

**Charmed Circle of Motherhood:
How Discourses of Motherhood Discredit and Empower
Young and Low-Income Mothers**

by

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Dedication

To my immediate, original and extended family,
including those living only in my heart.

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Abstract

Public and political debate blame the childbearing behaviors of young low-income women for their economic struggles while ignoring the role of structural inequality in the negative outcomes they and their children experience. Research showing that without increased access to quality education and living wage jobs, low-income teenaged women experience only *slightly* worse outcomes than low-income women who wait until their 20s to have children has failed to shift this blame. I argue that this phenomenon is driven by the power and ubiquity of dominant discourses of motherhood which shape the way society understands these mothers as individuals, citizens and parents.

Through an analysis of how young low-income mothers negotiate dominant discourses of motherhood as they construct understandings of themselves as mothers, I make visible the discursive dynamics through which they continue to be positioned as bad mothers (e.g., “welfare queens”) and challenge the assumption that young low-income women are inherently flawed mothers. My analysis of thirty-three interviews conducted with both Black and white low-income mothers reveals that they employ the dominant discourse of the good mother to challenge the stigma of the welfare queen; however, their arguments that their love and self-sacrifice are sufficient to prove they are good mothers reproduces the idea that women should be required to give so much of themselves with so little social support in order to be recognized as

good mothers. Furthermore, their claims leave invisible the reality that meeting the criteria of good mothering requires a great deal of privilege many women cannot access.

I further demonstrate that the lack of alternative images of good mothers in dominant culture obscures the fact that many low-income mothers work as hard and use (appropriately) different parenting logics than those of middle-class mothers. As a result, dominant discourses of motherhood remain unchallenged and policy makers and the public continue to blame the difficulties young low-income mothers and their children experience on their presumed weaknesses as mothers; and so neither the mothers nor policy makers recognize the importance of seeking out/providing resources necessary to remediate the structural barriers that are primarily responsible for those difficulties.

Chapter 1

Introduction & Overview

Stacy, a 34-year-old Black woman, has borne seven children. She became pregnant with her first son when she was fourteen, after dating a man in order to secure food for herself and her four siblings who were being abused and neglected by their aunt. Her second son was conceived after her foster mother's son raped her when she was fifteen. Both of these children were removed from her custody because she was a ward of the state and deemed too young to care for them. At the age of 17 she became pregnant with her third child, a daughter, while completing the living skills program mandated by the foster care system in lieu of high school. After getting married at the age of twenty, Stacy bore four more children. She goes to great lengths to care for the five children she is raising: they have all attended pre-school programs, after school and summer enrichment programs and summer camps and they are never without shelter, food and clean clothing. Resources for food, clothing, rent and educational enrichment come from a variety of social service programs that she energetically searches for and supplements with money made from hair braiding and cash payments from studies like mine. She actively seeks parenting advice, especially for constructive ways to discipline her children. She remains married to her husband, who disappears for days at a time, rarely has employment and does not help with the home or childcare, because she believes her children need a father.

Stacy loves her children dearly and describes herself as a good mother who wants the best for her children: "I want them to graduate from [high] school and go to college and try to further their education before they start having children and I really want them to just graduate and go to college and find somebody, don't rush into no relationship...I just want them to have a better life...a good life".

Although Stacy and other young low-income mothers consider themselves to be good mothers, the general public, for instance, a woman shopping at Target, Bill O'Reilly or a member of Congress considering changes to welfare policy, do not recognize women like Stacy as good mothers (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hancock 2004). Instead low-income mothers' race, teenaged childbearing and/or reliance on public assistance evoke the discourse of the welfare queen. This discourse provides a ready-made image that disregards the women's maternal devotion and instead imagines them as women who have irresponsibly had more children than they can support because they have so little self-control and prefer to live off welfare rather than to get respectable jobs (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hancock 2004; Hays 2003). According to our society's ideologies of motherhood, if Stacy and other mothers like her really cared about their children they would not have brought them into their impoverished lives but instead would have completed high school, attained college degrees, stable, well-paying jobs and/or stable marriages before having children. Mothers who fail to follow this pathway are, therefore, perceived as inherently unfit mothers.

Although public and political opinion continues to ascribe to this view of young low-income mothers and their role in the perpetuation of poverty, a growing body of research challenges this viewpoint. Some studies have shown, for example, positive behavioral responses by teenaged mothers (Hotz et al. 2005; SmithBattle 2007) and even health advantages to having children while young (Geronimus 1996). Additionally, in his book, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged* (2007), Frank Furstenberg argues that research that better accounts for selectivity (for example, comparing sisters or comparing peers who had miscarriages to those who had live births) or that follows low-income teen mothers further into adulthood show that public and political perceptions are based on a misconception that teen childbearing has a powerful affect on the life course of low-income teenage mothers and their children. Instead, Furstenberg argues, once selectivity is better (albeit still partially) accounted for, the dramatic negative effects of teen childbearing are reduced to small effects and when mothers and their children are followed further into their life spans, there is evidence that the mothers are able to recover educationally and economically to the point where they are not very different from similarly situated women who waited until their 20s to have children.

These empirical findings turn assumptions about cause and effect on their head: instead of teen childbearing causing negative outcomes and perpetuating poverty, teen childbearing and many of the negative outcomes associated with it should be seen as being *caused by* poverty:

results suggest that the campaign to lower teen childbearing, while certainly desirable from a public policy perspective, was fueled by a misguided contention that it would reap large

benefits as both an antipoverty strategy and a way of strengthening the family. It could not deliver on either of these objectives because policymakers failed to account for the fact that the timing of first births among highly disadvantaged women is largely *a marker of, not an important causal factor* in shaping, the life course of low-income women and their children. Added to a multitude of other conditions that are part and parcel of growing up in disadvantage—poverty, poor education, minority status, family instability, lack of stable paternal involvement, health deficiencies, and so on—early childbearing may well contribute to poor outcomes in later life, on average, but it does not play a singular or even an especially powerful role in the creation of social disadvantage, as many social scientists, myself once included, believe. (Furstenberg 2007:162, emphasis added)

Given these findings, then, why are policy makers and media pundits not asking how we can prevent or remediate poverty in order to decrease teen childbearing, health problems, low-educational attainment, etc.? Why does the question continue to be: how can we prevent teen childbearing in order to decrease poverty, poor health outcomes, low-educational attainment, etc.?

In this project I argue that a part of the answer to this question lies in the power and ubiquity of dominant discourses of motherhood and the ideology of individual responsibility embedded within them. Dominant public discourses are important in the shaping of public opinion, policy and identity. The discourse of the welfare queen or welfare mom, the current incarnation of the social category of the bad mother, has been shown to have significant impact on public opinion and policies and, therefore, on the social support available to low-income mothers (Hancock 2004). Moreover, women of color, immigrant women and low-income women of any race or ethnicity, especially those who are unmarried, have all historically been consigned to the category of bad mother, and this continues to be true today (Bell

2009). As a result, these women must contend with the stigma of presumed bad motherhood as they construct understandings of themselves as mothers. Not surprisingly, low-income mothers draw on the discourse of the good (loving, self-sacrificing, devoted) mother (Douglas and Michaels 2004) in their efforts to resist the stigma of bad motherhood.

The power of dominant discourses of motherhood to position young low-income mothers as deficient is apparent even within excellent studies such as Edin and Kefalas' *Promises I Can Keep* (2005). These scholars give readers a mostly sympathetic image of the efforts of poor mothers to survive and help their children survive and hopefully transcend their impoverished and even dangerous social contexts. However, even as they place the blame for the mothers' inability to lift their children out of their economically and socially vulnerable situations on their social locations rather than on the women's shoulders, the authors' analysis unintentionally reproduces the view of these mothers as less effective and agentic than middle-class mothers. Yet, no research has investigated the impact of dominant mothering discourses on mothers' sense of themselves nor asked how they understand their mothering in the context of these discourses.

This innovative study is designed to document and analyze the processes through which young, low-income mothers construct understandings of themselves as mothers and, by centering the perspectives and experiences of marginalized women (Collins 1994), the findings shed light on how dominant ideologies of motherhood shape both the mothers' understandings of themselves and researchers' understandings of their data.

In this project I examine the processes through which Stacy and other young low-income mothers, both Black and white, construct a sense of themselves as good mothers and how dominant cultural discourses of motherhood shape these processes while simultaneously obscuring their often extraordinary efforts to care for their children. My analysis of interviews conducted with both Black and white low-income mothers reveal that these women use the dominant discourse of the good mother, which is based on the ideology of intensive mothering (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996), to challenge the stigma of being stereotyped as welfare queens based on their gender, class, age and, in the case of Black mothers, race (Chapter 4). I further demonstrate how the women's arguments that they are good mothers on the basis of their love and self-sacrifice, the apparently key criteria of good mothering, reinforces the idea that all women should be required to give so much of themselves with so little social support in order to be recognized as good mothers and leaves invisible the reality that meeting the criteria of good mothering requires a great deal of privilege many women do not have (Chapter 5).

Furthermore, I find that society's, scholars' and the mothers' embrace of the discourse of the good mother and the lack of alternative images of good mothers in dominant culture obscures the extra work these women do. In other words, because the discourses of good mothering and bad mothering (the latter built from discourses about teen moms and welfare queens) obscure how structural and institutional barriers make economic and social stability unattainable for most low-income mothers and their children, these mothers—and the public, policy makers and scholars—do not recognize they are working at least as hard and using (appropriately)

different parenting logics than those of middle-class mothers (Chapter 6). As a result, the two primary discourses of motherhood remain unchallenged and, therefore, young, low-income and Black women continue to be blamed by the public and policy makers for their apparent weaknesses as mothers. Furthermore, low-income mothers and policy makers often fail to recognize the importance of seeking out/providing the resources recommended by scholars to remediate these barriers.

My findings demonstrate the need for contextualized research into low-income parenting that will help us understand what these mothers do that is constructive and how we might re-conceptualize successful parenting within different social locations. The findings of such research would help to construct alternative discourses of good parenting, or lend credence to non-dominant discourses of motherhood already circulating within communities but denied validity in dominant society that frame low-income mothers as hard working and deserving of the social support they need. New dominant discourses of good mothering would also serve to challenge the current public and political discourse of intensive mothering that demands that every mother use a particular set of middle-class parenting logics and strategies, and be held solely accountable for her children's future class standing, by giving society (especially parents) a discourse that could be expanded to make visible the various structural constraints parents in different social locations confront while raising their children. Through a contextual analysis of the strategies and logics described by the interview participants, I lay out a framework upon which such discourses might be built (Chapter 6). Without these efforts, recommendations derived from even the most rigorous statistical analysis (e.g., Furstenberg 2007) will

continue to be ineffective in shaping public policy and opinion because the discourses of good and bad motherhood draw upon and reproduce the power of the ideology of personal responsibility and, therefore, preclude an image of a deserving low-income mother.

Intersectionality

The women included in this study all occupy a stigmatized category of motherhood by virtue of their age and economic status at the birth of their first child and most of them remain stigmatized based on their current economic status, marital status and/or race. As a result of the assumptions underlying this stigma, most research on low-income mothers have centered a white middle-class norm in their analysis (why are these mothers not behaving like white middle-class mothers?) rather than the experiences and perspectives of these women. This study is different from previous studies of low-income mothers in two ways: 1) it centers not only the data but the analysis on the experiences of low-income mothers; and 2) it takes an intersectional approach through an assumption that the various configurations of these women's race, class and gender positions (e.g., Black and working class with a high school diploma; white and poor with a GED; Black and working class with a college degree, etc.) impact their lived experiences and allows the salience of any given category to emerge from the data.

Intersectionality makes visible the complex ways in which social categories interact to shape and affect experiences and identities. Activist (particularly feminist) Black women argued for and constructed a theory of intersectionality (the term was

coined by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1991)) that made it clear that political activism, social research, social service programs and public policies could not be effective without an understanding that people not only occupy multiple social categories (i.e., sex, class, gender) but they experience the world differently based on the interaction of those categories (for a succinct review of the development of this theory, see Cole 2009). Intersectionality challenges scholars to understand, for instance, that the experience of being a woman is different for white and Black women and for working class and middle class women. Empirical research that gives analytic primacy to a single social category obscures the complexity of lived experiences and so renders the experiences of marginalized groups invisible (Bettie 2003; McCall 2005). This can be seen in research on teenage mothers that does not account for the ways in which race and social class status impact the experience in addition to the outcomes of teen motherhood. As a result, scholars have sometimes failed to recognize vulnerabilities particular to different racial and/or social class groups as well as opportunities for nuanced support and intervention.

This study is intersectional because 1) it is assumed that the ways women experience and think about motherhood are inflected by their social locations as Black or white working class or poor women, at the same time no one social category is presumed to be most salient; and 2) dominant public discourses of motherhood are understood to be constructed from presumptions about the sexuality, morality and character of adult, middle-class white women (good mothers) versus young, low-income women and women of color (bad mothers). Furthermore, this study

understands that social categories are transformed by each other, so, for example, being poor is qualitatively different if one is white or Black, male or female.

The following analysis discusses race and class based differences among the women that emerged; however, it is not focused on uncovering race differences nor class differences. Instead I strive to allow the perspectives of this heterogeneous group of women who are all positioned as stigmatized mothers to come together to challenge the assumption that the norms of motherhood (i.e., the practices, logics and philosophies of white middle-class mothers) are natural, always the best and equally available to all mothers.

This study will provide a new line of inquiry for scholars investigating the lived experiences of low-income mothers, a challenge to the hegemonic discourse of good motherhood to which all US mothers are held accountable (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996) and the first steps in the construction of discourses that will broaden our images of what a good mother looks and acts like.

Chapter 2

Background Literature

A fact sheet produced by *The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and Unplanned Pregnancy*¹ articulates the way the childbearing of teenaged women and low-income women is framed in public and political discourse:

If more children in this country were born to parents who are ready and able to care for them, we would see a significant reduction in a host of social problems afflicting children in the United States, from school failure and crime to child abuse and neglect. (The National Campaign 2010: 1).

This discourse about young and low-income women's childbearing places the responsibility for "school failure," "crime," and "child abuse and neglect" squarely on the shoulders of young low-income parents, especially unmarried mothers (Hays 1996). Statistics on teenage mothers, reported by organizations such as *Child Trends*, show that children born to young low-income women are at "an increased risk of having a baby themselves," "a higher risk of having academic and behavioral problems in school" and "the sons of teen mothers are also more likely to end up in prison" (Holcomb et al. 2009). Not only are the children of these mothers

¹ An organization founded with the strong endorsement of President Bill Clinton in 1996, the same year he signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (commonly referred to as "Welfare to Work") which dramatically changed services available to poor mothers and their children. The organization is led by a panel of political figures, scholars and media representatives.

disadvantaged by early childbearing, so are the mothers themselves. *Child Trends* also reports that “compared with women who delay childbearing, teen mothers are more likely to drop out of high school and to never graduate” and “are at a higher risk of receiving public assistance and living in poverty” and less likely to be married at 35” (ibid). Furthermore, the “public cost of teen childbearing was \$9.2 billion a year” (ibid).

This dominant discourse around teenaged and low-income parenthood asserts that mothers who are not “ready and able” to care for children, i.e., are young, low-income, women of color and/or single, are entirely responsible for the social problems that affect their children and themselves, presumably because they do not have the parenting skills nor the financial resources to care for their children properly (Hancock 2004; Solinger 1992). The solutions that follow from this logic of individual responsibility focus on changing the behaviors of these individuals. The recommendation included in the *Child Trends* fact sheet quoted above makes this assumption clear:

One important line of defense in helping to reduce the large number and percentage of unintended births among teens is to *help these young people develop positive future aspirations and motivations* so that they want to avoid having or fathering a child during the teen years. Parents, practitioners, community members, and policy makers must continue to be mindful about encouraging teens to postpone child-bearing until young men and women are fully prepared for parenthood. Only then will the problem of “kids having kids” be solved. That day is not yet here. (Holcomb et al. 2009: 5; italics added for emphasis)

Child Trends calls for changes to be made in the aspirations and motivations of low-income young adults—an approach that is common among policy makers and media

pundits. Such an assertion presumes all Americans share the same opportunities and must simply make the right choices and conduct themselves in the correct ways (i.e., finish high school and college, get a secure and well-paying job and get (heterosexually) married in order to take advantage of those opportunities. This logic justifies blaming teenaged low-income men and women for their own and their children's socioeconomic disadvantages and lack of class mobility. Although it is certainly true that low-income children and adults are at high risk for a variety of negative health, educational and social outcomes, the belief that the primary *cause* of these outcomes is young low-income women's childbearing has been strongly challenged.

A growing body of research is showing that teen childbearing is only one of many factors in the negative outcomes associated with teen and low-income motherhood and that pre-existing conditions of mothers' lives may mean that having a baby as a teenager does not significantly alter their life chances (Furstenberg 2007; Geronimus 2003). Structural factors such as poverty, racism, sexism and the public school system's inability/unwillingness to address the needs of pregnant and parenting teens and neighborhood characteristics (e.g., Furstenberg 1976, Harding 2003, Luttrell 2003, Phoenix 1991, SmithBattle 2007) have been shown to be more powerful than early childbearing in shaping the lives of low-income mothers and their children. Furthermore, scholars argue that although these young women face well-documented difficulties, there may be some *positive* outcomes to their childbearing. For instance, Upchurch and McCarthy (1990) examined graduation rates among teen mothers compared to their peers and found that those young women who were still in

school at the time of conception were just as likely to graduate as their non-pregnant/parenting peers, but those who had dropped out of school prior to their pregnancy were less likely than their non-pregnant/parenting peers to return to school and graduate. Another study, however, showed that although teen mothers are less likely to graduate, they are more likely to earn a GED and more likely to work as young adults than non-parenting peers (Hotz et al. 2005). Geronomis' (1996) work suggests there may be advantages for poor urban African-American teens to have babies when they are teens; specifically, they may have *healthier* infants during their mid to late teen years than older African-American mothers because of the health problems related to urban poverty. Furthermore, SmithBattle (2007) explains that:

Other studies suggest teen mothering may promote positive behavioral changes, at least in the short term. For example, pregnant or parenting teens decrease risky behavior and consumption of cigarettes, alcohol, or marijuana, sometimes to rates even lower than their nonpregnant peers (Hope, Wilder, and Watt, 2003; Shanok and Miller, 2005). (410)

Studies such as these bring complexity to the straightforward causal relationship between teen childbearing and negative outcomes that is articulated through the media and policy debates.

The persistence of the belief that young and low-income women are ruining their own and their children's life chances in addition to burdening taxpayers is in large part the result of 1) the framing of low-income women's childbearing as a social problem responsible for the increase in non-marital childbearing and the lack of class mobility among low-income individuals; and 2) the mobilization of stereotypes of

race, class, age and gender in the construction of the discourse of the bad mother and the discourse of the good mother.

The remainder of this chapter will discuss the construction, relevance and power of the dominant discourses of the bad mother and the good mother. It is important to understand the specific ideological underpinnings of each of these discourses separately as this will help us to determine the impact they have in shaping how low-income women understand themselves and other women as mothers and the ways in which society understands low-income women as mothers.

Teen Moms and Welfare Queens: The Discourse of the Bad Mother

Stigmatized mothers are defined through the explicitly race, age, gender and class-based narratives of the teen mom and welfare queen. These narratives, almost always conflated with one another (teen mothers are presumed to be dependent on state aid and mothers on state aid are presumed to have been teenaged mothers (Hancock 2004)), create the impression and expectation that young and/or poor women, especially poor women of color, are inherently bad mothers undeserving of the status associated with good motherhood and, therefore, requiring punitive social policy to curb their deviant behavior.

The discourse of low-income teenaged motherhood asserts that young women bear children in order to fulfill their own needs (Hancock 2004; Luker 1996), ignoring the needs of children for educated, financially stable mothers. It is implied that a woman selfish enough to bring a child into a household with limited means cannot possibly be sacrificial enough to be a good mother. Furthermore, the popular

discourse of “babies having babies” suggests that teenaged women, by virtue of their age, are too immature to fulfill the requirements of a good mother, who must be an expert in protecting her child and actively developing her/his intellect and character (Hays 1996; Douglas and Michaels 2004). This discourse also insists that young and poor women bring children into the world to get a welfare check, a perspective that positions these women as so crass they bring their “kids into the realm of market values...putting a price on their heads” (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 20). Young low-income mothers, therefore, are placed in stark contrast to adult middle-class and wealthy mothers who posit their children as priceless and plan “their pregnancies...so as to mesh their career trajectories, sibling spacing, and financial capabilities” (ibid, 192).

