



Honors College Theses

---

4-29-2021

## The Perception of Motherhood through the Smiles and the Spit-up

Sydney M. Forsythe  
*Georgia Southern University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Family, Life Course, and Society Commons](#), and the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Forsythe, Sydney M., "The Perception of Motherhood through the Smiles and the Spit-up" (2021). *Honors College Theses*. 631.

<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/honors-theses/631>

This thesis (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by Georgia Southern Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Theses by an authorized administrator of Georgia Southern Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu).

***The Perception of Motherhood through the Smiles & the Spit-up***

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in *Sociology*.

By  
*Sydney Forsythe*

Under the mentorship of *Dr. Pidi Zhang*

**ABSTRACT**

*This research examines how motherhood is viewed by women, particularly mothers, in the southeast of the United States today. The treatment of women compared to men in women's studies has been a popular topic, but there is less research on mothers. This qualitative study is designed to hear personal stories from mothers and potential mothers, both employed and unemployed, describing how they feel mothers are perceived in the southeast of the United States. Facing the overwhelming literature that describes motherhood as associated with numerous negative impacts on women's lives, this study explores the weight of joy or the paucity of it relative to the negative impacts. This study explores what joys mothers have from having children, how they struggle to balance the pros and cons of having children, and how they make sense of motherhood. This research finds that many mothers share the idea that while motherhood is not easy and is often viewed as a burden by many members of society, the joys far outweigh the challenges for them.*

*Key words: motherhood, penalty, pregnancy, discrimination, gender, women*

Thesis Mentor: \_\_\_\_\_

*Dr. Pidi Zhang*

Honors Director: \_\_\_\_\_

*Dr. Steven Engel*

April 2021  
*Sociology*  
University Honors Program  
**Georgia Southern University**

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Pidi Zhang, for inspiring me to take this research further and for assisting me in my research for the past few years. I could not have done this without all of his help, encouragement, and expertise. I would also like to thank all of my sociology professors over the last four years, who have taught me how to think like a sociologist and have continued to allow me to find more reasons to love my major. Finally, I would like to thank my parents who have supported me through college, and for all my friends along the way; I wouldn't be where I am today without all of you.

## **Introduction**

Our ever-changing society has seen great changes over the last several decades in terms of women in the workplace; many women now work in positions that were once predominantly filled by men (Neubauer & Fradella, 2018). The fact that women are being more educated leads to more women in the workplace, and therefore, more women who have options outside of motherhood. While motherhood is still very common today, it is less common that being a mother is the primary or only role of the woman, and it seems that today the United States views this in a more negative than positive manner. This study looks specifically at the many ways in which motherhood affects women in multiple areas of their life. While it seems that there are both pros and cons to being a mother, our society often views motherhood as an unpaid and very time-consuming job that is daunting and is not to be desired. As the trend of women in the workplace increases and the number of stay-at-home moms decreases, it is important to look at the factors that go into shaping the ideas women construct about motherhood. This research seeks to understand and question how motherhood is perceived and how mothers are treated in the southeast of the United States, both positively and negatively, to draw conclusions about women's choices regarding motherhood.

## **Literature Review**

A common theme within the literature is that across the board “women lead ‘linked lives’ when it comes to work and family” (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016). It is hard for women to separate their work life and their family life because of cultural and societal norms in the United States that reinforce the fact that it is the women who are “supposed” to be in charge of taking care of the children. Working mothers are said to be viewed poorly in the workplace and face daily pressures from the world telling them the best way to be a mother according to the idea of

the society's culture (Lamar, Forbes, & Capasso, 2019). For example, it is usually just assumed that the mother will adjust her daily schedule according to her child's needs. This assumption becomes a problem though for single mothers, who often have a much less flexible schedule and can't afford to not work (Dodson & Luttrell, 2011).

Dodson and Luttrell discuss this issue of single motherhood, pointing out that "institutions (employment and education) operate according to rules that demand untenable choices from mothers and children"(2011). These authors give some real examples of narratives of single mothers who struggle to balance an unpredictable and inconsistent work schedule with their child's unpredictable and inconsistent school schedule, because they are unable to pay for childcare (Dodson & Luttrell 2011). But, single mother or not, Kahn, García-Manglano, & Bianchi (2014) claim that, "motherhood is 'costly' to women's careers." The literature also suggests that the effects of motherhood penalty begin even before the birth of a woman's first child, such as the discrimination against pregnant women who "remain among the most vulnerable workers"(Shinal, 2018), and may even begin before that due to employer discrimination (England, Bearak, Budig, & Hodges, 2016).

