

The mother and the magazine:

Sociologists Deirdre Johnston and Debra Swanson discuss their recent research on the representation of mothers in popular magazines with the MMO.

In her groundbreaking book The Feminine Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan developed her argument about the cause and consequences of the "crisis in women's identity" with a an analysis of representations of women and wives in popular magazines from the pre- and post-war years. Friedan found that in the late 1930s and early 1940s, magazines were more likely portray high-spirited "New Women" who ventured boldly forth to create "a life of their own". But by late 1940s and 1950s, these images of independence and confidence were replaced by depictions of women Friedan described as "Happy Housewife Heroines": wives and mothers whose personal ambitions were fulfilled by successfully navigating the minor challenges of marriage and family life.

Friedan – who began her career writing for women's magazines – had a profound appreciation for the potential of popular media to shape cultural ideas of what is "normal" for women and families, and was frustrated that editors of the most popular women's magazines steadfastly refused to include regular features on serious social issues of the day. According to two recently published studies by sociologists Deirdre Johnston and Debra Swanson on representations of mothers in popular magazines, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Contemporary women's magazines that target women of child-bearing and child-rearing age tend to project a skewed image of mothers and motherhood that confines the primary activities of women with children to "the house, the yard and the car".

When Johnston and Swanson engaged in a systematic study of women's magazines published in 1998 and 1999, they discovered a distinct pattern of mixed messages and a perpetuation of negative myths about mothers and motherhood. The researchers noted that readers of popular magazines "are inundated with contradictory messages that affirm a particular mother role and simultaneously condemn a mother for achieving it." They also determined that mothers participating in the paid workforce and Mothers of Color were significantly under-represented in the content they examined. Johnston and Swanson concluded that on the whole, the magazines that mothers are most likely to read today overwhelmingly portray mothers as White, middle class, and exclusively rooted in the roles and responsibilities of domestic life. In the following interview with the MMO, Johnston and Swanson describe other highlights of their recent reports.

MMO: How did you become interested in representations of mothers and motherhood as a subject for formal study?

DJ & DS: As mothers ourselves, we experience the tensions of balancing work and family. We are enmeshed in the myths of motherhood that create cultural ideals about who is a "good mother" and who is not. On days that we went into the office, we felt guilty, crying as we left our young children at childcare. On other days, we stayed home, watching the clock, waiting for each painful minute to go by, calling a spouse at the office, waiting desperately for an adult to walk through the front door. To answer our own questions, we decided to research motherhood, how it is perceived by popular culture (through magazines) and then later through interviews with other mothers of young children.

MMO: Why did you target popular women's magazines for your research? Which magazines did you focus on, and why?

DJ & DS: Women's magazines target women between the ages of 25-45. Women are confronted with magazine messages in their homes, doctor's offices, and grocery stores. For mothers who are seeking affirmation as they negotiate the most dramatic identity transformation of their adult lives, magazines are one source of information. Whether mothers model the maternal expectations of these magazines or use them as sites of resistance, magazines impact us as we negotiate our own mother-identity in relation to the maternal expectations of the culture.

For our study, five magazines were selected based on the highest circulation for mothers (*Good Housekeeping*, *Family Circle*), for parents (*Parent's Magazine*), and for working mothers (*Working Mother*, *Family Fun*). The entire content of four issues of each of these publications over the 12-month period of the study comprised the sample for analysis. Eighteen hundred thirty one text units (articles, side bars, letters, advertisements, columns, etc.) were analyzed.

MMO: In one of your recent projects, you systematically analyzed the occurrence of conflicting messages about the qualities and capabilities attributed to mothers – for example, you evaluated sections of text to determine if the content represented mothers as either competent or incompetent in the domestic or public sphere. What were your key findings?

DJ & DS: We investigated the cultural stereotype that employed mothers are incompetent in the domestic sphere, and that at-home mothers are incompetent in the public sphere. To our surprise, employed mothers were not presented as incompetent in the domestic sphere. At-home mothers were.

At-home mothers were presented as incompetent 34% of the time (compared to only 4% of all employed mothers). For example, at-home mothers are quoted in magazines saying, "I got up to put the bottle in the warmer and put the phone in the warmer instead," or "I had slipped the new diaper on without removing the old one. She'd been sitting in the same soggy diaper for hours." Mothers were presented as competent in both public and private spheres in less than 10% of all depictions of mothers. Representation of mothers as competent in public sphere alone (this means outside the home, yard or car) was less than 1%. An at-home mother reading women's magazines is presented with a conundrum: magazine's perpetuate expectations of domestic success yet represent at-home mothers as incompetent in achieving this success.

MMO: In a second project, you examined how the ideology of motherhood – either the traditional ideology of selfless motherhood or non-traditional ideology that is more favorable to mothers' participation in the paid workforce – is transmitted through popular women's magazines. Based on your findings, how would you describe the prevailing ideological model of contemporary motherhood? What signals does this send about how mothers should look, think and act?

DJ & DS: We found that women's magazines perpetuate a traditional motherhood ideology: Mothers are White, at-home and consumed by domestic tasks. Women of Color are represented in these magazines in the work force, but not as mothers. This sends a cultural message that White children are privileged; they alone are worthy of full-time at-home mothers.

