering ideologies lead women to interpret their own experiences in terms of official discourse. This has the effect of making women feel like failures because they cannot measure up. Mothers realize that motherhood is not natural and that mothering and caring behaviors must be learned. New mothers report experiences of shock and disappointment because things didn’t turn out as they had expected. Evidence from these

studies illustrates that dominant discourses of motherhood have real life implications for mothers and fathers. Outside of the private sphere, there are many implications of motherhood discourses particularly in the public sphere of the workplace.

### **The Mommy Wars: Motherhood and the Workplace**

Johnson and Swanson (2003) argue that “mother wars, the pitting of at-home and employed mothers against each other, dominate public discourse” on motherhood (p. 243). In *The Truth behind the Mommy Wars*, Peskowitz (2005) argues that “motherhood isn’t a war and parenting is not a competition” and that “metaphors of the marketplace” are not helpful to the discussion of motherhood (p. 47). The debate about women’s role in the workplace is still active in public discourse. In *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead*, Sandberg (2013) argues that women are somewhat responsible for their own setbacks in the workplace and if they just make specific changes then they can have success like men in the labor force. Slaughter (2012) suggests that women still cannot have it all—both a high powered career and a family—due to the structural demands of the workplace and the lack of family friendly schedules and policies for women.

Peskowitz (2005) believes that the mommy wars have been mostly created by the media and that the media’s pitting on stay at home moms against working moms obscures the serious structural problems in our society concerning motherhood. By framing decisions about child care and work as private choices that women make inside their own homes, individualism is reinforced and the larger public discussions about work, child care, and caring for families are left out of the discussion. Peskowitz (2005) argues

It turns out that fathers and mothers want improvements, and few of them are easily delivered: greater workplace flexibility for parents and support for family leave, part-time work, flextime, telecommuting, and home-based business; universal healthcare for children that doesn't depend on a parent's job; successful schools for all kids,...and new cultural messages that are less concerned with consumption and more concerned with valuing family life in all its forms. (p. 35)

Peskowitz (2005) argues that many mothers are caught in the middle of working full time jobs and not working at all. While the media plays up stories of women "opting out" of the workplace, many fathers and mothers have actually chosen to work part-time jobs and in doing so lose wages, benefits, and seniority, because they "don't have work conditions that support them as parents" (p. 129). Labor and the structure of work are important social issues that need to be addressed with real solutions and Peskowitz (2005) finds that the media's fueling of the mommy wars serves to derange the conversation about how to make policy changes to address the needs of parents in this country. Crittenden (2001) argues that there is an enormous price and cost to becoming a mother in our society especially in terms of equality and pay. Crittenden (2001) suggests that motherhood is the most important job in the world yet it is still the least valued. Caring jobs including staying at home with children or working in education or child care professions continue to be low paying jobs that are devalued by our culture.

The mommy wars shape the discussion about labor force participation among mothers as they appeal to dominant discourses of mothering when they make choices about whether or not to go back to work or stay home with their children. Sutherland (2010) found that the "gendered structure of 'work' outside the home is built upon a model that works against 'good mothering'" because "it is in the labor force that we see

the implications of good mothering ideologies working against women to the extent that, for many women, leaving the home for work includes maternal guilt and shame” (p. 314).

### **Double Bind Messages and Cultural Contradictions**

Johnson and Swanson (2003) argue that the impact of double bind messages is very powerful for mothers. Double binds according to Kuiken and Hill meet four criteria:

(a) a receiver motivated to discern a message to enact appropriate behavior; (b) a message promoting two mutually exclusive self-presentations, or a self-presentation combined with a metamessage that disqualifies the advocated self-presentation; (c) implicit content in one or both parts of the incompatible message, making it difficult for the receiver to address the contradiction; and (d) a receiver who is unwilling or unable to avoid the double bind. (as cited in Johnson and Swanson, 2003, p. 244)

Johnson and Swanson (2003) are communication scholars who explored contemporary women’s magazines noting the presence of maternal double bind messages. In their analysis of magazine texts, Johnson and Swanson (2003) found “discursive constraints that subjugate women in their roles as mothers and perpetuate patriarchy” (p. 262).

Johnson and Swanson (2003) identified four maternal contradictions: selfish/selfless double bind messages, mother-child independence/dependence double bind messages, success/failure double bind messages, and natural/unnatural double bind messages. The selfish/selfless double bind messages “tell mothers who forsake an identity outside the mother role that they are good, self-sacrificing mothers but implicitly condemned for being powerless women” (p. 245). The other side of the bind is that women who work outside of the home are powerful women but “implicitly condemned for being bad and selfish mothers” (p. 245). Double bind messages about mother-child

independence/dependence imply that working mothers will have insecurely attached children while at the same time condemning stay at home moms for being overly involved in their children's lives (Johnson & Swanson, 2003; Eyer, 1992).

Success/failure double binds “assert that employment leads to success in the public sphere but failure in the domestic sphere, and staying home leads to success in the domestic sphere but failure in the public sphere” (p. 245). Finally the natural/unnatural double bind messages reinforce essentialist views of women as being naturally good mothers and caregivers. These messages suggest that men are not good caregivers but that mothers should defer to the male expert guided advice in medical decisions childrearing. Hays (1996) argues

when women's increasing participation in the labor force, the cultural ambivalence regarding paid working and stay-at-home mothers, the particular intensity of middle-class mothering, and the demanding character of the cultural model of appropriate child rearing are taken together, it becomes clear that the cultural contradictions of motherhood have been deepened rather than resolved. (p. 151)

The contradictory messages that women receive from the media and the workplace greatly shape their own views and experiences of motherhood. The dominant discourses of motherhood are laced with contradictions and double bind messages that penalize all mothers no matter what decisions they make. Mothers that are pursuing graduate degrees and that work in the field of higher education have also been negatively impacted by dominant ideologies of motherhood.

## **Motherhood, Graduate School, and the Ivory Tower**

Kuperberg (2008) argues that women enrolled in graduate school programs are “increasingly likely to be mothers of young children” (p. 473). Mason (2013) has shown that “family formation negatively affects women’s, but not men’s, academic careers” (p. 1). Eisenbach (2013) describes how difficult it is to balance doctoral work and mothering a young child. Williams (2004) and Osell (2009) argue that most female doctoral students are paid annual stipends below \$20,000 and because of this many women must rely on their husbands with full time jobs for economic support. Osell (2009) suggests that the material support is vital for graduate students and until major changes are made in the way that research universities support motherhood the “subtext of unacknowledged motherhood clearly reads ‘mommies are not allowed’” (p. 235). In *Do Babies Matter?: Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower*, Mason et al. (2013) argue that there is a baby penalty at every stage of academia starting with women who have babies in graduate school. Mason et al. (2013) found that women in academia that have babies within 5 years after earning their PhD are 38% less likely to get tenure than men or women without children. Because of these negative penalties, many women in academia choose not to have children or wait until after they have been awarded tenure. Williams (2004) argues that “many graduate-student mothers feel the need to remain ‘in the closet’” about their pregnancies for as long as they can to avoid negative repercussions (p. 2).

Besides the low paying stipends offered to graduate students, health insurance has become a major problem since most university policies make it extremely expensive to

add dependent coverage. Evans and Grant (2009) argue that the “academy seems oblivious to the struggles mothers face within its walls” despite the fact that

all working mothers, regardless of their educational level or professional status, should be entitled to on-site child care; flexible policies regarding sick and family leaves; part-time jobs that truly require only twenty hours of work per week; flextime, job-sharing, and telecommuting possibilities; private space and time to pump breast milk for their infants; health-care coverage that is independent of hours worked. (p. xix)

Brown and Watson (2010) found that child care responsibilities and lack of support were impediments to female doctoral students and their ability to complete their doctoral degrees. In their research, Brown and Watson (2010) interviewed women who had recently completed their PhD or were about to complete their PhD. They found that

Being a mother had profound implications for doctoral-level study. First the timing of study was dictated by domestic demands; second, balancing home and academic life was a source of great stress, and women were torn between their roles as wife/mother and student. Further attendance at conferences was problematic, and, for many women, impossible. (p. 385)

Child care is rarely provided at conferences so many women with children were unable to attend. Conferences are an important part of an academic’s career success including creating opportunities to get published and network with other academics around the country. In response to this research, some elite universities have slowly started to make changes. Osell (2009) found that Princeton, Stanford, and the University of Pennsylvania have “instituted broad new policies supporting women graduate students during pregnancy and early motherhood” (p. 233). The University of California at Berkeley has

also instituted many family friendly policies for doctoral students and faculty members (Mason, 2013).

Mason (2013) suggests that academia is particularly difficult for mothers because it follows a “rigid lockstep career track that does not allow for time out” and places the greatest career pressure during the ages of 30 to 40 which are also the prime years for starting a family (p. 3). Mason (2013) also reports that women who have children within five years of earning their PhD are “twice as likely to change careers as other women” (p. 3). More research is needed to better understand the obstacles women and mothers face in doctoral programs in working in institutions of higher education. Women enrolled in graduate school and working in academia have a great deal to say about the lack of structural and family friendly policies that guarantee equal opportunities for both men and women in the ivory tower.

### **Mothers and Technology**

With the increase of affordable technological devices, many mothers are now using technology in a variety of innovative ways. Clements and Thompson (2011) argue that technology enables moms in two significant ways: “to help her communicate with her child, caregivers, and significant others” and to “help her accomplish tasks more effectively and even make her life easier” (p. 103). Clements and Thompson (2011) found that “most moms are highly ‘wired,’ using cell phones with texting and email features to communicate real-time information” with their children and other adults (p. 103). Mothers are using online retail outlets such as Amazon.com to make purchases saving time and allowing women to shop without going into the store. Moms are using

Skype and Facebook to communicate with friends and family members. The internet, email, and online meeting software innovations have created additional opportunities for working inside of the home for many parents. Online schools have revolutionized the way that traditional education is delivered to children in some states.

There has been an increase in mommy blogs and websites like HipMama.com and LiteraryMama.com where women share their experiences and emotions as mothers. Clements and Thompson (2011) found that first-time mothers are the group “most likely to use blogging as a way to communicate their experiences” (p. 105). Koenig (2013) claims that Facebook and Twitter have led to what she terms “parental oversharing.” Koenig (2013) argues that social media is the gateway drug to oversharing information about your parenting experiences and your child’s life. Koenig (2013) found that mothers often have “mompertitions” in social media where they brag about their children and implicitly compete with other mothers.

Mothers are increasingly using technological products like Ninetendo Wii, the iPod, and iPhones. Deino (2013) describes a study finding that “the majority of American parents have used their tech gadgets as a means of babysitting their children before, with the average occurrence being twice a week” (p. 1). Many parents described using tablets with interactive games to entertain their children. This illustrates that not only are mothers using technology in a variety of ways but they are using technology with their children. Clements and Thompson (2011) argue that educational television shows that have accompanying web sites, toys, and other consumer items are utilized by mothers (p. 62). Baby Einstein, V-Tech and LeapFrog are brands of educational toys that focus on

learning through technology. LeapFrog products are “innovative technology-based educational products” that focus on providing an “engaging, effective learning experience” for children while at the same time allowing “mothers to monitor her child’s progress” (Clements and Thompson, 2011, p. 63). Technological products are heavily used by and marketed to mothers by advertisements that promote educational benefits and products that claim to make women more efficient mothers.

### **Implications of the Research on Motherhood**

The literature review covering a wide range of topics from dominant mothering ideologies to cultural scripts to motherhood and technology illustrates the deep impact and permeation of ideas about the good mother in every aspect of society. Both women and men have internalized the ideals of the good mother and these mothering ideologies have tangible impacts on women’s lives mainly in the form of structural conditions that oppress mothers. Women’s experiences of becoming mothers and deciding whether to stay at home or work are mediated by the dominant discourse of the mommy wars. Sutherland (2010) argues that guilt and shame are experienced by most mothers because they think they don’t measure up and this is directly related to internalized ideologies like intensive mothering and new momism. Women in the labor force, doctoral programs, and working in academia are negatively affected by structural conditions that are based on dominant discourses of motherhood.

The institution of motherhood has been socially constructed in our society to reflect patriarchal views and long standing systems of oppression. Many women make decisions about having children, how to parent their children, what careers to pursue or

not to pursue, and what to buy based on the dominant discourses of mothering. When mothers speak out and break the silence about their experiences with motherhood, their issues, concerns, expectations, and experiences are vastly different than what we see on television and what we tend to accept as common knowledge about motherhood. My research is an attempt to remove the mask and speak honestly about my own personal experiences becoming a mother in a culture that devalues mothers and their experiences.

### **The Need for More Research: Filling the Gap with an Autoethnography of Motherhood**

Arendell (2000) and Kawash (2011) argue that there is a need for more research on motherhood especially with regards to first person accounts of mothering. Arendell (2000) suggests that the topics of meanings and identities, relationships, experiences and activities, and social locations and structural context need further scholarly consideration. Kawash (2011) suggests that while “motherhood has been an energizing topic in the past decade, there has been little boundary crossing between academic and popular discussion” (p. 997). My study fills the gap in the research literature by addressing many of the cultural issues surrounding motherhood and by reflexively examining my own motherhood experiences for the presence and/or impact of dominant mothering discourse and ideologies.

Despite the emergence of mommy lit where mothers write popular culture memoirs with the intent of selling books, this research project takes a serious reflexive look at the way that culture shapes and influences the experiences of motherhood for a new mother. There is a lack of reflexive autoethnographic research on motherhood. My

study is unique because of the research methodology utilized and the study's focus on reflexively analyzing my personal experiences for the impact of dominant motherhood discourses. This study has educational implications because it is concerned with the experiences of a doctoral student, who is also a new mom, it explores the way society "educates" mothers, and it looks at how mothers may not be sharing the realities of motherhood with each other exploring the potential implications of these sociocultural beliefs and practices.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **REFLEXIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: THE RESEARCHER AS EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL NEXUS**

Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience. In interpreting the autoethnographic text, readers feel/sense the fractures in their own communicative lives, and like Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual, create efficacy and healing in their own communal lives... This kind of transformative and efficacious potential for researcher, researched, and reader/audience is a primary goal of effective autoethnography in print and in performance.

–Tami Spry, *Performing Autoethnography*

#### **Introduction and Overview of the Chapter**

Employing autoethnography as a research method can provide an alternative and authentic perspective on the topic and experience of motherhood. This chapter explores the justification for and the importance of using autoethnography as a research method in investigating the lived experience of motherhood. I argue that reflexive autoethnography is a form of empirical research that can be used to better understand the experiences of becoming a mother and how that experience is shaped by cultural contexts and ideologies. I begin with a discussion of autoethnography as a research methodology and praxis and offer some contemporary definitions of the hybrid concept. A discussion of the methodological approaches, principles, and goals of autoethnography follows. I argue that reflexive autoethnography is grounded in a feminist and critical epistemology and I describe these connections.

Reflexive and narrative autoethnographies are explored and compared as forms of research. One of the goals of autoethnography is a desire to provide counter-narratives to dominant discourses and bring attention to otherwise hidden or secret information. The process of doing autoethnography is explored alongside a discussion about writing the final product. I suggest that through the writing and sharing of personal narratives a process of witnessing and sharing of testimony is undertaken, thus providing a powerful genre of research.

Next I discuss effective autoethnography and provide some evaluative criteria for the use of autoethnographic methodology in educational research. Common characteristics of autoethnographic stories are explored and I argue for the applicability of autoethnographic research methods to cultural foundations work and educational research. I attend to issues of reflexivity, trustworthiness, validity, and generalizability in autoethnographic research methods. This chapter argues that autoethnography is a valid research methodology that can provide meaningful and emotional experiences for both the autoethnographer and the audience as one reads and writes about lived experience within a social context.

After a substantial discussion of autoethnography as a research methodology, I discuss the specific methods used in the research study. The process of writing and the types of data collected are discussed. I detail the writing process and the parameters followed in the study. I describe how the data was coded for patterns and themes and used in thematic analysis. An overview of the process of theoretical analysis is given. The chapter ends with a reflexive conversation discussing my own positionality in terms of

the research process and how that affected the study. I conclude by summarizing my research methodology and the reasons why I chose reflexive autoethnography as my method. I provide a segue to the following chapters on stories, themes, and reflexive theoretical analysis based on the autoethnographic stories explored in my study.

### **What is Autoethnography?: Defining the Hybrid Term**

Before any findings are presented as a result of this research project, it is important to have a good understanding of the methodology employed in the study. Autoethnography has been described as a hybrid term because it combines the word *auto* with *ethnography*. It is important to discuss the different meanings associated with the term and I believe this understanding is enriched through a discussion of how the term emerged as a research methodology. Spry (2001) argues that “autoethnography can be defined as a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts” (p. 710). Reed-Danahay (1997) suggests that the “notion of autoethnography foregrounds the multiple nature of selfhood and opens up new ways of writing about social life” (p. 3). Autoethnography as both a text and a method grew out of two disciplines – ethnography and life history (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Ellis et al. (2011) argue that “autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)” and as a method autoethnography is “both a process and a product” (p. 273). Hughes et al. (2012) claim that the term “autoethnography is intended to name a form of critical self-study in which the researcher takes an active, scientific, and systematic view of personal experience in relation” to culture (p. 209).

Over the past 40 years, many different approaches to autoethnography have developed. Van Maanen presents “alternatives to ethnographic realism” including “confessional ethnographies” where the attention is on the signifier or the ethnographer rather than the signified, “dramatic ethnography”, “critical ethnographies”, and “self or autoethnographies” where the culture of one’s own group is textualized (as cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 5). Some autoethnographers view the writings based on this research method as being more authentic since the author’s voice is synonymous with the subject. Denzin (1989) has labeled this type of writing the “biographical method” which includes “autobiography, ethnography, autoethnography, biography, oral history, case history, case study, life history, life story, self story, and personal experience story” (p. 27).

Pratt, a literary critic, argues that autoethnographies are “forms of writing that address both the writer’s own group and a wider, more dominant one” and can be used as forms of resistance that assert non-traditional forms of meaning and representation from the dominant culture (as cited in Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 8). Reed-Danahay (1997) maintains that the major distinction in the different approaches to autoethnography is “whether or not the accent is on autobiography or ethnography” (p. 8). Researchers including Pratt (1992, 1994), Van Maanen (1988, 1995), Hayano (1978), Dorst (1989), and Strathern (1987) advocate for a form of “native ethnography” where they argue the autoethnographer is a professional anthropologist studying one’s own group (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 8). The focus for these researchers is on ethnography. Researchers including Lejeune (1989), Brandes (1982), Denzin (1989), and Deck (1990) link autoethnography to autobiography and life story methodology (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p.

9). For Reed-Danahay (1997) autoethnography is both a “method and a text” and is a “form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (p. 9).

Ellis (2003) argues that “autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture” (p. 37). She maintains that it displays multiple layers of consciousness and is an autobiographical form of writing (p. 37). There are many different forms of autoethnography and most approaches call for the analytical analysis of personal narratives in addition to comparing and contrasting reflexive personal stories against existing research findings (Hughes et al., 2012, p. 211; Ellis et al. 2011, p. 276). These stories about the self and one’s lived experiences, beliefs, and feelings are shared and analyzed to reveal things about the larger culture, ideology, and the self.

### **Methodological Approaches, Principles, and Goals of Autoethnography**

There are many different approaches to writing and doing autoethnography. Regardless of the approach used by the researcher, autoethnography always refers to autobiographical writing about the self and one’s relationship to culture (Ellis, 2003). Ellis (2003) describes the process of doing autoethnography.

Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 37)

Ellis (2003) suggests there are six major approaches to autoethnography each with its own goals and methods. The first approach to autoethnography is *personal narrative*. The authors “view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative stories specifically

focused on their academic as well as their personal lives” (p. 45). In personal narrative autoethnographies, the primary purpose is to “understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context” (p. 45). The authors become ‘I’ and readers are “invited into the author’s world” (p. 46). Ellis (2003) suggests the goal is to “write meaningfully and evocatively about topics that matter and may make a difference, to include sensory and emotional experience, and to write from an ethic of care and concern” (p. 46). Ellis (1997) sometimes refers to this as *evocative autoethnography*.

The second approach to autoethnography is *indigenous* or *native autoethnographies*. *Indigenous* or *native autoethnographies* are written by social scientists who “share a history of colonial or economic subordination, including subjugation by ethnographers who have made them subjects of their work” (Ellis, 2003, p. 46). Pratt (1992, 1994) views this approach as a way to resist the colonizer and dominant discourses about the colonized. Pratt (1994) argues that autoethnography is a “text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (p. 28). Tierney (1998) maintains that this type of autoethnography “confronts dominant forms of representation and power in an attempt to reclaim, through self-reflexive response, representational spaces that have marginalized those of us at the borders” (p. 66).

*Reflexive* or *narrative autoethnography* is the third approach according to Ellis (2003). Ellis (2003) argues that reflexive or narrative ethnographies “focus on a culture or subculture and authors use their life story in that culture to look more deeply at self-other interactions” (p. 46). Researchers are reflexive in their writing examining how their own

positionality impacts the culture under study. Anderson (2006) argues for additional reflection by incorporating the use of theoretical analysis in autoethnographies. Ellis (2003) suggests three forms that analysis of storytelling or narrative can take: narrative analysis, thematic analysis of narrative, and structural analysis of narrative (p. 195). Ellis (2003) argues that narrative analysis “assumes that a good story itself is theoretical” and that “stories themselves are analytic” (p. 196). Ellis (2003) suggests that in order to add another “layer of analysis” autoethnographers can “theorize about the story from a sociological, communicational, or other disciplinary perspective” (p. 196). Theorizing can take the form of thematic analysis, which is similar to grounded theory. Or theorizing can take the form of structural analysis (p. 196). In structural analysis stories are analyzed in terms of their particular structures or form (p. 196). Thematic analysis is used in this study and key themes are pulled from parts of stories and theory is used to explain and analyze the data.

The fourth approach to autoethnographic research is known as *complete member researchers* (Adler and Adler, 1987). Complete member researchers “convert” during the research process, identifying with the group and “become the phenomenon being studied” (Ellis, 2003, p. 49; Mehan and Wood, 1975). The fifth approach is what Van Maanen calls the *confessional tale* (as cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 49). In confessional ethnography, a term that Ellis (2003) despises and prefers to call *ethnographic memoirs*, the ethnographer is the focus of the story and they tell “a personal tale of what went on in the backstage of doing a research project” (p. 50). Ethnographic memoirs originated as researchers began to write separately about their own personal experiences while

conducting research. This work was given legitimization as more historically marginalized groups began to be recognized in their own right as ethnographers.

The final approach in autoethnographic methodology is known as *contingent autoethnography*. Ellis (2003) argues that in this type of research the ethnographer “writes about others, most likely not planning to study anything about the self” (p. 51). During the research process, the writer feels some connection to the work and then learns something new about themselves. This becomes the subject of the writing. Insights into their own life and experiences characterize the research as a result of another research project (Ellis, 2003, p. 51).

### **Reflexive Autoethnography and Critical/Feminist Epistemology**

My research methods are grounded in postmodern epistemology informed by feminist and critical theory research methods. My own personal beliefs about ontology or the nature of reality, epistemology, referring to what can be known, and methodology, or how knowledge is gained greatly affected the research decisions about my study of motherhood. This section of the chapter describes the theoretical and epistemological frameworks that shaped my choices for using reflexive autoethnography as my methodology. Combining ideas from critical, feminist, and poststructuralist research paradigms, I believe that knowledge is subjective and political and that there is no one “truth” to be known. Critical and feminist researchers hold the ontological view that reality, or the “apprehended world, makes a material difference in terms of race, gender, and class” (Hatch, 2002, p. 13). The reflexivity piece of my research project pays special

attention to my own positionality and the ways that race, gender, and class have shaped my views of ideology and my own experiences of motherhood.

The methodologies preferred by critical and feminist scholars “raise consciousness of those being oppressed because of historically situated structures” tied to social positioning (Hatch, 2002, p. 17). The forms of knowledge produced by critical and feminist researchers seek “to expose the structures that ensure the maintenance of control by those in power” and these forms of knowledge attempt to raise consciousness and awareness of oppression that may foster social change (p. 17). The research questions described in previous chapters make direct connections to the belief that my reflexive autoethnography is designed to explore and question dominant ideologies about motherhood and raise consciousness of the ways that these discourses may be oppressive. Social structures and dominant ideologies work towards oppressing women and this study intentionally uses research methods that seek to disrupt dominant discourses about motherhood.

Villaverde (2008) argues that a primary concern of feminist research is “to make androcentrism, lococentrism, and patriarchy explicit, to expose the ways these create and shape the world around us and how these operations of power disenfranchise” others (p. 112). Logocentrism and androcentrism both view reality through dominant masculine perspectives and utilize methods that privilege male ways of seeing the world through logic, reason, and other values stemming from Enlightenment thinking. In choosing reflexive autoethnography as my research methodology, I am engaging in feminist research guided by the belief that there are others forms of knowing and reaching

conclusions. Villaverde (2008) argues that a goal of feminist research is to create cultural change and “research is but one conduit of activism” (p. 104, 108). I have conducted my study on motherhood using the self as the method of inquiry and I intentionally used research methods that are non-traditional and that value women’s ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986). My goal is to raise awareness and consciousness about the lived experiences of new mothers and the challenges and shocks they face as a result of patriarchal dominant ideologies that serve to oppress women and greatly influence their experiences as new mothers.

There is some overlap between critical and feminist theories and both paradigms have shaped my methodology and my choice of using autoethnography. Critical theory and feminist theory both understand that research is political because it challenges hegemony and dominant power structures. The critical theory paradigm refers to “the detecting and unmasking of beliefs and practices that limit human freedom, justice, and democracy” (Usher, 1996, p. 22; Glesne, 2011, p. 9). Glesne (2011) and Prasad (2005) argue that a primary belief in critical theory is that “ideologies work to distort reality” and researchers using critical theory methodology work to “reveal and critique these distorting ideologies and associated structures” that allow them to function (as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 9). My study explores the ways that dominant mothering ideologies shaped my own personal experiences of becoming a mother. I argue in this project that the dominant ideologies of motherhood do in fact distort reality and lived experiences and I hope to critique these ideologies and expose structures of power including gender

inequalities and natural ideologies of motherhood through the telling of my story and associated themes found in my research.

My reflexive autoethnography is similar to standpoint epistemologies because my research is positioned in the experiences and values of a new mother, a woman, who has been historically oppressed through the system of patriarchy and I critique the stories and ideology of dominant groups about motherhood (Glesne, 2011, p. 10). Reflexive autoethnography as a research methodology is more closely examined in the next section. I discuss the process of doing and writing autoethnography in addition to making connections between reflexive autoethnography and narrative research.

### **Storytelling and Personal Narratives: The Process of Doing Autoethnography and Writing Stories as Witnessing and Sharing Testimony**

The six approaches to autoethnography have various goals and methods yet all focus on storytelling and dialogue, interaction with culture and others, and are concerned with studying the self within some context or social world. This section of the chapter discusses in detail how to do and write reflexive autoethnography. The process for doing autoethnography varies greatly based on the different forms and within the forms themselves. Autobiography is a crucial component of the research method because the self is the method of inquiry. Ellis et al. (2011) argues that autobiographers “retroactively and selectively write about past experiences” most commonly in the form of “epiphanies” or “vignettes” that are “assembled using hindsight” (p. 275). These epiphanies are remembered moments that are “perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life, times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze

lived experience”, and events that permanently alter one’s life (p. 275).

Autoethnographers first write vignettes and epiphanies about their lived experiences and then they analyze their experiences. Personal experiences are analyzed using theoretical analysis and by comparing and contrasting the existing research with the researcher’s personal epiphanies.

The epiphanies written by autoethnographers should be evocative and aesthetic using basic tenants of storytelling such as plot and character development (Ellis et al., 2011). Wolcott argues that qualitative researchers and ethnographers “need to be storytellers, and storytelling should be one of their distinguishing attributes” (as cited in Holt, 2003, p. 5). Ellis (2003) argues that stories “should be both a subject and a method of social science research” since they are the way that “humans make sense of their worlds” (p. 32). Bochner (2002) suggests that there are patterns of development and certain conventions of storytelling common to most stories. The patterns and conventions include:

- a) People depicted as characters; b) an epiphany or crisis to provide dramatic tension, around which events in the story revolve, and towards which a resolution and/or explanation is pointed; c) a temporal ordering of events; and d) a point or moral to the story that provides an explanation and gives meaning and value to the crisis. (p. 80)

When explaining the characteristics of autoethnographies, Ellis (2003) states that

Usually written in first-person voice, autoethnographic texts appear in a variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction, novels, photographic essays, scripts, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose. They showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment,

spirituality, and self-consciousness. These features appear as relational and institutional stories affected by history and social structure, which themselves are dialectically revealed through actions, feelings, thoughts, and language. (p. 38)

Writers can use storytelling processes of “showing” and “telling” whereby they show the reader what they experienced by bringing them into the story or by telling the audience about what happened (Ellis et al., 2011). When the stories are analyzed, the researcher looks for “patterns of cultural experience – repeated feelings, stories, and happenings” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277). Through thematic analysis the researcher compares and contrasts these patterns of cultural experience with existing data. Hughes et al. (2012) argue that autoethnographers “reframe and refocus their inquiry in order to draw conclusions and establish” additional questions and in doing so the researcher “continually reflects, resolves, evolves, and redefines the issue at hand” (p. 212). A key component of reflexive autoethnographies is the role of reflexivity and subjectivity in the analysis of the research. Reflexivity will be discussed later in the chapter but a primary goal of this form of research is to intentionally explore how the researcher’s own positionality affects the process of doing and writing the research and how the positionality actually shaped the lived experiences and the interpretation of them.

The writing, or the product, of reflexive autoethnographies varies based on the writing and sharing style of the author. Some researchers choose to share their autoethnographic stories in full length within the product and then use existing literature and theory to analyze their experiences. Other writers search for themes across stories from months of writing and use excerpts from stories and vignettes to compare and

contrast connections to existing research findings. Ellis et al. (2011) argue that the “writing of personal stories can be therapeutic for authors as we write to make sense of our own experiences” and in doing so we often end up challenging “canonical stories” (p. 280). Denzin (2004) and Ellis and Bochner (2006) suggest that witnessing is possible through the recalling, writing, and sharing of personal stories, experiences, and epiphanies. DeLeon (2010) similarly argues that “testimony opens new ways of looking at the world by participating in a subversive form of scholarship” (p. 398). Witnessing to readers and sharing testimony about one’s lived experiences through the process of reflexive autoethnographical research and writing leads to theory building and is seen by some as a “performative act where my experiences are open to a wider audience” (p. 399).

Reflexive autoethnographies are often referred to as narrative autoethnographies because there are some methodological similarities to narrative research. Miller (2005) argues that a narrative approach focuses on storytelling and can serve as a way to better understand social life and social practices. Miller (2005) believes that using narrative research is a critical method when the goal is the exploration of the way “individuals make sense of biological disruption and personal transition” (p. 11). The process of becoming a new mother is viewed as a transition and a biological disruption that forever changes life as one has previously experienced it. A key component of narrative research is interviewing others and sharing their stories while in reflexive autoethnography the primary data source is the stories shared by the author. Narratives and storytelling are utilized in the process of doing the research but the focus of autoethnography is the self

as the method of inquiry with a special consideration of the way that reflexivity and subjectivity impacted the work. The next section of the chapter explores the process of evaluating autoethnographies and discusses criteria for effective autoethnography.

### **Evaluative Criteria for Autoethnography: Effective Autoethnography as Empirical Research**

Some scholars in academia suggest that autoethnography is not trustworthy or empirical research because the self is the main data source. To address these criticisms Anderson (2006) adds an additional approach to Ellis' (2003) approaches to autoethnography called *analytic autoethnography*. In analytic autoethnography, Anderson (2006) argues for additional reflection and the use of theoretical analysis. Specifically, Anderson (2006) argues that analytic autoethnography should include “analytic reflexivity”, “narrative visibility of the researcher’s self”, and “commitment to theoretical analysis” (p. 6). Anderson (2006) proposes this additional approach as a way to avoid what he sees as self-indulgent autoethnographies. Denzin and Clough argue that “good ethnographic writing should motivate cultural criticism” and should be “closely aligned with theoretical reflection so that it can serve as a vehicle for thinking new sociological subjects and forming new parameters of the social” (as cited in Ellis, 2003, p. 252-253).

Richardson (2000a) describes five specific criteria that hold autoethnography to a high research standard. Here are the five factors Richardson (2000a) uses when she reviews autoethnographic research papers for publication:

a) *Substantive contribution*. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life? b) *Aesthetic merit*. Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring? c) *Reflexivity*. How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of the text? Is it informed by postmodern epistemologies? d) *Impactfulness*. Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions or move me to action? e) *Expresses a reality*. Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? Is it an honest and credible account of a personal, social or cultural experience? (p. 15-16)

Spry (2001) adds that the writing must be well crafted and should "have the ability to transform readers and transport them into a place where they are motivated to look back upon their own personally political identity construction" (p. 713). Writing in autoethnographic works should be characterized by Geertz's (1994) concept of thick description. Spry (2001) quotes Goodall as arguing that effective autoethnography

completely dissolves any idea of distance, doesn't produce 'findings,' isn't generalizable, and only has credibility when self-reflexive, and authority when richly vulnerable...When it is done well, we can *learn previously unspoken, unknown things about culture and communication* from it. (as cited in Spry, 2001, p. 714)

Most recently, Hughes et al. (2012) argue that autoethnographic scholarship is empirical research and can be translated across the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) standards for meaningful scholarship and research. In a lengthy discussion of how autoethnography as a research method complements AERA's empirical research reporting standards, Hughes et al. (2012) argue that autoethnography

- 1) formulates social scientific problems (2006, AERA Standards 1 & 2),
- 2) facilitates critical, careful, and thoughtful discussion of methodological choices and claims (2006 AERA Standards 2, 3, & 6),

- 3) offers multiple levels of critical analysis, including self-critique, naming privilege and penalty, and selecting classification schemes and units of analysis while being critically self-reflexive about selection criteria (2006 AERA Standards 3, 4, & 5), and
- 4) provides opportunities for credible analysis and interpretations of evidence from narratives and connects them to researching the self via triangulation, member-checks, and related ethical issues (2006 AESA Standards 5, 6, & 7) (p. 212-215)

I believe that autoethnographic methods are a valid and important research practice. For scholars that are trying to disrupt the taken for granted experiences of the everyday and seek to analyze the ways that ideology shapes lived experiences, autoethnography is a powerful research methodology. The goals of critical and feminist research methods can be realized as personal stories are analyzed and used to make social and political claims about knowledge and experience. Reflexive autoethnographic methods are very important to researchers in cultural foundations disciplines.

### **The Role of Autoethnographic Stories in Cultural Foundations and Educational Research**

While autoethnographic research may be frowned upon by certain researchers who value what they consider “more objective” forms of knowledge, I agree with Spry (2001) that there is personal, professional, and political potential in interpreting culture through self-reflections and using the self as a method of inquiry (p. 706). There is a wealth of support for using autoethnographic methodology as a way to resist dominant forms of knowledge and hegemonic forces in society which is a major goal in cultural foundations discourse. Park-Fuller (2000) believes that

the telling of a story itself becomes a transgressive act – a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced – an act of reverse discourse that struggles with the preconceptions borne in the air of dominant politics. (as cited in Spry, 2001, p. 706)

Key cultural foundations and feminist scholars emphasize the importance of using dialogue and story in educational practices and research methodology. Autoethnography values these tenants as well as using story and text to challenge and resist dominant ideologies and representations. In describing performative autoethnography, Spry (2001) comments that

The dynamic and dialectical relation of the text and body emerge as a major theme in autoethnographic praxes. The living body/subjective self of the researcher is recognized as a salient part of the research process...In autoethnographic methods, the researcher is the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns. (p. 711)

Autoethnography as a research method can inform the work of cultural foundations in many ways. Hearing and reading about the lived experiences of those telling their stories is an important way to understand the social aspects of culture and the ways that individuals construct their own identities.

This research study has many implications for education. This research is building on the premise that society and culture has “educated” and “taught” women how to be “good mothers” and these idealizations have been internalized by mothers. This research is concerned with ways that the dominant discourse affects the experience of motherhood and how mothers’ identities are shaped/transformed by the confusion arising from their experiences which do not reflect what they have been taught. This research provides a

counter-narrative to dominant discourses about the lived experiences of a new mother. A deeper study of the transition to motherhood will better educate mothers-to-be and others in society by drawing connections between issues of power, patriarchy, gender norms, and cultural expectations. The research is positioned to open a space where readers can dialogue about ways that culture shapes identity and lived experience and often remains hidden, unquestioned, and unchallenged.

Reflexive autoethnography is relevant to research in education. Banks and Banks (2000) argue that autoethnography is pedagogical because as a form of research it “teaches us about ourselves,” it “affirms our subjectivity”, it “challenges our assumptions of normalcy”, it “forces us to be more self-reflexive”, and it “instructs us about our professional and personal socialization” in addition to the possibility of “socializing others” (p. 235). DeLeon (2010) believes that doing and writing autoethnography is a form of subversive scholarship. I chose reflexive autoethnography as my research methodology because it embodies all of the ideas and beliefs that I share about the nature of research and the importance of telling stories and using theory to challenge and interrogate dominant discourses and ideologies that oppress new mothers. I decided to show and tell my stories about my lived experiences becoming a mother with hopes that my storytelling will be a transgressive and political act that challenges the dominant discourse of motherhood. I was deeply influenced to write an autoethnographic account of motherhood after reading Lazzarre’s (1976) memoir *The Mother Knot*, which is a feminist classic that focuses its central theme on “maternal subjectivity, a mother viewed from a maternal perspective, as opposed to a child’s” (p. i). Lazzarre (1976) argues “it is

rare to read, whether in literature or social science, about the experience of motherhood as described by mothers themselves” (p. xxii).

Adrienne Rich’s (1976) *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* also uses excerpts from journal entries to discuss the experiences and social constructions of motherhood. Brown (2010) argues that “writing maternal narratives provides the authors with a space for reflection and social criticism of the current conditions of motherhood” and these mothers used their memoirs “to challenge existing cultural definitions and practices related to motherhood as a social institution” (p. 137). This makes connections to Ellis’ (2003) approach of indigenous or native autoethnography where the main goal is to resist dominant discourses or representations by others or society.

### **Reflexivity, Trustworthiness, and Generalizability in Autoethnographic Methods**

Glesne (2011) argues that “being attuned to positionality is being attuned to intersubjectivity, how the subjectivities of all involved guide the research, content, and interpretations” (p. 158). I believe that my positionality directly impacts why I have chosen this research and how I will interpret it. As a qualitative researcher, it is important to be critically reflexive. Goodall (2000) maintains that reflexivity is the “process of personally and academically reflecting on the lived experiences in ways that reveal deep connections between the writer and his or her subject” (p. 137). In the case of autoethnography, reflexivity is a bit different but still must be a significant consideration of the research study. Villaverde (2008) argues that reflexivity is a “critical awareness of the researcher’s engagement or participation in the inquiry process and of her or his

epistemological choices in the research design, implementation, and articulation” (p. 104). The researcher’s subjectivity is “constructed through reflexive engagement with, and critical analysis of, the self” and is affected by the researcher’s positionality which is the “result of how one is situated through the intersection of power” and socially constructed categories of race, class, and gender (p. 109).

In writing effective reflexive autoethnography, the researcher must intentionally reflect on their own subjectivity and positionality and ask how that impacts the research process and the analysis of the personal narratives. Through discussing and sharing one’s positionality with the readers, researchers can theorize and question the ways that dominant discourses and ideology have shaped their own beliefs and has shaped their own experiences. As part of the analysis, I will share reflections on my own positionality and subjectivity and discuss my thoughts on the ways that my social positioning may alter or shape the research.

In addition to being reflexive about one’s positionality and subjectivity, researchers also must attend to trustworthiness. One way to attend to trustworthiness is employing peer review whereby colleagues and peers can provide feedback on data analysis and major themes. This is particularly important when the researcher is analyzing their own personal stories. Reed-Danahay (1997) argues that in regards to questions of voice and its authenticity “autoethnography has been assumed to be more ‘authentic’ than straight ethnography” and the “voice of the insider is assumed to be more true than that of the outsider in much current debate” (p. 3). Ellis et al. (2011) argue that questions of consistency or “reliability refer to the narrator’s credibility” and ultimately

ask if the stories presented are what the author really believes happened to them (p. 282).

Issues of validity are also of interest to autoethnographers and they are similar to issues of reliability. Ellis et al. (2011) suggest that

validity means that a work seeks *verisimilitude*; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true. The story is coherent. It connects readers to writers. (p. 282)

Hughes et al. (2012) argue that “notions of generalizability and transferability in autoethnographic research tend to be guided by the researcher’s personal critique, and ultimately reliant on the connections that readers make to link the autoethnographic text to their own experience” (p. 214). Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Andrews (1998) “explicitly reject the possibility of seeking to generalize” their experiences (as cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 387). However, other scholars including Murphy (1987), Davies (1989), Karp (1996), and Anderson (2006) suggest that broader generalization should be a goal of autoethnography. Anderson (2006) argues that autoethnographies should be “directed toward theoretical development, refinement, and extension” (p. 387). Anderson (2006) believes that while autoethnography is grounded in self-experience it should go beyond that as well (p. 386). Autoethnographies should contribute to or challenge social knowledge in some way. When describing maternal writers, Brown (2010) argues that they “break the silence about maternal ambivalence” and also create “a public discourse that makes ambivalence a part of the motherhood experience, making it more manageable for other mothers” (p. 135).