In the media, bad mothers are represented by images of large and/or slovenly, unmarried Black women with several children who have different fathers (Hancock 2004); these women are treated as objects of concern and/or social problems that require intervention. Teen and low-income mothers, particularly Black and poor young mothers, are often depicted as abusive and unfit mothers who yell at, hit or ignore their children, and these images are “not countered by images of welfare mothers tucking their kids in at night...or telling the reporter all that she had to do to feed, clothe, and protect her kids” (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 196). These images corroborate the assertion made through the discourse of the bad mother that low-income women are irresponsible, lazy, lacking ambition, immoral and sexually promiscuous. Political discourse sometimes goes so far as to describe young low-income mothers as animals whose children require public assistance although the

mothers themselves are undeserving (Hancock 2004). A public statement the lieutenant governor of South Carolina, Andre Bauer, made in January 2009 succinctly articulates this discourse:

My grandmother was not a highly educated woman but she told me as a small child to quit feeding stray animals. You know why? Because they breed. You're facilitating the problem if you give an animal or a person ample food supply. They will reproduce, especially ones that don't think too much further than that. And so what you've got to do is you've got to curtail that type of behavior. They don't know any better. (Cary 2010)

Young, low-income and especially Black mothers are depicted in dominant public discourse as immoral, selfish, greedy and undignified—the opposite of the good mother.

Gendered race and class ideologies are at the center of the discourse of the bad mother (Fields 2005; Geronimus 2003; SmithBattle 2007). In the U.S., Black women have historically been constructed as sexually promiscuous, lazy, hyper-fertile and insufficiently nurturing toward their own children (Higginbotham 1993). During the early twentieth century these characteristics were also ascribed to immigrant, working class and poor women, as well as other women of color, to justify punitive social policies and practices. Media images of welfare queens, the symbol of the bad mother in the 1980s, and teenaged welfare mothers, the symbol in the late 1980s and early 1990s, depicted Black women fulfilling race and class stereotypes (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Although originally based on presumptions about single Black women living in poverty, the discourses have broadened to encompass all recipients of public assistance (Hancock 2004) as well as working class women (Douglas and

Michaels 2004), all of whom are now positioned as bad mothers by dominant discourses of motherhood.

An additional, and under-theorized, layer of ideology in motherhood discourses is that of age. An adult woman is an essential component of the good mother while an immature girl is an essential component of the bad mother. These presumptions derive from the naturalized binary of adult-child that positions adults as stable, independent, sexual, rational and agentic and the bearers of power and children, particularly female children, as unstable, dependent, asexual, irrational and passive (James et al. 1998). Sexuality is at the center of this adult/child binary (Renold 2005: 19)—adults are sexual, while normal or healthy children are asexual; therefore, when a female child or teen shows signs of sexual desire or knowledge (e.g., bears a child), adults get anxious and treat her “as deviant and even polluting because she violates the cultural order of age categories” (Thorne 1993: 141). Simultaneously, an unmarried sexually active teenaged girl violates the purity and sexual innocence expected of young women and when she is perceived as agentic in the sense of seeking out or even enjoying sex, she becomes more of a threat—in other words a sexually active teenaged girl also violates sexual gender norms that are especially strict during childhood and young adulthood.

Finally, the constant re-inscription of the “child-like nature” of children is necessary to justify the status quo (i.e., children as passive, dependent and vulnerable and women as their devoted protectors and caretakers). If children were not in need of protection and teaching/training, there would be less imperative for women to devote their energies to them (Thorne 1987), i.e., the imperative of the good mother narrative

would lose power without a sacred, innocent and vulnerable child at its center. A teenaged mother challenges the adult/child binary because she is apparently a fully sexual person who is responsible for caring for a child and yet she is not an adult. This threat to a clear-cut distinction between adult and child causes her to be summarily positioned as deviant.

It is clear that the bad motherhood discourse is constructed from intersections of gender, race, age and class discourses. Low-income women, especially those who are also Black, are presumed to have deviant sexuality and morality and young women who are undeniably sexually active are presumed to be immoral and irresponsible. This mobilization of gender, race, age and class ideologies have proven powerful in the shaping of public policies, medical practices and public opinion because the resulting discourse of bad motherhood conceptualizes “poverty as an individual failing...a consequence of individual failings and deficiencies” (Rank et al. 2003, 4). The U.S. public is inundated with this discourse that convinces them the choices and behaviors of young and low-income mothers (especially if they are also women of color and unmarried) are responsible for these women’s and their children’s life circumstances, while structural and institutional factors remain obscured (Luker 1996). Although nearly all mothers feel their performance as a mother is under constant scrutiny (Lareau 2003; Warner 2005), young and low-income women are presumed to be inherently bad mothers until proven otherwise and are rarely given an opportunity to publicly defend or define themselves (Douglas and Michaels 2004).

Decreases in public assistance in the U.S. for all low-income women and their children, and particularly for low-income Black mothers (Moller 2002), over the last thirty years—the period during which poor Black women took center stage as the symbol of the bad mother (Douglas and Michaels 2004 Hancock 2004; Luker 1996)—illustrate the material impact of the hierarchy of motherhood and the centrality of race, age and class ideologies in its power. The discourse of the bad mother has been used effectively to bring public opinion into line with efforts to cut social services and benefits for women living in poverty (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hancock 2004; Luker 1996; Solinger 1992, 2005). In their book, *Mommy Myth*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) trace the policy effects of narratives about welfare and teenaged mothers. They explain that:

the stereotype of the welfare queen... became part of the common sense about welfare in the mid-1970s [and] was a crucial first step in resenting, vilifying, and punishing all welfare mothers... when Reagan took office, he and his conservative cohorts simply switched around cause and effect. Welfare wasn't an effect of poverty. No, no, no. Welfare was now the *cause* of poverty. (186-187; italics in original)

They further explain that in the 1980s and 1990s,

stereotypes of welfare mothers increased in the news media [and] played a central role in justifying a major shift in public policy away from declaring war on poverty in America to declaring war on welfare, and then, more specifically, on welfare mothers and their kids (176)

As a result of this discursive twist, benefits provided through Aid to Families with Dependent Children dropped and, “according to one estimate, one-third of the

increase in poverty since 1979 would not have occurred had these government cutbacks not taken place” (ibid: 187). However, the discourse of the bad mother helped to obscure the ways in which these policy changes hurt women and children who were living in poverty:

when infant mortality rates increased, when poor women could no longer get prenatal care or birth control information, when poverty rates worsened, it was the poor woman’s fault. (ibid: 188)

Decreases in benefits to mothers and children living below the poverty level occurred again in 1996 when “welfare to work” programs were passed. These programs were designed to move welfare recipients to jobs or work training and they required that no one receive cash assistance for more than five years. Additionally, the new policy allowed states to deny benefits to women who had more children while receiving public assistance as well as to women who were unmarried and under eighteen. Currently, there are proposals in states across the nation as well as in Congress that would further cut public benefits for low-income families. The bad mother discourse, then, does not simply stigmatize young low-income women: it functions in political discourse as justification for the discontinuation of social support services.

The Role of Dominant Cultural Discourses

The power of the discourse of bad motherhood to impact the lives of so many women by determining who is worthy of respect, dignity and access to resources is evidence of the importance of studying cultural discourses in an effort to understand

more about how inequality occurs and is perpetuated. Cultural discourses, which often serve to naturalize powerful ideologies such as individual responsibility, affect individuals' behaviors and sense of self, i.e., they shape how we understand ourselves, what choices we feel are available to us and the meanings of those choices. Sociologists first came to understand the power of ideas such as those embedded in cultural discourses through the theorizing of Max Weber:

In his influential essay on the social psychology of world religions, Weber formulated an approach to social action that combined the pursuit of material interests with the constitutive nature of ideas. He wrote that ideas, or the “world images” created by ideas, “have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest” (Weber 1946, p. 280). In other words, people do not simply have straight-forward interests; instead, they have ideas about their interests. (Steensland 2006: page 1281)

Individuals use cultural discourses to construct personal narratives about themselves: stories that explain who they are and why they do what they do (Somers 1994):

research is showing us that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that “experience” is constituted through narratives that people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives. (Somers 1994: 614)

It is important to note the “limited” nature of available narratives, or discourses.

Dominant discourses are not value-neutral nor democratically constructed; rather they

are created and imposed by the dominant segment of society, yet they have the power to define the meanings of actions and social phenomena, such as motherhood.

Discourses, therefore, have power to constrain the meanings available, particularly to those individuals on the margins who might find them a poor fit (Spivak 1995).

In the late 60s the “culture of poverty” theory (Lewis 1966) proposed that low-income populations and minority racial and ethnic groups deviate from white middle-class behaviors, attitudes and beliefs because they use non-dominant ideologies and discourses to construct their “world images.” This theory led many sociologists to believe that low-income teenagers, particularly Black low-income teenagers, have children as teenagers and/or outside of marriage because their culture accepts and even rewards such behavior. Strong challenges have been levied against this theory, however. David Harding (2007), for example, shows that although it is true that disadvantaged neighborhoods have more variety in “cultural scripts and frames,” there is also “considerable support for conventional norms” within those communities (361). Alford Young (2004) showed the power of dominant discourses about individual responsibility for marginalized Black men isolated within their neighborhoods. These studies imply it is important that we investigate not only how non-dominant groups engage with culturally specific frames but also how they engage with those frames (and the discourses that circulate and reproduce them) that originate in dominant culture.

Unfortunately, although scholars problematize and challenge the way young low-income mothers are imagined, i.e., the discourse of the bad mother, and make suggestions designed to remediate the structural disadvantages low-income mothers

face, they have not adequately understood nor investigated how the discourse of the *good mother* affects the behaviors, identities and perceptions of young low-income mothers, researchers and society.

Dominant Discourses: The Good Mother

In the U.S., the good mother is an adult woman who works hard to keep her child safe from all the physical and social ills of the world, and does anything and everything necessary to ensure appropriate intellectual, psychological and physical development for her children (Blum 2007; Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). The good mother engages in intensive mothering (Hays 1996) by devoting her mind, body and economic resources to the development of her child's potential and to protecting her/his innocence and essential goodness. As a result, she is expected and expects herself to either become an expert or hire experts to keep her child healthy, intellectually challenged, adequately socialized and emotionally balanced. This version of the mother-woman evolved from Victorian versions of womanhood to incorporate medicalized/ professionalized notions of childrearing and the increase in the educational levels and participation in the paid workforce of women (Hays 1996). Although an ambivalence about whether or not a good mother should work outside her home remains (Warner 2005), there is a clear mandate that a woman should give all of herself to her mothering regardless of her employment status.

Sociologist Sharon Hays (1996) summarizes the three fundamental assumptions of the dominant ideology of motherhood in U.S. culture: 1) mothers are

primary caretakers; 2) mothering is intensive in that it requires a great deal of time, energy (emotional and physical) and money; and 3) children are sacred, priceless and pure and so need and deserve intensive mothering. Douglas and Michaels (2004) show that the intensity of mothering has increased through crises such as the day care abuse scandals of the 1980s and the child abduction scares of the current decade. Mothers, media and medical professionals imply, must be ever more vigilant in their choices of caretakers and must certainly not allow their children to be unsupervised, *ever*. Discoveries about other dangers to children lead to even more responsibilities for mothers:

Everything led to “permanent damage”: letting the baby fall asleep with a bottle (cavities)...not having his/her eyes tested regularly (poor classroom performance due to vision problems), not curing ear infections quickly enough (deafness, learning disabilities)...not putting enough 48 SPF sunscreen on the kid (skin cancer) [which, by the way, has recently been blamed for an epidemic of Vitamin D deficiency]. Mothers needed to be the equivalent of physicians’ assistants, pharmacists, child product safety testers, nutritionists, crafts people, and district attorneys. (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 84)

Mothers in the U.S. are led to believe that they can meet the ideal of the good mother if they are dedicated and loving enough, i.e., if they are sufficiently maternal, because this love and devotion will “naturally” lead them to engage in intensive mothering practices (Hays 1996).

The discourse of good motherhood is found in a variety of media forms including advertisements, magazine articles about celebrity mothers and motherhood and newspaper articles about trends in mothering. This good mother is alternately a working supermom and a traditional stay at home mom, but regardless of her work

status, her children are her biggest concern. In her book, *Second Shift*, Arlie Hochschild (2003) describes the image of the ideal working mother in the mid-80s as exemplified in an image on the front cover of the *New York Times Magazine*:

a working mother walking home with her daughter. The woman is young. She is good-looking. She is smiling. The daughter is smiling as she lugs her mother's briefcase. The role model is talking, the child is a mini-supermom already. If images could talk, this image would say, "Women can combine career and children"...there is no trace of stress, no suggestion that the mother needs help from others. She isn't harassed. She's busy, and it's glamorous to be busy. (22-23)

At the same time these images were prevalent, a counter narrative of the mother who had the skills, experience and education to be this career-mom but "opted out" of her high status, well-paying career to stay home with her children developed. News coverage about these mothers has been in mainstream news media continuously since the 1980s. This news coverage has perpetuated a traditional image of women as mothers who *want* and choose to give up their own ambitions for the sake of their children while ignoring class and race privileges that make their "choices" possible and legitimate. Furthermore, this discourse allows policy makers to view these women's maternal "choices" as the cause of gender differences in career and salary advancement (Kuperberg and Stone 2008).

Today it is celebrity mothers who most often represent the good mother in the media. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) argue that the celebrity mom profile:

snowballed as the 1980s progressed and became a dominant fixture of women's and entertainment magazines by the 1990s.

The celebrity mom profile was probably the most influential media form to sell the new momism [a current version of intensive mothering identified by Hays (1996)], and where its key features were refined, reinforced, and romanticized. (113)

Celebrity mothers have the advantage of being at times a working mother and at times “opting out” by putting their work on hold between films or television projects. The exemplary mother has the face of Angelina Jolie, Sandra Bullock, or Sarah Jessica Parker, mothers “just like us,” who adore their children and wish they could spend every moment with them but know it is important to pursue their careers *in order to provide their children a role model* of a strong, independent woman. This ideal mother is sexy, energetic, successful and glamorous, as well as dedicated to her child—she juggles her career and utter devotion to her children without breaking a sweat. In these articles motherhood is used to create an “everywoman” image—she is just like you and me now that she’s a mom, too! The following are illustrative examples of how celebrities and the media depict the beliefs, behaviors and values of the good mother²:

Rene-Charles is a miracle baby for us. It’s a dream come true in many ways. I’ll never be the same person anymore. As a human being, as a singer, it changed my life completely. I think that children are holding the secret of life. When you’re around children, they are everything.--*Celine Dion*, singer (Oprah.com 2006)

You learn that you can take on quite a lot and make it all work. When your kids need you to be strong and secure, it’s very natural to be.--*Heidi Klum*, former supermodel (Redbookmag.com 2011)

² These quotes were taken from slideshows on each of the cited websites, most of them appeared in the “Family” or “Relationship” sections. The slideshows included a large picture of the actors alongside their statements.

I think every working mom probably feels the same thing: You go through big chunks of time where you're just thinking, 'This is impossible — oh, this is impossible.' And then you just keep going and keep going, and you sort of do the impossible. --*Tina Fey*, writer and star of *30 Rock* (Goodhousekeeping.com 2011)

So I've become a lot more organized. And I'm a much happier person since I've had Henry, and much more balanced. I feel I have an ultimate purpose beyond anything else in my life. --*Rachel Weisz*, movie actor (Berger (Redbookmag.com) 2011)

My children are my life ... It's not like I don't have my own wants and dreams anymore — it's just that the kids come first.--*Angie Harmon*, on *Rizzoli & Isles* (Goodhousekeeping.com 2011)

Sometimes, when I want to take on the world, I try to remember that it's just as important to sit down and ask my son how he's feeling or talk to him about life. --*Angelina Jolie*, movie actor (Goodhousekeeping.com 2011)

As a working mother high heels don't really fit into my life anymore — but in a totally wonderful way. I would much rather think about my son than myself. --*Sarah Jessica Parker*, on *Sex and the City* (Goodhousekeeping.com 2011)

I've learned the value of absorbing the moment. I remember the first time Ripley saw her shadow. My God, it was like shadows had just been invented. It was the most exquisite moment. —*Thandie Newton*, movie actor (Goodhousekeeping.com 2011)

I'm really clear about my priority in life — it's being a mom ... I love doing films, but I wouldn't like to do that more than I'd like to be my daughter's mother. --*Teri Hatcher*, on *Desperate Housewives* (Goodhousekeeping.com 2011)

You make sacrifices to become a mother. But you really find yourself and your soul when you are one. --*Mariska Hargitay*, on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (Redbookmag.com 2011)

...life is an adventure. No two days are ever the same, which is so exciting. --*Jada Pinkett Smith*, on *Nurse Hawthorne* (Redbookmag.com 2011)

Being a mom made me stronger. I'm a warrior! --*Gabrielle Beauvais-Nilon*, television actor, on *Eyes*, *NYPD Blues*, *Jamie Fox Show* (Redbookmag.com 2011)

I lifted up my son with love and delight after feeding him, and he proceeded to vomit into my mouth. I thought it was hilarious. I love him so much that I would like to put his drool in a bottle and wear it as perfume.-- *Debra Messing*, on *Will & Grace* (Oprah.com 2006)

Statements such as these clearly articulate the discourse of good motherhood that says that mothers can do the “impossible” because it is “natural” to be “strong” when your children need you to be. Additionally, the discourse posits that it is wonderful to make sacrifices and put your children and her/his needs before your own because motherhood provides a woman with a higher purpose. Finally, the discourse tells mothers that although they may work, children are always more important than “taking on the world”; therefore, good mothers find a way to balance everything.

The representation of the good mother in dominant media is important to pay attention to because although scholars still debate precisely how much power the media has to impact behavior, attitudes and beliefs and have posited a variety of theories as to the mechanism of that power (e.g., Swidler’s cultural tool kit (1986) and Gerbner’s cultivation theory (1969)), there is little doubt that the more pervasive and unified a message is, the more powerful it will be. Furthermore, the fact that mothers in this and other studies (e.g., Hays 1996) describe the dominant version of the good mother in the same ways regardless of their race and class locations speaks to the power of media to, at the very least, instill a uniform representation of the good mother. Hays (1996) argued that even mothers who choose to resist the mandates of intensive mothering are well aware of what they are, i.e., even when behaviors are not

apparently affected, all mothers engage with the image and discourse of the good mother.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of this discourse is that it leads mothers to believe that they, like these wealthy and privileged celebrity women, can effortlessly meet the standards of the good mother if they are dedicated and loving enough. The responsibility for raising children properly, therefore, is placed squarely on the shoulders of women; therefore, men and society are relieved of the need to address the structural inequality that causes women, especially middle and upper middle-class women, to lose ground in the workplace (Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Warner 2005) and in their own personal welfare and development (Collins 1994; Warner 2005) when they become mothers.

The image of the good mother is just as intersectional as that of the bad mother but in reverse: it centers an “unmarked” apparently everywoman who is in reality an ideal derived from race, class and sexual presumptions about white, middle-class women. She is sexually circumspect (i.e., heterosexually married), of sound moral character, well-educated and maternal by nature. By leaving this woman unmarked with regard to race and class, while simultaneously centering emotional claims of overwhelming love and devotion, the discourse of good motherhood obscures the financial, social and cultural resources that are required to meet the standard of good motherhood. As a result, the good mother discourse implies that because every woman is capable of being a good mother, those who do not meet the standards are individually responsible for their failure. Magazine spreads, news reports and television interviews highlighting women who “have it all” create an ideal

that not even a middle-class woman can actually attain, regardless of the financial and racial privilege she may possess (Warner 2005) and ignores the reality that low-income women and women of color living in a stratified society are prevented from convincingly performing the role of the good mother through their lack of access to the requisite social and financial resources.

Good motherhood, therefore, is a “charmed circle” (to borrow the phrase from Gayle Rubin (1993 [1984])) whose boundary is constructed through and maintained by its opposite, bad motherhood. Both of these versions of motherhood are constructed through the mobilization of stereotypes of race, class, sexuality, age and gender, however those stereotypes are most visible in the “outer limits” of bad motherhood (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Charmed Circle of Motherhood



The charmed circle of good mothering holds an implied promise that women who successfully enter it will be granted the highest ranking on the scale of mothering and, therefore, presumably social respect. This is important for all mothers, but low-income mothers may perceive the charmed circle of mothering to be their only available path to the attainment of social respect.