Generally women are treated worse than men in the workplace for really no other reason except that they are women and therefore are viewed as less competent and a possible inconvenience (Gloor, Li, & Lim, 2017). While there is a great focus on comparing women with and without children, childless men and women are also compared in some of the existing literature, because men too make up the labor force. Employers may discriminate against a woman because they know the woman is a mother, or maybe just because they know the woman is of child bearing years and has the potential to have a child in the relatively near future. Gloor, Li, & Lim (2017) claim that childless men are often favored in the eyes of supervisors and

coworkers, over childless women. This again refers back to the overwhelming theme of the literature that cultural norms drive how the United States society views and treats mothers, specifically in the workplace, where there has been a considerable increase in mothers in the last few decades (Lamar et al., 2019). So, one can see that women of childbearing age are being compared to not only childless women, but also to both men with and without children. It is clear that this would be a contributor to the gender pay gap and many other ways in which women, as a whole, suffer from discrimination and sexism (Gloor et al., 2017).

There are however, some studies that contradict this, such as the study done by Kelley, Galbraith & Strong (2020), that claim that the pay gap may not be nearly as great as we think it is and that negative perceptions of mothers in the workplace may not actually exist. The results of this study point at the idea that, while this may not be true for all professions, there are many in which a woman would not suffer any penalty due to becoming a mother (Kelley et al., 2020). It may depend on the profession, but it may also just depend on the society and how it portrays motherhood and mothers in the workplace, which may be affecting the way mothers see themselves.

Finally, Ringrow (2020) analyzes the usage of metaphors through the eyes of bloggers who are mothers with religious affiliation when it comes to motherhood. The three specific metaphors Ringrow (2020) focused on in the article were motherhood as a journey, motherhood as a job, and motherhood as a season of life. With the focus on these three metaphors, the author aims to portray how religious bloggers paint the picture of parenthood, and even more specifically motherhood. Quotes were taken from many different blogs to exemplify these three metaphors as ways that mothers talked about motherhood and when sharing their personal experiences with it (Ringrow, 2020). While the religious aspect is not necessarily the most

important part of this study, it is interesting to point out and recognize the role religion plays here. When women make references to the faith in relation to motherhood they are doing so based on assumptions of the knowledge of certain Christian religious terms and events, such as the cross, sacrifice and God's plan, therefore these shared metaphors work for women with shared understandings and beliefs. It is worth pointing out that Ringrow's (2020) study is not published in an academic journal. The dearth of studies in the mainstream academia about the positive side of motherhood points to needs for at least some attention to this overlooked aspect.

Overall, the literature on motherhood and its effects, were largely in agreement with the idea that in the capitalist American society, motherhood has many negative associations with it, and delaying motherhood has become more common than ever before, as other things in a woman's life are looked at more positively and made a priority over children. Rarely was there any study that focused on the joys and the benefits of having children. This research takes a balanced approach in hopes to compare the pros and cons of motherhood in the American society, by asking women in this society for their personal perception of motherhood and how they feel motherhood is perceived by others.

## **Methodology**

Both due to convenience and the accessibility of both younger and older moms in the community, this study was originally to be conducted in Statesboro, Georgia, but then the sample was extended to include some participants from outside of this small town, in order to receive some more diverse and hopefully more generalizable results. Ten women who are mothers and five women who are not mothers were chosen to be interviewed, in order to learn more about their perception of motherhood and how they think motherhood is viewed in the American culture. Pseudonyms are used for all participants in the thesis for confidentiality purposes. The

performed study is qualitative, with the goal of getting detailed answers about the perception of motherhood from in-depth interviews with each of these women. The open-ended questions in the semi-structured interview allows the participants to elaborate and add details that they feel are important to their story.

The participants for this study were not chosen randomly, but rather some younger and older mothers and non-mothers were intentionally selected for interviewing. The participants were chosen using this method on the basis of the knowledge and expertise that mothers have on the topic of motherhood. Non-mothers were then used as a point of comparison of the perception of motherhood from an insider versus an outsider. Each of the women interviewed was given the freedom to choose when and where would be most convenient and comfortable for them to meet for the interviews; this was especially important for the mothers who often had to work around their children's schedules. Therefore, some of the interviews took place at coffee shops or restaurants, a few took place in the home of the participant, and most took place over the phone, especially when the Covid19 Pandemic hit, and in-person interviews were temporarily put on hold.

The interview questions began with the basics asking them to share a little bit about themselves, including their age, race, employment status, religious affiliation and their family to create a foundation. Those were then followed up with questions about how many kids they had and how many they wanted to have. Following these questions, which gathered some background information, were the questions that were more related to the research question, such as, “What are your feelings and opinions about being a mother?” “What do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman in the American society?” and “How has having a child impacted your life or the life of a woman you know?” The questions obviously did not

end here, and the interviews were not limited to the prepared questions, with follow-up questions being asked when necessary in the depths of the conversation in the interview. The open-ended questions and the follow-up prompts allowed the interviewees freedom in expressing their thoughts and experiences encouraging them to provide detailed information. They also allowed them a comfortable level of control in the conversation so that they were not completely led by the questions.