Ellis et al. (2011) suggest that in autoethnographic research methods generalizability is “determined by whether the (specific) autoethnographer is able to illuminate (general) unfamiliar cultural processes” (p. 283). While the previous discussion has focused on the merits of using autoethnography and its characteristics, the final part of the chapter focuses on the specific methods and the process I used in my autoethnographic research.

### **A Study of Motherhood through Autoethnographic Research Methods:**

#### **The Process and the Product**

There are many different ways to do autoethnography. The remaining contents of the chapter focus on the specific methods I used for this research project. For this reflexive autoethnographic study, I relied on two main forms of personal data: daily journal entries and reflective autoethnographic stories. I spent approximately 13 months writing about my personal experiences of becoming a new mother using writing as an outlet for my experiences. The first form of data was my journal entries. I wrote in a journal for 13 months about my day to day experiences being a mother. I wrote when I wanted to write and about whatever was on my mind. The reason for keeping a journal about my experiences was so I could look back at the end of 13 months and see what I was going through and what themes emerged in my daily life while I was raising my son. I did not go back and read any journal entries until the conclusion of the study as a way to keep from noticing themes and writing more about them. This allowed me to look back and see things going on in my life that might have gone unnoticed when reflectively

writing in hindsight. These mommy journals serve as glimpses into the day to day experiences of navigating motherhood and my struggles and joys as a new mother.

The second form of data for this study was a collection of twenty-four reflective autoethnographic stories and vignettes about my experiences becoming a mother. These stories were written during the same period when I was writing my journals and this writing extended for the total duration of 13 months. My son was 14 months old, or just over a year old when I started writing and at the conclusion of my writing he was 27 months, or 2 years and 3 months old. These autoethnographic stories were written using hindsight and with a focus on epiphanies, or significant moments that impacted my life as a mother. These stories were originally written and then were revised to provide additional information to the audience. All of these stories are true and based on my own personal experiences. Some autoethnographic stories focus on one event in particular while other stories are concerned with a series of events that led to an epiphany. These autoethnographic reflections tell individual stories and at the same time they are organized chronologically which has the effect of telling a story of my life as a mother over a year long period. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of those in my stories. The only name that was not changed was my name and my son's name. It was really important to me to use my son's name, Noah when I am describing my experiences becoming his mother.

These stories and journal entries were the data used in the study. I conducted thematic analysis of the content in the form of a narrative analysis. Using this type of analysis, key themes were pulled from parts of stories and theory was used to explain and

analyze the data. In presenting and analyzing the data, I use the process of showing and telling my story (Ellis et al., 2011). Chapter Four tells the story of my experiences with motherhood through recounting autoethnographic stories. These stories are shared as a way of allowing the audience to fully understand my journey through motherhood. I also hope that the readers will experience some of my feelings, epiphanies, and struggles as a new mom navigating uncharted terrain. Chapter Five analyzes the data thematically. Journal entries are woven throughout the thematic discussion as a way to show the reader what I was experiencing on a day to day basis. Inductive analysis was used to analyze and interpret the data. Hatch (2002) argues that

To argue inductively is to begin with particular pieces of evidence, then pull them together into a meaningful whole. Inductive data analysis is a search for patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made. (p. 161)

Following Hatch's (2002) model of inductive analysis, I read the data and identified frames of reference. Then I created domains based on semantic relationships within the frames of analysis. I identified significant themes and assigned them a code. I reread the data and refined my themes and searched for relationships in the data. I searched the data to support my domains looking for specific examples. I completed an analysis within domains and searched for themes across domains (p. 162). In conducting thematic analysis, I then used theory to analyze the data, making connections to dominant discourses of motherhood.

Ellis (2003) discusses several different ways that writing can be utilized in autoethnographic research.

You may simply want to position yourself in your research by telling your story, then move to analyzing the stories of others, which you connect back to your story. Your focus would be on the analysis of narrative. Alternately, you might focus on telling your story, then frame it with an analysis of the literature, and concentrate on raising questions about that literature or about accepted theoretical notions, or on generating new ideas. This is a sandwich – a story with academic literature and theory on both sides. (p, 198)

I analyzed and interpreted my data using a thematic approach and inductive analysis. My study is concerned with the main themes based on autoethnographic stories and in connecting those themes to theory and previous research findings on motherhood.

Triangulation refers to the incorporation of multiple theoretical perspectives (Glesne, 2011). This study is also interested in making connections to the dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood.

I have been describing the *process* of my autoethnographic research. The *product* of my autoethnographic writing is exemplified in Chapter Four which focuses on telling my story through autoethnographic reflections. Chapter Five analyzes and weaves autoethnographic stories with reflexive theoretical analysis. These stories illustrate my personal experiences facing the cultural contradictions of motherhood and the ways in which I started to question my own beliefs which were greatly shaped by dominant mothering ideologies. I interrogate my own positionality as part of the reflexive process of this research. In doing so I reach some conclusions about the ways that culture and society shaped and informed my personal process of becoming a mother. Chapter Five

reflexively analyzes my personal experiences as described in the vignettes searching for strands of dominant discourses of mothering. My own personal beliefs are challenged and questioned as my experiences of becoming a new mother do not match up with cultural mothering ideologies. This section explores the extent to which my own stories reflect, question, and/or challenge the dominant cultural discourse. I examine the ways in which I subscribed to the culturally prescribed norms and expectations of new mothers. My positionality is discussed with regard to race, class, and gender as this deeply impacts my own experiences of becoming a mother.

In Chapter Four, the data is presented in the form of autoethnographic stories and vignettes. Chapter Five analyzes the data thematically and supports the themes with additional journal excerpts. Ellis' (2003) sandwich approach is used in my writing style whereby stories are analyzed using theory and existing literature on motherhood. Theory and dominant discourses of motherhood as discussed in Chapter 2 via the literature review are used to analyze the themes after an in-depth sharing of my stories about motherhood. My own positionality is explored and discussed as it is directly related to the research and my own experiences with motherhood. I write reflexively about my own positionality and subjectivity in regards to the research and the ways that it shaped my findings and my experiences.

In using reflexive autoethnography as my methodology, I use theory to interrogate and reflect on my own personal experiences of becoming a mother paying specific attention to the ways that race, class, gender, and dominant patriarchal discourses have shaped my own experiences. This happens in a concrete way by exploring where my

mothering beliefs came from and examining my beliefs about what I think a good mother is and comparing it to dominant ideologies of motherhood. One does autoethnography concretely by telling personal stories that speak about the self. These stories about the self and one's lived experiences, beliefs, and feelings are shared and analyzed to reveal things about the larger culture, ideology, and the self.

I reflexively analyze how my personal experiences as described in my data subscribe to and/or challenge these dominant cultural ideologies. I realize that my own vulnerability is an important factor in the research and I was forced to ask difficult questions of myself in order to find out more about how culture has impacted my personal experiences. Behar argues that researchers using autoethnography must be comfortable “with passionate vulnerability that welcomes critique and they must have the perseverance to have their testimonies heard in a hostile environment” (as cited in DeLeon, 2010, p. 400). Chapter Six provides recommendations based on the implications of the research findings.

### **Conclusion**

Reflexive autoethnography as a research methodology was utilized to write a thought provoking and evocative study about motherhood. The practice of autoethnography can be used as a transformative and transgressive form of research. My hope is that in sharing my personal story and experiences about motherhood I will come to better understand myself and the culture I am a product of in addition to countering dominant representations of mothers and their experiences. In telling my story I am adding to the existing body of literature, research, and theory about motherhood and

autoethnography. This study has a great deal to say about culture, socialization, power, and the self. Throughout the research process, I have come to make meaning out of my own experiences of becoming a new mother and I have drawn conclusions by using theory to examine the role and impact of culture in shaping motherhood. I believe that using autoethnography as my research method was an emancipatory and transformative experience. I hope that those who read and learn from my story can share in my experiences and will begin to question dominant ideologies in our society and how they affect their own lives. The next chapter shares twenty-four autoethnographic stories about my experiences becoming a mother.

## CHAPTER IV

### AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC STORIES & REFLECTIONS: MY JOURNEY

#### BECOMING A MOTHER

It is rare to read, whether in literature or social science, about the experience of motherhood as described by mothers themselves...When women professionals, who may also be mothers have sought to contribute to our knowledge of this complicated experience...they have to a large degree been overly influenced by the ubiquitous Western myth of placid, fulfilling maternity which has been accepted by their male teachers and mentors, and they, therefore, like their male counterparts, have given us only half the story. And the vicious circle is complete; the myth determines the content of our so called “objective knowledge” and our knowledge is used to reinforce the myth...Since our experience is not described, we have to begin from the beginning—to speak about what it is really like. Only in this way can we hope to change the conclusions and theories which always hover on the edge of our experience, demanding we sacrifice our self-knowledge to their established vision of the truth.

–Jane Lazarre, *The Mother Knot*

#### Introduction and Overview of the Chapter

This chapter shares twenty-four reflective autoethnographic stories about my experiences becoming a mother. The stories and reflections describe my journey becoming a mother and navigating motherhood through the first two years of my son’s life. The chapter begins with a section describing my background and my expectations for becoming a mother. The rest of the chapter shares memories from the time I found out I was pregnant to the difficult decisions I had to make about returning to work full-time. The stories trace my experiences becoming a mother, learning how to mother, and facing

challenges along the way including difficult decisions about staying at home versus returning to the workplace. The stories document experiences in my journey of becoming a mother. The autoethnographic stories are primarily descriptive in nature yet they point to several major epiphanies or key discoveries that I found in the process of becoming a mother. These epiphanies are discussed and unpacked in Chapter Five which reflexively analyzes the autoethnographic stories and the silences that shape the stories. Some of the stories and reflections are written in past tense and some are written in present tense. These reflections explore personal experiences while at the same time calling attention to structural and cultural conditions and beliefs that contribute to and shape the experience of becoming a mother in our society.

### **Setting the Stage for Becoming a Mother: My Background**

I am 31 year old woman who lives in the southern state of North Carolina. I have lived in my current town all of my life and for as long as I can remember I've wanted to be a teacher, a wife, and a mother. When I was a little girl I had a chalkboard hanging on the wall in my bedroom. I used to play school and principal every day in my room with my make believe students. I wrote lesson plans and collected teacher's editions of textbooks. If I wasn't playing school then I was creating elaborate soap operas with my extensive Barbie collection in my walk-in closet. Most of my stories involved Barbie and Ken and revolved around love stories. As a young girl playing with Barbie's and playing school were my two favorite pastimes. I think they allowed me to practice, act out, and negotiate who I wanted to become as an adult.

My parents are still married after many years and I have two younger brothers. My father works as a director of development at a local community college and my mother is an accountant. Our family was pretty close knit as we were growing up. We attended church every Sunday and religion has played a big role in our lives. I attended college at a local state university and followed up with a master's degree in education. I got a teaching job at the high school that I attended as a teenager teaching social studies courses. I loved teaching and working with students in the classroom. I married Austin when I was 25 years old. We had both attended the same high school but were only friends back then. We had run into each other downtown at a local bar and had been dating ever since then. We got married several years after dating at the church where Austin's father was a pastor. Our reception was quite an event at the country club where both of our parents were members.

Austin's parents have been married for almost 30 years. He has two brothers. Nana, his mother stayed home with her children until they were all in public school or kindergarten age. Then she worked as an elementary school teacher for 20 years before retiring. Austin's father is a jack of all trades. After retiring from his position as a church pastor he worked as a home inspector and an insurance salesman.

My husband, Austin works in outside sales at a local building supply. He sells lumber and other building products to contractors. I decided to leave my job as a high school teacher after 3 years to work on my doctorate in education. I currently teach an undergraduate course in education and conduct research for a professor in the school of education at the university where I am enrolled in graduate school. My assistantship with

the university is part-time. I also teach online psychology courses for the Virtual Public School in our state.

Austin and I had been married for four years when I found out I was pregnant. I had started my teaching career and gotten married. Now I was going to be a mother. My expectations for motherhood were traditional in the sense that I thought being a good mother was associated with having good caring motherly instincts. I thought my baby would sleep all the time and I would always know how to care for him. I assumed that I would love staying home with my child and not working. All of these expectations about motherhood had remained unquestioned because I had never been a mother. All of these expectations were turned on their head as I experienced motherhood for myself. These stories and autoethnographic reflections document my experiences becoming a mother and facing new challenges. I was one of the first women in my group of friends to have a child and that impacted my experiences as well. My personal experiences in no way are reflective of all women's unique experiences becoming a mother but these stories do document possible things that new mothers may experience as their roles change.

### **Finding out I Was Pregnant with Noah: An Unexpected Surprise**

Austin and I had talked about getting pregnant in October so I stopped taking my birth control pills and we just hoped I would get pregnant. After not really trying and not getting pregnant, it became a stressful thing so we stopped trying all together and pretty much just decided that it would happen whenever it was meant to happen. In July of the following year we went to Austin's cousin's wedding in New Jersey. My sister-in-law,

Sarah was pregnant at the time and I remember thinking, “Gosh I’m glad I’m not pregnant for this wedding because I want to drink and have a good time!”

I was eating at the rehearsal dinner and I started to feel sick to my stomach. I thought, “Yuck! The food tastes terrible.” At first I thought it was just nasty food but everyone else seemed to be enjoying it. So I thought nothing of it. The next night at the wedding I was drinking a martini and I just couldn’t seem to drink very much. I said to Nana, my mother-in-law, “These drinks taste funny.” I’ll never forget this line, she replied, “Maybe you’re pregnant. Maybe you shouldn’t be drinking.” I thought she was crazy. I said, “No way. I don’t think that’s possible and I want to have a good time!” And again I didn’t think anything about it—until we got back home. We got back on a Sunday and I thought I’d get my period sometime the following week. My breasts were hurting so I thought for sure my period was coming soon. I never really kept up with when I got my period because it was always irregular so I was never exactly sure when I could expect to get it. That Thursday I had a stressful day and I went to the ABC store and bought vodka to make martinis. But I kept thinking about what my mother-in-law had said. Could I be pregnant?

A little voice in my head kept saying, “Maybe I should make sure before I drown my stresses away with alcohol.” So I went to the drug store and bought a pregnancy test—two actually. Austin said I should take the tests before I made a drink. So I told him I would take the test but only to prove that I was not pregnant so that I could drink in good fun and not have any guilt associated with my fun. The directions on the box said to pee on the stick and wait for three minutes for the positive or negative symbol to show

up. Easy enough right? As soon as I peed on the stick, the positive symbol was bright pink. I remember feeling anxious while I was waiting for the test results which were almost immediate. When I saw the positive result I was both excited and anxious. I made this really weird noise somewhere between a scream and a moan out of shock. I felt joy and at the same time a pit in my stomach because of the sense of responsibility. I almost couldn't believe it. It was surreal. Here I was taking the test just to show that I wasn't pregnant because how could I be? And then I was. Now I really wanted to have that martini. But I couldn't. Austin couldn't believe it either. The next day I called my OBGYN and scheduled an appointment to come in and have a test done in his office to confirm the pregnancy. A few days later I went into the doctor's office and it was official. I was already two months along and I had no idea I was pregnant. The day after I found out I was pregnant I had planned on going with my mom to help clean my brother's college apartment so that he could get his security deposit back. I really did not want to go and clean now. All day it was all I could to keep from throwing up from smelling the bleach while I was scrubbing bathrooms and floors. I was already thinking about the safety of my little one. It was hard to not tell my mom that I was pregnant the entire day we were together.

Once I had the results from the doctor's office I wanted to tell my parents and Austin's parents that we were going to have a baby. I wanted to tell them in a special way. My sister-in-law wrapped up a bib that said something like, "You're a Grandpa" for Austin's dad on Father's Day as her way of breaking the news that they were expecting. Everyone I know had some clever way of telling their parents. So I went to Babies R Us

and bought two stuffed monkeys that had a little rattle and blanket attached to them. I spent a great deal of time picking these out. I also bought a few cute baby outfits in yellow. It was weird buying these tiny outfits. Was I really going to have a sweet baby to wear these clothes? It just didn't seem real! So I wrapped up the monkeys and I printed a little note from the computer that said, "We are adding another monkey to the zoo!" We had planned on eating dinner with my parents a few nights later to celebrate my dad's new job at the local community college. We planned to share the big news then.

A few nights later, we were all in the kitchen at my parents' house and I said, "Dad I brought you a present to celebrate your new job!" I was so anxious waiting for him to open it. How would they react to news of their first grandchild? My dad started opening the present and my mom wasn't even paying any attention. She was washing dishes. I said, "Mom you need to pay attention!" I will always remember that. She replied, "Oh okay." Then my dad opened the bag and read the message out loud. It took a little while for them to understand what adding a monkey to the zoo meant but they were really happy once they did. We all laughed and hugged and celebrated. It was really great to have their support.

Austin's parents were suspicious from the get go. We had called and asked if we could come by their house for a quick visit after eating at my parent's house. My parents live right up the street from my in-laws. When we told them we wanted to stop by they had asked why and were clearly suspicious of some upcoming news. I think Austin just made something up as to why we were going to stop by. They were probably suspicious because it was his mom after all that suggested I was pregnant in New Jersey. After

leaving my parent's house, we arrived at my in-law's house. I carried the gift bag out to the screen porch where his parents were sitting along with his brother. They were all giggling so I think they definitely knew I was pregnant. They opened the bag and read the card attached to the monkey and laughed. Nana said, "I knew it after you were nauseous at the wedding last weekend!" They were really excited too. This would be their third grandchild but the first one to live only five minutes away. They were thrilled.

### **A Boy or a Girl: The Ultrasound**

I only had two or three ultrasounds during my entire pregnancy which I thought was odd. I kept thinking I would have one every appointment which would've been really fun. But my insurance will not cover "unnecessary ultrasounds" so I guess my OB's office only does ultrasounds in the beginning of the pregnancy or if there is a problem later in the pregnancy. The first ultrasound was really cool. I went to my ultrasound appointment a week or so after finding out I was pregnant because I was already several months along. Austin came with me and we were nervous as we waited in the room for the nurse to come in. The nurse instructed me to go and "empty my bladder" so that it wouldn't block the view of the baby. Then the nurse came in and she did the internal ultrasound. We could see a small object but nothing that looked like a baby yet. I could only see a small spec or blob. How strange. The coolest part of the procedure was hearing the baby's heartbeat. I asked the nurse if there was one heartbeat or two since both of my parents are twins. Part of me was really hoping for twins. But there was only one heartbeat and looking back I think this was really a blessing. I could've easily had a meltdown caring for two newborn babies at once. After hearing the baby's heart beat and

seeing the small blob on the screen, this whole pregnancy thing seemed real. There was definitely a baby inside of me. I had seen it. I could hear its heart beating. We got a few pictures to take home and show our family and friends.

Months later we returned for another ultrasound. It had been many weeks and I was far enough along to find out the sex of the baby. I thought the baby was a girl and Austin thought it was a boy. I was so nervous because this was another moment that would define the pregnancy, another known fact in a sea of unknowns. We waited anxiously for the results. This ultrasound was external. The technician squirted gel on my belly for the ultrasound. It felt cold and weird. Almost immediately after putting the tool on my stomach, she said “Oh it’s definitely a boy!” I will never forget the sweet smile on Austin’s face after hearing that he was going to have a son. He seemed even more excited about the baby knowing it was a boy. He began talking about all the fun things he would do with him one day like playing golf, coaching his little league team, teaching him things. I was excited too but part of me had been hoping for a girl. Mainly I just wanted a healthy baby. I felt some stress going away with each new discovery. Now I knew I was going to have a son. I was so happy.

### **Pre-Baby Rituals**

Nana and her friends have this informal agreement that they will take turns throwing showers for whoever’s children are getting married or having a baby. Basically they enjoy throwing showers at each other’s houses for any event. We decided to have my baby shower at Nana’s house and by the time invitations went out there were 75 people invited. I would have preferred a small intimate gathering but this was going to be

a big event. Selecting baby items to place on my registry before the shower was exhausting. I was amazed at how many choices there were for everything from bottles to strollers to car seats to diapers. I got lots of advice from friends and I read reviews from other moms on Amazon.com to pick out most of my items. It all began to seem like too much. I remember thinking, “Am I really going to need all of this stuff? How can a small baby need so much stuff?”

At my baby shower, I opened presents for over an hour. The decorations at the baby shower were beautiful and it ended up being a monkey theme. I hadn't really picked a theme. I was trying to be different but the invitations had a monkey on them so I got lots of gifts with monkeys which were really cute. There were even people at the shower that I didn't know but they were friends of Austin's mom. I felt bad I didn't get to talk to hardly any of the guests because I spent so much time opening the gifts. I got a bunch of great baby stuff and I was really thankful for the gifts. The event still felt like a big ritual to me, one of many expected pre-baby rituals. Was I really going to need all of this stuff when the baby arrived? I had never seen so much baby stuff before. How would I even know how to use this stuff? I was really far along in the pregnancy at this point so opening presents for an hour was exhausting. That night after transporting the gifts home, I was so tired.

Austin and I took baby classes at the Women's Hospital near our house. We attended a three day mega-session and it was really informative. I thought that the classes really helped Austin to get a sense of what I had been going through while I was pregnant. He seemed much more attentive after attending the classes and watching the

other men care for their wives. I remember that we did a tour of the birthing and recovery room at the Women's Hospital and the rooms were so nice and big. They were huge and had flat screen televisions. I was amazed. I knew that I would not be delivering at this hospital since my doctors' insurance company only did business with a different Regional Hospital which is located right next to my OBGYN's office. So we arranged for another tour of the hospital where I would be delivering Noah.

The hospital tour at the Regional Hospital was a real disappointment. The lady who gave the tour was from the emergency room and did not know what she was talking about. She showed us a delivery room that was the size of a closet. She also couldn't answer many of my questions. A big thing for me after having attended the baby classes was that I wanted to hold Noah and breastfeed him right after he was born. I didn't want to deliver him and then the nurses take him away from me. It was very important to me to have him stay in the room with me instead of going to stay in the baby nursery. I kept asking the nurse about whether the baby could stay in the room with me and how a large baby cart would fit in the tiny room and she really couldn't answer me. I was so worried about delivering in that hospital after having seen the nicer Women's Hospital.

The final ritual that had to be completed before the arrival of my son was getting the nursery ready. This was really fun for me even though I was stressed out about whether I had all of the necessary baby things. I ordered a crib from Amazon.com and my mom gave me some gender neutral bedding for the crib from Pottery Barn. I loved putting all of the small outfits in his dresser. After the nursery was completed I kept going in the baby's room and thinking about what my son would be like.

### **Noah's Birth Story: "No pain medicine! ... Please give me the epidural!"**

I remember my labor and Noah's birth story very vividly. It's one of those memories that you never forget. It was a Thursday night and I remember I had taught my undergraduate education course that morning and a student had said to me, "Maybe tonight will be the night you have your baby." I laughed and thought, "Yeah right." After all it was a week before my due date. All throughout the pregnancy I was convinced that my baby was coming early. I thought he was going to come 3 to 4 weeks early. Maybe I had just hoped he would come early. So I had already been on high alert but the closer I got to the delivery date, the more I had started to think he wasn't coming early after all. I was sitting on the couch writing my to-do list for the next week and getting organized so I knew what articles I had to read and what assignments were due for my graduate classes that week. Austin was sitting on the other end of the couch watching television. We were watching the NCAA basketball tournament and the Duke game was coming on. As I was writing in my notebook, I heard and felt this loud "POP!" I jumped up and I looked at Austin with a stunned expression on my face. He appeared unfazed. I said, "Did you hear that? What was that?" He had not heard it. I said, "I think my water broke!" I ran to the bathroom and pulled my pants down. I saw a clear fluid trickling out of my crouch. It was a slow trickle like if I had been peeing only I had no control over this.

I got this weird and excited feeling in my stomach like I knew this was it—this was the beginning of my labor and delivery. I was so ready to meet Noah but now this was it. Ahh—the delivery. I said, "Austin come and look!" and he came and saw the fluid. Now it was real because he had seen it too. Austin started freaking out. I told him,

“Okay let’s go to the hospital.” We had learned in our baby classes that once your water broke you had to be admitted to the hospital to prevent infection. All that worrying about counting time in-between contractions so I would know when to go to the hospital and now my water had broken and I didn’t even have to count time in-between contractions. It had never occurred to me that my water might break. I remembered the scene from the movie *Riding in Cars with Boys* (2001) where Beverly’s water breaks in the bathroom. In the movie tons of water goes all over the floor. My experience was nothing like this. I had a trickle. How strange. I wondered if something was wrong.

I hadn’t even thought about the fact that Austin needed to pack a bag to take to the hospital. My bag had been packed for over a month. So I told him to go and get some stuff ready. I called my parents because they were going to come and get our dog, Sally to keep her at their house while I was in the hospital. Another thing that was really weird was that our Dalmatian had started crying loudly as we started getting prepared to go to the hospital. It was like she knew. Maybe dogs have intuition about stuff like that. My parents were really excited after hearing the news that we were on our way to the hospital. They wanted to come and meet us there. I told my mom, “It’s probably going to take a really long time since I am not having any contractions. Just stay put and we will keep you posted. I don’t want you to have to sit in the waiting room all night.”

We got in the car and Austin drove towards the hospital. He stopped at a local Exxon gas station and got some coffee on the way. He was a nervous wreck. He was more nervous than I was despite the fact that I was the one that would be pushing this baby out. The whole car ride to the hospital I had this weird feeling in my gut like,

“Okay, here is what you’ve been waiting for—the chance to meet your child.” I was nervous about the labor but I didn’t show it. When we got to the hospital we parked in the emergency lot and we both walked into the ER. This was nothing like what I had expected. I thought I would have to be wheeled into the hospital in a wheelchair and I would be in great pain. Wasn’t I supposed to be screaming in pain like a crazy person? That was always what I had seen on television. But I hadn’t even started having contractions yet. We arrived at the hospital and checked in. A nurse took all of our information and led us to another room to complete some paperwork. I provided my insurance card and paperwork and a hospital administrator took my information into her office while we waited outside. I felt like our insurance had to be cleared before we would be admitted. I was kind of anxious about it even though I knew my information was correct. I had never realized how one’s insurance policy determined where you could deliver your baby and what types of services you would receive. After getting approved by the hospital administration, we were escorted upstairs to the delivery floor. The birthing rooms were in a locked section of the hospital. I was relieved. Who wants to worry about someone walking by their room while they are in labor? We were led to a huge delivery room that was nothing like the one we had been shown during the hospital tour. I was excited now.

The television in the birthing room was miniature. We tried watching the Duke basketball game but we couldn’t really see the screen very well. I got changed into a hospital gown and a nurse came in with some additional paperwork. She asked me a bunch of medical questions. I gave her my birth plan which stated that I did not want an

epidural. I wasn't completely counting it out but I wanted to try and deliver Noah without the epidural. I wanted to give birth the natural way like my mother did with her three children. The nurse checked my progress and I was at a 2. I had a long way to go to get to a 10. The nurse said that my doctor, Dr. Kendall had wanted to start me on pitocin to speed up the process. I said, "Okay, whatever he thinks is best." I also got on narcotic pain medicine. For some reason I didn't want the epidural but I thought that the other pain medicines were okay. That was a big mistake. I started to feel really loopy once the narcotics went into my arm through my IV. I felt like I was on serious drugs. Before the contractions really kicked in I was feeling terrible on the narcotic pain medicines. I remember looking at Austin slouched over in the chair watching the game and I thought, "Who is this person sitting in my room and why is he here? Why am I here?" My mind was all jumbled and confused because of the drugs. There was a clock on the wall and I couldn't stop staring at it. I started getting really agitated. Finally after sleeping for several hours the narcotics wore off. I started feeling really bad—the pain was getting intense and almost unbearable.

My contractions got really strong. I started crying and moaning. I will never forget how painful the contractions were. I cannot even begin to explain what the pain felt like since there is nothing to compare it to. I tried to hold out and not get the epidural as long as I could but I started feeling out of control. I hate feeling out of control. At about 2:00 am I realized I had to get the epidural. I had been in labor for over 5 hours. I told Austin I needed to get the epidural and he asked me, "Are you sure?" I told him, "Yes!" He went out and told the nurse that I wanted the epidural and then the nurse came

in and asked me to make sure the epidural is what I really wanted to do since it was not on my birth plan. I told her, “Yes, I am sure.” So they called the anesthesiologist. And the waiting began. I had to wait for almost an hour for the anesthesiologist to get there. I was in so much pain. I wondered why I had tried to do this the natural way. Austin came back in the room and told me that there was a group of nurses out at the nurses’ station when he went out and said that I needed the epidural. He said, “They all laughed when I told them you needed the epidural.” It irritated me when he told me this but I was in so much pain that I didn’t really comprehend. But later when I could reflect, this really made me mad. What were they thinking? She is stupid for trying to do this without the epidural. I don’t know but I felt it was inappropriate like I was being judged for my medical choices.

When I requested the epidural all I could think about was what my doctor had told me. Dr. Kendall was one of five doctors in the rotation of the OB practice I used. One day when I went in for a regular visit I asked him about making a birth plan and he laughed and said it wasn’t really necessary but I could make one if I wanted to. I also asked him about the epidural and told him I was going to try to give birth without the epidural. He laughed again only harder this time and responded to me with a line that I will never forget. He said, “Emily, imagine if you had to have surgery and had to have your appendix removed. Can you even fathom a doctor saying to you that you didn’t need to have any pain medicine and you should try to do the surgery without pain medicine?” I laughed and said, “No.” He said, “It’s the same thing...only you are having a baby. Emily, a bowling ball will be coming out of your vagina. It will be very painful.” I laughed but I thought, “He does have a point.” I had often watched TLC’s *A Baby Story*

on television and I had heard doctors say, “Nobody needs to be a hero here,” insinuating that the woman should get the epidural. Interesting isn’t it? I started thinking about why I didn’t want to have the epidural in the first place. What is a natural childbirth anyway? And did it somehow make you a better mother? My mom had delivered me and my two brothers without any pain medicine so maybe I was trying to follow in her footsteps. Or maybe it had something to do with all of my friends saying they wanted to do it naturally.

But when those contractions started getting really bad I didn’t care what everybody else was doing in their delivery rooms or what choices they had made. I needed relief especially if the pain was going to get worse. In that moment I knew my doctor was right and when he was the one on call I laughed because he had told me so. So the anesthesiologist came around 3:00 am, 6 hours after I was in labor. He made Austin turn around so he couldn’t see the large needle because so many men faint when they see the size of the needle. He put the needle in my back and I didn’t feel anything. It took another 30 to 45 minutes for the epidural to kick in but once it did I was much more comfortable. I started thinking, “Okay I can do this! I am going to have this baby!” After the epidural, the hours flew by quickly. At some point the nurse checked me and I was far enough along that they called the doctor to come and meet with me. The doctor had checked in a few times but I hadn’t seen much of him which I thought was odd. I had expected the doctor to be there for most of the time but he was not. He only stayed in the delivery room when I was ready to deliver. It hurt really badly when the nurse checked me and said, “You are ready to push.” Finally the doctor arrived and he agreed, “You are ready to push.” This was it. It was weird because I could feel the contractions but they no

longer hurt after I had gotten the epidural. The nurse hooked up some sort of monitor thing to me and I started the process of pushing the baby out.

Austin grabbed my leg and was very supportive with the counting and breathing and offering encouragement. I was surprised at just how supportive he had been through the entire delivery process. I started pushing around 7:30 am. I pushed for close to an hour before Noah made his entrance into the world. At one point during the pushing it got really intense. The nurses started whispering in a corner of the room and I knew something was wrong. No one wanted to let me know what was going on so I finally asked, "What's wrong? Is my baby okay?" The doctor said that the baby's heartbeat was dropping whenever I pushed and we really needed to watch this. I was scared but I tried not to panic. The nurse brought the mirror over because she thought it would help me along. As soon as I saw my progress and how far I had left to go I told her, "Take it away!" I kept pushing and at some point the doctor had to leave to go do another surgery. I couldn't believe it. He actually went and performed an emergency surgery on a patient one floor below us while I was in the middle of delivering my child. The doctor was back in 15 minutes from the surgery. It was time for the doctors and nurses to change shifts but they all stayed on hoping for the baby to come. It was sweet and it made me feel special that they wanted to finish the process and see my baby. They had done all the hard work and they wanted to see the baby delivered. My nurse did leave about an hour after her shift was over. A new nurse came and she was good too but much more vocal and forceful. She was yelling at me to push while the other nurse was much calmer.

I gave one last push and Noah was born. I had Noah at 8:19 am. I felt this big relief. I was exhausted. The nurses immediately started cleaning him up and the doctor held up the umbilical cord and said, “Oh my gosh, look at this. There is a huge knot in the umbilical cord and that’s why his heart rate was dropping when you were pushing during the contractions.” He looked right at me and said, “Young lady you are so incredibly lucky that you didn’t have to have an emergency c-section. Somebody was looking out for you and this baby. The cord was so thick that he has been able to get oxygen and nutrients despite this large knot in the umbilical cord.” I was in shock. I couldn’t believe that my child could’ve died and I had no idea that there was a knot in the cord and neither did the doctors since no ultrasound had been done in months. My OB’s office had not done any additional ultrasounds because I had not had any problems and my insurance wouldn’t cover the procedure unless there was a specific reason or problem that caused the need for another ultrasound.

Austin cut the umbilical cord and they handed my son to me for the first time. I was still in shock. I held him and I just looked at him. Noah was so beautiful. Who was this little guy that looked just like me? I held and cuddled him and then the nurses told me to breastfeed him. It was so weird. I had helped make this tiny baby and now I was responsible for taking care of him. How was I going to do this? I put him to my breast and he just started sucking and drinking. I was shocked. I didn’t even know I had been producing milk. I knew my breasts were big and sore but I had not seen any milk yet. It was the first of many surprises of motherhood.

The nurses cleaned Noah and me up. Austin was in shock too. It was really funny to watch him in the delivery room. He started texting all of his friends and family to tell them Noah was here. Dr. Kendall said to me, "Your husband is missing a lot of really great picture opportunities." I told Austin to stop texting since he could do that later and get some photos of them washing Noah off and cleaning him up. He began taking many pictures. A nurse said, "Your mom is in the waiting room." I was excited that she was there. I told Austin to go and get her. She came back to the delivery room. I was holding Noah. I asked her if she wanted to hold him and she said, "Has Austin held him yet?" I told her, "No." She said, "I don't want to hold him before Austin does." This was a good choice. I hadn't even realized that Austin hadn't held him yet. I said, "Austin do you want to hold him?" And he did. He started tearing up. It was so sweet to watch him cuddling Noah. After Austin and my mom held Noah the nurses took him to bathe him and do some tests. Austin went with them. Now that Noah was here it was like I was afraid that someone was going to take him away from me. Before they took Noah for his first bath they told me that I was going to be moved into a new room. I couldn't believe it. I'm glad my mom was there to go with me to my new room so I wasn't alone. They wheeled me to a much smaller room and I got all new nurses. I was disappointed because I really liked my other nurses. There was so much change taking place all throughout the process and it was so methodical. After you had the baby you moved to a recovery room. I didn't know about any of this so I was surprised about having to switch rooms so quickly after delivery. My new nurses were great. I got settled and then the doctor came in to check on me. I was missing my sweet child already. Austin finally came back with

the nurse and they brought Noah to me. I felt complete now. I held him all night in my arms. I knew that I had the option to keep him in the nursery. But why would I want to? I had waited 9 months to meet him and I wanted to love him and hold him safe in my arms. It was the best feeling I'd ever had—holding my son that night. Even though I had some pain and soreness, I felt like I was in dream holding this tiny creature in my arms. I thought, “This is what life is all about.” My parents and Austin’s parents both came to visit later that day and they were smitten holding Noah.

I couldn’t believe how good the hospital food was. It was awesome. They brought me milk and fruit every few hours and I could order whatever food I wanted. Another male doctor in my OB practice came in to check on me later in the day. He said, “You can go home tomorrow if you are ready.” I was excited to get home. Austin heard this and was thrilled. The next morning he went home and cleaned the house spotless and got everything ready for me and the baby. Noah had his circumcision in the hospital and that was really hard as a parent. I knew he was in pain. This was a new feeling for me—being a parent and knowing your child is in pain. Austin felt it too. This was intense. My parents had talked about this—how hard it is as a parent when your child is suffering or in pain—but you don’t really understand until you have a child of your own. Noah was extra fussy and sleepy after the procedure. I wanted to make all of his pain go away.

I ordered lots of egg salad sandwiches and fruit to eat in the hospital. On Sunday, the day after my delivery, we went home. A female doctor in the OB practice came in to check on me that morning and said that I would be able to go home on Monday and I was really disappointed. I told her that the other doctor said I could go ahead and go home.

She told me it was up to me but I needed to rest. I knew Austin was ready for us to be home and I was ready too. I told her I wanted to go home that day and she approved it. It was so strange—we arrived late Friday night as a married couple and now, a day and a half later we would be going home a family. I managed to brush my teeth and put some makeup on while Noah had some additional testing done. I was ready to go home and be a mother. I filled out all of the discharge paperwork. Austin and I waited for an hour for them to bring Noah to my room so we could check out. I was getting anxious. The outfits I had brought to take him home in were all way too big. Everyone told us to buy 3 month outfits instead of the newborn sizes since babies are usually too big for the newborn outfits. Noah was really small and the 3 month outfits were way too big. The nurse finally brought him to and we bundled him up in blankets since it was a cold day in March. A nurse wheeled me and Noah down to the parking lot and Austin drove around with the car. We got in the car, strapped Noah into his new car seat, covered him in blankets, and left the hospital to go home. We were both so nervous about the drive back. I said to Austin, “Drive carefully!!” He drove very slowly the whole way home. We arrived home and our dog was really good with him. We showed Noah his room and our house. It was really fun. It was strange having a new family member with us, new responsibilities, and a new role as a mother.

Our close friends called and offered to bring us dinner that night. They came over and brought baked ziti and salad. It was really nice and much needed. I had a glass of red wine that night and enjoyed the company of friends. Noah slept well that night as long as

he was asleep in my arms or on my chest. He cried every time I tried to put him in his crib. I was so happy. I felt needed in a way that I had never felt needed before.

Austin had taken the entire week off of work following Noah's birth. That first week Noah did a great deal of sleeping. I recovered really quickly and began adjusting to my new life as a mother. I loved it. It was physically exhausting but I couldn't imagine my life without my son and the joy he brings. I remember being really surprised that we only got one other meal from friends. The first few weeks were hard as far as meals were concerned. We were too tired by the end of the day to make dinner. What happened to all those meals we were anticipating? My mom eventually made us a meal after tax season was over. Since she is an accountant it was hard for her to help out as much during tax season when Noah was born. We did have people come and visit but I guess since most of our friends didn't have babies so they didn't think to bring us food. We had thought all along that we would have weeks of food delivered by friends, family, and church members to help out with the adjustment at home with a newborn baby. We were wrong.

Austin and I took Noah on all kinds of errands during that first week because he just slept in his detachable car seat. We had to go and buy him more newborn clothes since all of his other clothes were too big. We went out to eat at local restaurants for lunches with our newest family member. It was really fun. I was really anxious about Austin going back to work the next week. The thought of doing this whole mother thing alone during the day was scary. The feeling of being a new mother reminded me of the time when I made a 100 in my driver's education course but when I actually got my license I didn't know how to read street signs and had to get my dad to come and lead me

home after getting lost downtown. I had taken the baby classes and read the how to books for moms but actually putting this knowledge into practice was a whole new experience. And when did the maternal instinct that I had heard so much about kick in? I was finding out that this was all a lie. Women and men have to learn how to be mothers and fathers—we have to learn to how to be parents to our children. At least, I had to learn. Maybe all the other mothers had the maternal instinct and there was something wrong with me. Maybe I didn't get that gene. As time went by I often considered these things and I began to realize that there is no maternal instinct. I had to learn how to be a mother through experiences with my son Noah.

### **Breastfeeding: A Love-Hate Activity**

Breastfeeding was something that I loved and hated. I was sick and tired of breastfeeding by the time I weaned Noah at 8 months. I felt like every decision I made right after Noah was born revolved around my breasts. In the beginning when Noah was first born it was a really strange feeling when Noah breastfed. I did get used to it and in time it became easier and I began to enjoy it. But breastfeeding made it hard for me to go anywhere alone because Noah wanted to nurse almost every hour. I also got very uncomfortable when I couldn't feed or pump. I remember wanting to drink a glass of wine after a long hard day of taking care of a newborn and being restricted because I was breastfeeding. I enjoyed breastfeeding but despised pumping using a breast pump. I hated using the breast pump unless I had to use it to relieve excess milk production. I found the entire process of pumping to be extremely tiresome. There are so many pieces of the breast pump that have to be washed and dried and taken apart and pieced back together

again after cleaning. I had rushed and negative experiences pumping breast milk in the bathroom in the school of education building between classes I was teaching. I would freeze my breast milk in the faculty refrigerator after pumping and then go teach my class. I would come back and get my frozen milk to take home and use for the next time I had to go teach. I preferred breastfeeding over pumping breast milk.

