

# Bringing home the bacon while staying out of the fire: Communicatively negotiating the working mother identity

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## Abstract

The desire to work outside the home and the communication strategies of employed mothers when confronted with comments from coworkers and associates about their life choices to work outside of the home are examined through the perspectives of two types of working mothers: the wage-focused mother and the career-focused mother. Qualitative interviews of twelve working mothers were analyzed. Themes emerged related to reasons for working, personal desires of the working mothers, and the types of comments they received from others about their choices related to motherhood and employment. Employed mothers chose passive or aggressive strategies when responding to comments based upon their perceptions of the situation and direction of the comment. Overall, wage-focused mothers appear to receive a “pass” for working out of necessity to help provide for the family while career-focused mothers appear to be viewed as selfish for not choosing to stay home to raise the children.

## Keywords

communication strategies, life choices, motherhood, work, career

## Introduction

Women have historically worked in and out of the home; however, their working identity has evolved, particularly during the 1970's and 1980's with focused attention on professional and working mother's identities (Everingham, Stevenson, & Warner-Smith, 2007). Regardless, expectations about the role of motherhood have remained relatively constant (Raskin, 2006). Tracy and Rivera (2010) found most male executive participants stated family was more important than work and that childcare responsibilities should be

shared. Even though this was not the reality in their own work and family practices where they preferred their wives stayed home to manage the household and majority of parenting duties.

Cultural expectations of working women and economic circumstances for women and families continue to shift and evolve. In the not so distant past, most women grew up expecting to be mothers. Acceptable employment (teaching, nursing, office work, retail work, and hairdressing) was to provide financial support for themselves between leaving their families of

origin and marriage (Bulbeck, 1997; Everingham, Stevenson, Warner-Smith, 2007). Returning to the workforce once children were older was also acceptable, as long as it did not interfere with the family's home life (Gibson, 2003). As it became more difficult for families to survive on one income, financial well-being became the main reason for women's employment. Today, almost 70% of mothers are employed or looking for employment (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

The current generation of women are leaving high school expecting to work in some capacity and also become mothers (Everingham, et al., 2007). Unfortunately, idealized work/life expectations are violated in the workforce. Women are inundated with media images depicting the myth they can "have it all," a career and family (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Additionally, women are led to believe that organizations care, encouraging work/life balance and implementing family leave policies; however, advancement implications may exist for utilizing the policy (Golden, 2009; Kirby, 2006; Kirby & Krone, 2002).

Women may be subjected to, and often are confronted with conflicting views about their choices to balance employment while raising children. Some women may feel the need to defend their working mother status through communication strategies that reframe the discourse of a socially acceptable good mother image to a good working mother role while simultaneously participating in intensive mothering strategies which requires being ever present in children's lives (Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012; Buzzanell, et al., 2005; Damaske, 2013). Although it is a misconception, in general, society typically views women as homogenous in their desires to be mothers; however, motivations for work and family

can vary greatly among women. Understanding how women communicatively navigate societal expectations of their varied desire to balance employment and motherhood serves as the focus of this study.

## Conceptual Framework

Employed mothers experience various identities and assume multiple roles. In addition to the tasks that must be performed as a mother and a professional, women must defend decisions and motives about raising children concurrently with employment and/or career goals (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Damaske, 2013; Sutherland, 2010). This study examines these situations of identity navigation with coworkers, acquaintances, friends, and family members.

Identity theory links role identity to behavioral outcomes, and acknowledges some identities have more self-relevance than others (Stryker, 1968). A woman may perceive her role identity as a mother as more important than as an employee, while another may value her professional identity. When work/life issues interfere with the performance of what a woman perceives her ideal identity should be, stress occurs (Wieland, 2010). Buzzanell, et al., (2005) found women who desired to be identified as a good mother and a good worker negotiated the dialectic through reframing the socially acceptable good mother image into a good working mother identity. However, the good working mother image was found to be very fragile and easily damaged by what they may consider a failure (e.g., missed quality time with family), causing more stress and identity negotiation.

