

Reality Skewed: Newspaper Codification
of Stay-at-Home Mothers and Working Moms

by

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ABSTRACT

Newspaper portrayals of stay-at-home mothers and working moms often limit and distort the motherhood experience and don't reflect scientific and academic research. They perpetuate stereotypes and fuel "Mommy Wars," which pit women against women on the issue of raising children. Through a content analysis of seven American newspapers from Jan. 1 to July 31, 2010, my research reveals pervasive, although probably unconscious, framing and labeling by the media – especially Southern and Midwestern journalists – about stay-at-home mothers and working mothers. The sample reviewed shows that stories that label a source as a working mom are mostly about guilt, challenges and time management. Stories that identify stay-at-home mothers as sources are about small-town values, and they also paint the mother as a heroic figure. Neither of these reflects the reality of the motherhood experience. This research shows a pattern in the coverage of stay-at-home mothers and working moms with nearly all stories falling within four themes: Life Challenges, How-To, Small-Town Values and Hero/Activist.

Keywords: stay-at-home, working, mothers, newspapers, stereotyping

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Editorial coverage often categorizes women in relation to their children. This general construct of motherhood offers a limited view of women, especially when the labels “stay-at-home mother” and “working mother” are used. Also, the coverage doesn’t reflect scientific and academic research that show children are not necessarily negatively affected by growing up in homes where mothers are working.

Much newsprint is devoted to helping the working mom who apparently has little time to run a home, but there are few stories about why cultural expectations of motherhood are slow to change even though 77 percent of women with children ages 6-17 work outside the home (64 percent for women with children younger than 6), according to 2009 U.S. Department of Labor statistics (USDHHS, 2009). And there are even fewer articles that highlight workplace innovations that provide better environments for employees with children. And despite the large percentage of women with children working outside the home, the coverage is weighted toward stay-at-home mothers.

Stories about stay-at-home mothers mostly advance the idea that dedication to children is integral to the fabric of American life. There are few stories about boredom or money struggles among stay-at-home moms. These issues are not popular because they rival the pervasive belief that raising children without working outside the home is the noble choice, with mothers sacrificing careers for the good of their children.

The way journalists use these labels presents a one-sided view of mothers, possibly putting undue pressure on women and creating doubt and unhappiness. The characterizations perpetuate stereotypes that stay-at-home mothers are heroic defenders

of small-town values. Stories about working women leave the impression that they are overwhelmed and would stay home with their children if only they could.

There are several potential harms in this case, the biggest being the misrepresentation of motherhood, providing young, childless women a skewed notion of what motherhood will be like: Stay-at-home moms are happy and working mothers struggle. Working women with children could be harmed because the stories bolster employers' beliefs that mothers struggle to juggle responsibilities more than childless employees. Can they perform their jobs well if their home life is so out-of-control?

Stay-at-home mothers might be made to feel guilty when they are unsatisfied with their choice. Or perhaps they will be anxious about their ability to return to work after a few years on the "mommy track." Their children needed them, but will the workplace?

Finally, society is badly served by stories that portray stay-at-home mothers and working mothers in absolute terms. Rather than opening a dialogue about the "unfinished women's revolution," the coverage puts the responsibility of child rearing directly on the shoulders of women. How children are raised affects all of society. As these children become adults, they will run the government, become doctors and sales clerks and raise their own children. Reinforcing mythical stereotypes benefits no one and reduces the likelihood that anyone will take alternatives seriously. The village concept of child rearing is more than a clever political slogan because rings true for many parents who rely on others, including society and government, to help educate and care for their children.

Here, I conduct a content analysis of the coverage of working and stay-at-home moms by seven American newspapers, the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Atlanta Journal-*

Constitution, Houston Chronicle, Kansas City Star, Newark Star-Ledger, Seattle Times and *Sacramento Bee* from Jan. 1 to July 31, 2010. These seven papers were chosen for their geographic diversity and because of their similarities in circulation demographics.

I analyze the data through framing theory, narrative theory and agenda setting. A review of the literature pertaining to these theories, and studies already conducted on childhood development in relation to mothers who stay home and those who work outside the home, suggest the following research question:

RQ1: How have the national print media framed the differences between working and stay-at-home mothers?

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are studies that show that mothers who work in satisfying, well-compensated jobs outside the home are happier and healthier than those who do not (Rivers, 2007). In some cases, having a baby does not increase emotional stress for women unless she drops out of the workplace (Wethington & Kessler, 1989). Some women consider child rearing more challenging than working outside the home because “child rearing possesses a lesser public value than paid work does within a still patriarchal American culture” (Hays, 1996). It is not necessarily working outside the home that creates stress for women with children. It is the amount of control that women have in their jobs that determines satisfaction in various aspects of their lives (Haynes, 1980). Lousy job, lousy home life. Satisfying job, better home life.

Working mothers do not spend less time with their children than stay-at-home mothers (Bianchi, 2000) and stay-at-home mothers also struggle with what to cook for dinner. Some women have chosen to stay at home with their children because they cannot afford childcare (Dillaway & Pare, 2008). Media stories about stay-at-home mothers place much value on “reproductive” contributions, a topic Jane Roland Martin writes about in *Reclaiming a Conversation: The Ideal of the Educated Woman*. Though she is investigating the disparities between men and women in education, her comparison of reproductive and productive processes and how we assign value to both, has application to this research. Her findings show that reproductive processes focus on the domestic roles of females, including child-rearing and caring for the elderly. Productive processes focus on the male role as a professional in such areas as politics and businesses. In

newspaper articles referencing stay-at-home mothers and working moms, this dichotomy is prevalent, though all subjects are female (Martin, 1987). The media have difficulty reconciling a woman's role as a mother and her ability to work (Loke, Harp & Bachmann, 2011).

Many studies have set out to show the effects of maternal employment on children's academic achievement and emotional development. Some have shown negative effects on very young children depending on the home situation, but results are not consistent from study to study (Parcel & Menaghan, 1994; Clarke-Stewart & Miner, 2008). One study claims that a mother's employment during a child's first year has "detrimental effects on the cognitive and behavioral development of all children regardless of gender or poverty status" (Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1991). Another study asserts that there are persistent questions about the effects of daycare but that the answers are elusive. "Studies have continually yielded inconsistent, conflicting results" (Shpancer, 2006). This study says that 40 years of inconsistent results "do not constitute a failure to find the hidden answer" about the effects of care outside the home on children. "They *are* the answer," which reflects the "vast complexity of the links between experience and development (Shpancer, 2006).

Despite common belief, on which many mothers base their decision to work, it "appears that the dramatic movement into the labor force by women of childbearing age in the United States has been accomplished with relatively little consequence for children" (Bianchi, 2000). Women are still subject to public debate about the "appropriateness of employment" (Wall & Arnold, 2007), despite the lack of overall evidence that non-parent childcare is harmful to children.

There is not a universally required or preferred way to raise children (Kagan, 1986). Besides the basic requirements of food and shelter, there is no question that children need physical, emotional and cognitive nurturing to survive. The methods by which these things are delivered, however, are not absolute (Hays, 1996), and there is evidence that many women feel they can value work and motherhood equally. The “construction of ‘mother’ and ‘worker’ as necessarily opposed identities is based on a false assumption about women’s identifies and attitudes” (McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler and Tichenor, 2008).

Women move back and forth, from work to home to work, experiencing the different aspects of motherhood as part of the lifecycle of a female with children (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). The period of staying home with young children is often just a chapter, not the entire book, of a woman’s life. The reality of contemporary families is that situations are fluid (Dillaway & Pare, 2008).

