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# **All You Need is Love**

## ***Representations of Maternal Emotion in Working Mother Magazine, 1995-1999***

On the surface, it seems like the realization of a liberal feminist dream. First published in 1978 and with a turn-of-the-century subscription rate of just less than one million (*Ulrich's National Periodical Directory*, 2000: 7527), *Working Mother* supports those who are both mothers and work outside the home. The magazine constructs working mothers as particularly skilled and capable, “superwomen” who simply need a little advice to achieve a healthy balance between motherhood and career. Yet at the foundation of this ideology of “having it all” exist carefully constructed representations regarding the “good” mother.

This paper interrogates representations of maternal emotions in *Working Mother* and illustrates how the romantic ideal of the all-loving mother is central to definitions of “good” motherhood. Through a reliance on iconic images and advice-centered articles, the magazine defines such emotions as inherent to “good” mothering and a necessary foundation that enables mothers to achieve “superwoman” status by “having it all.”

In this essay, I offer a rhetorical analysis of *Working Mother*, focusing on the five years (50 issues) from January 1995 through December 1999. I argue that the magazine, through visual imagery and reliance on romanticized discourses, constructs a narrow representation of motherhood that promotes the utopian archetype of the all-loving maternal figure. Subsequently, “negative” maternal emotions such as anger, jealousy, resentment, hostility, and frustration are not only deemed insignificant, but almost entirely ignored (Parker, 1995).<sup>1</sup> As a result, the magazine contributes to what Shari L. Thurer has termed a “cultural conspiracy of silence” (1994: xiv) that pervades American cultural understandings of motherhood. At its best, this contributes to the shaming and admonishment of mothers who articulate “negative” maternal emotions. At its worst, it renders

certain maternal emotions virtually unspeakable and, thus, an important aspect of women's experiences invisible.

Employing a feminist images and representations approach (Rakow, 1986), I first offer a brief description of format, organization, and content of the magazine. Then, I conduct visual and textual analysis of magazine covers and selected articles. This dual approach illustrates how the cover images and written content complement one another to produce a powerful representation of maternal emotion. It is through reliance of particular representations that the magazine contributes muted alternate representations while simultaneously reinforcing cultural ideals of "good" motherhood.

Feminist scholars have illustrated the myriad ways motherhood is socially constructed, as both "experience and institution" (Rich, 1976), within mainstream American culture. These analyses have demonstrated how beliefs and behaviors concerning motherhood are composed at the intersection of cultural political, scientific, philosophical, social, economic, and religious ideologies and discourses (Grant, 1998; Heffner, 1978). A related subset of theories of social construction concerns notions of the "good" and the "bad" mother. As Jane Swigart (1991) explains, this binary produces complex American cultural myths:

Imagine a woman who wants only what is best for her children, whose needs she intuits effortlessly. This mother adores her offspring and finds them fascinating. She is exquisitely attuned to her children and is so resourceful that she is immune to boredom. Nurturing comes as naturally as breathing, and child rearing is a source of pleasure that does not require discipline or self-sacrifice. She is the Good Mother.

Now imagine the opposite: A woman easily bored by her children, indifferent to their well-being, a mother who is so narcissistic and self-absorbed she cannot discern what is in the best interests of her children. Insensitive to their needs, she is unable to empathize with them and often uses them for her own gratification. This woman damages her children without knowing it. ... She is the Bad Mother ... and is known by many names: The Castrating Mother; the Smothering, Intrusive Mother; the Cold, Rejecting Mother . (6)

It is tempting to dismiss these descriptions as caricatures and, therefore, insignificant. However, a growing number of scholars have begun to argue that "cultural obsessions" with mothering function as a "collective wish for *perfect* mothering" (Thurer 1994: xvi).<sup>2</sup> Ladd-Taylor and Umansky (1998) argue that these myths are key contributors to mother-blaming which is so prevalent in American society. This involves not only labeling mothers who do not fit the "good" mother ideal; it also has a material impact on the lives of mothers and their children in legal, political, and social arenas and "can be found in custody disputes, political speeches, and parent-teacher conferences"(2).