Expectations of motherhood roles have remained somewhat traditional. Stay-at-home mothers have been considered the

norm and essential to raising healthy, well-adjusted children (Hattery, 2001; Stebbins, 2001). However, the Great Recession prompted a shifting of the ideal “norm” as the employment of both parents became necessary for the income security of families (Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012). Approximately 70% of mothers were working outside the home in 2015 (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Many are in the workforce out of economic necessity while others regard their career as the motivating factor (Raskin, 2006). Perceptions of working mothers are still mixed. Regardless of dialogue supporting equality for women in the workplace, male executives revealed they personally preferred to have their own wives home with their children, referring to women’s employment as a choice. Although men understood the need for women to work for economic reasons, they preferred women to manage the home if possible (Tracy & Rivera, 2010). Therefore, it appears it is more socially acceptable for mothers to work, as long as it is economically necessary. Regardless, some may desire both a family and a career.

Research by Everingham et al. (2007) found young women entering higher education did not consider paid work a means of achieving independence until marriage and they held multiple meanings of work based upon their career path. Employers have recognized the need to implement family policy to help employees achieve work/life balance. Unfortunately, sometimes employees feel taking advantage of a family leave policy could be detrimental to career goals (Kirby and Krone, 2002). The fear of being passed over for a promotion or advancement opportunity may hold some women back from successfully fulfilling motherhood duties, causing stress and forcing

renegotiation of motherhood identities. A possible response found in previous research was reframing the good mother role to a good working mother role by arranging quality childcare, becoming unequal partners at home by taking on the majority of the childcare duties, and by taking pleasure in working mother roles (Buzzanell et al., 2005).

Women with breadwinning roles have faced gendered identity conflicts of control, independence, pressure, partner contributions, career ambitions, and guilt and resentment. Navigating tensions related to deviation from traditional stereotypes and norms of women causes stress (Meisenbach, 2010). Working mothers experience tensions of conflicting identities as a good mother and a good worker or professional. Tensions may be amplified by comments forcing women to communicatively negotiate identities.

All women do not share similar work and family desires. Women with more education and higher paying jobs tended to wait longer to have children and were less likely to believe the homemaking role was more important than other roles (Raskin, 2006). Conversely, lower wage-earning women were more likely to place greater importance on family and community while considering work as a job, not an aspect of identity. A focus group of working-class young women expressed anger for their loss of choice not to work, viewing staying at home with children a luxury (Everingham et al., 2007).

With this conceptual framework in mind, the following research questions emerge:

*RQ1: How do mothers perceive work and their choice to be employed and/or working toward a career?*

*RQ2: How do mothers respond to comments about their choice to be employed and/or working toward a career?*

## Methods

The data were collected through 12 semi-structured interviews with employed mothers from small and mid-sized communities in the upper Midwest. This number of interviews was determined to be sufficient once it became evident phenomenological saturation had occurred and gathering further data would add little to the conceptualization or categories of inquiry (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Typically, saturation is reached around 15 interviews plus or minus 10 (Kvale, 1996). Recorded comments of participants made during the interview process were reflected upon periodically in relation to all comments. After six interviews, comments appeared repetitive, depending upon if the primary motivation for employment by the participant was wage driven for economic reasons or career driven for reasons related to personal desire. As the interview process continued, participants began to cluster around one of these two distinct groups. Upon completion of 12 interviews, no new perspectives were being introduced.

Digitally recorded semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to allow for exploration of additional questions (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Participants were asked to describe their current work and family situation and reflect upon comments they had received, both inside and outside their work environment related to their career and life choices. Interviews lasted ten to thirty minutes. Transcription resulted in 58 pages of single-spaced text for analysis. Each participant was given a pseudonym which was used to reference quotations reported in the findings.

## Participants

Participants were heterosexual white females living and working in the Upper Midwestern United States a minimum of 40 hours per week in an hourly or salaried position. Participants were recruited through a snowball sample technique. All participants self-identified as employed mothers, were between the ages of 20 and 50 with a mean age of 34. Each had one to four children ranging in age from 6 weeks to 12 years. Three participants were divorced or never married, and nine were married. Occupations of participants included: administrative assistant, community development, pharmacy assistant, funeral home director, construction manager, university administrator, associate professor, and extension agent.