Newspaper frames about women with children do not reflect this research. They often present just the opposite of the findings from scientific research, with stories about harried, struggling working women and noble, content stay-at-home moms being the norm. Most of the information is presented anecdotally, rather than scientifically, as is the custom with journalistic storytelling. Framing in the news affects how people see the world and other groups of people around them (Hallahan, 1999). However, the frames also create meaning for aspects from might lead to other conclusions. For example, the frame of the dedicated stay-at-home mother attaches universal meaning to a choice that is constructed for one individual and may not fit another woman’s situation. Likewise, the frame of working woman as struggling mom, puts undue attention on balancing work

with children, when in reality, every worker has to balance the personal with professional, regardless of gender, parenthood or particular homelife. There are different opinions about whether media framing is deliberate and deceiving (Tankard, 2001) or unintentional and lazy (Gallagher, 2001). More often than not, the frames don't edify anything, but instead plant an idea about an entire group.

Framing can take place in any part of a media product, through photo or video editing, placement on a page or news show, headline and the story itself. The frame can be compared to a picture on a wall that offers a specific point of view or it can be "likened to the frame of a house, providing the structure around which everything else fits" (Fountaine & McGregor, 2004). The effects of framing develop over time, specifically from repetition and placement of stories. In most newspapers, football games are emphasized over orchestra reviews. This framing carries with it the implicit message to audience members that they should value sports more than classical music.

"Symbolic annihilation" speaks to the marginalization and omission of women in news coverage (Tuchman, 1978). This oft-cited work divides the theory of coverage into three aspects: omission, trivialization and condemnation. Those three "annihilating" aspects can be found in contemporary media framing of mothers. Stories about mothers with lower incomes tend to center on crime and public assistance. The stories about poor women, many of them minorities, beyond these two social concerns are omitted. Needs of mothers, especially in the area of childcare, tend to be trivialized, as is the dedication of mothers to their children. The phrase "soccer mom" exemplifies this by reducing the demands of parenting to a 60-minute game that requires someone to bring snacks and first-aid, and act as chauffeur.

And the news media often publish stories condemning women for their child-rearing choices without offering substantive discussion about society's role in helping raise its children. Media depiction of motherhood remains very traditional, rooted in the mores of the 1950s (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Hays, 1996). As a society we insist that women on welfare go to work and leave their children in daycare. But at the same time, the media lecture women "with good jobs and excellent child care that they are at risk for stress and probably rotten mommies to boot" (Rivers, 2007). Despite the continued rise of women in the workforce, media coverage of mothers is not so much a "reflection of the real world" as a "value-laden repackaging of gender myths" (Gitlin, 1980). Media framing often casts motherhood in moral terms, "juxtaposing the 'good mother' with the 'bad mother,' who is frequently a working mom, lower-income mom or someone who does not conform to traditional roles of gender behavior, ambition or sexual orientation" (Hall & Bishop, 2009). Even though women live more diverse lives than ever before, the media continues to perpetuate the story that working women pay a price and stay-at-home mothers are heroic (Hall & Bishop, 2009).

Agenda setting media theory holds that through repeated coverage, the media tell the audience what to think about. This is certainly the case with stories about how women raise children. The volume of stories that quote stay-at-home mothers in heroic situations such as running for office (Klepper, 2010, p. OL3), learning to walk the trapeze (Liu, 2010, p. D8) or championing laws to protect young drivers (Lockwood, 2010, p. 9), sets the tone and the bar high for women. Stories that pound away at the challenges of working mothers leave another impression.

This power to guide people to think about certain subjects is at the core of agenda setting. There is a high level of connection between the amount and kind of attention paid to a particular issue by the media and its audience (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Journalists react to what is happening around them, so there are more stories quoting working women than ever before, though readers may not know this because they the women are not necessarily identified as such. For example, every story about Sarah Palin does not mention that she has young children. But when they do, the stories emphasize her motherly qualities (Loke, Harp & Bachmann, 2011) filtered through traditional values that the mainstream media champions (Hall & Bishop, 2009).

Agenda setting was one of the primary media theories put forth in the 1970s. It was commonly believed that with agenda setting, the media were telling the audience not what to think, but what to think about (Williams, 2003). In the 1990s, social scientists rethought the theory, some believing that the news tells us both what to think about and how to think about it (McCombs, 1992). This new idea of agenda setting raises issues of responsibility for journalists. The audience needs journalists to put information, and indeed the world, in some order so that people can understand it and function productively. The journalist's window on the world, while perhaps narrow, should be clear and help "build the bonds of society" (Meyers, 2010). Readers likely to be the most interested in stories about working and stay-at-home mothers are women who have young children. The "need for orientation is based on two factors: the relevance of the information to the individual and the degree of uncertainty concerning the subject of the message" (Weaver, 1977). The most interested audience of stories about women meets

both these factors with children. This audience is also the most susceptible to agenda setting because the information affects them most directly.

One of the dangers of agenda setting is that journalists pass on information almost unconsciously, especially when it come to source attribution. This idea goes back to Gallagher's notion of unintentional and lazy reporting. Sources are labeled "stay-at-home mom" or "working mother" when the information makes little difference to the story or paints a stereotypical picture on entire groups. Men are rarely labeled according to their reproductive or parenting roles. The topics of the stories and those attributions have a cumulative effect. One study asserts that there are issue-specific sensitivities that may give some stories greater impact to a narrower audience (Erbring, Goldenberg & Miller, 1985).

Studies show that news media coverage does not correspond well to reality (Staab, 1990). In long-form obituaries, coverage of women tends to offer a more complete picture of their lives, recounting how they might have worked for a while, stayed home with children for a time, and then returned to work. In stories where women are identified by their reproductive role, the tone is skewed and one-sided. In a wire service story printed in the *Orlando Sentinel* about an Alaskan couple accused of spying, the woman is first introduced as a devoted mother who drove her 4-year-old to school (Murphy, 2010, p. A15). In cases like these, unconscious labeling occurs and the journalist has presented information that shows only part of reality and one that might not have much pertinence to the story (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

Narrative theory also has application to this research. While the stories analyzed do not generally fall under the relatively new narrative journalism form, they do have

elements of storytelling. Certainly, they tell and structure narratives about stay-at-home mothers and working mothers. They leave impressions of what those worlds are and should be about. Narrative theory posits that news articles use storytelling to convey meaning and unites journalism with popular culture (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1992). In the 1980s, the *Wall Street Journal* popularized a form of journalism storytelling that is still used widely today. A story begins narrowly with a real-life, personal manifestation of an issue, and then expands to describe the issue and all its complexities. It then narrows again, coming back to the personal account it began with. For instance, a piece on home foreclosures would open with a couple that is worried about losing their home. Their story engages readers and helps them understand the more complex economic issue. This tactic puts a human face on an otherwise dry topic.

The “clash of binary oppositions organizes the narrative” (Williams, 2003). There are several “binary oppositions” in stories of women with children at home. The predominant clash is stay-at-home moms (noble) vs. working moms (challenged), but then there is the fight within the woman herself. The working mom, according to media stories, is constantly questioning herself about the choice she has made to work outside the home. This doubt manifests in stories about time management, work challenges, day care, summer camps and the well being of children. The clash for the stay-at-home mom, again according to media stories, tends to be worldlier, pitting the woman against the injustices of society and, on a smaller scale, the noble mission of running a household. Few stories address inner turmoil and doubt of stay-at-home mothers. And even fewer stories that quote stay-at-home mothers or working moms address much else than the husband-wife, Leave-it-to-Beaver sort of lifestyle.

Narrative theory assumes that there are basic organizational structures that undergird society. These structures help us navigate life. Certainly one of the structures is the universal theme of mother's love. A mother's strong attachment to her child is necessary for the child to grow up strong, healthy and well adjusted (Bowlby, 1988). However, the media make the leap, based on long-held American mores that are not backed up by statistics or research, that mother's love is somehow better if she doesn't work outside the home. Another important factor is that maternal instinct evolves as the mother learns new skills. The willingness and ability to acquire parenting skills has more to do with education and economic level than work situation (Mercer, 2004).

