

Getting Past the Dream of a Bounded Life? An Analysis of Advertisements in *Working Mother* Magazine

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Abstract

The dominant culture portrayal of work and family in the United States classifies women as either mothers or paid workers, and suggests that women cannot participate in both institutions successfully because both require full dedication and commitment to role responsibilities. Despite these ideals, however, most women engage in both paid work and motherhood. Today's working mother may therefore seek guidance from cultural texts while attempting to balance multiple roles. Product advertisements have long been studied as one such cultural text. In this study we examine advertisements in *Working Mother* magazine from 2011 to 2013. While we find that *Working Mother* Advertisements advocate for a boundary between paid work and motherhood, advertisements also hint that motherhood and paid work are intertwined roles. The notions that mothering and paid work are confined to separate spaces or can be bounded are false and readers of this magazine may clue into this subtle message. Getting past the notion of a boundary between paid work and motherhood is critical if our goal is to move cultural debates about paid work & motherhood forward in countries such as the United States.

Keywords: working mother, paid work, motherhood, advertisements, boundary, qualitative content analysis

1. Introduction

The dominant culture portrayal of work and family for women in the United States classifies women as either "work oriented or family oriented" (Garey, 1999, p. 6). Women are constructed as either mothers or paid workers, but not both. That is, work-family issues are always "depicted as either/or dilemmas in which women [have] to pick or choose sides" (Buzzanell et al., 2005, p. 262). Also inferred within this construction is women's physical location – either women are physically at home or at work, but not both (FirstAuthor, 2008). In fact, cultural ideals suggest that paid work and family are "greedy institutions" (Coser 1974), in that women cannot participate in both institutions successfully because both institutions require full dedication and commitment to role responsibilities. Ongoing media debates (e.g., Kantor, 2012; Slaughter, 2012) about whether women can really "do it all" continue to call into question whether women can engage in both paid work and motherhood successfully.

The reality is that the vast majority of women with children in the United States work for pay outside of the home. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014), approximately 74.7% of all women with children ages 6-17 and 64.2% of women with children under 6 were in the paid labor force in 2013.

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A burgeoning feminist literature on working mothers also documents women's history of combining paid work and motherhood (Amott and Matthei, 1991). The very existence and success of magazines like *Working Mother* in the United States also suggests that women are not choosing family or work *only*; rather, they are trying to do both.

With this reality, working women in the United States are encouraged to keep strict boundaries between paid work and motherhood activities so that they can give their full attention to each. According to our cultural imaginations, a "good" worker keeps parenthood at bay during work hours and a "good" mother keeps paid work out of her motherwork. These ideals frame our current study.

Background

A hay (1996) explains that the dominant motherhood ideology in the United States is that of "intensive mothering." The "good," "intensive" mother focuses *exclusively* on mothering her children and is committed to them in time, physical space (in that she is in the same location), energy, and affection (Hays 1996; Arendell 2000). Similar to what Wolf (2002) argues about beauty norms or what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue about hegemonic masculinity, intensive motherhood ideology is a set of prescriptions for behavior, since women/mothers must constantly prove their complete commitment to children and caregiving activities. To be a good mother, women must also simultaneously demonstrate their lack of commitment to other non-caregiving activities (such as paid work). In the face of dominant ideology, then, a "working" mother (especially a "full-time" one) is a bad mother. A cultural assumption is that working mothers are "prevented by employment from being full-time [read: good] mothers" (Ranson, 2004, p.89).

Nonetheless the concept of a "working mother" gained ideological popularity during the late 1970s and early 1980s and has been seen as the feminist ideal at times (Douglas, 2000; Kantor 2012). Largely because of her feminist (and seemingly anti-motherhood, anti-family) backing, this mother has always been fraught with controversy. The term "working" mother typically narrowly refers to a professional mother who works forty-hours or more per week outside of the home and brings to mind a woman who is career oriented (e.g., lawyer, doctor, CEO) (Smith, 2001). As she progressively earned opportunities for education and paid work in a public sphere, feminist scholars and activists thought this mother would revolutionize the way society saw women's "place," and that eventually the public sphere would alter its practices so that women could combine the two roles with ease (with benefits such as flexible work hours, on-site day care, job sharing, and paid leave for parents) (Mack-Canty & Wright, 2004). From this perspective, the working mother and the stay-at-home mother would eventually parallel each other in acceptance. At base, then, feminist advocacy of working mothers has been about dismantling an equation of women with caregiving, family, and the home.