## Analysis of Interviews

Interview transcripts were read twice to get a comprehensive sense of the data. Next, every significant statement relevant to the topic was highlighted, giving each equal value (Creswell, 1998) and analyzed for emergent themes through open coding (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). The women fell into one of two groups with distinct differences. The first group consisted of women focused on earning a wage above all else in order to help support their families. The second group consisted of women who were dedicated to advancing their careers. While both groups of women were employed mothers, upon closer examination, variations were found in age, number of children, level of education, salary, motivation for employment, and personal goals. A descriptive overview, reasons for working, desires, and comments received is provided below for both types of

women followed by an analysis of the similarities and differences between the two types of working mothers.

## Two Types of Working Mothers

### Wage-Focused Mothers

The women interviewed for this study who fell into the category of Wage-Focused were in their mid-twenties with one or two young children and hoping to have more within the next few years. These women had some college, held a vocational degree, or held a bachelor's degree and all earned less than \$30,000 per year. Overall, they enjoyed their jobs and colleagues but reported their work was not their passion. If their families did not need their income, they indicated that it would be nice to stay home to raise their children. A similarity of the women placed into this category was how they discussed the topic of work.

**Discussion about working.** When discussing work, the wage focused mothers did not think twice about why they worked and spoke in a very matter-of-fact style. Christina said, "I work, there is really no other option but to work. There's not much for staying home income-wise." Beth also pointed out, "you just kind of assume everyone works, and everyone works because they have to." Participants also described how sometimes people are surprised by how much, and how hard they work considering they have children. Kathy recalled when her baby was born, "I was ten days late, I worked up until my induction date." Similarly, Jamie mentioned, "(the guys at work) seem sympathetic that it's busy having kids and working, but they understand because most of their wives are employed."

Conversations in the workplace tended to focus on the fact that it was the

status quo to be a parent working outside the home with limited options for alternatives. Jamie explained, "I think most everyone is aware that the economy is what it is and that in order to get by in life a lot of families have to have both parents working." Christina mentioned, "most of the people I know, their wives or girlfriends work that have kids, they're all working outside the home." Beth noted her family needed her income so desperately that after her daughter was born "I didn't take a lot of maternity leave. I would bring [baby] in and I just stuck her underneath the desk." Overall, wage-focused participants indicated women working outside the home was not an important topic of conversation, as Beth noted, "we don't really talk about it [working]."

The wage-focused mothers in this sample also reported they felt staying home was a poor choice. Nancy said, "I would feel guilty... if I wasn't contributing, if I was home when I should, could be out earning money." Participants reported that they felt judged as being selfish by others if the family needed the income, but they chose to stay home. Jamie explained, "I had a friend who stayed home for a few years with her kids when they were small, and they made the comment that she needed to go out and get a job to help support that family and not expect her husband alone to carry that burden."

**Desire to stay home.** Wage-focused participants in this study revealed they would have liked to stay home and have a more active role in raising their child(ren). Despite the desire, Kathy pointed out, "we're just not in the financial position to only have one income." She went on to report that like her, most of her friends also "really hate work, but most of them, their husbands tell them they have to work." Wage-focused participants also reported

that they felt guilty as a parent and believed they were missing out on a lot of quality time at home. Christina said, "I feel like I'm gone too much, because I work a lot of hours, I'm gone about 50 hours a week generally, so that adds up when you leave so early in the morning, get home at 5:30 or 6:00 some nights; supper then it's bath and bed, that's it." Jamie also stated, "I feel like in order for me to be working outside of the home, I have to say we aren't going to be participating in every activity." During their interviews, these women continuously reaffirmed the fact that they had to help put food on the table, clothes on everyone's backs, and provide shelter for their families. These participants reported a desire to stay home and raise the child(ren) with comments such as, "it would be nice to have more of a hand in how she is raised, the day-to-day stuff, that'd be a benefit" (Christina).

**Comments from others.** The wage-focused mothers reported they perceived people sometimes felt they had a right to comment about their motherhood. Beth had one child at the time of her interview and stated others with more children often told her she was "lucky to only have one child because raising one is so much easier than raising two or three or more." On the other hand, the participants with only one child also reported because of this, others expected them to be available to volunteer for everything. Jamie noted, "they know I'm good for that or that I will be dependable and show up and everything." Beth also stated, "I get stuck with a lot of things that are supposedly volunteer" at church and with other organizations such as scouts, etc." These participants noted that although they did not appreciate the comments or expectations, they often said nothing and volunteered as much as possible.

Participants further noted they have received unwelcome advice about how to care for their child(ren). For example, shortly after her baby was born, Christina and her sister went shopping on a Friday evening for baby supplies.