Analysis method followed a controlled abstraction of data into themes and behavior or thinking patterns (Chenail 2012). Special care was taken to capture the themes and patterns faithfully avoiding simply summarizing or paraphrasing the interviewees reports. Four major areas emerge in the perception of motherhood, the perception of stay-at-home moms, the perception of the joys of motherhood, and the perception of motherhood penalty. Some themes and patterns are abstracted into concepts used as subheadings under the four major areas, others, along with the abstract concepts, are described in somewhat less abstract complete sentences at the beginning of the subsections under the four areas.

## **Results**

### **Perception of Motherhood**

In general, there were four main points of discussion when it came to talking about the perception of motherhood, according to these women. Firstly, the restriction of having children on a mother achieving her goals and dreams. Secondly, motherhood as a growing process that was not all fun and games, and in fact could be very difficult at times. Additionally, many of the women mentioned the culture of comparison that tended to exist within motherhood. Finally,

there was the effect that religion tended to have on the way the women spoke of motherhood and dealt with the challenges it brought.

***Child or career dreams: The restriction of having children on a mother's goals and dreams***

Mothers tend to regard restriction of having children on a mother's goals and dreams as individual choices. Megan, 37 year old mother of 5 children, and a very big advocate for motherhood, has known her whole life that she wanted to be a mother and have lots of children, but even she admits that being a mother requires sacrificing other things in life. She believes women can be anything they want, but clarifies that they can't be everything. She explains this further by saying, "we can go be astrophysicists if we want to, but the truth of it is that eventually if you want to be a mother and an astrophysicist, there's going to come a point where you have to make a choice between breastfeeding the baby and going to work and completing this experiment." The belief that women can be anything they want is immediately modified by acknowledging the restriction women are subject to. However, the restriction is expressed as an individual choice a woman has to make: where she wants to devote her current time and efforts in life, to motherhood, the workplace, or something else. Expressing a structural constraint as different choices may indicate the level of individualism that prevents appreciation of financial and other material circumstances in shaping people's decision concerning having children.

Molly, a 26-year-old woman with no children, expresses the constraint in a more direct manner when she discusses how our culture tells us that, "motherhood is restricting and debilitating to a career or personal goals in life." Nonetheless, other interviewees tend to express the constraint as choices under restrictions that seem to emphasize choice. For example, Megan says, "there's still always this undertone that children are in some way a burden that they're disruptive to your goals and your purpose or your trajectory in life... (but) everything in life

comes at a cost, and ya know motherhood is one of those things, and there are necessary consequences that come with making that choice for yourself.” Still others express the constraint as making use of alternative options available to them. Andrea, mother to a 2 and a half year old little girl, shares how, for her, having a child hasn’t necessarily changed her dreams and career goals; she says “I’ve always been very determined like I knew exactly what I was doing, where I was going, what my purpose was, so in that regard having a child hasn’t changed it. The only thing that’s really changed is the way I do that. Like instead of doing it in a corporal setting I do it in an entrepreneurial setting.” It is great that she was able to do this in her own life and has made this work for her family, but her response ignores whatever resources may have enabled her to do so, displaying a similar individualist approach regardless of the available opportunities that prevents them from seeing realistic structural constraint to other mothers.

Life revolves around the baby when a woman becomes a mother. Rachel, 25-year-old mother of a 7 month old, addresses the fact that her “life is different now because now (she’s) always thinking about another person in the equation (she’s) not just worrying about (herself).” She explains “being a mother is the hardest and most fulfilling and abundantly joyful thing I’ve ever taken on.” Sloan, a middle aged mother of 2 teenagers, says, “I think I thought that when I became a mother you just added a baby to your life, and I didn’t realize like you have a baby and your life revolves around the baby, the child. You adjust to them.” Upon becoming a mother, a woman is no longer in charge of just themselves, and now has another human depending on them. Interviewees tend to report that the transfer of centrality from themselves to the baby as a process of realization after the arrival of the baby. The level of this realization is not anticipated and is only felt after having the baby, even if they are prepared for being a mother and have lots of support around them. Melissa, a 78-year-old mother of three and grandmother of eight, attests

a similar transfer of centrality that seems to have been the case for many mothers not just for mothers of today: “when I became a mother, I believed that it was the most important job I would ever have.” Both of these women, along with many of the others share having to adjust their life due to their child(ren). Most of them are willing to do so because they view their children as their top priority.

***Growing pains: Motherhood as a growing process***

Mothers tend to perceive motherhood as a fulfilling process for the children as well as the mother to grow together. According to these mothers, while it is full of joy, motherhood is not all fun and games. Motherhood involves the process of forming a child to eventually become a contributing member of society. Sloan says, “I don’t think people view it in an active way,” referring to motherhood, which she sees as an active learning process that you can grow in and get better at over time. The American society, which has the internet at their fingertips, is used to instantaneity, not having to wait for really anything, but motherhood requires a different, more patient and time-consuming approach. Megan, also touches on this idea that motherhood is not a one and done thing, but rather a continuous process of making good choices, where you get to watch your kids develop their own uniqueness and you have this strong sense that you are raising a person, who you hope is successful in all aspects of life one day. She mentions how, “as individuals (children) show us who they are and then I have the chance to grow and become more of who I am as a result of them being in my life and like us being a family unit together.”