I loved how breastfeeding felt and the bonding that took place with Noah when I breastfed him. But I was ready to wean him after about 8 months. I also felt that those who didn't breastfeed their kids or who had never did not understand the feeding schedules or how constraining it could be. I always had to schedule errands or doctor's appointments around Noah's eating schedule since it is frowned on to breastfeed in public. I couldn't go out to eat for several hours with Noah because I would need to breastfeed him and I didn't want to pull my breast out in public. Some of my friends took breastfeeding to a whole additional level. They would have breastfeeding parties and drink mimosas after breastfeeding their babies. It sounds kind of fun but I preferred to feed Noah alone at home and in a private quiet area. Other people that I know were very judgmental about how long you should breastfeed. They would tell me that I needed to breastfeed until Noah was at least one year old because that is what is best for him physically. These types of comments really pissed me off. Dr. Kendall said that medical studies suggest that infants will get all of the nutritional benefits during the first 6 weeks of breastfeeding. He recommended that I stop breastfeeding whenever I was ready. I took his advice.

## **Writing a Dissertation and Raising a Baby: Graduate School and Being a New Mom**

Sometimes I really wonder why I am getting my PhD. It seems like I am doing all of this work and none of it is valued at home. And likewise the work I do as a mother is not valued by society. The time I spend writing and researching takes away time that I have with my son and my husband but it is important to me. It seems like a balancing act that I never master or even partially master. When I was pregnant it was challenging getting all of my school work done because I was physically exhausted. Somehow I managed and did a good job. I remember having two classes back to back every Tuesday night one semester. I had to sit in a hard chair for 6 hours straight. That was hard when I was really far along in my pregnancy. My professors were really supportive. After I had Noah I was back in class the next week. But getting research and writing done was even more challenging because I was constantly breastfeeding. One of the biggest struggles was teaching my undergraduate seminar class one night a week. Noah was breastfeeding every hour or so and my class lasted 3 hours. Austin and his mom helped out with the childcare aspect but I had to be creative as far as pumping goes. I taught two classes one semester so I remember having 10 minutes to run to the bathroom and pump out all my milk and then put it in the faculty refrigerator and then run to my other class. I was always physically uncomfortable when I was teaching because my breasts were so full by the end of the evening. I would get lots of emails about attending seminars and meetings in the school of education but they were all during the daytime. I could never attend because of my schedule and a lack of provided childcare.

I've come to the conclusion that graduate schools and universities are really not equipped to provide support to new mothers. There was no drop-in childcare available for students or faculty at my university. I tried to get Noah into the childcare program offered by the university but I was told he could be on the waiting list for years. He has been on the list now for almost a year. It was very hard for me to meet with professors and attend on campus events and workshops when I was staying home full time with Noah. I could not find any childcare provided by any of the events including professional conferences. I had to cancel several scheduled paper presentations at conferences because of the lack of childcare.

### **Noah's Head Injury and Mommy's Guilt**

I have been avoiding writing about this incident because it was so traumatic for both Noah and I. When Noah was about 4 months old we went to go run some errands one day. I was starving so I went by McDonald's to get a fatty but convenient meal. Noah had just started eating baby food and he wasn't going to be eating the unhealthy stuff so I went with convenient. We got back to the house and I put him in his high chair which was a hand-me-down chair from Austin's brother. I got Noah situated and I sat down to eat. I realized I had no ketchup for my French fries so I quickly got up and ran to the fridge to get the ketchup. As I was running back to my chair which was only feet away, I heard a loud thud and screaming. I immediately knew that Noah had fallen out of the high chair. This tremendous fear came over my whole body. I ran to his side and he was laying head first on the slate floor of our dining room. He had been trying to reach our dog that was standing next to his chair and he fell out of the chair. I immediately picked

him up and held him close to me soothing him. He cried for a while and I looked at his forehead. It was so swollen and a dark purple bruise was already showing. I worried that he had sustained a concussion or had a brain injury because the high chair was very tall and he had landed on such a hard surface. He had landed head first.

I felt so bad for getting up to get ketchup. In fact I was plagued with guilt. What was I thinking? I called Austin sobbing and told him what happened. He left work and immediately came home. I called the doctor's office and told them Noah needed to come in right away. I was crying on the phone with the receptionist. They agreed to see him immediately so Austin and I took Noah to the doctor's office. I remember the nurse asking me if I was okay upon our arrival. I'm sure my tear-stained face and my expression gave it away that I was also traumatized by the fall.

The doctor examined Noah and determined that he hit the hardest part of his head and did not sustain a concussion. I was so relieved. They checked him and looked closely at the huge knot on his head. He got a clean bill of health and I was calmed down. It was a terrible ordeal because it was almost as if I'd imagined losing him when I saw him fall. I had started thinking the worst and I felt so guilty for not keeping him safe. This guilt worsened when Austin and I discovered the high chair straps hidden beneath the high chair. We had never seen them and hadn't been using them. I am assuming that had Noah been strapped in he probably wouldn't have fallen out of the chair. I still feel awful about that. How could we not have known this?

A few days after the incident I made Austin get rid of the high chair. I couldn't stand seeing it in the house. It was unsafe. I went and bought Noah a booster seat with

safety straps that you can strap into an existing chair. It has been very safe so far. The old high chair is still in the garage and I cringe every time I see it. I won't let Austin donate it because I'm afraid other kids could get hurt. It is too tall. I wish he would take it to the dump already. After several weeks the swelling on Noah's head started to go down and the bruise faded away. In its place there was an indentation that looked like a small line in Noah's forehead. I started getting worried when this mark did not go away. I made him another appointment and the same doctor examined him. She said he would need x-rays done to make sure he didn't fracture his skull. Great I thought. And she wanted them taken immediately. I was by myself that day because Austin couldn't get off of work to go to the doctor's office with us. I took Noah downstairs to the x-ray office. I had to help the technician hold his head down while he screamed so they could get a picture of his injury. Noah was a real trooper throughout the entire ordeal. I was frightened with fear. But only moments later the doctor told me that he had not fractured any bones and that his skull looked good. She said that the trauma from the blood and the bruise caused the indentation in his head and said that it would probably go away in time. I was glad that he hadn't broken any bones but I was still worried about the indentation in my son's forehead. Every time I looked at him I saw this injury and I felt so bad. Is he going to have this scar forever? I will know it's my fault. I should've known how to use the high chair. After several months went by we went back and saw another doctor because the indentation in his forehead had still not gone away. The other doctor said that it would definitely go away but it might take many more months. I have spent months worrying about Noah's

head. It has finally started going away at 18 months and it is now almost completely gone.

Ever since that day I have been extra careful about Noah's safety. I am more aware of falls and I always strap him into his booster seat now. This was the most traumatic injury that Noah has had. I felt like a bad mother for letting this happen but thank God Noah was okay and his head is finally healing. No one ever tells you about how hard it is when your children get hurt.

### **I'm a mom! Noah is here! Why is no one around to help?**

I remember coming home from the hospital the day after giving birth to Noah. I was so excited to get home and get situated with our newest family member. I just knew that I would have all kinds of help from my mother and my mother-in-law upon my arrival home especially since they both live only 5 minutes away from our house. The first few days it was really easy because Noah slept so much. Several of our friends came to meet Noah. But after his birth, we had seen less and less of our closest friends. I kept wondering, "Where are our friends?" Our friends without children carried on as they always had and continued to have get-togethers late at night which we could not attend. It seemed like there was a loss of contact between our friends. I no longer felt like they understood what my life was like. It was definitely isolating for me and my husband. We did spend time with our parents by going to their houses some on the weekends.

Austin and I bought a new house when Noah was 8 months old. It was very challenging moving with a baby to care for during the packing, moving, and unpacking process. I was shocked when my parents did not help us at all. They live 5 minutes away

from us but they didn't offer any help. Thankfully Austin's parents helped with Noah during the move or I don't know how we ever would've gotten settled in. Nana offered to take Noah for three days in a row while we packed and moved and unpacked. We moved in November and I remember being upset that my mom took a week off of work to get her house clean and in order for a big Thanksgiving meal but did not take even one day off work to help with Noah. I felt like I was expected to do everything on my own especially taking care of Noah.

Support and especially help with a baby as far as babysitting was really hard to come by. With two sets of parents just up the street I thought for sure we would have lots of support. Instead I have found that family members usually agree watch Noah only when I have a planned work or school event that I have to attend. It feels like no one values the need for personal time. No one has offered to keep Noah while I go have a spa day or while I clean the house. I feel like the only time I have support is when I demonstrate that I really need it and need means working or some mandatory meeting at school. This is all very strange to me. Don't parents, people that have already had children and raised them understand the importance of offering support to mothers with babies? I don't feel comfortable hiring a babysitter because I don't trust very many people to take care of Noah.

The lack of support has become more apparent as I've started to talk about going back to work and putting Noah in daycare. Austin's mom, Nana has made comments like, "Just remember that you have that little guy and he has to come first. It's whatever is best for him." These type of comments really burn me up because no one wants to help me

and give me some time to get the work done I have to do much less have time for myself and yet they all want to judge me like I am a bad mother when I cannot do it by myself. They don't want to help yet I am a bad mom because I have entertained the idea of putting my child in daycare. Maybe I am just angry with myself for not being able to do everything all by myself.

I feel like society in general is not supportive of mothers and young children. Every time I tried to make a dentist appointment I had to reschedule it multiple times because everyone else was working and couldn't watch Noah in the middle of the day so I could get my teeth cleaned. I guess it was just really shocking to me how little help I actually received even when I asked for help. It was assumed and expected by everyone that I was the primary caregiver and I somehow had to make it work by myself. Others were there to help only when I had to go to work or needed an occasional date night but other than that life went on. I felt like I was the only one experiencing a new role and new responsibilities.

### **Mothering Alone?**

When I was a senior in college I took a political science class and we read a book called *Bowling Alone* (2000). I remember it well and I have thought of it often after having a baby. It was written by Robert Putnam and he did lots of research about communities and their decline. He uses the metaphor of bowling to discuss how the sense of community has declined in our culture. Bowling clubs and leagues used to be prevalent and people used to get together to bowl, but now people tend to bowl alone. The book documents how people have become more isolated and the sense of community

has declined. Many times I have reflected on how alone I've felt as a mother and one day I remembered this book. I often wonder, "Am I mothering alone?" My husband is certainly a great father so I do not mean to diminish his role at all but when I think of mothering alone I think about how I am the one person who is responsible for Noah's care. I am the one that carries the baby monitor around when Noah is sleeping. I have often wondered, "Why is this? Why doesn't Austin ever pick it up and take it with him around the house?" How strange. I make all the major decisions about Noah's healthcare, usually adhering to the doctor's advice. I decide Noah's schedule and most of his meals. I choose what he watches and what activities he participates in. Perhaps I have felt so alone as a mother because I expected to have so much support. I do have lots of influences in society bombarding me with messages about what choices I should make but ultimately it is up to me to make major decisions. This is a great deal of pressure especially when it comes to big decisions like childcare and education. I am new to this role of mother and I am learning as I go.

There has been no shortage of advice coming from my mother and my mother-in-law. Some advice has been particularly helpful but sometimes it just makes me mad because I feel like they pass judgment on my own mothering abilities. To be honest I have been really angry and disappointed with both my mom and my mother-in-law in regards to the level of support they've given me. Why is this? I think I expected Nana to be more helpful than she has been since she is retired. I was hoping she would keep Noah for a least one day a week this summer so I could write and do research. When I pressed her for a commitment she said she would help some but that turned into one or two days

all summer and she only watched Noah for a few hours each time. Maybe I am projecting here. The day to day caring for a young child is hard work and maybe my expecting her to want to help all the time was a mistake on my part. I feel like she looks forward to shopping and traveling more than watching her grandson. And this is her prerogative completely. But it has been surprising to me. It irks me when she tells people that she watches Noah on Tuesdays when she only watches him from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm on Tuesdays for only three hours while I go and teach a class. She describes it to others like she watches Noah all day when in fact she watches him for a few hours.

With my parents, I've found that they never offer to watch Noah unless I ask well in advance. My parents are so tired from working throughout the week that by the time the weekend gets here. Both Austin's parents and my parents like for us to come and visit with Noah instead of really giving us a break. I think the reality is that our parents don't particularly enjoy childcare either even though they love their grandchild very much. Again I feel as though a good part of my life as a mother has been spent mothering alone. I used to be okay with this when Noah was a little baby and I saw him as so fragile and I felt like I was the only one that could properly care for him. But now that he is a toddler that is all changing. I am starting to really question why it is that I don't have more help. I have found staying at home to be an isolating experience. Part of the problem is that I will only let certain people help me. I don't feel comfortable allowing a babysitter to watch Noah. I only feel comfortable with family members or experienced mothers watching him.

Perhaps the greatest level of support I've received since becoming a mom has been from Noah's church preschool. He goes to preschool three days a week from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm. It has been a real God-send. I think if Noah hadn't started preschool I would have had a nervous breakdown. That planned time three days a week has really been wonderful and they have cared for Noah in such a great way. I have no worries when I leave him with his teacher. I love Noah's preschool and watching him interact with the other children in his class of five toddlers. Noah got the last spot in the toddler class. I did months of searching and there are very few programs that offer half day care for children before the age of one. The only childcare I could find for infants was full time. This made it challenging. I did find lots of church preschools filling that void once kids are at least one year old. There is definitely a pressure out there on moms to stay home with their children as long as possible as way to protect them or shelter them from the real world. I think I bought into this in the beginning but now I am feeling a bit suffocated by these expectations. Where is my alone time? Somehow my own well being has been devalued as my son's wellbeing has been put first as it should be but my own wellbeing is still important. Are moms that work full time not good mothers? What if I want to go back to work? Does that make me selfish?

### **Tuesdays with Nana**

Tuesdays with Nana has become this catchy phrase we have used to describe Tuesdays when Noah goes to play with Austin's mom, Nana. She has been a really big help in allowing me to teach an undergraduate course at the university as part of my assistantship duties. My class is taught on Tuesdays from 4:00 pm to 7:00 pm. All last

year I had to go in and meet with my professor to do research an hour before teaching so Nana would watch Noah from 2:00 pm to 6:30 pm since Austin arrived home before I was done teaching. This year thankfully I am working with someone who understands my role as a mother and I don't have to go in for regular meetings. So now my mother-in-law watches Noah from 3:00 pm to 6:00 pm. I know that Nana looks forward to watching Noah on Tuesdays and I am really appreciative of that. Sometimes we will stay for dinner and a glass of wine after I get back from teaching. We order dinner or go out at times too. I have had to really push to get to teach my class at this time despite the fact that there are three night sections of the course. Other graduate students have full time jobs and are unable to teach during the day sections of the course so they beg for the night sections too. It is a struggle to get assigned a night section but that is the only time that works with my schedule since I don't have day time childcare for Noah. Scheduling and even being able to work part-time has been a real challenge because I have no dependable childcare for the majority of the week.

I wish Nana would offer to watch Noah much earlier in the day giving me a few hours to get some work done or go out to lunch. Maybe next year will be different because I really want to go back to work. I have thought about going back to work full-time and I have voiced these desires from time to time. I remember a specific comment that really made me mad when I was sharing my desire to go back to work with Austin's parents. One Tuesday I was really overwhelmed with schoolwork and online teaching so I told Austin that I needed to go to the library after teaching my class instead of coming straight home afterwards and that he needed to feed Noah dinner and put him to bed. I

relayed this to Nana so she was aware that I would not be picking Noah up from her house and that Austin would get Noah after he got off of work. She asked me, “What are Austin and Noah going to eat for dinner since you are going to be staying late at school?” I responded, “I don’t know. I am sure they will find something to eat at our house.” Why is she assuming that I am responsible for feeding everyone?

Austin later shared with me that Nana told him she felt like I was like was saying to her, “Here’s my family, I have to go,” like I was making her responsible for my family. It really pissed me off. Maybe she feels responsible for her family too and this was one of those moments where our expectations collided. It just seems like when I act differently than what she expects I am demonized or called out for being a bad mother. Is it really selfish for me to go to the library one night to study? My husband is perfectly capable of feeding our child and putting him to bed.

### **Showers and Sleep**

When Noah was a newborn baby he constantly wanted to be held. I think I contributed to this by holding him the entire time he was in the hospital after his birth. He was used to mommy always holding him. I loved holding him all day too. I remember after the first few weeks I started to get frustrated with not being able to put him down without him screaming until I picked him back up. He wouldn’t sleep on his back and I was so scared to put him on his stomach for fear of SIDS and the doctor’s warnings. So the measuring stick of how good my day was rested on my ability to take a shower. If I could enjoy a hot 10 minute shower while Noah slept or quietly lay in his crib, the day had been a success. There were many days when this did not happen. I remember

daydreaming about having a peaceful hot shower while I was holding Noah. If Noah woke up and started screaming before I could get in the shower or once I was taking a shower it drove me to tears. There were many times when he cried the entire time I was taking a shower which really stressed me out and made me feel bad. I would feel guilty and wonder, “Do I really need a shower every day?” I think for me showers came to represent the ambivalence I felt about staying at home all day with my newborn. I loved staying home with Noah but I needed some time to myself even if it was just a 10 minute shower a day. I started to feel like I was losing parts of myself and my identity in constantly caring for another person.

Noah slept with me in the bed from the day he came home from the hospital. I cradled him in my arm and wedged a pillow under my elbow to prop up my arm. Some nights he lay directly on my chest. I loved this feeling. I had to adjust to sleeping on my back since I was used to sleeping on my stomach. Austin would say, “Noah needs to sleep in his own bed.” But every time I would put Noah down he would cry. Sometimes I could move him to the bouncy seat on the floor next to our bed and he would sleep there for a few hours. At about 4 months old I finally decided to disobey the doctor’s orders and I started letting Noah sleep on his stomach in the pack-n-play in our room. Instead of screaming because he wasn’t being held, Noah started to sleep on his own! The doctors had said he shouldn’t sleep on his stomach because of a risk of suffocating to death or SIDS. But my mother and Nana had said that all of their children had slept on their stomachs in the crib. At about 4 months old, Noah started sleeping in his own bed. I would routinely wake up about every two hours and go and check on him to make sure he

was breathing okay. Every night I would wake up worrying that he had stopped breathing and it would be all my fault if he suffocated since I had not followed the doctor's orders. After several months I finally began to trust my own choices and I stopped worrying about this.

### **Intentional Buying: Mommy as Responsible Consumer**

I have tried to be a responsible spender when it comes to buying my son stuff he needs or wants. My middle class status affords me the privilege to buy pretty much whatever I think Noah needs. I am constantly bombarded by advertisements that try to convince me to buy certain products. Most of the advertisements geared towards mothers focus on health or education as reasons for buying. I have made some intentional decisions about certain products that I buy. For example I only buy Noah organic whole milk and I usually try to buy the brands with the DHA added for brain health. I am willing to pay an extra \$4 to \$5 for the organic milk. I cannot believe all of the additives and unhealthy things that are in baby food (and adult food too). I spent a great deal of money on organic baby food and food pouches by Earth's Best, Plum, and Dr. Sears with organic fruits and vegetables with no added preservatives. I think it is important to feed Noah healthy food without all the sugar and preservatives in it. Nana gives Noah juice boxes and I cringe because they are so packed with sugar and calories.

I buy many interactive toys and books for my son. Noah watches a lot of shows on Netflix so he doesn't see as many commercials. His favorite shows are *Curious George*, *Go Diego Go*, *Dora the Explorer*, *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, *Olivia*, *Peppa Pig*, *Jake and the Neverland Pirates*, *Little Bill*, *Yo Gabba Gabba*, *Max and Ruby*, *Bubble*

*Guppies, Team Umizoomi, and Handy Manny.* I feel bad for letting him watch so much television but oftentimes I am at a loss for coming up with a fun activity. Maybe I am just too exhausted. These shows do have some aspects that I do not like my son being taught but they are also educational in good ways too.

I definitely spend lots of money on Noah for Christmas and birthdays. I try to buy toys and clothes that are not gender specific but sometimes this is really hard. It seems like all of the marketing is so gender specific and reinforces stereotypical notions of girls and boys. In Target the toy isles are color coded by pink for girls and blue for boys with certain toys on each aisle. It makes me sick. I know that kids learn the gender norms from all of these products and that I as a mother am actively playing a part in this socialization. Therefore I try to neutralize or counteract these stereotypes when I can. I also find that other people will buy stuff for Noah that I would not buy and this also reinforces these stereotypes.

### **Facebook Mommies: Sharing Your Status**

I've never been that crazy about using Facebook for communicating and keeping up with other's lives. But when I was pregnant I started noticing all of my friends with kids and what they were saying about motherhood on Facebook. Mothers posted lots of stuff about their kids online including ultrasound pictures, birth photos, and pictures of their baby's nursery. Several women I went to high school with posted some pictures of elaborate nurseries decked out with \$3,000 Restoration Hardware cribs. Some of these nurseries were completely over the top. It's like they were more for show than for use. The rooms were glamorized and always gender themed with either pink or blue walls and

decorations all over the room. Mothers posted pictures from their child's 1<sup>st</sup> birthday parties focusing on the smash cake pictures. Some women had pictures of the now popular Reveal Party where they would cut open a cake that had either blue or pink icing in the middle to announce and reveal the sex of their baby. I think this is a strange new ritual.

In addition to posting lots of pictures of events, the moms I am friends with on Facebook use the medium to communicate advice about lots of things including the best pediatricians, good daycare facilities, what schools are the best, what baby foods to buy, the best diapers, and everything else you can think of. Several women also post weekly "mommy reflections" where they reflect about something they've learned that week about motherhood. Mothers are using Facebook for informational purposes and to give advice to each other. Facebook is also used as a medium to brag. Strangely many posts by mothers about their children seem to be a form of competition or bragging. Personally, I have used Facebook to read about my friends who are themselves new mothers and like to write about the things that have surprised them about motherhood. Many of these one or two sentence quotes have served as affirmation and validation that many women experience the shock of motherhood in similar ways.

### **A Few of My Favorite Things**

1. Holding, kissing, snuggling, and hugging Noah.
2. Watching Noah sleep or sleeping right next to him hearing him breathe and making sweet baby sounds.

3. Watching Noah play with his bath toys in the bathtub while creating elaborate stories.
4. Singing songs with Noah and reading books before bedtime.
5. The way Noah smells.
6. Driving in the car with Noah and having conversations about everything we see out the window.
7. When Noah talks to me and tells me things like, “Mommy your shirt is blue and it’s not dirty.”
8. Watching Noah smile and giggle while playing with his daddy.
9. When Noah says, “I love you too mommy” and kisses me on the lips.

### **Naptime, Schedules, and Efficient Mothering**

One of the hardest adjustments for me as a new mother was adapting to a new schedule where I had no free time. When Noah was a newborn baby he slept a lot of the time. But he wanted to be held most of the time or he would wake up. This made it really hard to get any work or chores done since I was always cuddling him as he slept. As Noah started to get older I began trying to get him to nap regularly each day. This proved to be a real challenge. For some reason I had always thought that babies slept all of the time. Every time I spoke with other mothers with young children at the park or at the store they would say, “My baby takes two naps a day.” I would laugh and say, “I am lucky if Noah even takes one nap!” They would look at me strangely probably thinking, “She must be doing something wrong.” I read some articles online about how to get your baby to sleep through the night and how to establish naptime routines. But I wasn’t sure

about these “how-to” advice sites. Wouldn’t Noah nap when he was ready and tired enough? I didn’t want to force him to nap. So I decided that I would let him nap whenever he wanted to. The problem was that he would never nap on his own.

My parents used to talk about how I would fall asleep eating at my highchair when I was really tired. Noah never did this. It was like he didn’t want to sleep even though he was tired and fussy. After several months of him not napping at all during the day I decided to try a regular naptime routine and see if he would nap. I would sing to him and rock him to sleep in his room and then put him in his crib at the same time every day. This became an exhausting routine because Noah would not nap unless he was completely asleep before being put in his crib. If he woke up while I was putting him down then he screamed and wouldn’t go back to sleep at all. I would tiptoe out of his room trying not to make any noise. I finally started taking naps with Noah in the rocking chair in his room because it would take him so long to fall asleep that I would go to sleep too. This routine solved the problem of Noah getting enough rest but did not allow me to get any work or chores done. I realized at some point that I was getting really stressed out about the nap routine. I had started making the entire day about his nap. I would think, “Well I cannot go to the grocery store at 11:00 am because Noah may fall asleep in the car on the way home and then not take his nap.” If I was not successful at getting Noah to sleep then I was stressed the rest of the day. I started to hate the pressure associated with feeling like I had to get him to nap. It was exhausting. I had a really hard time getting school work done and online grading done because Noah would never nap in his own bed.

My family and friends all told me that I had to let Noah cry it out in order to get him to nap and sleep at night. If I let him cry, then he would realize that I was not coming to pick him up and he would go to bed. Everyone I knew had used and supported the Ferber Method to train their baby to sleep. I didn't like this idea at all. It seemed abusive to me. I didn't like when Noah was upset and I certainly was not going to let him cry for long periods of time and ignore his cries. I refused to let Noah cry himself to sleep. Once I realized that I was putting all of this stress and pressure on myself trying to make Noah go to sleep each day for a nap, I began to question why I was doing it to begin with. Why was I doing this? Was it just because other mothers talked about their babies napping? Why was I spending hours each day trying to force Noah to sleep? I decided to stop worrying about naps altogether. Noah would sleep when he was ready and tired. I did not need to control his schedule. I had been trying to get him to nap because he was fussy and because I needed time to get my work done. I was too focused on being an efficient mother. I felt like I had to do it all every day. I was expected to be and had been trying to be a supermom. Since I was failing at getting everything done each day, I felt like I had to get Noah to nap. I could justify this because he was also tired and fussy. As soon as I stopped worrying about his schedule and naptime a huge weight was lifted off of my shoulders.

Since Noah rarely napped he would quickly go to sleep at night between 8:00 pm and 9:00 pm. I think he was so tired that he just collapsed. I still had to rock and sing him to sleep before bed but he seemed willing to fall right asleep. Once he was asleep at night I felt like I could finally relax. I was so exhausted each night. All I wanted to do was take

a shower, watch some mindless television, and go to bed. I was definitely not supermom. I was discovering that I could not possibly manage staying at home and working part-time without childcare help. After trying to prove that I could do it all—that I was the perfect mom—I realized I was kidding myself. There were simply not enough hours in the day.

### **My Career Status: Stay at Home Mom or Part-Time Worker?**

I left my teaching job at Northern High School because I wanted to get a PhD in Education and eventually obtain a faculty job at a local university. The month after I told my principal that I would not be returning to teach in the fall I found out I was pregnant. My mom said, “After all of that job stress went away it was easy for you to get pregnant.” I had agreed with her. There was something really exciting about accepting a teaching assistantship position in the school of education. My assistantship came with insurance benefits which was a big perk. I felt like I was moving forward with my career—advancing to the next step—the PhD. I thought the timing was great since I would be working part-time and teaching one undergraduate course. I could rest at home as needed while I was pregnant and my day to day life would be relatively stress-free. Then I could stay home with the baby after he arrived.

I had also accepted a job teaching Advanced Placement Psychology courses to high school students through the state’s Virtual Public School. I would be teaching two online courses. The pay was pretty good but it was part-time contractual work and came with no benefits or retirement perks. I decided to work the two part-time jobs while I was working on my PhD. I figured I could easily manage. After all, I had always been really

good at multitasking. This work arrangement worked out fine the first year. Noah was an infant and he slept a lot leaving me lots of time to get work done. I became skilled at holding a sleeping baby and typing on the computer at the same time. The following year I agreed to teach an additional online course. I could manage teaching three courses online, one undergraduate course, completing research for a professor I was assigned to, and getting my coursework done for my graduate classes. Besides being really good at multitasking, I am also known for taking on too much responsibility. I tend to think that I can do it all and I underestimate how much time completing tasks will actually take me. That summer my division director called and asked me if I would be interested in teaching five online courses that year. I was stunned and excited at the same time. I accepted and I just hoped that I could manage. I knew that Noah would be starting preschool at the beginning of September so I could complete work for my online classes while he was there three times a week. I really wanted to work. I enjoyed it.

What I came to realize several months later is that I had really committed to more responsibility than I could handle. The Virtual Public School had just recently switched from using Blackboard to Moodle for the delivery of online courses. There were so many technology nightmares and operating problems that all of the teachers were spending twice as much time teaching their courses, grading work, and fixing problems in their courses than they had the previous year—for the same pay. The entire technology switch was a huge disaster for the school and many teachers broke their contracts and quit teaching when the problems became unbearable. But I stuck with it. However I was spending many hours a day teaching these courses. I started to dislike the enormous

amount of time I was spending on my computer. When Noah would go to preschool all I would do is work teaching my online classes and I would still not get what I needed to get done completed. Even with Noah attending preschool, there was still no free time.

As the year went on I started to have second thoughts and doubts about my work choices. I had always enjoyed working outside of the home. I especially enjoyed my previous job teaching high school social studies courses. But I was ready for a break when I decided to go back to graduate school. By a break I mean a change of pace, a less demanding schedule, and more flexibility. Teaching had been a big part of my identity and I really enjoyed the relationships that I had built with my students and colleagues. I started to really miss these types of interactions and relationships with others.

But at the same time, I had also always thought that if I could financially afford to I would like to stay at home with my kids when they were young. I just assumed that I would enjoy it and that every mom wanted to do this if they could afford to do so. That is what middle class moms do right? At first, right after Noah was born and I was working part-time, I thought of myself as a stay at home mother. I did work two part-time jobs but I thought of myself as a stay at home mom. People would ask me, “What do you do?” And I never really knew how to answer them. I found it was really difficult to explain that I was a doctoral student taking graduate classes and I also have a part-time assistantship at the university where I teach an undergraduate course and conduct research for a professor and I teach five online courses and I care for my son Noah. People looked at me like I was crazy when I tried to explain my work and motherhood responsibilities. So I found it easier to just answer with, “I am a stay at home mom and it

is a lot of work.” After answering career questions this way many times I began to wonder why I felt like there were only two options or categories: either a working mom or a stay at home mom. What about all of the moms and parents that work part-time? What am I—an in-between mom? What category did I fit into?

I started to feel trapped by my situation. Much in the way that I had trouble explaining my jobs, I had started to realize that I didn’t really like the juggling involved in working part-time and being a stay at home mom all at once. I was having a hard time being good at both jobs. I wasn’t happy. I was realizing that I never had enough time to finish my work much less work on my dissertation or have some free time for myself. I was finding that teaching online courses was extremely isolating—all contact with students was done online and via text message. I missed the person to person interaction that is such a big part of teaching. I was starting to re-think my current job situation and I began to notice things that I didn’t like about them—things that I had previously overlooked. I enjoyed my university teaching job and interacting with students face to face. But the pay was small and the insurance benefits turned out to be a form of emergency coverage. I was spending tons of money out of pocket on medical expenses for well baby care and immunizations for Noah which were not covered. It started to bother me that the Virtual Public School did not offer insurance and retirement benefits even though I was essentially teaching more classes online than face to face teachers and they are offered benefits. Since these part-time jobs had always been “fillers” or temporary positions meant to allow me to stay home with Noah for a while, when should I move on?

## **The Preschool Experience**

When Noah was 11 months old I was anxious to find him a good preschool. Being an educator, I knew how important being social with other kids is to cognitive development. I also desperately needed a break several times a week to complete my work for the online courses I taught, to work on homework, and to get work done for my graduate assistantship. It was the first week in February when I started looking for preschools and I was hoping to find something available right away. I spent hours at night after Noah was asleep searching and reading websites of local preschools and day care centers. I found that there were two main options for child care: full time day care that was geared towards parents that work full-time and part-time preschool programs that were geared towards one parent staying at home. I was not ready to put Noah in full-time day care so I focused on the preschool option. I went and toured two local church preschools. I met with the directors of both preschools which were about 10 minutes from my house. The first preschool, Pumpkin Preschool was associated with the local church that Austin's parents were members of. After emailing back and forth with the director, Joyce, Noah and I went to tour the preschool. We looked in all the classrooms which were small with 5-10 children in each class. The preschool was colorful and had lots of children's artwork hanging up. The playground was big and fenced in. I really liked Pumpkin Preschool and I was concerned about Noah even getting a spot for the fall semester starting in September. Joyce told me that registration for the fall started next week so I was hopeful that Noah would have a spot. The preschool offered classes for children aged 1 year old and up. Classes were scheduled as follows for Noah's age group:

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm for \$155 per month or Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm for \$130 per month. I couldn't believe the affordability of preschool. After touring the preschool I was relieved that there were some good options for Noah. But I wanted to make sure that there wasn't a better option in Apple Preschool.

Later in the week I met with the preschool director of Apple Preschool, another church affiliated preschool near our home. The director, Sharon was a teacher at heart and she gave a wonderful tour of the school. There were more children at this school and I liked it as well. The preschool offered classes for toddlers aged 1 year and up. The schedule option for this preschool was more limited with classes being offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:00 am to 1:00 pm for \$130 month. I sat in on a toddler class for a few minutes and I was concerned about the heavy focus on following the rules. I decided that I would try to get Noah a spot at Pumpkin Preschool for the following reasons: I liked the three day schedule better than the two day schedule at Apple, I didn't really care for the focus on discipline and rules at Apple Preschool and the playground was much smaller there, and I liked the toddler teacher better at Pumpkin Preschool. The location also played a role in my decision since Pumpkin Preschool is located right next to the Police Station and Fire Station while Apple Preschool is located in a less desirable area. I was very much looking for a place with small class size, a great teacher who interacts with the children, and a curricular focus on outside play, reading, art, and music.

The next week I showed up super early for preschool registration at Pumpkin Preschool. Since Austin's parents were members of the church we were allowed to

register Noah before spots were open to the public. I was thrilled to learn that Noah got the last spot for the Monday, Wednesday, and Friday classes. I had hoped for five day care but I also knew I would be lucky to get any spot at all at this preschool. Five day classes were not available but Noah did get three day care. I was very excited!

My parents and Austin's parents were glad that Noah would be going to preschool. Nana was especially excited because she had once served as a church preschool director and she knew this program was really good. I remember her commenting on the fact that I chose three day care instead of two day care like it would be too hard on Noah to go for three days a week. I was really glad that Noah would be attending preschool but at the same time I was disappointed that classes wouldn't start until September. It was going to be a long summer without any help with childcare.

As September was approaching I was getting really anxious about Noah going to Pumpkin Preschool. I had very mixed emotions about it. I knew it was a great school but I was worried about leaving Noah and him being upset when I left him. I had serious separation anxiety about leaving him since it was a new thing for me. I attended the Open House for his class and I met his teacher Mrs. C who was excellent. I also knew most of the mothers of the toddlers in Noah's small class of five children. After seeing that these other moms had enrolled their children in this program, I was even more convinced that I had made the right choice for Noah. I liked Noah's teacher who was formerly an elementary school teacher and she had several kids of her own. Preschool would be good for Noah and good for me.

Noah started preschool later that week and he really seemed to enjoy it. It was really hard for us the first few weeks getting adjusted to being apart from each other. I had to take a snack for the class once a month and Noah brought his backpack, a sippy cup, and a folder to school every day. For the first few weeks I really had a hard time leaving Noah and I was always super excited when it came time to pick him up. On days that Noah went to preschool we got up earlier than usual so that we could get ready and be at school by 9:00 am. I would pick Noah up at 12:00 pm and then we would go home to eat a quick lunch and Noah would usually nap after lunch because he was so tired from playing at school. He would be fussy and cry a lot when we would get home because he usually fell asleep in the car on the way home which would only make it harder for him to nap at home.

Noah made friends with the children in his class and we attended various events like birthday parties and lunches with his classmates. I loved the artwork Noah brought home from preschool. I could tell that he was learning and having a really great time at school. The preschool year ran from September to May. About three months after Noah started preschool I started to consider enrolling Noah in a full-time daycare program. The work for my online classes had become overwhelming. By the time I would take Noah to preschool and get home it was already 9:15 am and I would leave to pick him up at 11:40 am. That gave me about two and a half hours to get my work done three times a week. I could rarely get my work completed in that amount of time much less get any writing, researching, or chores done. When I had an appointment like a dentist appointment or a

hair appointment that would take up one of those days Noah was at school. I was still lacking enough time to get everything done.

Once I saw that Noah was fine and he liked going to school I started to focus on my own desires which involved going back to work full-time. We loved Noah's preschool and his teacher Mrs. C but I was starting to realize that this stay at home and work part-time mom gig was not working for me. I was disappointed that Pumpkin Preschool only had classes for several hours a day several times a week. What about parents that work part-time and need childcare for more hours? These feelings about going back to work and enrolling Noah in daycare aroused deep feelings of guilt within me. I kept thinking that I was an inefficient mother because I couldn't get everything done while Noah was at preschool. Was I doing something wrong? Would I be a bad or selfish mother if I did put Noah in daycare? What was I going to do after May when preschool ended for the year? How could I possibly finish my dissertation without any childcare during the summer? I had to think about what was best for me and what was best for Noah. This process picked up momentum when I began talking to other mothers who worked outside of the home.

### **“I Hate Stay at Home Moms”: Working vs. Being a Stay at Home Mom**

I was talking with a friend the other day and telling her that I was thinking about going back to work. I asked her about her daughter's experiences with daycare and if she enjoyed it. My friend Julie has a daughter about Noah's age and she works full-time and her daughter attends daycare. I wanted to ask her about her experiences. At one point in the conversation Julie said, “I hate stay at home moms. They are so judgmental of moms

that work and they act like we are making selfish choices by choosing to work. It's just ridiculous. I like working and my daughter enjoys her school. I am not a bad mother because I work." The funny thing is that even though I stay home with Noah and I have told people when they ask about my career that I am stay at home mom, I agreed with her to some extent. I don't really consider myself a stay at home mom anymore. This has changed based on my experiences. I work two part-time jobs and watch my son. What comes to mind when I think of stay at home moms are all of the images I would describe as stereotypical mothers. Julie was saying that she didn't like stay at home moms because they are so judgmental of working moms for putting their kids in daycare. She said that several of her friends that are stay at home moms have said thing to her like, "I would never put my child in daycare." I have heard this from many stay at home moms and sadly I think I've even said it myself when Noah was very young. I was starting to shift my beliefs about staying at home versus going back to work.

When Noah was a little baby I wanted nothing more than to stay at home and care for him all day. It was hard work but he was so fragile and I wanted to hold him and love him all day. But as he has gotten older I have gotten tired of staying home all day. I feel bored and like I am not providing Noah with a stimulating enough environment. How can I compare to a classroom with several toddlers and a teacher with all sorts of activities and fun toys and games? I like spending some time at home but I really want to go back to work. I think this has always been an issue for me because I remember several months ago applying for several full-time jobs. I would go back and forth with what I wanted to do. After all of this writing and reflecting I have finally come to realize what has been

dictating my decisions. I have refused to go back to work or put Noah in daycare because of these unquestioned beliefs about what a good mother should do and because of my own issues. I felt like if I put Noah in daycare I was somehow a failure. I really wanted to prove to myself that I could be a happy stay at home mom. I wanted to be like the moms on TV. If I spent so much of my time caring for someone that needed me then maybe I wouldn't have to confront my own issues. It seemed like I was unhappy with all of my decisions.

After months of frustration and unhappiness I have started to realize some of the reasons why I haven't gone back to work. I think a big part of the dilemma (or non-dilemma) for me is economic. Many mothers have to work for a living for economic reasons and do not have the same choices and options that I have. But in my case, my husband makes a decent living and I do well with my assistantship and my online courses so I do not have to work full-time. Because of this and the fact that I am still in graduate school it was an easy choice to stay at home. I was already working from home essentially. So when Noah was born it seemed like a perfect arrangement. Except that I am now overloaded with work and I have no help. I am also ready for day to day adult interaction with peers and co-workers. I feel isolated. I really want to go back to work in some capacity. I want an office—my own space. I really want some independence from motherhood. Does that even make sense? I want to be able to do things on my own. I am tired of having to beg for help in order to go to a doctor's appointment or get my teeth cleaned.

Maybe once I go back to work I will long for the ability to stay with my child all day. Maybe it is all just an illusion but I'm not sure. I have been praying about it and I think I am ready to go back to work. I want to go back to work but I have an enormous amount of guilt about the decision. I feel guilty for wanting to go back to work. I am worried I will regret the choice and miss Noah too much. I am afraid of missing important developments in his life if I go back to work. What if I make the wrong choice? What about childcare? Can I even find a place where they will take good care of Noah and teach him things?

### **I'm Ready to Go Back to Work Full-Time: Questioning My Beliefs about Motherhood**

After months of daydreaming about going back to work, I finally decided to make a change in my life. I have decided that I want to get my principal's license and work in a leadership position at a school. My parents and my in-laws have said the same types of unsupportive things, "You know how many hours a week those jobs take" or "Is that really what's best for Noah?" My husband has been very supportive of whatever I choose to do. He just wants me to be happy. I am finally feeling empowered by looking into full time daycare options for Noah. I am going to tour a private Christian daycare facility tomorrow morning. I've also put him on the waiting list at the university where I work part-time. I have been a bit stressed about when Noah should start and which school he should attend. My husband says he trusts my decision. Here is another decision made alone. I like that he supports whatever decision I make but I am still making the decision by myself. I am confident that I can find a good caring place for Noah to go. I just really

need a break. I've even started having second thoughts about having another child right now. I guess I feel like I am about to have a taste of freedom and independence after several years and I'm not so sure I'm ready to go back in to super responsibility mode.