We stopped back downtown so I could have my first beer afterwards and I was like 'woo hoo'... so we went in and we had one and someone came up to me and said, 'well aren't you breastfeeding,' and I'm like 'no.' 'Well you should be, it's way better for the child.' And he's like a friend of my parents ...I was so mad I had to leave (Christina).

Participants noted there never seemed to be a shortage of advice or opinions offered about how to care for their child(ren) when they were not working and that the comments often aggravated them. Despite all the unsolicited parenting advice they received, they did not mention anyone offering advice about working less or quitting their jobs to stay home with their children.

Overall, participants who fell into the category of Wage-Focused Mothers reported that they worked because they had no other choice due to the economy and out of financial necessity for their family; they would prefer to stay home in order to have a more active role in raising their child(ren); and they received what they considered to be value-laden comments from others about their parenting abilities. Next, attention is turned to the women who were identified as career-focused.

### **Career Focused Mothers**

The women who fell into the category of Career-Focused were in their mid-thirties with two or three school-aged children. Most had graduate degrees and held professional positions earning over \$40,000 per year. They reported they were very career focused and loved their jobs. They also reported that they were dedicated

to their children, but felt they were better mothers because they had a career. The women in this category discussed their work as something intangible and beyond employment.

**Discussion about working.** Career-focused participants reported their employment transcended income for the family. To be clear, these participants did not report that they did not need the income, nor did they say they would be willing to give up their income; however, they did report more reasons for working that went beyond food, clothing, and shelter. As an example, Nichole pointed out:

I would be unhappy staying home. After my maternity leave, I was ready to get back to work. I went to school way too long and I usually tell [people] that I'm a much better mother as a working mother... I have that other outlet where I can go to work and use my intellect and do some of those things at work and then come home and really dedicate my time to [my children].

Similarly, Erin noted, "I think probably if I had a job that was just a job to pay the bills, then I probably would feel a lot differently than I do, it wouldn't be worth it." Participants reported they felt they were making a difference working in their career while also providing for their families, giving them a greater sense of fulfillment with comments such as, "I'm providing my family and others with hopefully, something that's good for them" (Erin). Participants enjoyed having a family and having a career and as Allison stated, "I can't imagine any other lifestyle."

**Desire to continue working.** Career-focused participants in this study reported an interruption in their career path could be detrimental. Allison remarked, "I'm gonna figure out how I can work with the children and my career to keep both." Nichole pointed out, "my mom quit her

professional career when she raised my sister and I and she continues to this day to career hop because she just really couldn't get back into the working world... I vowed... I would never do that." She went on to explain:

Professionally that's probably one area in society we aren't really supported as women. If you do take time off and then try to get back into working, into a career they're gonna ask you why you have that year gap, or three-year gap, or whatever, and are you still as up-to-date as you should be in all of your skills. (Nichole)

Participants reported the balance can be challenging. Similar to the wage-focused mothers, Sara said, "there have been a number of people who would comment about 'how do you get it all to work?'" However, unlike the wage-focused participants, career-focused participants in this study indicated that some people still believed a woman with children could not function in certain job positions. Lisa described a situation at her previous job where her co-worker asked when she was going to start having children. Lisa had not disclosed she was leaving for graduate school:

So, I'm like well, it will probably be a year or two you know then we'll maybe start thinking. Well my boss comes rearing out of his office, he's like 'you're pregnant?! ...'you can't be pregnant and do this job.' I was dumfounded... it was really interesting that he felt that that was not appropriate. There was nothing in that job description that prohibited you from being pregnant. (Lisa)

Participants in this study on the career path reported facing additional trials with their career interfering with their spouse's career. Lisa explained that their child was born with health issues and could not attend daycare. Since her husband was just finishing his graduate work and she was already established in her employment, they made the decision for her to continue

working and her husband to stay home with their newborn child. She stated that it worked great for them, but others felt the need to point out the “unusual” situation. “One individual, ...once said ‘how’s that feel since you’re not providing for your family?’” (Lisa). This comment annoyed Lisa and her husband. Similarly, Sara’s husband did not work for a few years while they were having children. She commented that people “just didn’t understand why he would choose to not work... so he got a lot of ribbing from his friends and got really irritated with that.” Nichole’s husband had always worked but also had to help with childcare responsibilities, while most of his colleagues had wives at home or working a job that allowed them to be responsible for most of the childcare. Nichole shared:

His boss will make comments to him about, ‘I suppose you can’t do that because your wife works; oh, I suppose you have to pick up the kids from childcare.’ And there’s been one promotion that he was looked over, he definitely was qualified for, but because his boss felt since I worked he’d not be as committed, he didn’t get the promotion. (Nichole)

The women in this study reported they felt they were not the only ones being value judged for pursuing a career, their spouses were also impacted. Participants reported feeling annoyed and irritated by others’ perceptions, actions, and comments.