The following content analysis data shows strong framing along certain themes in stories about stay-at-home and working mothers. Both agenda setting and narrative theories are also prevalent in coding the stories.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

The media portrayal of stay-at-home mothers and working moms is a tale of two different lifestyles. One is a world of small-town values, where dedication to family and community are held dearly. The other is a place where women struggle to make it to work on time, daycare is a disastrous proposition and guilt is the primary emotion during those long hours away from children. These portrayals are especially strong in the South and Midwest but to a lesser extent in the West, Pacific Northwest and Northeast. The results are startling enough to warrant study into why the terms “stay-at-home mother” and “working mom” are used in such uniform ways.

This dichotomy is clear in a content analysis of seven major American newspapers from Jan. 1 to July 31, 2010. This contemporary time frame was chosen because I wanted to study modern journalism mores. Also, this span of the year covers part of three seasons, including some of summer when school is out plus Mother’s Day. I was interested to research whether Mother’s Day or summer vacation had an impact on coverage.

I used quantitative and qualitative techniques to identify themes and frequency of label usage. Using Access World News online, I searched the *Orlando Sentinel*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Kansas City Star*, *Newark Star-Ledger*, *Seattle Times* and *Sacramento Bee* for the aforementioned time period. The papers were chosen for their geographic diversity representing the South, Midwest, West, Pacific Northwest and Northeast, and because they cover urban, suburban and rural areas. Their circulation figures were a factor too, in that they are among the country’s largest regional

newspapers, all with solid reputations and long histories. Their daily circulation figures for 2010 according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations were: Houston, 343,952; Seattle, 251,697; Newark, 223,037; Kansas City, 206,441; Sacramento, 205,531; Atlanta, 181,504, and Orlando, 172,271.

For the search, the keywords “stay-at-home” and “working” were paired with “mom,” “moms,” “mother” and “mothers.” The results were: 119 total stories for the “stay-at-home” category and 60 for “working.” After identifying the stories for the sample, I classified the type of story (news, features, obituaries or advice/commentary and the gender of the writer (female, male or undeterminable because there was no byline or the name was unisex such as Pat or Dana). I also logged the tone of the story, negative or positive. Some of the words that signified negative stories included “challenge,” “guilt,” “difficult,” “problem” and “victim.” Some of the words that signified positive stories were “good,” “love,” “award,” “success,” “help” and “win.” (See Code Sheet for Content Analysis in Appendix, p. 43.)

Concerning the dominant themes, a content analysis of three Florida newspapers, the *St. Petersburg Times*, *Orlando Sentinel* and *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, from May 1, 2010, to July 31, 2010, that I conducted in November 2010 informed this research. That research revealed four strong themes in coverage, plus a neutral category. Those four themes were: Life Challenges, Hero/Activist, Small-Town Values and How-To. I had those four themes in mind as I widened the research to seven newspapers located around the country. Using the coding sheet and recurring words, I discovered that themes were prevalent in the wider sample also.

The themes defined:

Life Challenges. The stories with this theme focused on challenges that mothers with children have in both the workplace and at home. Highlighted were issues with daycare, time management, emotional stresses and decision-making. Some of the words that signified this theme were guilt, emotions, employment, salaries and balance.

Example: “A Camera-Ready Mom Really Means Business,” an interview with a Fox Business Network anchor on how she balances motherhood with work, *Newark Star-Ledger*, Jan. 21, 2010.

“Q: What is the most important thing you have learned as a working mother?”

“A: That it’s never going to be perfect. You can walk in at 10 o’clock at night, and if your child hears you, pull ’em into bed and ask, ‘Wanna make waffles?’ Granted, they might be frozen waffles but you can have your moments in nontraditional ways” (Perone, 2010, p. O10).

Hero/Activist. These stories drew the mother as community activist or champion of her children, painting her as noble and important to both the family and society. Some of the words that signified this theme were sacrifice, determination, charity, volunteer.

Example: “More than 300 candidates seek elected office in Kansas,” *Kansas City Star*, June 12, 2010.

*“TOPEKA -- Amanda Grosserode was a young **stay-at-home mom** in Lenexa who had never thought about running for public office.*

“Then came the bailouts. The stimulus. Health care reform. Skyrocketing federal debt. She told her husband somebody should do something about what she saw as government run wild. That someone, it turns out, was her” (Klepper, 2010, p. OL3).

Small-Town Values. Themes of hearth and home, including cooking, sewing, gardening and general parenting, were central in these stories. Rural traditions were painted in positive and desirable terms. Some of the words that signified this theme were responsibility, church, garden, recipes and sewing.

Example: “Flavor of Georgia features state products,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 16, 2010.

“Friends loved her homemade chicken salad and pimiento cheese so much that Leah Gordon finally decided three years ago to start producing them for sale.

*“Today, the former **stay-at-home mom** will find out whether her latest creation -- a sun-dried tomato, goat cheese and pesto spread -- was good enough to impress a panel of finicky foodies and win in the dairy category of the annual Flavor of Georgia Food Product Contest” (Markiewicz, 2010, p. A7).*

How-To. Suggestions on how to cope with the challenges of parenting and motherhood were the primary content in stories in this category. The purpose of these articles was to help women with time management and other challenges. Though there were more how-to stories in the stay-at-home mom category, those stories tended to quote these mothers on parenting advice. How-to stories about working moms were espousing advice from professionals about how they can juggle their time to meet the challenges of motherhood. Among the words that signified this theme were seminars, schedules, multi-tasking and time-management.

Example: “Linking governments’ ‘data silos’ would help everyone,” *Sacramento Bee*, Feb. 1, 2010:

*“As a commuting, **working mom**, after putting my kids to bed, I do a lot of multi-tasking.*

“The other night -- thanks to my laptop and Wi-Fi -- I enrolled my 6-year-old in an after-school enrichment class, moved money from my savings account to my checking account, paid overdue fees at the library, donated to Haiti relief, and checked in and printed boarding passes for my morning flight to San Bernardino.”
(Page, 2010, p. A11).

Neutral. This category was made up of stories in which the labels had little meaning because the sources were tangential characters. If the labels or the subjects were deleted, it would not change the meaning of the story. The stay-at-home mothers and working moms in these stories were usually relatives of the primary subject.

Example: “Edna Hargrett-Thrower: Superior director led Jones Chorus,” *Orlando Sentinel*, April 22, 2010:

“Hargrett-Thrower was born in Quitman, Ga., to an insurance-salesman father and stay-at-home mother. The family moved to Orlando in the 1940s to provide better academic opportunities for the children, said Hargrett-Thrower’s godson, Rudy Claire of Orlando” (Willis, 2010, p B8).

To test intercoder reliability, a 35-year veteran print journalist and now a writer for the medical website WebMD analyzed the *Orlando Sentinel* sample of 35 stories. He was provided my definitions of the four themes and the additional neutral category. He coded 29 of the 35 stories, or 83 percent, the same as I did. Our point of disagreement was in the neutral and small-town values categories. He did not identify the small-town

value themes in several stories that I did, placing them in the neutral category. We agreed on nearly all the How-To, Hero/Activist and Life Challenges coding.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The results of the content analysis showed that the coverage of stay-at-home mothers is significantly different than the coverage of working moms ($X^2 = 45.195$, $df > 4$, $P < .01$). There were more stories in the Life Challenges theme for working women and almost none in the Small-Town Values theme. The stay-at-home mom label turns up mostly in the Hero/Activist and Small-Town Values themes.

The numbers:

Life Challenges: Sixty-four percent of the 119 about working mothers included this theme, and 13.5 percent of the 60 stories about stay-at-home mothers did.

Hero/Activist: Forty percent about stay-at-home mothers included this theme, while 15 percent of the stories that referenced working mothers did.

Small-Town Values: Twenty-six percent of stories about stay-at-home mothers included this theme. Three percent of stories about working moms contained the small-town values theme.

How-To: While it was expected that more stories about working mothers would include the how-to theme, the results showed the opposite, even though working mothers were described as more harried and in need of help. Only 7 percent of the stories that used the working mom label included this theme. Nine percent of the stay-at-home mother stories had the how-to theme.

