

**Addy Bareiss, Alicia Woodbury
and Alesha Durfee**

Children's Birthday Parties *Welfare and Constructions of Motherhood in the United States*

Mothering in the contemporary United States is positioned uneasily at the intersection of gendered cultural expectations of child rearing and consumerism. Contemporary expectations of "motherhood" require extensive time and financial resources. Poor mothers face a complex negotiation of cultural expectations and consumerism as they mother with limited time and financial resources. Using children's birthday parties as a site of exploration, this study seeks to examine the construction of the cultural expectations of "good" mothering. How do mothers with greatly limited resources understand the cultural expectations of children's birthday parties? How do mothers organize the resources to host successful children's birthday parties? What do they believe are the most important elements and outcomes? Twenty mothers who receive government assistance were interviewed about their experiences of organizing children's birthday parties. Results from this analysis indicate that managing children and activities on greatly limited resources creates greater difficulty in meeting the expectations of conspicuous consumption. Mothers orchestrating children's birthday parties with meager financial resources may judge their parties successful, and themselves "good" mothers, by altering their (personal or communal) definition of success or the necessary elements of celebration. Creating different personal and family values and expectations, and organizing communities with similarly limited resources and expectations, allows mothers to mediate their economic position and rationalize their decision in organizing children's birthday parties.

In the United States, children's birthday parties have become a well-recognized cultural ritual (Lee, Katras and Bauer, 2009). The rising expectation of significant resource allocation to child rearing, in terms of both time and money, and the related growth in commercial markets directed to children's birthday parties has been well documented (Otnes, Nelson, and McGrath, 1995; Lee et al., 2009;

Clarke, 2007). Less attention, however, has been paid to the gendered nature of organizing children's birthday parties (for an important exception see Clarke, 2007) or to the impact increased material expectations have on poor mothers (for a notable exception see Lee et al., 2009). This study is interested in how mothers with limited resources plan their children's birthday parties within the context of growing material and commercial expectations. Specifically, this study is interested in poor mothers' experiences of negotiating cultural expectations and financial limitations as they plan for and host birthday celebrations for their children. What factors influence mothers' experiences of children's birthday parties? How do mothers describe their decisions in planning and hosting children's birthday parties? How do consumer messages shape poor mothers' expectations for their children's birthday celebrations and how do poor mothers judge a birthday celebration a "success"?

As part of "carework," children's birthday celebrations not only represent a site of gendered work, but also a site of consumerism and cultural expectation. Hence birthday parties offer a useful lens through which to examine motherhood, consumerism, and social expectations. While the material costs of child rearing may be shared by more than one parent in many twenty-first century households, women continue to shoulder the greatest responsibility for the needs—both personal and cultural—of their children. For this reason, this study focuses on mothering rather than parenting. In *Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: A Decade's Scholarship*, Terry Arendell asserts "mothering is associated with women because, universally, it is women who do the work of mothering" (Arendell, 2000: 1192). The physical and emotional labor of rearing children remains gendered. The expenditures of arranging food, entertainment, and transportation for children's birthday parties are socially placed within women's carework (Hays, 1998: 129). As such, whether or not it is explicitly examined, meeting the social expectations of children's birthday parties is often women's work.

Intensive mothering: cultural ideals of mothering

Although the extent to which individual mothers internalize any socially accepted ideal is open to interpretation, the consistency across studies of contemporary interpretations of motherhood suggests there are ideas mothers hold in common across race and class differences (Hays, 1998; Clarke, 2007; Adair, 2002; Pugh, 2005). One particularly useful frame for examining the time and resource heavy requirements of contemporary mothering is Sharon Hays' concept of "intensive mothering." A normative ideal of contemporary mothering, "intensive mothering" describes socially "appropriate" mothering as involving large financial and time expenditures on children (Hays, 1998: 97). In addition to the willingness of mothers to listen and respond to children's needs, their willingness to devote "a great deal of physical, emotional, cognitive and financial resources to the child" characterizes Hays' "intensive mothering" (98). Despite social and material contradictions, "intensive mothering" remains

the normative political and cultural standard against which individual mothers are evaluated and as the monetary costs of normative ideals continues to increase, poor mothers are left at an increasing disadvantage (Arendell, 2000; Hays, 1998; Clarke, 2007).