Feminist hopes have not become a complete reality, however, and we can see this in the contemporary discourse surrounding working mothers. While there have been important feminist successes within the realm of paid work (including many policy adjustments regarding, for example, women's work hours and family leaves), the working mother is still often depicted as a woman concerned more with her own personal success (e.g., getting a big salary, career advancement) and attainment of material objects (e.g., new car, big house, expensive clothes) than the wellbeing or success of her children (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). Working mothers also are suspect because of their presumed "lack" of attachment to their children; as they engage in activities besides mothering they are seen as putting aside caregiving responsibilities which, presumably, a "good," stay-at-home mother does not do.

They must compensate for this by working extremely hard to still appear committed to motherhood. Part of this work is upkeeping a very strict boundary between motherhood and paid work (or at least the appearances of a boundary) so that motherhood time is protected. This image work is the responsibility of individual working women (First Author, 2008) and is the "manic motherhood" reported on by Quindlen (2005), as working mothers frantically attempt to (1) carry out intensive motherhood despite working, and (2) maintain the boundary between their two worlds. The most that working mothers can be, however, according to some recent research, is "good enough mothers," as they try to balance and divide paid work and motherhood demands (Quindlen, 2005; Buzzanell et al., 2005).¹

At the same time, research on work-family conflict and work-family spillover argues that "work and family boundaries [are] ... asymmetrically permeable," meaning that both equally impact one another and are not separate (Eagle et al., 1997, p.169; Michel et al., 2010). Much of the literature on work-family conflict, work-family balance, and work-to-family spillover reaffirms Coser's (1974) idea of work and family being "greedy institutions," and the fact that it is difficult (if not impossible) to draw a boundary between one's roles (Hays, 1996; Eagle et al., 1997; Michel et al., 2010; Carlson et al., 2009). Greenhaus et al. (2003) go so far as to say that researchers have overemphasized individuals' abilities to equally balance work and family and/or keep them separate (see also Carlson et al. 2009). Thus, while cultural prescriptions still focus on working mothers' maintenance of the boundary between paid work and motherhood, other work-family research increasingly shows the impossibility of this work. Mothers who work for pay therefore exist in a very contradictory space.

In light of the fact that U.S. working mothers -- especially ones who may be "career-committed" -- are in danger of falling short of cultural prescriptions for good motherhood and are embarking on a difficult journey to define and maintain a boundary between two "greedy institutions," what do cultural texts -- especially those that advocate for contemporary working mothers -- prescribe?

Methods

Product advertisements have long been studied as representative of social "reality" (Cook, 2011; Pugh, 2005). In addition, the analysis of consumerism (and, thus, product advertisements to encourage consumerism) can act as a barometer of social progress for women, and an assessment of the cultural prescriptions that women still confront and negotiate. Pugh (2005, pp.729-730) suggests that

"American women with children live within a hotly contested cultural space, in which different cultural dictums about the terms and obligations of caring for children battle for primacy. . . . In this environment, mothers cannot mother, cannot construct a childhood for their charges, without forging some path through this thicket of cultural schemas, or scripts for action. . . . When people feel anxiety as they construct their lives from a range of only partially sanctioned cultural choices, they turn to cultural intermediaries for guidance."

Pugh (2005) proposes that these intermediaries could be product advertisements. Therefore we concentrate our analysis on the products advertised in *Working Mother* magazine. For this study, we analyze two full years (14 issues) of *Working Mother* magazine, published between February/March 2011 and December/January 2013. We cover this time frame because the print version of *Working Mother* went through important structural changes in early 2011 (beginning with the Feb/Mar 2011 issue) such that these two years of issues provide a consistent but brand new backbone for analysis. According to our conversation with Editorial Director of *Working Mother*, Jennifer Owens, and also an online news release on workingmother.com about an award that *Working Mother* won in November 2011 for their redesign, "the cover-to-cover redesign takes working moms through their day and week so they can achieve more at work and at home. The [magazine's] new architecture reflects readers' non-stop 24/7 lifestyle with "Morning", "Workday", and "Evening" sections that solve her problems and simplify each part of her life" (Jennifer Owens, personal email correspondence with the second author, 2012; see also *Working Mother*, 2011). In total, we analyzed 883 product advertisements within the newly redesigned sections of *Working Mother*. We consider the analysis that follows to be a qualitative content analysis in that we examine advertisements for how they define motherhood, paid work, and the boundaries between these two roles. Thus, this study is a preliminary analysis of the tone and text of advertisements, rather than a comprehensive statistical analysis. In presenting each of our themes, we select examples of advertisements that represent the themes.