Neutral. Ten percent of the stories about stay-at-home mothers fell into the neutral category and 13 percent of the stories that references working moms were neutral.

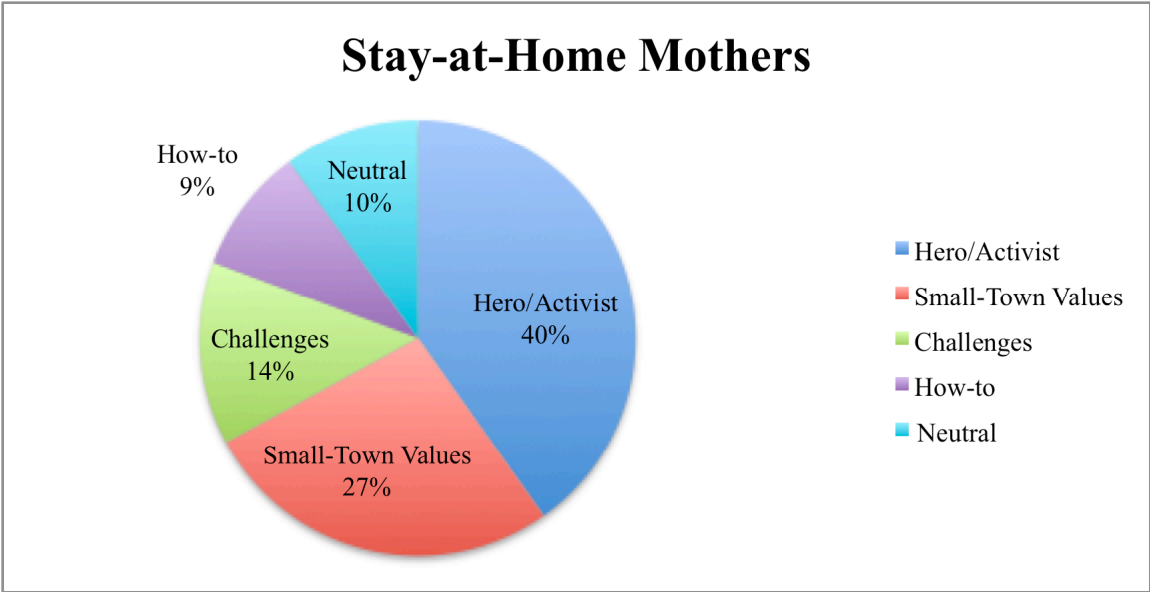


Figure No. 1: Breakdown of stories about stay-at-home mothers

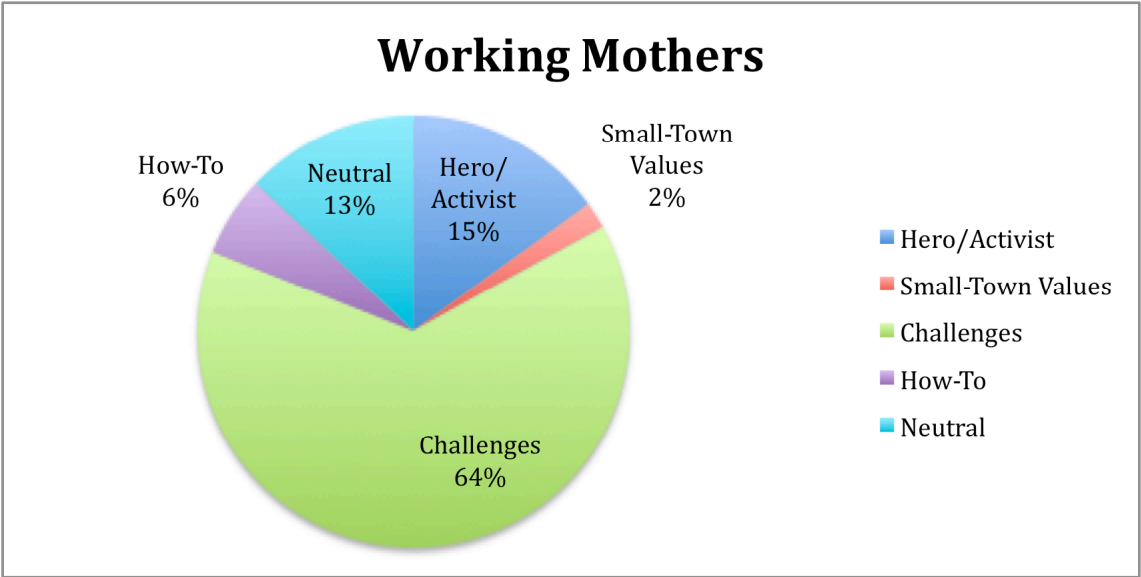


Figure No. 2: Breakdown of stories about working mothers

Table No. 1: Breakdown of Stay-at-Home Mother stories by newspaper

	How-To	Challenges	Hero/Activist	Small-Town Values	Neutral
Orlando Sentinel	13%	9%	22%	31%	14%
Kansas City Star	0%	17%	43%	39%	0%
Newark Star-Ledger	18%	25%	12.5%	9%	8%
Atlanta Jour.-Const.	28%	0%	25%	19%	8%
Seattle Times	0%	13%	4%	6%	0%
Sacramento Bee	28%	13%	10%	3%	17%
Houston Chronicle	0%	13%	17%	13%	25%
Totals	9%	13%	40%	27%	10%
Total Stories					119

Table No. 2: Breakdown of Working Mother stories by newspaper

	How-To	Challenges	Hero/Activist	Small-Town Values	Neutral
Orlando Sentinel	0%	23%	25%	0	3
Kansas City Star	25%	6%	0%	0%	0%
Newark Star-Ledger	50%	25%	25%	50%	0%
Atlanta Jour.-Const.	25%	6%	0%	50%	0%
Seattle Times	0%	7%	25%	0%	0%
Sacramento Bee	0%	0%	25%	0%	0%
Houston Chronicle	0%	27%	8%	0%	43%
Totals	11	16	48	32	12%
Total stories					60

My research also shows that there are regional differences in how newspapers portray stay-at-home mothers and working moms. Newspapers in the South and Midwest (*Orlando Sentinel*, *Houston Chronicle*, *Kansas City Star* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*) published 75 total stories that drew stay-at-home mothers as virtuous and noble caretakers compared to 19 stories with this theme printed in the newspapers in the Northeast and West (*Sacramento Bee*, *Newark Star-Ledger* and *Seattle Times*). The stories divided along Blue State/Red State lines, with the newspapers in the Red States of the South and Midwest publishing stories that included more traditional values, and included words such as sacrifice, charity, cooking, gardening, family. The newspapers in the Blue States also had tinges of traditional values in their stories about stay-at-home and working mothers, but they tended to include fewer stories using these two labels and took some other views that bucked the trends. *The Seattle Times* wrote about a stay-at-home mother fighting boredom (Shouse, 2010, p. MG3), just one of two stories that painted that lifestyle choice in a negative light.

The types of stories analyzed fell into four categories: news, features, obituaries and advice/commentary. The only stories I did not consider were repeats; some newspapers have several editions and the same story might have been published with another headline or length. Besides classic spot news stories (crime and accidents), I also included pieces about elections and government in the news category. There were many features among the sample, including profiles, entertainment stories and business pieces. Obituaries included both long-form story obits and shorter death notices. Advice/commentary included reviews, opinion pieces and Q&A's about lifestyle and finances.

Nearly half – 48 percent – of the stories that referenced stay-at-home mothers were features and 25 percent were news. There were more long-form story obituaries written that included the stay-at-home label than the working modifier, 8 percent compared to 3 percent. News and feature stories were divided evenly, 35 percent each, in the working-mom category.