Perceptions of motherhood as an active learning process and a continuous process during which the mother experiences growth while raising her children into unique individuals indicates a process of mutual socialization between mothers and children. The awareness of the learning process and growing together seems to be arrived at only by women who have motherhood

experiences. This is similar to women's realization of the transfer of the feeling of centrality to the baby after they become a mother. In contrast, non-mothers lack this feeling of growing together with children but tend to display a perception of objectification toward having a baby. It is more likely for them to perceive raising a child as a job and having a child as a gift.

Abby, a 24 year old with no children, says, "[In] America a lot of the times we are in such a fast paced society, that parents just want their kids to start making money and start providing for themselves...I think sometimes we view motherhood as another job or task." She talks about the fact that she views motherhood as a gift, but doesn't feel that it always aligns with society's views. Alex, a 37-year-old interviewee with no children, also displays this objectification of children, saying in her opinion, "I think in the pop culture, having a kid is like getting a pet, where you get to dress them up and show them off and like all as sort of an accessory and not really to form them as like a whole human being." One thing is certain that non-mothers do not have experiences of having and raising a child. They may have their perceptions about motherhood from observations, the environment, and the overall information system of the society. Personal experiences or lack thereof are the only salient difference between mothers and non-mothers, and that seems to make a big difference in their perception of motherhood.

***Peer Pressure: Pressure in regards to motherhood***

Mothers tend to be pressured by what may be called a comparison culture. They alike talked about how easy it is to get caught up in comparison and pressure when it comes to motherhood. Andrea gives many examples of "women putting pressure on other women, mothers putting pressure on other mothers," such as things as small as how you're feeding your baby, the swaddle you have for your baby, whether you're taking your child to the park, and whether you're part of a mother's group. Today especially, with advances in technology and knowledge

about the “best” motherhood practices, along with the increases of women in the workplace, there seems to be more room for comparison in motherhood. This tendency to compare and the pressure from it seems to be intensified by the media, as Megan explains her experience with this when she says, “You're constantly presented images in advertising and television that show this perfect image of motherhood...where ya know you’re changing this diaper lovingly and everything’s perfect...and of course changing a child’s diaper rarely works out that way.” Megan’s remarks suggest that even if mothers may be aware of the bias and misinformation as displayed in media commercials, mothers are subject to the pressure such misinformation helps to intensify.

While mothers are subject to pressure from comparison about how to be a good mother, non-mothers are pressured into whether or not to be one. With more options available to women deciding what to do with their lives, comes more comparison and judgement of those who are not mothers. Although Lily, a 24 year old unmarried, childless woman, says, “You can live a satisfying life without kids, doing what I want on my own time,” there is pressure to become a mother and start having children once you are married or get to a certain age, especially in more religious areas. Andrea shares “my friend...and her husband...have been married for like 15 or 16 years...and neither of them have any desire to have children. She grew up in New Jersey, and it wasn’t a big deal that they weren’t gonna have children and then they moved to Tifton, Georgia and she spent the first three or four years battling with herself because everyone was like ‘When are you having children? When are you having children?’ At some point she was like it just got uncomfortable and I was tired of telling people we aren’t planning to have any children...like there’s nothing wrong with not wanting children, like every woman is not supposed to have children, but if you’re a woman the assumption is you will have children.” Andrea’s remarks

suggest a larger pressure toward women to have children in the South than in New Jersey. This is also where we start to see religion playing a role, because it is more likely in religious communities for there to be this expectation of having children.

***Sacrificial gift: The influence of religiosity on motherhood***

Religion emerges as a big factor in motherhood and in influencing women's choices regarding it. Two themes emerge when the women discuss religion as a big part of their identity: motherhood as a gift and motherhood as a sacrifice. Motherhood is perceived as a gift innately endowed in women for them to embrace and live out rather than a burden to reject. For example, Molly, a Catholic woman, says "motherhood is awe-inspiring. I think that motherhood is written in the female design...that we are all called to some sort of motherhood. Women have dispositions of receptivity...I think that women inherently have the gift of taking in the things around them and bringing life to situations, relationships, places and things." Rachel, who comes from a large devout catholic family, says, "when I had (my son) my mom said something like 'welcome to the mom club' and she told me I now have this huge network of women who have all gone through the same things that I have and that I'm never alone." Sarah, a 24-year-old Catholic woman, with a 6 month old, says, "it is like the best gift that you can receive to be able to carry a child for nine months and then give birth to a baby." These women shared however, that despite their positive thoughts on motherhood, they felt that there were plenty of people in society who saw children as more burdensome than anything else.