Although most mothers will fail to meet the unrealistic good mother ideal, those who are at least middle-class, especially those who are white, heterosexual and married, are presumed to be potential good mothers and, therefore, they are expected to provide evidence through their behaviors that they are worthy of being considered good mothers who belong within the charmed circle (Lareau 2003; Warner 2005). Low-income women, on the other hand, are presumed to be inherently bad mothers who are unwilling to even try and, therefore, the media and public examines their attitudes and behaviors for evidence that reinforces the presumption that the mothers, rather than social inequality, are responsible for their and their children's troubles (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Young and low-income mothers, especially those who are also Black, in other words, are presumed to belong outside of the charmed circle.

Unfortunately, studies of the discourses of good and bad motherhood and their impact on women hold the perspective of white, middle-class women at the center of their analysis even as their data include low-income women and women of color (Choo and Ferree 2010). These stigmatized mothers are brought into the analysis either to understand why they are behaving differently from middle-class mothers (e.g., Edin and Kefalas 2005) or to understand how public discourses are hurting them through their effects on welfare policies (e.g., Hancock 2004). Both of these are

admirable and useful agendas, but there has been little effort to systematically examine the good motherhood discourse from the perspectives of low-income women. Although young and low-income women have been interviewed and surveyed to investigate how they understand good and bad motherhood, the analysis of the women's responses remains centered on white, middle-class norms of childbearing behaviors (Edin and Kefalas 2005) and/or parenting logics and strategies (Lareau 2003) and how and why these women are unable to meet those norms. This approach has assumed (and reproduced the idea) that there is only one set (i.e., those of white, middle-class mothers) of appropriate childbearing and child raising behaviors.

We need new ways of understanding low-income women as mothers so that: 1) scholars can see beyond simple economic and structural constraints to the ways in which dominant ideologies and their discourses impact those constraints; and 2) we can perhaps challenge dominant ideologies by constructing new discourses of motherhood that depict low-income mothers as structurally disadvantaged yet hard working and worthy of social support which would serve to undermine the ideology of individual responsibility that leads to the unfair burden placed on mothers of all social classes.

My analysis centers the perspectives, concerns and experiences of low-income women and so allows us to understand more about the process through which the dichotomous discourses of motherhood reinforce and reproduce each other and the process through which they serve to obscure scholar's and society's understanding of low-income women's mothering logics and practices.

Chapter 3

Research Methods

This study seeks to understand mothering from the perspectives of young low-income women who are positioned on the margins of respectable motherhood. As Alford Young, Jr. (2004) explains in *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men*, far too often the behaviors of marginalized populations are investigated for insight into their thoughts. Instead,

it is important to pay attention to what people articulate as their own understanding of how social processes work and how they as individuals might negotiate the complex social terrain, rather than simply looking at their actions. (10)

This approach is important because otherwise the ways in which a group's behavior appears to deviate from the norm (usually defined by white, middle or upper-class behaviors and practices) is taken as evidence of resistance to or a disregard for social norms. This logic led to the "culture of poverty" theory (Lewis 1966) that was eventually used by politicians to justify a decrease in social services with the intent of discouraging the deviant "choices" being made by the poor. Without an understanding of the meaning-making processes of marginalized groups, dominant culture continues to be the only source of valid meaning creation and the behaviors

and (presumed) attitudes of low-income individuals continue to be seen as the sole source of their economic and social difficulties.

It is my intention to discover the complex thinking and meaning-making processes of young low-income mothers as they negotiate the meanings of motherhood imposed upon them by dominant society. By doing this I hope to challenge the current oversimplified view of these women as well as to make visible how the discourses of motherhood not only inflict injury upon all women but affect low-income women in particular ways.

In order to analyze how young low-income women understand and construct meanings of motherhood and of themselves as mothers, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews. I then employed analytic techniques that allow concepts and themes to emerge from the narratives of young low-income mothers who have so often been pathologized and, therefore, have had their own concerns and perspectives subsumed as researchers seek to compare them to or explain why their behaviors and outcomes deviate from their middle-class counterparts. Accordingly, I used inductive methods of data analysis such as those described in the grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006).

Mothers and not fathers were interviewed because women, rather than men, have traditionally been held primarily responsible for the day to day direct care of children (Hays 1996). Additionally, young and low-income women are the primary focus of discourses around welfare and irresponsible parenting. Although young and low-income men are also vilified for being sexually and financially irresponsible, discourses about them focus primarily on their financial and “head of household”

responsibility towards their children rather than on their “hands on” role in raising their children.

Sample

I conducted interviews in 2009 and 2010 with thirty-seven women, however the analysis presented here relies on interviews with the thirty-three women who are Black (14), white (17) or bi-racial Black (2) and were unmarried, low-income and teenaged at the time of their pregnancies 8-17 years ago. Because the study focuses on low-income mothers’ engagement with the image of the “welfare queen” I sought to interview women who might currently or sometime in the past be perceived by a stranger as a “welfare queen” based on their race, age and/or social class with the assumption they would have engaged with the discourse at some time during their years as a mother, whether they had actually received public assistance or not. This proved to be a valid assumption as every mother interviewed reported being treated as if she were a stereotypical welfare mother at some point in her parenting life.

I chose to interview Black mothers because the discourse of the welfare queen has been built around stereotyped images of them. White women were also included as part of the goal of the study was to understand how low-income women as a class group engage with discourses of motherhood, therefore, including a second group which is not racially marked was important. Most studies of teenaged mothers interview women while they are pregnant or within a year or two of their child’s birth. I interviewed women who had been parenting for at least eight years because these women had compiled a rich trove of experiences during many years of

negotiating the stigma associated with young and low-income mothering from which they could draw in our discussions.

Participants were found through convenience (31) and snowball sampling (2) in southeast Michigan, and an effort was made to interview approximately equal numbers of African American women and white women. Flyers were posted in public places such as grocery stores, social service organizations and coffee shops. The flyers posted at a social service organization that provides food and housing assistance was particularly successful in getting a response. Small versions of the flyer were also given to interview participants to pass on to friends or family members. Additionally, an advertisement was posted on Craigslist.org, a website that is comparable to an online classifieds section of the newspaper. The ad was placed alternately in the “jobs” and the “volunteer opportunities” sections of the website. Both the advertisement and the flyer were titled: “Are you a mom?” and then listed a set of criteria for the age of her oldest child, her age at the time she had her first child, her race (Latina, White or African-American) and the country in which she grew up. There was also a statement about the topic of the interview: “I am a student at the University of Michigan and the mother of two daughters. I would like to learn more about the experiences of other mothers.” The ad and flyer also stated that the participant would receive a \$20 Visa gift card or \$20 cash. No Latinas other than one bi-racial woman (who categorized herself as Black) responded to the flyer; therefore, after about fifteen interviews had been conducted, the flyer and ad were changed to stipulate white and/or Black. Interviews were stopped when saturation was achieved, in other words, no new themes emerged in interviews.

Black women were oversampled for theoretical reasons, specifically 1) Black women are disproportionately represented within low-income populations; and 2) the “welfare queen” is built upon historically-based assumptions about Black women’s sexuality, morality, motivation and competence (Hancock 2004). Therefore, Black mothers’ engagement with these discourses are of particular interest. I have included the two bi-racial women as “Black” in the demographic description both in this chapter and in the findings chapters given that they both identified themselves as Black women.

Eighteen of the women were seventeen or eighteen years old at the time they became pregnant (6 of these women are Black, 12 are white) and fifteen were 14-16 years old (10 are Black, 5 are white). The first born child of eighteen of these women was 8-12 years old at the time of the interview, and fifteen children were 13-17 years old (the median age of the first born child at the time of the interview was 12 years). Participants averaged 2.2 children (mean 2.2; median: 2); the range was one to six children. Fourteen of the mothers have 3-6 children (9 of the mothers are Black, 5 are white). Seventeen of the participants have never been married (9 of these are white; 8 are Black), sixteen of them have been married and, of these, six married the father of their first child after they became pregnant (4 of these women are Black, 2 are white). Of those who were married at the time of the interview, one was married to the father of her first child (Black).

Table 1: Description of Sample

	Black*	White	Total
Total	16	17	33
14 - 16 y/o at 1 st pregnancy	10	5	15
17 – 18 y/o at 1 st pregnancy	6	12	18
First born child 8-12 y/o	11	7	18
First born child 13-17 y/o	5	10	15
1 - 2 children	7	12	19
3 - 6 children	9	5	14
Never married	8	9	17
Some college or training program	6	10	16
College degree	2	4	6
* 2 of these women were bi-racial but identified primarily as Black			

All of the participants included in this analysis were determined to be working class or poor during the early years of their parenting on the basis of their use of public assistance (few had ever received cash assistance, most had received WIC and Medicaid for their children) and/or the education level and occupations of themselves and their parent(s). I used the definitions of class provided by Annette Lareau (2003) in *Unequal Childhoods*:

Middle-class children are those who live in households in which at least one parent is employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that centrally draws upon

highly complex, educationally certified (i.e., college-level) skills. Working-class children are those who live in households in which neither parent is employed in a middle-class position and at least one parent is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority and that does not draw on highly complex, educationally certified skills. This category includes lower-level white collar workers. Poor children are those who live in households in which parents receive public assistance and do not participate in the labor force on a regular, continuous basis.
(279)

These criteria were applied to the mothers' situations during and in the several years following their first child's birth. All but four of the women graduated from high school or had completed a GED. Sixteen reported attending, but not completing, college and/or having received job training (e.g., medical assistant; 6 are Black, 10 are white). Six of the women had earned a college degree: one holds a Master's degree (white), five a Bachelor's (three are white, one is Black) and one an Associate's degree (Black).

Two of the women interviewed appear to have attained at least lower middle-class economic stability through education (Phoebe who earned a Master's degree in psychology) or marriage to a man employed in a middle-class occupation (Annette whose husband is a police officer). Three others qualify as working class but appear to be more financially secure than other working class women in the sample; these three women (Tashieka, Tara and Jackie) are all married to men with stable and reasonably well-paying employment. Only one of these women, Tashieka, is Black. The rest of the women in the sample report either a long history of financial struggles or temporary set-backs resulting from a recent loss of employment for themselves or their husbands. Individual details for each participant are in Appendix A.

Data Collection: Interviews

I used a semi-structured interview schedule and, in order to get a sense of their childhood and family context, began interviews by asking the women: “What was life like before you had a child?” I then asked them to describe their feelings and reactions to their pregnancies as well as the reactions and feelings of friends and family members. After discussing their pregnancy and birth experiences, the majority of the interview was spent discussing parenting. The questions asked of participants were open-ended and broad in order to encourage them to describe the parenting experiences and approaches they felt were the most salient or important. For example, I asked: “What do you think is the most important thing you do as a mom?” “Do you parent differently than your own parents?” “How?” “Why?” “How would you compare yourself to other moms?” “What do you think the ideal mom is like?” I also asked the women to reflect on their strengths and weakness as mothers by asking: “What are you proud of about yourself as a mother?” and “What would you change about yourself as a mother?”

In order to avoid imposing particular meanings on the women’s identities and experiences, I made sure that neither recruitment materials nor screening questions specified that “teen mothers” or “low-income” mothers were sought. Materials highlighted a desire to talk with volunteers about their experiences of motherhood and included in the criteria the prospective interview participants had had a child when she was 18 or younger. During most of the interview, questions focused on parenting practices and experiences, how they view themselves as mothers and how they

understand the role of motherhood *in general* without reference to teenaged motherhood. The term “young mother” was used when necessary until the last few minutes of the interview when I asked participants to describe the stereotypes they believe people have about teen mothers (see interview schedule in Appendix B).

Interviews were conducted in person (18; most often at a coffee shop or restaurant and twice in their homes) or by phone (15) and lasted 31 to 113 minutes and averaged 67.5 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped (except one that was handwritten during the interview) and transcribed by the researcher for analysis.

As I conducted interviews I was struck by the enthusiasm participants exhibited: they spoke at length and with candor, expressing surprise and pleasure at being asked to share their stories as mothers. According to many of these women, no one ever asked them to talk about their lives as young mothers, presumably because teen pregnancy is assumed to be embarrassing. My experiences as a teenaged mother may have made me more comfortable in approaching this topic as mundane, simply a part of life. All of the women were aware that I am a mother as this information was shared at the beginning of the interview and in recruitment materials and this seemed to create some sense of camaraderie between us. The fact that I had also been a teenaged mother was shared if the participant directly asked for the information or if it was relevant to the conversation (e.g., yes, that’s how my mother reacted, too). In two instances this information was shared strategically a few minutes into the interview when the participant appeared to be reserved and possibly concerned about being judged for her teenaged motherhood. In both of these cases, the women relaxed and were quite candid throughout the remainder of the interview. Talking with

another mother and for those who knew, another young mother created a kind of rapport—I seconded the women’s comments about how frustrating the early teen years can be or how exhausting the sleep habits of infants are which opened the discussion to further discussion of mothers’ ambivalence; and I empathized with their experiences of shock and judgment upon revealing their pregnancy, in some cases sharing brief recollections of my own. Of course, there was no illusion on my part nor, based on their demeanor and words, on theirs that we were the same in all ways (Zavella 1993), or that the fact that we both experienced teen pregnancy meant that we shared the same experience overall.

I was identifiably different from most of the women by virtue of having a college degree and being in graduate school. This may have impacted their reports of having a strong desire for a college degree; however most of those who made such statements also reported failed efforts to obtain one, indicating that they were being truthful. My race (bi-racial Latina and white) may have impacted interviews conducted in person with Black women. A Black interviewer may well have heard additional information from these mothers about how race impacts their lives. On the other hand, interviews conducted over the phone are fairly anonymous and these interviews did not show a systematic difference in the frequency race was or was not raised by participants.

Social desirability may well have led the women to select stories about themselves that framed them as good mothers, particularly because they may have perceived me as a “successful” mother who was getting a college education and appeared to be middle-class. However, most expressed not only pride but also guilt

about things they felt they did wrong as mothers. For instance, every mother but two gave an answer to the question “what would you change about yourself as a mother?” One of the most common responses to this question was a desire for more patience and a regret for losing her temper with her children more often than she would like. Some mothers described how they yelled at their children too often or wished they were more consistent in disciplining them. Additionally, many mothers spontaneously (i.e., they were not directly asked) described occasional feelings of ambivalence about mothering. Several stated that they were sometimes tired of spending so much time at home with their children and even at times resentful that they were tied down to childrearing while their friends got to go on trips together. Given these disclosures there is reason to believe that even if the women initially chose only positive incidents to describe over the course of the interview many of them developed enough comfort to reveal at least some of her perceived weaknesses.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the interview data throughout the process of data collection. I wrote field-notes following each interview, making note of themes appearing in the participant’s story and, as I collected more interviews, how the stories were similar to and different from one another and emerging patterns. My experiences as a teenaged mother doubtlessly shaped my analysis in the sense that some themes stood out because they resonated with some of my own and others stood out because they contrasted so sharply with mine. These memos then guided my thematic coding of the transcripts and creation of data matrices, which facilitated systematic analysis of the

participants' narratives. I repeated this process as I collected more data. I used the qualitative data software HyperResearch (version 2.8.2) to organize and manage data as the analysis progressed. I also created domain analysis tables (Spradley 1980) in order to compare particular perspectives or approaches across participants.

Comparisons were important given the intersectional nature of this study. Too often differences *within* social categories and similarities *across* social categories are missed when only one axis of analysis is used. As Julie Bettie (2003) states, it is important for the analysis to:

speak to the similarity of working-class experiences women might have across race and thereby teach us something about how class operates, and that would show the limits of those similarities and thereby lend more clarity to how race operates independent of class and why it cannot be reduced to it. (37-38)

Therefore, as themes emerged within the sample I made comparisons across differences, specifically I looked for differences between white and Black women, women who are poor and those who are working class or upwardly mobile, those who earned a college degree and those who did not and women who have one or two children and those who have three or more.

Limitations

Participants self-selected into the project and so may be women who identify more strongly than others with their identity as a mother. This could mean that these women spend more time thinking about mothering and may be those who feel best about themselves as mothers or those who are actively working to become better

mothers and so are willing to talk about it. Because this study focuses on how mothers engage with the good mother discourse as well as the bad mother discourse, it is appropriate to interview women who are making a conscious effort to be good mothers. Furthermore, this project is an effort to understand some positive aspects of low-income mothers' parenting, therefore, the lack of interviews with mothers who are not particularly invested in their parenting role does not adversely affect the data.

Additionally, because the data were collected via interviews and not through observations, it is not possible to know if the mothers actually practice everything they “preach”. This is not problematic for my analysis, however, because the intent of this study is not to evaluate mothers using the good and bad mother framework (this has already been done far too often as I will discuss below), but rather to investigate how the women themselves use that framework to understand themselves and the work they do as mothers. Although I did not seek to verify that these women are able to be as good at mothering as they say they would like to be, mothers often provided specific examples of the appropriate parenting behaviors they discussed and when they did not they were asked to do so (“can you give me an example of that?”) in order to make their point more clear and concrete. Furthermore, many of the mothers appeared to be frank about the ways in which they did not live up to their own expectations, leading me to believe they were reporting a mix of positive and negative attributes of their parenting. Opportunities to triangulate the data were available through analysis of what they stated mothers should do, the rationale they provided for those statements, examples of their own behavior and their reports and evaluations

of the behaviors and practices of mothers they know. In only one case did a mother appear to be advocating parenting strategies she did not make an effort to practice.

Chapter 4

I'm A Good Mother: How Young Low-Income Mothers Understand Themselves as Mothers in the Age of Intensive Mothering

Research shows that most women in the U.S., regardless of their race or class positions, know about and feel accountable to the ideology of intensive mothering, whether they resist or embrace it (Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). The relationship of middle-class women to this discourse is complicated. On the one hand motherhood negatively affects their career trajectories and lifetime earnings through assumptions made by employers that mothers are not dedicated enough to their jobs because their children are their priority (Hays 1996; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). At the same time, however, the discourse of good motherhood is useful to middle-class women in as much as it provides a rationale for the valuation of their intensive mothering work (Hays 1996). Given the stigmatizing and materially punitive effects of the bad mother discourse, it is not surprising that low-income women interviewed for this and others studies “disavow an association with irresponsible and dependent mothering” and “instead [identify] with a redemptive maternity that is worthy and sacrificial” (Baker 2009: 285). Swidler (1986) argues that people reach into their “toolkits” and find cultural narratives with which to construct a sense of self and research shows that young low-income mothers pull the good mother discourse from their toolkit.

Beyond this, however, we know little about how they engage with the discourse of good motherhood nor how useful or constraining it is to them.

My findings as well as those of others (e.g., McCormack 2005) indicate that the discourse of the good mother is attractive to them because it emphasizes that the key to meeting the criteria for the good mother is to be sacrificial and devoted to the care of their children and these are qualities they can hope to embody even with limited resources. Additionally, motherhood is an extreme form of femininity that evokes the stereotype of women as nurturing and willing to put the needs of others above their own—something young, low-income and Black women are presumed to be unable to do. Unfortunately, while claiming to be a good mother seems to be the way out of being presumed to be a bad mother, the mobilization of ideologies of race, class, sexuality, age and gender to position some women as most likely to be good mothers and others as inherently bad mothers ultimately undermines young low-income women's efforts to shrug off a stigmatized identity in favor of an idealized one.

Each of the women interviewed for this study describes herself with terms that indicate she sees herself as a good mother who has transcended low expectations. For example:

I'm a very good mom, I'm a good mom, I got, man, I'm telling you...I think after knowing me and stuff...everybody know when you see me or you see my kids, their hair is combed, my house is always clean, all that. If I need food in the house, I will get up and go get it! From these churches, anywhere, I'm not ashamed to do nothing. And everybody knows that. (Stacy³, Black, 5 children)

³ To protect confidentiality, the names of all participants and their children have been changed.

I don't want to sound conceited but I'm a good mom. (Jackie, white, 2 children)

Like I don't think I'm top notch or anything but...I guess I do feel like I'm a really good mom, compared to most I think I'm probably better. (Kate, white, 1 child)

The data indicate that these women have been able to not only access but to actively, agentically make use of the discourse of the good mother to construct a sense of themselves as worthy mothers and to make a bid for respectability.