During the past century, women have been targeted as “bad” mothers for a variety of reasons. Often, they are branded on the basis of specific behaviors. These include women who don’t have children, surrogate mothers, and non-custodial mothers as well as mothers who work outside the home, mothers who do not work outside the home, mothers who breastfeed, and mothers who do not breastfeed (Ashe, 1992; Boris, 1994; Edwards, 1989; Ginsburg, 1998; May, 1988; Ragone, 1994; Weiner, 1994). In addition, “bad” mothers have been labeled on the basis of certain identities including race, age, class, marital status, and sexual orientation (Kunzel, 1998; Lewin, 1993; Luker, 1996; Roberts, 1999; Ross, 1993; Solinger, 1992).

Maternal emotion has also been a central in the construction of “good” and “bad” mothers. In fact, as Swigart’s above definitions indicate, maternal emotion is a central component of these categories, particularly that of the “bad” mother. That is, even when maternal actions or identity are the primary basis upon which a mother is labeled “bad,” maternal emotion is always a consideration. For example, when college student Donna Sloan delivered what she determined to be a dead fetus in her dorm bathroom and then placed it in the trashcan and went back to bed without telling anyone, it was not only her actions which were the basis of her being labeled a “bad” mother. Concerned with the difficulty in controlling Sloan’s public image, her attorney stated, “She was expressing no emotion, no grief. She didn’t seem to be grieving at all” (qtd. in Tsing, 1990: 287). Thus, while Sloan’s actions initially made her suspect, her lack of “appropriate” maternal emotion confirmed her guilt in the court of public opinion.

Similarly, actions are the primary basis upon which rock singer Courtney Love has been targeted as a “bad” mother. These include her admitted heroine use during pregnancy—during the first month, before she knew she was pregnant (Coates, 1998: 328)—sexual persona and activities, and stage antics. As Coates explains, the mainstream media focuses on these behaviors almost exclusively and, in doing so, “posit Love as a poor behavioral model for her daughter” (324). Judgments regarding Love’s maternal emotions, however, are integral to these concerns. By focusing on these particular behaviors, those critical of the singer also attack her emotional stability, depicting her as a selfish mother, one who places her own needs above those of her child and fails to show proper maternal concern.

Of course, expectations regarding maternal emotion are operative not only in critiques aimed at specific “bad” mothers such as Sloan and Love. They are also key components in a variety of popular cultural sources including newspapers and mass media (Coward, 1997), advertisements (Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan, 1994), parenting books, and baby manuals (Grant, 1998; Hays, 1996). Not surprisingly, they also permeate mothering-related magazines, including *Working Mother*. Initially, this magazine may seem rather benign, a periodical that simply addresses and attempts to provide support for working mothers as they encounter the many challenges of their personal and professional lives.

However, through its representations of maternal emotion via cover images and articles, the magazine reinforces a fairly narrow definition of “good” motherhood while simultaneously banishing so-called “negative” emotions to the realm of “bad” mothering.

Owned by MacDonald Communications Corporation, *Working Mother* is published ten times annually, with a new issue arriving on newsstands and in subscriber mailboxes each month of the year except for January and August. Readers are greeted by a “cover mom,” generally pictured with her child or children, although the cover mom is occasionally absent and replaced by bold text and headlines for special issues or collector’s editions.<sup>3</sup> The magazine is explicitly organized via the following categories: work, children, mother’s concerns including beauty, health, relationships, food, and a buyer’s guide and editor’s notes.

The text of a full-page subscription advertisement from the April 1995 issue indicates the magazine’s overall philosophy:

Discover the magazine that helps you bring balance to your work and family life.

*Working Mother*—the “Voice of Authority™” for America’s career-committed mothers.

How successful are you—juggling home, kids, work, fun? We understand your challenges, show your options and support your choices. *Working Mother*: making your impossible dream possible . . . (“Subscribe Today!” 1995).