I also assessed the news, features and advice/commentary stories for negative or positive tone. Because the percentage of neutral stories and obituaries was small, I did not include them in this assessment. The stories about working mothers were more evenly distributed with 64 percent including positive signifying words such as “love,” “good,” and “help.” Sixty-nine percent were categorized as negative, identified by signifying words including “challenge,” “guilt,” and “difficult.” The difference gap was wider in the stay-at-home mom category. Sixty-eight percent of the sample was positive stories and 34 percent was negative.

The gender of the writers for news, features and advice/commentary stories (again leaving out neutral stories and obituaries) was noted, though not thoroughly analyzed. Fifty-nine percent of the writers were female; 24 percent were male and 16 percent were undetermined because there was no byline or the name did not clearly indicate gender, i.e., Pat or Dana. The numbers do not reflect the newsroom gender breakdown. Thirty-three percent of daily newspaper journalists are women (Mitchell, 2003).

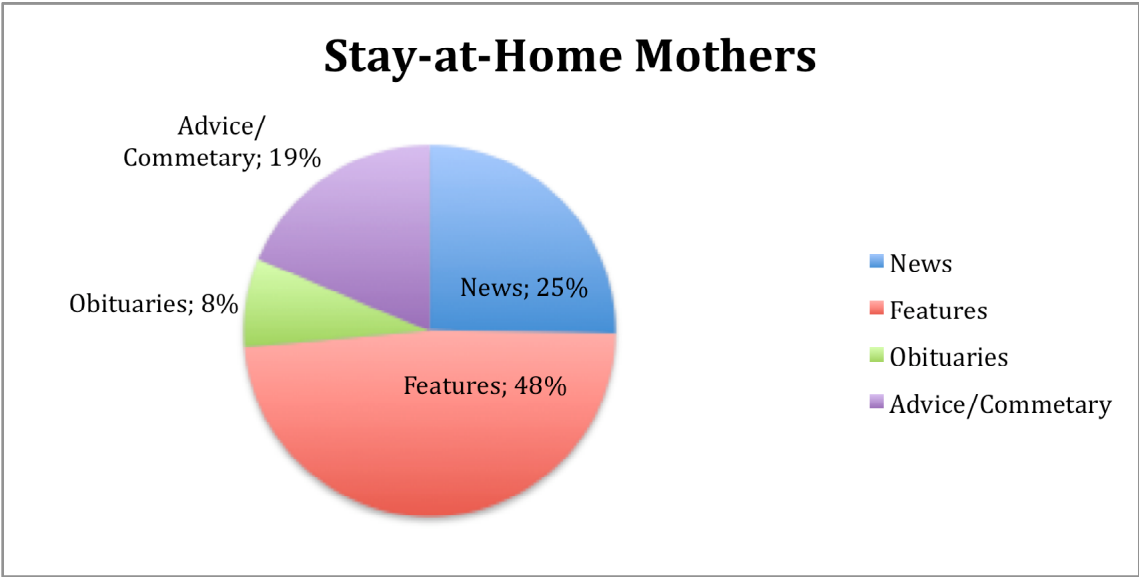


Figure No. 3: Percentages of types of stories that reference stay-at-home mothers

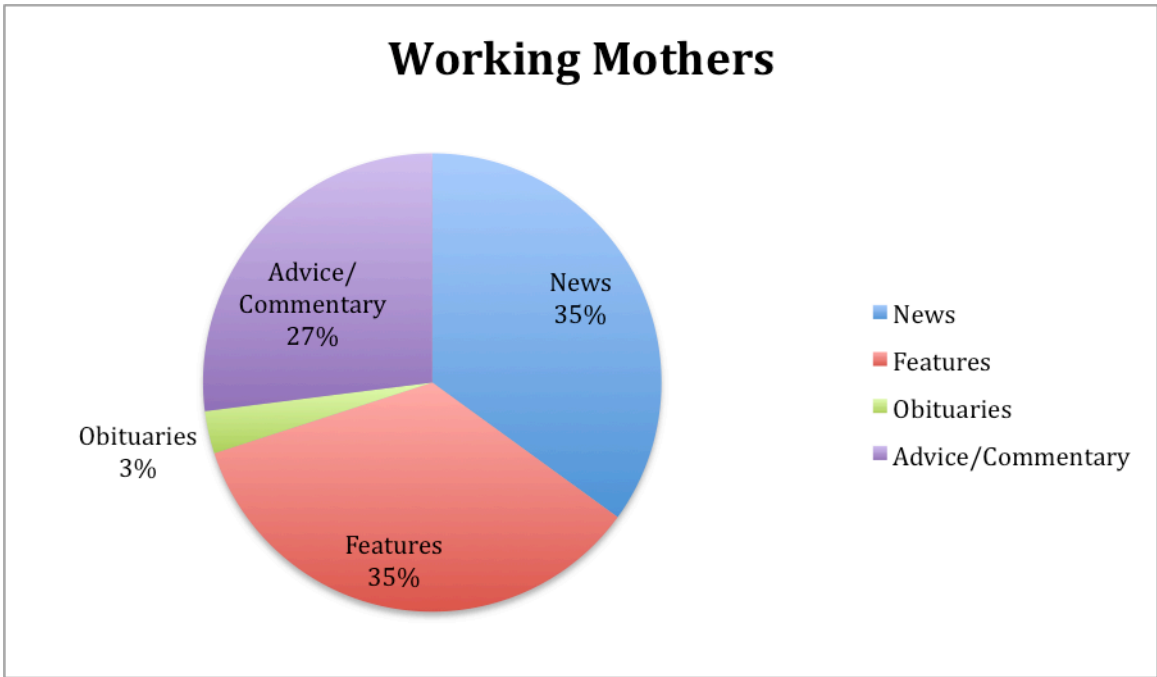


Figure No. 4: Percentages of type of stories that reference working mothers

Table No. 3: Dominant theme in largest story categories for stay-at-home mothers

News	Hero/Activist 95%
Features	Small-Town Values, 89%
Advice/Commentary	How-To, 80%