Census figures indicate 62% of mothers are employed. Yet, employed mothers are represented in only 12 % of the mother-related content in these magazines. When employed mothers do appear, their presence in the public sphere is presented in conjunction with their pursuit of domestic success. The message seems to be that one must be an exemplary mother to justify employment outside the home. Imagine portrayals of men having to establish their paternal success in public sphere contexts.

At-home mothers are almost always presented in domestic pursuits (89% of all at-home mother portrayals present the mother in the home, yard or car, compared to only 45% of employed mother portrayals). When mothers are presented in any activity outside the home it is almost always an employed mother.

What this means is that the expectations presented in the popular culture of magazines persist in presenting the “ideal American mother” as White, at-home, and removed from involvement in public issues. In effect, a traditional motherhood ideology is preserved, and those who fall outside of the “cult of good motherhood” – on the basis of race, employment status, or community involvement – are suspect. Foucault (a modern social critic) talks about how cultural power is preserved by privileged classes by creating role expectations that can only be fulfilled by the dominant group, thereby ensuring the failure of non-privileged groups. This raises the questions, how does the representation of American mothers as White, at-home and fully fulfilled by domestic pursuits affect mothers who are not-White, employed, or otherwise defined by multiple identities and roles?

MMO: You also looked for representations of mothers’ emotional experience in magazine content – why did you decide to evaluate the aspect of maternal feeling as part of your study, and what did you learn?

DJ & DS: We were intrigued with the maternal bliss myth – that motherhood is to be the joyful culmination of every woman’s desires. This myth attributes unhappiness and dissatisfaction to the failure of the mother. We were also intrigued with the popular representation of employed mothers as tired, guilty and busy. In our study we found at-home mothers were portrayed as unhappy, not proud, and confused/overwhelmed more often than employed mothers. Yet, employed mothers were not presented as tired, busy and guilty any more frequently than at-home mothers. In a paradoxical way these representations create dependence in both employed and at-home mothers. Employed mothers are happy and proud, but are underrepresented, suggesting that it is the rare woman who can make this work. At-home mothers are frequently represented, but are portrayed more often as unhappy and confused, which may in effect make them more dependent upon the magazines for expert opinions and advice. For at-home mothers, the maternal bliss myth is perpetuated: “Unhappy? Dissatisfied? Buy a magazine and a few products and you too will be a happy, successful woman and mother.”

MMO: What trends did you observe concerning references to mothers’ sense of self? How often were mothers represented as owning or acting on personal interests that were completely unrelated to children and family?

DJ & DS: Selflessness is presented in magazines as a maternal virtue. In women’s magazines, non-mothers are motivated to do or buy things to be good to self. Employed mothers are encouraged to do or buy things to combine self and family needs. At-home mothers, by contrast, are encouraged to do or buy things to be good mothers. Only 3% of all at-home mother representations encouraged them to do something to be good to self.

When we analyzed mother identities, we found that 31% of the at-home mothers are presented with no self-identity information (e.g., no reference is made to character or personal interests). At-home mothers are represented with a uni-dimensional identity defined by serving others in 62% of their portrayals. In contrast, employed mothers are presented with multiple identities 70% of the time.

The representations of mothers, with a primary focus on an identity other than mother occurred in only 8% of all mother portrayals. This reinforces a cultural message that mothers’ independent roles are a threat to good mothering. It is possible for magazines to present at-home mothers with independent interests and identities outside of family responsibilities; it is also possible to construct advertising or editorial motivations that promote an idea because it is good for a mother and her family. But magazines don’t.

MMO: In your study, how often were mothers depicted as politically engaged or actively pressing for social change?

DJ & DS: There are plenty of opportunities for magazines to portray mothers involved in social and political change in their communities. Yet the magazines we analyzed focused on introspective, self-related content, to the neglect of global and social issues. The results of our study show that mothers are still confined to the home. At-home mothers, in particular, were not associated with knowledge or influence outside the home; indeed, they were not even seen outside the home.

We also found that the flow of information in these magazines is uni-directional. Less than 2% of magazine content depicted information flow from the private to the public sphere (e.g., a woman using her mother experience in the workplace, or using her mother position to advocate for policy changes). The lack of representation of mothers' involvement or even appearance in the public sphere, and an absence of examples of private sphere influence on public sphere policy, may affect a reader's ability to engage the public sphere where social change occurs.

MMO: Was there a significant difference in the way employed mothers and at-home mothers were represented in the content you examined?

DJ & DS: The most dramatic contrast is that employed mothers are presented in less than 10% of all mother presentations, but are presented as competent and happy, and at-home mothers are presented in 90% of all mother presentations, but are frequently presented as incompetent and unhappy.

When we analyzed how mothers were depicted interacting with their children we found that at-home mothers were most frequently presented as providers, protectors and playmates. This provider role perpetuates a traditional female stereotype that love and nurturance is conveyed through food. The protector role justified the restriction of mother and children from the "dangerous" public sphere. The playmate role reflects a neo-traditional perspective that places the children, rather than the father, as the *raison d'être* of the family.