The notion of sacrifice seems to be paired with that of gift. Sarah responds to society's idea of motherhood saying, "there are just sacrifices you are going to have to be willing to make and I think a lot of people just aren't willing to make them or accept that the sacrifice will be worth it and that they will still have joy in their life." Sacrifice and gift are words that are often

emphasized in the tradition of Christianity. In many religions in the American culture, both the sacrifice of God or Jesus, as well as his gift of life are commonly discussed. Also, some religions encourage sacrifice in small ways in one's own life for the good of others. Therefore, it is likely that more religious women are more prepared for the sacrifice of motherhood and more open to the sacrifices that motherhood entails.

### **Perception of Stay-at-Home Moms**

The interviewees share the feeling that society doesn't see being a stay at home mother as a fulfilling role. Despite this idea, there is also the contradictory admiration of being a mother, specifically a traditional mother, especially for the religious women.

#### ***“Just” a mom: The idea that being a stay-at-home mom isn't enough***

As the women talked about being a mom, there tends to be this sense that society expects women to be moms, and do that fully, but at the same time not only that. They are faced with a paradox of pity and seeming admiration. The paradox puts stay-at-home moms in an irresolvable situation more difficult than a role conflict, which typically entails two or more contradicting roles of a single status. One may try to handle two contradicting roles of a single status if that person has the two roles, but a woman with a role of stay-at-home mom does not have an out-of-home career. It is impossible for her even to have the role conflict. Nevertheless, she is still judged by the role conflict, making her situation unresolvable. Megan discusses how others look at her, especially when she goes out in public with all of her children. “At best it's good natured pity, or sometimes admiration, you know like ‘I could never do that’ that sort of thing...” Sarah shared about her personal experience with being a mother and the questions she has been asked by the people around her, such as when is she going to start using her degree, as if it is not okay for her to be “just” a mom right now. Sarah says, “I think that our culture views

motherhood and stay at home moms as not a fulfilling role and that it's kind of a waste and you should be working and that it's not a full-time job.”

The paradoxical expectations for stay-at-home moms are also displayed by mothers whose occupation allows them to work at home. Jessica, a 35-year-old mother of a 15-month-old, who is also five months pregnant with her second baby at the time of our interview, enjoys the break she gets with her very flexible job with Mary Kay. She works as a sales director and is able to choose her hours and be at home with her baby when she wants. She doesn't feel she is missing out on anything in his life. She comments, “I admire people who stay home full time, because I honestly don't know if I could do it.” Jessica's remarks may reflect a mixed feeling of an admiration tinged with the subtlety of pity. Thanks to her occupational and financial statuses, Jessica has been able to choose to have a nanny, rather than sending her son to daycare. Jessica's arrangement allows him to be in the safety and comfort of his own home with a caretaker they know and trust. It should be noted, however, Jessica is in a privileged condition many stay-at-home mothers do not have access to. It should also be noted that, as other mothers who perceive that a structural constraint can be overcome with choices, stay-at-home mom tends to be perceived as a choice regardless of the occupational and financial resources that in actuality make the difference.

The contradicting views in our society about stay-at-home mothers are summarized in a way by Molly when she says, “there are conflicting messages that motherhood is amazing and beautiful and we should all be overjoyed by motherhood and motherhood is restricting and debilitating to a career or personal goals in life.” It is seen as both fulfilling to be a mother and equally not fulfilling to “only” be a mother, or to be a stay-at-home mother, with no “real” career out in the workforce. This irresolvable role conflict causes much confusion for women and their

identity, as they question their worth when they feel they can never meet the society's paradoxical expectations. Today there is much more of a push for women in the workplace, as well as a desire for mothers to be able to both be a mother and be in the workplace, but the occupation structure can only provide limited numbers of positions that allow mothers such as Jessica to choose their own work hours at home. So, women often feel the pressure of the society's expectations for them and may not feel free to make their own decisions. As a result, most women find themselves in a dilemma of you are judged if you do and you are judged if you don't. The irresolvable role conflict as a result of the single role or stay-at-home mom causes role strain for the women.

***Settling on one role: The traditional role of a mother and how resources affect that***

Some interviewees are less bothered by the role strain or irresolvable conflicting expectations for mothers. They settle on the role of stay-at-home mother and disregard at least for the time being the other expectation for having a career. Sarah was a missionary her first two years out of college, so she has not yet been able to use the nursing degree that she earned from Alabama University. Now that she has her first kid, she says, "I pretty much know I am never going to (use her degree) unless I absolutely have to." She gives priority to her role of the mother rather than her potential career option. Sarah has experienced the pressure of the world around her and has generally gotten the sense that it is frowned upon by the American society to get a degree that goes unused and be a stay-at-home mom. However, she continues to be a stay-at-home mom and defends her own decision saying, "I just know that I want to stay at home to raise my daughter and any future children that we might have." This idea is shared by Megan, "I decided that I didn't have a child for someone else to raise him 10 hours a day, and so I went back to graduate school and stayed home with him." It is important to note however, that Sarah

and Megan choose to be stay-at-home moms because they are able to afford that, as Sarah says that she is never going to use her degree unless she absolutely has to. The importance of availability of resources or lack of thereof is reflected in Rachel's remarks, "I really wanted to be a stay-at-home mom and hope to be able to one day, but God had other plans and I am happy, but if I could choose, I would be home with him." It may also be important to note that all three of them are religious. It may be safe to infer that religiosity may play a role in their unambiguous indorsement of stay-at-home moms as a solution to the dilemma irresolvable with what the society expects.