Welfare and mothering

A growing body of feminist scholarship has been devoted to analyzing the relationship between motherhood and public assistance (see Adair, 2002; Gray, 2005; Nelson, 2002; Seccombe, James and Walters, 1998). Such works reveal the realities of poor mothers in the contemporary United States, from material deprivation to the social stigma of accepting government assistance to the corporeal markings of poverty worn by mothers and their children (see Adair, 2002; Stuber and Schlesinger, 2006; Gray 2005). Critical analyses of the enduring popular construction of poverty and the personal narratives of impoverished mothers reveal overarching discourses about poverty, mothering, and social expectations (Adair, 2002; Gray, 2005). Adair argues that depicting poor mothers who receive government assistance as deviant, pathological, and immoral reifies normative, “good” mothering (2002: 455). Popular scripts of “welfare mothers” collapse the rich and difficult experiences of poor mothers and serve to demonize poor women (and their children) while erasing the experiences of individual families, systemic power inequities, and enduring oppression. Against this socially defined “bad” mothering, normative ideals of “good” mothering are constructed. Thus poor mothers face multiple pressures: not only must they meet the ideals of cultural motherhood, they must also successfully resist being labeled a “bad” mother.

Children's birthday parties and normative social expectations

Over the last decade a consumer market devoted to planning and organizing children's birthday parties has flourished and the availability of consumer goods and services has changed the social expectations of children's birthday parties in the United States (Clarke, 2007; Lee et al., 2009).

Several recent studies have analyzed the materialism associated with children's birthday parties. Alison Clarke (2007), Allison Pugh (2005), and Jaerim Lee, Mary Jo Katras and Jean W. Bauer (2009) focus on the giving and receiving of gifts. Pugh's (2005) study of children's toy catalogues exposed ways in which the growing 'children's birthday party market' capitalizes on the disjuncture between the normative ideal of “intensive mothering” and the reality of many contemporary U.S. mothers (Pugh, 2005). Most recently, Lee et al. (2009) probed children's birthday parties as a significant cultural and familial ritual with specific attention to the expectations and goals of poor rural mothers. Clarke's (2007) analysis of children's birthday parties in contemporary Britain draws attention to gender and social class in the planning and performance of children's birthday parties, pointing to the roles gender and social class play in determining middle class mothers' social anxiety over performing just enough

to satisfy expectations without being excessive. Although low-income mothers do not have the luxury of a flexible resource base, they face similar community norms and expectations (Lee et al., 2009).

Data and methods

All of the data in this study comes from twenty open ended interviews with mothers who receive government assistance and are the mothers of at least one child under the age of eighteen. The children's ages ranged from one to eighteen years old, with an average age of eight and an average of two children per household.

The mothers who participated in this study were recruited using two strategies. Eighteen mothers were recruited in person at a Department of Economic Security (DES) branch office in a suburb of large southwestern United States city. Permission from the office was secured prior to the recruitment process, allowing the researchers to conduct recruitment within the office waiting area. The purpose of the study was verbally explained to all women who confirmed that they had children under eighteen years old, and mothers who expressed interest in the study were supplied with an information letter and the researchers' contact information. Mothers could then call or email the researchers to schedule an interview. Two additional mothers also receiving government assistance were contacted through study participants.

To cover their time and transportation costs, each participant was given a \$25 gift card to a grocery store of their choice. Women who are receiving government assistance have limited financial resources and often face additional time and transportation barriers. For these reasons, the researchers felt that financial compensation was an ethical component of the study's design. To reduce the likelihood that the monetary incentive would act as a form of coercion within context of the DES office, the researchers used two tactics. First, potential participants were told about the \$25 compensation only after they had shown interest in participating in the study. Second, the researchers avoided scheduling participants for an interview on the day of first introduction. The twenty taped interviews were conducted between November 2008 and March 2009.

The sample consisted of twelve white women, four Black women, one Hispanic woman, two Aboriginal women, and an African immigrant. These percentages generally reflect the racial poverty demographics of the local population, although Hispanic women were underrepresented in the study (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). All of the women interviewed for the study were actively seeking or were receiving government assistance at the time of their interview. Although the income level and access to extended family resources varied for each of the mothers in this study, as a group, these women did not have access to the extensive resources required to match normative conspicuous consumption patterns associated with "ideal" children's birthday parties (Lee et al., 2009).

Mothers were asked to describe an ideal birthday party, to list which items were essential to have for a party and which items that could be forgone if necessary, and how they judged the overall success of a party. Digital recordings of all twenty interviews were transcribed and coded by the researchers using a collaboratively created coding document. The researchers then independently coded each interview by hand. At the completion of each interview's coding, the researchers deliberated any differences until agreement was met.