In this chapter I explore how the women's discussion of motherhood reflects their use of the discourse of good motherhood to understand themselves as mothers and to decide upon parenting strategies. The women base their claims first and foremost on the sacrifices they make for their children and the attention they devote to them. It is no accident that their argument begins here given that the good mother discourse centers on an exceedingly selfless and nurturing woman who engages in time and labor-intensive parenting practices which are purported to flow naturally from women's maternal impulses. The women also implicitly address the race, age and class aspects of the bad motherhood discourse, showing that they are aware that describing their devoted and intensive mothering is insufficient to challenge the presumption that their race, age and class locations make them inherently bad mothers, i.e., they must not only prove that they belong in the inner, charmed circle, but that they do *not* belong in the outer circle. At the same time, there is a benefit to these mothers' efforts: they express pride in themselves as mothers and describe the acknowledgement of some of their friends, families or even case workers that they are good mothers.

Bad Woman—Bad Mother

Every woman interviewed explicitly acknowledged an understanding of the narrative of the bad mother as a woman who is, or was, a teenaged and/or welfare mother. In other words, they are all well aware of the kind of mother society expects them to be by virtue of their socioeconomic status, race, and/or age at the time they gave birth. By their own report as well as the findings of scholars, low-income teenage mothers are all presumed to be bad mothers who want to exploit the welfare system whether they actually use or need public assistance or not or whether they are Black or white (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hancock 2004). For example, when I asked the women to describe the stereotype they think people hold of young moms and how that stereotype affected them they made statements such as these:

I think that [teen moms] are seen as irresponsible, not very good mothers, like they don't take care of their children, or selfish, or... almost... white trash even... basically they are, they are not good moms, they don't really care, they kind of just push their kids aside and do their own thing or, they're just irresponsible... I think that's part of the reason I was so scared when I was pregnant, I didn't want people to think that I was, like, white trash going down the wrong pathway, or that I was going to end up being some loser with, like, six kids. (Kate, white, 1 child)

That we're just loose women, that we're just screwing around and slept around with every guy that we wanted to look at and we can't control ourselves. And I've heard people say that they, that people just have babies for aid and all that stuff. There's, there's just some crazy stuff that people say as far as young mothers, [such as] they don't know what they're doing, they don't have a brain of their own to think, much less take care of somebody else. So, you know, I just kind of tried to do the OPPOSITE of what they said that I was supposed to be doing. (Raina, Black, 6 children)

Statements such as these reveal that these women feel driven to prove they are responsible, sexually circumspect, attentive to their children and able to care for them well.

Despite diversity in the race, class access, marital status and educational attainment in this sample, the women described the stereotype of low-income teenaged mothers in remarkably similar terms: teenagers who are stupid, unmarried and have children to get welfare and/or because they are “sluts” and will, therefore, continue to have children they cannot or will not support or take care of. These presumptions about this group of mothers places them squarely outside of the charmed circle of good motherhood. All the women, even those who are white, married and are not dependent on public assistance, reported that they feel accountable and judged based upon the stereotype of the welfare mom.

Good Mother—Good Woman

The women all expressed an understanding that the central characteristics of the good mother are that she is self-sacrificing, nurturing and so devoted to her children that she willingly engages in intensive mothering practices. The lack of an *explicit* exclusion of low-income, young and/or Black women in the good mother discourse appears to have led these mothers to view the performance of sacrificial and devoted womanhood as the most effective and accessible way to lay their claim to the charmed circle of the good mother. As a result, the women emphasize the sacrifices they make, especially the ways in which they put their children’s needs before their

own and their labor intensive efforts to keep their children safe and to support their education, all of which can be done without a great deal of money.

Self-Sacrifice as Evidence of Good Motherhood: The primary evidence given by the women for their “goodness” as mothers was the degree to which they sacrifice their own needs for those of their children and the high level of nurturing they practice.

I make it a point to get up and, like, make my kids breakfast, I make homemade dinner four or five times a week... I do things with my kids. Education is number one in my house, I mean they have to read an hour a day when school's out, ½ hour when school's in, we do math work...I try to devote a lot of me to my kids because I don't want that to be a void in their lives.
(Tashieka, Black, 3 children)

(Interviewer: What are you proud of about yourself as a mom?)
Um, I guess that I'm always, that I always put my kids first. You know, I always put them before any activity that I might do.
(Annette, white, 1 child + 2 step children)

I put my child first, I always have and I always will...If I have \$50 and I want to go to the bar or whatever and he needs diapers or clothes, obviously he's getting what he needs first and foremost. He'll even get his WANTS first and foremost before I get any of mine. No matter what I do...[I ask myself] what's going to benefit him out of this versus what's going to benefit me out of this (Haley, white, 1 child)

These mothers claim they put their children first, making sure they spend a great deal of time and effort fulfilling their needs for attention, healthy food and educational enrichment. Doing this, the mothers explain, requires that they put their children before themselves. Spending so much time on intensive parenting strategies

necessitates that children be prioritized above what mothers might need for their own physical and mental health.

The women describe mothering as a time-intensive endeavor that makes socializing and spending time taking care of oneself impossible. Some mothers explain that their lives now revolve around their children and they have given up their own social lives:

Pretty much [once I had the baby], you know, going out and hanging out with friends? That was over. Going to the mall just because? That was over. (Ana, Black, 4 children)

(Interviewer: And what would you do after school?) Um, (pause) nothing, just—it's about babies once [you have them]...you don't have anything for yourself anytime. (Kathie, Black, 6 children)

I'm more of a stay at home mom when I am at home, when I'm not working, I'm more attached to my kids, I devote myself now to my kids...I'm very devoted to my family...I'm not one to go off and have a night out with my girlfriends...I would say I'm more of a hands on mom. (Tara, white, 3 children)⁴

Tara makes it clear that devotion, i.e., staying focused and attentive to one's family and children, is an important aspect of her mothering. Her language resonates with the discourse about good mothers as devoted and self-sacrificing. Furthermore, she mentions she does not go out with friends in favor of being with her family—something many of the mothers describe as causing them to lose touch with their own needs and inclinations:

⁴ These moms have three or more kids but mothers with one or two children made similar statements.

That's one thing you lose when you become a parent is yourself. For a long time I didn't know what I liked or, you know, it's funny to wake up and not to know if I liked going to the movies. (laughs) Cause you get so rolled up in your kids and you lose your identity and just become Tim's mom or Mary's mom (laughs). (Tashieka, Black, 3 children)

I wish I was more in tune [with] myself. Like with [my daughter], I can be all into her or I can be all into [my boyfriend]. When it comes to me, I mean, like, I take a shower everyday and I clean my house and stuff, but it's like I would do ANYTHING for [my daughter] or anything for [my boyfriend but] I always put myself on the back burner. (Sue, white, 1 child)

Sue's statement describes her devotion not only to her child but also to her boyfriend—both are expectations tied to gender norms around nurturing. Linking these two expectations underscores the gendered core of good mothering.

The demand that mothers prioritize their children's needs above any other sometimes leads these low-income mothers to have to choose between being present and active in their children's lives, i.e., being good mothers and working long hours at paid employment and/or college:

I'm always involved, I mean, everything my kids do, I take my daughter to cheerleading every day...my oldest son's in robotics—so I support him in his robotic team. I'm just ALWAYS there for them, no matter what. And now, even when it's hard because the economy sucks so bad, you know, I should take any job...but now I won't take any job that I can't take my kids to school or [that keeps] me from making breakfast for my kids. And we eat dinner together every single day. (Sophia, Black and Latina)

After I started working again I started going...to college full time...I took night classes. So I was working like 8 or 9 to 5, picking her up from day care and dropping her off at my mom's

and going to college from 6 to 10...I went to school like 3 nights a week. So I kept that up for, like, maybe two terms and then I just, like, dropped out of school because I felt like I was missing too much of her life. You know? (Annette, white, 1 child + 2 step-children)

Although middle-class mothers must also confront this tension and in many cases must sacrifice the satisfaction they might get out of pursuing interesting career paths (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996)), the price paid by low-income mothers is far greater because the wages they lose by prioritizing their children may put them into or keep them in poverty.

Additionally, middle-class and wealthy women are more likely to have access to the feminist rationale that justifies long hours for career and educational advancement as a way to teach their children that women are smart and powerful as well as nurturing (Hays 1996). Some middle-class and wealthy women see it as their responsibility to be both ambitious and successful career women and loving, devoted mothers—an extremely difficult juggling act. Phoebe, who had her child when she was an eighteen-year-old college student and is now a therapist with a Master's degree in psychology, is the most educated and financially stable mother I interviewed and so is not surprisingly also the only one who articulated this particular perspective:

the perfect mom [is] somebody who can, who can make cookies for you to take to the school birthday party but also has her own life and career and independent. But...to me, that's a good WOMAN, you know?...How do you think that those things help the kid or the kids?...Um, to know that they're loved and cared for and that they're taken care of but that the adult has their own life because you want that for the child too...if you focus on taking care of your kid and never take care of yourself, they

learn to take care of others but not themselves. So I think that's why it's important for a mother to both be care-taking of the child but also be independent in who they are, because that frees up their child to do the same thing. (Phoebe, white, 1 child)

In contrast, all low-income women, but especially Black women, have historically been *required* to work while they raise their children while those who stay at home with their children and so rely upon public assistance are vilified. Yet, for these mothers, passing up post-secondary education or a job in order to devote time and energy to their children is sometimes seen as a route to emotionally satisfying and dignified work given the low-paying and often mind-numbing and dehumanizing work available to them (hooks 1994; Jones 1985).

For these women, prioritizing their children over work and education is also a way to show their devotion and challenge the presumption that they do not value and love their children. The historical context of low-income and Black motherhood and the tension created by the discourses of motherhood (good middle-class mothers work as little as possible while low-income mothers must work to support their children rather than being burdens on society) put these women in a no-win situation: when they work to support their children they are too tired to practice intensive mothering; and when they do not work or pass up (rare) opportunities for post-secondary education, they simultaneously compound their financial difficulties and leave themselves vulnerable to having others use their choices as evidence that low-income mothers, particularly low-income black mothers, shirk their economic responsibilities.

Sacrificing their own needs for those of their children is a core component of low-income mothers' claim to good motherhood as it not only positions them within the charmed circle, but violates the bad motherhood stereotype. The other requirement of a good mother is the practice of parenting strategies that are time and labor intensive—a requirement these mothers address.

Child Care: As mentioned in Chapter 2, intensive mothering requires that mothers carefully monitor the safety of their children, and the women I interviewed presented this as an important (and time consuming) component of good mothering, especially for those who work full-time outside their home. The provision of safe and supportive care-givers while they were working or attending school is tied to the ideology of intensive mothering in as much as mothers are believed to be the most suited to keeping a child safe and happy and, therefore, leaving one's child in the care of others is questionable for any mother (Warner 2005) but perhaps even more so for low-income mothers who are stereotyped as women who are too irresponsible and selfish to raise their own children.

Finding quality childcare that is also affordable is difficult for all mothers but exceptionally so for low-income mothers (Crittenden 2001). For these mothers, childcare centers that are licensed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) are difficult to find and too expensive for them to afford. Securing a safe environment for their children, therefore, requires more effort and compromises for low-income mothers than middle and upper middle-class mothers.

Concerns about safety and about the necessity of their child being left in the care of an attentive and loving person led many of the women I interviewed to either avoid daycare altogether or to go to great lengths to find a safe and nurturing place to leave their child.

I only let my mom watch her. I was like, you know, you watch that stuff like on 20-20 and they showed the babysitter that's like beating up on the kids with the nanny-cam, so (laughs), I was always worried about that, I'm like, she's not going to daycare! (Christy, Black, 1 child)

I visited...at least 12 [daycare providers] and I couldn't find one that was right. And then my friend [recommended her daycare center] and...I had a chart, where's your fire extinguishers, what do you do as far as discipline, blah, blah, blah...a lot of people passed that but I didn't have a good feeling. But one thing that I looked for is—did they touch her? Did they interact with Lisa—did they say “Hi Lisa!”? And you know, just, grab her hand or something like that? THAT is what I was looking for. If they just talked to me and ignored her then how could they be a good—you know? So I turned most of the people away because they just didn't, they didn't—you know? I mean I'm there for ½ an hour and you haven't said anything to her?...I wanted someone that not only could answer the questions but that if my child got hurt was going to pick her up and hug her. (Nora, Black, 1 child)

Christy avoids the dangers and expense of daycare by having her mother babysit her daughter. Nora, who does not have family to rely upon, searches for someone who is capable of keeping her child safe but who will also nurture and love her child.

Middle-class and wealthy mothers also labor to find quality childcare because any mother will feel less guilty for leaving her child if she knows the child is being well-cared for. Unfortunately, low-income mothers rarely have the resources to afford such high quality care.

I tried to be picky at first...I wanted the BEST daycare and the best this and the best that until I realized how much it cost. And then I was just going through the yellow pages (laughing) looking for the cheapest one. It was very upsetting, he cried everyday and, you know, that, that's terrible to see...But, pretty much I worked to pay for day care. And, it's awful. (Lacey, white, 1 child)

Mothers like Lacey, who must leave their child in a substandard environment, face the difficult choice of continuing to work and enduring the guilt and concern they feel for their child's welfare or trying to survive on public assistance. After recent changes to welfare, however, this is rarely an option—they simply must work. Another option for these mothers is to find alternative care arrangements. In many cases this means having a family member watch their children while they work.

I was kind of protective. I didn't want anything bad to happen to my child and, if it did happen to her, I wanted it to be a close relative...[and] I knew [they] weren't going to get scared if I left them with my grandmother or my sister or my mother-in-law. (Raina, Black, 6 children)

Echoing Nora, Raina seeks out a situation she can afford and in which her child will receive love and affection not simply supervision. Another mother, Phoebe, relied on her family to baby sit while she attended college courses and chose a combination of a low-paying position as a nanny that allowed her to keep her child with her on the job in addition to public assistance in order to earn adequate sums of money and spend more time with her child when she was not in class:

To get work I had to be a nanny and take her with me. So that's how I avoided having her in daycare...[but] that limits what you can do to make money. And I got on welfare and that was completely... a degrading experience. (Phoebe, white, 1 child)

Phoebe addresses the tensions of childcare by balancing low-paying but flexible work and cash assistance (which was more available at the time).

Protection and Supervision: Protecting their children from sexual predators and child abusers, even beyond daycare contexts, is a common concern of all mothers (Martin et al. 2007) and the women I interviewed were no exception. For instance, Vicky talks about how she checks for registered sex offenders in her neighborhood:

Every time I move the first thing I do is check [the] online predator list, I want to know who lives where and why they're on that list. [I tell my son] don't walk past that person's [house], walk that way [instead]. [I want to make] sure that they stay well adjusted without anybody hurting them. (Vicky, white, 2 children)

In addition to checking for registered sex offenders Vicky and other mothers make an effort to know where their children are and who is around them at all times. For instance, when asked how she compares herself to other mothers she knows, Jackie pointed out that her friends are not as good as she is because of their lack of surveillance of their children:

This is going to sound bad: I know that I'm a much better parent than some of my friends are. There's a few people in my life circle that I love to death but they just suck as mothers (laughs). They are terrible. I think that I've done a pretty good job with my kids...I don't want to sound conceited but I'm a good mom. What do...your friends do that you disagree with? Um, they don't watch their kids, they let them roam and, just, they don't check the surroundings, they don't even keep their eye on them. [For instance] a five-year-old girl who's wondering the streets of [City] where there's handfuls and handfuls of sex predators out

there. You know, you don't DO that, she's just lack-lazy, just lets her go, she don't think anything bad's going to happen, she just turns a blind eye to it and that, to me, just irritates me so bad. (Jackie, white, 2 children)

Jackie points out that good mothers are responsible for ensuring the safety of their children even when they are out of sight. In this vein many of the mothers state that they make sure to speak to the parents of their children's friends before letting them visit other homes. Tara (white, 3 children) explained succinctly: "I have to know their friends, I have to know the parents of the friends". Through their extensive and time consuming efforts to keep their children safe and well-cared for in their absence, these mothers stake a claim to good motherhood.

Educational Support: I found that low-income mothers monitor their children's homework and school performance. Nearly all mothers interviewed described spending time and energy helping with and monitoring their children's homework and emphasizing to them the importance of getting good grades:

[I sit down with the kids and ask:] what do you have going on? What did you turn in? what's in your backpack?... my daughter...came home with three A's and an A- on her progress report...because she had three missing assignments. And I gave her, I said well I'm really proud of you for your report card BUT you have until tomorrow to talk to your teacher and figure what these missing assignments are, or you're grounded from your TV in your room. (Annette, white, 1 child + 2 step-children)

I...sit down with my kids and talk to them one on one and help them with their homework when they come home. (Stacy, Black, 5 children)

While Annette Lareau (2003) also documents the efforts of low-income mothers to support their children's education through the monitoring of homework and grades, her findings led her to conclude that low-income parents feel "powerless and constrained" (228) within educational institutions and convey this sense of powerlessness to their children. On the other hand, I found that Black mothers and mothers with children who have learning disabilities reported behaviors that exhibit agency and the belief that they can, through a great deal of hard work, impact the quality of their children's education. These mothers describe labor intensive and structured efforts to ensure their children were successful in school.

Black mothers, likely made aware through media coverage of the Black-white achievement gap in schools and the fact that low-income students often lose ground academically during summer breaks, go to great lengths to enrich their children's education within the bounds of their resources. These mothers report making arrangements to meet their children's needs through services or strategies that cost little or no money. Buying workbooks and instituting reading and study time at home was one such strategy, as Tashieka describes in the remainder of her discussion (quoted above) of what she does to support her children's education:

I buy all kind of books and stuff, activity books. So we'll do math, or, like my daughter right now we're trying to make sure she's got her...times tables 1 through 12 down before she...goes back to school. So we'll do flash cards and it's funny because all the kids will do them together, whatever we're working on, they like, even my son will do like 2 times 5 or whatever and we'll do little tests and stuff like that...I try to devote—especially in the summer time—a couple hours a day to school work because they lose so much...[My oldest daughter has] been reading an hour a day since she was—I used to read to her...now she's at the point where: "Mom, do I have to read more?"...But I just want to keep

it going because I tell them, at college when they hand you a book and say go read 137 pages tonight, it's not going to be that hard for you because you've read. [My oldest daughter] reads at a 12th grade reading level, my son is in 1st grade and he reads at 4th grade and [my other daughter is] in fifth grade and she's reading at, I think, it's 10th grade, she's reading 10th or 11th, so I'm on them about that. (Tashieka, Black, 3 children)

Tashieka's provision of educational enrichment does not cost a lot of money; however, it is very time consuming and, with three young children, requires a great deal of energy. When Nora and her daughter moved, she expended of a great deal of time and energy in order to support her daughter's academic interests through the prioritization of her school choice:

We walked around [three schools] and interviewed them. [My daughter said] I want to go to Adams Middle School... because [they had classes in four languages and had a] food and garden club and then the choir, she can sing really well...you don't have to try out...everyone gets a chance to be in choir...the other school districts [in nearby towns] we checked...they only offered one language...[my daughter said] this is the school I want to go to...so I took [that] school district and I (laughs) went and I drove through the neighborhoods and I went to every apartment and knocked and found out how much it was. That's how we found this apartment. So I, I changed where we lived for the school instead of doing it the other way around. (Nora, Black, 1 child)

Another mother, Ana, also tried to find a school that would enhance her daughter's talent, in this case a musical talent, unfortunately, a change in the orchestra's schedule sabotaged her efforts:

I put [my oldest daughter] over at Lincoln Academy [because] they're one of the few schools that has a... middle school orchestra program and actually they changed that, which is why she stopped. They were doing it throughout the school day and

they changed it to early in the morning so I stopped doing that because there just was no way I could get her to school at 7 o'clock with all the other [children]... Yeah, they changed it to 7 o'clock in the morning, so. But I probably will get her a private tutor because she's really talented...If I can afford it, I'll probably be continuing on with that. (Ana, Black, 4 children)

Ana's predicament shows the limits to the efficacy of low-income mothers' efforts to meet the mandate of intensive mothering that requires them to find their children's special skills, talents, and interests and then enhance and support their development.