According to its website, *Working Mother* reaches 2.2 million readers and is the "only national magazine for career-committed mothers." Thus, this magazine explicitly defines itself as a resource for women who are combining motherhood and paid work. Additionally, Working Mother Media, the company within which *Working Mother* operates, "is a company focused on culture change for working moms, women and diversity in the workplace" (Working Mother Media, 2012). According to *Working Mother's* Writer's and PR Guidelines, their "readers include full-time, part-time and sidelined moms who work at public and private companies of all types and sizes; who are entrepreneurs; and who are self-employed" (*Working Mother*, 2012). Based on our analysis of the magazine, it is specifically written for a 9am-5pm professional worker, White, economically privileged, and with at least some job authority (thus, able to control their own schedule, advocate for themselves on the job, organize work tasks themselves, etc.).

Cook's previous analyses of *Working Mother* also affirm that most readers of this magazine are employed, college-educated, and have a median household income of approximately \$58,000 (well above the national average) (Cook, 2011). The readers of *Working Mother*, then, are a very privileged bunch. If anyone can uphold cultural prescriptions for good motherhood and paid work, it is most likely these readers.

Results and Discussion

Below we highlight three themes that we found in our preliminary analyses: (1) women should define a boundary between paid work and motherhood; (2) expert advice is needed in boundary-making; and that (3) this boundary, in reality, may be impossible to draw or maintain. As a result, we argue that *Working Mother* presents somewhat contradictory messages to its readers and we discuss this contradiction again in our conclusions.

Defining the Boundary between Paid Work and Motherhood

Many of the ads for products in the newly redesigned sections of *Working Mother* suggest the importance of staying on an extremely strict schedule and saving time, so that women can get to paid work or make it home more quickly (assuming paid work happens in a separate space from childcare). In our data analyses, we first coded advertisements as illustrative of "saving time" and "making transitions" from home to work or vice-versa. We found that advertisers labelled mornings as critical transition times, times within which women are truly experiencing the pull of two greedy institutions but are still technically only in "family" space. A significant proportion of consumer goods advertised in the magazines speak to women in ways that emphasize herefficient management of children's needs and behavior in the mornings so that she can quickly exit the home in pursuit of work. Eventually, we realized that these morning advertisements were often advocating for a strict boundary between paid work and motherhood.

Many of the products advertised suggest efficiency and/or time-saving techniques, as well as the need for organization and preparation for/eradication of morning mishaps, so that women move through motherhood activities quickly in order to prioritize paid work. For instance, the morning section advertises an *Unforgettable Door Organizer* (February/March 2011, p.22) that "greet you on the way out," with a place to store "items you need the most" such as office keys, ipods, overdue bills so that, as a photo and text above the ad depicts, women have more time to say "short and sweet goodbyes" to their children and get to work on time. An advertisement for *Garnet Hill Totes* (June/July 2011, p.20) also gives women a way to personalize baskets for kids' belongings so that kids will be organized to "get out of the door." A *Boon* advertisement also advocates for a "squirt baby food dispensing spoon" to avoid clothing stains that might cause morning "setbacks" (December 2011/January 2012, p. 11). Women can buy *Tie Buddies* for children (May 2011, p.20) so that they "don't have to wait" for them to tie their shoes, or buy *Lori Griener Make Up Case* to bring their makeup to work with them if they are "too rushed to put on makeup" at home (June/July 2011, p.16).

While some of these products allow women to appear as if they are being good mothers (by tending to children's needs for food or comfort) the underlying message of these advertisements that encourage a strict boundary is that mothering time should be minimized, managed quickly, and ended. Leaving for work on time (and not getting delayed by the expansion of motherhood time) should be the main goal of professional working mothers, according to magazine advertisements. Approximately one third (n=297 or 34%) of the advertisements we analyzed concentrated on aiding women with their morning routines, perhaps intimating how many products women actually "need" in order to be able to manage both family and work needs (and push through family tasks in order to "get to work").

Experts Needed in Boundary Work?