A major factor in my decision to go back to work has been getting over my belief that a good mother must stay at home and always be with her child. I have really been questioning the idea about what is best for Noah. Are working moms bad moms? Are stay at home moms better? Am I a failure because I didn't particularly enjoy being a stay at home mom? If I am unhappy at home, then maybe I will be a better mother if I go back to work. Does Noah really need me the entire day each day? Will he be okay if someone else takes care of him during the day?

I have begun to question and challenge my own beliefs. I am starting to believe that working moms and stay at home moms are both good. It is really up to individual mothers and parents what they decide to do in their own lives. I believe that for me I need to go back to work. I am unhappy staying at home at this point in my life. I don't want to give up 10 years of my life in a career by staying at home when my son would probably be happier and have more fun in a school environment playing with other kids. I was put in daycare at 6 weeks old and I turned out okay, right? I still feel like I have to convince myself that I am not making a selfish decision. The guilt is hard to swallow.

I am learning and finding out that I do not subscribe to these cookie cutter traditional characterizations of motherhood and I will not continue to live my life as if I do. I am starting to challenge my own beliefs and expectations by going back to work and putting my child in daycare. I will always do what is best for my child but I must also do

what is best for me and my own well-being too. I know that I will be judged by other moms and family members because I am choosing to go back to work full-time but I cannot worry about that. I must be true to myself. I cannot continue to let others' expectations and my own conditioned beliefs determine my decisions. I want to get my identity back outside of being a mom.

### **From Preschool to Daycare: Choosing Education for Noah**

I made the decision to add a principal's license to my PhD. I would have to take four additional courses and complete a year-long full-time principal internship. I applied for the certificate program and was accepted. Now I had to find a place to complete my principal internship. The school I had taught at for three years, Northern High School is only a few minutes from my house and the principal there is awesome. Dr. Sanders has over 30 years of principal experience and I decided I would go and meet with her about the possibility of completing my principal internship at Northern High School the following year. Before I met with her, I had already emailed the daycare director at Friendly Education Center. Friendly Education Center is a private Christian daycare facility about 15 minutes from our house. Martha, the director had told me that there would not be a spot available until the end of May for a child of Noah's age. I would need to put him on the waiting list if I wanted to reserve the spot. That meant I would have to wait about 6 months to get a spot for him there.

I decided I would first go and tour Friendly Education Center and see what a daycare center really looked like and how children interacted with the teachers and each other in the classroom. I wanted to check out the place before reserving a spot for Noah. I

arrived at Friendly Education Center for the scheduled tour. Martha was out sick so her assistant director Carol gave me the tour. I didn't really care for this woman because she couldn't really answer any of my specific questions. Carol showed me several different aged classrooms. All of the classes Noah's age were outside playing on the playground. I was disappointed I couldn't really see the toddlers in action in a classroom. This was my first tour of a daycare facility and I wasn't really sure what to think about it. I noticed that all of the rooms were so clean and organized. I had expected to see toys everywhere and lots of playing. I said to Carol, "These rooms are so tidy and everything is put away. Do the kids get to dump the toys out and play freely?" She said, "Yes they do play but they have to help clean up before going outside on the playground." I noticed in several of the older classroom that some of the teachers were just talking to each other and not really interacting with the kids.

After leaving Friendly Education Center I was disappointed. I started having conflicting thoughts about putting Noah in daycare. I would miss him so much. I went to see my mother after visiting the daycare and I told her I wasn't sure about it and how all the classrooms were so clean that they looked unused. She gave me some very good advice telling me, "You need to go and look at several different daycare centers because this is the only one you've seen. You don't have anything to compare it too. My guess is you will change your opinion after looking at some other places." I also told my mother-in-law Nana about the experience and her response was the opposite, "Daycare is not good a good place for children. I am not surprised you did not like what you saw." Nana seemed shocked that I had actually gone to tour a daycare facility without telling her first.

She seemed very relieved that I was disappointed with the facility. I decided to wait a few weeks before making any decisions since there was a 6 month waiting list anyways.

A few mornings later when Noah was at Pumpkin Preschool I had arranged to meet with Dr. Sanders, the principal of Northern High School about completing my principal internship there the following year. Dr. Sanders gave me a big hug and was really excited to see me. I remember this meeting like it just happened yesterday because it served as a real turning point for me in deciding to enroll Noah in daycare and return to work full-time. I asked Dr. Sanders, “Will you allow me to complete my principal internship next year at Northern? Would you be willing to show me the ropes and teach me how to be a great administrator?” She smiled and responded, “We would love to have you back at Northern! You can definitely complete your internship here next year.” I was excited to hear her say that and we engaged in small talk for several minutes.

I started telling her about how bored and isolated I was feeling in being a stay at home mom. She nodded and agreed with me saying, “I completely understand. You need some intellectual stimulation and engagement. I put my son in daycare shortly after my maternity leave for the same reasons. I love working and the interaction with other people.” This was one of the only times another mother especially a mother that is much older than me voiced empathy with my situation. My mother had told me she understood why I wanted to go back to work. Most of the older women I had spoken to about motherhood had talked about how much they loved staying home with their kids and regretted that those years are gone. I felt like I had an ally in Dr. Sanders. She understood me. I also asked her if she would have any full-time paid positions at Northern High

School next year that were non-teaching positions. I was hoping to have a paid position in addition to completing my internship since it was not paid. Dr. Sanders replied, “No I won’t have any non-teaching positions open but you could come back and teach.” I looked at her surprisingly and said, “Teach what?” She smiled and said, “You could come back and teach AP Psychology courses.” At this point she turned to the principal intern that was in her office shadowing her that day and said, “Emily is an excellent social studies teacher. I cried when she told me she was leaving the school.” I smiled and said, “Thanks, but I don’t know. I haven’t been able to get Noah into a good daycare yet. I toured Friendly Education Center and they won’t have a spot until May.” Dr. Sanders gave me some childcare suggestions including the daycare where she enrolled her son. She told me, “Let me know if you change your mind. I may get allocated an additional position for next semester.” I told her okay and I left.

For the entire drive home and through the next week my head was spinning. I was very excited about the offer she had proposed. I was glad I could do my internship at the school but I kept thinking about going back into the classroom. Wasn’t that what I had left behind? Wouldn’t that be taking a career step backwards? I was very excited about the opportunity of going back to work full-time. I was also really looking forward to the chance to interact with students face to face again instead via online courses. This was a lot to think about.

It was the end of November and I decided I would think about going back to work and the daycare situation after Christmas and then I would make some decisions. Several weeks later I got an email from Martha at Friendly Education Center and she said that a

spot had opened up in Noah's age group if I was still interested in enrolling him. I couldn't believe it. I was still unsure about the whole daycare situation. I kept thinking that I would be a bad mother for putting Noah in daycare. I reasoned that I must make sure I put him in the best daycare if I do go back to work. So I made another appointment to tour Friendly and this time Martha was there to show me around. My experience touring the facility for the second time was completely different than the first visit. I got to see lots of children including Noah's age kids playing in the classroom and interacting with the teachers. Martha showed me the entire facility and introduced me to Noah's would be teachers. Martha was someone that could completely relate to my anxieties about putting Noah in daycare. She had four kids of her own and she answered all of my questions. I was especially concerned about the following things: training and experience of the teachers, the daily schedule, classroom activities and curriculum, time spent playing outside, quality of the food provided, the cost, and the location of the daycare. Martha answered all my questions and told me about how children usually adjust to full-time daycare after being in a preschool or stay at home setting. She really alleviated all of my fears about daycare. I also saw lots of "normal" looking parents and children at the daycare. I started to realize, good parents do put their kids in daycare. I began to see that these kids were just like Noah and they were happy and healthy and well adjusted and their parents worked. I was not being a bad mother by considering this option.

After leaving Friendly, I felt happy and relieved. This could work out after all. I called Austin and told him I really liked what I saw this time around. I decided to take my mother's advice and go look at other daycare centers before I pulled Noah out of

preschool and enrolled him in Friendly Education Center. My mother's advice was right on the money. I toured two other schools. The next school I toured was closer to our house. I could tell from the moment that I walked into the facility that it was not good enough for Noah. This daycare was a dump. Maybe that is too negative of a description but it was messy and really unorganized. The director showed me around and I asked her a bunch of questions. The fact that there was already an opening at this daycare concerned me since most of the places I considered to be good daycare facilities had waiting lists. She opened the door to the room that Noah would be in and there were several kids playing on the floor in gated areas. I was horrified. I kept thinking the toddlers were put in small boxes and not allowed to move all over the big room. I left and thanked the director for the tour telling her I would be in touch. I called my husband and told him about how awful this daycare was compared to Friendly Education Center.

I decided to tour one more school. I visited Vision Montessori School and met with the director. The website for Vision Montessori School is awesome and shows lots of pictures of kids doing fun projects and playing outdoors. I had always been interested in Montessori education and philosophy and I really liked the focus on caring for the whole child and teaching independence. This school is about 30 minutes away from our house and it is very expensive. It costs twice as much as Friendly Education Center and is twice as far away. But it is a really great school. I was willing to make whatever sacrifices necessary to get Noah in the best school. I also was struggling with the guilt associated with putting him in school or daycare to begin with so I was prepared to make any necessary sacrifices to ensure he was enrolled in a great school.

Vision Montessori School was a wonderful school. I spoke with the toddler teacher for awhile asking all sorts of questions about the curriculum and day to day schedule. I really liked the school but there were some major drawbacks. The driving distance was an issue. Friendly Education Center was 5 minutes from Austin's work and 15 minutes from our house while Vision Montessori School was 30 minutes from both locations. The cost of Vision Montessori School was very high. Parents were also required to send lunches and snacks with their kids each day. That meant a lot more work and preparation in the mornings. I knew who would be responsible for packing Noah's lunch—me. Perhaps the biggest drawback of Vision Montessori School was the schedule. The school provided care from 8:30 am to 2:30 pm and was out for the summer. You could pay for additional care provided by other caretakers working part-time for the school for an hour in the morning before school and for several hours after school. These would not be the regular classroom teachers. I spent a long time thinking about enrolling Noah in Vision Montessori School. But I realized that the schedule at the school was more like the schedule of Noah's preschool. It was designed for children who have a stay at home parent. If I got a job where I was required to work in the summer months then I would have no childcare for Noah. I also didn't think Austin and I could afford this school.

I told my mom that she was right about looking at other daycare centers. My whole perspective changed after seeing a bad daycare center. I shared with her my thoughts about Vision Montessori School and Friendly Education Center. She agreed with me about the drive, schedule, and cost being major problems with Noah attending

Vision Montessori School. I told Nana about Vision Montessori School and she said, “I visited that school a long time ago when I taught kindergarten and I did not see anything at that school that I would like to use in my own classroom. The environment was too structured and rigid.” I had not told her yet that I had gone back and re-toured Friendly Education Center.

Austin and I went out one night and met some friends of ours at a local restaurant. My friend Karen is a teacher at the childcare center at the local university I work for. She teaches at the same facility that has the 1-year-plus waiting list and is almost impossible to get your child into. I told her about how I had been looking into going back to work full-time and that I was having a hard time deciding which daycare to choose for Noah. Karen told me, “I really liked Friendly Education Center when we were looking for a spot for our son. We decided to enroll him at the university childcare center since I work there but I liked Friendly Education Center too. They have a really great program there.” I was really excited and relieved to hear her say this. Karen is a good mother and she teaches at a daycare for a living at one of the best schools in our city. If she liked the place, then it must be good. I spoke with another one of my friends who had recently had a baby and then had gone back to work 4 months later. When I was talking about struggling with the decision about going back to work she told me, “I was really ready to go back to work after 4 months of staying at home with my son. Working outside of the home makes me a better mother.” I thought about what she said. I finally started to have some confidence in my decision and some of the guilt associated with going back to work was fading.

I told Austin about the conversations with my friends. After many discussions, we decided to enroll Noah in Friendly Education Center. I completed the lengthy application and delivered it to Martha along with a deposit for Noah. Noah would start daycare in 2 weeks. I was both anxious and relieved at the same time.

Now that I had officially enrolled Noah in another school I knew I had to notify Pumpkin Preschool and let them know that Noah would be leaving their program. I felt really bad about him leaving in January and not staying until May. After days of avoiding it I emailed the director Joyce to let her know that Noah would be leaving the school. I also typed up a letter and put it in Noah's red school folder in his backpack that same day so his teacher Mrs. C could read it while he was at school. It was easier writing to explain why we were leaving instead of telling her in person. I knew Mrs. C would be sad that Noah was leaving. I think Noah was her favorite student. I'm sure all the parents think that though. I spent an entire day trying to plan how to break the news. I didn't know how to explain Noah's exit from the school. Should I say, "I don't enjoy staying at home with my child and your preschool doesn't provide care for enough hours each week. I can't get my part-time work done and I really want to go back to work." No, I didn't like that. It wouldn't sound good. I decided to just tell them that I had to go back to work full-time for economic reasons. That sounded better. It sounded too selfish to say that I really wanted to go back to work full-time even though financially I didn't have to do so.

The preschool director assured me that she understood and said that a child on the waiting list would be given Noah's spot. Hearing this made me feel better. Some other stay at home mother would be given a few hours to herself several days a week. She

would be very happy no doubt. When I picked Noah up from preschool that day, Mrs. C and I talked for a long time. She was practically in tears because Noah was leaving but she understood. I was touched to know that she really cared for my son Noah. Mrs. C knew that I loved the artwork Noah brought home so she said, "I am going to have Noah make you so much artwork before he leaves." I was going to miss Mrs. C and I knew Noah would too. I hoped that his teachers at Friendly Education Center would be this good. On Noah's last day at Pumpkin Preschool his class of five toddlers had a going away party for him. It was the sweetest thing. His friends hugged him and said good-bye. Mrs. C said her good-byes too and she gave Noah a going away present to take home. She gave Noah some books and stickers. He was thrilled. I was moved to tears when I opened his red school folder and saw what else she had made for him. Mrs. C had made a book for Noah out of green construction paper titled "Pumpkin Preschool Toddler Class 2012". Noah's name was on the cover and on each page she had glued photographs that she had taken of Noah and his friends at school. It started out with pictures of his first week in preschool all the way until his last week there. There was a sticky note on another piece of artwork that said, "This is for Noah." On a red piece of construction paper she had written, "This hand will hold my heart forever." There were shapes of a hand and a heart on the paper surrounded by red paint. It was the sweetest thing. Noah definitely had a wonderful preschool teacher in Mrs. C. I hoped that she liked the thank you card I gave her as much as I had enjoyed the gifts from her.

### **Sharing the Decision with Family: Dealing with Approval and Disapproval**

I visited my parents' house and told them that Noah was starting daycare at Friendly Education Center in a few weeks. Both my mom and dad were supportive of my decision about daycare. My mom said, "Good. Noah will be fine. It will be an adjustment for him but you will be able to tell if he is unhappy. You are making the right choice." I knew my parents would be supportive of my decision because my two brothers and I went to daycare from 6 weeks on and we all turned out okay. For my mother, daycare had been part of her own mothering and she had experience with it.

I was anxious about how to tell Austin's parents, especially Nana. I knew that she would not approve of us sending Noah to daycare. Austin knew that I was worried about how to break the news. The last time we had discussed childcare options with his parents I had shared my negative thoughts about Friendly Education Center after my initial visit. We were going to eat dinner at my in-laws house the next night so Austin and I decided we would tell them then. Since Nana usually watched Noah for a few hours on Tuesdays while I taught my undergraduate course we knew she would have thoughts about changing the arrangement in addition to opinions about daycare itself.

The next night we arrived at my in-laws' house for dinner. I figured that Austin would tell them after dinner maybe right before we made our exit so we could have a good night before breaking the news. But he had other plans. We came in the house and said our hellos. Nana was cooking the meal in the kitchen and Austin's father was going through the mail. I was sitting at the dinner table drinking a glass of red wine. Austin was playing with Noah on the kitchen floor. Suddenly, out of the blue my husband blurted

out, “Noah’s starting school at Friendly Education Center in two weeks.” I almost spit out my wine in shock. I couldn’t believe how he just blurted it out like that. Nana gasped, “What?” Then Austin proceeded to share with them about how I had returned for another visit and looked at other schools for comparison. After the initial shock wore off, Austin’s parents were quiet for awhile. They were visibly angry with me. They knew I was the one that decided it was time for daycare. How dare I put Noah in daycare! Austin’s dad kept saying, “Nana’s been replaced.” He must’ve said it five times. This comment infuriated me since she was only watching him for a few hours each week and she hadn’t offered to keep him additional hours even when given the opportunity. Nana was upset with me for several weeks. She never said mean things directly to me about the decision but she acted disappointed and made comments insinuating that Noah wouldn’t like daycare. I felt like she wanted me to be a stay at home mom just like she was. But the reality is that I am my own person and I need to mother in the way that is best for us. Austin joked for the next few weeks by saying things like, “My parents don’t like you anymore” or “They are still mad at you about daycare.”

The in-laws eventually came to terms with the decision we made for our son but it was a bumpy ride for sure. What was important was the fact that I knew I was making the right choices for both Noah and myself. As soon as Noah had gotten a spot at Friendly Education Center I had felt a huge weight lifted off of my shoulders. I was finally going to get some help with childcare. This feeling of relief was paired with feelings of guilt but I was learning how to get over these feelings.

### **Making the Transition: Switching from Preschool to Daycare**

I took Noah to visit his new school several days before his official start date. I wanted to meet his teachers and give him a chance to see his new classroom and meet some new friends. I met his teachers Mrs. Bonnie and Mrs. Cheryl. They seemed really nice and caring. Noah played with toys on the floor for about an hour. He met some of his classmates and he seemed like he really enjoyed it. Noah cried when we left. Several days later I drove Noah to Friendly Education Center, what we call at home “Big School.” It was his first full day. I was extremely anxious about it. I took Noah in and stayed with him in the room for several minutes. Noah acted kind of scared and anxious like he wasn’t sure what was happening. I noticed his teachers had already made him a cubby labeled with his name in big block letters. Noah was clinging to my leg and I knew he was going to cry when I left the room. Eventually I handed him to Mrs. Cheryl and she held him while he screamed. I left the classroom and I could hear him crying all the way down the hall. It was really hard for me to leave that day. I knew he was scared and he was probably wondering where I had gone. I cried the entire car ride home. What had I done? Did I do the right thing?

For the first few days Noah was enrolled in daycare I really didn’t know what to do with myself. I felt lonely and I really missed him. I would constantly check the clock to see if it was too early for me to pick him up. I checked my phone to make sure the daycare hadn’t called about Noah. I definitely suffered from separation anxiety. I had finally gotten some time to myself to get my part-time work done and now I was bored. The house was too quiet. The sweet noises of laughter during the day were now gone.

After about three weeks Noah stopped crying when I dropped him off at Big School. He started to get really excited about going in the mornings. We've had a wonderful experience with his teachers and the staff at Friendly Education Center. Noah has made lots of friends in his class and he takes a two hour nap there every day. I think his napping at school is a result of peer pressure or maybe he was just doing what the other kids were doing. He is learning all types of things including his numbers, shapes, and colors. It has really been fun watching him come home and share the things he has learned at school. I know I made the right decision about enrolling Noah in daycare. I had been so worried about making the decision and following through with it but it turned out to be the right thing for our family. Noah is happier in daycare, I am happier, and I am a better mother now.

### **Changing Career Directions: High School Teacher with a PhD**

Three weeks after Noah started daycare, Dr. Sanders emailed me. She said, "I received funding for an additional social studies teacher for the spring semester. Are you interested in teaching AP Psychology at Northern next semester?" I couldn't believe it. I hadn't even contacted her to let her know that Noah had gotten a spot in daycare yet. I was still adjusting to the new arrangements. So much was changing at one time. I needed some time to adjust to these changes. But I was really excited after getting her email. I wanted to go back to face to face teaching. I was craving interaction with students again. I responded and told her I was interested. Then I went to meet with Dr. Sanders. After meeting with the principal, I was re-hired at Northern High School. I had to wait a few

weeks for all of the paperwork to get done by the school system. I was scheduled to start teaching in the middle of February.

For the next month I was both anxious and excited about returning to work full-time. I worried about whether I would be able to manage all of my motherly responsibilities in addition to working full-time. What would I do if Noah got sick? Would I be able to find a substitute teacher when he was sick? I worried some about these things but I was mostly excited about working again. I felt like my pre-baby identity had been resuscitated. I had really missed teaching high school students. I started getting out my boxes of school stuff including lesson plans and activities. I was having so much fun going through my stuff again. I knew I had made the right decision. Most of my family members were supportive of my choice to go back into the classroom. Austin was excited that I was so happy about it.

In February I returned to Northern High School and resumed teaching AP Psychology courses. I really enjoyed being back in a full-time teaching position. I was excited to get up and get ready every day. I no longer felt isolated teaching online classes at home on my laptop. I was amazed at how much I remembered from when I taught social studies before I left for graduate school. I was laughing, smiling, and building relationships with students again. I was so relieved to be back in my element teaching high school.

The one thing I struggle with is the idea that I have gone backwards career wise. I left teaching in public education because I wanted to get a PhD and obtain a faculty position at a university. Somewhere along the way my career decisions took a detour.

After having a baby I found it really hard to write and publish. I started to doubt my abilities as a writer and a scholar. I started worrying about not being able to find a job because I didn't have any scholarly publications. My self-confidence in terms of my writing abilities has disappeared. I worry that I don't have what it takes to be a Professor. I hope that one day I will work as a faculty member but I am interested in working as a school administrator or principal too. I found that I am not really suited to teaching online classes. I love teaching face to face classes and forming relationships with students. This process was so different in virtual teaching.

This fall I will complete my PhD and I will return to Northern High School to begin a principal internship. I don't know what my role will be public education in the future. I am thinking I will be working in the school environment instead of academia. Maybe this will change when Noah gets older and I can focus on publishing. I now know that I will continue to work full-time regardless of how many additional children Austin and I have together.

### **I Want another Baby: Trying Again, My Miscarriage, and Hope for the Future**

Several months ago when I was describing all of the struggles and surprises about becoming a mother to one of my friends, she asked me, "Is there a possibility that you don't like being a mother?" I was shocked. I responded, "No. That is definitely not it. Becoming a mother has a very steep learning curve and nothing can really prepare you for the experience. Motherhood was just not what I expected." I thought to myself, "Motherhood is nothing like you see on television. In real life it is really hard. It's not

hard to love your child but the other stuff is hard. Learning how to become a parent is hard work. Negotiating a new role is difficult especially when there are so many conflicting views about what makes a good mother.” I have often thought about her original question. It is a valid question but it points to difficulty that women often have in even discussing their disappointments with motherhood. Just because I am baffled by the experience of becoming a mother doesn’t mean that I don’t also love being a mother. It’s just really hard to explain.

For the past year I have been trying to get pregnant again. Austin has been supportive because he wants another child too. It has been really hard not having success the second time around. I feel like a failure, like something is wrong with my body. Several of my friends have had babies recently and it’s been really hard for me even though I am happy for them. A month ago I started noticing changes in my body. I could smell faint scents strongly and I was really hungry and sleepy all of the time. I decided to take a pregnancy test just to see if I was pregnant. Austin was in the kitchen and I said to him, “I’m going to take a pregnancy test.” He replied, “Okay. I think that would be a good idea.” I was nervous taking the test because I didn’t think there was any way that I could be pregnant. I thought I had had my period a few weeks ago. I peed on the stick and to my surprise it came back positive. I didn’t believe it. I took three more tests and they all came back positive too. I was stunned and excited. Austin couldn’t believe it either. We had been trying so hard to conceive again and I had been pregnant for six weeks and didn’t even know. I began thinking back to when I found out I was pregnant with Noah. It had also been a shock and a surprise. But this time around I wasn’t as

shocked because we had been trying. I had been convinced that I was not going to be able to get pregnant again for some reason.

Austin and I decided that we would wait to tell our families after I went to the doctor to make sure everything was okay. All that night I couldn't sleep because I was so excited and anxious about being pregnant again. The next morning my mood changed when I saw blood in my underwear. I never had any type of spotting when I was pregnant with Noah so I was alarmed. I told Austin and he was worried too. I spent hours on the internet the next day looking up bleeding during early pregnancy. It didn't look good. Some websites said that some spotting in the first trimester was normal but bright red bleeding was not. I knew that these could be signs of a miscarriage. I kept thinking, "Can this really be happening? I just found out I was pregnant last night after trying to conceive for the past year." It was a Saturday so I knew I'd have to wait until Monday to see my doctor. I worried until Monday morning as I continued to bleed. I kept praying that my baby was okay and that nothing was wrong. I worried that I had done something to cause the bleeding. Was this my fault?

Monday morning I had planned on calling the doctor's office and scheduling an appointment for later in the day. But while I was taking a shower I almost fainted after seeing a large amount of blood and tissue. I stumbled out of the shower and lay in the bed in my bath towel next to Noah who was busy watching cartoons. I cried and tried to regain normal consciousness. I knew that I had lost the baby. The large amount of blood could not be normal. I called Austin and told him what had happened. He asked, "Do you need me to come home and take Noah to school?" I had told him, "No" since my doctor's

office is near Noah's school. I could handle this right? I went to my OB's office that morning. I had to wait a long time to be seen. It was awful sitting in the waiting room wondering if I was still pregnant. There were lots of other women waiting for checkups in the lobby. They were all visibly pregnant. I wondered how far along they were. I was envious. Finally the nurse called my name and I went back into the office to let her know what was going on. She was really nice and I could see that she was worried something had gone wrong. She had a beautiful drawing hanging on the wall in her office. It was a picture of her family and had obviously been drawn by one of her children. It was colorful and it showed all of her family members holding hands. I noticed she had three kids. I thought to myself, "I want to have more kids. Please, please let everything be okay." I think it was harder because I went to the appointment alone. I hadn't asked Austin to go with me. I kind of wished he had offered but I don't think he really understood the gravity of what was going on since it wasn't his body experiencing it. The nurse arranged for me to have an internal ultrasound. She took me to the room and I undressed from the waist down. She said, "The doctor will be in soon."

The doctor, Dr. James came into the ultrasound room and I could tell he was concerned. He asked me about the bleeding and told me that some women do have spotting early on in pregnancy. This was nothing like the internal ultrasound I had had with Noah. This was different. Dr. James used the ultrasound wand to look and see if there was anything in my uterus. The room was dark and the nurse was holding my leg in a comforting way. Dr. James said right away, "This is more than just spotting" when he began the procedure. I had a knot in my stomach and I wanted to cry. It was quiet in the

room while he was looking for signs of life. Finally he said, “There is nothing here. It looks like the baby has passed. I am sorry. The good news is it doesn’t look like you have an ectopic pregnancy but I am not 100% sure.” Dr. James told me that a tubal pregnancy or an ectopic pregnancy happens when the embryo implants outside of the uterus. This can cause really bad complications for the mother and the pregnancy has to be terminated because the baby cannot grow outside of the uterus. I was still processing what he had told me about losing the baby and now I was worried about these other complications.

Dr. James ordered some blood tests to check my hormone levels and told me he would call me the next day. He also gave me a big hug and said, “I am really sorry. I think you already knew this had happened.” He was right. I did have an intuition that the baby had not made it. Now that I knew for sure, I felt like a part of me had died. Dr. James told me, “Early miscarriages are the body’s way of terminating a failed pregnancy. There was probably something wrong and its better this way.” Despite this, I still felt guilty like I had done something to cause my body to abort this baby. I left the office and I called Austin. I cried and told him what had happened. I also called my mother and told her about it. She was comforting. Everyone made the comment that, “At least you know you can get pregnant again.” This was true but it was not comforting at the time. I was mourning the loss. Thankfully I had only had a few days to get excited about being pregnant before finding out I had lost the baby.

I had to go to work immediately after my doctor’s appointment. I had to maintain the facade that I was okay. The school was hosting a PTA luncheon for the teachers and the staff since it was the end of the year. I knew I was expected to go but I had just had

this traumatic morning. It was strange because I didn't want anyone other than my family to know what had happened. I was embarrassed. I'm not sure why I was embarrassed. After crying for a while and getting myself cleaned back up, I went to work and attended the required functions. I smiled and talked to colleagues. It was so weird because I kept thinking, "I wonder if they can tell I just had a miscarriage." It's not like breaking your arm or getting into an accident where there are visible wounds and injuries. I was walking around as if nothing had happened yet I had lost a pregnancy that morning. After eating and visiting with other teachers, I went home early.

Austin picked up Noah from school that day and he gave me a big hug when he got home. He told me, "We will keep trying." He also told me about all of his colleagues at work whose wives had had miscarriages. Austin and I dealt with our loss in different ways. I kept my suffering to myself and only discussed it with him and my family. Austin shared what had happened with his friends and co-workers. After sharing the loss with men at his work almost all of them stated that their wives had had a miscarriage too. I was comforted by this fact in a strange way. I was sad that they had gone through the same experience as me but I felt a little better knowing it was not just me who had lost a baby. Both Austin and I were shocked at how many women had had miscarriages. Why does no one ever talk about it? Then I thought about how I had not talked about it either. Maybe it is just too painful. For the next few weeks I noticed every pregnant woman in public and thought about my loss. I wondered if they could tell I had had a miscarriage. I wondered if they had had a miscarriage. I kept all of these thoughts to myself. After all I was very good at keeping secrets especially when I feared they would embarrass me. My

doctor called me a few days later and told me my blood results were good and he didn't think I had a tubal pregnancy.

Time is a great healer. After several weeks, I got over the loss and I was anxious to get pregnant again. I am hopeful that we will conceive in the next few months and I am optimistic that when we do the baby will be healthy and make it to term. I can only hope for this. Maybe when work resumes in the fall I will be able to get pregnant again because I will not be so focused on getting pregnant. I want Noah to have siblings and I have finally gotten the hang of being a mother. I am enjoying being a mother now that I have had the experience and I have adjusted to my new role.

### **Conclusion**

One of my professors once said, "Parents send us their best" when talking about parents doing the best that they can for their children and preparing them for school. I think that mothers do their best too given the support and resources available to them. My journey getting pregnant, having my son Noah, learning how to mother in a society that has certain beliefs about mothers, finally deciding to go back to work full-time, and trying to have another baby has been a roller coaster ride. As these autoethnographic stories indicate, I have learned so much about myself and the culture in which I live in becoming a mother. The journey will continue on and my hope is that in sharing my stories other people will better understand what it is like to become a mother and to face life changing decisions and situations. I realize that other's experiences will be different and that is what makes life interesting. But my experiences and stories shed light on some interesting and disturbing cultural issues concerning motherhood, the status and rights of

women, and the way that our society in general functions. The next chapter focuses on the themes found in these autoethnographic stories. I will discuss expectations, experience, and ideology focusing on the key themes. Let the dialogue begin.

## CHAPTER V

### THEMES & REFLEXIVE THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Narratives exist at different levels. They are individual stories emanating from personal experience and reinterpreted and reconstructed over time and in different contexts. They are also collective stories of discernible groups in wider society, which provide the contours of the available and, importantly, acceptable cultural scripts. It is important then to note the cultural dimensions of narratives.

-Tina Miller, *Making Sense of Motherhood*

#### Introduction and Overview of the Chapter

This chapter presents and discusses the major research findings and themes found in the autoethnographic data. Selected journal entries and autoethnographic stories are used to support the research findings. I also examine absences and silences in the autoethnographic data—what remained hidden/what was kept secret. The excerpts of journal entries provide an in-depth look at my day to day experiences becoming a mother through selected passages written during a 13 month period. The autoethnographic data in the form of stories, vignettes, and journals are woven throughout the chapter with reflexive theoretical analysis. The themes and reflexive theoretical analysis that follows are presented in the form of epiphanies. An epiphany is a realization, a moment of insight where I discovered something new about myself and the cultural structures and institutions that shaped my experiences. Some of these moments of insight happened through the process of writing and others only came to light after deep analysis of my

autoethnographic stories and the silences emanating from my storytelling. Chapter Four focused on sharing descriptive autoethnographic stories and this chapter reflexively analyzes these stories and their silences using theory. The reflexive theoretical analysis focuses on eleven epiphanies that came to light after deeply analyzing the autoethnographic data. The themes—whether *present* or *absent* in the autoethnographic data—are presented as epiphanies. The themes and epiphanies discussed in the analysis include:

- 1) Epiphany #1: My expectations of motherhood were shaped by two forces: portrayals of mothers in popular culture artifacts such as television, movies, magazines, advertisements, and traditional cultural stories/discourses; and my own experiences learning from my mother and my mother-in-law.
- 2) Epiphany #2: I did not talk about my battle with depression despite the fact that it impacted my experiences of motherhood.
- 3) Epiphany #3: Throughout the process of telling autoethnographic stories about motherhood, I was silent about the intersectionality of gender, Whiteness, privilege, and power in my own experience. These positionalities were hidden/invisible and functioned in hegemonic ways.
- 4) Epiphany #4: I subscribed to discourses of essentialism and felt like I had to “obey” medical experts.
- 5) Epiphany #5: I practiced maternal gatekeeping and limited my support from others while at the same time blaming other mothers for not being more supportive. My unexamined practices of maternal gatekeeping affected the childcare support I received as well as my assessments of the support.
- 6) Epiphany #6: I subscribed to attachment theory beliefs and the ideology of intensive mothering. These beliefs shaped my behaviors, experiences, and choices as a mother.
- 7) Epiphany #7: Motherhood is really expensive, even for a privileged middle-class White mother with health insurance.

- 8) Epiphany #8: Getting a PhD and becoming a mother is really hard to do.
- 9) Epiphany #9: Going back to work full-time forced me to open the maternal gate to institutionalized childcare/daycare. My background as a teacher shaped my educational decisions for my son.
- 10) Epiphany #10: Technology operated as a double bind in my experiences becoming a mother. Technology was both empowering and oppressive.
- 11) Epiphany #11: Mothers exclude, judge, and reproduce dominant gender ideologies through their surveillance of other mothers. This surveillance takes place under the guise of friendly conversations about their children.

I begin the chapter by briefly describing the process of writing journal entries on a day to day basis since the journals are used as supplemental data to support some of the themes. Excerpts from the personal journal entries are used in this chapter as an additional form of autoethnographic data and as a way to further support the research themes.

I start the analysis of the themes by discussing my expectations about motherhood prior to having a baby. My pre-baby expectations were largely rooted in the ideologies of intensive mothering, attachment theory, and essentialism. My expectations about motherhood were shaped by portrayals of mothers in popular culture and the media and my own experiences learning from my mother and my mother-in-law. I discuss self-reflexivity and the ways that my expectations differed from my experiences and the ramifications of these contradictions. I focus on the importance of reflexivity in my analysis of the research findings. I describe the significance of being vulnerable as a researcher and the process I went through as I realized that I had kept certain things secret and silent in my writing of personal stories. I discuss how the writing process allows one

to discover things they did not previously know and how I had unconsciously guarded certain secrets and unintentionally left certain aspects of my experiences invisible. I disclose my past and current battles with depression discussing the possible reasons I remained silent about this part of my life. I theorize the impact of depression on my experiences becoming a mother.

Then I discuss the intersectionality of gender, Whiteness, privilege, and power in my experiences. The intersectionality of these social positionalities greatly affected my experiences of motherhood yet at first glance they seemed invisible and they functioned in hegemonic ways. My social positionality in regards to race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion are explored paying special attention to the ways that my social positioning and privilege impacted my internalization of specific motherhood ideologies. After examining my social positionality, I explore the strength of mothering ideologies in my own life as evidenced in the data. I look at the ways that I subscribed to and challenged the ideologies of essentialism and how I tended to defer to the experts for medical and childrearing advice.

I discuss how I practiced maternal gatekeeping by restricting who I allowed to help me care for my son. By limiting my support to certain people, I created a situation where I had less support available. I initially interpreted this as a lack of help on the part of others until I realized I played a role in the amount of support I received. My subscription to certain ideologies influenced my tendency to view certain people—mainly mothers—as the best caregivers for my child. My adherence to the ideology of intensive mothering and attachment theory is explored as I look at the power of guilt in my

decision making process. As I explore the ideology of intensive mothering in my own experience, I use Hays' (1996) concept of intensive mothering as "*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*" (p. 8).

I explain how expensive having a child is in contemporary American society. Despite my privileged position, the costs incurred as a result of having a child were quite surprising to me and the absorbent costs provides additional evidence of a society that devalues women and anything associated with children. Later in the chapter, I focus on the ways that graduate school and being a doctoral student impacted my role as a mother and my experiences in general. I talk about the difficulties of trying to do it all as a new mother and I reflect on the ways that my maternal gatekeeping affected my experiences as a PhD student.

I explore my internal mommy wars, a yearlong internal battle of deciding to go back to work full-time and enroll my son in daycare. I talk about the difficult educational decisions that I made for my son. I discuss the ways that technology functioned as a double bind in my experiences of becoming a new mother. And lastly, I describe the process I experienced where mothers exclude, judge, and reproduce dominant gender ideologies through their surveillance of other mothers. This surveillance of other mothers most often occurred under the guise of friendly conversations about each other's children. Chapter Four served as an introduction, a background to the analysis that takes place in this chapter. Throughout this chapter excerpts from stories and journal entries are used to explain the main themes in the data.

I conclude the chapter discussing my personal challenges in writing an autoethnography about motherhood and the difficult decisions involved in deciding what to share and what not to share in the research process. I reflect on the process and experience of doing and writing an autoethnography. I conclude by arguing that storytelling and autoethnography can be used to pull back the mask of motherhood. I preview the next chapter which focuses on the implications of my study based on the research findings.

### **Journaling Motherhood: My Day to Day Life**

The data collected for the autoethnographic research project was two-fold. In addition to writing autoethnographic stories about events that made a significant impact in my life, I kept a journal that detailed my daily experiences. I have shared portions of selected journal entries in this chapter to illustrate the issues and struggles I faced on a day to day basis in my journey through motherhood. Many of the themes apparent in the autoethnographic stories are woven through these journal entries making the struggles seem more fluid. Journal entries are presented to provide additional support for the major themes found in the research.

Inductive analysis was used to search for patterns within the autoethnographic stories and journal entries. As the stories were analyzed I looked for “patterns of cultural experience – repeated feelings, stories, and happenings” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277). Several main themes emerged from the autoethnographic data. This chapter focuses on these major themes and their analysis. Excerpts from my journal entries and autoethnographic stories are used to provide examples of patterns and meaning within the

data. In addition to looking for patterns within the data, I analyzed the absences and the silences in my storytelling.

Ellis et al. (2011) argue that writers can use storytelling processes of “showing” and “telling” to convey to the reader what they experienced. The previous chapter presented autoethnographic stories as a way of *telling* about what happened in my life. The inclusion of journal entries in the analysis portion of the chapter serves the function of *showing* the audience various day to day experiences. Throughout the process of coding for themes and pulling research threads from the data, I found that many of my decisions and struggles as a new mother were directly related to ideologies of motherhood that I had internalized. My lived experiences of having a baby and becoming a mother served as a catalyst which led to the questioning of previously unchallenged and even unacknowledged beliefs about what mothers are like and what they are expected to be like. As I struggled to be more like the idealized images of mothers I had internalized based on distorted media representations and experiences and stories I was told as a daughter and daughter-in-law, I realized that these were myths.

**Epiphany #1: Motherhood Expectations Shaped by the Media and My Background**

*Epiphany #1: My expectations of motherhood were shaped by two forces: portrayals of mothers in popular culture artifacts such as television, movies, magazines, advertisements, and traditional cultural stories/discourses; and my own experiences learning from my mother and my mother-in-law.*

The past two and a half years have been a real learning experience for me. I have learned so much about myself, others around me, and American cultural expectations. I

have found my expectations to be dead wrong about what motherhood is really about. I have spent a great deal of time thinking about what makes a good mother and my beliefs have shifted based on my own personal experiences becoming a mother. My expectations about what a good mother is and what she does were greatly shaped by the ideologies of intensive mothering, attachment theory, and essentialism. These ideologies influenced what I expected motherhood to be like. They also shaped the choices I made as a mother even though I didn't realize this at the time.

Prior to having my son, I had always believed that a good mother was selfless and stayed home and doted on her children all day. I explore where these beliefs came from and how they were reinforced primarily through media images and family modeling. This section of the chapter explores my beliefs about motherhood pre-baby up until Noah's 1<sup>st</sup> birthday. The following journal entry discusses my *pre-baby beliefs* about what good mothers are like and the choices they should make.