In many cases mothers did what they could to support their children but wished they could do more:

[Academically the most important thing I do is] enforce how important academics is and, that, it's not going to get easier...third grade is hard and it's going to be harder next year. And I'm like, it's not going to get easier at this point. And just trying to help him to basically not fall behind as he's going through school. How do you help him, with school? Homework, and also get books from the library, do a lot of reading, and I also bought, like, a phonics thing to help with reading as well. And then I have different workbooks that I have him do also along with the homework. So. Doing, having a routine everyday after school...I went to Sylvan, I went to Kumon, whatever, all these various different reading things. I have him set up with tutoring at the school, American Reads...comes in [to the school]. I'm just like, what else can I get? Can I get some more phonics? I'm like, Sylvan is ridiculously expensive! And, I'm just like, what can I do? (Kendra, Black, 1 child)

Kendra voices a frustration implied by several other mothers that without financial resources they are unable to enlist the help of professionals through private tutoring. Kendra has had some success in getting her son's school to meet his needs that may be linked to the fact that she has a college degree and may, therefore, be more knowledgeable about how to advocate within educational institutions. None of these

mothers, however, rely entirely upon their children's schools to meet their educational needs. Instead they find creative (and time consuming) ways to meet their children's needs themselves.

For mothers, including white mothers, who have children with special needs, it is imperative that they convince school staff to bring their expertise to bear upon their child's intellectual development. For example, Vicky chose to stop working temporarily (with the support of her fiancé) in part so that she could advocate for her son at his school. She felt that he needed to be tested for learning disabilities and that the school should then take steps to address his needs:

I think that he's not developing well in school, I don't think he's understanding what's going on, and that there's something wrong there, but I could never get anybody to pay attention, you know? They thought I was overreacting, didn't know what I was talking about. Sometimes you have to make sure that, you have to fight because everybody thinks you can just lump all these kids together and just generically pass them on to the next level. You have to fight to make sure everybody knows that your kid is different and special and whether they want to get off their butts and do it or not, you have to do it because your kid's not the same as everybody else. (Vicky, white, 2 children)

Although Vicky was initially ignored by the school staff, she persisted and was ultimately successful in getting her son tested for a learning disability. The work reported by nearly all of the mothers, but especially by Black mothers and mothers of children with special needs is consistent with the work of good mothers and shows that previous studies such as Lareau's may not give us a complete understanding of the lengths low-income mothers go to in their efforts to help their children obtain high quality education.

Good Money Management as Evidence of Fitness: Despite their limited economic resources, having money to spend on their children, regardless of the amount, is presented by many of these women as important evidence of caring for their children and of their selflessness. Just as good mothers are expected to support and encourage their children's educational achievements, they are also expected to provide adequate material possessions for their child. This imperative is complicated for low-income mothers. The discourse of the bad mother describes women who spend their already sparse dollars on themselves (e.g., getting manicures and their hair done or going to the bar) rather than on their children's basic needs (e.g., food and clothing). Given this reality it is not surprising that the mothers I interviewed described how they make sure to spend their money on their children and not on themselves. Haley's statement (quoted previously in this chapter) addresses this criticism directly when she states that she puts her son's "wants" before any of her own. When low-income mothers do spend money on what are considered to be luxury items (e.g., on electronic game systems or name brand clothing or shoes) they are still seen as irresponsible for not prioritizing basic needs over their children's desires.

Alison Pugh challenges this interpretation of low-income mother's spending in her book *Longing and Belonging* (2010). She argues that low-income mothers carefully consider which possessions have the most "symbolic power" (124) for their children and then purchase only those, thereby, conserving their resources while still allowing their children to have dignity among their peers. This strategy of "symbolic indulgence" allows low-income mothers to meet their children's psychological needs

to feel normal rather than deprived and also serves to prove that they are good mothers who can provide normalcy to their children.

When I asked Kathie, a Black mother of six children, “What do you think is the most important thing you do for kids?” she answered: “Spend a lot of money on them, I buy them stuff before I [buy things for myself]. I still got clothes [from when] I was little”. Kathie goes on to explain that for Christmas she purchased a PlayStation for her children. Other mothers also describe their principle of spending money to make sure their children have not only what they need but what they want:

I certainly think that they have...just about [as much] if not more of what all the other kids their age have. They have the Nintendo, then they have the cell phones, you know. I think they're pretty much...I don't think they're spoiled...I mean they have, they're regular kids, they have what everybody else has.
(Ana, Black, 4 children)

Everything is SO expensive...I like her to wear nice clothes, they're expensive, you know, shoes, expensive, very expensive. I mean she doesn't have all nice-nice clothes, but I like her to have some nice clothes for when she wants them. (Sue, white, 1 child)

Purchasing decisions, then, are offered as evidence of self-sacrifice and devotion to children's psychological as well as material needs.

Like middle-class mothers (Hays 1996), these low-income mothers report making difficult sacrifices in order to practice intensive motherhood. However, for women who were teenaged and low-income when they became mothers, hard work and self-sacrifice are points of pride not only because they represent adherence to the foundation of the good mother, but also because they violate the stereotype of the bad mothers these women are presumed to be. Through their narratives, then, the women

describe themselves as successfully achieving key characteristics within the charmed circle of good motherhood and from this position they build a claim to being worthy of social respect.

Resisting Ideologies of Race, Age, Sexuality and Class

The interview data show that the evidence participants provide for their “goodness” as mothers is secondarily based on the claim that they are meeting criteria tied to race, age, class and sexuality. Their claim to being selfless and devoted has important implications for their presumed categorization as bad mothers: if a mother is putting her children’s safety and welfare first, then it follows that 1) she must be mature and hard working because these are required for self-sacrifice and 2) she must not be partying nor exposing her children to a series of boyfriends because these would be *selfish*, not *selfless*, behaviors. Specifically, the women spontaneously explain that they are mature and not lazy or lacking ambition, and they do not prioritize partying or boyfriends over their parental responsibilities, qualities society attributes to women who are low-income, young and/or who are women of color. Their statements reflect an understanding that they must directly confront the presumptions made about bad mothers on the basis of their gender, race, age, class and sexuality.

When asked how having their child when they were young shaped their life, most of the women stated that they grew up fast, implying an end to childhood and irresponsibility and the beginning of responsible adulthood.

I think it...made me mature quicker, um, and party less (laughs). And be more focused...I feel like it made me a stronger person even though I had to grow up faster than a lot of my other counterparts. (Kendra, Black, 1 child)

I had to grow up quicker, I had to learn life a little quicker. Responsibility came a lot younger. (Susan, white, 4 children)

You have to step up and you're an adult very fast, very fast, and, I, I had a hard time because we would play football in the middle of the street—you can't do that. You can't just go outside and hang out with your friends or—that's all done and over with because all of a sudden you're just, you're the one in charge. And that's the choice you made and it's not that baby's fault, so you, you have to grow up and, and make sure that you put that baby 110% before anything else and anybody else. (Vicky, white, 1 child)

It made me stronger...I was really social, like I always wanted to be hanging around my friends...I wouldn't even go to the MALL by myself...so [being pregnant] made me a lot more independent...I noticed my whole mindset changed. My focus was no longer, you know, what am I going to do for this summer. [It changed to] what am I going to do for the rest of my life? [My mindset] just changed...[to be] more future focused...I was trying to...find better jobs and figure out what type of insurance I was—I mean I was thinking, like, long term. (Alice, Black, 1 child)

These women offer visions of a child shedding her self-centered carefree childhood to take on life as a responsible, future focused adult caregiver. These descriptions challenge the conception of them as “babies raising babies”.

The women resisted presumptions of laziness ascribed to Black women and white low-income women by emphasizing their hard work and responsibility as mothers. For instance, during her interview, Marsha, an unemployed mother of five children, compares herself to her friends who do not have children and criticize her for having too many:

We [young mothers] get up and do a lot of things before they even, before they even get up and get dressed. You have to, cause... you know, it's about what they [your kids] have to do, they have to go...they have to study [so you] have to sit up late studying with them. (Marsha, Black, 5 children)

For Marsha, her untiring work on behalf of her children is evidence that she is a better woman, or more specifically, a better low-income woman than her friends who spend their nights partying and their days sleeping. Many of the mothers made statements challenging the idea that they prioritize their own comfort over their children's needs:

[I work] really hard to make her life as best as it can, under the circumstances that she doesn't have the parents that I was given. But, um, I think that's probably one of the best things is, you know, I'm working really hard for her. (Kaya, white, 1 child)

You know, it doesn't matter what you want, you know, you have to do, if you're tired it doesn't matter, you have to get up and you have to do [it]. (Ana, Black, 4 children)

These statements challenge the idea that young low-income mothers are lazy and fail to put in the effort required to raise children properly.

Black mothers explicitly described and took pride in their efforts to ensure the cleanliness of their homes, themselves and their children—a concern that reflects resistance to long-standing assumptions about Blacks, particularly those who are also low-income. As Evelyn Higginbotham (1993) documents, by the turn of the twentieth century, Black women, led by a newly emergent Black middle-class, resisted raced and classed presumptions of their laziness, sexual promiscuity and immorality through an organized effort to present themselves, their children and their homes as

scrupulously clean and well-kept. Stacy, a married Black mother of five, reflects the same concern when she explains:

I'm a very good mom, I'm a good mom...everybody knows when you see me or you see my kids, their hair is combed, my house is always clean, all that... I love taking them places and I love that when we do go out the way people look at us, like: "DANG, every time we see her, her kids' hair is done". Like, we went and took pictures about two months ago up at Wal-Mart and the girls, they think my girls are triplets because they all look alike, so I had them all dressed alike and everybody was looking nice and, it was the way everybody was just looking at us...like: "Dang, she always keeping her kids looking nice and the house always clean" and, you know, the way I can sit down with my kids and talk to them one on one and help them with their homework when they come home.

Stacy takes special pride in the appearance of her children and home as indicators that she is a good mother. The pressure to maintain this appearance, however, has taken its toll on her—she has been diagnosed with a “cleaning disorder” for which her doctor prescribed medication and therapy. Other Black mothers mention that they and their children stand out at the social service office because they don't look like the other mothers who have “their hair sticking up out they heads, they kids got snots and everything running off their face” (Corinne, Black). Although the raced and classed stereotype of the “welfare queen” is a stigma white mothers must confront, because it has been constructed from deeply entrenched assumptions about Black women, Black mothers articulate more pressure to prove their respectability through the appearance of themselves, their children and their homes.

Contrary to the presumption that low-income mothers are lacking in ambition or do not want “better” for themselves, the majority of the women who had not

earned a college degree mentioned their desire and often their failed efforts to do so. They express a belief that education, especially higher education, is important for all young mothers—tacitly addressing the requirement that a mother’s ambition (even middle-class mothers’ ambition) must be in the service of one’s children’s needs rather than one’s own. For instance, when I asked Christy what she would change about herself as a mother she, along with many other participants, stated that she wished she had a college degree and a career:

I would probably. I don’t know. I just wish that I was in school. I wish that I had a career so that I could provide for her better, really, to be quite honest. That’s the only thing that I really, really worry about. (Christy, Black, 1 child)

And when asked what advice she would give to a young woman who is pregnant, Justina, who had been attending community college sporadically over the last decade, responded:

I would definitely encourage her to not let life stop because of having a baby, you can still get an education, you can still be productive...you can still go to college, you can still have a career...I got my GED and I’m just a few classes away from several associates degrees. (Justina, white, 1 child)

Although these mothers are often unable to attain a college degree, statements such these show that they are not apathetic and lacking ambition and instead aspire to become college educated.

These mothers defended themselves against the stereotype that low-income mothers use drugs and alcohol irresponsibly and expose their children to their presumed sexual promiscuity. The fact that most of the women made statements

about these two topics without ever being asked about them demonstrates an awareness of how prevalent the stereotype is and how likely they are to be judged by it. Most of the women addressed the issue of drug and alcohol use by mentioning that they do not go out to bars very often or at all, and/or that they do not drink alcohol or take other drugs. For example, after discussing why she does not allow her father to babysit her children (he is an “alcoholic” and a “mean drunk”), Cindy states:

[My husband and I] don't drink, I've never been a big drinker. If we drink we don't drink around our kids...once in a blue moon we'll have something to drink, we don't drink beer, we drink something totally different and it's very mild and we always had to have somebody sober around, we're not big on going to bars.
(Cindy, white, 3 children)

Even occasional drinking warranted an explanation for Cindy as she clarified the ways she and her husband drink responsibly. Other mothers discuss how they have no time in their lives for partying or how the party culture is inappropriate for children to be exposed to:

Oh man, [my life] changed DRASTICALLY. Um, no more going out and, you know, clubbing and hanging out drinking and, just, no more of that. It was just all about being at home with my baby and finding a job and securing a place [to live].
(Helen, Black, 2 children)

[Unlike a friend of mine,] I don't go to someone's house and leave my kid sleeping in the bedroom while everybody's partying...there's people that are drinking and partying and stuff and people are just, I, I have trust issues with people...I don't trust people when they're drinking and on drugs and stuff. (Sue, white, 1 child)

Low-income mothers resist the stereotype that they are irresponsible girls who neglect and endanger their children in favor of wild parties and getting high.

Sexual respectability was also a concern many participants addressed spontaneously—an implicit recognition that women of color and low-income women’s sexuality is always suspected to be excessive and uncontrolled. When participants, both Black and white, discussed dating they often mentioned the care they took to keep their dating life separate from their parenting. For instance, Cindy explained:

I had boyfriends, but I didn’t bring them around. My social life stayed away from kids because your kids, when they get older and you bring all these different guys or whatever, it gives them a negative look on women. And, you know towards men too, and towards yourself. That’s one thing I kept away from my kids because I don’t want them thinking negative things about me. But I was tired of being lonely and, yeah, I had boyfriends, but they, I didn’t bring them around my kids. (Cindy, white, 3 children)

It is interesting that Cindy began the discussion as a point of pride—she kept her kids from being exposed to her dating life—but ended it in a defensive posture, “I was tired of being lonely and, yeah, I had boyfriends”. Her tone of voice and word choices in this statement indicate that Cindy feels that she opens herself up to judgment or criticism by her children and others through her dating. This interview was conducted over the phone; therefore, it is unlikely that Cindy’s defensiveness came directly from my response, as I listened silently; rather, she appears to have been answering an imagined criticism she would expect from someone she did not know. She also believes her children would perceive her and other women negatively if they saw her with different men over time. By keeping her dating partners and her children

separate, Cindy seeks to prove that although she was not monogamous before she married, she always put her responsibilities as a mother before her sexual life, making her more worthy of respect than mothers who bring boyfriends in and out their children's lives.

Bringing multiple men into the home and to the lives of their children was mentioned by many participants as irresponsible maternal behavior to be avoided. Kaya, for instance, explains that she would go see her boyfriend when her daughter was asleep at night and her parents were home with her. She goes on to say: “[my daughter] was never brought around him...I knew I wasn't going to marry the guy” (Kaya, white, 1 child). For Kaya and other mothers I interviewed there was an additional concern that their children might become emotionally attached to a dating partner and then be saddened when he was no longer in their lives.

I have had boyfriends, but...I don't want them to get too close—because I wouldn't want her to get attached to somebody that I'm not going to be with, you know? So, like, if I was going to introduce somebody to my daughter it would have to be somebody that I was, like, seeing a future with, like long term, that type of thing. (Christy, Black, 1 child)

As a result of their concerns about protecting their children from emotional pain and maintaining their own sexual propriety, mothers reported that they did not bring men into their children's lives until they were reasonably sure that the relationship was serious and long term.

Conclusion

Analysis of how these low-income women think about and present themselves as mothers shows that the ideology of good motherhood is useful to them because it gives them concrete behaviors and a specific parenting philosophy upon which they can base their claims to being good mothers. Their descriptions of the intensive mothering they do helps to bolster their resistance to the stigma attached to their position as young, low-income and, in some cases, Black mothers.

Implicit in the women's narratives is recognition of the cultural (i.e., discursive) forces working against them. They demonstrate an understanding that they need to not only provide evidence of their performance of traditional womanhood by describing their selflessness and nurturing, but they also must refute the race, age and class-based notions of gender embedded in the bad mother narrative used to define them. Despite a lack of explicit mention of welfare queens or teen moms by the interviewer, every woman early in the interview discussed an awareness of and resistance to the stigma applied to them and presumptions made about them as young and/or low-income mothers. They describe their sexual circumspection, provision of material support (at the expense of their own needs), hard work, maturation, avoidance of partying/substance use and concern for education. Unlike middle-class women who must strive to prove that they are not failing at being good mothers (Warner 2005), i.e., that they deserve the position they are granted within the charmed circle, these women are compelled by their culturally assigned position in the "outer limits" of motherhood to work from the outside in to the charmed circle,

addressing not only why they should be admitted inside but arguing *against* the specific presumptions that keep them outside.

It is clear that these women are actively working to construct meaning from their role as mother, and that they are using the discourse of the good mother—and its contention that devoted and self-sacrificing mothers deserve respect and social status—as a resource in their efforts. Motherhood not only offers one of the few respected social roles available to low-income women that holds the potential for a meaningful and recognizable contribution to society, but it is also an extreme form of femininity that emphasizes women’s “natural” (and therefore, it is implied, inherent in every woman regardless of her social status) abilities to nurture and care for others. These qualities are denied young, low income women and women of color as is evidenced in the discourse of the bad mother. Therefore, it is logical for these women to embrace the ideology of good motherhood in an effort to earn a place somewhere near the top of the hierarchy of motherhood.

At the same time, viewed from a social rather than individual level, claims to respectability re-inscribe repressive norms and obscure structural factors contributing to the phenomenon while blaming those who have the deck stacked against them for their own difficulties (Baker 2009; Higginbotham 1993; Skeggs 1997). In this case, when the women claim to be good mothers by emphasizing that they meet the core criteria—self-sacrificing, devoted and responsible mothers, they inadvertently perpetuate the idea that any woman can and should be a good mother, i.e., that success is the result of individual effort rather than structural factors.

As the mothers make a case for their good motherhood and against their categorization as bad mothers, and explain how their devotion to their children made them into responsible adults, they imply that all mothers who work hard enough and love their children deeply enough can be good mothers. This belief, derived from the public and political discourses of motherhood so prevalent in U.S. society, obscures the reality that women need access to economic resources and cultural capital to truly meet the requirements of good motherhood. After all, the result of good motherhood, the motherhood discourse tells us, is a self-sufficient adult, which means a well-educated, well-employed individual. The argument that any mother can be a good mother is built upon the foundation of individual responsibility that posits that with enough hard work (in the case of mothering, with enough self-sacrifice and labor), individuals will be economically self-sufficient. The reality, however, is that those who are born poor are likely to remain poor given their lack of access to quality education, health care and employment opportunities (Furstenberg 2007), no matter how much effort they put in.

Chapter 5

No Respect: Society Denies Respect to Low-Income Mothers

Cindy is a white 30 year old mother of three children and is engaged to the father of her third child. When she was 15 years old she dropped out of high school and began using drugs and alcohol and hanging out with what she calls the “wrong crowd”. Just before her 16th birthday, Cindy became pregnant with her first child. Although she considered having an abortion, her mother assured Cindy that she would help her, so she decided to keep the baby and stopped using drugs and alcohol for the sake of her unborn child. When her son was two months old, Cindy’s mother kicked her out of the family home. Cindy periodically used public assistance and worked in fast food until she found stable employment as a bar tender. Cindy has a great deal of concern about the damage drugs and especially alcohol might do to her children if they were to become addicted to them, therefore, she makes sure they are aware of the problems her own father’s alcoholism has caused him and the family so they know drinking is not simply something fun to do. She and her fiancé rarely drink and never do it around their children as they believe it is important that they serve as role models. Additionally, Cindy encourages her oldest son, who is in high school, to stay active in sports and explains to him that physical activity is the way to get a “natural” and healthy “high” while drugs and alcohol provide only a “fake” and

destructive high. Cindy has always been very protective of her children and when they were little wouldn't let anyone except two trusted family members babysit them. She continues to monitor them closely, for example, if one of her children wants to go to a friend's house Cindy calls and speaks with the parents in order to ensure the children will be supervised and, in the case of her daughter, there will be no unknown men or boys present.

Cindy believes it is very important to have good communication with her children, especially her teenaged son so she can help him deal with his problems: "I let them try to speak out as best they can cause I always grew up kids are not to be heard, they're only to be seen... To me that is so wrong because then they can't develop their own character or their own personality, who they really are, it's like they have to hide and I think that creates more problems than what you're ready for." Cindy stresses to her children that their education is the most important thing for their future and that they need to have career goals that involve helping other people. She monitors their schoolwork closely and stays in touch with their teachers.