**Comments from others.** The career-focused participants reported they perceive they have endured negative comments about choosing to continue on a career path while having children. While pregnant with her third child several people asked Sara if she was going to be staying home once the baby arrived, which was very upsetting to her. She said, “I don’t see men being asked, that I knew of, ‘are you going to be staying home after you have this third child?’ And it seemed very clear to me that I was focused

on a career as well as a family, so that wrangled.” Although Sara was clearly upset about the comments, she reported holding back her true feelings and calmly answered the questions about her intentions to return to work.

Participants shared what they considered to be negative, naïve, and ignorant comments received from others. Melissa stated, “I have had to take days off for my daughter... [and] other women in the office told me [male supervisor] said, ‘this is what you get for hiring a woman.’” Melissa was upset with her supervisor but reported she did not approach him but rather vented to others she trusted. Lisa also shared, “our son had a lot of GI issues... having him be breast fed for a long time would be very beneficial for him, so I made that conscious decision... and so I pumped.” She also pointed out that periodically men in the office commented about how “gross” it was that she was storing the milk in the office refrigerator. She said to one, “so the cow’s milk that you’re getting out of the grocery store, that’s not gross? It was just uncomfortable” (Lisa).

Based upon participant comments, it appeared there was no problem with the career-oriented participants working; the problem was the employment they had chosen. Nichole pointed out, “I think maybe if I was a secretary, it might be better and considered OK to keep having babies.” Rachel vividly recalled when she was a graduate student and informed her mentor she was expecting her second child:

Our relationship changed, the environment became very tense, and he stopped offering me research opportunities. I kept getting comments from him that I would do really good at a small, liberal arts college. I did find out later that he told one of my fellow grad



students that because I was having babies I was not a serious scholar. (Rachel)

Rachel went on to note she learned a valuable lesson from her experience in graduate school:

I don't really talk much about my kids and my life because I don't want to be seen as not serious. And I just don't ever want anybody to question my abilities. And it's hard for people to see women both as smart and capable and successful, and as moms.

Career-focused participants in this study often reported feeling annoyed by the way they felt others treated them because of their desires to advance in a career. For the most part, participants reported allowing the comments to pass with little to no response and moved on.

Overall, participants who fell into the category of Career-Focused Mothers reported working because it was personally fulfilling and a part of their perceived identity; felt they were better mothers because they had a career; and believed they had received value-laden comments from others about their career ambitions while also being a mother. Following is an overview of how both wage-focused and career-focused mothers reported responding to the comments they received from others related to their motherhood and their employment choices.

## Responsive Strategies

Both wage-focused and career-focused mothers reported receiving comments from others inside and outside of the workplace. Participants, regardless of their motivation for working, reported responding to the comments they received from others passively or directly in a way that appeared to be dependent upon how she felt the comment impacted her identity as a mother and/or professional.

**Passive Response.** Passive response strategies included ignoring comments or simply not offering any type of response. The passive strategy was often chosen when there was no perceived threat to either type of working mother's identity as a mother or as a professional. Many times, both categories of women participants reported they perceived the comments to be unworthy of a response with reported comebacks similar to Beth who replied, "I just smile." Jamie justified her silence to a perceived undesirable comment stating:

I didn't really react to [the comments] because everybody's opinion is what it is and it's not going to change my course of events. My husband and I will make a choice for what's best for our family... And you get annoyed by it [but] I don't get too mad. (Jamie)

Both categories of women also reacted in a passive manner if they felt confronting the individual could be detrimental or carry greater consequences than annoyance or anger. Melissa noted even though the comment, "that's what you get for hiring a woman" made by her boss angered her, she remained silent because he was her boss. She excused his behavior stating, "we get quite busy around here and don't have enough help" (Melissa). In another instance, after her graduate defense was successfully defended, Rachel's mentor, who had criticized her for having children commented to her colleague, "I didn't think she had it in her." Rachel went on to explain "I was so upset. [but] I didn't confront him, I mean it wouldn't do any good, it's not gonna change his mind. He is a really arrogant man, and ...he's said some really horrible things to some of the females." Overall, the participants in this study reported they usually approached undesirable comments with a "choose your battles" mentality and remained silent when they perceived saying something

would do little to make the situation better or change the attitude of the individual making the comments. Participants also noted there were times they felt speaking up was necessary.