The ad juxtaposes juggling with balance—juggling to warn of the potential chaos that can accompany the range of responsibilities which working mothers face, and balance to indicate that such chaos can be avoided through appropriate actions. In addition, it affirms the importance of women’s employment and conveys to its readership that working mothers can achieve their highest goals. More specifically, because mothers with careers as “committed,” they can make possible their “impossible dream,” particularly if they rely on the magazine’s “Voice of Authority™” to guide them. Finally, through the rhetoric of options and choice, the ad emphasizes individuality in decision-making as well as autonomy and self-determination for women. The resulting message is that women, if they choose, can achieve balance and have a satisfying career without sacrificing the rewards of motherhood. In short, working mothers *can* have it all.

It is important to recognize that *Working Mother* supports working mothers in a variety of ways. First, it recognizes the struggles women face as they balance career and family and attempts to help women be successful in those struggles. Second, it values women’s paid employment, indicating that in their roles as executives, managers, administrators, supervisors, directors, overseers, and bosses, they make a significant contribution to the American

corporate and economic landscapes. In addition, it provides information on topics relevant to several areas of working mothers' lives as well as ideas and suggestions for dealing with work, family, and personal issues. As such, it is a source of information, a resource which working mothers may find helpful. Finally, the magazine does challenge some cultural stereotypes of "good" and "bad" motherhood, specifically by illustrating the gender bias central to these stereotypes as well as their personal (Shelton, 1999) as well as legal (Holcomb, 1995) consequences.<sup>4</sup>

Despite these challenges to cultural norms and ideologies of motherhood and the variety of ways it celebrates the efforts and lives of working women, however, the magazine also performs a kind of surveillance function. Through this, appropriate (and, by implication, inappropriate) practices of mothering are publicized in an explicitly didactic way. More specifically, *Working Mother* both constructs *and* comments on ideologies of appropriate and acceptable maternal emotion. In doing so, it reinforces dominant discourses of "good" motherhood while simultaneously obscuring alternate discourses of motherhood, specifically those regarded as "bad." This is evident in both the magazine covers as well as articles.

The magazine's cover images frequently rely on the Madonna/Child archetype so widespread in Western culture, thereby accentuating a close emotional and physical bond between mother and child. Representative of this is the February 1995 cover, featuring "Talk Radio Personality" Debbie Nigro who is pictured with Alexis (see Figure 1). Although the cover does not indicate that Alexis is Nigro's daughter, the relationship is implied by the image. Nigro and Alexis are standing close to one another, the top of the child's head just level with her mother's breast, their arms wrapped around one another to create a circle of affection. Both are smiling softly, their expressions conveying feelings of contentment and serenity, again indicating a strong maternal-child emotional bond. This atmosphere is reinforced by the lush, abundant foliage that surrounds them, lending an element of "natural-ness" to this portrayal of maternal love.

Not all covers, however, rely on this serene ideal. Others issues publicize a more active view of motherhood, one which celebrates enthusiasm and excitement as central components in a successful mother/child relationship. This is evident on the April 1995 cover featuring "Fitness Expert" Kathy Smith with Kate and Perrie (see Figure 2). Again, the text does not indicate that the children are Smith's. The relationship, however, is implied through the proximity and positioning of Smith and the girls. This image of mother and daughters is a lively one, with the younger child occupying the foreground, arms stretched wide, while the older child stands close to Smith, leaning her head on her mother's shoulder. Both children are smiling. Smith is also smiling, although hers suggests open-mouthed, spontaneous laughter. While this cover touts a more active and enthusiastic type of motherhood, one based on elation rather than serenity, it is similar to the Nigro cover in its position that the



*From left to right, "Talk Radio Personality Debbie Nigro with Alexis," and "Fitness Expert Kathy Smith with Kate and Perrie."*

mother/child relationship is based solely on affection and love.

In addition to the professional and celebrity working moms such as Nigro and Smith who appear on the cover of the magazine, the magazine cover also features its annual "Working Mother of the Year." These mothers are distinguished by their intense self-sacrificing nature. For example, JoEllen Barnhart is featured on the May 1995 cover after being named the magazine's "Working Mother of the Year." A departmental director at Hagerstown Junior College, Barnhart is the mother of two children, Michael and Andrew. At the time of the award, she is expecting her third child. What earned Barnhart the award was her ability to overcome challenges, specifically in relation her children. Her first son, Michael, was "a special baby" (Cartwright, 1995: 24) who was diagnosed with Down's Syndrome at birth. Her second son, Andrew, was born two years later, and presented a "new challenge" (25). He was born with a cleft lip and palate.