The impact of religion on the indorsement of the traditional role of the mother is also reflected in Sarah's opinions on the distinctive gender roles for parents in child rearing. She discusses when the mother is more important in a child's life versus when a father is more important: "Our roles are different in the ways that we care for our kids. My role as a mom is to protect my children from within and provide for her within...especially in these young formative years...and my husband's role as the father is to protect and provide from outside the home...like once you are in high school and college the father's role becomes way more critical than the mother's."

### **Perception of the Joys of Motherhood**

It is important to recognize that every single mother shared many challenges alongside the joys of motherhood. While not forgetting all the hard times, they were all in agreement that motherhood is full of so many joys, which outweigh the challenges.

### ***Challenge accepted: The challenges that accompany the joys of motherhood***

The interviewees reported a number of challenges of motherhood. As many of them are stay-at-home-moms, challenges are mostly about social deprivation such as missing out on time

with friends, physical pains and fatigue such as giving birth, breastfeeding, and getting less sleep. Sarah explains, “Just practically in the beginning you don't get a lot of sleep and if you're breastfeeding that requires a lot of actual pain and suffering.” Jessica agrees saying for her, “I think one of the hardest things is the sleep deprivation...And nursing, oh my gosh, that is not for the faint of heart. But trying to work and nurse was probably the most challenging thing I feel like, probably even more than dealing with sleep.”

In addition to the social and physical challenges, mothers are faced with psychological sufferings as well. In Rachel's words, “mom guilt and comparison” are the most challenging parts of motherhood. Megan seconds this, when she talks about the challenge of self-questioning such as, “am I doing enough, am I doing well enough?” The self-questioning may be related to the role strain discussed above that makes it impossible for mothers to meet the paradoxical expectations for them. In spite of the challenges, all mothers report joys of motherhood. Rachel acknowledges that being a mother can be very difficult sometimes, but even if in very difficult times there is so much joy. Megan sums up her thoughts when she says, “Sometimes it's a wild ride, sometimes it's a little chaotic, but it's been like also an unmitigated joy as well.”

***If you're happy and you know it clap your hands: Motherhood is full of unmitigated joys***

When asked what she thought the joys and challenges of motherhood were, Abby said she didn't think there were any disadvantages to being a mother, even though she figures a lot of other people would disagree with her. She said she thinks a big joy “is just the gift of love that comes from being a mother.” While her ideas for this may be a little broad-stroke because she is not actually a mom herself and cannot experience it, Sloan's words illustrate the broad-stroke description with a color of religion, “a mother's love is the closest thing we come to understanding God's love because a mother always sees who her child could be, what their best

potential is, no matter what.” In addition, Sarah describes the joy as everyday experiences, “Just getting to watch your baby grow and develop is like the coolest thing ever...It is just amazing to watch a baby take in the world with such wonder.”

Most mothers report enjoying the little moments motherhood brings about. With the biggest smile on her face, Jessica shares about the joy of waking up every morning and seeing her baby push himself up and smile at her when he first sees her. Speaking from personal experience, from the last 6 months, Sarah tells how there is just so much joy in the small accomplishments. Rachel says that the best part of being a mother for her is “just all the little sweet moments I get with him and watching him develop more and more each day...I just know I never take my time with him for granted and just make all my time with him really count.” For these mothers, time with their children is not just spent, it is experienced, enjoyed, appreciated, and, at times, looked at in awe. Many of the women share that as a parent, specifically a mother they feel responsible for getting their child into adulthood. They share that it is a wonderful thing to slow down sometimes and enjoy all the little moments of motherhood and raising a child.

One of the greatest joys mothers talk about is getting to watch their children grow into their own individual person. Mothers seem to expect in their children’s growing process something yet unknown but unique as a wonder that will unveil and their own children are to become. The number of children does not seem to matter as there is a beauty in watching with excitement the unique person that each of them becomes. Sloan says, “you really see the uniqueness of each of your children, even though they come from the same gene pool.” She elaborates on this when she says, “I think the joys are that you get to see the individuality in your children and their gifts.” Megan adds that to this when she talks about how different each of her

five children are saying, “one of the great joys of parenting for me has been watching each of my kids sort of like show me who they are and...figuring out who that one person was.”