As intensive mothering ideology reminds us, mothering should be expert-guided (Hays, 1996). Accordingly, then, good mothering may not be instinctual or natural and mothers might not be able to create boundaries between paid work and motherhood by themselves. In our analysis of *Working Mother* advertisements, we found that expert advice advertisements - the literal selling of expert advice - also comprised one of the most common categories of products advertised. Expert advice comprised almost one third of the advertisements overall (n=279 or 32%), across the redesigned sections of the magazine. Because of the overwhelming amount of expert advice advertised, we found it important to focus in on what these expert advice advertisements offered U.S. readers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Expert advice advertisements, like other product advertisements, reinforced the importance of a boundary between paid work and motherhood. An exemplary illustration of this message can be found in the August/September 2011 issue (p.17) as Jim Taylor, author of *Your Children are Listening*, instructs the working mother on ways to "never be late" to work. The key to "Never [be] Late Again," according to Taylor, lies in employing time saving strategies and managing children *before* they wake up in the morning. By getting up and ready for work before the children wake, setting out their breakfast and clothing, and factoring in an extra 15 minutes for morning mishaps, the working mother (and her children) can stay task-oriented and prioritize paid work (getting out the door).

From the books and websites advertised, however, it is clear that women have difficulties leaving paid work on time, sometimes take work home with them, continue to do work during commutes to/from work, and have difficulty with coworkers understanding that their workday has to end and their "mom time" needs to begin. The message in expert advice advertisements in the workday section, then, is that women need to learn how to stop work on time and draw lines between family and work time, especially when they need to prioritize "mommy" time. An example of a website advertisement for *Cozi.com*, a website for "managing your jam-packed life and keeping your whole family in the loop," offers tips for women on how to manage their time at work and unwind during their commute -- for example, "you could pack a lot into your commute but you don't have to...relax...before switching into mommy mode" (October 2011, p.46). On the other hand, the workday section also included advice about how to manage motherhood when paid work had to be prioritized. For instance, a book by Natalie Gahrman, *Succeeding as a Super Busy Parent*, describes how to set up a "Plan B" for childcare, prepare children for mothers' absence, yet simultaneously negotiate with one's boss to squeeze in more family time (Feb/Mar 2012, p.34). Another advertisement from Allison O'Kelly at *Moms Corps Flexible Staffing Firm* gives advice about how to prepare to leave a job for one's maternity leave, and how to check in on the job but still maintain boundaries when at home with a new baby (e.g., checking email during the baby's nap times rather than when the baby is awake) (Oct/Nov 2012, p. 30). Overall, boundary-making seems difficult for individual women to maintain and the line between paid work and motherhood seems vulnerable and incomplete without the help of expert advice.

The Boundary as Permeable, or Impossible to Draw?

A subtle message in *Working Mother* advertisements also seems to be that, if working mothers are not perfectly scheduled and/or do not listen to experts, they will have difficulty drawing and maintaining the boundary between paid work and motherhood. Product advertisements often acknowledge that women must still deal with motherhood during their "work" hours and vice-versa, and are actually faced with what seems to be an imperfect or permeable boundary. For instance, a *Facetime* Smartphone app is touted as a way to stay in touch with children while traveling for work (Feb/Mar 2012, p.30), suggesting that one must donate some time to motherhood while on "work time." *Sea Bands* also reduce pregnancy nausea at work (October 2011, p.42) and allow women to get back to work despite impending motherhood. An *Owie Pillow* also advertised in October 2011 (p.43) intimated that a special pillow could increase women's comfort while commuting to work after a Cesarean section (for she should not be home any longer!). Finally, an ad for *Tupperware* storage containers includes the suggestion of how women can make sure to leave the office on time: put their lunch containers on their desk at the end of the day to signify departure (June/July 2011, p.46), indicating that it is difficult to control the spillover of work into family time.

The message in many of these advertisements is that women are continually negotiating the boundary between motherhood and paid work, and that motherhood has the tendency to creep into work, or vice-versa, if women are not extremely watchful. Many of the advertisements we discussed in above sections also suggest this. In the workday section of the magazine, emphasis was also placed on the things that women can do for or give children in other parts of the day, to ensure that they are still good mothers during the workday when they are not physically present (e.g., *Mini Lunch Notes* to put in a lunchbox in the morning (April 2011, p.25), *Kids Smart Fish Oil Chewables* for kids (October 2011, p.42), or a book teaching daughters that it's okay to make mistakes (Feb/Mar 2012, p.33)). Motherhood-related ads in the workday section of the magazine also acknowledge that women do not stop thinking about kids at work, can often use their "mom skills" at work (to, for instance, a book titled *Tame Your Office Tyrant* (Feb/Mar 2011, p.33), and have evidence of their kids at work (e.g., pictures frames for ultrasound photos (*Bonnie Marcus Sonogram Frame*, Dec/Jan 2012, p.26)).

As much as motherhood-related activities should not take place during the workday, advertisements defined the motherhood role in particular as all-encompassing and something that could not be relegated to family time only.