The accompanying article classifies Barnhart as uncommonly strong in the face of adversity. After Michael was born, this mother "found herself on an emotional roller coaster," but "it didn't take long ... for JoEllen to put her grief and disappointment behind her" (Cartwright, 1995: 25-26). She located a caregiver, arranging for relatives to "fill in as needed," hired a therapist for Michael, and arranged for counseling for herself and her husband (26). Reflecting on Barnhart's success in overcoming these and related challenges, the author announces:

Today, Michael is a happy, active child, says JoEllen. “He runs, he swims, he hops and skips—he’s learning all the time!” He is now flourishing in a half-day Head Start program, and may start kindergarten in the fall (Cartwright, 1995: 26).

Michael’s “happiness” and “flourishing” are attributed to his mother’s strength. More specifically, they are presented as direct results of Barnhart’s willingness to get off her “emotional roller coaster” and put the negativity of “grief and disappointment behind her” and dive headfirst into parenting a child with disabilities. To emphasize this point, the author closes with the following paragraph:

JoEllen says her strength comes from her children. When Michael was born, she wrote in her journal that if she was sad or tired, all she needed to do was look into his eyes. “When his little hands wrap around my fingers,” she wrote, “I feel I can move mountains” (Cartwright, 1995: 26).

In addition, the article emphasizes maternal sacrifice while it celebrates Barnhart’s ability to balance work and parenting. Readers learn of a working mother who is determined in a seemingly super-human way. When her second son, Andrew, was born, “the room fell silent. I couldn’t see my baby, but I could see the looks, and tears, on everyone’s faces” (Cartwright, 1995: 25). Barnhart’s seemingly composed reaction to the situation is described in the following way, “In her usual style, she researched Andrew’s condition thoroughly, asking countless questions so she could help her son get the best possible care” (26). While engaged in these tasks, Barnhart also remained devoted to her professional life, developing a childcare center for the college’s students and employees, an element which she believes will “increase access to education” in the community (26). Through its focus on these specific aspects of Barnhart’s personal and professional lives, the article leaves little doubt that she will continue to conquer whatever challenges may lie ahead of her. Indeed, she is the magazine’s quintessential working mother—professional, successful in both work and family life, and selfless in her devotion to her children.

While emphasis on selflessness is standard fare for the annual “Working Mother of the Year” issues, this theme is prevalent throughout all issues of the magazine, including articles that focus explicitly on maternal emotion. Serious consideration of this aspect of maternal experience, however, is quickly dismissed as mothers are instructed to turn their attention to the emotions of their children. As a result, maternal emotions are dismissed as peripheral. Not surprisingly, mothers are offered “quick fixes” to help them get over their own feelings, maintain a “selfless” attitude, and get on to what should be their real focus—their children.

Articles typically conform to what Helena Michie and Naomi R. Cahn

have described as a simple “problem - advice – resolution” format common to parenting texts (1997). In this genre, authors address a particular issue that a working mother might face and offer specific, often expert, advice on what to do. As with all advice-oriented texts, the reader is tacitly assured that following the advice will ensure a successful resolution. For example, in her article, “The Juggling Act,” author Dana Friedman (1997) addresses the problem of evaluating a job-share partner. Friedman first defines the problem: “How do you evaluate a job-sharing partner?” (11) Next, she offers expert advice: a list of “traits and qualities to consider” when evaluating a potential partner (11). Finally, Friedman assures readers that if her advice is followed, a suitable job-sharing partner will be found. While this particular article relates to work, the pattern is evident throughout the magazine and includes not only work-related articles, but also those regarding family, personal time, and food.