Cindy, like Stacy who was introduced in Chapter 1, describes herself as a good mother and, like Stacy, she spends a lot of time and effort trying to do what good mothers do: spending time with her children, helping them to stay healthy and become educated, productive and responsible adults. To someone who does not know Cindy or how she is raising her children, however, she might appear to be an irresponsible woman of questionable moral character, given the fact that she has three children with three different men, is working class and remains unmarried. On the

surface, Cindy, like Stacy, fits the stereotype of a bad mother. Despite the enormous efforts of women like Cindy and Stacy to meet the criteria of the good mother, as long as they remain recognizable as teen moms or potential welfare queens by virtue of their age, race and/or social class, they are not granted the status of a good mother by anyone other than themselves, their friends and family and sometimes caseworkers who have gotten to know them over time.

Why, these women wonder, do people not recognize them as good mothers? One reason is that the discourse of bad motherhood employs gendered ideologies of race, age and class. Therefore, no matter how hard these mothers work to be good mothers, the fact that they are young, low-income and/or Black, is sufficient to invoke the image of the welfare queen (whether they are receiving welfare or not) and thereby, the image of the bad mother (Hancock 2004). It appears, therefore, that the bad mother discourse is impervious to challenges made by low-income mothers given that a successful challenge must first dismantle hegemonic constructions of race, age, class and gender.

A second, unacknowledged reason many low-income mothers are misrecognized as bad mothers is their inability to secure middle-class status for themselves and, therefore, a middle-class upbringing and future for their children. Although the ideology of good motherhood leads society to believe that love, self-sacrifice and hard work are sufficient for good motherhood status, the contrast in the way the media depicts celebrity mothers and the way it depicts low-income mothers is telling. Celebrities who exhibit childbearing behaviors similar to those of vilified welfare queens (e.g., actor Natalie Portman is having a child outside of wedlock and

former supermodel Christie Brinkley has had three children with three different men) are seldom condemned and are more often celebrated. Scholars Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) point out that during the welfare reform debates of the 80s and 90s the media began to give us contradictory portrayals of motherhood based on the social locations of the women:

if you were really rich, famous, beautiful and white, being an unmarried mom was way cool. If you were poor and black, it was degenerate, the epitome of irresponsibility. If you were black and poor, you were not supposed to want babies at all, and you sure as hell didn't deserve to actually have them. (137)

Although sometimes there are controversies around the pregnancies of celebrities, the fitness of the woman to raise her child properly is not the center of the concern. Instead, as in the cases of Natalie Portman and Jamie Lynn Spears, who was 16 years old at the time she announced her pregnancy, the concern is that mothers without the economic and social resources of movie stars will nonetheless feel moved to emulate them. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee made the following statement to a conservative radio host:

One of the things that is troubling is that people see a Natalie Portman or some other Hollywood starlet who boasts of, 'Hey look, we're having children, we're not married, but we're having these children, and they're doing just fine.' But there aren't really a lot of single moms out there who are making millions of dollars every year for being in a movie. (Politifact 2011)

This statement created an uproar once it was repeated in the media, therefore, Huckabee posted the following clarification on his website:

In a recent media interview about my new book...I was asked about Oscar-winner Natalie Portman's out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Natalie is an extraordinary actor, very deserving of her recent Oscar, and I am glad she will marry her baby's father. However, contrary to what the Hollywood media reported, I did not 'slam' or 'attack' Natalie Portman, nor did I criticize the hardworking single mothers in our country. My comments were about the statistical reality that most single moms are very poor, under-educated, can't get a job, and if it weren't for government assistance, their kids would be starving to death. That's the story that we're not seeing, and it's unfortunate that society often glorifies and glamorizes the idea of having children out of wedlock. (ibid)

The fact that Huckabee felt compelled to clarify his first statement is evidence that many people were angered at what they termed an attack on Natalie Portman who was wildly popular at that time as well as on single mothers, the majority of whom are employed and are not receiving public assistance (ibid). Perhaps even more important to notice is that Huckabee's clarification emphasized not that he is concerned about Portman's ability to properly parent her child but rather is concerned about the children of unwed low-income mothers who will either end up "starving" or on "government assistance".

Similarly, concerns surrounding the pregnancy of Jamie Lynn Spears who became pregnant while she was a "tween" star on Nickelodeon centered on the impact her impending motherhood might have on her young fans. This concern is evident in an interview conducted by *Newsweek* with Ron Shuter, the executive editor of *Us* magazine which broke the story of Spears' pregnancy and published the first photos of her and her newborn child:

NEWSWEEK: On the cover of the magazine, Jamie Lynn says that "being a mom is the best feeling in the world." Do you think

you're giving your readers, many of whom are Jamie Lynn's age or younger, an overly glamorous take on teenage pregnancy?

Rob Shuter: I think what we've done successfully in this story is point out that Jamie Lynn is an exceptional situation where she's a young girl but she's already made a handsome living. She's not worried about paying her electricity bill. I think we talk to her about going back to work and what that would be like. I don't think we pretend for one minute that this story is anything but what it is and I hope what we've done is reflected the reality of the story in a fair way. We didn't go down there to slap this girl on the wrist and tell her off. (Kliff 2008)

Newsweek articulates the concern prevalent in the media following Spears' announcement: that the media coverage and the fact of her pregnancy will encourage other young girls to become pregnant. In defense of the magazine's coverage of Spears' pregnancy and motherhood, Shuter points out that they emphasize that Spears is already wealthy and will have work whenever she wants it. These wealthy celebrity mothers are not presumed to be bad mothers, rather they are held accountable for potentially contributing to the early or unwed childbearing of low-income women who *are* presumed to be unable to care for their children properly.

At the same time, however, the dominant discourse of good motherhood posits love, self-sacrifice and hard work as the keys to good motherhood. There is no explicit explanation within this discourse of why or how money is important to good motherhood. It seems, then, that the discourse that provides instructions for how to be a good mother (be loving, devoted, self-sacrificing, protective and hard working) mislead women and society into believing that *every* mother can and should be a good mother. Instead, a woman's class status when she becomes pregnant and while she is

raising her child is actually the crucial factor in whether or not she is recognizable as a good mother.

Judgment

The women in this study report being judged for a variety of reasons, but for most of the women these reasons all relate to economic instability and the character flaws presumed to lead to that instability. For instance, being judged for having more than two children is linked to questions about how many fathers their children have, which is, of course, linked to sexual propriety and marital status. Furthermore, the lack of sexual propriety and the act of having children outside of marriage are both held up in dominant discourse as causes of economic hardship. Being poor is sufficient to invoke presumptions about the number of fathers a woman's children have:

It was like mind boggling to people that I had three kids by the same guy! (laughs) Yeah, I got that a LOT, like when I went to social services, they were always like: Oh! All the same father?! Yeah! (laughs) You know the typical three kids by three different guys or whatever they were assuming. (Jane, white, 3 children)

Jane, who was married when she had her children, explains that her financial instability following her divorce led people who did not know her well to assume she was yet another example of the “three kids, three dads” stereotype. The fact that she could say “yes” when asked if all the children had the same father was evidence for Jane that she does not meet the stereotype of a welfare mother and, therefore, is not a bad mother. Even mothers with only two children experienced questions and what

they considered to be judgment about paternity. Vicky, for example, has two sons both of whom are being raised with her boyfriend, who is the father of her younger son. Near the end of the interview while discussing whether she felt she was stereotyped more because she had been a teen mother or because she is a single mother, Vicky stated:

At first I was [stereotyped for] both, even now, with having [my boyfriend] here, it's still hard because you still get the question, where's [my oldest son's] dad? I shouldn't have to answer that, he's not around, he has no part in decision making, [my boyfriend is] his dad as far as everybody's concerned. (Vicky, white, 2 children)

Vicky, Jane and other mothers report that the absence of their children's fathers, whether they had ever been married or not, is understood to be a marker of their unfitness as mothers.

Justina felt she was looked down upon by the staff at her daughter's pediatrician's office because the paperwork she filled out revealed her to be a single mother. She felt this stigma so acutely she was motivated to marry a man (not her daughter's father) who she later divorced because of his abusive behavior.

I was treated like crap at the doctor's office... That's actually part of the reason I got married. They really looked down on me because me and my daughter had different last names. *And did things get better with that after you guys had the same last names?* Yep, yep, I was a married mother. (Justina, white, 1 child)

Although being a single mother is one of the many markers of bad mothers, Justina's simultaneous use of Medicare may have combined with her marital status to create

the situation that caused her to feel judged. Several of the mothers mentioned their use of Medicare as catalysts for presumptions about their ability to mother.

Although they did not always blame their perceived class status as the reason they experienced judgment, low-income mothers are almost certainly identifiable as being outside of the middle-class in the contexts within which they reported experiencing stereotyping. This identification can come from their use of public assistance, for example, food stamps at the grocery store or Medicaid at the doctor's office, simply from being Black or from their class display (e.g., clothing, demeanor, etc.). It is likely, therefore, that the judgment they report is often inflected by their perceived class status rather than simply being based on the number of children they have, their marital status or their age. If Justina did not use Medicare for her daughter, if Jane was not applying for welfare and if Vicky were perceived as middle-class, they might not face the same questions and the concerns implied by those questions.

The salience of social class standing is evident in the fact that most of the mothers who had applied for public assistance described feeling stigmatized in the process, regardless of their race. Hancock (2004) and others have shown that welfare receipt and inadequate mothering are conflated in the dominant discourse of the bad mother; therefore, assumptions made about mothers who receive welfare are closely linked to their fitness as mothers. For some mothers the treatment they received in welfare offices was distressing and hurtful enough to cause them to avoid applying for aid unless absolutely necessary:

[Because my job changed from full-time to part-time] I've had to actually go [FIA] to get some assistance. And they expect you to not, like, be clean. And the lady said I was really well spoken

and I was dressed nice so why was I there? I tried my hardest to stay away from assistance all my life, cause every time I dealt with them it's just been a negative experience. [It makes me so angry] I'd rather work. Like I seen [your recruitment advertisement] on craigslist, I said, oh, my daughter's birthday, that's \$20 on one of her gifts, you know, [or] I can give her the giftcard...I'd rather hustle and work myself to death than to deal with those people and be degraded. (Sophia, Black, 3 children)

Other mothers discuss how they are judged negatively until their caseworkers get to know them. Christy, a Black, single, working mother of one child, explained how she and her friend see themselves as particularly attentive and hard working mothers. However, when I asked her how she was treated by caseworkers while she was receiving WIC, she explained:

I felt like when I first started going they were kinda like, not nasty, but like, I don't know, you know, how people talk down to you kind of—they act like you're stupid? But I think after, like, they talked to me and they got to know me, after a few times it changed, like they were nicer to me...I think that they probably had their own stereotypes too, thinking, like, oh, these people, they're lazy they don't want to work so they, you know, come in here using tax payer money. (Christy, Black, 1 child)

Christy's perception is that once the caseworkers saw how responsible she was as a young working single mother, their opinion of her, but not necessarily of other young mothers, changed. Until the women prove themselves to be exceptions to the stereotypes of the lazy, neglectful welfare queen, then, they are subject to assumptions about their character and, therefore, their ability to mother properly.

Another source of judgment about these young low-income women's right and ability to mother is their apparent youthfulness.

Oh! Yeah! It comes all the time. Especially with our age, they just. I've, I've had a lady in the GROCERY store, pull me by arm and [say]: 'Girl, are you crazy?' I'm looking around like, what happened? 'You're just a baby, how you going around having children?' I'm like, 'I AM MARRIED.' I think I had four [kids] at the time, but I, I, still kind of looked young. (Raina, Black, 6 children, 28 at the time of this incident)

Even Raina's marital status fails to protect her from censure. Alongside Jane's experience described above, it appears that young, Black and/or identifiably low-income women are presumed to be single whether they are married or not, reflecting the power of the stereotypes disseminated through the discourse of the bad mother.

Mothers' reports of judgment on the basis of apparent or actual youthfulness also show that this characteristic provokes assumptions about their intelligence, responsibility and maturity and, therefore, about their fitness as mothers.

I still look young, I'm 29 and I still look like I'm 15 years old. So, even till this day I'm judged by strangers...I was at a birthday party over the weekend and they said, "Oh, where's your son? How old is he? and I said, "Oh, he just turned 10." And they're looking at me like, are, are you kidding!? Even at work...I work with patients a lot so that comes up a lot and they're afraid to ask me. Once I say how old my son is they just kind of shut up and look at me like: oh my god! (laughs)... especially, some teachers at school or other moms at school. I noticed a lot that I just kind of feel like they think I may not know what I'm doing, or (pause), it's an awful feeling actually...[people assume young mothers' children are] going to grow up and be bad, and, murderers and things like that. And, you know, not smart or not successful. Um, I know when [my son has] gotten into trouble at school, which is just silly, minor boy things, just the way teachers look at you and talk to you, it's just kind of, insulting. Um, they just, it seems like they look at you like you don't know what you're doing and that your kid is bad because you're a young mom and that you don't have values or morals because you're a young mom, you know? I definitely think that that's what people think. (Lacey, white, 1 child)

Lacey's status as a young mother makes strangers and patients uncomfortable, despite the fact that she is employed in a stable, skilled job as a medical assistant at an optician's office and was recently married. Her age is even more problematic for her when dealing with teachers at her son's school. Lacey believes that teachers treat her as if she does not know what she is doing as a mother and that her age at the time she had her son is responsible for any trouble her son may get into. Vicky also described a similar belief that her age impacted her ability to convince her son's school to test him for learning disabilities (Chapter 4). Although these two examples come from interviews with white women, Black women also reported feeling that their children's teachers treated them as too young to know what they were doing as mothers.

Again, these women are not only young mothers, they are also low-income mothers and although they did not identify this as an additional basis of judgment, research shows that school staff presume children from low-income families are less supported by their parents and, therefore, more likely to have academic and behavioral problems (Lareau 2003). We also know that low-income parents are often unable to effectively advocate for their children within educational institutions because the system and the staff within it recognize middle and upper middle-class parenting as more legitimate and, therefore, see wealthier parents' concerns as more worthy of a response (*ibid*). It is likely, therefore, that the combination of Vicky and Lacey's youthfulness (in comparison to other parents) and low-income status were indeed major factors in the judgment and lack of response they received from their children's teachers and schools.

Although young middle-class or wealthy mothers and single middle-class or wealthy mothers may well be subject to questions or judgments about their moral character, they are not vilified to the same degree nor to the same effect as low-income mothers. Middle-class and wealthy mothers do not suffer like low-income women and their children do when social services are decreased as they have been over the last 30 years (Hays 2003). Blaming low-income parents, especially mothers, for their economic and social struggles allows politicians and media pundits to justify policies that, for example, withdraw public support for higher education in favor of requirements that low-income mothers work at low-paying service sector jobs as well as lifetime limits on the receipt of cash assistance.

The dominant discourse of bad motherhood puts the ability of mothers to support their children economically at the center of its concern and, thereby, completely obscures any evidence that mothers love their children and work hard for their futures as the mothers describe in Chapter 4. One mother, Tashieka, articulates an understanding of this reality when asked to further explain her comment that people assume teen mothers don't have the "skills" to be good mothers:

What kind of skills do you think people think teen moms should have that they might not? ...I don't even think it's the skills that they worry so much about a lot, because, it's usually how, you know, where you gonna live, how you gonna take care of this baby. The questions never are: what are you gonna teach them? You know, how are you gonna teach them? I think it's more economical where their concerns lie when it comes, when you become a teen mom. (Tashieka, Black, 3 children)

Tashieka is well aware that society's primary concern is her financial standing. Given the fact that the women interviewed for this study report giving a great deal of

thought and effort to raising their children in precisely the way the good mother discourse prescribes yet they are still not generally recognized as good mothers, it is clear that Tashieka's assessment is correct. When a mother fails to attain middle-class standing, i.e., economic independence and stability, she is consigned to the category of a bad mother regardless of her efforts and devotion to her children. As a result, as Marsha explained to me, people disregard evidence that a low-income mother can create a happy and close family:

I think they have a lot of different judgments about things...they don't look at the good side of parenting, or the part that if you did have kids somebody will be able to look after you when you get old. Or the part that, you know, some people are friends—like me and my kids are really good friends. We go to a lot of places together. We go bowling, we go to, we even go to karaoke...we get up and sing together, we have a lot of fun. We go to parks, we go to a lot of places, they go to the grocery store with me, you know, we all work together to keep the house clean, we work together to wash the clothes, we all work together making meals. There's a lot of stuff that comes good also out of having a family, things those people don't know.
(Marsha, Black, 5 children)

It is clear from the experiences of these mothers that low-income women are presumed to fit the image of the bad mother regardless of their actual parenting behaviors or beliefs. This reality gives lie to the assertion that every mother can and should be a good mother—in reality only those mothers who are already at least middle-class are even potentially legible as good mothers.

So, it is apparent that there is an important but unarticulated requirement for a mother to be understood as a good woman and, therefore, a good mother: she must already have proven her worthiness as an individual by having attained at least

middle-class status prior to becoming pregnant (Solinger 2004). This hidden criteria is obscured by the embedding within the discourse of the bad mother of stereotypes about young women, low-income women and Black women—all of whom are constructed as unable or unwilling to do the work necessary to attain class mobility and, therefore, as inherently flawed women and mothers.

Reproduction of “Individual Responsibility”

The power of the ideology of individual responsibility, the belief that every person has the ability to rise into the middle-class given enough effort and ambition, is so powerful that not only does society use it to categorize low-income mothers, but so do low-income mothers themselves. In the quotes below mothers explain to me how they are responsible for not having earned a college degree and, thereby, ensuring a better life for their children:

What would you change about yourself as a mom if you could? I would probably. I don't know. I just wish that I was in school, I wish that I had a career so that I could provide for her better, really, to be quite honest. That's the only thing that I really really worry about...because you don't want to struggle with your kids you want them to have, like, the stuff you didn't have. Sometimes I feel bad because they want to do something you're like, oh sorry we can't do this because we don't have the money. (Christy, Black, 1 child)

What would you change about yourself as a mother if you could? I want to say (pause) I wish (pause) I had (pause) more courage, I guess (pause) to, like, go back to school and know what I want, to have a better career so my kids could have more. (Cindy, white, 3 children)

These women understand that a college education might make them able to provide more opportunities to their children and they believe that they simply chose not to go to college. Marsha makes this perspective very clear:

I was trying to be a corrections officer, but they put me out of school because I didn't have my high school diploma or my GED. So I kept trying to go back and I was about 7 points off from getting my GED...then I started trying to work and then I got pregnant with [daughter] so it was too much for me. I never did get it though, I kept trying and I tried again when I came to this country. I remember my friend, she got hers, but I should have just kept, kept going to school, you just have to go everyday. It's just hard when you have kids, especially little ones. Yeah. That's no excuse though. My mother told me that's no excuse she said, even if you got kids you should still try to make something out of yourself or you'll end up being nothing, you know? (Marsha, Black, 5 children)

The conviction that their lack of courage or persistence is the primary barrier to their educational and career achievement is consistent with the logic of individual responsibility which obscures the significant role of privilege in gaining access to higher education and well-paying careers.

This “mis-recognition” of how individuals move into and stay in the middle and upper-class has been studied and explained by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. As Annette Lareau explains, Bourdieu

sees a pattern of domination and inequality at the heart of social structure... the transmission of privilege is ‘mis-recognized.’ Individuals tend to see their society’s social arrangements as legitimate. Status, privilege, and similar social rewards allegedly are ‘earned’ by individuals; that is, they are perceived as resulting from intelligence, talent, effort, and other strategically displayed skills. Bourdieu, in showing how cultural capital is acquired and used in daily life, makes clear that individuals’ social position is not the result of personal attributes such as

effort or intelligence. In particular, he argues that individuals in privileged social locations are advantaged in ways that are not the result of the intrinsic merit of their cultural experiences. (Lareau 2003: 275-276)

According to Bourdieu and many other scholars, our society continues to believe and base public policies on the idea that those who are in higher status social classes are there because they have earned the right to be there and those who are not have failed to work hard enough or lack the ambition to even try.