Analysis

Mother's Experiences

Mothers in this study spoke about birthday party planning within the context of their larger financial situation. Eighteen of the twenty mothers spoke about short term or long term financial limitations as a factor that shaped their birthday party expectations, planning decisions and how they measured the party's outcomes. Within the context of their financial hardship, mothers worked to meet or manage the expectations of their children, expectations of others and of their own social conceptions of the "ideal" child's birthday in ways that often minimized the perceived distance between what was desired and what was possible.

When the mothers described expectations for their children's birthday parties, they frequently discussed them in terms of a social conception based on conspicuous consumption and intensive mothering. The ideal traditional birthday party was an "event," something that would take place at a commercial party place, with a large number of child guests in attendance, gifts for the birthday child, gift bags for the guests, and cake and food for everyone. However, most of the mothers in this study recognized that there was a difference between this idealized birthday party and what they could actually afford to provide for their children. When asked to describe an ideal child's birthday party, Melanie requested clarification: "ideal for me, or ideal for anybody?" This distance between the social conception of children's birthday parties and the mother's realities was clearly understood in economic terms. Daphne explained that she knew what parents with unlimited "incomes could do for their kids", but, as Edna stated, "nowadays that's not going to." While some of the mothers described their limited financial resources as a temporary situation related to the weak economy, other mothers compared their current financial situation to previous periods of higher resources, such as when Edna referred to "when they [her kids] were younger—back when we had the [family business] and more money." Other mothers described poverty as a lifelong experience. Regardless of how long they had they had been living with limited financial resources, however, most of the mothers expressed a desire to emulate, to some degree, the idealized commercial image of birthday parties that shaped their children's expectations.

Thirteen of the twenty mothers expressed a desire to match the birthday

celebration to their child's expectations. Developed through a combination of media exposure and comparisons to other children's celebrations, the mothers discussed their child's expectations in terms of how far in advanced they planned for their party and how excitedly they talked about it. Mothers explained that expectations for a celebration shifted with the age of the child, but for children under twelve, there was often a desire for elaborate entertainment, many guests, themed elements, themed cakes and gifts. For older children, or for children whose mothers' actively managed their expectations, the ideal party was less of a commercial spectacle and more of an at home "family" event. While Marnie stated that her children "look forward to [themed parties] so much," Mary Anne explained that her children had learned to "expect a cook out and cake and ice cream."

When poor mothers in this study took efforts to meet their children's expectations of elaborate consumer birthday celebrations, their stories were often similar to Hays' (2004) descriptions of intensive mothering. Sixteen of the 20 mothers described their sacrifices in order to host a birthday party that met, or tried to meet, their child's expectations. If their efforts fell short of reaching those expectations, the mothers expressed guilt. Jacqueline, when discussing an expensive restaurant that her son wanted to go to for his birthday, stated that, "so I want to take him, so I'm like oh my god, I gotta come up with a way." Mothers devoted both time and financial resources to meeting their children's expectations, but certain items were often described as more essential to obtain than others. For example, birthday cake was often described as essential; Mary Ann stated, "I guess it doesn't really matter the cost [of purchasing the cake], because, it's a birthday cake."

In addition to being sensitive to their children's expectations, many mothers were also sensitive to the expectations of other child and adult guests (both friends and family). Half of the mothers interviewed indicated that the expectations of these guests added an additional pressure to their party planning and hosting, as they believed these guests were also expecting a specific type of social event—an elaborate birthday party that reflected the mothers' ability to meet the requirements of intensive mothering and conspicuous consumption. Although the mothers believed that the expectations of other guests did not differ significantly from the expectations of the mothers' children, mothers who indicated that they were aware of family and friend expectations also indicated that they felt responsible for a greater number of people's satisfaction.

Half of the mothers interviewed also indicated that in addition to the perceived expectations of the guests, they had their own expectations and desires for the parties they planned. Sometimes these expectations were related to the theme and inclusion of others in the party. Anna admitted that her youngest children were too young to care about the theme of their birthday party, but that she did care. Laney said that, "I'd say that if I could have it my way, I probably would have, you know, a big party every year." Mothers' expectations were often

expressed as a comparison that they would like to match: "I know other single moms who really go all out every year for the birthday" (Laney). However, as frequently as mothers expressed a desire to conform to the ideals of intensive mothering, they also expressed a desire to modify or resist those ideals. As Daphne encouraged, "you just try to do the best with whatcha got."