This pattern, as well as an emphasis on maternal selflessness through the writing off of maternal emotions, is illustrated in Julia Martin’s 1999 article, “I Like Daddy Best.” Martin explores the favoritism that children often express toward one parent. Claiming authority through her own experience as a mother, Martin recounts the first year of her daughter’s life and says that she “bonded in a big way” (50) with Tess. However, the child would cry whenever her father, a business executive who worked long hours and was seldom home, came near her. As a result, Martin was responsible for the majority of the parenting and child care responsibilities. She says this situation made her feel “frustrated ... (and) I also found that Tess could seem like a pint-size tyrant when I needed a break. When I was home, she always wanted me—and only me” (50). Despite this problem, Martin assures the reader that there is a happy ending to this tale. At present, she says, Tess enjoys a close relationship with her father, “and I’m the one who feels slighted” (50).

Although the essay begins with the recognition of two so-called “negative” maternal emotions—frustration and jealousy—Martin quickly shifts from her own feelings to those of her daughter, and struggles to understand why Tess exhibits favoritism. In doing so, she dismisses her own emotions and, relying on the “expert” opinion of Carole W. Morgan, Los Angeles psychologist and psychoanalyst (Martin, 1999: 52), advises other mothers to do the same. The resulting message is that “good” mothers deny their own emotions and focus, instead, on the emotional well being of their children.

While “negative” maternal emotions are dismissed in some articles, others erase the very idea of them as they focus on “good” mothering. For example, Jacquelyn Mitchard, author of *The Deep End of the Ocean*, emphasizes motherhood as an always and entirely rewarding experience in her article, “Each Day’s Joy” (1998/1999). Reflecting on her relationship with her own mother and what it taught her, Mitchard advises readers to “find the jewel in the ordinary clay” (56) of daily life and appreciate simple things. To gain this sense of appreciation, according to Mitchard, mothers must slow down long enough to enjoy “light traffic, spaghetti for dinner, a good book waiting upstairs ... the

look of the sky before a storm. Getting all the laundry done” (56). Adopting this philosophy, she says, has allowed her to maintain a positive outlook, for “even (during) the blackest periods of my life, there always was the chance that something could turn out interesting—tomorrow” (56).

Mitchard’s article is joined by a companion piece, “Count Your Blessings” (1998/1999), written by Senior Editor Catherine Cartwright. Examining the infant, toddler, and preschool stages, this collection of testimonies indicates that the small things in everyday life are what (should) mean the most. These small things, of course, are children, little blessings that “have the wonderful ability to comfort us when we’re feeling down” (58), and teach “how to enjoy life and try new things” (60), thereby overshadowing even the possibility of negative emotions. One mother tells how “a hectic workday would fade into the background as my son and I shared those precious moments alone in the rocking chair” (57). Another says that if she started feeling down, all it took was one moment with her child to “make the blues vanish” (58). Emphasizing the positive emotional aspects of motherhood, Cartwright closes with the unambivalent words of one mother: “I wish I had known having a child would be so wonderful! I would have done it a long time ago!” (60).

Two things are particularly noteworthy here. First, Mitchard (1998/1999) idealizes the experience of mothering without recognizing that mothering activities, duties, and responsibilities have the potential to lead to frustration, anger, and other “negative” emotions. For example, even though laundry is a daunting task for many that requires hours of labor, typically by women (Hochschild, 1989), Mitchard presents it as an entirely pleasurable activity. And mothers, like “cheerful robots” (Mills, 1959: 171) are expected to find joy in completing this task. Second, the mother-child relationship is portrayed as always-loving, never angry, selfish, or frustrated. In fact, the only pressures mothers face according to these articles originate *outside* the mother-child relationship. This treatment denies the existence of “negative” emotions a mother might experience as a result of her mothering responsibilities and, in doing so, again emphasizes the all-loving maternal ideal.