The traditional nature of these roles is apparent when we see how employed mothers are depicted interacting with their children. Employed mothers are portrayed less frequently than at-home mothers as necessity providers, and twice as frequently as loving nurturers. This is consistent with a nurturing parent ideology that focuses less on parental authority and discipline and more on development of self-esteem, individualism, and social responsibility. Employed mothers were also depicted interacting with their children while working, thereby demonstrating multiple identities (either through homework or employment) in addition to their mother-identity. While employed mothers are presented in a positive light, the employed mother reader quickly realizes her short-comings. The "good mother" as created by women's magazines provides "Welcome Home Brownies" for her children and does not expose her child to public sphere daycare.

MMO: The popular media is notorious for fueling the crossfire in the "mother wars" – the reported friction between mothers who participate in the paid workforce and those who don't. Beyond high-profile feature articles with titles like "Mom vs. Mom", does your research suggest that women's magazines also send more subtle cues about the clash of traditional and feminist ideals?

DJ & DS: The Mommy War rhetoric makes mothers defensive; it undermines our confidence and makes us second-guess our mothering. Lacking confidence in our mothering abilities, we are vulnerable to marketers selling parenting expertise — i.e., women's magazines. Specifically, we found that less than one percent of mother-related magazine content addressed any facet of ambivalence about work-family balance. The refusal to even acknowledge that women are passionately committed to and/or conflicted about their employment/at-home decision makes work-family choices a non-issue. Since mothers are not allowed to acknowledge this ambivalence, they often make the decision to work or stay-home, and then become entrenched in defending their position. With mothers fighting each other and second-guessing their competence and roles, social change that would benefit all families — quality childcare, flexible work, co-parenting, and tax benefits for at-home mothers — is ignored.

MMO: Magazine publishers are in the business of selling magazines — is it likely that they promote certain representations of mothers and motherhood because they believe it improves the market for their product?

DJ & DS: Market potential at first seems like a plausible explanation, yet it cannot account for the facts. Employed mothers represent a viable market in numbers and income, and are the majority of mothers, yet they are underrepresented in women's magazines. Women of Color are also a viable market; market research indicates that African-American women spend more than White women on consumer goods, high-end merchandise and new products. One might argue that these magazines target White Women and it is, therefore, not surprising to find a lack of representation of Women of Color. This argument doesn't hold up, however, because Women of Color are represented in 40% of the portrayals of women in the workplace. Why do these same magazines not portray Women of Color as mothers? As for at-home mothers, we could speculate that their portrayal as incompetent makes them more dependent upon the expert advice offered in these magazines.

MMO: What do you think is the potential impact of the prevalence of mixed messages about mothers and motherhood in popular media?

DJ & DS: The women's magazines analyzed present messages that cumulatively promote particular mother identities and then summarily condemn the promoted identity. For example at-home mothers are targeted with messages for domestic success yet are portrayed as incompetent in the domestic sphere. These no-win doublebinds set mothers up for failure; mothers experience guilt and feelings of inadequacy no matter what they do.

Combined with messages that restrict mothers from participation in the public sphere, these messages undermine the power of mothers to change the conditions that bind them.

The messages undermining the self-efficacy of at-home mothers, and the lack of representation of employed mothers, help us to understand how we have arrived at the current Mother Wars. If mothers were empowered by the culture to feel confident in their abilities and roles they would not be defensive and feel the need to justify their personal decisions by denigrating the choices of others.

MMO: Do you plan to develop this line of research further?

DJ & DS: We are writing a book based on interviews with 100 mothers. The book, *To Work or Not To Work: What Every Mother Needs to Know Before She Decides to Work, Work Part-Time, or Stay At Home*, presents a balanced view of the pros and cons of each decision to help a mother make an informed choice and develop strategies for how to best live out that choice. In this book we dare to broach the politically incorrect possibility that our work/family choices do affect our children, our sense of self, and our marriages. We suggest that there is no "right answer" — as promoted by the rhetoric of the Mommy Wars — rather, there is only an answer that is right for you.

Deirdre D. Johnston is an associate professor and chair of Communication Studies at Hope College. She has a Ph.D. in Communication Studies from the University of Iowa. **Debra Harvey Swanson** is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Social Work at Hope College. She received her Ph.D. from The Catholic University of America. They are authors of a number of research studies on motherhood published in academic journals such as *Sex Roles*, *Journal of Association of Research on Mothering*, *Mass Communication and Society*, and *Women in Higher Education*. They have also presented at numerous conferences on motherhood issues and research. In the process, they have shared their own joys and frustrations as mothers with other mothers facing similar choices.

The information used in this interview is published in the following journals:

Johnston, Deirdre D. and Swanson, Debra H. (2003).
Invisible mothers: A content analysis of motherhood ideologies and myths in magazines.
Sex Roles, 49(July).

Johnston, Deirdre D. and Swanson, Debra H. (2003).
Undermining mothers: A content analysis of the representation of mothers in magazines.
Mass Communication & Society, 6(3).

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Please address all inquiries to: editor@mothersmovement.org