Table No. 4: Dominant theme in largest story categories for working mothers

News	Life Challenges, 89%
Features	Challenges, 95%
Advice/Commentary	How-To, 86%

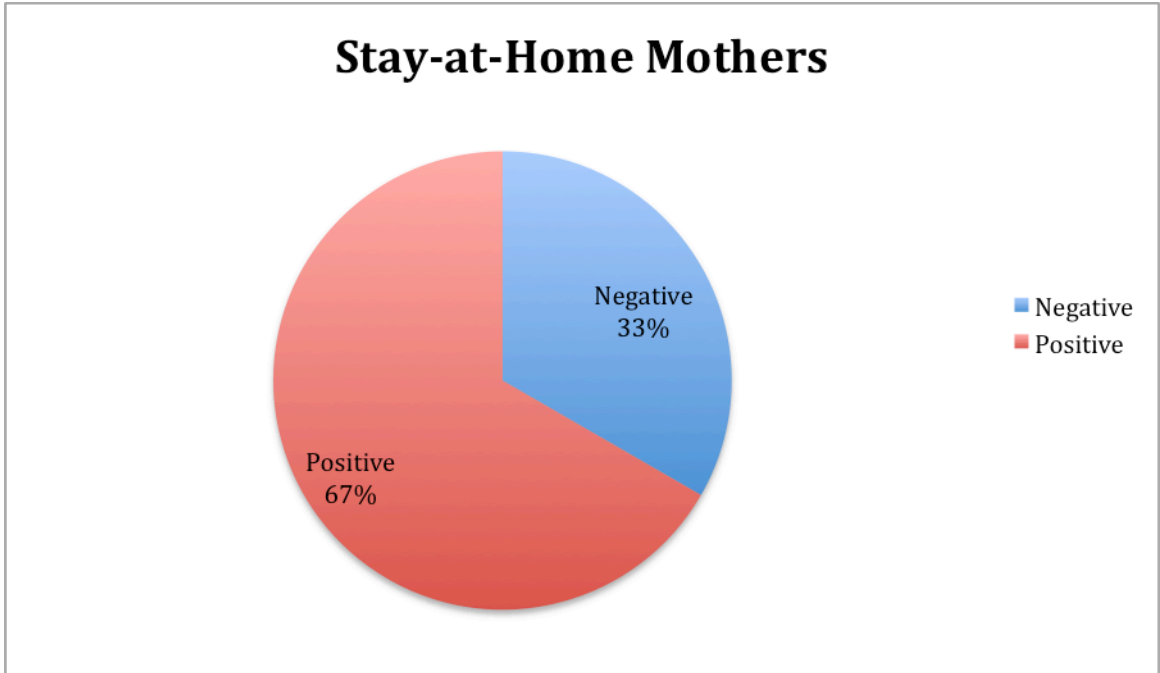


Figure No. 5: Tone of stories that reference stay-at-home mothers

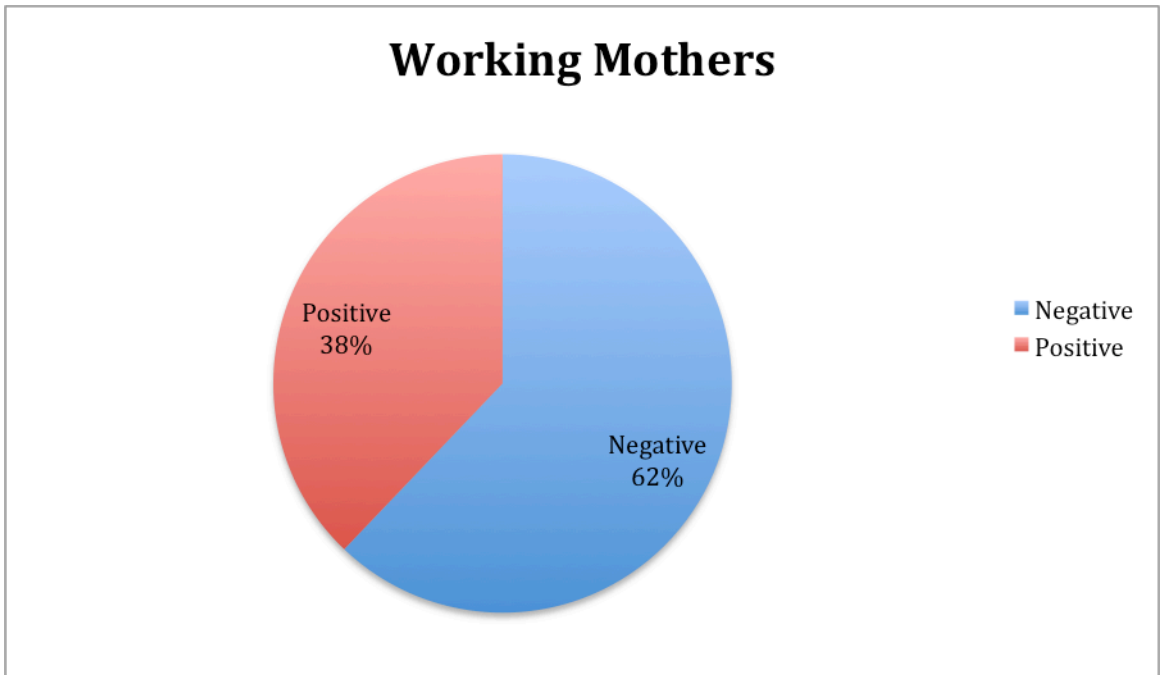


Figure No. 6: Tone of stories that reference working mothers

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Rural life, or small-town values, is a theme that is much coveted by the U.S. media and also marketers (Gans, 1979). Americans seem particularly susceptible to this narrative. We see it over and over in media reports and also in advertising. As Americans become further and further removed from farm life, they become increasingly enamored of rural lifestyles. Marketers, advertisers and product manufacturers know this and the evidence is found on packaging. Red barns and tractors are prevalent on food containers even though most food produced in America comes from industrial farms where there are no farmers wearing overalls. Stainless steel doesn't sell; small farms do.

The stay-at-home mother is a symbol of small-town values to both the media and the general public. The pull to this image is so strong, that even a suspicion of terrorism doesn't change the narrative. Nadia Rockwood of King Salmon, Alaska, was a "stay-at-home mom who drove their 4-year-old to preschool, sang in the town choir and picked berries with her girlfriends" (Murphy, 2010, p. A15). Nadia's reported way of life hardly jibed with her being under investigation for domestic terrorism-related crimes. How could she, the article screamed, she picked berries! That was deemed more important in the story's hierarchy than the fact that Nadia's husband was a follower of a radical U.S.-born Muslim cleric, now living in Yemen.

Another story featured a stay-at-home mom who gave up comfort to make sure her children didn't go without (Oliviero, 2010, p. E1) when the economy got worse.

Others “sewed clothes, cultivated vegetables gardens and raised chickens” (Florea, 2010, p. B8).

The stay-at-home mother is a force to be reckoned with. Newspapers paint her as strong, ferocious and protective, not unlike a mama bear. She is a credit to her community. She is a triathlete, a library volunteer, trapeze daredevil, a mountain biking champion, missionary, Tea Party organizer, and community stalwart.

“Since I was a stay-at-home mother, I never had an outside career,” said Womack. “Volunteering was a way for me to give back to my community, and show my children the importance of acquiring very close friendships through all of the organizations I’ve been involved with. Interface-Samaritan is very dear to my heart for I believe in what they do. They have become like a second family to me and the work I do there is very rewarding.”

(Houston Chronicle staff writer, 2010, p. 8).

The working mother is a different animal altogether, according to media coverage. The only circumstances that connect her to stay-at-home mom are her gender and the fact that she has children. From that point, their very existences split into different realities. One is a media darling, a woman who embodies the rural values that journalists find impossible to resist. The other is a working schlep that can barely get it together. She needs the media’s help to point out what she is feeling (guilt!) and how she can make life better (quit?). Some stories equate working motherhood as a challenge like divorce or as a chronic medical condition such as autism (Dooley, 2010, p. 1).

Most of the writers of the feature stories were women and the stories they wrote had an overwhelmingly positive tone. In general, stories by women journalists draw upon

greater diversity of sources and are cast more positively than stories written by men (Rodgers & Thorson, 2003).

Singer Sarah McLachlan of Vancouver, B.C., is a “working mom who has troubles others will recognize” (Powers, 2010, p. F10). One child is easy, the other a pill. Dad has Parkinson’s disease and her husband has split. She is “deeply fulfilled,” but lord, it’s not easy. What those circumstances have to do with McLachlan working outside the home are unclear. There are stay-at-home mothers who have challenging children, sick parents and husbands who leave them. For a long time, there was a push to note in stories that stay-at-home mothers are working mothers, they just do their jobs inside the home. However, none of the stories in the sample reflected this trend.

More views from the working mom jungle: They feel the need to explain and rationalize their decision to work outside the home, even going so far as detailing what they do when they are with their children.

“I can’t speak for all working moms, but I make the most of the time I do have with my children. My weekday mornings and evenings are devoted to playing, reading books and snuggling on the couch with my children.

“Every Wednesday, my son and I have a standing lunch date. My cell phone is left on my desk and he receives my undivided attention as he regales me with stories about preschool.”

(Lofing, 2001, D1).

Working moms are “jugglers” (Fikac, 2010, p. A1) and “strapped” (*Star-Ledger* staff writer, 2010, p. O34). And they are “intimately familiar with the darkest depths of mommy guilt” (Kassab, 2010, p. M1).

The word “guilt” itself turns up in four stories about working moms, but is not used once in the stories about stay-at-home mothers. “Don’t Make My Vacation a Guilt Trip,” states a headline on a working mom column (Lofing, 2010, p. D1). One poor working mother “died without warning from prescription pills after a rare date night with her husband” (Olsen, 2010, p. A1). And another example:

“Mommy guilt bruises the mommy ego. I know I won’t be there for every skinned knee, may get home too late for bath time or miss little joys like that first solo plunge down the playground slide”
(Kassab, 2010, p. M1).