The importance of meeting birthday party ideals expressed by one's children, or implied by social comparisons, reflects the mothers' gendered and classed positions. While these mothers do not have the luxury of extensive financial resources, the time and effort it takes to create an idealized birthday "event" seemed of special significance. The mothers were constantly aware that the expectations for the party were above what they could afford, and as a result, they were constantly working to bridge that difference or manage their children's expectations. The fact that half of the mothers in this study were single, and that thirteen of them discussed their party planning in terms of gendered carework, further illuminates the efforts that women, especially poor women, must make to host a party that had a "successful" outcome.

Mothers' Decision-Making

Mothers provided several different strategies for balancing their children's expectations and their financial situation. Some described a "traditional" party, the cultural conception of the ideal birthday that includes the birthday child's family and friends gathered at a commercial party place with themed decorations, a lavish birthday cake with lit candles, and a pile of gifts. Other women clarified "ideal for me" meant large celebrations with extended family, a trip to a pizza place or mini-amusement park with a few close friends, a get-together with family and friends with BBQ at a public park, or a dinner out at a restaurant with immediate family. Some viewed the ideal party they had described as unattainable, at least with their current resources, while for others, their ideal party mirrored the type they were accustomed to organizing. Each mother went on to detail how she organized her children's birthday parties.

Financially-dependent planning characterized most of the participants' narratives. The resources each mother could secure depended on her contextual financial situation and varied over time. "I do a total budget depending on what's going on in my life at the time. And what my budget is depends on what I will do" (Ruth). Planning birthday parties was often described as a general structure from which items could be added or removed depending on monetary constraints. Some mothers had several different models for party planning that could be adapted to fit within their budget. "Sometimes [I do themed parties]. If I have the money, yeah. If I don't have the money, it's just a certain color. Pink for girls, blue for boys, I'm a bargain shopper" (Karen).

Mothers knew where to shop and they gave specific item lists and price estimates. Several mothers named stores where important items could be obtained for the lowest cost, like the Dollar Store where mothers could consistently purchase small items for prizes, goodies bags, and other favors

cheaply. One participant outlined in great detail how she budgeted for her son's birthday parties:

You can go to [the grocery store] and you can get two packages of hot dogs for somewhere between \$2 and \$3 depending if they're on sale or not; two packages of hot dog buns – you want the store brand, not even the store brand, the cheaper than store brand, like the “maximum value,” the really cheapy-cheapy stuff—you can get those for less than a dollar a piece. So you can feed everyone for like \$5? Go to the Dollar Store, they've got 2 liters of soda for like \$1. So you can get grape, orange and Tiki Punch or something for \$3. And you can also [get] plates, napkins, forks, spoons, knives all a dollar each. That makes \$8. \$13 you've got the food, the plates, and the drinks. (Daphne)

Although Daphne's description offered the most precise budgeting, many of the mothers interviewed provided dollar estimates on food, plates, utensils, goodie bags, and decorations, including where to shop to find the “best deals.”

Although all of the mothers operated with limited resources, they made different choices about how, and how much, of their resources to put into birthday parties. How they were able to collect sufficient resources to put on birthday parties, and how they allocated those resources, indicates what they perceived as the most important elements of children's birthday parties.

Mothers with family members living nearby often relied on family for financial support. Others worked cooperatively with friends, helping out and getting help from close female friends. For some mothers, relying on family for financial support seemed like a given. “I will usually figure something out. My mom will contribute somehow. It's a blessing she is involved.” (Ruth) For others, asking for or expecting help from friends or family was out of the question:

“Do they help out, if your family members are coming to the party?”

(Interviewer)

“I'm sure they would if I asked them to, but I feel like I have to do it.” (Laney)

The friend and family networks mothers described revealed that in some cases, mothers with minimal financial resources were able to put on successful birthday parties because family members contributed time, support, and money. For instance, if Karen “didn't have the money, my brother always came through.” Other mothers with similar personal resources were unable to maintain the scope of celebration from year to year because they did not have support networks to rely on.