Lately, I have been thinking a great deal about what I consider to be a good mother. I guess these beliefs were always in the back of my mind and I have started to draw on them in my own life. I need to really think about what it is that I do believe—or what I believed—before Noah came along. I thought that good mothers did not work unless they had to for economic reasons. When mothers do work, they work from home while staying at home to care for their children. I really believed good mothers always do what is best for their children and they do so *willingly* and *selflessly*. Good mothers love staying at home with their babies and feel sorry for those mothers that have to go back to work for economic reasons. They take their kids to parks and have picnics. Good mothers have play dates with other good mothers. Good mothers have lots of fun and come up with creative activities for their children and always keep them engaged. Good mothers buy their children all sorts of educational toys and all the cutest outfits and the latest gadgets. Good mothers have really clean houses and lots of time to cook and clean. Good mothers have relatively stress free lives. They spend their days lovingly taking care of their families and this meets all of their own personal

needs. Good mothers post pictures of their children on Facebook doing fun activities daily. Good mothers do not need help or support because they know best.

Mothering is natural and instinctual to women. Good mothers breastfeed their children as long as possible loving every moment of it and feed their kids organic foods. Good mothers spend their days and nights with their children including letting them sleep with them. Good mothers do not need any time to themselves. Good mothers are content to have careers after their children get older and that is only if they choose to do so. Good mothers do not complain or have a hard time coping with motherhood because it comes natural to them. Good mothers and wives let their husbands play golf and do whatever they need to do for recreation because they work hard all day at work and need a break. Good mothers can do everything in the home by themselves including raising children, cleaning the house, making dinners, paying bills, and doing laundry. Good mothers are good consumers who buy all the right stuff for their kids especially when they can afford to do so. (Author's personal journal, May 20, 2012)

These beliefs had been internalized and I began to draw on them as I became a new mother. I didn't even realize I had subscribed to and internalized these beliefs. I realized that none of these things were true after Noah was a few months old. I had started to question traditional gender roles for men and women and the socially constructed categories of gender along with their accompanying expectations when I started my doctoral classes as this was a major focus of my studies. But for some reason I had not translated this knowledge into the realm of mothering. I believed that gender was socially constructed and that our patriarchal society and its perpetuation of stereotypical gender norms oppress women and men yet I did not realize that mothering had been so affected by this process. My views of mothering had remained unquestioned because I was not a mother and I had no experiential knowledge of what being a mother actually entailed. I believed that part of mothering was instinctual until I experienced it. It is as if

my views of motherhood were kept in a safe box away from the critical thinking I did about gender. I had held onto these beliefs and they remained unchallenged until I was forced to confront the fact that my own expectations were shaped by dominant discourses of mothering.

As I have struggled to be a good mother, I have come to know a *different truth* based on my own experiences with motherhood. I have questioned all of these beliefs and I have pondered where these beliefs came from to begin with. *Whose* beliefs are these really? After experiencing motherhood, I no longer believe these things. My beliefs about what a good mother should be came from lots of different places including my own parents, my mother and mother-in-law, and the media including magazines and popular culture movies. In my own family, my mother was always very caring and she took us and picked us up from school. My mother made our lunches, did the laundry, did the dishes, made dinner, and ran the household. My mother worked full-time for most of my childhood but after I was in elementary school she switched to part-time work so she could pick us up from school and have summers off when my brothers and I were out of school. My father was also very caring but he was the primary breadwinner of the house and he served as the disciplinarian if we got into trouble. He did chores typical of most fathers like mowing the grass and taking out the trash. I learned from my parents how traditional families operated within socially constructed roles of gender. Growing up I watched lots of Disney movies and I had internalized the view that I would one day grow up and marry my Prince Charming, have children, and live happily ever after. After getting married, my mother-in-law further reinforced notions of the good mother by

constantly discussing her choices as a mother with her own children and expecting me to choose the same mothering path she did.

I had never considered being a mother as challenging or difficult. My own mother seemed like a natural. I never saw her struggle with being a mom with me or my younger brothers when we were young. So as I struggled as a new mom to adjust to a role that seemed predetermined by certain expectations, I didn't really have any social scripts to relate my struggles to. I can only think of two scenes from movies I have seen where mothers struggled with motherhood. In these films the mothers had near breakdowns and they were pathologized. There is a scene in *Marley and Me* where Jennifer Aniston's character loses it because she has three kids and they are all crying at the same time while her dog Marley is barking at the mailman (Rosenfelt, 2008). She calls her husband and breaks down because she is so overwhelmed with being a mother and all of the responsibilities that go along with that.

The other scene that comes to mind is from the movie *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (Bruckheimer, 2002). The young mother, Vivi, played by Ashley Judd is overwhelmed and depressed and she leaves her children for several days after taking some pills prescribed by her doctor. She is portrayed as having abandoned her children and that is how her children remember it. In both films, the mothers are demonized for being overwhelmed. The women's inability to cope with their situations and their responsibilities as mothers who are expected to do it all are the causes of their own failures. Both women somehow cope and eventually redeem themselves in the films and become good mothers again. But nowhere in the movies is any deep questioning of the

structural or social factors that caused the breakdowns in these young mothers. And that is the problem. Mothers are portrayed as being naturally predisposed to caring and doing all of these motherly things and very little is done to question or challenge these beliefs and explore who benefits from these beliefs and how they affect mothers.

All of the movies and commercials on television show moms happily making dinners and playing all sorts of fun games with their children. Dads are always at work or shown coming home in their suit and tie with briefcase in hand just in time to join the family for dinner. Fathers are portrayed as a joke when it comes to childcare. Shared parenting is rarely addressed in media images.

There are no social scripts for shared parenting or caring fathers. Poniewozik (2012) argues that despite that fact that 20% of dads with children under the age of 5 are the primary caregiver, television shows portray fathers as clueless and unable to take care of children without the help of women. Poniewozik (2012) suggests that “the baby carrier is a symbol of a generation of dads—the Baby Bjorners—...who are doing more of the physical work of parenting” (p. 60). Poniewozik (2012) cites the films *The Hangover* and *What to Expect When You’re Expecting* as examples of popular culture movies that portray these images of inept fathers. Shows like NBC’s *Guys with Kids* and ABC Family’s *Baby Daddy* are TV sitcoms that also show fathers struggling to care for their children on a shallow and comedic level. Poniewozik (2012) argues that these portrayals of fatherhood suggest “an anxiety that the nurturing role turns men into girls” (p. 60). Gerstel and Gallagher (2001) argue that “gender itself as a structure, as a set of patterned social relations, is a powerful predictor of care” (p. 213). Gerstel and Gallagher (2001)

found that “wives are the gatekeepers for men’s involvement with kith and kin” and that “members of men’s extended families also affect the caregiving that they do” (p. 212-213). These findings suggests that gendered ideologies of caring have been internalized by men and women in society and that wives “pull men into caregiving” (Gerstel and Gallagher, 2001, p. 197).

Television shows that I watched after becoming pregnant reinforced gendered constructions of caregiving. I had frequently watched TLC’s popular show, *A Baby Story* when I was pregnant (Pendelton, 1998). I loved this show because it showed women prior to the birth, during the birth, and shortly after the birth. In the final part of the show titled “Bringing Home Baby” the new mom is shown adjusting to her new role as a mother. This part of the show is only five minutes long. The show neglects any discussion of what happens to the women as they become mothers in their everyday lives. The show makes it seem like the only real change or event is the transition from being pregnant to delivering the baby. After watching this show many times, I focused on the delivery and labor part of the story without any real thoughts about what happens after you bring the baby home.

I had also watched many episodes of MTV’s *Teen Mom* which follows teenage girls after they have found out they are pregnant (Dolgen, 2009). The girls on *Teen Mom* tend to be lower income and uneducated. The teen moms on the show are pathologized and are often portrayed as bad mothers or mothers that make irresponsible choices. This is perhaps the only show I had watched where the realities of motherhood are explored—the day to day realities of raising a newborn baby. *Teen Mom* sends the message that

raising a baby is hard if you are a teenage mom who gets pregnant accidentally or as a result of not being careful. There is no discussion about women that choose to get pregnant and how it is still hard to mother regardless of how old one is when they become a mother. The message is delivered that if a woman waits until she is old enough, out of college and married, becoming a mother is easy—but not for teenagers who make irresponsible choices.

Other mothers have contributed to my beliefs about how a good mother should be especially the belief that good mothers should stay home with their children. My mom went back to work after having each of her children but she always talked about how she wished she could've stay home with us (something that I am now somewhat skeptical of). My mother-in-law, Nana, chose to stay at home until all of her three boys were in elementary school and then she taught elementary school. She did this so her schedule matched her children's school schedules. Nana has made numerous comments to me about how a mother should stay at home with her children as if there as an expectation for all mothers to do this. Even though I am close with my mom and Nana, we never had deep discussions about what motherhood is *actually* like before or after Noah came along. Why is this?

I started to become very angry when I felt like I had been lied to about motherhood. Who are these women shown on television and in movies? Where are the *real* moms? Or is it just *me* that is different? Why is it that new mothers learn more about motherhood from television and movies than from their own mothers and other women that have children? I have found motherhood to be extremely oppressive—in fact it has

been nothing like the portrayals on television. In referring to motherhood, I am talking about my *expected role* as a mother and all of my expected responsibilities that go along with the role of being a mother. I feel like I have been expected to give up everything, all of my free time to care for someone else. I constantly felt like these ideas about what a good mother should be have been used against me to put me in a submissive box where I am made into something that I am not. I want to mother with the help and support of my family and others in society. I want to be a mother and have a career. I want to be defined in ways other than the fact that I have a child.

Mothers participate in spreading these lies about what motherhood is like; they participate in perpetuating the mask of motherhood. Maybe mothers just forget how hard it is. When older women with grown children ask me what I do and I tell them I stay at home with my son they say things like, “Oh those are the best years!” or “Oh I loved that time in my life.” I just smile and agree adding that it is really hard work. Why don’t they talk about the difficulties along with the joys? Are they embarrassed to admit that being a mother is hard work and challenging? I know these images of good mothers on television are not true and they make me angry because they make it harder for new mothers to be honest with one another about how physically and emotionally exhausting it is to care for a young child with little support from others. By little support I mean that I couldn’t always count on others to help me with child care. Help from family members was dependent on why I needed help, the nature of the help I needed, my articulating that I needed help, when I needed the help, and whether that worked with family members’ schedules. I had wished for help with child care that was previously scheduled like two

days a week having time to get part-time work done, go to the grocery store, or clean the house. I was disappointed that I always had to ask and make a big deal about help before I would receive it from family members. Later in the chapter I will explore other explanations about the perceived level of social support I received and my own role in the process.

I never questioned any of these beliefs about motherhood until my own experiences did not match up with these myths. I began to see these stereotypical gender roles being played out in my own home after my son was born. I became responsible for chores that were previously shared and I was angry that I didn't receive more help. My husband and I have had to deliberately push back against these expectations about what our roles should be and it has been a real challenge. Only when my expectations—which were greatly shaped by the media and my own upbringing—did not match up with my experiences did I start to reflexively question these accepted and internalized cultural beliefs about motherhood.

My background experiences were shaped by traditional notions of gender modeled by my parents and family members as well as patriarchal constructions of gender roles via the media. Feminist scholars are committed to exploring the ways that gender is socially constructed and communicated and they focus on self-reflexivity (Griffin, 2009). This chapter explores subject compilations that are “highly contextual, bound by the ideologies of the researcher, and deeply influenced by the social milieu from which they emerged” (Griffin, 2009, p. 391 ). I follow Frye's (1996) interpretation

of feminist method believing that using pattern recognition in analysis “opens new fields of meaning and generates new interpretative possibilities” for the researcher (p. 39).

### **Self-Reflexivity and the Disconnect Between Expectations and Experience**

Adkins argues that “self-reflexivity is where agency reflects on itself and there is increased self-monitoring” and this “takes place as a response to rapid transformations” (as cited in Miller, 2005, p. 140). Self-reflexivity happens as agency is set free from structure. Miller (2005) believes that “women’s agency has not been freed from structure but rather structural and material concerns continue to shape expectations and experiences” (p. 140). Miller (2007) argues that as everyday experiences of mothering “come up against the tenants of dominant discourses” confusion results and this confusion “can work as a catalyst prompting women to begin questioning” ideals of the good mother they previously subscribed to (p. 350). Somers (1994) suggests that as one’s personal experiences do not match up with dominant cultural ideologies, they construct counter-narratives (p. 631). As a woman becomes a mother, major changes take place in her life. Because of this “disruption” new mothers are in a unique position to be self-reflexive about their experiences with motherhood. For me, having a child and becoming a mother served as a catalyst for self-reflexivity and prompted me to question my beliefs about motherhood which had been deeply shaped by dominant discourses. Atkinson, Coffey, and Delamont argue

[Auto] ethnographers-as-authors frame their accounts with personal reflexive views of the self. Their ethnographic data are situated within their personal experience and sense making. They themselves form part of the representational

processes in which they are engaging and are part of the story they are telling. (as cited in Anderson, 2006, p. 382)

Being reflexive is not necessarily a given in the process of writing an autoethnography—authors have to work at it and be willing to be critical of the self. My autoethnographic stories by themselves as data were not very self-reflexive. In the process of analyzing the themes and the silences, the invisible/hidden themes, I was most reflexive. Anderson (2006) believes that authors should “openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships” illustrating that they are “fluid rather than static” in the social world (p. 384). Woven throughout the themes described in this chapter are constant periods of reflexivity where contradictions between my expectations and my lived experience led me to reflexively question my assumptions about my own mothering abilities and choices. I was most reflexive as I began to uncover the silences in my autoethnographic stories. It is important to remember that “personal experience stories are *made*” by researchers and storytellers (Langellier, 1999, p. 128).

### **Writing to Discover or Writing to Guard Secrets? Peeling Back the Mask**

It is in the middle of the night and I am sitting at my kitchen table writing. I have a pit in my stomach as the anxiety of writing about my own life is almost too much to bear. I once attended a symposium held by my department where a panel of recent doctoral graduates shared their experiences writing their dissertations. One of the panelists remarked that she went to Starbucks for coffee one morning and saw another doctoral student sitting in a corner typing and weeping. I was surprised by this comment and I thought to myself, “What could be so emotional about writing a dissertation?” I

comforted myself thinking, “That won’t be me. I can handle telling my story without being too affected.” I was wrong.

I set out to write an autoethnography that was reflexive in nature, one that disclosed my *true* experiences of motherhood. I learned a lot about myself through the writing of descriptive autoethnographic stories. I coded my stories for themes and wrote a nice and neat chapter about the major findings based on my stories about motherhood. I viewed writing as a process and a method of discovery as Richardson (2001) describes it. Richardson (2001) sees writing as a way to find out about yourself and your culture.

I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it. I was taught, though, as perhaps you were, too, not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined. No surprise, this static writing model coheres with mechanistic scientism, quantitative research, and entombed scholarship. (p. 35)

Richardson is right. Through the process of writing autoethnographic stories and keeping a journal about my experiences becoming a mother, I did find things out. I located recurring themes and patterns within my data and I thought I was done with my research.

Then my advisor sent me the first chapter of Behar’s (1996) *The Vulnerable Observer*. In reflecting on her own writing, Behar (1996) asks herself, “What, as she blithely goes about the privilege of doing research, is the story she isn’t willing to tell?” (p. 20). As I read these words I felt a pit in my stomach and anxiety consumed me. Why had my advisor sent me this article about vulnerability? Wasn’t I vulnerable enough? I had always been a very private person about my personal life. I kept thinking, “Did I give myself away? Does she know?” Behar (1996) talks about how Kay Redfield Jamison, a

successful professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University reveals her personal struggle with manic-depressive disorder in her memoir *An Unquiet Mind* (1995). Jamison says, “I am tired of hiding, tired of mispent and knotted energies, tired of hypocrisy, and tired of acting as though I have something to hide” (as cited in Behar, p. 10). Her words brought tears to my eyes. Now I was the one weeping. I knew about hiding and guarding personal secrets. I realized that I had remained silent about my own battle with depression in my autoethnographic writing. I kept my painful memories and struggles locked away, fearing that I would be judged or viewed as weak by my audience. Over a period of several days I re-read all of my autoethnographic stories and I noticed very different patterns—patterns of silence. Why hadn’t I written about my own depression? Why had I remained silent? What else was I silent about? What was I hiding? What was missing from my stories? Giddens argues that we consciously and unconsciously develop strategies to deal with the tensions between memory and forgetting to safeguard our own sanity (as cited in Poulos, 2008). Poulos (2008) suggests that

one of these strategies is a strategy of silence, the kind of silence that disrupts the story, a silence that keeps the narrative from being spoken—and thus defusing its power a little—a heavy, silencing silence that builds into a secret. A story told is a powerful thing that can unleash all sorts of grief; an untold story gives off at least the illusion of control. (p. 51)

Poulos (2008) argues that in order to mediate and avoid stigmatization from society when we do not fit into the category of normal, we develop a practice of “passing” for normal which rests on the practice of secret keeping (p. 52). After reading Behar’s (1996) article about vulnerability, I felt like I had been given permission to become more vulnerable in

my own research. In addition to analyzing patterns within the data, this chapter examines the *silences* in the data and uses feminist theory to interrogate the reasons for these silences. I explore what information I consciously/unconsciously kept secret/hidden from the research process as I examine the general findings from the data presented. Exploring the silences in the autoethnographic data helps to situate the pressures I felt through dominant perspectives of motherhood. I discuss additional themes found in the research and use a feminist framework to analyze these findings and make connections to the research literature.

The original research goal had been to share my *uncensored* account of becoming a mother. Since there were silences in the stories—details I did not disclose—I had not done such a good job of this. After realizing I had been silent on certain issues, I became more fascinated with the stories I did not share. Similar to Van Maanen's (1988) concept of a confessional tale where the description of what went on behind the scenes during the research is the primary interest, I realized that I had still not completely peeled away my own mask of motherhood. Dominant cultural ideologies of motherhood and my own positionality not only shaped my experiences and what I was willing to share; they also laid the blueprint for what I had not been willing to share.

A crucial aspect of writing an autoethnography is the commitment to critically examine the self and make oneself vulnerable. If refused to be vulnerable then I would continue to perpetuate the mask of motherhood. I realized the importance of sharing a key aspect of my experiences despite the fact that it is very difficult for me to do so. I

know that my vulnerabilities deeply impacted my experiences in ways that may diverge from and intersect with dominant discourses of motherhood.

**Epiphany #2: Disclosing My Vulnerabilities: Depression and My Fear of Failure**

*Epiphany #2: I did not talk about my battle with depression despite the fact that it impacted my experiences of motherhood.*

I have always been a perfectionist. When I was little my mother used to reward us for having straight A's with a report card surprise which was a toy we got to pick out from the toy store for maintaining good grades in school. My mom recalls that she said my brothers and I could have a report card surprise if we had good grades but I remember it differently. I thought I had to have straight A's. My mom says that this is one of many examples of me putting pressure on myself to be perfect. She is probably right. I always wanted to get perfect grades and do well in everything. I didn't get the athletic gene so I focused on academics as an outlet for being successful.

When I was a sophomore in high school I started having some problems. I suffered a bad breakup with a boyfriend. My confidence dropped, I started doing poorly in school, I wasn't motivated, and I was always sad. I was diagnosed with clinical depression and put on medication. I attended weekly counseling sessions. In 11th grade I dropped out of high school and did homeschooling. My depression got worse over time and I spent most of my days in bed sleeping or watching TV. For months I was suicidal. All I could think about was making my emotional and physical pain go away. I was taking the high doses of Zoloft for depression and Trazodone to help me sleep at night. By the time the anti-depressants kicked in I was so jacked up that I couldn't sleep at

night. I would lie in the bed watching *Lifetime* movies or infomercials all night. I hated myself and my life. I wanted out. I was tired of waiting for the medicines to fix me. I had been on medication for a year and I still wasn't better.

One night I decided that I was ready to say goodbye to my life. I had had enough suffering. I swallowed almost an entire bottle of Advil and lots of sleeping pills. I laid in the bed with the lights out listening to the song "When You Believe" (Edmonds, Schwartz, Carey, & Houston, 1998, track 1) sung by Mariah Carey and Whitney Houston. I listened to the song over and over as I cried my eyes out. The lyrics still cause me to cry.

There can be miracles  
When you believe  
Though hope is frail  
Its hard to kill

Who knows what miracles  
You can achieve  
When you believe  
Somehow you will  
You will when you believe

They don't always happen when you ask  
And it's easy to give in to your fear, ohh  
But when you're blinded by your pain  
Can't see your way safe through the rain  
Thought of a still resilient voice  
Says love is very near (Edmonds et al., 1998)

I had given up almost all hope yet I felt a connection to the song. I thought about my life and how I had ruined everything. I prayed to God that my parents wouldn't be too upset. I had selfishly convinced myself that everyone would be better off without me. I also

hoped for a miracle yet I wanted to die. As Wurtzel (1994) describes her own depression in *Prozac Nation*, she says

[I] can no longer combat whatever it is that was wrong with me in the first place. I feel like a defective model, like I came off the assembly line flat-out fucked and my parents should have taken me back for repairs before the warranty ran out. (p.1)

Wurtzel (1994) uses the metaphor of being “drowned by some kind of black wave” to describe her depression (p. 109). I felt the same way. I was in too much pain to continue on with my life. Wurtzel (1994) says

I will eventually be so crazy from this black wave, which seems to be taking over my head with increasing frequency, that one day I will just kill myself, not for any great, thoughtful existential reasons, but because I need immediate relief. (p. 109)

I only remember bits and pieces of what happened next. My parents filled in the gaps afterwards. I woke up sometime in the middle of the night choking on my own vomit. My dad woke up and came into my room. I was completely out of it and I told him that I had taken a bunch of pills. He took me to the hospital and I was admitted to the Emergency Room. At some point I woke up and I remember this doctor scolding me. He said, “You are very lucky young lady. We couldn’t pump your stomach because your body had already digested all of the pills you took. It is a miracle you didn’t die.” I just looked at him in disbelief. My dad was by my side. Hours later after I was stabilized I was moved to a hospital room. I was embarrassed about what had happened but my family was supportive. At that time there were state regulations that required adolescents to be admitted to a local in-treatment facility to be monitored until the psychiatrist released

them. I spent three days in this treatment center and it was an eye opening experience. I kept thinking, “I am not like these people.”

After going back home I began to put my life back together. I graduated high school early and enrolled in college. I was happy again and I tried to forget about my past battles with depression. My demons were a well kept secret. I excelled in college until my junior year. Then my depression came back to haunt me. As Wurtzel (1994) describes the return of her depression, “it chased me like a runaway train and clung to me like leeches” (p. 111). I took a semester off of college to regroup and get better. I managed to stay healthy and happy for many years. I felt like I had something to prove. I wanted to prove to myself and to my family that I could handle life. I was okay. I would be successful and overcome these obstacles. I wanted to be able to do everything by myself. I kept myself extremely busy all of the time always taking on too many commitments. In Wurtzel’s (1994) words, “I literally did not stop moving, never dared to slow down to think, too scared to find out what was there” (p. 111). When Noah was a year old my depression returned. I wasn’t suicidal but I was depressed. My doctor prescribed Prozac and I started feeling much better. I was determined to be a great mother to my son. These experiences shaped my thoughts and decisions as a mother. I felt like I had been given a second chance at life and I wanted to do everything right this time around.

### **Depression’s Impact: Theorizing the Silence**

The most glaring omission from my autoethnographic accounts of mothering was my silence about my own experiences with depression. On some level of consciousness, I had quickly dismissed my background and trauma with depression as inconsequential to

my position as a new mother. Only after reading Behar's (1996) article about other writers and practitioners that suffered from mental illness did I reflexively analyze the ways in which I had kept my fight with depression secret. Poulos (2008) suggests that no matter how hard you try to ignore or suppress memories they continue to seep out and shape experience.

When the memory is of trauma, there is often an insistent human urge to bury it. In part, this comes from the difficulty of dealing with pain and grief in a culture that doesn't welcome human discomfort, it simply seems that, to go on in our world, we must work to not let the memory overwhelm. (p. 50)

A piece of my own mask of motherhood was my silence about my battle with depression. I was afraid that if I shared my struggles with mental illness that I would somehow be delegitimized as an academic scholar and as a good mother. I had always been fascinated with the literary works of mothers writing about depression's influence in their lives. At one point during proposal writing I had planned to analyze Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892) which is an autobiographical account of her madness as a young mother suffering from depression. Gilman (1892), a feminist writer and scholar, writes about her own experiences with depression after becoming a mother and being confined to a room where she later becomes obsessed with the yellow wallpaper on the walls. Gilman (1892) raised awareness of the common tendency back then (and today) for men and the medical community to dismiss depression in women as nervousness and hysteria. Somehow this plan had gotten shelved because I did not see

making connections to Gilman's work as relevant to my own experiences of motherhood. After all, I had remained strangely silent about my own suffering.

I also related to many of the experiences of Sylvia Plath and her obsession for perfection. As a college student I was drawn to *The Bell Jar* (1971), a novel where Plath describes a young woman's descent into clinical depression. Plath described her novel as "autobiographical apprenticeship" confessing that she was impelled to write the story about her battle with depression as a way to "free herself from the past" (Alvarez, 1972, p. 21; Perloff, 1972, p. 507).

Realizing the fact that I did not talk about my depression at all in my autoethnographic data was an epiphany for me. I had been drawn towards analyzing these autobiographical literary texts about motherhood and depression yet somehow along the way I refused and neglected to acknowledge that these life experiences affected my identity and the ways I related to motherhood. Part of the reason I desired to return to work was that I was afraid that if I continued to stay home with Noah my depression would get worse. I needed something to keep me busy during the day. I needed something to take my mind off my negative thoughts and my own inadequacies. My view of myself as a mother tended to be negative as a result of my depressive tendencies. These negative evaluations of the self were deepened by the cultural stereotypes of good mothers in society which were impossible to attain.

Feminist theory can be used to examine the role of power and ideology in my decision to keep my depression a secret. In the private sphere of my life my socially constructed and expected role was to be a good mother and wife. My internal life was

fraught with a battle for remaining happy and content. I struggled daily to view myself as a good mother and a woman that had triumphed over depression. Part of my power in the household was directly related to my status as a mother. I was afraid that being honest about the ways that depression impacted by role as a mother could jeopardize my power within the domestic sphere. In a society that expects women to be intensive and child-centered caregivers for their children there was no space for considering the mental health of the mother. My struggles with depression became oppressive in the sense that I felt compelled to keep these experiences to myself and keep my demons locked away from public view.

**Epiphany #3: The Intersectionality of Gender, Whiteness, Privilege, and Power in My Experience**

*Epiphany #3: Throughout the process of telling autoethnographic stories about motherhood, I was silent about the intersectionality of gender, Whiteness, privilege, and power in my own experience. These positionalities were hidden/invisible and functioned in hegemonic ways.*

An important part of reflexivity is attention to one's social positionalities. My experiences are directly influenced by the fact that I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual, married, woman, who is a Christian and is from the South. My experiences and beliefs about motherhood reflect my position as a white, middle-class mother and it should be no surprise that for much of my life I was exposed to and I had internalized the dominant discourses of motherhood which are directed at mothers like me. Villaverde (2008) defines intersectionality as the "way sexism, racism, classism, ageism (any -ism)

intersect in lived experience, bringing awareness to the varying degrees of oppression in layered structures of power” (p. 54). Feminist researchers seek to better understand the way that privilege, race, class, sexuality, and religion intersect with social constructions of gender. Reus et al. (2005) suggest that the concept of intersectionality

requires us to examine how social institutions, organizational structures, patterns of social interactions, and other social practices on all levels of social organization influence the choices, the opportunities, and identities that individuals and groups make and claim as their own (Collins, 1998). (p. 449)

McIntosh argues that “privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to” (as cited in Johnson, 2005, p. 21). These unearned advantages privilege certain groups over others and give more power to groups in society that represent what is considered to be normal. Privilege is hegemonic and often remains unnoticed and invisible despite its power because it is accepted as natural. My heterosexual orientation, my Whiteness, and my economic class status placed me in a privileged position. Other positionalities that affected my experiences include my level of education, my religious beliefs, my marital status, my middle-class status, where I live, and the status of my parents (Loden and Rosener, 1991). While I was privileged in many ways, my gender and my role as a mother were oppressive positionalities. Much of my autoethnographic data focuses on my gender without interrogating how Whiteness and privilege shaped my experiences. My White middle-class heterosexual status afforded an elevated level of power and privilege

compared to women of different classes, sexual backgrounds, and races. Young (1990) argues that oppression is a hegemonic and structural problem.

Oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions off well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms—in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (p. 41)

Dominant discourses in society privilege certain groups and create oppressive structures that impact everyday lived experiences for those living in and internalizing the cultural messages of that society. Blum (1999) argues that the dominant contemporary view of mothers is a woman who is “affluent, thin and toned, [and] white” (p. 183). My Whiteness and my middle-class status place me in that privileged group. I had the privilege to stay at home and work part-time. I had the privilege to be able to afford full-time childcare. My Whiteness and the access I had to material resources allowed me to aspire to the dominant cultural idealized position of motherhood. Yet my gender as a female affected my individual level of economic power and my power within the domestic sphere, or my household. My positionality empowered me in specific ways and oppressed me in others. My Whiteness and class status directly impacted my desire and attempts to measure up to the dominant discourses of motherhood. My privileged status shaped my views about feeling isolated in the domestic sphere. In a study of White, married, heterosexual, middle and upper-class mothers, Mulcahy et al. (2010) found that

The story of motherhood told by these mothers is actually the story of a very specific kind of motherhood, one that is coloured by characteristics of privilege,

such as having a car, being able to buy organic foods, having the opportunity to stay at home, being able to depend on a breadwinning spouse and having access to people who share your life experiences and values. These characteristics of privilege, then, become normalized aspects of the motherhood story within these particular groups. (p. 21)

Avishai (2007) found that for privileged women in American society motherhood is an “anxiety-producing enterprise” that involves a great amount of labor in order to comply with dominant mothering ideologies (p. 139). Avishai (2007) suggests that privileged White and middle-class women learn about “mothering practice within a specific cultural context, one that is heavily stratified, highly consumerist, and deeply invested in bodily discipline, medicalized and bio-medicalized discourses, and a regime of experts” (p. 149). Avishai (2007) argues that privileged mothers face a “different set of complexities” as they are the “target of discourses of health promotion, good outcome childrearing, science, rationality, and the market” (p. 149). White, middle-class mothers have economic and material resources that help them to make decisions that other women do not have including access to healthcare and pediatric care. My privileged status was normalized and was invisible to me. Avishai (2007) found that White, middle-class mothers discussed motherhood using “primarily consumerist, rational, and scientific” terms indicating that they viewed many of their mothering duties as a method of “production” (p. 149). Blackford suggests that married, White, middle and upper-class mothers police each other through the guise of policing their children and he terms this “playground panopticism” (as cited in Mulcahy et al., 2010, p. 21).

Many of my beliefs about what a good mother should do and the roles of husbands and wives were impacted by my Christian upbringing which reinforced patriarchal and heterosexist views of the family. Growing up and living in a southern state also contributed to what I perceived as normal or traditional roles of mothering and being a woman. The fact that I am married to a man that makes significantly more money than me contributes to my status as a middle-class woman and provides a high level of economic power.

My middle-class status directly influenced my experiences of motherhood in terms of my participation in the labor force and my ideas about staying at home versus working. My struggle about whether to stay at home or work full-time makes connections to historical struggles of women facing these same decisions. The conflicts I experienced between the domestic sphere and the public sphere were shaped by patriarchal discourses of motherhood that have historical roots in shaping the experiences of White, middle-class mothers historically. My middle-class positionality affected my privilege and purchasing power in terms of buying certain consumer goods along with my child care choices. Having money to afford daycare which costs almost \$800 a month was attributed to my class status. Being middle-class allowed me to pursue my doctoral degree and have access to higher education which was impacted by my becoming a mother. My consumer choices and access to technology were results of my economic status as well.

My social positionality greatly influenced my experiences, expectations, support available, and ultimately my tendency to subscribe to dominant discourses of motherhood. The access I had to material resources afforded me an elevated status as a

mother compared to mothers in lower classes. The choices I faced were different as a result of my access to more wealth. The invisibility of my Whiteness, my heterosexuality, and my class status illustrates how ideologies, privilege, and oppression function in a hegemonic way. My race, class, and sexuality empowered me and afforded me an elevated level of privilege. Yet I would argue that my access to material resources was exploited by the marketplace which suggests that I would be a good mother by purchasing certain consumer items. My gender was a source of oppression as it relegated me to the home and taking care of my child alongside other household responsibilities. Johnson (2005) argues that one's positionalities have "no significance outside systems of privilege and oppression in which they were created" (p. 18). My positionalities are continually revisited as they directly influenced and impacted each theme in the research.

### **Gender Role Ideology/Theory**

Kulik and Tsoref (2010) argue that gender role ideology refers to a system of beliefs about "activities, feelings, and needs that distinguish men from women" (p. 266).

Shimanoff (2009) suggests that

Gender role theory is grounded in the supposition that individuals socially identified as males and females tend to occupy different ascribed roles within social structures and tend to be judged against divergent expectations for how they ought to behave. As a consequence, the theory predicts males and females will develop different skills and attitudes and that they will behave differently. (p. 434)

Gender role theory makes connections to feminist theory because both theories assume that men's and women's experiences are different because of socially constructed gender roles and expectations.

Based on my expectations of motherhood and the gender roles that I had internalized from my own upbringing, I subscribed to traditional gender roles in masculine and feminine terms. Despite the fact that I had challenged some of these assumptions in my graduate research and coursework, I had not critically challenged my expectations for parenting which were primarily based on traditional gender roles. Kulik and Tsoref (2010) suggest that

In families with a traditional gender role ideology there is a stereotyped, rigid division of labor—the father is responsible for supporting the family and does not participate in raising children or in household tasks, whereas the mother cares for the needs of family members and is responsible for household chores. (p. 266)

My expectations for what motherhood would be like and should be like were based on these traditional gender roles that I learned from my family and from dominant discourses in the media. Coltrane (2000) and Cowan and Cowan (1988) found that after having a baby heterosexual couples moved towards enacting more traditional gender roles even if they did not practice rigid gender roles prior to having a child. Katz-Wise et al. (2010) found that a number of processes may account for the reasons why parents follow more traditional gender roles after having a baby.

One factor may be the labor involved in caring for a baby (e.g., breastfeeding), combined with societal attitudes about a woman's competency in the role of motherhood. When a new mother adeptly cares for her child, these attitudes are

confirmed. At the same time, having a new baby is financially demanding, both immediately and more many years following infancy. This may cause the father's provider role to become more salient within his identity hierarchy, leading to more traditional gender-role attitudes and identity salience. (p. 26)

These could be some of the reasons that after the birth of our child both my husband and I started adhering to more strict/traditional gender roles.

#### **Epiphany #4: Essentialist Beliefs and Obeying the Experts**

*Epiphany #4: I subscribed to discourses of essentialism and felt like I had to “obey” medical experts.*

A major epiphany for me was realizing that I did not have maternal instincts. I had examined gender and explored how it functioned socially, structurally, and institutionally in society but I had not applied this critical consciousness to the realm of motherhood. Prior to having a baby, I believed that mothers were better parents than fathers. I thought women were naturally predispositioned to be better caregivers. Without even being aware of doing so, I had internalized pillars of essentialism including the view that women are biologically better mothers and possess a maternal instinct. When I faced struggles in childrearing I wondered whether I had this maternal instinct or if something was wrong with me. Only after months and months of reflecting and realizing that my expectations did not match up with my experiences, did I begin to question these ideologies that I had internalized and accepted as normal. I had never realized that I had internalized essentialist discourses until I began to code my stories and journals for themes. In the data, I found lots of evidence that I subscribed to the ideology of essentialism when Noah was born and for several months afterwards. I also found that I

frequently deferred to the advice of medical experts. The times when I did not follow doctors' suggestions, I framed my choices as acts of disobedience or not "following the rules" and I tended to doubt myself. The fact that I subscribed to essentialist views of motherhood and tended to see mothers as having natural mothering capacities conflicted with my feelings of guilt associated with not following the doctor's orders. Yet the need to rely on male, rationalized, scientific, and medicalized knowledge is an entrenched feature of patriarchal societies.

### **Essentialism and My Missing Maternal Instinct**

Hovey (2007) argues that essentialism is "a concept that suggests that a thing or a class of people has an inherent quality that comes from nature rather than from culture or history" (p. 482). I have argued in my analysis that I subscribed to tenants of essentialist thought and socially constructed views of gender and mothers despite the fact that these ideologies are opposites. Hovey (2007) suggests that

one of the oldest, strongest, and most pervasive forms of essentialism relates to gender... Essentialism naturalizes gender inequality by maintaining that it is women's special nature to care for children and men's special nature to create culture and commerce. Woman's nature is held to be more passive, nurturing, peaceful, domestic, emotional, and content; men's nature is seen as more aggressive, intellectual, competitive, worldly, remote, and restless. Such views naturalize both sexual difference and a social structure in which women stay home and men run the world. (p. 482)

In Noah's birth story, it is clear that the pain of childbirth was completely shocking to me. I had never felt pain of this magnitude and I was surprised at my body's *failure* to handle what I had viewed as a *natural* event. I mentioned over and over again how I had

wanted to deliver my baby the “*natural way*.” After researching childbirth, I understood that there were four main choices for delivering a baby: by having a c-section, delivering the baby naturally—vaginally without any pain medicine, having a vaginal delivery with an epidural for pain, or having a vaginal delivery with narcotic medicine. I was scared to get the epidural and I knew there were risks associated with the epidural. I figured that if I couldn’t handle the pain I would start out with the safest form of pain medicine—the narcotic drugs. Looking back I realize that having pitocin administered to speed up my contractions was not natural. In my mind it was important not to have the epidural because my mother did not have one when delivering her three children. My mother represented a good mother to me and I wanted to be a good mother like she was.

As the pain grew increasingly intense, I started to feel out of control. I was disappointed that I was not in *control* of my body. I expressed similar shock when my water broke before going to the hospital. Not being able to control this natural event—childbirth—was something that I clearly had to come to terms with. Based on my reflections, I clearly thought that I would be able to control some of the process of childbirth, like my body was a machine. This makes direct connections to the ideology of technology. When I realized I needed the epidural for pain relief I began to question my decision not to have the epidural in the first place. After I realized I had “failed” at a natural childbirth I began to reflect on my reasoning. I wondered what a natural childbirth really was and why it had been so important to me to try and do it naturally. My personal medical decisions including the decision whether or not to seek pain medicine during childbirth were affected by the ideology of “natural childbirth” which is based on

essentialist discourse. This ideology portrays good mothers as women who give birth naturally without pain medication. The belief that women's bodies were created and are biologically designed for childbirth characterizes this discourse (think "childbearing hips"). My own mother's experiences and successful deliveries without an epidural reinforced these beliefs that a good mother should be able to deliver babies without the use of an epidural. I ignored the fact that my mother also didn't use pitocin or narcotic drugs either.

My decisions were directly related to the ideology of technology subscribing to assumptions that I should be able to control my body. Mothers who subscribe to and practice attachment theory/parenting view epidurals as a way that doctors and the medical field seek to control the birthing process. They refuse pain medicine because it is their way of resisting a medical discourse of motherhood. Both mothering ideologies with regard to natural childbirth have diametrically opposed beliefs about why a mother should have a baby the "natural way" but both made me feel guilty and like a failure for needing the epidural. This struggle about whether to have an epidural or not makes connections to Johnson and Swanson's (2003) description of the natural/unnatural double bind messages in which mothers receive conflicting messages about the process of childbirth.

After Noah was born, I had to *learn* how to be a mother and nurturer to my son. I had expected all along that I possessed innate caregiving knowledge because I am a woman. As a new mother I realized that I was ill-prepared because I had no experiential knowledge of how to care for a baby. I was worried about having to care for Noah all by

myself even though I knew I was expected to do this. I continued to believe that my maternal instinct was missing. I was surprised that my maternal instinct had not kicked into gear right after Noah's birth and I started wondering if there was something wrong with me or whether there was no such thing as maternal instincts.

My discussions of breastfeeding also made connections to essentialism. In addition to learning how to parent, I also had to learn how to breastfeed. Breastfeeding was not instinctual; I had to learn how to be good at it. I was shocked when the nurses expected me to breastfeed Noah right after he was born even though I had been told in the baby classes that this would happen. After the initial shock of breastfeeding wore off, I began to enjoy it. My body continued to produce milk for many months and as Noah got older I was ready to wean him off of breast milk. I felt bad for starting to wean him when my body was still producing milk, but I was ready to get my body back after eight months of breastfeeding.

Almost a year after Noah was born, I started thinking about getting pregnant again. I reasoned that I should get pregnant again because my "biological clock is ticking." I always discussed getting pregnant and having another child in terms of my body's ability to get pregnant again. This seems very much steeped in the discourse of essentialism.

I am starting to feel old like my biological clock is ticking. I'm not getting any younger and I know how hard it is to be pregnant, deliver a baby, and care for a newborn. I think having two babies close together in age will be easier for me physically rather than waiting four or five years. I want to go ahead and get it over with—that is having my babies. It is a really difficult process to go through. (Author's personal journal, June 2, 2012)

Because I am getting older I started to feel pressure to conceive and have another baby before “time runs out” meaning before my body gets too old or I don’t have enough energy to take care of young children. I was also concerned about “wasting time” in regards to my future career options.