**Direct Response.** Direct response strategies reported by participants included confrontation or inviting discussion. Although both types of working mothers sometimes remained silent, they did speak aggressively when they felt their position needed clarification for the individual making the comment. Christina told the person who asked if she would quit playing softball, “no, not in this lifetime.” Likewise, when Lisa was faced with “that’s so gross” comments about breast milk in the refrigerator, she simply asked, “is there something else that I could do because it is really important,” inviting discussion and opening the lines of communication to put the solution back on the commenting individual. All working mothers interviewed in this study indicated they sometimes said things along the line of, “Well, I’m not sure why that’s really an issue, that was the choice that was best for us’ versus launching into [an extended explanation]” (Lisa). The women also noted some things are no one else’s business.

Overall, regardless of the motivation for employment by the working mother participants in this study, both passive response and direct response strategies were utilized when confronted with comments related to their motherhood and employment. What is interesting is that both types of working mothers (wage-focused and career-focused) reported implementing similar strategies for responding to undesired comments directed toward them for similar reasons. The working mothers in this sample also

provided some insight to the differences between the wage-focused mothers and the career-focused mothers.

## Comparisons of Working Mothers

Through the examination of each of the interviews and comments given by the two types of working mothers identified in this study, three contrasting themes emerged: 1) One was driven to work for a wage to provide income for her family, while the other was motivated to work for her career advancement; 2) one viewed her employment as less desirable than staying home with her children, while the other desired work to enhance self-fulfillment; and 3) one received more value-laden comments about her capabilities as a mother, while the other received more value-laden comments about her career ambitions.

## Purpose of Work

The two types of working women in this sample reported different purposes for working. Some participants reported working to provide for their families while others reported possessing career ambitions. Undoubtedly, a difference between the two types of working mothers in this study was how others view their roles as working mothers. In a society experiencing economic challenges, women are expected to work to help provide for the family; however, career-focused participants appeared to be less accepted in the workplace. Women with the capacity and desire to have a fulfilling professional career are often confronted with resistance, not only by men, but also by women both in and out of the workforce due to their supposed prioritization of career over family. The media has pushed the notion that a woman who puts too much effort

into her career cannot also be a “supermom” so she should forgo her career to focus on her children (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Therefore, some may expect women to choose raising children over a career, which is consistent with previous research where male executives framed women balancing home and work as problematic, while women’s choices to stay home were applauded (Tracy & Rivera, 2010). Based upon the reports by the small sample of women in this study, it almost appears as though society in general is accepting of women in the workforce only when economically necessary.

## Personal Desire

Both types of working mothers in this study also embraced different personal desires. Wage-focused mothers expressed the desire to be able to stay home with their children rather than punch a clock forty hours each week. Career-focused women, on the other hand expressed the desire to advance in their career. A distinct difference between the wage-focused mother and the career-focused mother was the way they viewed their identities and roles in the workforce. One was content in her job; she desired a more self-fulfilling role she believed she could be performing at home raising her children. The other considered her career integral to her identity. She was a mother and a professional feeling both roles fulfilled different needs. She was also painfully aware a break in her resume could be detrimental to her professional goals. Coverman (1985) found women experiencing role conflict also experience decreased job satisfaction. The wage-focused mother may feel less content in her job than the career-focused mother because she feels her role as an employee conflicts with her role as a mother.