The analysis of these stories shows that once a woman ventures out of the traditional role, daring to have children *and* work outside the home, the media devalues and even undercuts her contribution. This is done by stories that reinforce the notion that working woman is tired and challenged. She is missing out on precious moments with her children. Stay-at-home mom, on the other hand, is benefiting fully, and contributing to society, by exercising her reproductive rights and keeping a home.

The whole experience of women, one that includes having children and working or not, or a combination of these situations over a lifetime, is also devalued. (Martin, 1985). The stories studied draw women’s lives, whether they stay at home or work, in definitive terms, causing readers to form skewed conclusions.

The *Seattle Times* was the only paper of the seven that bucked the trends, publishing the same amount of stories on stay-at-home mothers and working moms (Six in each category). The *Seattle Times* published stories including the labels “stay-at-home” and “working” less frequently than all other papers, 12 times and evenly split between both categories. The next lowest was the *Sacramento Bee* with 16. Also, the *Seattle*

Times stories had the most progressive tones, including one about pregnant Portland, Ore., singer Laura Veirs getting ready to stop her tour late in pregnancy.

“... Being pregnant doesn't make one a fragile flower.

“ ‘ ... I've since found out about many women that tour and have babies. People ask me a lot of questions because you don't see heavily pregnant performers that often.’

“ ‘I would hope that other women who find out that I'm doing this would say, 'Oh, I can do stuff' ” (Shimp, 2010, p. E4).

In several papers, there were examples of extended obituaries that provided a fuller picture of women's lives, showing how they moved back and forth over a lifetime from working to child rearing and back to working. The nature of the obituary lends itself to a more complete picture because it is intended to be an assessment of a lifetime, not simply a snapshot of a moment. A long obituary for Sally C. Johnson, 70, was published in the *Newark Star-Ledger* on Feb. 9, 2010. She had many accolades including advanced college degrees and a long tenure with IBM as a systems analyst. In the middle of the obituary is this sentence: “After a 14-year break in employment as a stay-at-home mother, Sally joined Curtiss-Wright Corporation as a computer programmer in Fairfield, N.J., in 1980.” Her status as stay-at-home mom was a chapter in her life as it is for many women.

Just seven months, seven newspapers and 179 stories illustrate what scholars have observed about media coverage of stay-at-home mothers and working moms. The mother who chooses to stay home with her children is living an enviable life with a higher purpose, and working mom struggles to feel content and accomplished but always falls

short. The gray areas of their lives, which overlap in reality, do not make it to black and white newsprint unless they are in obituaries.

The regional differences in portrayals of stay-at-home mothers and working moms are interesting not because it could have been predicted but because the journalists at those newspapers do not necessarily come from those areas. Especially in their early careers, journalists are generally migratory, going from newspaper to newspaper for more money, stature and circulation. That means that the journalists, including top-level editors, at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, for example, hail from universities around the country. There is something ingrained in the newspaper's DNA that produces homogenizes stories that reflect the community's mores (Lauterer, 2006) or at least what the newspaper believes are the community's mores.

These attributes don't seem to change whether the journalists at the paper are educated in New York City, Southern California or Iowa. The results of my research on the seven papers predict future coverage about stay-at-home and working mothers. Kansas City, Houston, Atlanta and Orlando will write more about stay-at-home mothers as heroes and activists who exemplify the rural values that the American media so covet. Seattle, Sacramento and Newark are more likely to publish stories that show both situations have their challenges, but they too are susceptible to the pull of the hero story and small-town values.

All three theories used to examine the stories, framing theory, narrative theory and agenda setting are well illustrated.

Framing theory. Stay-at-home and working mothers are framed very differently in the 179 stories I found over a seven-month period in 2010. Mothers who do not work

outside the home are depicted in a positive way in 102 of 119. Indeed only two stories out of 119 on stay-at-home mothers had any negative overtones at all. One woman was fighting boredom (Shouse, 2010, p. MG3) and another got hooked on crystal meth after her husband lost his job (Kim, 2010, p. B1).

Conversely, the working mothers were frazzled and guilty, their situations lumped in with diseases and social maladies. It seems inconceivable that a journalist could group a woman who owns her own company, with a family's struggle with divorce or a child's diagnosis of autism, but the *Houston Chronicle* TV critic did.

"This season's newest offering, "Parenthood," is an extended clan grappling with working moms, divorced dads who know best, dads who know nothing and a child with autism." (Dooley, 2010, p. 1)

The frame built by these newspapers constructs meaning for readers but only shows part of the story. The might describe the situation of the subject of the story but the stereotypical attributes don't apply to everyone. The frame is an easy tool that allows the journalist to move quickly, basing the story on previous ones that he has read, but there is no consideration for the cumulative effect. The narrow frame, however, doesn't include poor women or women on welfare, whose stories are often relegated to the crime report or pieces about social welfare programs. Those women we expect to work. So despite being stereotypical and predictable, there is also an element of racial and economical bias in the stories. The overall tone of coverage of stay-at-home mothers is positive unless they are receiving public assistance.

Narrative theory. The "clash of binary opposites" is needed to tell a story. That clash is what provides the drama, which plays out in the seemingly opposing worlds of

stay-at-home mothers and working moms. What more drama does a storyteller need than the pull of conscience of a mother who works outside the home or the superhero capabilities of a stay-at-home mother saving the library from shutdown. The clashes are certainly attractive to a journalist looking for a dramatic story, and while they aren't fabricated they are skewed. Of 119 total stay-at-home mother stories, 80 are put on the small-town values pedestal or are shown as exemplary citizens.

The one aspect that isn't addressed is that stay-at-home mothers of school-age children have those school hours to volunteer in the community. In a way, this is like a job. It takes energy and creativity to run programs at the library or help the local food bank catalog its pantry. Sometimes those activities spill over into the evening or even after school. For women who get very involved, these activities could be as mentally time-consuming as a part-time or full-time job.

Another story that was missing is the story of working mothers who also volunteer in their children's schools or other facilities. Many working mothers are at the Valentine's Day parties or helping stuff envelopes in the office. At some events, the only mothers there had full-time jobs and used personal or lunch hours to volunteer. That narrative didn't emerge in the data set.

Nor was the story of the contented working mother to be found. Research reveals children are happy when their parents are happy and that homelife is very much affected by how women feel about their jobs. Stories rarely reflected the lifecycle of motherhood, which changes as a child ages.

Agenda setting: The stories of stay-at-home mothers and working moms tell readers what and how to think about the issue. The lopsided reporting, weighted toward

stay-at-home mothers, indicates that that is the more important topic. The volume of stories would have readers believe that there are more women staying home with their children than are in the workforce. This is not true. More women with children work outside the home than stay with them all day.

The skewed reporting would make women who work believe they are in a minority. That, coupled with the tone of stories about working women, instructs readers to thinking negatively about that life choice. Again, word choice makes a difference in how stories are perceived. In a piece in the *Newark Star-Ledger* on July 10, 2010, Vicky Hyman wrote, “(Tammy Lynn) Michaels wants full legal and physical custody of the twins, with Etheridge allowed visitation, and spousal support. (Melissa) Etheridge's filing asked the court to deny spousal support for Michaels, even though Michaels gave up her acting career to be a stay-at-home mom.”

The modifier “gave up” indicates that what Michaels was doing was far more important than raising children. The descriptor “traded” would have been more neutral. This contributes to how the media want us to think about this topic. Journalists with blinders are dangerous when they set agendas. Some topics get full attention, but stories of women are often marginalized and labels are spewed without thought. Unless it is an obituary, and a long one for a prominent person, stories about working and stay-at-home mothers are one-dimensional. Women in aprons are nobles; women with brief cases not so much. That agenda is punctuated over and over in stories about women with children who work outside the home.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Newspaper journalists have always battled against the clock to get their work to print. Stories are often reported and written, and then line edited, copy edited and designed in the course of a workday. That's the nature of daily journalism. In today's newsroom, beset by cutbacks and buyouts, journalists are doing "more with less." The more includes picking up second, or even third, beats plus incorporating the growing online component into their work. The Internet has hastened the once-a-day deadline to a race with the minute hand.