While the above articles implicitly regard “negative” maternal feelings as irrelevant, others explicitly condemn mothers for daring to express these maternal emotions. Yet again, the mental health and emotions of the mother are less important than the negative influence those feelings are thought to have on the child. In her article, “Depressed Moms, Depressed Newborns” (1998), Sarah Hutter warns, “A bad case of the blues during your pregnancy may also be bad for your baby” (54). Citing a recent child-development study, Hutter describes how elevated stress hormones during pregnancy can lead to infants who “show little facial expression and exhibit other depressive symptoms such as loss of appetite and sleep. Untreated, these newborns can grow into depressed infants” (54). While Hutter does advise mothers to see a therapist to deal with depression, her concern here is not with the well-being of the mother but, instead, that of the child. She suggests mothers learn infant massage to help

ensure their child's well-being (54). Mothers who do not "deal with" their depression (54), it seems, are "bad" mothers whose emotions can result in irreparable harm to their children.

Many articles, however, focus solely on the feelings of children and do not consider maternal emotions at all. In "A New Twist on Tears" (1999), Mary Ellen Mengucci tells mothers that rather than being alarmed and frightened by a child who won't stop crying, they should recognize it as a normal way to express emotion. She advises:

The best way to soothe a sobbing child may be simply to let her cry, while holding her and letting her know you love her. That's because crying is actually a healthy and normal way for kids—even infants to relieve stress. Of course, a little one's tears may signal physical pain or an immediate need such as hunger. But tears may also mean a child is angry or upset and needs to blow off a little steam. If parents can begin to look at crying as a stress release mechanism that allows children to heal from the effects of a frustrating day, fearful moment, or difficult situation, they'll see a variety of benefits (42).

Here, mothers are instructed that crying is a normal, healthy expression of human emotions. This position seems particularly ironic coming from the same magazine that advises mothers to simply "deal with" their own depression lest they somehow damage their children.

As I was writing this article and heading toward the conclusion, a student brought me a tape of the September 17, 2002, episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. It was called, "What Your Mother Never told you About Motherhood." Focusing on myths of motherhood, the episode sought to "break the silence" about so-called negative maternal emotions in order to let viewers know that they were "not alone" in experiencing these feelings. The show generated so much response—nearly 20 times that of any other episode in the show's 17 year history—that the producers responded with not one but *two* follow-up episodes.<sup>5</sup> While some viewers empathized with those who expressed frustration, anger, jealousy, and similar emotions, many others vilified and condemned them for daring to expose such feelings. In both cases, respondents demonstrated fluency in cultural definitions of "good" and "bad" motherhood.

These responses indicate how heavily invested the American public is in motherhood as a political issue. They also illustrate the pervasiveness of the ideal of the "good" mother while simultaneously revealing the risk women take if they dare suggest motherhood is anything but emotionally rewarding. Furthermore, they are a clear indication of the power of cultural representations of the mythical "good" mother, such as those analyzed in this essay. If feminists are serious about challenging these cultural myths, we must continue to identify and interrogate the variety of cultural sources that contribute to them. We must also identify and discuss sources that challenge them. Both are fundamental in

the move toward a different kind of society: one in which mothers are supported as they articulate a full range of emotions and where “mother-blame” and the resulting “mother-guilt” (Eyer, 1996) are but distant memories.

<sup>1</sup>I do not believe these or similar maternal emotions are “negative.” However, they are most often characterized as such. Thus, I use “negative” for lack of a more accurate term.

<sup>2</sup>Emphasis mine.

<sup>3</sup>For example, see the October 1997 special issue. This particular cover heralds the results of the twelfth annual survey, “100 Best Companies for Working Mothers” and does not include a cover mom. Similarly, the June 1999 collector’s edition, celebrates the magazine’s twentieth anniversary. It does not include a cover mom.

<sup>4</sup>In her article, “The Bonding Myth,” Shelton (1999) discusses how cultural ideals of the mother-child bond often lead to intense feelings of guilt among mothers who regard themselves as “bad” when returning to work after the birth of a child. Holcomb’s (1995) article, “Working Mothers of Trial,” addresses how cultural ideals regarding the “good” mother often result in the unfair judgment of working mothers during custody disputes.

<sup>5</sup>The first follow-up, “What Mothers Honestly Think About Motherhood,” originally aired October 8, 2002. It was followed on October 17, 2002, by, “More Mothers on Motherhood.”

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