The exciting joy also comes from what can be described as wonders of a new life created from the union of two parents. Andrea discusses how she had her whole life planned out for herself, but having a child redefined her whole purpose into something she never could have imagined. She admits that while motherhood can be very challenging and stressful, she feels like her daughter is the perfect combination of her and her husband; “I feel like it’s literally everything that I love walking outside of my body.” Similarly, Sarah says, “...getting to watch my husband with her is just so fun, just all the ways that he loves to play with her and talk to her and I just can’t imagine life without her.” Such joys may not be completely expressible to the mothers, as one of them describes it as unmitigated joys.

### **Perception of the Motherhood Penalty**

In conversation about the penalties of motherhood, many of the women brought up the gender pay gap and the way gender roles affect the view of mothers and how mothers feel. They also often discussed the significance of where you work and what occupations women choose.

#### ***Men and women: Gender roles and the gender pay gap***

Many mothers express objection to the ideas of gender equality initiatives. They tend to embrace the ideas of innate differences between males and females, and, for that reason, different purposes, functions, and treatments for the two sexes. The gender roles assigned according to functional differences of both sexes are perceived, as it were, elevated that both assume a sort of divine aura and an aesthetic beauty. They are frustrated with other women fighting against gender inequality rather than females being treated unequally. When the Motherhood Penalty is brought up, Abby responds, “I do think it’s very sad, but it’s...because we have this movement in

our society, this woman empowerment movement, where it's like women can do anything just the same as men. Which to a point that is true, but we have different gifts that we were given." It is immediately clear that Sarah is passionate about her thoughts on the topic; she seems almost frustrated with the whole idea that people have an issue with the pay gap between men and women and the fact that people are getting so upset by the discrimination against mothers. She says she just doesn't understand why women and society cannot see the beauty in motherhood and the beauty in a man carrying out his role as a leader to provide and protect from outside the home. To sum up Sarah's thoughts about the gender differences in just her own short sentence, "I just think women need to not be so offended by that."

Sarah's defense of gender difference is also expressed in her support to higher pay for males. She thinks that men should be getting paid more than women for many reasons. For one, she says that it only makes sense that the man is getting paid more if they are going to be the primary provider of the household. She explains, "I think that we now live in a society where two income households are the norm and hypothetically a husband and wife have kids and are not the ones primarily raising the kids because we both want to work because we both want to make a lot of money so we can live a certain lifestyle, so we make all this money so we can pay for daycare for our kids. There is not a real need or necessity for two income households if one wage is livable for sure."

It is obvious that these ideas are based on the household of a husband and wife with children as the basic unit of the society. They may not take into consideration the high rates of single-parent families, the much lowered rates of two-parent families, and the ramifications of unequal treatments of the two genders in the real lives of different types of families. Besides, they are obviously uninformed of the leveling off of male workers' real pay since the 1970s,

which has made the female's contribution to the family income less dispensable even for two parent families.

***Making money moves: Deciding where to work and who to work for***

Mothers with a career tend to emphasize the selection of where to work based on their own experiences. Jessica is all for women in the workplace, but emphasizes that, "you have to be careful where you work or what you are representing when you work." She agrees with this idea that being a mother does require lots of sacrifices, but that there is a way to have a job with a flexible schedule where one can still sacrifice for one's child while not giving up on one's own dreams. Jessica talks very highly of working for Mary Kay, a predominantly female employed company that allows women to be women, not encouraging them to try to be like men. Jessica is fortunate to be in her position. But once again, it should be noted that not everybody has the choice of where to work and who to work for. The structural constraint is not resolvable with individual choices. Besides, it is important to note that even Jessica is able to have her child without giving up her dream, her remarks imply that raising a child is the woman's responsibility and it is natural for the woman to make the sacrifice.

Other mothers acknowledge the idea of selecting where to work, but clearly recognize the disadvantages for females even if their workplace allows flexible hours. Megan agrees that where one works plays an important role in motherhood. She discusses working in the academic field and the constant battle she and other female colleagues of hers face for not only being a woman, but also for being a mother. Megan shares a story about a close friend of hers, "they take advantage of her because they know that as a parent and the primary breadwinner, she's motivated to keep her job and so like they have really made her work much harder than her male colleagues...like she has to do laps around them and is asked regularly to do stuff that they're not

asked to do.” Megan, through trial and error, figures out what she could do while still devoting the amount of time she wants to, to her children. She says, “...that perfect triangle of things came for me...as a teacher, I’m getting to do ya know something important that has purpose and also contributes.”

## **Discussion & Conclusion**

The in-depth interviews with mothers and potential mothers, both employed and unemployed, show the shared idea that motherhood is challenging with various difficulties. Meanwhile, interviewees also discuss joys of motherhood and overall report that the joys they feel are much greater than the challenges for them. The perceptions of motherhood reflect the restrictions of having children on a mother’s goals and dreams. This is consistent to Kahn et al.’s (2014) claim about the cost of motherhood to women’s careers. However, many interviewees shared that this does not have to be looked at in a negative manner. Mothers tend to perceive the structural constraint in terms of personal choices women need to make to resolve the restrictions. Many mothers perceive the gender division of labor as something as a divine arrangement. They are frustrated by other women failing to appreciate the beauty of such arrangements. Mothers also tend to perceive motherhood as a fulfilling process for the children as well as the mother to grow together. These findings are consistent with Ringrow’s (2020) findings about mothers with religious affiliation who perceive motherhood as a fulfillment of a season of a woman’s life.