I keep thinking about why all of a sudden I am so anxious to get pregnant again. I remember at my OBGYN checkup after Noah was born I talked to the doctor about getting the birth control that protects against pregnancy for 5 years. I was really so overwhelmed that I couldn’t see having another baby for 5 years and here I am now that Noah is a year old and I am anxious to start again! I think I just feel pressured in some way. But pressured by whom? Myself I guess. I feel like I’ve stayed home raising Noah for a long time and I either need to get going with baby number two or I need to get a job and get on with my career. No time to waste! (Author’s personal journal, June 8, 2012)

Essentialist discourses of parenting assume the mother is the most capable parent and these beliefs shape the type of caregiving provided by mothers and the *amount of support* women receive from family members. These issues will be addressed later in the chapter. The research data describing my own experiences giving birth and early mothering illustrate that I subscribed to essentialist ideologies of motherhood. But as I have shown, I began to question the validity of these beliefs after realizing mothering is not instinctual. Rizzo et al. (2013) found that “rather than empowering women, essentialism seems to increase the burden placed on them and decrease their satisfaction with life” because essentialist discourses are detrimental to mental health (p. 619).

### **Deferring to Medical Experts**

The belief that childbirth and parenting should be expert guided has roots in the ideologies of essentialism, patriarchy, and technology. My White middle-class status

afforded me access to quality healthcare and doctors' advice. Yet my gendered position and the internalization of dominant patriarchal ideologies of motherhood gave rise to the pressure I felt to defer to expert advice. My personal experiences becoming a mother made many references to relying on expert guided medical advice from my doctor and my son's pediatrician. My experiences suggest that I relied heavily on knowledge from doctors and advice from my mother and mother-in-law for many decisions including pain management during childbirth, breastfeeding, weaning, and sleeping arrangements. I sought advice from my husband when making decisions but one of three things usually resulted. My husband would either agree with me, say he didn't know, or if he disagreed I tended to disregard his opinion because I didn't see him as a source of knowledge about childbirth and baby things. I rarely solicited knowledge from my father and father-in-law about these decisions. Without even being aware of what I was doing, I didn't value their opinions because they were not mothers or medical experts. I didn't see the men in my life as knowledgeable about childrearing or pregnancy—unless they were medical experts. This tendency will be more deeply theorized in the following section on maternal gatekeeping.

When I was admitted to the hospital without the start of any contractions, my doctor immediately suggested administering pitocin to speed up the delivery process. Since I was new to this whole labor process and had never done it before I agreed to basically whatever the doctor suggested. Based on my discussions with my obstetrician prior to my delivery, doctors pretty much had a standard way of managing deliveries.

Dr. Kendall had laughed when I discussed making a birth plan and then again at my decision to avoid getting an epidural. This suggests that the doctor did not see me as a real decision maker in the process. I was not educated about these medical things like he was. He was implying that I should just leave all of the medical decisions about my body up to him since he was the expert. When I did end up getting the epidural to ease the pain this served as affirmation that my doctor knew best. I was very surprised at how instrumental the doctor was in my delivery without really being there until the baby was ready to be delivered. I was even more shocked when the doctor left to conduct another surgery while I was in the middle of pushing. If the doctor knew all about delivering the baby and was the expert, then why were the nurses present for so much more of the process than the doctor? Throughout the process I experienced conflicting feelings about my quality of care. I really liked the doctors and nurses and I thought they had done a great job but I wasn't really sure how the process was supposed to work. I didn't have anything to compare my experience to. After Noah was born, instead of deferring to my obstetrician as the expert, the pediatrician became the new guide.

When the doctor gave me advice that I agreed with I tended to feel relieved, like I was doing the right thing. But when I disagreed with the doctor's suggestions or assessment, I felt like I had to get support from another source like my mother or another expert. After Noah had a serious head injury I didn't trust the doctor's assessment of his injuries so I kept going back to see several specialists and different doctors to make sure he was alright. The fact that I could see an injury on his forehead despite being told everything was fine made it really hard for me to believe that he was in fact okay. I was

relieved that he was getting x-rays because I wanted to be certain that he was okay. I didn't want him to have some internal injury that was not treated because I didn't take him to the right doctor. I felt like it was my responsibility to make sure the doctors were right. The doctors did end up being right about him not sustaining any permanent injury from his accident but I didn't believe them until I got word from several different experts.

I agonized when Noah was a newborn over where and how he should sleep. This worrying resulted in me sleeping with my child in my arms for the first 4 months of his life. The advice of Noah's pediatrician and informational handouts from their office about babies and the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) greatly influenced my mothering practices and the stress that was associated with these decisions. Noah's doctor had said it was fine for him to sleep in the bed with me but that I should never put him to sleep on his stomach because it would increase the risk of SIDS and he could smother himself. I was constantly worried about Noah's breathing while he was sleeping and for months I was very protective of him when he slept.

It is interesting how I discussed making decisions for Noah that went against the doctor's suggestions. I talk about deciding to "disobey" the doctor's orders. I talked about it almost like I was a child and I was disobeying a parental authority. In cases where I chose to make my own decisions about Noah, I usually deferred to my mother's advice. Since my mother said that babies used to sleep on their stomachs all of the time and she assured me that it was okay I felt comfortable making this decision. As a new mom, I was so unsure of myself and my capabilities as a parent. I was always soliciting advice from those who were more experienced than me. In addition to decisions about Noah's

sleeping, I found it difficult to follow the doctor's orders in regards to weaning Noah from bottles at 12 months per the doctor's suggestions. Noah's doctor's office gave out these typed up handouts at each well baby visit. So when Noah was 12 months old this literature and the doctor told me that he should be weaned off of breast milk and/or formula by age 1 to avoid damage to his teeth. Choosing when to wean Noah from formula and bottles was a difficult decision for me. I felt torn between the doctor's advice and my own feelings about what Noah needed (just as I had in terms of his sleeping situation). At 14 months I started trying to wean him off of the bottles because I felt guilty about not following the pediatrician's suggestions since they were the experts.

I bought the Toddler kind of formula this go round. The doctor said that Noah needs to be weaned off the bottle at 12 months but I am definitely not ready to do that! Noah is getting really good nutrition and vitamins from the two bottles he still takes a day and I am not so sure that he needs to be completely off of them yet. (Author's personal journal, May 22, 2012)

For several days I wrote in my journal about how I had to wean Noah so I didn't disappoint the doctor at his next visit. I disagreed with the doctor that Noah had to be weaned off so soon but I had a hard time resolving this and having confidence about my decision because I was an inexperienced mother.

I know that at his 15 month doctor visit the doctor is going to give me a hard time about the fact that he is still on 2 bottles a day. I just can't wean him off of those yet. They make him happy; he loves the parts of the day when he gets to snuggle and drink the bottle. My mom and Austin's mom both said that if he likes it then it's fine to keep giving them to him. He is just so little. Some moms breastfeed well into toddlerhood so how can it hurt to keep him on bottles? (Author's personal journal, June 16, 2012)

The process of trying different routines was a source of stress for me as a new mom.

Trying to get Noah to adjust to something new was difficult for me. I felt like a failure when I couldn't get Noah to do something.

Noah's 15 month doctor visit is coming up and I've been thinking about how to wean him off of these two bottles and get him started brushing his teeth. Yesterday I tried to put the toddler formula in a cup for him to drink instead of the bottle. Epic fail! I ended up trying three different cups and then putting the nipple back on the bottle for him to finish. He liked the first cup okay but it took forever for him to get the milk out. The other two didn't work either. He knows how to drink from a cup; he does it at every meal but he loves to have his bottle. It is a soothing thing for him and he has become somewhat dependent on the whole process to go to sleep. Maybe I'll just give him the bottles until this container of toddler formula runs out and then stop them cold turkey. But it's so hard because I know he really likes the bottles and I don't want to take away something he likes and is used to. I'm not sure what I will decide. I've been putting off the tooth brushing because we don't have a stool yet for him to stand on to reach the sink. I need to get it together!! (Author's personal journal, June 21, 2012)

As I learned and gained experiential knowledge of how to care for an infant I started to gain confidence in myself as a mother.

I have been weaning Noah off of his last two bottles a day this week and it's been easier than I had imagined. He has not had his afternoon bottle around for the past three days. I think I miss it more than he does! It was a really nice time to cuddle and watch TV while he drank that bottle. He was a little fussy but I've just been giving him more snacks to hold him over until dinner. Yesterday he saw a bottle left over on his nightstand from his nighttime feeding and he kept pointing to it. I just told him, "No honey, not today." And he moved on. When I took him to Nana's house today and told her, she had the exact response I was expecting. She frowned in a sad way and said, "Oh I was looking forward to giving him that bottle!" I said, "I know I've been missing it too." It's a really strange thing watching your child grow and move to different stages. I want him to be able to do more on his own but I still want him to need me and do certain things that only babies do. I keep telling myself that I am weaning off of these bottles to keep him from having damage to his teeth from sucking but I know the real reason is because I dread going to the doctor and telling her he is still on bottles. I mean

part of me doesn't care and I want to make all those decisions about his health and stages based on what I think works and based on what other mothers say. But part of me dreads the look of disapproval that I would get. I remember when I told the doctor that Noah was sleeping on his stomach after they made this big deal because of SIDs that babies only sleep on their backs. Noah, of course would not sleep on his back at all. My mom and Austin's mom both said that all of their children slept on their stomachs and we all turned out fine. So after four months of him sleeping in my arms in the bed at night I started putting him on his stomach in his crib. He slept great! Of course I would wake up all the time to check and make sure he was breathing, especially since I was "breaking the rules." When I told the doctor Noah was sleeping on his stomach at night she laughed and said, "Oh and you openly tell me this like there is nothing wrong with it." I think she was kidding but she was definitely making a point to say that I was not only breaking the rules but I was openly sharing this with her. (Author's personal journal, June 28, 2012)

When I made decisions about mothering my son that were in conflict with the expert guided advice from the doctors, I framed it as disobeying and breaking the rules. It was important to me to be the best mother I could to Noah but I also wanted the doctors to think I was a good mother. I thought that the doctors would think I was a better mother if I followed their advice. I also thought that I would be a better mother if I followed their advice. When I was "right" about something I felt reaffirmed about my abilities as a mother.

Noah was fighting a fever for several days and I was constantly worried about it. The highest it got was 103. I called the doctor's office and spoke with a nurse and she said to wait it out. That was on a Friday of course. So I had to wait until Monday to take him to the doctor. By then his fever was down but he was still acting like something was wrong. As a mother I just knew something was wrong. Noah was clinging and tired all the time. I was so stressed out worrying about it. So I took him in on Monday and the doctor joked with me about bringing him in since he had no fever and he looked fine. Then the strep throat test came back positive and she had to eat crow. She said, "Well mom you were right!" I was almost relieved even though I didn't want him to be sick because now I could give him an antibiotic. So we left and he was put on amoxicillin. He is doing

much better now but yesterday he had a bad rash as a side effect of the medicine. It is neverending this job of being a mother! (Author's personal journal, July 27, 2012)

My experiences giving birth and mothering a newborn/infant were greatly shaped by expert medical advice coming from my own obstetrician and Noah's pediatrician. The labor process, Noah's sleeping habits, weaning, and sick care were all affected by knowledge and advice directly coming from my doctors. In some cases the expert advice was helpful and I subscribed to it. At other times, when I disagreed with the doctor's orders I sought advice from other experts including my own mother. It was hard for me to make mothering and decisions about care on my own because of my lack of experiential knowledge. As I gained more experience, I started to trust my own decisions more. I wanted to be a good mother to my son and I wanted to be viewed as such by the medical experts and other moms I interacted with.

#### **Epiphany #5: Maternal Gatekeeping and Support**

*Epiphany #5: I practiced maternal gatekeeping and limited my support from others while at the same time blaming other mothers for not being more supportive. My unexamined practices of maternal gatekeeping affected the childcare support I received as well as my assessments of the support.*

One of the most striking and recurring themes from the research was my discussion about the lack of social support. Data from my autoethnographic stories and journals show I believed there was a severe lack of social support available to me as a new mother. Lather (1988) claims that an "overt ideological goal of feminist research in

the human sciences is to correct both the *invisibility* and *distortion* of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position" (p. 571). At face value, my stories indicated that indeed there was a lack of social support. I spent a great deal of time theorizing about the fact that I did not hire babysitters despite the fact that it could have helped with many of my problems of not having enough time to get work done, needing a break, and so on. Bengtson et al. (2005) argue that theory is "an attempt to explain" and that theorizing is an attempt to "solve some puzzle we have encountered in our experience as scholars" (p. 6). Bengtson et al. (2005) suggest the following about theory and theorizing.

- Theorizing involves explanation.
- Theorizing is a process.
- Theorizing should be explicit.
- Theory can be used to explain naturally occurring events.
- Theorizing is contextual, relevant, and imaginative.

I agree that theorizing is a way to explain and offer explanations, a scholar's way of putting a puzzle together. I used these conceptualizations of theory along with tenants of feminist theory to deeply and rigorously explore my explanations of social support.

Mothers in our culture are often seen as being solely responsible for taking care of their children and my research affirms this experience. I had internalized this view along with essentialist views that mothers were naturally better caregivers. Without even realizing it I practiced a form of maternal gatekeeping that directly affected the support provided by my spouse and my appraisal of that support. In the sections that follow I

discuss my assessment of the social support I received while exploring the silences that shaped my descriptions about social support.

### **Maternal Gatekeeping and Spousal Support**

There was something unusual about my reluctance to hire a babysitter to help me take care of Noah. In re-reading my stories and journals my exclusive reliance on support from my mother and my mother-in-law led me to more deeply analyze what was actually at work. I was interested in the silences within the stories. What was I not saying? I was saying that I had some support from my spouse but not as much as I needed. I discussed how I expected constant support from my mother and my mother-in-law but this was never enough. What was really going on?

Through the process of searching and theorizing, I had an epiphany. My idealized beliefs about motherhood and the natural caregiving abilities of women shaped my choices, practices, and beliefs about who I would allow to care for my child. My subscription to traditional ideologies of gender—my view that mothering was a gendered talent—led to my unconscious and almost invisible choices to practice maternal gatekeeping.

Allen and Hawkins (1999) argue that maternal gatekeeping is the conscious or unconscious process where mothers attempt to restrict and exclude fathers from childcare responsibilities. Allen and Hawkins (1999) suggest the following three dimensions of maternal gatekeeping

- Mothers' reluctance to relinquish responsibility over family matters by setting rigid standards

- External validation of a mothering identity
- Differentiated conceptions of family roles

Kulik and Tsoref (2010) describe their conceptualization of maternal gatekeeping as “likening the home and family to a maternal garden that has a wall built around it with a latched gate, which will ensure the mother maintains her designated role as caregiver for her children” (p. 264). Puhlman and Pasley (2013) argue that feminist theory enables researchers to explore the influence of gender and power within family relationships (p. 178). They view maternal gatekeeping as a “reciprocal process” that involves mothers and fathers and changes over time (p. 178).

In reflecting on my own experiences mothering when Noah was an infant, I believe I practiced maternal gatekeeping. In subscribing to traditional gender roles, I thought that I was the best caregiver for my child. I limited the amount of help that my husband could provide. I tried to be a supermom and do everything like the dominant discourses portrayed in the media. As I became overwhelmed I realized that I could not do everything on my own and I began to seek help from my husband. I more frequently unlatched the gate and solicited support from him once I learned and saw that he was/is a great dad. Mulcahy et al. (2010) found that new mothers described “trying to survive sleep deprivation, isolation, lost leisure time, physical and emotional pain, conflicts with their spouse, and complete exhaustion, all within a culture that expects women to naturally and smoothly transition to motherhood on their own” (p. 24). Mulcahy et al.’s (2010) research confirms that “women are feeling desperate to survive motherhood” and

researchers should explore “coping strategies for surviving motherhood” that do not “revolve around economic survival” (p. 24).

My initial strategies for surviving motherhood focused on doing everything by myself. I tried to conquer and live up to the myth of the supermom. After realizing this was a myth and I did not have a maternal instinct, I sought more support from my husband. I had internalized the view of fathers as “helpers” or part-time dads (Sunderland, 2006). Gaunt (2008) argues that maternal gatekeeping behaviors are “particularly evident in the common manager-helper pattern of relationships between mothers and fathers” (p. 375). As I invited my husband into the maternal garden and solicited his help and support I was angered and disappointed at times when he didn’t *want* to enter. Cowdery and Knudson-Martin (2005) found that most couples “hold contradictory ideologies related to parenting; they want fathers to be involved, but the ideology of mothering as a gendered talent perpetuates separate-sphere parenting and gender inequality” (p. 343). These traditional gender roles and the practices of separate-sphere mothering emerged from socio-historical contexts dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideological views of separate gender spheres for fathers and mothers (Allen & Hawkins, 1999, p. 201). My internalization of traditional gender roles shaped my views and practices of childcare.

My story about Noah’s delivery suggests a high level of *surprise* at how supportive my husband was during Noah’s delivery. My surprise when my husband engaged in caring behaviors suggests some internalized beliefs about men’s inability to care in the ways that women care. Why would I have been surprised that my husband was

caring? Of course he is caring. After keeping my husband out of the maternal garden for a period of time when I could handle the mothering responsibilities on my own, I became disappointed when he refused to help or was too busy to father in the ways that I expected him to.

Austin provided (and continues to provide) financial support for our family. Part of providing this financial support meant that he had to work long hours and always be available on his cell phone for work related calls. His work schedule led to many disagreements about what “family time” really meant and at what point he needed to stop working after he returned home.

It's 9:45 pm and I just got into another fight with my husband. And guess what it was about...him not spending enough time and/or helping out. So what else is new? I am really starting to believe that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. He had a work golf tournament to play in and didn't get home until after 7:00 pm. Noah and I went to eat at my parents' house (the first time we have seen them for three weeks since my mom has been sick with a bad cough). We got home and 7:45 pm and Austin was in the driveway talking on his cell phone. As I pulled in and parked he didn't even turn around. I got Noah out of the car along with all of the bags and proceeded to go into the house. Austin never even turned around to acknowledge us. Noah was extremely upset. After coming in the house he just stood at the door crying wanting his daddy. After 15 minutes had passed I went outside with Noah and told Austin that Noah was going to bed in 15 minutes if he wanted to see his son. After 25 minutes passed I finally put Noah to bed. I know that Noah was crushed because he didn't get to see his dad at all today. I am angry. And I became angrier after I found out that he was on the phone with a new builder/customer. Then he gets on the phone with a friend and talks on the phone for an additional 30 minutes. He doesn't care about spending time with me either? When I confront him about not making time to spend with us he tells me I am crazy. My biggest complaint with him is that he never puts me or Noah first...at least that is the way I feel.

We got in a similar fight like this on Friday not even a week ago when he came home after 8:00 pm because he chose to play golf at 3:30 pm on a Friday. I can't even remember the last time that I got to do something fun with friends for a long

period of time. I feel like I have so much responsibility. I have complete responsibility for taking care of Noah and the household chores. Austin thinks that since he makes more money than me he is entitled to all of this leisure time. I wish that he considered hanging out with Noah and I to be leisure time but I don't feel like he does. Noah is my number one priority but it's not that way for Austin because he knows that I have that responsibility. I think that men are socialized to act this way because I see it in almost all of my friends' relationships too. I feel like I am expected to graciously take whatever time I can get with him because he is so busy doing all of these important paid things. Why is the unpaid work so devalued? Am I really expecting too much by wanting shared parenting? I want him to want to parent and be a supportive husband. I know he loves both of us very much but I cannot seem to understand these assumptions about my role.

When did I become a housewife and full time caregiver that requires no help? I mean clearly the state of the house especially the dirtiness of our bedroom and the fact that I cannot keep up with household chores should be a sign that I am not supermom. Austin says that it is my fault that he never helps out because I don't schedule time for him to watch Noah so I can get things done. Well let's see...maybe because there is always too much to do around here and because I want to spend time with both of them together so we can be together as a family. I just need to let it go and let him make his own decisions. If he misses seeing his son then that has to be his consequence. I just feel like it's my responsibility to say something when Noah is getting hurt too. It's like my sister-in-law Sarah told me last weekend, that if her husband isn't home by 5:30 pm then she and the kids just go ahead and eat dinner without him. Since their kids go to bed at 7:00 pm he can chose to be home in time to see them or not. (Author's personal journal, May 25, 2012)

One of the hardest things for me was being home all day with Noah when he was a baby and being so relieved when Austin finally got home from work. Austin would be tired from working all day and once he was home I was expecting a break and oftentimes we both were so exhausted that we argued about who was supposed to do what around the house. I felt like I was expected to care for Noah all by myself. Yet I did not seek support from babysitters because I did not trust them with caring for my child. I limited who could enter the maternal garden and care for Noah. Those that were allowed in were my

spouse and family members. I didn't even realize my own role in the lack of support I had access to. Because I limited who could offer support I had less support and I suffered from not having enough support, yet I didn't even realize what I was doing.

A recurring pattern in my journal entries was anger towards my spouse for not “giving me a break”—time to relax or even time to do *nothing*—and I talk about it many times how I am upset that he gets to engage in leisure activities and time with friends while I am “stuck with all the childcare responsibilities”.

Austin has really upset me this evening. It feels like the same old battle over and over again. I do everything as far as taking care of Noah (which I love dearly but still need help with...and he should WANT to spend time with his son right?), cleaning the house, doing laundry, paying the bills, and lately cooking since Austin has been getting home late (and playing golf). I need a break! My two jobs are extremely busy right now with me teaching an education seminar course at university as part of my assistantship and teaching online classes and staying home with my son. Can I even call it balancing? (Author's personal journal, August 26, 2012)

I felt overwhelmed by all of the household and child care responsibilities. I was upset that I didn't have much help with Noah and I desperately felt like I needed a break. Part of the anger towards my husband stemmed from my belief that since he chose to engage in other activities instead of spending time with Noah that he did not want to spend time with him. I wanted Austin to *want* to spend time with my son instead of me making him spend time and if he wanted to spend time he would not choose to engage in these leisure activities or invite friends over after he got home from work. There were many nights when he would invite his brother Sam over for dinner and to hang out after work. It was a constant source of anger for me.

Austin called today and said he wouldn't be home until 6:30 pm and that his brother Sam would be coming over for dinner. Great. Thanks for asking. Am I making dinner? No. We usually go out to eat Mexican food on Wednesdays so that's what I thought we were doing. It really makes me mad that he is at work all day until 6:30 pm and then he invites his brother over at 6:45 pm immediately after he gets home. It makes me feel like he doesn't value spending time with me or Noah. When his brother comes over they hang out ignoring Noah and leaving me to do all the work. It really pisses me off and I've told Austin this numerous times. All I can say is that an ugly argument is going to break out tonight if that is the game they want to play. I've had a really hard week. Noah rarely napped all week. I'm in no mood to be ignored or left to take care of Noah all by myself. Noah and I may go eat Mexican by ourselves but then Austin will think I am trying to get back at him. But I know that Noah and I will be starved by the time he gets home and Sam is always late. I am not waiting until 7:00 pm to eat dinner. It's really a catch 22 because I want to let Austin have it for inviting Sam over without asking me especially since I have made him aware of how hard my week has been. But I am going to be ovulating in the next few days and I want to try for baby number 2 again. If I complain to Austin he will make comments like, "You want another one and you can't even handle Noah" or something like that. So wrong... (Author's personal journal, June 13, 2012)

This issue of fighting and feeling like I had to "keep my mouth shut" because I was trying to get pregnant again was common in my journals. I felt like I had to show my husband that I could do it all by myself so that he would think that I could "handle" having another child. These comments are patriarchal in nature along with the assumption that the mother should be exclusively responsible for child care and should be able to handle it all by herself. I was angry at my husband for expecting these things of me yet I expected them for myself as well.

When my husband did watch Noah and give me time to have a break or work on research projects, I had a really hard time leaving Noah. It's almost like I had separation anxiety from leaving him. Or it could've been because I was worried that Austin wouldn't be as good of a caregiver as I was. I demanded a break and additional support

but once I got some time alone I just wanted to be with my family. Guilt played a big role in this process. I would feel guilty for not being with my child all of the time and for not *wanting* to be with him all of the time.

I had “scheduled” several times to go to the library and write but I would always change my mind because of not wanting to leave Noah and Austin. It’s hard to leave and go write (and think) when Austin’s home because I love being around him and Noah and being a family. That is really something that I have struggled with—wanting time away—but not wanting to be away. Does that make sense? I stress because I don’t have time to myself or time to write but then the few opportunities I get to be by myself I find it really hard to leave Noah. I think it’s more than just guilt although I definitely think that is present too. I really love being with him and don’t like the separation. (Author’s personal journal, June 5, 2012)

I did not mention anything in my autoethnographic stories about not trusting my husband to take care of Noah properly but it appears that that played a role in my refusal to accept help from him. Kulik and Tsoref (2010) found that the “more satisfied the mother was with her husband’s involvement in child-care, the more confidence she had in his ability to care for the children, and the greater her tendency to let him enter that territory” (p. 273). Because I rarely allowed Austin to watch Noah while I was out of the house, I hadn’t yet developed this satisfaction with his parenting abilities. Only gradually as I was forced to relinquish some control over childcare did I see how great of a father he is and then I gained confidence in his ability to parent.

After having a baby I realized that gendered expectations were a constant source of struggle for my husband and me. I expected Austin to work and do traditional male chores like take out the trash and mow the grass. In turn, Austin expected me to stay

home with Noah, do the laundry, pay the bills, do the dishes, and clean the house. I had also internalized these roles and they became especially defined after having a child. As I struggled to be this supermom that I thought would come natural to me, I found that these expectations were impossible to meet. The effects were two fold. I began to feel like a failure and like something was wrong with me because I couldn't take care of my child and keep the house spotless and have all of the laundry done in addition to everything else. At the same time I started demanding more support from Austin specifically in the form of shared parenting and shared child care responsibilities. Austin and I had many conversations about what moms and dads are *supposed* to do and how oppressive and unfair these expectations actually are. We had to re-negotiate our roles as parents and spouses. A big part of this process involved our shared experiences of learning to parent and to care for our son Noah who did not come with an instruction manual. Both my spouse and I had bought into the myths that being a parent is instinctual and natural for both mothers and fathers. We soon realized that you have to *learn* how to be a good parent. These shared experiences along with our re-negotiations about our roles allowed us to be better parents for Noah and greatly supported our marriage relationship. I realized that men can be excellent parents. Austin and I've had our ups and downs as we learned how to be parents. In constantly challenging gendered expectations in regards to the household and child rearing, we were able to re-define our roles and find some balance as a way to better support one another and our son.

## **Antecedents and Results of Maternal Gatekeeping**

Gaunt (2008) suggests that many women practice “maternal gatekeeping” whereby they limit help from others because they believe they are the best caregiver for their child. Gaunt (2008) argues that gatekeeping behaviors are not deliberate and intentional actions, instead mothers who practice gatekeeping are “mostly unaware of their gatekeeping behaviors and of the potential consequences that their behaviors have for father involvement” (p. 375). Gaunt (2008) found that three psychological characteristics are antecedents of maternal gatekeeping: “the mother’s self-esteem, gender schematization, and the salience and prominence of maternal identity” (p. 377). Gaunt’s (2008) research on gatekeeping found that the “lower a mother’s self-esteem, the more she struggled to maintain responsibility for family work by setting unbending standards” (p. 387). Mothers with lower self-esteem and a stronger feminine gender orientation were more likely to gatekeep and as a result the fathers were less involved in childcare tasks (Gaunt, 2008). Gaunt (2008) argues that women with lower self-esteem are more likely to engage in gatekeeping behaviors because they view childcare and taking care of the family as sources of power. In taking on complete responsibility for childcare, mothers who gatekeep are affirming their gendered self by adhering to traditional notions of gender and they are validating their identity as a mother based on the way that motherhood has been socially constructed (Gaunt, 2008). After seeing my husband parent and care for my son, I changed my views and realized what a great father he is. After realizing that he could care for our son, I permanently opened the gate for him.

I have suggested that my family background and the dominant discourses of motherhood played major roles in my views about what mothers should do. I have also discussed my struggle with depression throughout my life. Based on all of these factors I realize that I did practice maternal gatekeeping—limiting the amount of support received and provided by my husband. My low self-esteem and my subscription to traditional gender roles—where mothers care for their children while fathers are the breadwinners—greatly contributed to my unconscious gatekeeping practices. Without even realizing what I was doing, I blamed my husband for not helping me more when in reality I often *kept* him from helping. Then I wanted to return to work because I had no support—a condition that I made more likely by practicing maternal gatekeeping. These findings illustrate how powerful dominant ideologies and the social construction of gender are in individual women’s lives. They often operate to shape choices and decisions while remaining hidden and invisible to those who they are influencing. I was contributing to the maintenance of gendered inequality in parenting and other household responsibilities while I was trying to understand and challenge the conditions in which I was experiencing motherhood. I realized that my refusal to hire a babysitter or nanny led me to solely rely on my husband who worked full-time and my mother and mother-in-law who were rarely available.

### **Limiting Entrance to the Maternal Garden to Experienced Mothers**

While maternal gatekeeping primarily refers to mothers engaging in behaviors that limit support from fathers, I argue that maternal gatekeeping can apply to other family members and people in society. I believe that gatekeeping can refer to a mother’s

attempts to control who has access to her child and who can help raise her child. I only allowed my family members and Austin's family members to watch Noah when I needed help. There were consequences of only relying on support from my mother and my mother-in-law. I viewed my mother and my mother-in-law as the next best childcare help if I was not available to watch Noah. Hays (1996) argues that the ideology of intensive mothering prescribes that "when the mother is unavailable, it is other women who should serve as temporary substitutes" (p. 8). Sunderland (2006) found in a study of parenting magazines that shared parenting was rarely shown or discussed. Instead experienced mothers were portrayed as being the experts that should help and support new mothers. I had expected a great deal of support from family members that had years of experience raising children—especially the experienced mothers. My autoethnographic stories and journal entries are filled with disappointments and shock at the lack of support from my mother and my mother-in-law regarding help with childcare for Noah.

A recurring theme in the data was the lack of familial support provided by my parents and in-laws. It was hard for me to secure support from my family members unless I had a scheduled meeting or event relating to graduate school or work. Much of my writing and disappointment in terms of support focuses on Austin's mom, Nana. Nana is retired and lives a few minutes away from us. Because she is retired I had expectations that she would offer to help out with Noah for at least one day a week. When this didn't happen, even after I asked her for help, I was very disappointed. I found myself constantly overwhelmed and without time to complete part-time work or schoolwork.

Today I interviewed a babysitter to help with watching Noah while I write my dissertation. Big mistake. I emailed a former student on Facebook, a sweet girl that goes to a local university and is studying to be an elementary education major. I had forgotten how much this girl likes to talk. She came over at 3:00 pm and I had to tell her I was going to the store to buy more baby formula (which I was) in order to get her to leave at 5:30 pm. I mean here I was desperately trying to get some help and make sure that she would be great at taking care of my son and responding to his every need, giving him full attention and the entire time she was here she paid absolutely no attention to Noah. And I'm supposed to feel okay leaving him with her? What if he falls and hits his head? What if she gets a phone call and carries on with her friends and he goes into the bathroom and turns the bath water on? Oh geez!

This whole thing started because it is summer and I have no help with childcare. Suddenly Noah requires a lot more energy and supervision and creativity since he is 14 months old now and it becomes a challenge to write my dissertation without planned or scheduled help. Nana agreed to help with Noah while I was teaching an undergraduate university course once a week but now that classes are over I guess I'm on my own. It is really frustrating when no one will help unless you have to work or something like that. It would be so nice to be able to have a few hours to myself and just relax or do something unplanned. Oh well. So I had emailed Nana and asked if she had any interest in watching Noah one or two afternoons a week from 2:00 pm to 5:30 pm this summer so I could work on my dissertation. She responded by asking, "What do you have in mind?" What? How could I be clearer? So I responded and told her that I was hoping to have a planned time several days per week so that I had some time set aside for writing. She never responded. Basically she wants to offer like the day before with no advance warning so that she does not feel pressured or locked in. I don't blame her but I really wish she would help out more even though I know that's not fair. It's really hard because all of my friends' mother-in-laws or their mothers help out several days a week or on a regular basis. But my mom is not yet retired and she doesn't have much time to help out. Austin's mom helps some but not like I was hoping. So after I finally got the potential babysitter to leave two and a half hours later, I took Noah to the store to get some formula. I ran into a former student's mom while I was at the store and it was such a delight to see her! I thought after walking away from her, "I want someone like this to watch my son while I write! I would not think twice about leaving Noah in her care." But leaving him with my former student who paid him no mind was another story. (Author's personal journal, May 22, 2012)

I only sought a babysitter for help because I thought that Nana would offer to help more with childcare if she realized that I was considering hiring a babysitter. I really had no intentions of hiring a babysitter because I did not trust someone else with caring for my child. I was most comfortable with child care help from family members. I was most comfortable with experienced mothers watching Noah in my absence. But I felt like family members were not willing to help me out by watching Noah for several hours a week. I would ask for help and get rejected often.

Nana is supposed to keep Noah tomorrow afternoon for a few hours so I can really write. The scenario is familiar. She offered to keep him one day next week saying that she could do Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday. I texted her today and asked if she would rather do Tuesday or Wednesday. She responded saying that she had appointments both mornings and wouldn't be back until 1:30 pm. That was fine. But it's like, why offer to do any day and then I ask which day is best and you have appointments each day? I always feel like she offers to do it but then it's a hassle or an inconvenience. But anytime I ask her about it she says, "Oh no you know I love watching Noah!" I just don't get it. And then she will ask me, "What do you need to get done?" She always asks this. It's like I have to have something specific and planned in order for her to agree to help. I told her I had to work on dissertation writing which is true. But she should know that. I feel like everyone around me expects me to hurry up and finish my degree and PhD/dissertation but no one wants to help. When exactly do they think I am getting all this work done? In my sleep? What am I supermom? Well actually I'm not.

Our friends Pam and John have a son who is 6 months old. John's mother Sharon keeps their son 4 days a week while Pam works. I think this is a little overboard asking your mother-in-law to help full-time with childcare. I feel like Austin's mom always acts like she wants to help a lot but I am lucky if she offers to keep Noah one afternoon a week for 4 hours. She is retired. But hey, whatever. I am glad to get any help. On the other hand my mom works full-time so she really can't help. I know she would help more if she was retired. I just wish it were easier. I love watching Noah and staying home with him but by the time Austin gets home, I am really exhausted. I know I could hire a babysitter but then I would worry about leaving him the whole time. (Author's personal journal, June 11, 2012)

I've had numerous conversations with my friends and they also have been surprised at how little familial support they got particularly from their mothers and mother-in-laws. I think this lack of support was surprising to me because I had expected to have so much help from my mom and Nana. It was really hard for me to understand why the mothers in my life were not offering more support. My assumptions about good mothers had been projected onto my family members. Since I viewed mothers as selflessly wanting to care for children, I had assumed that I would have lots of support from the mothers in my life. My own expectations and assumptions about what a good mother should do and be like in turn shaped my opinions about the amount of social support received from my mother and my mother-in-law. I assumed that since they were both mothers they would happily want to help out with child care. Rizzo et al. (2013) argue that "women may endorse essentialism as a result of perceiving less social support" (p. 618).

Much of the time I was disappointed with my own mother because she was too tired to help care for Noah after working all day during the week. There were times when I was upset that she worked full-time and couldn't be available more often. I was constantly angry with my mother-in-law because she didn't offer to keep Noah more often. I had assumed that she would want to watch her grandson once a week since she was a mother and Noah was her grandson. My expectations about what a good mother (and grandmother) does and offers to do greatly shaped my expectations about Nana's help. I just assumed since she was retired she would be bored and would want to spend lots of time babysitting Noah. Only after I started analyzing the data did I realize that I had all of these expectations for my mother-in-law based on what I thought a good

grandmother/mother should do. The reality may have been that Nana wanted to travel and do her own thing after working for many years. And maybe my mother and my mother-in-law don't particularly enjoy childcare. It is really fascinating that while I was questioning and challenging the expectations of new mothers in my own life I was placing similar expectations on the mothers in my life.

Kulik and Tsoref (2010) found that as a mother "receives more help from family members, she develops a positive attitude regarding the competence of others to help her raise her children" and because she sees that others can successfully help with childcare she is "less likely to view herself as the only person who can perform the demanding role of child rearing" (p. 273). It could be that since I received little support from family members with childcare that my beliefs in the essentialist nature of motherhood were reinforced and strengthened and I was less likely to allow others to help out and more likely to engage in gatekeeping activities.

### **Mothers Mothering: Advice from Mom and Nana**

There was an abundance of support provided by my mother and Nana in the form of "motherly advice." When Noah was sick or I was having problems getting him to nap, my mother and my mother-in-law had plenty of stories about how they did things as a mother and about how I should do things. My mother would always suggest things and tell me that I needed to decide how I wanted to do things for myself while Nana would always assume that I would want to do things the way she did. I believe that Nana subscribed to intensive mothering ideology and that she routinely expected me to do so as well. My mother-in-law practiced a form of "intensive grandmothering" in the sense that

she expected her grandchildren's mothers to practice intensive mothering and expecting them to stay at home to raise their children. She also had engaged in maternal gatekeeping herself so she encouraged me to do the same.

When I made the choice to go back to work my mother was very supportive. I attribute this to the fact that she went back to work after I was born and after my two younger brothers were born. She had to work out of economic necessity but she has often told me that she really enjoys working and it is a big part of who she is as a person. My mother-in-law was very unsupportive when I decided to enroll Noah in daycare and return to work full-time. She made many comments about how Noah would not be better off making me feel like I was being selfish for choosing to return to work after 2 years of staying at home. I have realized that I am a lot like my mother in all of my parenting and mothering decisions. It is interesting that the fathers, my father and my father-in-law, rarely appear in my reflections. I think this is because for the most part, my father and my father-in-law were supportive of all my decisions or they simply chose not to share their opinions. I tended to focus on moments of conflict and disagreement in my writing. I did solicit the father's advice sometimes but I most often sought advice and approval from the mothers. This illustrates the power of essentialism in my own life. I sought advice from those who I viewed as experts including doctors and experienced mothers.

Mercer (1986) defines social support as emotional informational, physical, and appraisal.

*Emotional support* is defined as feeling loved, cared for, trusted, and understood. *Informational support* helps the individual to help herself by providing

information that is useful in dealing with the problem and/or situation. *Physical support* is a direct kind of help, such as babysitting, lending money, etc. *Appraisal support* is information that tells the role-taker how she is performing in the role; it enables the individual to evaluate herself in relationship to others' performance in the role. (p. 14)

In my personal experiences becoming a new mother, my husband and my parents, especially my mother provided the most effective emotional support. Most of the support available to me reinforced and re-inscribed traditional gendered constructions of men and women. I sought informational support from Noah's pediatrician, my obstetrician, and my mother and mother-in-law. I struggled most with a lack of physical support. It was very difficult for me to obtain direct help especially in the form of childcare because of my gatekeeping practices and my reluctance to allow others to help. I received appraisal support from many sources including my friends, other mothers I met, my own mother, my mother-in-law, and moms on television. Appraisal support played a pivotal role in my own evaluation of myself as a mother. My internalized beliefs about gender roles shaped my decisions, beliefs, practices, and experiences as a new mother. By limiting the support available to me I increased my own isolation in child rearing and this contributed to my ultimate desire to go back to work and escape the prison I had helped to build for myself.

#### **Epiphany #6: Attachment Theory and Intensive Mothering**

*Epiphany #6: I subscribed to attachment theory beliefs and the ideology of intensive mothering. These beliefs shaped my behaviors, experiences, and choices as a mother.*

The most visible and strained theme in the autoethnographic data was the struggle I faced deciding to return to the labor force. I had expected that I would love being a stay

at home mom but I didn't. Instead I felt isolated and bored. I felt like I had lost my identity, or some part of myself in the process. In reflecting back, I can see how my choices about staying at home or returning to work were greatly influenced by the ideology of intensive mothering, discourses of new momism, and idealized good mother myths. Hays (1996) defines intensive mothering as "*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*" (p. 8). This ideology assumes that women will stay home because they are the best caregivers for their children. My experiences show that I was greatly influenced by the ideology of intensive mothering and that for the most part I subscribed to its assumptions. Subscribing to these beliefs and trying to practice intensive mothering caused a great amount of stress and guilt in my life especially in terms of deciding to go back to work. This part of the chapter explores my own internal mommy wars and the tensions I experienced between staying at home and going back to work.

Damaske (2013) argues that accounts, or descriptions of personal experiences, can be understood as the product of negotiations "between actions taken and the cultural meanings attached to these actions" (p. 439). These accounts are a "subset of narratives" that "refer to specific explanations of decision-making behavior" (p. 439). My stories about motherhood focus on accounts used to explain and negotiate the process through which I decided to go back to work. I examine these accounts in depth in this section as a way to better understand whether my actions were a way to challenge discourses of motherhood or whether they subscribed to them as I constructed my identity as a working mother.

I have discussed how I felt exclusively responsible for taking care of my child. Despite the fact that I did not specifically say that I subscribed to attachment parenting beliefs, after analyzing the data and the silences within my stories, it became apparent that I definitely subscribed to attachment parenting. Liss and Erchull (2012) describe attachment parenting in the following way.