## Characteristics of Comments

Both types of working mothers have endured opinion-based comments about their motherhood. The comments directed toward the wage-focused mothers have manifested around her abilities as a mother telling her she should be breastfeeding her infant or should give up playing softball, while the career-focused mother has received comments directed toward her abilities as a professional telling her she should consider a smaller, liberal arts college rather than pursuing a position at a research institution. Plainly, a difference between the two types of working mothers was not that they received opinion-based comments, but the direction of the comments. Research has shown while it may be acceptable for mothers to work as long as it is only work; when the job becomes a part of her identity, criticisms shift to her ability to be both on the career path and have children (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). The research appears to be consistent with the reports of working mothers in this study of perceptions of comments directed toward them regarding their ability to have both a career and a family.

## Discussion

The first research question asked how mothers view work and employment choices. Previous research on working women indicates “not all women occupy the same standpoint, or live the same experiences” (Buzzanell, 1994, p. 353). When applying this statement to the women in this study, the differences in their socio-economic levels may have affected their outlook as to why they work outside the home. The wage-focused mothers work outside the home because the family “isn’t in the financial position to only have one

income” (Kathy). The career-focused women, on the other hand, work outside the home because it “gives me satisfaction that I’m doing both, I’m providing for my family and doing what I love” (Erin).

The working mothers hold distinctive meanings of work. Many societal messages related to the meaning of work are contradictory, especially for women. Some emphasize the importance of a fulfilling career and others emphasize the importance of family above all else (Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, & Shepherd, 2006). It has been argued those who are able to provide for themselves and/or others will experience greater feelings of accomplishment and self-worth than if they have to depend upon someone else for their basic survival needs (Kant, 1775 [1963]). Work can be tied to personal worth through an individual’s sense of status and feelings of contribution to community and society. Likewise, individuals who experience work as enjoyable and feel a sense of reward from their work often do not distinguish a difference between work and free time (Csikszentmihali, 1997). On the other hand, work can be viewed as confining. Minority and low-income women may see work as a means of survival rather than as liberating (Williams, 2000). Consistent with previous research, based upon the reports of the wage-focused working mothers, they do not view work as liberating while the career-focused working mother reported finding their careers rewarding.

The differences between the two types of working mothers also affect comments they receive. The wage-focused mother does not receive comments about her job. In fact, she reported that everyone she knows is in a similar situation so when they do talk about working outside the

home, it is usually to validate their position and express the wish circumstances were different. When the wage-focused mother receives comments, it is usually about her parenting choices. Conversely, the career-focused mother is more likely to receive comments about her desire to succeed professionally. One reason for the difference in the comments may be because Western culture accepts women working outside the home but views being career-focused a male-gendered characteristic less acceptable for females (Tracy & Rivera, 2010). The reports by participants in this study imply women who must enter the workforce force out of economic necessity are given a “pass” because they have no other choice, whereas women privileged enough to have the option to stay home may be viewed as selfish or senseless for not desiring to be a homemaker.

In identifying the communication strategies of women responding to comments about their choice to have a career and a family, the findings for the second research question suggest that the perceived identity threat and nature of the comment determines whether passive or direct response strategies are used. If either type of working mother feels the situation might escalate into something that could be detrimental to her employment, or the comment is unworthy of response, she uses passive communicative strategies, often remaining silent. On the other hand, when confronted by comments that challenge what she believes to be important aspects of her life and identity, her strategy is direct justifying her position and/or inviting discussion. The women participants in this study reported they felt the need to defend their choices; this action further supports the traditional socially constructed roles of women as stay-at-home caregivers.

## Conclusion and Directions for Future Research

This study sheds light on two different types of working mothers and the communication strategies they use when confronting comments about their choices. The results provide evidence that employed women who choose to have children must be prepared to confront the comments about their choices. The results also provide a glimpse into the meaning of work for women of various social classes and the reasons mothers may choose to navigate a family and a career.

One study limitation is the decision that saturation was reached after 12 interviews. While the two classifications of a wage-focused mother and a career-focused mother clearly emerged, the participants lack ethnic and geographic diversity. Despite these concerns, the lived experiences of the employed mothers as described in this study gives value to scholars looking at women functioning in real-life situations.

Future research should focus more on a variety of employed women from various socio-economic, religious, cultural, gender, and geographic backgrounds and their identity as a working mother. Examining all types of women allows insight into each woman's experience. Understanding the differences between employed mothers along with their motivations and the values they hold can only benefit work environments, family life, and society. Knowing what matters to a mother working outside the home may allow organizations to reconsider how employee needs are met, allow for the development of effective family policy, and guide social and political movements. ■

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