Tight deadlines do not afford time to choose words carefully. Newsroom stylebooks simplify decision-making, but they can be slow to respond to societal changes and are only as good as the staff that monitors them. As duties multiply in lean newsrooms, language style, especially that which is perceived as mundane, is sometimes neglected. Unthinking or ritualized use of the language shows that journalists themselves seem to be unable to resist the framing built by other media.

But as philosopher Bernard Gert said, that doesn't make it right to pass on information that is causing harm (Gert, 2004). While it may not exactly be deception, because there is no clear intent to mislead readers about women's situations, the unthinking use of the labels "stay-at-home mom" and "working mother" is damaging and does conceal the truth. Over time, writers can become callous to meaning, perpetuating misperception without realizing it. In our society, there are so many "mother" images that evoke strongly positive feelings such as "Mother Earth," "Mother Nature," "mom and apple pie," "mother's milk" and even "mother ship." They indicate a strong anchoring of

beliefs and conviction. Those deeply ingrained feelings of motherhood carry over into news stories.

It is easy for a writer to use the labels “stay-at-home mother” or “working mom” and think that she has given readers what they need to know about a source. The writer does not consider the cumulative effect of all stories using those phrases. She is worried about making deadline and getting facts straight. But she is using loaded words and perpetuating common beliefs that some researchers have proven wrong. This is a shortcoming of journalism in general. Stories focus on individuals rather than society, so the issues of motherhood are framed as personal problems rather than “needing systematic, public policy solutions” (Hall & Bishop, 2009).

In the sample studied, there were several stories where a stay-at-home mother decided to enter the workforce. She still had the sheen of nobility, deciding to jump back into the workforce to fill a role that only she could. The stories of the working moms never cast them as righteous. There was a pronounced difference in the portrayal of stay-at-home moms who re-entered the workforce and those mothers who did not stay home with their children, at least for a time. There was an underlying message that the mother who made the choice to stay with her children deserved the right to leave home for work and, in fact, she might even be more qualified.

A journalist, in one definition, is “someone who gathers, in a morally justifiable way, topical, truthful, factually based information of interest to the reader or viewer and then publishes it in a timely and accurate manner to a mass audience.” (Berry, 2008) Using this definition, it is the journalists’ role-related responsibility to fully represent women with children, and to scrutinize the way they use language.

But lazy writing and thinking finds its way into newspaper articles regularly. It seems innocuous until distinct patterns of skewed coverage emerge after careful review. Most journalists take their role of educating the public seriously when it comes to big-picture information about elections, government, disaster preparedness and other civic topics. They should, though, stop to consider the weight of “accepted” labels. Journalism is ideally about noticing differences, and it is important that journalists understand their power.

Journalistic presentations that promote misperceptions cause harm in three ways:

First, the lemming-like usage of “stay-at-home mom” and “working mother” causes pain by perpetuating stereotypes. This leads society to believe that women with children who work face overwhelming challenges and women who stay home with their children are noble and satisfied. These portrayals may create difficult situations for women in the workplace, plus they impede progress on the need for affordable, quality childcare outside the home. The repeated stereotypes also may create guilt for the women at home who are not as thrilled with their lives as the newspaper stories suggest they should be.

Next, stories that suggest that working women should feel guilty and stressed deprive mothers who have satisfying jobs of their happiness. Constant reminders that they’ve made the wrong decision for both their families and society may deprive them of the pleasure of fulfillment and success. Likewise, some women stay home with their children because they think that is better for their families, basing their decisions on myths perpetuated by journalistic accounts. This may not be what they truly want to do, and the stories they read are based on anecdotes not impartial research.

Last of all, the coverage causes harm as the journalists are failing to do their jobs. It

is the duty of journalists to be informed and to give voice to the voiceless. The story of the content and proficient mother who works is not being told. And articles about mothers at home who struggle with boredom and money problems are also not written. It is the job of journalists to look for differences.

Journalists, both writers and editors, are moral agents who are capable of understanding the consequences of their actions and they are certainly vulnerable and fallible. The fact that they make mistakes, beyond spelling someone's name wrong or printing an incorrect address, is something they should think about more. In many instances, language usage is second nature to them and it is understandable that they reach for shorthand labels to identify people. However, this does not mitigate the effects of the coverage.

That stories were heavily weighted toward stay-at-home mothers is also significant because of Labor Department statistics that show more than three-quarters of women with children ages 6-17 work outside the home with 64 percent of women with children younger than 6 working (USDHHS, 2009). Editorial coverage gives the opposite impression.

Nineteenth Century British philosopher John Stuart Mill said that everyone has a duty to seek out other viewpoints (Mill, 2010). People are notoriously lousy at this, reading commentary pieces that they already agree with and looking at websites that jibe with their thinking. We expect more from journalists who have power, via a public platform, to shape opinion. It is a matter of justice that they treat people impartially and not assume a 1950's position about women's roles.

According to media theorist Christopher Meyers, the relationship between

journalism and the audience is not passive (Meyers, 2010). They both have a shared interest in the well being of society. In essence, the audience does something with the information that journalists put forth. What they do with the information might be active, voting for instance or even clipping and later baking a cookie recipe, but it might also be internal. The information may be used to formulate opinions and thus affect how the individual treats others in a casual way or even as an employer with power. Meyers goes on to say that it is of great importance that journalists understand their audience and are responsive to them. They have an ethical responsibility to not simply regurgitate what other journalists are writing.

It would seem that traditional views about raising children would be more prevalent in the more conservative South and Midwest. My research shows this to be true. The four newspapers in these regions published more stories about stay-at-home mothers as heroes/activists teeming with small town values than the other newspapers. The journalists there may perpetuate these beliefs while “many Southerners may feel that in the ideal world mothers should not be employed but that employment does not necessarily make women poor mothers” (Twenge, 1995).

Working journalists, among others, might say it is impossible to know all of this while battling the clock and an ever-increasing workload. If they had to consider the social ramifications of each word they use so carefully, work would never get done. This is a seemingly valid argument until that thinking is transferred to other professions. We would not let a doctor off the hook who was unaware of recent developments in heart surgery techniques and consequently a patient died on the operating table. Nor would we excuse a police officer that entered a house with guns blazing, killing innocent

bystanders, because he didn't know they were there. In a less dramatic example, a hair stylist who dyed a woman's hair black instead of brown because most of his clients liked that color, wouldn't get much repeat business. We expect professionals to understand and carry out their responsibilities, and part of that entails paying attention to clients (or audience) and also being aware of the impact of actions.

For more definitive support of my hypothesis, future study could review a random sample of stories that appeared over a three-year period. Also, future analysis could include a more rigorous study the gender of the writers of stories that use the labels stay-at-home mothers and working moms. This research would add another dimension to the results and possibly bolster these findings.

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APPENDIX

Code Sheet for Content Analysis

How are the phrases “stay-at-home mother” and “working mom” used in newspapers?

Unit ID

1. Seattle (Wash.) Times
2. Sacramento (Calif.) Bee
3. Kansas City (Miss.) Star
4. Houston (Texas) Chronicle
5. Orlando (Fla.) Sentinel
6. Atlanta (Ga.) Journal-Constitution
7. Newark (N.J.) Star-Ledger

What type of story?

1. News
2. Features
3. Obituaries
4. Advice/Commentary/Review

Tone of story?

1. Negative
2. Positive

Gender of writer?

1. Female
2. Male
3. Undeterminable/No Byline

Does story content fall under these themes?

1. Hero/Activist
2. Small-Town Values
3. How-To
4. Life Challenges
5. Neutral