Attachment parenting is a child-centric parenting technique in which children's needs are ideally met on the child's schedule rather than that of the parent. The techniques of attachment parenting include extended breastfeeding and breastfeeding on demand, co-sleeping, and frequently carrying one's baby in wraps and slings (Green & Groves, 2008; Sears & Sears, 2003). These techniques are designed to help minimize the boundaries between parents and children. Thus theoretically, increases the ability to create a strong attachment bond (Schon & Silven, 2007) and has been argued to be a natural way to bond with one's children (Etelson, 2007; Schon & Silven, 2007). (p. 132)

Liss and Erchull (2012) found that feminist mothers were “more supportive of attachment parenting practices than were non-feminists” (p. 131). Franzblau and Friedman argue that feminist mothers may “understand attachment parenting in less essentialist ways” viewing fathers and others as capable caregivers for children (as cited in Liss & Erchull, 2012, p. 139). I believe that I attempted to practice attachment parenting *within the framework* of intensive mothering ideology. Unlike some feminists, I did view attachment parenting in essentialist terms. Another strange silence in my autoethnographic stories that support these claims is the fact that Noah has been sleeping in our bed for over a year now. I enjoy co-sleeping with my son and so does my husband even though we have caught serious grief from both of our parents for allowing Noah to sleep in the bed with us. I talked about Noah co-sleeping when he was a baby but there

was no mention of him sleeping back in our bed after he stopped sleeping in his crib in my stories. I think I left this out because I was embarrassed about it because it is frowned upon by many parents. Much in the same way that the ideology of intensive mothering has been critiqued as being oppressive to mothers, Franzblau (1999) suggests that attachment theory works as the guiding archetype that expects women to be good enough mothers. My subscription to attachment parenting theory and the ideology of intensive mothering without any critical consciousnesses of the essentialist nature of both paradigms created the situation where I felt like I had to return to work in order to have some time for myself and to reclaim my identity. I felt like my decision to return to work was somehow a way to resist my internalized beliefs about what mothers should do.

After Noah was about a year old I realized I no longer wanted to stay home and work part-time. I missed interaction with adults and I always felt overwhelmed. I had internalized the view that a good mother should *want* to stay home with her child instead of working a full time job. This created day to day tension for me as I wanted to go back to work yet I felt like I *should* stay home.

This past week I have been dealing with the whole going back to work or stay at home thing again. I am actually quite surprised how much I think about this. I never really noticed it until I realized how much I was journaling about it. I guess I just feel guilty about the whole thing. After all I am in a desired position right? I can make the choice about whether or not to work. I don't have to work out of economic necessity. I actually think it makes the decision harder. I feel like I should love every moment of staying home with Noah and I shouldn't want to go back to work. (Author's personal journal, June 28, 2012)

I held certain expectations because of my class status—namely—that I would enjoy being a stay at home mom. Stone argues that “middle-class women call a decision to leave the workforce a ‘choice’ in order to reclaim a sense that they had options even when their choices may have been quite limited” (as cited in Damaske, 2013, p. 440). I referred to the fact that because my husband had a good salary I had the “choice” to stay home. But the reality is that I couldn’t afford to stay at home exclusively and not work. That is the reason why I had two part-time jobs. The decision for me came down to whether I wanted to juggle and try to stay at home and work part time or go back to work full time and enroll Noah in daycare. I also had a hard time explaining to others the fact that I worked part time and stayed at home. I felt there were accepted binaries of either being a stay at home mom or being a mom that works full-time. I didn’t know where I fit in.

I began to wonder why I felt like there were only two options or categories: either a working mom or a stay at home mom. What about all of the moms and parents that work part-time? What am I—an in-between mom? What category did I fit into?

In my journals I wrote about wanting to go back to work and feeling guilty about it. I felt like it was impossible to choose both work and being a mother. The two roles seemed at odds with each other. I felt guilty for leaving Noah and perhaps jeopardizing his level of attachment. I felt guilty because I had somehow failed to live up to traditional discourses of the good mother, the mother who can do it all.

Today I have been dealing with conflicting thoughts about going back to work full-time. I am having a hard time doing the stay at home mom thing. I thought I would love staying at home everyday caring for Noah but I am finding it to be

boring and isolating. I am so concerned with his schedule and his meals and naptime that I rarely have time to write or do any research which are things that really define me.

And the strange thing is that I am ready to get pregnant again! I want to go ahead and get my family started so that I can figure out what it is that I really want to do. I feel like I have waited and planned and worked my whole life to start my career and my family and now the two are at odds and competing for my attention. I applied for a job at a local university yesterday. I am sure I won't get the job but I keep hoping I have a chance so that I can go back to work and have a flexible schedule. I really want to do both – work and take care of my son. There is hardly enough time in the day. I guess I just really feel overwhelmed and like I don't have a lot of options. I am also feeling guilty that I do not love every minute of staying home with my son. I do love lots of the moments but it is just really hard! And what's really bad is that I don't feel like there is anyone who I can talk to about this stuff. Nana keeps telling me that she was never away from her first son at all until her second son was born three years later. What? I cannot imagine going three years without a break. That is just crazy! And my mom put me in day care six weeks after I was born so she is on the opposite spectrum. I feel stuck. What should I do? Look for a full-time job with a flexible schedule (assuming that actually exists) or just stay at home working part-time like I have been while trying to finish up my dissertation? Oh the decisions! (Author's personal journal, May 22, 2012)

I look to my mother's choices and the choices of my mother-in-law as a model or options of what I can do or what I should do. I tried to find a job that has a flexible schedule so that I could spend time with my son and work. My expectations of being a supermom were completely different than my actual experience. I realized I could not possibly accomplish everything I needed to given my current situation.

I feel trapped by my situation. Much in the way that I have trouble explaining my jobs, I have started to realize that I don't really like the juggling involved in working part-time and being a stay at home mom all at once. I am having a hard time being good at both jobs. I realize that I never have enough time to finish my work much less work on my dissertation or have some free time for myself. I was finding that teaching online courses was extremely isolating—all contact with students was done online and via text message. I miss the person to person

interaction that is such a big part of teaching. I am starting to re-think my current job situation and I have begun to notice things that I don't like about them—things that I had previously overlooked. I enjoy my university teaching job and interacting with students face to face. But the pay is small and the insurance benefits turned out to be a form of emergency coverage. I am spending tons of money out of pocket on medical expenses for well baby care and immunizations for Noah which were not covered. It bothers me that the Virtual Public School does not offer insurance and retirement benefits even though I was essentially teaching more classes online than face to face teachers and they are offered benefits. These part-time jobs had always been “fillers” or temporary positions meant to allow me to stay home with Noah for a while, when should I move on? (Author's personal journal, May 22, 2012)

As I slowly realized I was not enjoying being a stay at home mom, I decided to look for jobs. I went ahead and enrolled Noah in preschool. I liked Noah's preschool but I was still not happy. I wanted to go back to work. Preschool several days a week for a few hours didn't allow me enough time to get my part-time work done. I felt like my identity had gone on vacation and my whole life for the past year revolved around my son. I began to realize that my expectations for what being a stay at home mom meant were very different from the reality.

I don't really consider myself a stay at home mom anymore. This has changed based on my experiences. I work two part-time jobs and watch my son. What comes to mind when I think of stay-at-home moms are all of the images I would describe as stereotypical mothers.

I too had bought into the idea that stay at home moms live a life of leisure. I didn't realize how isolating it could be and how much work taking care of a young child actually involved. It was all-consuming. My maternal gatekeeping practices had ensured that I would always be responsible for watching Noah.

I was starting to realize that this stay at home and work part-time mom gig was not working for me.

When I realized that I want to go back to work I had to consider daycare options. I really struggled with whether or not to put Noah in daycare. I described how guilty I felt. I thought daycare will be bad for him. I thought that I was the best caretaker for my child even though I felt suffocated staying at home all day. These beliefs clearly subscribed to intensive mothering ideology.

But then I have doubts about whether I would really want Noah to be in day care all day long. I just would like to work at a job, in an office (not at home) for several days a week. That would be ideal. (Author's personal journal, May 24, 2012)

My decision to go back to work full-time became contingent on whether I could find a suitable daycare facility. In order to alleviate some of the guilt associated with going back to work, I had to find Noah a great school. Guilt was a big part of my decision in waiting to go back to work until Noah was almost 2 years old. If I was going to open the gates to the maternal garden even wider, I had to find a good enough school. My guilt was increased when I discussed going back to work with Nana, the disapproving mother-in-law.

I had a conversation with Austin's mom on Friday night talking about how I was getting anxious about finding a job next year when I finished my degree. I was talking about wanting to get a university job because of the flexibility and pay. She told me that she only went back to work full time when her kids were out of the house and she made sure that she was home when they were home. So she chose teaching elementary school so she could only work when her kids were in school. She also told me that I can't do it all and that my career will probably really pick up when my kids are 10 or 11. What??? I did not do all of this work

for a PhD to stay at home and not work until my children are in middle school. I think that it's great that she chose to do that but I feel like she is pressuring me to do the same thing. Like I'm a bad mother if I find a job before my kids are in public school or I cannot arrange to only work when they are gone. She has also made many comments about how she never left her kids to go out of town or never put them in day care. I was in day care at 6 weeks because my mother had to go back to work. I just do not want to be judged for whatever I choose to do. The reality is that I wish I could do it all...work and take care of Noah. I just find it really ironic that everyone wants me to stay home and take care of Noah yet it is rare that I get help to ease any frustrations I am having or just to get a break. (Author's personal journal, June 11, 2012)

I felt like Nana was trying to get me to make the same choices she made about staying at home while her children were young. Nana subscribed to intensive mothering ideology and she expected me to do the same. I started to feel trapped by her expectations. For several weeks I wrote about this dilemma on whether or not to go back to work. I would weigh the pros and cons. A big factor besides my guilt about putting Noah in daycare was the fact that my background in education meant that any job I was offered would probably have a low salary associated with it and Noah's daycare costs would probably account for half of it.

There is no way that any job offer I get will pay more than Austin's job so I feel like I should stay at home. I feel like at this stage I do have to choose between a career and taking care of my son. I am teaching online classes at home and that is hard enough. I guess I go back and forth with the issue. I would have a really hard time deciding what to do if I got offered a great full time job right now even if I really wanted to take it. I would have serious concerns about putting Noah in full time childcare at this young of an age, even though I am really ready for his preschool to start. I guess this next year will be really good because I can see how Noah does in preschool several days per week for a few hours and I can start to think about job searching for real. But do I really want a stressful job? Plus there is really no way to balance work and family with a demanding job schedule. I am ready to have another baby too. (Author's personal journal, June 16, 2012)

Going back to work full time involved lots of issues. I set all of these conditions in my mind that had to be met before I decided to go back to work. The pay had to be enough, the schedule had to work, and the job had to be meaningful—internally rewarding. I wanted to return to the labor force but I saw that choice as also giving up time with my child—time that was very important to me. For several weeks whenever I had a break I routinely searched for jobs online. I would sometimes apply for a job but I mostly just liked reading the job descriptions and daydreaming about what my life would be like if I had that job. But then I would come back to reality and think about the complications of going back to work.

I found two jobs that I would like to apply for. Both are at Women's centers. I don't think I'm qualified for one of the positions I do think I am well suited for the other one. But I keep thinking, is my work with Noah more meaningful than these jobs? Clearly I'm not going to apply for a job unless I am doing really important social justice work. But I keep wavering back and forth between going back to work and continuing to stay home with Noah. If I do get pregnant again that decision will become much easier. I will definitely wait to apply for a job if I get pregnant. Throughout my entire experience raising Noah from about eight months and after I have had this internal battle with myself about career vs. staying at home. My opinion on it changes from day to day. Maybe I just don't feel validated by staying at home. Maybe I don't think I am doing a good job and that's part of the problem. I'm really not sure. (Author's personal journal, June 18, 2012)

I struggled with not being able to understand or accept the fact that I was not completely fulfilled by being a stay at home mother. I felt like I had to make this choice of either working or caring for my child. It was hard for me to see that I could be a working mom and a caring mom at the same time.

It is so unfair that I have to choose between work and family. Why can't jobs be family friendly? (Author's personal journal, June 25, 2012)

Johnson and Swanson's (2003) selfish/selfless double bind messages and mother-child independence/dependence double bind messages framed my decisions about working or staying at home. I felt selfish for wanting to go back to work and for wanting independence. I struggled with going back to work full time because the schedule seemed too demanding and I didn't want to be away from my child all day. There didn't seem to be any real family friendly job schedules where a woman can have flexible work hours and still receive benefits from her employer.

I just don't want to work a regular schedule where I'll be gone from Noah all day. I would like to work several mornings a week. There are not many jobs out there that fit what I am looking for. In fact it seems like you have to choose between working from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, five days a week or staying at home all the time. It just seems unfair that work is structured around a certain set of assumptions. I guess we will wait and see what happens with the job thing. I can always turn down a job if it doesn't meet my requirements. But will I really do this? I don't know. (Author's personal journal, June 28, 2012)

I struggled with guilt for months before I finally decided that I would go back to work outside of the home.

I know that for months I have been thinking about and even applying for jobs but I am really nervous about having to make a choice between staying home with Noah and taking a full time job and putting him in day care. I am confused and excited. I am hoping I can find a job that will pay a lot and has flexible hours so that I can do it all...stay home and work. I must admit that a great deal of my thinking and stress come from this work versus staying at home dilemma. I want to do half and half. Maybe if I get a job Noah can go to preschool 5 days a week from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm and I can work then. I will just feel so guilty like I am being a bad mother or I am missing precious moments of my son's life if I work full time hours and put him in day care full time. I guess I know that I will need to

make some hard choices about work and childcare and I am dreading that even though I am excited about new opportunities. Noah is the most important thing to me in this world and I want to do what is best for him. But at the same time I don't want to miss opportunities that I have worked so hard for. (Author's personal journal, July 13, 2012)

I discussed wanting to be able to do it all. The process of writing daily journals and stories about my experiences with motherhood led me to reflexively analyze my thoughts about going back to work. Writing was therapeutic for me and through writing my journals I realized how important going back to work was for me. I questioned and challenged my internalized beliefs that good mothers are selfless and stay at home with their children. My reflective writing makes connections to images of the ideal good mother. As I realized I was unhappy with being a stay at home mom, I began to reframe my decision about returning to work as what's best for Noah. In my attempts to challenge what I viewed as oppressive expectations of a good mother—one who stays at home and doesn't work—I described and explained my reasoning in terms of the good mother/intensive mothering ideology. I described my choices using child-centered rhetoric.

I don't want to give up 10 years of my life in a career by staying at home when my son would probably be happier and have more fun in a school environment playing with other kids. I was put in daycare at 6 weeks old and I turned out okay, right? I still feel like I have to convince myself that I am not making a selfish decision. The guilt is hard to swallow.

Sutherland (2010) argues that “for white mothers, guilt associated with employment was reduced when they argued their work made them more present to their children at home” (p. 317).

When I was talking about struggling with the decision about going back to work [a friend] told me, “I was really ready to go back to work after 4 months of staying at home with my son. Working outside of the home makes me a better mother.” I thought about what she said. I finally started to have some confidence in my decision and some of the guilt associated with going back to work was fading.

I described returning to work as a strategy that would actually make me a better mother. I framed the decisions as doing what was best for my child. Even when I thought I was challenging the dominant discourses of motherhood, I was actually continuing to subscribe to it by framing my decisions in terms of doing what is best for my child.

Damaske (2013) argues that

Even in circumstances in which women attempt to challenge official discourse about mothering, researchers find that the normative cultural constraints remain ever present. The tension between rising workforce participation and intensive mothering, then, appears resolved not through a reduction in mothering efforts, but through a discourse that emphasizes conformity to good mothering ideals. (p. 441)

There were moments when I described my decision to return to work as doing something for myself and as a way to “get my identity back” but one of the main ways I dealt with guilt was to reframe my decision and make it about what was best for my child. Garey (1995) found that women use “various strategies to integrate their identities as workers and their identities as mothers into a construction of working mother which valorized their relation to work while preserving cultural norms about their role as mothers” (p. 417). I viewed my decision of returning to work as a challenge to dominant ideologies of motherhood, but in reality I was constructing my identity and negotiating my position within the regulations of good mothering ideology.

DiQuinzio (1999) defines ideological work as the “work of containing or managing contradictions within an ideological formation” (p. 4). Ideological work prevents and any critique of the ideology. DiQuinzio (1999) argues that ideologies also shift and they are frequently negotiated within subjects that are impacted most by the ideological formation. The process of deciding to go back to work full-time was mediated by months and months of ideological work. I could not see how I had internalized traditional feminine gender expectations and I was only judging myself against the dominant motherhood myths. I managed the contradiction of intensive mothering ideology and I thought I was resisting the tenants because they felt oppressive. Yet I was actually negotiating within that ideology without really critiquing the ideology itself. The questioning of the ideology came later through the reflexive analysis and writing of this chapter.

The power of intensive mothering and other dominant discourses of motherhood was pervasive in my experiences of becoming a new mother. I was constantly trying to fit into the mold of the good mother. My assumptions about motherhood and taking care of an infant were based on mythical images on television. I found it impossible to balance or juggle part time work while taking care of my child. I found I could not do it all and I had lost parts of my identity in trying to do so. My decisions about a career were much harder after having a child. The requirements for a job shifted and flexibility, pay, and having a meaningful position were bigger concerns. I felt a huge amount of guilt about returning to work which was deepened by discussions with my mother-in-law who also subscribed to intensive mothering beliefs. A big point of contention in deciding to return to work was

finding quality childcare. As I was adjusting to my role as a new mother I was trying to be a supermom and I felt like everyone around me also expected me to be a supermom.

I engaged in frequent self-monitoring after having conversations with other mothers who often described their practices of mothering. I would then compare my own mothering practices to theirs. I desperately wanted approval from other mothers, my own mother, and my mother-in-law. It was important to me that they thought I was a good mother. With time and experience, I began to question my own assumptions and expectations about motherhood. I gained confidence as I gained experience being a mother. In learning how to be a mother I felt like I became good at it. I had to get over the idea that mothering came naturally to women.

The past week I have been really relaxed and I think I've been happier. I don't know why. I do feel like I am getting more confident about my mothering skills. Maybe that just happens with time. I feel like I am finally getting it and I am confident enough to say that I know I'm doing a good job. (Author's personal journal, June 21, 2012)

When I started worrying less about what I should and should not do as a mother I found that I really enjoyed being a mom. I had to be myself as a mother and stop trying to please others. I had to stop trying to reach some unattainable standard of the perfect mother.

I am finally starting to develop real confidence about being a good mother. When I'm around other mothers I know that I am doing a good job. I finally feel like I am really good at this mothering thing and that I could do it all over again. I don't know if it's because it gets easier as your child gets older and grows from a newborn to a toddler or if I've learned so much and gotten so much experience at

being a mother. It's probably some of both. (Author's personal journal, August 28, 2012)

For me, going back to work even for just a few months marked a real turning point in my journey being a new mom. I felt like I had finally made a choice for myself no matter how I framed the decision. As I started to make choices that previously seemed impossible for me, I started to see glimpses of the puzzle pieces of my experience. Only in deeply analyzing the themes and especially the silences in my autoethnographic stories and journals did I reflexively theorize my choices, decisions, beliefs, and practices and only then could I see how the intersectionality of my Whiteness, my gender, and my class status contributed to my privilege (and oppression) and the internalization of specific dominant discourses of mothering.

### **Epiphany #7: Out of Pocket Costs of Motherhood**

*Epiphany #7: Motherhood is really expensive even for a privileged middle-class White mother with health insurance.*

Healthcare decisions and the cost of treatment were recurring themes in the autoethnographic data. I was shocked at how my insurance provider and my student health insurance policy determined so much about my care and the care provided to my son. Right after choosing the obstetrician's office for my preventative care during my pregnancy I found out how expensive it really was to have a baby. My health insurance was a student plan provided and paid for by the university. As a perk of my assistantship, the university paid the annual premium. I was required to pay a \$300 deductible plus 20% of all care. It ended up costing me over \$1,500 out of pocket for my preventative care

alone. I was informed that the obstetrician's office I selected required me to deliver at the Regional Hospital next to their office where the doctor's had exclusive delivering privileges. I was disappointed by this because I had wanted to deliver at the nicer Women's Hospital across town. But I liked my doctor so I decided to stay with the practice. After my water broke and I went to the hospital, part of getting admitted meant waiting for my insurance to clear or be accepted.

I was anxious about the costs of everything since I was making under \$15,000 per year on my assistantship salary. Austin had a good salary but I really had no idea how much it cost to have a baby. I called my insurance company prior to giving birth and asked a bunch of questions about coverage for adding a dependent to my policy. I also had asked about the costs of my delivery. After reading all of the fine print and legal jargon in my policy and talking on the phone on several different occasions with an insurance representative, I finally felt like I could make some sound economic choices about healthcare. Unfortunately, I was wrong. I still had not been given accurate information about what was actually covered under my policy.

I was shocked and upset when I saw the knot in my umbilical cord during Noah's delivery and the doctor said he could've died. I was angry that an additional ultrasound had not been done farther along in my pregnancy. I know that the knot could've just happened a few days before my delivery, but the entire procedure of not routinely conducting late term ultrasounds because insurance companies will not cover them unless there was a diagnosed problem is discriminatory and downright unethical. I had asked one of the obstetricians during a routine visit why they didn't do ultrasounds farther along

in the pregnancy and I was told that insurance companies typically would not cover the cost of a late term ultrasound unless there was a problem.

The prenatal, delivery, and postnatal care was very expensive. The costs that I incurred were much less than they would've been for a mother without insurance. My class privilege allowed me to be able to afford the medical costs even though they were still exorbitant. When I called the insurance company prior to enrolling Noah in my coverage, I was told that the policy covered immunizations and 80% of the baby's delivery costs. I looked at the benefits of Austin's insurance and there was a really big deductible so I decided to add Noah to my policy after he was born. This cost an additional \$1,500 for a coverage term of April to the end of August. I had to pay the same cost for the full year even though Noah was born after the term began. It was against my insurance company's policy to prorate annual premiums even if a woman had a baby at the end of the coverage term.

The actual out of pocket costs for my delivery and Noah's birth were around \$6,000. I was furious when I had to pay for the full \$600 anesthesiologist bill for my epidural because my insurance policy didn't cover it. My insurance policy did not cover pain medicine during labor? How is that okay? I also had to pay the full \$500 for Noah's circumcision because it was not a "required procedure" I was told.

The worst economic hardship for me was discovering that my insurance policy did not cover preventative well baby care. I had been told by an insurance representative that it was covered but after taking Noah to each well baby appointment every few months I kept getting these large bills from his pediatrician's office for his shots. After

calling the insurance company back I was told that immunizations were only covered up to \$500. That amount was met after one round of shots which totaled \$532. I was told by the insurance company that the university had chosen a plan that covers the minimum and that my policy didn't include well baby care. My policy was intended to serve as emergency coverage. The university had elected not to include the preventative and well baby care provisions in the policies to students probably because it is cheaper and they assumed that most students are not mothers or will not have a baby while in school.

I called Noah's pediatrician's office to find out how often his well baby visits were and how often he needed to get immunizations. I was told that normally babies follow this schedule for immunizations: birth, 2 months, 4 months, 6 months, 12 months, 15 months, and 18 months. I knew that I had made the wrong decision in enrolling Noah in my insurance instead of Austin's plan which covered immunizations in full. I was angry with myself for not knowing this and not asking the right questions. I was even more upset with the system that allows insurance companies to not cover immunizations and preventative care. The policy covered sick care so if Noah got hurt or had an injury like his fall then insurance covered most of it. But they would not pay to make sure that he didn't get sick. The companies would not cover immunizations that were required by our state for public school enrollment. I spent over \$4,000 on well baby visits and immunizations for Noah. For the first 2 years after having a child I spent over \$15,000 out of pocket for insurance and healthcare costs for me and my son even though we had health insurance. I spent the same amount of money on our healthcare costs as I made in one year with my assistantship salary.

It was a very stressful experience not knowing the costs and trying to make the right choices as far as which policy to add Noah to. It shouldn't be that difficult to make healthcare decisions for your child. I felt like society and our institutions did not care about the health of my child. The fact that an insurance policy adopted by my state university which is a member of a well respected university system did not cover well baby care and preventative care was shocking to me. I realize that people have bad experiences with insurance companies everyday but this was all new to me. How could our government not mandate that preventative care and vaccinations be covered by all insurance policies? I took it personal. I felt like society was openly discriminating against women/mothers and their children. Why were these costs and the oppressive amounts of money involved in having a child and ensuring their health accepted by society as being morally permissible?

After these bad experiences with my university sponsored health insurance company, the next year I decided I would make a switch and add Noah to Austin's insurance. My class privilege allowed me to have choices about which insurance policy to purchase. I had a really hard time finding out information about the actual costs when I was making annual enrollment decisions. I wrote about the difficulties deciding what to do for the next year in terms of insurance coverage.

I am going to put Austin and Noah on my insurance again because the coverage at his work is terrible. I would have to pay over \$4,000 under his plan to have a baby! There are downfalls of my coverage too, namely the inadequate immunization coverage for Noah, but I have really been shocked at the lack of basic coverage under both of our insurance plans. Do these companies want your child to get the measles or polio? They will pay for sick care but not preventative

care that keeps children from getting sick. (Author's personal journal, June 2, 2012)

Since there is a short window of time to make annual enrollment decisions for most employees, I knew I had to make some decisions quickly about whether to add Noah to Austin's policy or keep him on mine. This was difficult because my insurance company had still not released the costs of premiums for the next year even though the policy was set to begin two months later.

I have spent the past two days racking my brain over insurance policy information. Austin's open enrollment ends soon and I can't decide whether to add him and Noah to his work policy or add them to my policy. And of course I am making decisions without all of the relevant information. Austin's coverage pays for well-baby and immunizations at 100% which is great. My coverage pays for 80% of immunizations up to \$500 per year which is a joke. One round of vaccinations easily amounts to \$500 and my insurance doesn't pay for the actual doctor's visit which costs about \$150. I have spent more out of pocket on preventative care for Noah this past year than his delivery costs. It really is terrible that babies are required to have these immunizations yet insurance companies will not pay for preventative care only sick care. So you want my child to get sick before you'll cover him even though I've bought your policy? I felt like I made the wrong insurance decisions when Noah was born so I am trying to make really informed choices this go round. I just can't seem to figure out which policy makes the most sense and even once I pick one it is still really a gamble. My insurance carrier through the university doesn't even have rates or any specific policy information available yet and the policies are effective August 1<sup>st</sup> which is less than 2 months away. I think it is part of an effort to limit people's decisions about insurance. These open enrollment periods that are limited and the pressure to make decisions without all of the information are really unfair to consumers. I want to make sure that our family has proper coverage in case something happens and that shouldn't rest of my choice of insurance carrier. (Author's personal journal, June 4, 2012)

I felt an enormous amount of pressure to make the right insurance choice because I knew based on my experience the previous year that if I made the wrong choice it could cost me my entire salary.

So I just found out the rates for adding Noah to my insurance next year after emailing and calling at least five different people. Yikes! The amount more than doubled from last year and now I would have to pay part of my own premium in addition to the full premium for adding a dependent. I will put him on Austin's coverage because I cannot afford to put him on mine. So I guess one of the perks of being a graduate assistant at the university has evaporated. The insurance coverage is not very good. (Author's personal journal, June 5, 2012)

Recent changes in healthcare law and policy have begun implementation as a result of the Affordable Care Act spearheaded by President Barack Obama's administration. Obamacare, as it is often called, now mandates insurance companies cover 100% of all preventative care including coverage for prenatal coverage for pregnant women and well baby care plus immunizations for infants. The law requires insurance companies to reimburse women for the cost of purchasing a breast pump as well which can run up to \$350. These are very positive policy changes that are beginning to address the economic costs of becoming a mother. Having a child and becoming a mother is a financially expensive endeavor. As a society, our government and institutions should provide health care and preventative care to all members in society and not discriminate with policies that do not cover the costs of having a child. The lack of social support from family members, friends, and institutions in society greatly impacted my experiences becoming a mother.

### **Epiphany #8: Graduate School Mommy**

*Epiphany #8: Getting a PhD and being a mother is really hard to do.*

My status as a doctoral student enrolled in graduate school greatly shaped my experiences as a first time mother. I gave birth to Noah after my first year in the PhD program. His birth shaped my life and my research interests. I tried to balance being a stay at home mom and a full time graduate student with a teaching assistantship. I had support from my professors in my program but I felt a lack of support from the university itself especially with the level of services provided to graduate students who are also mothers. I found it challenging to get work done for my classes and writing my dissertation did not become possible until after Noah was enrolled in daycare. When I stayed at home with Noah the first two years, I considered myself to be a “naptime academic” because I could only write and research during his naptime. This proved difficult since many days he would not nap at all. With so much going on taking care of a child it was difficult to work on my research and writing. Much of this was self-imposed because I didn’t allow babysitters or others to help me take care of Noah.

I am at the library working on my dissertation. I am writing for the first time in a really long time. I am here because I am attending a dissertation workshop hosted by the Graduate School explaining how to format your dissertation. Maybe it will seem more real like I am actually writing my dissertation this year and planning to graduate with my PhD after attending this seminar. There is an odd connection between not really believing something is happening until certain steps take place. Just like getting pregnant and having a baby I didn’t really believe it until certain things happened that made it real. Getting pregnant, giving birth to a baby, raising a child, and writing comps, defending comps, and writing the dissertation are really hard to do at one time. Austin joked the other night saying that maybe the only way I will finish the dissertation this year is to get pregnant again. It’s funny because I had already thought the same thing. Instead of relaxing every night,

maybe if I get pregnant again I will buckle down and focus knowing that I need to get the dissertation done before baby comes. Of course that is what I had thought last year and instead of getting comps done early they got put off a semester. (Author's personal journal, June 5, 2012)

One of the biggest challenges for me was that there was no drop-in childcare available through the university for graduate students. While I didn't trust babysitters, I trusted preschools and daycare centers more because they were institutions that were governed by certain rules and policies. The childcare center run by the university as a training and learning lab in the department of human development was not set up for students with children. It had a waiting list several years long. In fact Noah is still on the waiting list there. I found it very hard to get support from my retired mother-in-law. All of my other family members worked full time so the only time I really had to write and conduct research was late at night. I was always too exhausted to work at night. I remember one day when I was walking to class to teach my undergraduate seminar a woman came up to me. I was very pregnant at 8 months along. She said to me, "I just had a baby and I want to commend you for taking classes and doing this while you are pregnant. It is so hard to juggle everything. Good for you." It was a really strange encounter because I didn't know this woman and she just came up to me and started talking like I needed support. The funny thing is I appreciated it. Some sort of "by the hour" childcare facility available for students with children would've greatly assisted me as a graduate school mommy.

I also found it impossible to attend seminars, workshops, and meetings during the day after Noah was born. I had no childcare and all of these great workshops I would get emails about were always during the day. I doubt seriously I would've attended even if

they did have childcare because I was very restrictive with who I would allow to watch Noah. The university never provided childcare for any event geared towards graduate students. Academic and professional conferences were hard to attend. Many of them were out of town and required travel. This was impossible to do while I was breastfeeding. I cancelled two accepted paper presentations because I could not find childcare for Noah and the conferences did not provide that service.

My assistantship through my department only paid \$11,000 per year. I had applied for a fellowship and some scholarships that greatly helped out financially while I was in graduate school. The biggest disappointment in terms of working for the university while in graduate school was the quality of the student health insurance. The benefits provided were greatly lacking in terms of preventative prenatal coverage and well baby care. I spent more money on healthcare the year Noah was born than I made from my job working for the university.

When I started my PhD program I was really excited about becoming a faculty member in a school of education somewhere. But after having a child I am not sure I will be able to handle the pressure to publish scholarly articles and books. I have found it really difficult to write and focus with all of my responsibilities. This has made me question whether I would even be able to get a faculty job or ever get tenure.

I want to find a faculty job where I can be in control of my schedule but I don't really want to have the pressure of writing. I would consider returning to teaching in public schools if the schedule was set up like a college schedule. (Author's personal journal, June 28, 2012)

I attended a going away party for a faculty member who had been my mentor and had shared my research interests of motherhood. At her going away party she talked about academia and having a family. I wrote about it in my journal.

A lot of the conversation today at the party was based around how demanding academia can be. Dr. Cole was basically saying that it cannot be your life even though it tries to be. She said that professors demand more and more and the more you do, the more that's expected and it's a never-ending cycle. And Eric, a fellow grad student who just graduated and got a job at a great university was asking me about whether I will be limited by a job search to stay around here. I said yes because I love being close to family and I really don't want to move out of state. I am fine working at university around here or having an administrative job at a college. I am not going to put my ego before the well being of my family.  
(Author's personal journal, June 16, 2012)

After this conversation I began to realize that in order to find a good faculty position right out of graduate school I probably would have to move out of state. I had thought about how my husband makes more money that I would ever be offered as an assistant professor. So how would it make since to give up his salary and move away for less pay? Plus my parents and Austin's parents live only a few minutes away and that would be hard to move away from them and limit the time they got to spend with Noah. I began to realize that my position as a woman/mother and my chosen profession of education would not translate into enough pay to support our family without my spouse's salary. These pressures and the pressure to publish began to discourage me from seeking a faculty position. I am starting to realize that my low self-esteem may account for much of this self-doubt. Maybe I just don't see myself as an academic or as a good writer. I am really not sure what the future holds for me.

Becoming a mother during my graduate school studies was very difficult. I found lots of support from faculty members but little to no support from the university institution itself. All school functions except for actual classes operated during the day and the university provided no childcare options for students with children. After having a child I began to question my future career choices and I began to doubt that I would be able to keep up with the “publish or perish” routine required in the world of academia. Becoming a mother deeply impacted my career aspirations. I lost confidence that I would be able to do it all.

**Epiphany #9: Internal Mommy Wars, Loss of Identity, and the Power of Intensive  
Mothering Ideology**

*Epiphany #9: Going back to work full-time forced me to open the maternal gate to institutionalized childcare/daycare. My background as a teacher shaped my educational decisions for my son.*

My background as an educator had a profound effect on my role as a mother. I felt this increased responsibility to be a teacher to Noah introducing him to all sorts of new things. After Noah started walking and talking, I felt this pressure to keep Noah engaged and busy doing activities *all* of the time. At some point I felt like I ran out of things to do. Noah would watch a great deal of television and I would feel guilty for not taking him on more play dates and picnics. I was always looking for new toy ideas. I worried that if I didn't keep him properly engaged I would somehow be setting him up to fail or get behind other kids his age.

I ordered Noah a train table and a water table today from Amazon. I am so excited! I took him to Barnes and Noble and he loved the train table there. So I thought it would be a good play toy to put in place of the tent he got for his 1<sup>st</sup> birthday. He's gotten bored with that. Since his preschool doesn't start until September (over 3 months away...yes I am counting!) I figure that I am entitled to buy him fun toys. I want to keep him busy playing!! I always feel guilty when I stay here with him all day and don't take him places like I should be constantly keeping him occupied. But I am starting to think that is unrealistic. I always wonder in the back of my head if Noah would have more fun at day care playing with other kids. (Author's personal journal, June 13, 2012)

My class privilege remained invisible as I didn't think about my ability to purchase these consumer items. This privilege put pressure on me to buy the right products and seduced me into thinking that I had to buy lots of new toys to always keep Noah stimulated and that was a condition of being a good mother. I constantly engaged in self-monitoring by worrying about what I *should* be doing. I felt like my day had been successful if I engaged Noah in fun activities all day.

So today has been a much better day! I took him to the park this morning and he played for almost 2 hours. He had so much fun and so did I! He watched some older kids and he really loved playing in the sandbox! I had been feeling like he wanted to play outside. After we went to the playground today we ate lunch and then I gave him a bath since he had a great time putting sand in his hair!! Then I let him play and watch cartoons instead of trying to put him down to nap. I feel like I did a good job today!!! (Author's personal journal, June 14, 2012)

Part of being a good mother and teacher to Noah involved buying the age appropriate developmental toys that would peak his interest. I have to admit that I bought many of the products advertised on television for infants and toddlers.

I would justify spending money on educational toys telling Austin they were necessary to keep Noah engaged. I also rationalized the need by telling myself that we

were not shelling out money for daycare. Moms in television commercials were presented as stay at home moms that played with their kids all day. I felt like I had to do that too. Spigel (1992) argues that television networks have spent years constructing a consumer identity for women after research studies found that women—particularly mothers—made the majority of consumer spending decisions for their families. The ideology of capitalism shaped my experiences being a consumer that was also a mother.

My background as a teacher made educational decisions more difficult. Prior to going back to work, I had to find daycare arrangements for my son. I had never realized it would be so hard to find a spot for him at a quality education facility. When I started looking for preschools I really liked the schools I visited. Noah had an excellent experience at his church preschool. His preschool teacher was caring and gave him one on one attention. This was really important to me as a mother and a teacher. My assumptions and beliefs about daycare facilities were very negative to start with. I had thought that putting Noah in daycare would somehow set him up for failure. I worried that the teachers wouldn't be caring and that Noah would just be a number. I also felt this pressure to find the best daycare. This was part of my rationalization for going back to work. Maybe my son would like daycare more than staying home with me. I could only find two types of childcare: full time daycare facilities and part-time preschool programs that ran a few days a week for 3-4 hours.

Even Noah's preschool is structured for stay at home moms something I didn't really realize at first. Since the hours are 9 am to 12 pm how many working moms can really take advantage of this schedule?

Once I finally decided to enroll Noah in daycare, I was very picky and judgmental about what school he should attend. My position as an educator and my middle class status allowed me more choices about daycare. But this also created tensions because I felt like maybe I *should* enroll Noah at the expensive Montessori school because we maybe could've afforded the tuition. After the director at Friendly Education Center gave me a tour, I felt better about my decision to enroll Noah in daycare.

She really alleviated all of my fears about daycare. I also saw lots of “normal” looking parents and children at the daycare. I started to realize, good parents do put their kids in daycare. I began to see that these kids were just like Noah and they were happy and healthy and well adjusted and their parents worked. I was not being a bad mother by considering this option.

I had held these assumptions that kids were somehow ruined by daycare. How silly. Once I saw parents like me taking their children to the daycare center I changed my opinions. Nana's response about putting Noah in daycare reflected her subscription to good mothering ideologies. She had said, “Daycare is not good a good place for children.”

In heeding my mother's advice, I looked at several other daycare centers. When my friend, who is also a preschool teacher, told me that she really liked Friendly Education Center it was much easier for me to make the decision. I continued to experience guilt associated with my choice to enroll Noah in daycare reflecting the selfless/selfish double bind. I made choices more easily and with less guilt after getting advice from experienced mothers.

Even in explaining my decision to Noah's preschool director, I was concerned about adhering to dominant discourses of mothering. I was still framing my decision as a

“choice” and I thought it would appear selfish to admit I wanted to return to work. In choosing education for Noah, I was concerned about many issues. I wanted his school to have consistent values and a schedule that reflected my parenting beliefs.

I was especially concerned about the following things: training and experience of the teachers, the daily schedule, classroom activities and curriculum, time spent playing outside, quality of the food provided, the cost, and the location of the daycare.

I ended up choosing a wonderful daycare center for Noah and we have been very happy with his experiences there. My assumptions about daycare centers were completely wrong and Noah has wonderful and caring teachers at his school. My assumptions about daycare versus full time care from one’s mother were greatly influenced by my subscription to ideologies of motherhood. I had subscribed to the view that mothers are the best caretakers for their children. Only after I had experience with Noah’s daycare center did my views change. My mother was supportive of my decision to enroll Noah in daycare because she had had positive experiences with daycare and her own children. Nana was not supportive because she had never had any experience with daycare settings and she had bought into the beliefs that they are bad for children. I know that as a teacher I will continue to demand high quality education and care for my son. I am glad that through this experience I rejected these views of daycare and found a good school for my child so I could return to work.

### **Epiphany #10: Technology as a Double Bind for Mothers**

*Epiphany #10: Technology operated as a double bind in my experiences becoming a mother. Technology was both empowering and oppressive.*

An interesting theme that emerged in my research was the importance of technology in my day to day life as a mother. Technology shaped my interactions with others, the nature of my part-time work, and my use of technology impacted my view of myself as a mother. This section of the chapter explores the way that technology functioned in both positive and negative ways in my personal experiences becoming a mother. I had learned a great deal about good mother discourses from television, commercials, parenting magazines, and movies. All of these communication mediums played an enormous role in my life because of increases in technology.