The perceptions of stay-at-home moms reflect stay-at-home moms facing a paradox of pity and seeming admiration and an irresolvable situation more difficult than a role conflict. As stay-at-home moms do not have an out-of-home career, it is impossible for their role of stay-at-home mom even to have the conflict with the role they don’t have, but that does not prevent them from being subject to judgement based on the role conflict imposed by the society.

Some mothers, especially the more religious, seem to have a solution to the dilemma by simply defying the society's expectation for them to have a career as well. This position seems to be related to their perceptions of the motherhood penalty. Most of the interviewees seem to be against the feminist positions of gender equality. They display a clear tendency of perceiving the family as the union of a man and a woman with their own children and accepting the distinctive gender roles and division of labor. Many of them expressed objection to females trying to get equal pay as males. Even when they acknowledge that females are treated differently in the workplace, they do not tend to perceive that in terms of inequality or lack of justice. Instead, they tend to perceive that as females facing different sets of choices than males and discuss how to select their careers if they opt to become a mother and have a career. These findings about anti-feminism perceptions may be different compared to most conventional studies of motherhood.

The women could not say enough when it came to all the joys that come with being a mom, but they were sure not to ignore the fact that there are many challenges alongside the joys. Once again, religion tended to play a role in the way the women talked about the joys of motherhood, as more religious women tended toward words like children being a gift. The notion of gift intertwined with the idea of sacrifice repeatedly appears in the interviews, added with the elated expression when the mothers discuss their appreciation of distinctive gender roles display a passion and devotion of a religious kind. They try to slow down the time in order to enjoy the beauty of all the little moments they get to experience with their child. These findings are also rare in conventional studies of motherhood.

It should be noted that this study is not to make an argument, but an exploration about the perceptions of motherhood particularly by mothers and non-mothers. The findings may be

restricted by the sampling limitations. As the small sample includes mainly mothers and non-mothers who are interested in the topic of motherhood, the findings should not be perceived to be representative of any population. Another limitation to this study is that much of the study was performed during the COVID19 Pandemic, causing the suspension of in-person interviews, as well as making it harder to meet with people. The Pandemic may have also had an effect on some of the responses in the interviews, as people were out of jobs, had their children home more than normal, and were unable to go and do as freely as before. Given more time, I would follow up with these women in a few months, then again in a year, and then again after the Pandemic was over.

In conclusion, as women and mothers continue to make a greater presence in the workplace, this research strives to understand women as mothers and to discover the aspects of their lives and the society that affect how mothers are perceived. While the society tends to portray children as a burden to women, particularly to those who pursue a career, it also expects people to continue having children. The interviews conducted in this research indicate that many mothers see having children as both a tremendous challenge and a more rewarding gift. Many mothers share that being a mother is an unmitigated joy.

## References

- Chenail, R. J. (2012). Conducting Qualitative Data Analysis: Qualitative Data Analysis as a Metaphoric Process. *The Qualitative Report*, 17(1), 248-253.
- Dodson, L., & Luttrell, W. (2011). Families Facing Untenable Choices. *Contexts*, 10(1), 38-42.
- England, P., Bearak, J., Budig, M., & Hodges, M. (2016). Do Highly Paid, Highly Skilled Women Experience the Largest Motherhood Penalty?. *American Sociological Review*, 81(6), 1161-1189.
- Gloor, J., Li, X., & Lim, S. (2017). An Inconvenient Truth? Interpersonal and Career Consequences of “Maybe Baby” Expectations. *Academy Of Management Proceedings*, 2017(1), 12949.
- Kelley, H., Galbraith, Q., & Strong, J. (2020). Working moms: Motherhood penalty or motherhood return?. *The Journal Of Academic Librarianship*, 46(1), 102075. doi: 10.1016/j.acalib.2019.102075
- Lamar, M., Forbes, L., & Capasso, L. (2019). Helping Working Mothers Face the Challenges of an Intensive Mothering Culture. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 41(3), 203-220.
- Neubauer, D., & Fradella, H. (2018). *America's courts and the criminal justice system* (13th ed.). Boston: Cengage.
- Ringrow, H., 2020. “I can feel myself being squeezed and stretched, moulded and grown, and expanded in my capacity to love loudly and profoundly”: Metaphor and religion in motherhood blogs. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 37, p.100429.
- Shinal, J. (2018). The Pregnancy Penalty. *Minnesota Law Review*, 103(2), 749-842.
- Ward, K., & Wolf-Wendel, L. (2016). Academic Motherhood: Mid-Career Perspectives and the Ideal Worker Norm. *New Directions For Higher Education*, 2016(176), 11-23.