Careful financial planning, creative use of existing resources, management

of resources provided by support networks, and knowing where to shop, allowed mothers to stretch their resources. Laney relied on her brother's help so that she never had to "break no bad news to [her] son and tell him, oh sorry," that she "wasn't able to get no cake and balloons or nothing like that." She used the resources provided by her support network to ensure she could achieve the outcome most important to her, meeting her son's expectations. Sandy made birthday cakes for her children because it was easier and cheaper than purchasing a cake; she used the money she saved to make her parties "look as nice as possible." Anna described potluck-style family gatherings where "everyone will bring something." The family support eased the financial burden as well as the stress of preparing food for a large group. The ways mothers managed their personal financial resources, support from family and friends based on their contextual financial situation highlighted the most important outcomes—for Laney, not disappointing her son, for Sandy, making it look like a party, and for Anna, bringing her family together.

Measuring Outcomes

Children's Satisfaction

Whether it was receiving the perfect gift, enjoying time with friends, or having a "Cars" themed cake, all of the mothers interviewed described observing their children's satisfaction as one of the most important outcomes of a birthday party. Although all of the mothers interviewed addressed their children's satisfaction as an important outcome of a birthday party, they constructed satisfaction in different ways.

Many of the mothers discussed making their child feel "special" or "recognized" as an important outcome of the birthday celebration. For them, a child's birthday was their day, a day characterized by extra efforts to acknowledge, honor, or treat the birthday child. Laney said that she thought it was "important that you just recognize that it's their day, and just make them feel special, put some emphasis on their birthday and give them something special." The "specialness" of the birthday also came from the recognition and singling out of the child, especially from siblings. "It's their day. It's not nobody else's day. Today is my day; they get that feeling that it's special, you know" (Mary Ann).

For other mothers, their perception of their children's satisfaction hinged on the child's happiness. Mothers described successful parties as ones after which their children verbally expressed happiness or demonstrated through their behavior that their experience of the party had been happy. "He was just a happy little camper, you know, just as happy as a kid can be. So that was one of the most successful birthday parties that he's had" (Marnie). Similarly, the most important thing for Karen was "for my kid to be happy. My kid to tell me they had fun. When my child says, I had fun Mom, and I loved it."

Some mothers viewed successful birthday parties as those through which they could give their children what they wanted. With limited financial resources,

many mothers felt they could not provide everything their child asked for, so being able to get them the most important thing they asked for became critical to producing children's satisfaction. Anna described being able to give her kids "whatever they are into, whatever it is that they ask for, to be able to give that to them, even in a moderate way," as the ideal birthday party. Giving children what they wanted did not always mean presents. For Jillian, birthday presents were something other guests provided. "Usually I don't buy them presents for their birthdays," she explained. "They get presents from everyone else. They get like 25 gifts or something ridiculous." Instead, she constructed elaborate themes by transforming "basic" cups, napkins, gift bags, and streamers into monkeys because her son is a "monkey freak." Coordinating the theme was the most important thing to her, because it was the most important thing to her children. Much like other mothers with greater financial resources, for poor mothers being able to provide the party, the theme, the gifts, or the guests that their children asked for or that they understood to be desired meant the party was a success. However, their ability to give these things to their child was compromised by their financial situation.

Mothers' Satisfaction

For many of the mothers interviewed, personal satisfaction with birthday parties was intimately tied to their children's satisfaction. Marnie described one of her son's "truly successful" birthday parties, "one of his favorites" as the one she "really enjoyed." As she recalled the great weather, plenty of gifts, friends, and family that delighted her son, she mused, "it was a fun day." The birthdays she described as "successful" and "wonderful," the ones she really enjoyed, were the ones she framed as her son's favorites, days when he had a great time. For Mary Ann, it was a party that her parents took over—when her daughter was "spoiled" by her grandparents—that she described as good.

In addition to the satisfaction mothers derived from watching their children enjoy their birthday parties, several of the mothers interviewed noted that anything that eased the stress of organizing or hosting that party was satisfying. Having her parents take over planning and hosting her daughter's birthday also meant Mary Ann did not have to cook for and clean up after the party. She could then watch her daughter enjoy her party without taking on many of the responsibilities of organizing the party. Having the available resources to purchase items, rather than make them, also relieved mothers of stress and anxiety. Although they acknowledged that making a cake was significantly cheaper, Selma, Karen, and Laney all preferred buying the birthday cake from the grocery store. Purchasing the birthday cake saved mothers time, hassle, and relieved anxiety, stress, and fear.

The Most Important Outcomes

It is not surprising that all of the mothers interviewed noted children's satisfaction as an important outcome of children's birthday parties. It is also

understandable that parties that went smoothly, without accident or incident, which satisfied hosts, guests, and children were described as the most successful. What is notable is the range of experiences that mothers characterized as “successful” outcomes.