The internet and the development of online schools shaped my job as an online psychology instructor. The creation and use of online courses allowed me to teach in a part-time capacity from a remote location—my house—while at the same time staying home and caring for my son. At first I really liked my job as an online instructor for the state's Virtual Public School but the conditions of the teaching—the conditions created by the developments in technology—created problems as well. I found teaching online courses to be an isolating experience. As a teacher, I had loved the interaction and the relationships I had formed with students and colleagues. In using the internet and technology like texting to communicate with students, a major part of teaching was removed from the experience. Also the courses were created by the state's department of public instruction and teachers could only alter or modify small things in their courses. I

felt like a technician. I wasn't creating lessons or activities. Everything was standardized. I was doing work that was meaningless and it was time consuming. The use of new education platforms like Blackboard, Moodle, and Wimba Classroom created conditions for teachers to work part-time from home. The ability to work from home also promoted maternal gatekeeping by allowing me to combine paid labor and childcare. This allowed some flexibility for me as a new mother to stay at home and care for my child. As far as scheduling, online teaching provided some liberation. But I found the job to be isolating. Communication technology permeated the work/home barrier and I felt like I was always working. The structure of the work as it was set up as part-time contract work also meant that the position did not offer other perks. I was only paid twice a year and I did not qualify for any benefits. I finally stopped teaching online courses when my contract expired earlier this year. It was a relief. I felt like the technology that enabled me to teach online courses created a double bind because while allowing some freedoms of scheduling it also was isolating and was set up as contractual work without benefits. The structure of the online work meant that I was only a contractual employee and did not receive a full-time salary or benefits. This was probably mainly because the work was flexible and could be done at home rather than really being based on the number of hours worked. By only paying part-time salaries and no benefits, online teaching as a structure/institution in society served to reinforce traditional discourses of gender—the belief that men are the breadwinners and women should work in the home.

I used the internet for most all of my shopping when Noah was a baby so I didn't have to venture out to the store. I used Amazon.com frequently because I could read

reviews by other parents about which products were the best to buy and the site offered free shipping on most products. Commercials that came on during cartoons that Noah watched gave me ideas for new toys and books to buy. I did miss the shopping experience of actually going to the store and looking at an item before buying it but when I had a small baby to take with me it was really a hassle to go anywhere. The developments in online shopping made purchasing more convenient for me but it also even further encouraged me to stay at home when I felt most isolated.

Technology, specifically my iPhone allowed me to keep in contact with my spouse and other family members. I shared photographs of Noah frequently and texted to communicate on a day to day basis. I have noticed that the increased use of cell phones was a distraction for some parents. I have to tell Austin several times a week to get off of his phone to spend time with his son. When I would take Noah out to the park or to museums I would see parents sitting in corners playing on their phones.

I took Noah to the community playground today and he had such a big time! It was also interesting to watch the parents/caretakers of the kids at the playground. A grandmother was watching the two boys and she was on her phone a great deal of the time and sitting in the shade far away watching them (or not watching them). They could've run off and it would've taken her several minutes to notice. A boy that was playing with Noah came with his dad. He pushed his son on the swing for awhile when we first arrived and I noticed that he kept looking at his phone. Then once his son was playing with Noah on the slide he sat down on a bench that was much closer than the grandmother but he just sat there and played on his phone. He only came over to tell him to stop doing something like going down the slide head first. He kept getting on his phone either texting or checking the internet. I thought it was sad that he wasn't even hanging out with his son. You can really see a lot of interesting things at the playground. (Author's personal journal, June 2, 2012)

In my journals and stories I mentioned Facebook many times. I started using Facebook to communicate and keep up with friends while I was pregnant. I used the social media site to learn about my friends' experiences with mothering. From my journals I realized that I also used Facebook to get ideas about fun events or new toys/activities for Noah.

My friend Erin posted pictures of her son George who is 6 months older than Noah on Facebook at a place called The Little Gym. Her picture caption read "George's first gymnastics class!" So I thought what a great idea. I checked out their website and sure enough they have classes for kids 4 months old and up. The parents have to stay in the class until children are age 3. I got excited! Maybe Noah would like this! I started wondering, is this what stay at home moms do? Do they find activities and keep their kids on a set schedule? I am excited about events since Noah's preschool doesn't start until fall. I think part of what makes new motherhood hard is that it has been really isolating for me. I don't know what all is out there and I want to take Noah to do fun things with other kids, I just need information. So to be honest I get a lot of this information and suggestions for toys from posts on Facebook by other mothers. (Author's personal journal, June 18, 2012)

In addition to getting ideas for classes or toys from posts on Facebook, I also used it as a way to monitor my own mothering behaviors. If a Facebook mom's child was Noah's age and was already potty-trained then I felt like I needed to get Noah potty-trained. Many of the mothers I know use Facebook to share recommendations and ideas about the best pediatrician or the best dentist. My friends that are mothers on Facebook shared things about their children in their status updates. I noticed that many of these posts were characterized by bragging. Mothers also posted pictures of their children's events like their first day of school. When I had similar milestones with Noah, I often thought back to what I had seen in my Facebook newsfeed.

My stomach had been in knots all day and I felt sick. It took me a while to realize that it was because of the preschool stuff. I had read several of my friends' posts on Facebook about anxiety associated with their kids starting preschool. They all put these picture perfect photos on their walls of their kids all dressed up for the first day of preschool. (Author's personal journal, September 5, 2012)

I participated in some of these motherly sharing rituals. I shared my ultrasound pictures and newborn baby pictures on Facebook. Many of my expectations about how the birthing room would look came from seeing pictures of friends in the hospital holding their newborn babies. However, I noticed that in asking and giving advice to other mothers on Facebook it reinforced many of the ideas behind the ideology of intensive mothering. The pictures and discussions on Facebook looked very similar to the depictions of motherhood in movies and on television where mothers enjoyed every moment of the experience. In looking to social media, specifically Facebook for support and advice after having a child, ideas about what a good mother should do were reinforced by other mothers. Certain maternal knowledge was transmitted via social media. Drenta and Moren-Cross found that social networking sites and online mothering communities provided spaces where mothers shared resources and information but they also tended to "reinforce traditional divisions between the roles of mother and father" and further perpetuate dominant discourses of parenting in our society (as cited in Mulcahy et al., 2010, p. 22). Technology greatly impacted my experience becoming a mother. It made some aspects of motherhood easier but it also led to isolating experiences with my work and the reinforcement of intensive mothering ideologies through my

communications with other mothers via Facebook. Once I began to realize the effects of Facebook on my views of myself as a mother, I no longer visited the site.

### **Epiphany #11: Surveillance of Other Mothers**

*Epiphany #11: Mothers exclude, judge, and reproduce dominant gender ideologies through their surveillance of other mothers. This surveillance takes place under the guise of friendly conversations about their children.*

My journals and autoethnographic stories show that I always felt judged by other mothers even after engaging in what appeared to be friendly conversations. Since I was one of the first mothers in my group of friends, I often sought out other mothers in public spaces to bond with and connect to. My interactions with acquaintances that were also mothers usually focused on topics relating to naps and children's schedules. I always felt like these discussions were a form of comparing one's own mothering practices to another's. I usually felt judged by other mothers after these conversations. In a way these conversations served as a form of self-monitoring or self-comparison leading me to assess my own mothering practices. Mulcahy et al. (2010) found that White, married, middle and upper-class mothers who regularly got together with their children for play dates frequently judged other mothers and felt judged by other mothers. They also found that women participating in mothering groups tended to reinforce traditional gender roles for both mothers and fathers. Blackford (2004) observed playground interactions at parks and found that the "suburban playground becomes a community that gazes at the children only to ultimately gaze at one another, seeing reflected in the children the parenting abilities of one another" (p. 227).

Noah loved his gymnastics class at The Little Gym. There were about 10 kids there and the mothers (there was one dad) all sat around in a circle and we did really fun things. Noah was so tired afterwards but of course he fell asleep in the car on the way back and didn't nap after that! He played well with the other kids. I talked to one of the moms whose daughter Alex was Noah's age (15 months). She told me that Alex was already potty training. Oh brother! The never ending competition! I started wondering, should I start potty training Noah? Haha! But wait I haven't completely weaned him from bottles yet! Here I am wanting him to be more independent and still a baby at the same time!! Anyways, it was a great class and I will take him back on Fridays at 10:00 am. Maybe once I get some scheduled events I can get a break while he gets to play with other kids! (Author's personal journal, June 25, 2012)

Blackford (2004) suggests that maternal self-monitoring through narrative practice takes the shape of friendly conversations and questions about "what a child can and cannot do, always measured against the direct observation of the child" (p. 238). After these discussions with other mothers I usually felt like I was doing something wrong as a mother or I was behind on some developmental change like potty training. It seemed like this mother was bragging about how young her child had started potty training. I hated having conversations with friends or other mothers about Noah's napping and sleeping schedules. They were very judgmental and would make little comments insinuating that I was doing something wrong.

Today a friend asked me about when Noah naps and goes to bed. I told her that he usually naps around 11:30 am or 12:00 pm for about an hour and a half and he goes to bed around 8:30 pm. Her eyes got all big and she said, "He doesn't sleep at all from 1:00 pm until 8:30 pm? Oh my gosh!" It really pissed me off; like I am a bad mom because my kid doesn't sleep as much as hers. In fact I think it's quite the opposite. I used to wonder if her kids got enough interaction and stimulation since they slept all of the time. Her kids take two naps a day and go to bed at 7:00 pm. (Author's personal journal, June 14, 2012)

I've had these discussions with other mothers many times. I often considered just lying to them so that I didn't have to hear the condescending remarks about how my child isn't getting enough sleep. Many women believe there is a "right" way to do things and they are disapproving if someone else does things differently.

I took Noah to the playground this morning and met this other mom named Jessica. She was really nice. She asked Noah's age and her daughter Analise was 22 months old but much smaller than Noah. She said, "Wow he is tall for his age." I hear this all of the time about Noah. He definitely is much taller than the other kids at the playground but his body size is the same. He's not fat or big just tall. Jessica asked, "Is he still taking two naps a day?" Ha! I laughed and replied, "Ha ha! No he never took two naps per day. I am lucky if he takes one nap a day for an hour!" I guess that mothers just expect other kids to have the same schedules as their kids. This seems to be a trend! But she was really nice. It was nice talking to another mom that I do not know but that seemed really laid back and accepting. I was kind of sad when they left. I should have asked for her number so we could do play dates or something but I didn't. Hopefully we will see them again. (Author's personal journal, June 18, 2012)

Some mothers were supportive and some were not. What really bothered me about these conversations is the way that other mothers asked the question, "Does your child *still* take two naps a day?" This assumes that all kids are on the same developmental schedule and they all require the same amount of sleep. What a ridiculous assumption.

Blackford (2004) argues that maternal performances and interactions on the playground and in other public spaces reveal "a sense of competition in mothering, signifying the fact that mothers struggle to authenticate the performance of their role" (p. 239). When I attempted to meet and mingle with other moms with young children at the playground or on play dates, I always felt judged by other moms. Maybe that is because I would share opinions that were different from theirs. I always felt like other mothers

were extremely judgmental. My experiences talking with other mothers support Blackford's (2004) findings.

Their efforts to validate their mothering and knowledge by story-telling and questioning reveal a real need among the mothers for cultural valuation. They lack cultural recognition for their difficult, everyday decisions and interventions, and the community must create their own job-performance review. (p. 239)

Perhaps this is why mothers (including myself) continue to wear the mask of motherhood. Since there are no cultural scripts for authentic mothering experiences maybe mothers find it really hard to share their doubts and struggles with one another especially since they know they will be judged.

### **Summary of the Research Findings**

When I wrote my dissertation proposal I had originally claimed that my autoethnography would challenge dominant discourses of motherhood. After thoughtful reflexive analysis, I found that my stories do not challenge dominant ideologies. Instead, my experiences revealed that I subscribed to many of the assumptions behind these ideologies. My stories illustrated how I negotiated at times within the constraints of the dominant ideologies while at the same time continually drawing on ideas about the good mother. I did challenge the ideology of essentialism realizing that there was no maternal instinct. But at the same time I tended to defer to medical experts, or doctors.

My experiences showed that ideologies often operate under complete invisibility. I only examined my expectations after realizing that they did not match up with my personal experiences becoming a mother. Only after looking closely at my expectations

and how they were affected by my positionality could I see how dominant discourses of motherhood shaped and influenced my expectations in the first place. After writing daily journals and autoethnographic stories, I forced myself to reflexively analyze my own thinking and my personal choices. Feminist theories guided the process of exploring the silences and the things that were hidden in my stories. I found that my positionality greatly shaped my experiences and expectations in many ways. My religious beliefs and the beliefs held by family members reinforced patriarchal notions of gender and family.

I was shocked at the lack of support provided by my spouse, family members, friends, and society in general. Yet I participated in my own lack of support through practices of maternal gatekeeping. I had subscribed to the belief that mothers should be solely responsible for their children. I became angry when I realized my insurance company didn't really care about the health of my child—they were only concerned with the bottom line. I realized that parents need support from institutions. As I learned how to be a mother and gained my own personal experiential knowledge, I questioned these assumptions that I had held all along. Feminist theory allowed me to see how power, privilege, and ideology shaped my beliefs, choices, and experiences as a mother.

The process of deciding to go back to work full time was greatly shaped by ideas of the good mother, attachment parenting, and intensive mothering ideology. After the long internal battle with myself, I decided to return to work and I changed my beliefs about working mothers. I changed my beliefs about daycare after deciding to enroll Noah in full time care. Having a baby affected my experience as a doctoral student and may ultimately alter my career path. And that's okay.

The biggest shift in my ideological views of motherhood is the belief that being child-centered requires a parent to stay home with the child. Clearly from my experiences I do subscribe to the view that mothering should be child-centered. But the problem arises when this is accompanied by the assumption that a caregiver must not work. In my experience, I was trying to fit the mold of what a good mother does and stay home to raise my child. I had thought that is what I would enjoy. In doing so I neglected parts of myself and did not leave any time for self care. Going back to work served as a reclaiming of my identity outside of being a mom and it was an act of self care.

**Lessons Learned: Reflections on the Process of Doing and Writing an  
Autoethnography on Motherhood**

This research process has been an emotional endeavor for me. I have learned so much about myself and others through reflexively analyzing my own experiences. In processing the data, I realized my tendency to think in binaries. I talked about being a good mother versus being a bad mother. Daycare centers were either good or bad. I was either a working mother or a stay at home mother. Through writing this chapter I have realized that there are lots of gray areas within these issues. I didn't either subscribe to or challenge dominant discourses of motherhood. I did both as I engaged in moments of ideological work. The writing of journals and reflective stories was cathartic and painful at the same time. While my actual autoethnographic stories are not particularly reflexive, the analysis of those experiences was deeply self-reflexive and led to a greater understanding of myself and my choices and how they were shaped by my gender, race, and class.

It has been a full month since I have written in my journal. To be honest this process has become painful. And perhaps the only reason I am finally writing is because I need to reflect on my life. Maybe it's like a *Sex and the City* kind of catharsis experience, writing that is. (Author's personal journal, August 26, 2012)

The experience and practice of writing my thoughts down created a space where I could be reflexive about what I was going through in my life.

I feel like I haven't had time to write in days! I have missed writing! It is cathartic and it lets me put my thoughts into words. But sometimes I don't want to write. I think it is really good for me though. (Author's personal journal, June 21, 2012)

It was hard for me to write about really painful things I experienced. I struggled with allowing myself to be vulnerable. I deliberately chose to write about my miscarriage because I felt it was important to do so. I did not share all of my emotional experiences as that would have been impossible. I agree with Myerhoff's conceptualization of personal narrative as "definitional ceremony" or a "strategy to show ourselves to ourselves (reflection) and to arouse consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves (reflexivity)" (as cited in Langellier, 1999, p. 134). It was challenging for me to discuss conflicts with family members knowing that they may read my work. Through this process of doing and writing autoethnography, I learned a great deal about myself and the culture I am a product of. In allowing myself to be vulnerable in the process of analysis, I found out more about myself than I did writing autoethnographic stories and journals. For me the process of writing and doing an autoethnography took an unexpected path. In writing primarily descriptive stories about my life, I realized that I had not allowed myself to be vulnerable enough. I was holding back sharing everything. Perhaps that comes later in the

research process after one has had time to reflect and think about the silences in their writing. I argue that silences in the stories are more powerful than what is actually said. But these things often remain hidden and secret for the author and the reader. Only after being critically self-reflexive and using feminist theory to problematize the silences can autoethnography truly become a transgressive practice.

My personal experiences becoming a mother were shared in the form of autoethnographic stories, vignettes, and daily journal entries. I attempted to remove the mask of motherhood through the analysis of my experiences. In using reflexive theoretical analysis, I tried to better understand the role that ideology and gender played in my expectations and my personal experiences of motherhood. I learned a great deal about myself and my beliefs through the process of telling and reflexively analyzing stories. I realized that when mothers remove the mask of motherhood, they may be surprised by what they find. In my case, I had not realized the extent to which ideologies of motherhood had shaped my views and practices about mothering, parenting, and work. It took this process for me to realize the strength of dominant discourse in my own life. A faculty member on my committee once said to me, “What makes you so sure that your story will challenge the dominant ideologies about mothers?” I don’t remember how I actually answered the question but in my head I thought, “Why wouldn’t it? I don’t subscribe to these unrealistic expectations.” Through the doing and writing of a reflexive autoethnography, I have learned about the power and pervasiveness of ideology in my own life. The final chapter discusses some implications of this research for mothers and society. I discuss ideas for further study and analysis.

## CHAPTER VI

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MOTHERS & SOCIETY

I learned quickly that the gains for women in the past decades have not meant similar gains for mothers.

-Miriam Peskowitz, *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*

#### **Introduction and Overview of the Chapter**

This chapter explores the implications of the research findings as discussed in the previous chapter. In response to the research findings, I draw conclusions about autoethnography as a research method and its potential limitations. I discuss the power of theorizing the silences in autoethnography using feminist theory. I focus on the importance of being vulnerable and reflexive in writing autoethnography. I discuss the ways that essentialism, the social construction of gender, and other dominant discourses of motherhood collude to oppress women. I more closely examine the relationship between feminism and attachment theories. I call for diverse and authentic media images of mothers and fathers in the form of shared parenting. I call for policy and institutional changes that improve workplace, healthcare, and educational options for families.

I revisit maternal gatekeeping as a practice based on my personal experiences, expanding the term and calling for more research to be done on gatekeeping practices. I describe how the process of writing an autoethnography for me was analogous to border crossing. I argue that reflexive autoethnography is performative and allows the

writer/researcher to cross borders and boundaries in their own personal lives and in cultural contexts so long as they allow themselves to be vulnerable and use theory to analyze their experiences. Finally I suggest that mothers can increase awareness about their experiences though telling stories and writing reflexive autoethnographies.

### **Theorizing the Silences in Autoethnography: Motherhood, Vulnerability, and Reflexivity**

Literary critic Macherey (1978) suggests that “what is important in a work is what it does not say” (p. 87). The silences, absences, and omissions can say more than the actual story that is told. In my autoethnography, I initially refused to be vulnerable. After reading Behar’s (1996) chapter about vulnerability, I felt like I had been given permission to be vulnerable. Feminist theories and my vulnerability allowed me reflexively analyze the silences and omissions in my autoethnographic stories. This process of only allowing myself to be vulnerable after writing the autoethnographic stories illustrates a potential weakness of autoethnography. Autoethnographies are not inherently reflexive. Because certain aspects of our lives remain invisible, for example my Whiteness and my privilege, these things were not explicitly told in the story. My own mask of motherhood remained in place in terms of being willing to share my experiences with depression. DiQuinzio (1999) argues that ideologies tend to be hegemonic, seen as “natural” or simply as “the way things are” (p. 2). My personal experiences illustrate how powerful and hidden hegemonic ideologies of motherhood can be. Only through the process of reflexive theoretical analysis was I able to see that instead of challenging the status quo, I was actually negotiating within the discourse and re-inscribing my actions to conform to

intensive mothering ideology. By interpreting the silences about my own role in refusing to hire babysitters and accept certain types of childcare support, I realized that I practiced maternal gatekeeping.

Media accounts and my own background influenced my expectations about motherhood. These expectations were molded by patriarchal and essentialist discourses that view women as natural caregivers. Family members, especially my mother-in-law and at times my husband subscribed to and reinforced the dominant discourses of motherhood. My research indicates that becoming a new mother is filled with many challenges. Based on my research findings, I had to *learn* how to be a caregiver to my child—there was no maternal instinct. I felt like I was being judged by other mothers on Facebook and in daily conversations with other moms.

The process of doing and writing and autoethnography deeply changed my feelings about myself and my experiences being a mother. Autoethnography is a powerful research methodology; yet my experiences illustrate the limits of autoethnography. Autoethnographies written and used for research purposes must focus on the reflexivity and vulnerability of the author. Writers can think they are being reflexive yet they may be guarding secrets or certain aspects of their experiences may be invisible in their analysis. I found the silences, absences, and omissions in my autoethnographic stories were very powerful. Researchers may not show and tell all aspects of the story. Feminist theory and its focus on intersectionality gave me the tools to analyze the silences and the constructs to see the ways that my positionality privileged

and oppressed me. Richardson (2000b) argues that writing is a complex process that can serve as a catalyst for change.

I believe that writing is a both a theoretical and practical process through which we can (a) reveal epistemological assumptions, (b) discover grounds for questioning received scripts and hegemonic ideals—both those within the academy and those incorporated within ourselves, (c) find ways to change those scripts, (d) connect to others and form community, and (e) nurture our emergent selves. (p. 153)

Writing this autoethnographic dissertation has done all of these things in my life but only because I was willing to be vulnerable and reflexive.

### **Essentialism and the Social Construction of Gender: Internalized Ideologies**

#### **Working Together to Oppress Mothers**

Mamo (2005) argues that “in feminist theory, the concepts of essentialism and constructionism are intertwined with debates concerning nature/nurture, biological/social, sameness/difference(s), and modernism/postmodernism” (p. 252). In my research, I found that I subscribed to discourses of essentialism and social constructivist theories of gender and motherhood. Hovey (2007) suggests that “social constructivism is the opposite of essentialism, holding that all the qualities of a person are socially constructed and are made to seem *natural* only to establish an ideological advantage for one group over another” (p. 483). Essentialism views gender differences as biological and natural while social construction theories claim that gender is a social construct that makes differences between men and women *seem* natural. My experiences showed that I subscribed to both of these dominant discourses despite the fact that they appear as

opposites. The ideology of intensive mothering and the other dominant ideologies of motherhood are all based on essentialist and social constructivist discourses.

All of the dominant cultural discourses of motherhood (and gender) were oppressive in my personal experiences. While my class and race privileged me in many ways, my gender as a woman was oppressive especially in the ways that dominant discourses frame mothering and ideals of good mothers. By internalizing essentialist discourse, I initially believed that I was a better caregiver than my spouse. This led me to unconscious practices of gatekeeping and limited the amount of support I received from outsiders. At the same time I subscribed to socially constructed ideals of the good mother and I made decisions and evaluated myself against the good mother archetype portrayed in the media. The dominant cultural discourses of motherhood were oppressive in my experiences. I believe that additional research should be conducted by feminist scholars to dig deeper into the ways that the discourses of essentialism and social constructivism shape dominant ideologies of motherhood.

### **Attachment Theory and Feminism**

Franzblau (1999) argues that from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century until now, “the relationship between infants and women has been explained using three grand narratives, psychoanalysis, evolution and positivism, which have combined in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to form the overarching narrative of attachment theory” (p. 5). Bliwise (1999) argues that attachment theory is problematic because it emphasizes “attachment bonds as natural, self-evident and unequivocal outcomes of mothering and attachment behaviors and traits

as fixed and stable properties of separate, autonomous individuals” (p. 43). Franzblau (1999) believes that attachment theory has extensive roots in the ideology of essentialism.

The notion that there is some inherent glue that unites mother and child, simplifies, depoliticizes and removes from historical review the exploitative and oppressive conditions under which most women reproduce and mother. Attachment pretends to explain social development as an evolutionary and biologically determined phenomenon, and as such, it represents the tradition of predetermining and controlling women’s reproductive tasks and children’s child-rearing needs. It is embedded in a history of misogynist discourse; and has emerged historically from that discourse. (p. 29)

Bliwise (1999) believes that attachment theory can be useful to scholars because of its focus on care and bonding with caregivers. But she argues that its current narrow focus on “equating the care and protection of infants with mothering” is problematic, sexist, essentialist, and oppressive (p. 49). Bliwise (1999) calls for increasing “awareness of heterosexist bias in attachment research” that limits our knowledge of “homosexual unions and underestimates the importance of attachments within the extended family” and with teachers working in daycare centers (p. 48).

In a study, Liss and Erchull (2013) found that self-labeled feminist mothers were more likely to subscribe to and practice attachment parenting than were non-feminists. Liss and Erchull (2013) found that self identified feminist mothers did not engage in shared parenting that equally shared parenting time between spouses. Instead, the women did a majority of the childrearing tasks. They suggest that this could be due to “the cultural pressures associated with the ideology of intensive mothering” (p. 388).

Based on my autoethnographic research, I subscribed to attachment theories of parenting that linked secure and healthy infant-mother relationships to essentialist notions that the mother as the natural caregiver. I agree with Bliwise (1999) that “feminists should view attachment theory as a theory in process which is about caregiving rather than mothering” (as cited in Franzblau, 1999, p. 6). It is hard to do this considering attachment theory’s historical roots in essentialism. I believe that feminists need to pay attention to more recent studies of caregiving and attachment that suggest that young children attach in healthy ways to a number of caregivers. Feminists scholars should redefine and expand attachment parenting to include forming healthy relationships with fathers and other caregivers also taking into account the differences in families instead of focusing on the stereotypical nuclear family.

### **Diverse and Authentic Media Images: Redefining Parenting**

The research findings from my reflexive autoethnography show the need for authentic representations of mothers and fathers and their journey through parenthood. As my stories illustrate, the expectations of new mothers are greatly shaped by media discourses of motherhood that portray good mothers in ways that are impossible for women to match up to. These high standards set me up for disappointment and cultural shock when I became a mother. A good mother is portrayed as a white, middle to upper class, married, heterosexual woman who can afford to and chooses to stay home and dote on her children all day. Attachment parenting and the ideologies of intensive mothering and essentialism are portrayed as normal and expected aspects of motherhood. Media images of parents—not just mothers—parents from all different backgrounds taking care

of children in different contexts should become the norm on television shows and in advertisements. Shared parenting should be portrayed and fathers should be shown actively parenting and caring for their children. Mothers and fathers from all social classes and ethnicities must be represented in the media. Lesbian mothers and mothers that adopt should be included in movies and television shows. Diverse images of fathers should be integrated in depictions of parenting including gay and queer fathers. Working mothers and fathers should be shown as caring and normal. Advertisements should depict parents in many different ways instead of reinforcing unrealistic views of their experiences.

Parents must demand changes from media outlets, network television, and Hollywood movie producers. All different types of parenting should be explored and portrayed in the media with the absence of moral judgments about mothers and their life decisions/situations. I believe that the image of the good mother must be replaced by authentic images of caring parents that are forced to make difficult choices in the face of oppressive structural and institutional conditions. Parents should support images that make connections to real life experiences that they face within their own families. I think that voicing diverse perspectives is crucial to opening spaces for discussion about policy and institutional changes that would better support parents and their children.

**Ending the Mommy Wars through Policy Changes: Restructuring the Workplace,  
Improving Educational Options, and Funding Healthcare**

A key reason that policy changes have not been supported in our society is because many people believe in the images of motherhood presented on television

suggesting that any challenges mothers face should be faced on an individual/family level. These ideologies create structural conditions that inhibit social support for new mothers from a variety of sources including support from family members, employers, the community, and the government. Oakley (1992) argues that four main hypotheses emerge from the literature on the importance of social support.

Social support affects health directly.  
Social support improves health by acting as a buffer to stress.  
Social support makes stress less likely.  
Social support facilitates recovery from illness or crises. (p. 38)

Social support for new mothers is imperative because it directly impacts families and their children.

I suggest the importance of employers making changes to the structure of work to benefit families, increasing educational and daycare options for parents while making them more affordable, and the need for the government to provide healthcare including preventative care to parents and their children. I provide additional ways that universities can better support graduate students through better stipends, providing on campus childcare, and providing quality and affordable student health insurance.

A focus of my research was my decision to return to the labor force despite the dominant discourses that argue mothers should not work. A consequence of relegating mothers to the home is the ability to distract from changes that need to be made in the workplace to better support families and mother in particular. Issues that dictate and shape a woman's career decisions include the availability of affordable and quality

childcare and education along with pay, advancement, and flexibility at work. There have been calls for years by leading sociologists for new policies in the workplace that respond to the needs of mothers. Crittenden (2001) argues that employers should redesign the workplace around parental norms and this requires that they give every parent the right to a year's paid leave, shorten the workweek, provide equal pay and benefits for equal part-time work, and eliminate discrimination against parents in the workplace (p. 258-261). Policies that are equitable for parents would undoubtedly affect non-parents but the institutional changes should be made to address inequities.

There must be policy and employer based changes to support new mothers. Under the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA), workers are guaranteed only 12 weeks of unpaid leave after the birth of a child (Covert, 2013). Covert (2013) argues "fewer than half of private sector workers are even covered by the FMLA because of restrictions in the law" and over "40% of new mothers only have access to unpaid leave" (p. H1). Employers should have family friendly policies that allow parents to care for their children and make it possible for parents to work flexible schedules to accommodate for their roles as parents.

Crittenden (2001) argues that the government should replace the welfare state with a caring state by equalizing social security for spouses so that those working as unpaid caregivers still benefit, offering work-related social insurance programs to all workers, providing universal preschool for all three- and four-year olds, and providing free health coverage for all children and their primary caregivers (p. 262-267). I believe that providing parents access to high quality childcare at affordable costs is imperative to

improving educational outcomes for our children and for supporting families. According to the National Association of Child Care Research and Referral Agencies, the average cost of enrolling an infant in full-time childcare is \$18,200 per year. The costs of daycare are astronomical and many parents cannot afford it. There should be more childcare options for parents in addition to full time care and preschool care.

Other important policy changes that must be made to support families in this country are changes in healthcare coverage and the costs associated with having a baby. I paid substantial out of pocket expenses when I had my son despite the fact that I had health insurance. Covert (2013) argues that “the costs of pregnancy have spiraled out of control” citing the “total price tag for a pregnancy and newborn care with a vaginal delivery is about \$30,000 while it comes to \$50,000 for a C-section” (p. H1). Covert (2013) provides these additional disturbing statistics: women with insurance pay an average of \$3,400 out of pocket for their delivery, more than 60% of women with private non-employer plans lack maternity coverage, and 1 in 5 women ages 18 to 64 are uninsured. The Affordable Care Act passed under the Obama Administration has taken some steps to address the high costs of having children. The new healthcare law requires most insurance plans to cover preventative care for pregnant women and newborn babies. The implementation of the law is so recent that we are unable to tell the affect it has started to have. The passage of the new healthcare law does little to support women that do not have healthcare coverage. Parents must demand high quality affordable healthcare for parents and their families. These are not individual problems and decisions that individual mothers/parents must face—these are social problems that require policy

solutions and legislative action. Citizens must demand policy and legislative changes from their elected officials and use their votes to support candidates that will make institutional changes to improve conditions for families.

### **Expanding the Concept of Maternal Gatekeeping: Future Research Suggestions**

Most of the research on maternal gatekeeping has focused on the ways that mothers unconsciously prevent their spouses from helping with childcare. My own experiences practicing maternal gatekeeping show that mothers latch the maternal gate for other people in addition to their spouses. I was very picky about who could care for my son. I tended to limit my support to my mother and my mother-in-law, both of whom were viewed as experienced mothers. Feminist scholars should study maternal gatekeeping expanding the definition to include other people and institutions that mothers keep out of the childrearing process. Scholars should more thoroughly examine the results in terms of social support and mental health for mothers that gatekeep. The process that mothers and fathers choose schools and daycare facilities would also be relevant in this analysis. Scholars should study fathers to see whether they also practice gatekeeping and if so, how it is similar or different than the ways that mothers gatekeep.

The research on maternal gatekeeping is heteronormative. There needs to be studies about gay and lesbian families and the ways that they may or may not practice gatekeeping. Grandparents should also be interviewed to see if they engage in gatekeeping practices. A deeper analysis of maternal gatekeeping should be undertaken using feminist theories to analyze the power structures inherent in gatekeeping practices and the ways that essentialism and the social construction of gender affect this process.

### **Autoethnography as Performative: The Reflexive Researcher Crossing Borders**

Perhaps the most challenging part of using reflexive autoethnography as the primary research method was the reflexivity and the vulnerability piece. It is difficult to be reflexive at times because we become so wrapped up in our own socialization that it is hard to see how our own positionality and subjectivity affects, shapes, and drives the research process. Langellier (1999) and Spry (2001) argue that personal narrative and autoethnography are performative in nature. Langellier (1999) suggests that “personal experience stories are *made*, not found, by either narrators or researchers (p. 128). While I have shared my own personal experiences throughout this research it must be noted that there is a deliberate sharing that goes on when telling stories. I have learned more about myself and my personal beliefs about women and mothering in this process of writing and being reflexive than I could have ever learned in another setting.

A big part of being reflexive is naming one’s positionality. I tried to do this throughout the research process. My social position as a white, middle class, heterosexual married woman, who is a Christian greatly impacted my experiences of first time motherhood. My own ideas about what constitutes a good mother were shaped by our culture, the media, my own social group, and my family. My views on motherhood went unchallenged for years until my expectations did not match up with the reality of my experiences and then I began to question my own beliefs. Miller (2005) argues that “self-reflexivity is more intensively practiced when embodied aspects of identity and gender are challenged” as is the case for first time mothers (p. 141). Miller (2005) believes that the transition to first time motherhood creates a “period of heightened and intensified

reflexivity as attempts to assert or retain individuality and control in life are made” (p. 141). In her research Miller (2005) found that the most common aspect of reflexivity that was practiced by new mothers was “self-monitoring” which arises as a result of the “continued dominance of morally underpinned discourses of ‘good mothering’” (p. 142).

My research focused on the reflexivity that occurs as lived experience does not match up with cultural expectations that are based on ideological discourses of good mothering. The subject of my research was my own writings and stories which focused on my questioning of the beliefs that shaped my expectations. Langellier (1999) references Myerhoff’s conceptualization of personal narrative as “definitional ceremony” or a “strategy to show ourselves to ourselves (reflection) and to arouse consciousness of ourselves as we see ourselves (reflexivity)” (p. 134).

The experience of doing and writing autoethnography and being reflexive about it has been a transformative and transgressive process for me personally. I agree with Langellier (1999) that autoethnography and personal narratives are “liminal”. Langellier (1999) argues

A limen is a threshold, a border, a margin, a transitional space, a site of negotiation and struggle...Personal narrative is a boundary phenomenon: between literary and social discourse, between written and oral communication, between public and private spheres of interaction, between ritual performance and incidental conversation, between fact and fiction. (p. 138)

I realize that my own positionality and subjectivity greatly shaped the research process. I struggled with my own identity and role as a new mother and for those very reasons I began to write about and question the dominant ideologies of motherhood. My

positionality paints my research in a particular light and I am keenly aware of this phenomenon. I believe that my research has been enriched by the reflexivity piece of the puzzle. In allowing myself to be vulnerable I was able to analyze the silences in my autoethnographic stories and find out things about myself that had remained hidden or invisible. Through the struggles and negotiating in my own life I have learned a great deal about myself and the culture that I am a product of. Using theoretical analysis to explore the themes in my autoethnographic stories, I paid particular attention to the ways that my own social positioning shaped the research.

### **Removing the Mask of Motherhood through Storytelling: The Call for More Autoethnography**

After writing an autoethnography on the topic of motherhood, I have reached some additional conclusions. I believe that storytelling is an effective way to remove the mask of motherhood but only if the storytelling process is reflexive. Mothers can start the process by sharing stories with their own children about the realities of motherhood. For me, storytelling and analyzing the stories afterwards was a process of getting to the bottom of my fears and my internalized assumptions about motherhood. I found that I had internalized much of the dominant discourse of motherhood. I had expected my story to challenge or subvert the dominant ideologies of motherhood. I was surprised to find that many of my experiences and accounts served as a way of re-inscribing the assumptions behind the ideology. The process of doing and writing an autoethnography about motherhood created a space for me to get to know myself better and to really question the beliefs that I had internalized.

I believe that more reflexive theoretical autoethnographies about motherhood need to be written by mothers discussing their own experiences. One of the reasons I decided to write an autoethnography was because there were none on motherhood that seriously explored reflexivity and the role of discourse in one's own life. Mothers can use autoethnographies to tell their stories and to open spaces for honest discussion and dialogue about the ways that discourse shapes and constrains choices and experiences. As women feel comfortable enough to share their stories, serious discussions about policy and institutional changes should finally come to the forefront of the political agenda and positive economic and social changes can be made to support families and mothers.

### **Final Thoughts: Continuing the Research**

I set out on this journey to share my experiences becoming a mother paying special attention to the ways that dominant discourses shaped my experiences. In reflecting back on my research and writing, I wonder whether this undertaking was a study of motherhood using autoethnography or whether it was a study in autoethnography illustrated by my experiences with motherhood. I believe that both are true. My research focused on my lived experiences becoming a mother and in the process the research was enhanced by the methodology which also became a subject of study. Other research methods could be used in future studies to explore motherhood. Narrative studies and qualitative interviews with mothers would provide a rich source of data using different methodological approaches. These methods would allow the researcher to gather a wealth of information based on the experiences of many diverse mothers. Then one could analyze narratives and interview transcripts for patterns of experience among mothers. To

continue my research on motherhood, I plan to undertake a narrative study using a small group of mothers from diverse backgrounds. I hope that I can learn new things about the experiences of mothers and the ways that ideology functions in their lived experiences through the continuation of this research.

In reading and reflecting on my personal stories, I questioned why I didn't write more about the joys of mothering. I experienced an abundance of joy mothering Noah yet I rarely talked about it in my stories. It was really hard for me to verbalize the love I felt for my child. It was easier to write about the challenges and the new responsibilities that accompany raising a child. I believe that a feminist critique does allow space to discuss and share the joys of mothering yet that was not a major theme in my autoethnographic stories. In searching for the reasons this silence permeated my stories, I believe two major factors were at work. First, I assumed that others knew about these joys—like there was no need to write about the wonderful parts of becoming a mother because everyone understands the love between a parent and their child. This was a fallacious assumption of course and it reiterates a theme in the research literature about dominant discourses of mothering—primarily that all mothers love motherhood and want to become mothers. In writing a critical study, I should have been more aware of this contradiction and focused more on the positive aspects of motherhood and how they were affected by the oppressive nature of becoming a mother.

A second reason I believe I did not focus or write about the wonderful aspects of mothering is that my writing served as an outlet for my feelings at the time. I primarily wrote about the oppressive nature of motherhood because that was what I needed to work

through and better understand. Since a major goal was critiquing the experiences of becoming a mother, I found myself verbalizing my frustrations with motherhood because I had no other space to share these experiences in an open and honest way for fear of being judged by others. More research is needed into why the joys of motherhood were left out of my research and writing. I think this speaks to the nature of autoethnography and vulnerability, and it makes larger connections to the feminist framework and critical theory paradigm I practiced in my research. In writing and critiquing my experiences with motherhood, I overlooked all of the good things and the aspects that I enjoyed in order to privilege what I experienced as oppressive to mothers. It could be that the oppressive nature of motherhood outweighed the joys in my own experience. This needs to be further explored.

Another interesting part of my research that I would like to further analyze in future research projects is the idea of child-centered mothering/parenting. In my experiences, I describe how I continue to subscribe to the notion of child-centered mothering. Many families today have found ways to work and be child-centered. The working mom versus the stay at home mom dichotomy has been challenged and replaced by families combining parenting and work in many different ways. The singular definition of the traditional stay at home mom is no longer the only way that a parent can be child-centered contrary to Hays' (1996) conception of intensive mothering. Child-centered mothering in the context of the ideology of intensive mothering as Hays (1996) describes it is shaped by essentialist notions that require a mother to stay at home with her child as a component of child-centeredness. I would like to further investigate what

child-centered mothering/parenting actually means and how it is lived out and practiced in diverse families. I believe that the concept of child-centeredness has also been perverted and used as a tool in the service of dominant discourses. I hope to focus my research on this concept especially within the ideology of intensive mothering as being child-centered is a key component of this dominant discourse of parenting and capitalism. I am particularly interested in how the commodification of childrearing has been used to distort the idea of child-centered parenting.

I keep coming back to the difficulties with autoethnography as a research method. I really like reflexive autoethnography as a methodology, but despite its claim as being reflexive, this may or may not necessarily be true. In my case, I illustrated how the silences and the things that I did not write about greatly shaped the research process. I found it hard when telling a personal story to be critically reflexive. My whiteness and my class and cultural privilege remained invisible to me until I went back after writing and analyzed my stories. I think this speaks to the hegemonic power of privilege in our society. Another aspect of autoethnography that I struggled with was knowing that those you are writing about may read your work. This results in writers consciously striving to consider others as they tell their stories. While I was doing this, at the same time I struggled with taking into account the way that others – those that are different than me – would see or hear my story. I think we struggle with these issues everyday and that is why it is so important to be critically reflexive.

In reflecting back on my experiences and the research process, I think that motherhood *happened* to me. I was ill-prepared for the experience and I felt betrayed by

my missing maternal sense. Motherhood happened to me. The social forces and discourses that shape motherhood largely remained unquestioned or unchallenged until I recognized what was happening in my life. Even as I started to see the cultural discourses at work in my own life I found it hard to challenge or push back against them. I hope that my story and my research experiences will speak to the human condition and the ways that motherhood may or may not be experienced by women in our culture. I also hope that this research project will call attention to the strengths and weaknesses of autoethnography as a research methodology.

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