This data shows that a college degree may help low-income mothers to challenge this idea to some extent. Two of the college educated mothers in the sample exhibit some insight into the connection between college completion and family support (i.e., a resource or privilege not available to everyone). Phoebe has a master's degree in psychology and works for a county mental health services as a counselor while Haley earned a bachelor's degree but still struggles financially as an IT technician. Both Phoebe and Haley describe the key role their family support systems played in their ability to gain a college education while simultaneously working and parenting:

I definitely could not have [gotten a college degree] without all the family support and friends that I had and even when I graduated with my bachelors degree I threw myself a graduation party (laughs). I did a little speech and I said, it's not just me who got here, it's all you for helping me. I couldn't have done it without them. (Phoebe, white, 1 child)

Not all young single mothers have had the support I have had from my family and I honestly in my heart feel that if it wasn't for their support I could have easily taken the easy route through life and been that stereotype that everybody pinned on me...Because without my parent's help and support I wouldn't

have been able to work a lot, I wouldn't have been able to go to school for as long as I did. (Haley, white, 1 child)

Phoebe and Haley understand that it would not have been possible for them to complete college without the support and help of their families. This insight was not apparently achieved by all the mothers who completed a college degree, however. Kaya, who received extensive financial and child care assistance from her parents throughout her years of parenting and who is a registered nurse, states that she is happy and somewhat surprised to be on the “positive side” of statistics by having completed college despite having been a teenaged mother. When asked what she believes helped her to achieve this distinction she cites her character and expresses bewilderment about why other young mothers do not get college degrees:

I just, I just did what I thought was the right thing to do and that's what kind of person I am. I didn't want to just have her and then work at some minimum wage job and have MY parents take care of me FOREVER even though it seems like that's what they're doing now... I just think it's really weird that more people when they have a kid just don't do that. And they just say, oh, I have a kid now, I DON'T have to do that...I just felt like that was right thing to do and I wanted to have, you know, I don't want her to suffer from [the fact that I was a teenage mother]. (Kaya, white, one child)

Kaya's statement that she is simply the “kind of person” who does the right thing is indeed consistent with the logic of individual responsibility. She foregrounds her ambition and effort and although she acknowledges that her parents provided support to her and her daughter this support was not seen as the determining factor in her ability to complete a college degree.

This logic around educational attainment closely parallels the logic of good and bad motherhood—good mothers are those who care enough and work hard enough, bad mothers are those who do not. In both the general case of social class mobility and the specific case of motherhood, the role of race, class, and gender privilege is unarticulated as an essential factor in an individuals' ability to attain and maintain middle-class standing. Although the presence of structural barriers to class mobility was not acknowledged by most of the mothers, the presence of structural barriers to the achievement of ideal motherhood was.

Awareness of Structural Barriers

Some of the women exhibited an understanding that their ability to practice good mothering, especially being present in their children's lives is impacted by the lack of family and spousal support:

I have a older sister from my dad's side and she's always trying to tell me I should [do] this [with my kids] and I should that. And I'll be just looking at her like, first of all, me and you got two totally different lives and you can't tell me what I should do with my kids because that's how YOUR kids operate. Our kids are totally different...I mean my sister works for the post office, she's married now, and...my grandmother does everything for her. You know what I'm saying? ...We totally different.
(Corinne, Black, 3 children)

Having help from family was understood by many of these women as shaping their ability to parent in particular ways, especially to be able to be energetic and creative in the activities they do with their children.

Needing to work full-time was a related barrier to ideal parenting identified by working mothers. When asked to compare her own parenting to her mothers', Kendra told me that she feels her son's reading skills are lower than they should be because she did not spend as much time working with him as she should have:

I wasn't as, um, consistent, I would say, as far as on things like reading as probably my mother was. Because at this point, he's in third grade, but to me he's not reading as well as he should be, but when I was in third grade, by fourth grade I was in chapter books, like fluently reading. So, not really, hadn't spent as much time, probably, with him as I should have with that aspect of learning, as far as phonics and reading and things like that. And I think it has to do with, going to school and working full time and things like that to where not really having the time, and when you do have the time, it's like you're coming home, you cook dinner, and basically do it all over again to get ready for the next day. So. (Kendra, Black, 1 child)

Kendra articulates an understanding that there is not enough time to work and spend adequate time on educational enrichment. At another point in the interview Kendra states:

If she existed I think, in this day and age, the ideal mom would be the home-maker, the mother that's able to stay at home and raise her kids... see every step that they take, every, their first words, and be there with them, and [be] able to participate in all their activities, PTA, PTO, or, all that [and their] extra curricular things that sometimes you may want to participate in but, at the end of the day you're so wiped out from working or running here, running there, it's hard to participate. So I think the ideal mother is a home-maker (laughs), somebody who is able to be at home and raise their kids while [their] husband works or something.

Although Kendra, Corinne and other mothers identify the lack of spousal and/or family support as a barrier to their ability to be not simply good, but ideal, mothers,

they do not connect this lack of resources to their inability to complete a college degree and secure stable, well-paying employment. This analysis, however, was limited and did not prevent some of the women from uncritically falling back on the discourse of bad motherhood in order to position themselves as good mothers.

Boundary Drawing: The Reproduction of the Bad Mother Discourse

Although the vast majority of mothers resisted stereotypes with general statements about how assumptions about young low-income and single mothers are often not true, several of the mothers frame themselves as exceptions to a true stereotype about young, unmarried low-income mothers. Less than a third of the women made derogatory comments about other young low income mothers and these comments differed according to the race of the woman making the claim. Of the four Black mothers who mentioned that some low-income mothers fulfill stereotypes, three referred to specific people they knew. For instance, Christy discusses her cousin's cousin:

I think that they probably had their own stereotypes too, thinking like oh, these people, they're lazy they don't want to work so they, you know, come in here using tax payer money... I guess there are some people like that, cause I know some people who, like, I have a, she's not my cousin, she's my cousin's cousin...and she's like, she lives in government housing and all her kids are grown and I guess she doesn't have a dependent, they cut her benefits and like she got pregnant cause she didn't...she's like forty something years old and she's just had another baby because her last kid turned 18 and she's like, oh, cause I want to keep getting my state assistance... that is crazy! She's like oh, yeah, cause my daughter's going to be 18 so they're going to, you know, I'm not going to get anymore assistance or I'm not going to get as much. So she just had

another baby. So, there are people like that, but the majority of people aren't like that. (Christy, Black, 1 child)

Comments like Christy's that describe individuals behaving in ways that resemble stereotypes still leave room for assertions about the general inaccuracy of stereotypes. On the other hand, statements that generalize about stereotypical low-income mothers reproduce the positioning of some mothers as deserving of assistance and some not. These types of statements were made by six white women.

[People] might look at me like I'm just this stupid little teenaged single mom, but then again, I am not. You know, there are some women who are 35 years old and they're pumping out kids so their welfare check doesn't stop. And I'm not one of those people. (Vicky, white, 2 children)

Vicky does not currently receive public assistance other than Medicare for her children; therefore, the fact that she has had only two children and is not getting a "welfare check" helps her to distance herself from "some women". When asked to describe what society generally believes will happen when a teenager has a baby, Jackie stated:

That their parents will end up taking care of the baby, that they'll continue living like a kid and just push that responsibility onto somebody else. And, you know...I see that and I tend to (pause) think that [this is true] even though I have been a teen mom. Maybe because I didn't do that and, I think, you know, I don't know, most, most girls do. (Jackie, white, 2 children)

Jackie believes that she, unlike "most girls" took responsibility for her children. Even Haley, who clearly articulated an understanding of how her parents' support allowed her to earn a college degree, positions herself and other mothers who work long hours

at work and in a college program as more deserving of assistance than a stereotypical low-income mother:

I truly believe in my heart that something needs to change as far as assistance for any single parent...I think it's a damn shame that through all these years me personally I've tried to take care of my kid on my own, without any help and that gave me a sense of pride. It didn't bother me getting help with day care paid for but it sure would have helped at some times for the government or whomever to take a step back and say, you know what, Haley? You ARE working 80 hours a week, you ARE going to college full-time and, you know what, we are going to give you \$200 a month in food stamps because you're TRYING. You know what I'm saying? Versus me sitting at home and having multiple children by multiple men and being content in this, in this lifestyle, you know?...Taking a step back and giving a little more assistance to those who are trying to make a better life because although it may be 4 or 5 years till a young person's finished with college, guess what? You're going to end up paying less money in that 4 or 5 years than what you will for the REST of a life for that person and ALL their children. (Haley, white, 1 child)

Haley's analysis here presents a binary: young low-income mothers who work and go to school and those who sit at home "having multiple children by multiple men".

Statements such as this show that these women are not fully aware of the role of privilege in determining the opportunities available to low-income mothers and that there is no image for them to draw upon of a hard working mother who cannot attend college due to the lack of family support or public assistance. It is also noteworthy that an important part of Haley's comparison is to mothers who have more than one child, which she does not. She uses the fact that she has only one child to position herself as an exception.

Given the fact that the white mothers had little access to class privilege but could draw upon racial privilege, it was not surprising that one white mother who compared herself to stereotypically bad young low-income mothers evoked an explicitly racialized stereotype:

Unfortunately I think people look down more on, African-American teen moms because there is this stereotype that they just like pop out kids so they can get more welfare. And, it's true they kind of do, because I've seen them with their BROOD. And they just kind of scream at them all day, and the teen moms, I've seen them in the mall, they take these poor kids to the mall and ignore them and they just sit in their strollers and scream and cry while they're laughing and joking and trying on clothes... And their kids are dirty and filthy and screaming and crying for, lord knows what. (Justina, white, 1 child)

This statement was by far the most blatantly racist one I heard, most comments along these lines were more general; however, this statement shows that the racialized roots of the bad mother stereotype are still present.

Although all the mothers I spoke with resisted stereotypes about young low-income mothers, some of them did so at the expense of other mothers. This boundary drawing reproduces the idea that some women choose to be bad mothers and some women, like themselves, choose to behave like good mothers. Furthermore, the belief some of the women expressed that they are to blame for their lack of a college education or, in the case of at least one college educated mother, their lack of understanding that the support they received from their family was instrumental in their achievements reproduces the ideology of individual responsibility embedded within the discourse of bad motherhood.

Returning to the Discourse of the Good Mother: Love is More Important Than Money

Just as the discourse of good motherhood proved useful in the creation of a positive sense of self for low-income mothers, it is also effective in giving mothers a rationale for seeing their economic struggles as not relevant to the quality of their child raising abilities. In an effort to maintain their status as good mothers, these women frame their love, devotion and sacrifice of their time and energy as more important to their children's well-being than the material things economic and cultural capital could give them:

(Interviewer: What do you think is the most important thing that you do for your kids?) I think just be there...I'm there as much as I can. Um, you know, I just, I went to my son's mother's day breakfast. And he was just all happy, oh she's here! I think just your time, although because I have four children and I'm a single parent I can't give as much. I found just my time and my energy is, they're happy, they're more happy with that than [with] the new newest game or the newest Nintendo. I think that's what it is, just the time. And making each child feel like they're individually special. (Ana, Black, 4 children)

The most important thing I do for 'em? Um, (pause). I used to think that it was like buying them stuff...but now I, I, it's just, like, spending time with them period. You know? Cause with my oldest son—when he was staying with his dad and his grandparents and stuff I would always buy stuff and send it out there but I wasn't out there a lot. And now that I spend more time with him, it's like he's getting closer and his attitude is changing more. (pause) Cause he was acting out a lot, he was getting in trouble at school, and, fighting and stuff like that. (Tanya, Black, 5 children)

It is no accident that a mother's attention is framed as more important than toys; after all, this reasoning is provided by the discourse of good motherhood which posits that

a mothers' love and devotion are the keys to a child's wellbeing. Kate describes an epiphany about how love transcends the trauma of food scarcity and poverty:

I've really learned that...love is the most important thing, like there was times where, I remember I worked at a restaurant and I had NO money, we were living in an apartment, it was just me and my daughter and I remember we got one meal a night at the restaurant [for free] and I used to get stuff for her so she could eat the next day and I would starve. And it was so hard, and that was like really probably the hardest time and that's when I was like, did I do the right thing? Maybe I should have gave her to someone who can take care of her, who doesn't have to worry about if they're going to get their next meal or not. But all of that worked out and she was always very happy and such a good kid that I realized that love was the most important thing and money comes and goes but it's how you, it's a lot of how you treat other people too. (Kate, white, 1 child)

Ophelia similarly argues that if a mother does the work of good mothering then even homelessness would not take away her good mother status:

(Interviewer: What do you think isn't a good mom?)
Not spending time with the kids when she has the time
Not doing educational things with them
Not taking care of them health wise
Housing—I think if someone's a good mom, but she doesn't have a place to live, that doesn't mean she's not a good mom
(from field notes; Ophelia, Black, 2 children)

The ideology of good motherhood convinces low-income mothers that if they protect their children, keep them healthy, provide intellectual stimulation and spend adequate quality time with them, then they will be good mothers. The fact that these women do these things to the best of their ability and yet they are still not recognized as good mothers by those who do not know them proves that these efforts are necessary but insufficient. The discourse, then, hides the requirement that a mother be at least

middle-class in order to be understood as a good mother at the same time that it offers an apparently airtight rationale for why money is unnecessary for good mothering.

Returning once again to Phoebe, who has counseled adolescents in foster care, we find an informed analysis of the difficulties low-income mothers face:

I work with a lot of kids in foster care, and, you know, those kids are in foster care with foster parents that are paid, educated. I mean they're educated by the DHS [Department of Human Services]...they have to go to classes on how to be foster parents, they get support groups every week, they get free items, people donate stuff, they get cash. If you gave all that to the birth parents?! [The kids] wouldn't have to go to foster care!... when parents, birth or otherwise, have the right resources you can parent pretty [well]...when child protective service is involved the family is inundated with resources for 12 weeks. And then [the resources are] gone and then it's back [to the way it was], then it's you're wrong or bad parents because you don't know how to keep going, without all this stuff. But if your kid gets pulled from you in foster care, those [foster] parents have [all those resources] until the kid's 18! (Phoebe, white, 1 child)

Phoebe clearly articulates how unjust it is that public policy denies the social support to low-income parents that they provide to foster parents and how important financial and social resources are to what is considered good parenting.

Conclusion

Low-income mothers are trapped by ideologies of motherhood that place all of the responsibility and all of the blame for children's well-being and future opportunities upon individual women without consideration for the level of access different groups of women have to economic and social resources. Good motherhood is seductive to low-income women because it promises some small measure of social

respect to self-sacrificing, hard working and loving mothers. Despite their financial struggles, these women are led to believe, they can give their children what they need to be healthy, happy and financially independent adults and through this work gain some claim to social esteem.

Although the embrace of the ideology of good motherhood allows these women to gain a positive sense of self and some respect from close friends and family members, it also reinforces the idea that all mothers are capable of being good mothers if they are willing to work hard and make sacrifices for their children. This assertion also obscures the fact that at least middle-class status is necessary to be perceived as a good mother and this status is only available to those who already have adequate race and class privilege. The data show that even when low-income mothers follow the intensive mothering principles to the best of their ability they are still judged to be bad mothers by society because the ideology of individual responsibility clouds our understanding of how privilege is transmitted and how race and class based structural barriers make the task of parenting more difficult.

Discourses of good and bad motherhood together allow society to pretend that mothers and children who become or stay in the middle-class are more loving and dedicated to their kids while mothers who struggle financially are just not loving and dedicated enough. Significantly, this logic lets society off the hook: the public, media pundits and policy makers can ignore the obstacles that low-income mothers and children face that middle-class and wealthy mothers and children do not have to contend with to the same degree. For the mothers interviewed here and for society at large the focus is, therefore, on how mothers need to change rather than on how

society provides unearned advantages to some individuals while expecting others to “make it” solely through their own efforts.

When these mothers minimize the effect of their economic constraints on their children, as the ideology of good motherhood encourages them to do, they and we are distracted from the structural inequality low-income individuals face. At the same time, the power of the bad mother discourse is evident in the fact that if these low-income mothers were to point out the disadvantages they face they would likely be blamed as bad mothers for having chosen to raise children in a situation for which there is no hope of advancement.

The discourses of good and bad motherhood, therefore, operate together to maintain the illusion that good mothers raise children who become economically independent adults while bad mothers raise children who do not. The insidiousness of the power of these two discourses is seen in the finding that when low-income mothers aspire to good motherhood, and work hard performing it, they are not only ultimately unsuccessful in gaining social recognition as good mothers, but they also reproduce the discourses that create this dynamic and contribute to the logics that lead policy makers to decrease public support for low-income families.

Chapter 6

“I don’t want them to be a statistic”: Mothering Practices of Low-Income Mothers

...is it right that we should expect the poor to be more motivated or talented than the middle-class, much less the affluent, in order to succeed? The middle-class need only to be motivated, while the poor need to be supermotivated to rise above their circumstances. Ordinary levels of talent and motivation will not suffice for the disadvantaged as it does for the more affluent. A stratification system that requires more of those with fewer assets is manifestly unjust, but that is precisely what is required of low-income families in American society. (Furstenberg 2007: 164)

Discourses around motherhood, especially the bad mother (i.e., the “welfare queen”) are built upon the ideology of individual responsibility and so the public and policy makers are convinced the choices and behaviors of young and low-income mothers are responsible for these women’s and their children’s life circumstances, while structural and institutional factors remain obscured (Luker 1996; Solinger 2005). This conviction posits “poverty as...a consequence of individual failings and deficiencies” (Rank et al. 2003, 4), which allows the public and policy makers to continue to believe low-income women are not deserving of more than a minimum of public aid because they are so rarely successful in producing economically self-sufficient offspring. Although scholars such as Rickie Solinger (2005) argue that class, race and gender inequality and stratification are primary causes of poverty

rather than the childbearing behavior of poor women, these facts remain unrecognized by the public and policy makers. In his book, *Destinies of the Disadvantaged*, Frank Furstenberg (2007) goes further to link the power of the ideology of personal responsibility to society's continued reviling of poor women's reproductive behaviors:

Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have too often confused correlation for causality, believing that if only poor teens behaved like those in the middle-class, they would reap the same benefits when they grew up. This fiction misses the simple fact that the vast majority of those who are born poor, grow up in impoverished and unstable families, reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and go to inadequate schools have long odds of escaping poverty. True, some do make it, by dint of talent, hard work, and good fortune, but given average talent, motivation, and happenstance, the odds of success are drastically lower than for their middle-class counterparts (Furstenberg 2006). Our deeply embedded value of self-reliance leads most Americans to believe that motivation and hard work permit anyone to overcome the obstacles imposed by economic and social disadvantage (Stonecash 2007). (Furstenberg 2007:163-164)

This belief also leads most Americans to assume that mothers whose children are not able to rise into the middle-class must not be trying hard enough. However, as Furstenberg states in the quote that opens this chapter, this is a tragically flawed assumption. Of particular interest to this project is the way in which the combination of the discourses of good and bad motherhood, coupled with the ideology of individual responsibility, so thoroughly obscures the fact that no matter how much low-income mothers love their children or how hard they work to prepare them to become middle-class adults, this is an unlikely outcome given the stratified society in which they live and the increasing fragility of the middle-class.

Many sociological studies of low-income mothers' parenting try to challenge the blaming of low-income mothers by taking a comparative approach, documenting the similarities and differences between the attitudes, beliefs, goals and practices of low-income mothers compared to middle-class mothers (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). Often the differences between these groups are chalked up to low-income women's lack of resources, arguing that given the same resources, low-income mothers would parent very similarly to middle-class mothers and, therefore, their children would be more likely to become financially and socially successful. This approach depicts these women as deficient mothers even when it blames their deficiency on the structural constraints low-income mothers face rather than on the women themselves. The implication of these studies is that these mothers would like to be good mothers; they certainly love their children as much as middle-class and wealthy mothers and want them to be educated, responsible, hard-working and financially independent, but they cannot adopt the practices of good mothering until society provides them the resources those practices require. As a result of this comparative approach and deficiency framework, low-income mothers, the public, policy makers and scholars do not recognize that these mothers are working at least as hard and using (appropriately) different parenting logics than those of middle-class mothers. As a result, these studies naturalize middle-class practices, logics and goals by leaving them unexamined and yet with an implied position as the gold standard.

Studies need to challenge the norm, not reproduce it by offering reasons why low-income mothers cannot meet them, albeit through no fault of their own. We need to challenge the ideology of intensive mothering that places all the responsibility and

blame upon parents, especially mothers, when children do not attain or maintain middle-class standing. The response of many middle-class parents and their children to the current economic reality is to work hard to ensure that their children will be the best of the best. This is seen by some scholars as problematic but understandable given the current lack of adequate spaces in top-level colleges and the increasing likelihood of downward mobility among the middle-class (see Lareau 2003; Levey 2009, 2010). Although scholars and society sometimes problematize the pressures some middle-class parents are putting on their children, there is also an understanding that what they are doing is indeed necessary for children to rise to the top in the current economic and social climate. Accepting the economic reality and studying what parents are doing to help their children cope with it is appropriate, but this approach cannot lodge a serious challenge to the status quo—it is not simply parents that need to change, it is the system that needs to be changed. Hays (1996) and Douglas and Michaels (2004) argue that as a society we need to change the gendered nature of child rearing and create policies that adequately support parents in raising their children. But what is missing is an acknowledgement that so many really good parents (some middle-class and most low-income) will raise children who will not gain financial stability for their children because the system is more and more skewed to the few privileged elite.