Even if advertisements do not come right out and state that the boundary between motherhood and paid work is permeable, the tone and text of the advertisements let perceptive readers in on this secret.

Conclusions

As greedy institutions, both work and family potentially require all of women's energies and time, making it difficult for women to uphold culturally prescribed standards for success in both. Today's working mother may seek guidance from cultural texts while attempting to balance, separate, or control paid work and motherhood. In this preliminary study we use qualitative content analysis to examine the tone and text of product advertisements in *Working Mother* magazine from 2011 to 2013. We argue that while *Working Mother* advertisements advocate for defining and managing a boundary between paid work and motherhood, collectively the advertisements also suggest that motherhood and paid work are intertwined roles and activities. The notions that mothering and paid work are confined to separate spaces or can be bounded are false and readers of this magazine may clue into this fact if they pay attention to the content and tone of advertisements. Discourses on juggling may be more accurate than discourses that suggest that women can concentrate solely on motherhood or paid work, for spillover is real and always has been (Carlson et al., 2009; Michel et al., 2010; Hays, 1996). Recognition of spillover is critical in getting past debates about who mothers are and what they do, and getting past the notion of a boundary between paid work and motherhood. Motherhood is not and never will be separate from other roles, activities and identities that mothers hold. Once we recognize this in full, we can have much healthier and more comprehensive discussions of what "good" motherhood might represent.

Buzzanell et al. (2005) suggests that the "good" working mother is a very "fragile" creature in the United States, who is constantly dreaming of and working towards a division between paid work and motherhood but finds that division almost impossible to create and maintain. Very similar to the prescriptions for action that surround beauty norms or hegemonic masculinity, prescriptions for action (or purchase) that exist in *Working Mother* advertisements also still encourage women to continue an endless pursuit of work-family balance and separation that cannot exist in most women's real lives. Even though we are glad to see some evidence of the difficulty women have in drawing a boundary between paid work and motherhood within the advertisements (enough to poke holes in the notion of a strict boundary), we believe more outright acknowledgment of work-to-family and family-to-work spillover in advertisements is necessary if *Working Mother* truly aims to advocate for their readers. In fact, the practical conclusions we reach after completing this analysis is that working mothers need even more realistic (and positive) images of what it is like to "balance" and "juggle" - but never succeed in bounding - paid work and motherhood, and perhaps more outright acknowledgment of the fact that mothers' pursuit of strict boundaries between home and work may be endless and ill-advised. We all need to make headway in getting past this dream of a bounded life.

Nonetheless, a positive image that *Working Mother* might currently be selling is that of the "good enough mother" or "managerial mother" that both Quindlen (2005) and Buzzanell et al. (2005) discuss. If one peruses the attention to motherhood throughout the magazine, the reader comes away with the sense that it is okay to make shortcuts in motherhood in order to prioritize paid work at times. That is, women can manage motherwork in ways to save time and keep on schedule, and still spend quality time with their children. Knowing that motherhood time can be organized and controlled at times is a good thing for working mothers to know.^{iv} Thus, *Working Mother* is (perhaps unconsciously) approving a "good enough" motherhood (Buzzanell et al., 2005) for professional working women that may be much healthier than any rush towards intensive motherhood. Advertisements do not fault women readers for the lack of time spent with children, the rushing of motherhood time, or the work-to-family spillover that might occur. *Working Mother* advertisements infer that motherhood does not need to be all-encompassing in time or energy in order to be done well.

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ⁱ We acknowledge here that the picture we are painting here applies primarily to White, middle class, professional working mothers in the United States – because this is who has benefitted from feminist advocacy efforts and also these are the women that are *Working Mother's* readers. Mothers of other classes, races, and job categories do not always have the same struggles, nor do they identify with feminist efforts to advocate for working women. The first author discusses this more fully in her 2008 publication (First Author, 2008).

ⁱⁱ This section was originally titled "Day" but was retitled "Workday" in the Aug/Sept 2011 issue, tellingly highlighting even more fully that daytime hours are supposed to be dedicated to paid work.

ⁱⁱⁱ We found that expert advice advertisements appeared in two ways in the redesigned section of this magazine. The first way was through the direct advertisement of a book or website for parents, with reference to tips found in the book or website in text surrounding the advertisement. Another way expert advice was advertised was in the case of an expert source within the text of an article (for instance, an article on putting children to bed might highlight a pediatrician's new book. As we coded, we counted both as exemplifying advertisements of expert advice.

^{iv} It is important to note here that a similar inference is not found about paid work. We argue that *Working Mother* magazine steers away from suggesting that you can cut corners at paid work.