Anna noted the wide gap between what she considered the “ideal” children’s birthday party and what was financially feasible. She scoffed at unlimited guests, expensive gifts, commercial party places, and providing everything her children asked for, but she described giving them what they wanted as the most important outcome of the birthday party. By actively shaping her children’s expectations, setting limits, and prioritizing, Anna was able to regard her children’s birthday parties as successful. Similarly, Laney described how she “switches it up” from year to year so as not to create expectations she could not meet. Thus, she was able to continually meet and satisfy her children’s expectations.

Mothers were able to reconcile not having the resources to create the “ideal” child’s birthday party with the importance of their children’s satisfaction by reframing the idea of a “successful” child’s birthday party. By recognizing that the cultural “ideal” of a child’s birthday party was realistically outside their financial ability, these mothers were able to negotiate a new definition of “successful” that they could conceivably achieve. Scaling back “everything that they want” to “the most important thing” allows poor mothers to view their children’s expectations as satisfied and the birthday parties they organize as successful.

Discussion

The mothers interviewed for this study supported Lee et al.’s (2009) descriptions of a common cultural “ideal” or “traditional” child’s birthday party, one that required extensive time and financial resources. Hays’ (1998) conception of intensive mothering captures the combination of extensive tangible resources and intensive carework required to satisfy the cultural ideal.

Both mothers’ and children’s expectations of birthday parties, they revealed, were shaped by this broad socially constructed ideal. Though their children’s satisfaction was the most important outcome for all of the mothers interviewed, it was not as simple as accepting social expectations and attempting to achieve them. Mothers negotiated cultural expectations and their contextual financial situations using financially-dependent planning strategies, actively managing their children’s expectations, and reframing their understanding of “successful” children’s birthday parties.

Mothers knew where to shop; they described themselves as “bargain hunters.” Most of the mothers interviewed detailed sophisticated strategies for obtaining party supplies cheaply. Mothers often related in great detail the “best” places to shop and knew specific costs of individual items. The intricate knowledge of where to shop for which items represented a significant resource for many of the mothers included in the study. Mothers drew on these skills and knowledge, using creative, financially-dependent strategies to organize

parties within their limited budget.

Actively managing children's expectations also emerged as a prominent theme. Anna set a limit on the number of guests her children could invite in order to give her children the kind of party they wanted. Laney changed the type of party each year as a way to manage her children's expectations. Mary Ann welcomed financial assistance from her parents as a way of off-setting costs. By setting limits on the number of guests, offering financially feasible options, and balancing their use of available resources, mothers were able to organize successful birthday parties.

Importantly, none of the women interviewed viewed successful birthday parties as an impossibility. Several mothers acknowledged guilt or disappointment at not being able to give their children everything they wanted in terms of birthday parties. Other mothers said even if they could afford it, they would not host expensive, over-the-top celebrations; they are not "those kinds" of people. Though none of them had the resources to consistently achieve this ideal, they celebrated their children's birthdays in ways that produced both children's and mothers' satisfaction, altering their framing of "successful" to reflect their financial situation.

Although the narratives collected for this study suggested a large degree of consistency with the results of previous work (Clarke, 2007; Hays, 1998; Lee et al., 2009), the findings may not be broadly generalizable. The racial composition of the study participants generally reflected the census data for the region studied, but Hispanic women were underrepresented in the study. One explanation for the small number of Hispanic women included may be a language barrier; several women approached for the study did not speak English, and the interviewers did not speak Spanish. Another possible explanation may be that significant portion of the Hispanic population living in poverty in the region is undocumented and therefore ineligible for government assistance, excluding them from the sampled population. Using receipt of government assistance as a marker of socioeconomic class excluded mothers living in poverty who did not seek government assistance, but allowed researchers to evaluate the experiences of social stigma associated with welfare.

Despite its limitations, the study reveals a significant awareness of a culturally constructed social ideal children's birthday party and suggested sophisticated strategies poor mothers employ in negotiating the social ideal within their financial context. There are, however, still many unexplored facets of children's birthday parties. Future research could compare poor mothers' experiences of negotiating expectations with those mothers who have greater financial resources. Future studies might also include a broader sample of women, including those living in poverty, but not receiving government assistance, those without family or partners to provide assistance, or those living in homeless or domestic violence shelters. The work of organizing children's birthday parties within a particular contextual financial situation offers a complex and rich opportunity for examining cultural ideals, expectations, satisfaction, and carework.

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