Even excellent studies such as Edin and Kefalas' *Promises I Can Keep* (2005) leave unchallenged the expectations that mothers who had enough money could and should follow the logic of intensive mothering in order to position their children to become middle-class adults. As a result, “the cultural logics by which the mainstream

itself lives are thereby naturalized and homogenized” (Choo and Ferree 2010: 138). These scholars give readers a sympathetic image of the efforts of poor mothers to survive and help their children survive and hopefully transcend their impoverished and even dangerous social contexts. However, even as they place the blame for the mothers’ ineffectiveness not on the women’s shoulders but on their social locations, the authors’ analysis unintentionally reproduces the view of these mothers as less effective and agentic than middle-class mothers. When the parenting practices of the middle-class are accepted as the “natural” and appropriate ways to parent and when these practices require resources low-income women do not have, then even from the most sympathetic lens, low-income mothers are seen as well intentioned but ineffective and differences in parenting practices are framed simply as survival strategies rather than productive practices.

For instance, in her study of parenting practices Annette Lareau (2003) reports that working class and poor parents establish clear boundaries between children and adults, boundaries that require children to comply with the directives of the adults around them, while middle-class parents encourage their children to use complex reasoning and language to negotiate for what they want. Her findings in the different parenting strategies and the variation in the benefits children gained from those practices led her to label the efforts of middle-class parents as “concerted cultivation” and those of working class and poor parents as “the accomplishment of natural growth”. These two approaches to parenting both require effort and a commitment to ensuring the best possible future of one’s children but they reflect middle-class parents’ concern to help their children maintain at least middle-class standing and

working class and poor parents' concern to do their best to raise their children to be healthy and happy adults while at the same time managing the struggles that accompany economic instability:

Middle-class parents who comply with current professional standards and engage in a pattern of concerted cultivation deliberately try to stimulate their children's development and foster their cognitive and social skills. The commitment among working-class and poor families to provide comfort, food, shelter, and other basic support requires ongoing effort, given economic challenges and the formidable demands of child rearing. But it stops short of the deliberate cultivation of children and their leisure activities that occurs in middle-class families. For working-class and poor families, sustaining children's natural growth is viewed as an accomplishment. (5)

The primary difference emphasized here is that middle-class parents' seek to *develop* their children's skills while working-class and poor parents work hard to provide the *basic necessities* of life to their children while also providing the opportunity for them to have safe leisure time during which they can enjoy their childhood. The implication of this analysis is that the economically perilous situation of working class and poor families causes their standards to be lower than those of middle-class parents. Edin and Kefalas (2005) also draw similar conclusions after analyzing low-income mothers' discussion of the importance of being present in their children's lives, giving them their time, energy and spending their money on them.

At its core, being there for poor mothers is a childrearing philosophy born of adversity and pragmatism... The day-to-day hardships these mothers and children face produce modest goals. Being there is a celebration of the small victories of daily life as poor mothers do not have the luxury of taking the little things for granted. (144)

Lareau and Edin and Kefalas take pains to lay the blame for the mothers' inability to behave and parent as middle-class mothers do on the constraints and realities these parents face rather than on the character or desire of the women. Unfortunately, however, conclusions such as these cause scholars to not see the complexity of low-income parents' logics and strategies because they keep white, middle-class logics in the center of the analysis, and so automatically position findings as either derivative or deviant.

Although the data presented in this study supports the conclusion that low-income mothers share the same goals and have similar attitudes and beliefs about parenting as middle-class mothers and that their economic constraints make their actual strategies and practices different from those of middle-class mothers, I view this as a *starting* point, not an *ending* point of the analysis. By centering the dominant values, beliefs and practices of white middle-class mothers, we fail to understand those values, beliefs and practices as constructed within specific race and class positions and we fail to fully investigate the values, beliefs and practices of low-income mothers *from their own perspectives* (Choo and Ferree 2010).

In the remaining parts of this chapter, I investigate how low-income mothers understand the logics and goals behind their parenting strategies and how their social (class, gender, race) locations shape the parenting work they do. I find that these mothers *sound* like middle-class mothers in many ways: they report the same goals for their children's futures and a belief that particular strategies will help ensure they attain the goal of self-sufficiency (such as, making sure their children feel loved and supported and are involved in educational enrichment and extra curricular activities).

However, when the mothers' discussions of the purposes of their strategies are analyzed more closely, a different logic emerges, one informed by their personal experiences within their working class or impoverished contexts. They also report strategies that are different from those of middle-class mothers; they describe these strategies as necessary for preventing their children from going the "wrong way". Their concerns and, therefore, the purposes of their parenting strategies incorporate the common pit-falls they, their family, friends and/or community members often fall into as they grow up as working class or impoverished youth (drugs or alcohol addiction, jail/prison, young pregnancy and "the streets") into the universal concern that their children grow up to have the "good life" (a well-paying job and a stable, supportive family). Low-income mothers, therefore, work hard to *both* prepare their children to avoid the pit-falls of their social world *and* to obtain the quality education and career they will need for self-sufficiency and success (Collins 1994). The necessity of parenting both *for* mobility into the middle-class and *against* the strategies sometimes used by working class and poor youth to deal with the lack of opportunities available in their social milieu constitutes unacknowledged additional parenting work for these mothers.

In order to begin the task of more fully understanding what low-income mothers are doing with and for their children, I center the analysis presented in this chapter around these questions: what do low-income mothers believe to be the most important things they can do to help their children have the best chance of gaining the futures they envision for them and how might the differences between their concerns

and logics and those of middle-class mothers' be appropriate rather than simply deviations from middle-class parenting norms?

Parenting Goals of Low-Income Mothers

Low-income mothers have similar goals for their children as middle-class mothers. They state that their highest priority is that their child become a financially stable adult with a loving (heteronormative) family—the American Dream of middle-class stability. Not surprisingly, they also hope that their children do not become parents too young because those who are very low-income believe their early childbearing is the reason they did not achieve financial stability; and those who are currently financially stable (in the quotations below, this includes Phoebe and Annette) believe that this will cause hardship best avoided.

I want them to go to college and get a nice job and meet somebody that they get along with really well. And not start a family too young, experience life a bit. (Annette, white, 1 child + 2 stepchildren)

What do you want for them in the future? For them to do everything I didn't—go to school, don't have no babies (laughs). Go to [high] school, get their education, go on to college and continue to do the schooling so they get to a point where they're in a field that they're comfortable with and they, you know, can make a career. (Tanya, Black, 5 children)

I hope that she would be able to go to college and get whatever kind of career she wants to have and if she wants a family, do that... And obviously not to have a child before she wants to have a child (laughs). (Phoebe, white, 1 child)

I would want them all to go to college, of course. My son, he wants to be a paleontologist. So, that's a big, big huge thing. Every since kindergarten, that's what he's wanted to be. He picked that out. So, you know, definitely college and then, wait,

till they have a career and THEN get married and THEN have kids. (Susan, white, 4 children)

I want them to graduate from [high] school and go to college and try to further their education before they start having children...and I really want them to just graduate and go to college and find somebody, don't rush into no relationship, get to know that person and find somebody that you feel is right for you, you know, is going to listen to you when you talk and things like that and I just want them to have a better life. And just have a good life, at least, (Stacy, Black, 5 children)

Many mothers not only described a middle-class lifestyle of financial security but added that it was important to them that their children have a better life than they have had. Like most American parents, they hope their children will surpass their own achievements.

I want my kids to go to school and graduate high school and live their lives as, as, you know, as children and go to college and get good jobs and do better than me. That's the most important thing that I believe I want my children to learn. And I want them to be able to do all the things that I was not able to do. (Darcy, white, 4 children)

I just want them to be successful. Like, I don't want them to be, in the street, cause that's what I'm used to. I don't want them to be a statistic. I don't want it to be: oh because [they] are these little black boys, they're going to automatically be—no I don't want it to be like that. I don't want my daughter to be a statistic, I don't want her to be pregnant young, like me, because that's the norm, that's what everybody thinks: Oh, she'll be pregnant by—you know what I mean? I want them to go to college, I want them to have good jobs and I don't want them to be, like, how me and my mom were, I don't want them to be the norm. (Corinne, Black, 3 children)

Corinne gives voice to a concern that her children, who are Black living in a racist society, not follow the stereotype of young Black men “in the street” or young Black

women pregnant. She acknowledges that these outcomes are statistical probabilities given what she has experienced and observed (what she's "used to").

A few mothers stated that they simply wanted their children to be happy, but as they described the futures they imagined for their children in more detail, it became apparent that their aspirations are still middle-class.

I want them to be successful, of course, at anything they do. If they're garbage men (laughs), you know, be a successful garbage man. If that's what you wanna do, go right ahead and do it. But that they find their niche. That's my main important goal, that whatever they do they do the best at what they're doing. I don't THINK they'll want to be a garbage man (laughs), but I don't know. So, like OH! (Raina, Black, 6 children)

Raina's exclamation at the end of this quote suggested dismay which I interpreted as concern that one of her children would actually choose to be a "garbage man," indicating that she does not actually mean that she believes this profession would be acceptable. She goes on to describe efforts to make her children "successful" by observing them carefully to find their special talents or interests and then doing what she can to develop and encourage those interests and talents so they can evolve into professions. This strategy is documented by Lareau (2003) as a strategy used by middle-class families to develop their children's unique gifts into passions that will help them fit into a well-paying career.

So, what kinds of things do you help them do to try to help them, go in that direction, in wanting to do things well and to be successful at whatever they do? I guess encouraging them...cause my, my 10 year old, my daughter, she doesn't have a clue, and I'm not trying to push her to—you gotta make a career decision right now, but...when I do see something that she does love to do, I try to exaggerate that and [try to get her

excited about doing that but] she just be looking at me like: whatever, mom...they'll be rolling their eyes at me and I say: What?! Leave me alone! I'm trying to encourage you to do the best that you can do. So, it's just, I guess, kind of trusting and believing that they'll make the right decision. But, I, I can't put a particular, they gotta do this, or, they have to make this type of career, I want them to be doctors, or I want them to be lawyers or, I, I don't even know what I want them to be, so, I can't put my, my goals or my aspirations on them. (Raina, Black, 6 children)

Christy also does not specify college as a definite requirement for her daughter to gain financial stability; however, she too works to help her daughter figure out what her interests and talents are.

What do you hope for her for her future? What do you want her future to be like? I want her to like to go to college and...I want her to be happy doing whatever she wants to do. I can't say college...because that's not for everybody. I don't want to put, like, I just want to expose her to enough stuff where she knows what she wants to do. So like...she does well in school, and I put her in—she did a soccer program this summer. And she wants to do cheerleading once she gets, like, once you go to the third grade you can do cheerleading at her school, so I just want her to be exposed to a lot of different things and that way she can decide on her own what's, what's the stuff she wants to do. (Christy, Black, 1 child)

Although Lareau (2003) did not find evidence of concerted cultivation strategies among low-income parents, both Raina and Christy use concerted cultivation techniques with the expectation that this will help their children have a bright future. They also both say they want their children to decide their particular career path for themselves with the presumption that all choices are available to them. Christy gives an indication, however, that she is aware that her financial constraints may get in the way of her efforts to expose her child to different activities.

[I was hoping] that she would have things better than I did, like cause I always wanted to do things, I wanted to play instruments and do dance classes and stuff and my mom never really did anything with me (she cries)...

I just wish that I was in school, I wish that I had a career so that I could provide for her better, really, to be quite honest. That's the only thing that I really, really worry about... because you don't want to struggle with your kids you want them to have like the stuff you didn't have. Sometimes I feel bad because they want to do something [and] you're like, oh sorry we can't do this because we don't have the money... I really want to take her on a trip... to Disney World... I did put her in a soccer program but she wanted to do this summer cheerleading program I wanted to put her in that but I wasn't able to afford it. Those are really expensive. So we just did the soccer thing because it was through [the city program] and... it was like 50, \$55 (Christy, Black, 1 child)

The emotion Christy showed during her interview is indicative of her awareness of, and concern about, the financial constraints she and her daughter are experiencing. It is evident, however, that few of the mothers were aware of specific strategies for addressing the structural barriers to college and class mobility.

Only four of the women described specific strategies for gaining access to college. Two Black mothers mentioned sports scholarships as routes to pay for and motivate college completion:

I told my son... you better stick to basketball to get you a, um, some scholarship. He's smart but you got to find something to get yourself [to college]. (Marsha, Black, 5 children)

Perhaps more realistically, Sophia states that she will likely go into debt to pay for their children's college educations.

What do you think will help them to get that point of going to college? Just keep reinforcing how important their studies are to them and trying to get them like, loans or something. Because I will go in debt for them. I'll take as many loans out until they finish. (Sophia, Black, 3 children)

Justina reports that she has started a college fund for her daughter as she discusses what she would like for her future:

Ideally I would like her to go to university and experience dorm life and, you know, like, have the whole like, normal kid experience—I have a college fund started and everything. . . I'd like for her to not struggle financially. . . I'd like her to find a nice guy and, I really look forward to her getting married and giving me. . . grandkids and just being, being happy. I don't want her to struggle like I have. That's really all I want for her, is to not struggle the way that I have. (Justina, white, 1 child)

Justina has attended community college for a number of years, although she has not completed a degree. This experience in the educational system, however, made her aware of the need for financial resources as well as the availability of financial aid.

What struck me about the mothers' descriptions of their goals for their children was the general lack of discussion about whether or not those goals are realistic or how they planned to overcome the many barriers low-income families face, for example, gaining access to college requires financial resources in the face of inadequate financial aid (Haycock 2010), and the ability and cultural knowledge necessary to meet admissions requirements and navigate institutions of higher education. Statistics suggest that without more resources, both financial and cultural (i.e., knowledge about how to navigate the financial aid process, guidance about

admission requirements, etc), their children will not earn a college degree nor mobility into the middle-class.

Only 8% of low-income college students earned a bachelor's degree by the age of 24 (vs. 82% of high-income students) (Postsecondary Education Opportunity 2010); Black students have a lower 6 year graduation rate than white students from both 4 year colleges/universities (40% vs. 60% for whites) and 2 year colleges (25.5% vs. 32% for whites) (Knapp et al. 2010), while all students who attend a community college graduate at an overall rate of 30.5% (Knapp et al 2010). It is unlikely, therefore, that the children of the women who are still low-income, especially those who are Black or do not themselves have a college degree (NCES 2001), will earn a Bachelor's or an Associate's degree. Furthermore, while the number of low-paying, low-skill jobs are increasing, "mid-skill, mid-wage" jobs are declining (Kanell 2010). Additionally, those without a college degree are increasingly likely not to be middle-class as the wages for those with only a high school education decline (Kanell 2010). Overall, however, low-income mothers appear to believe that their child-raising strategies will provide their children what is necessary to achieve a college degree and mobility into the middle-class.

The fact that these mothers do not have a framework through which to understand the reality (that the children of young low-income mothers rarely move into middle-class stability but instead remain in poverty or in the vulnerable working class) is in large part the result of the prevalence and power of the ideology of individual responsibility (aka, "the American Dream"). Because Americans believe that hard work and self-sacrifice are sufficient to class mobility, neither these mothers

nor society in general understand the barriers to class mobility that transcend individual character and effort.

As a result, low-income mothers do not have a discourse available to them through which they can articulate the importance of the additional work they must do as Black or white low-income mothers, and scholars have failed to adequately interrogate their parenting practices and logics. The analysis that follows, while keeping scholarship on middle-class parents and their practices and logics in mind, centers the experience and perspectives of low-income mothers.

Parenting Concerns and Strategies of Low-Income Mothers

Mothers described their biggest concerns for their children as: physical safety, becoming young (not necessarily teenaged) parents drug or alcohol addiction, being on the “street” and/or criminal behavior. And they report addressing these concerns with two sets of strategies—those similar to middle-class mothers who engage in intensive mothering ideology and concerted cultivation, and those that go beyond standard middle-class parenting practices.

Similar Strategies, Different Purposes: The analysis below provides evidence of low-income mothers’ use of strategies similar to middle-class mothers’ but for different purposes. The strategies discussed include: 1) involving their children in a variety of activities ranging from organized sports teams to trips to the museum or park; 2) developing open communication with their children while encouraging them to express themselves; 3) treating their children with respect by listening to their

ideas, thoughts and opinions as well as reducing the metaphorical separation between adults and children; 4) encouraging their children to be leaders rather than followers; and 5) disciplining their children with time outs and reasoning.

Extra-curricular activities: Mothers reported that sports and other activities outside of school are important to their children for several important reasons, most of which centered on giving them something positive to do so they would be less likely to get into trouble. For instance, Cindy contrasts sports to drugs as a healthier way to feel “high”:

We really try to focus on sports with the kids and I think it's a big thing, even when they're little all the way up to when they grow up...they talk about drugs at school and they come home and talk about it we tell them that that's a fake high, [sports] is a natural high, this high is so much better because it's healthier. That's why we tell them that a natural high is sports because, I mean, it really is. (Cindy, white, 3 children)

By pointing out that sports are healthier than drugs Cindy provides a way to understand drugs as harmful and an alternative way to seek out excitement and pleasure.

Many mothers report working hard to keep their children in a “positive” environment out of a fear that their child will be drawn to the “streets.” Below Kendra explains that she uses activities in addition to monitoring her son's media exposure and friends in the hopes that he will stay away from the lure of the streets and Lacey explains that she believes that the school requirement that athletes keep their grades

up in order to be eligible to play as well as the kinds of children he is exposed to are further benefits of sports.

I don't want him to end up, like, in the streets, like, I don't want him to end up doing, like, violent acts...that's my biggest fear. *(Interviewer: And do you feel like some of the things that you're doing are specifically to avoid that?)* Um, yes because, like, I don't let him watch rated R movies or violent movies even though cartoons are just as violent (laughs). But, so I try and monitor what he watches, who is he around, or what type of kids is he around...And then, like I said, just trying to keep him active and in a positive atmosphere so he won't want to do anything negative. (Kendra, Black, 1 child)

I think [sports and other activities] help him a lot...he meets a lot of different friends, he's constantly busy, he has his mind on doing, doing, good in school so he's allowed to play sports and things like that. It just keeps him positive because the people he's surrounded by are positive. (Lacey, white, 1 child)

Activities other than athletics are used by mothers for similar purposes. For instance, Sophia, the mother of one daughter and two sons, reported that her daughter participates in cheerleading at school and her oldest son is in the robotics club at his school. She also explained that she makes an effort to take her kids on outings outside of their neighborhood, which she considers unsafe, in order to expose them to a variety of social contexts and to be sure they feel cared for and supported:

The library always has free passes for the museums so we do a lot of that stuff. We just go to the library a lot or, in the summer we'll have a lot of picnics, but otherwise it's kind of hard because I can't afford for them to do a lot of other stuff. *(Interviewer: Right. And how do you think doing what they are doing, the cheerleading and robotics and hanging at the library and picnics, how do you think those help them?)* Um, my goal is just to build up their self-esteem. And I want them to be aware of more...of the educational things going on. I try to keep them away from negativity because I had extremely too much freedom

in my life because, it was like I was a ghost, nobody paid attention to me. I could come and go as I please. I just try to provide more structure for my children, and keep them busy so they don't go to the streets or go to nowhere else looking for love because they didn't get it at home. (Sophia, Black and Mexican-American, 3 children)

Sophia's personal experience with neglect and the lack of extra-curricular activities leads her to strategize to provide her children both with evidence that she cares about them enough to spend time and organize activities with them and to be sure they know that there are more positive activities to engage in than going to the "streets". The importance of building their children's self-esteem in order to prevent negative choices (e.g., unprotected sex, drug or alcohol use, criminal activity) was a common theme of the mothers in the interviews, and providing extra-curricular activities and giving their children attention and time were two of several strategies for accomplishing this.

Sophia's concern about her neighborhood was echoed in Kathie's efforts to keep her ten year old son out of trouble during the summer. When the summer began she moved her son to her mother's house across town in order to keep him away from the group of boys with whom he had gotten into trouble with the previous summer.

My 10 year old he's always been doing different things like stealing...That's why he's at his grandma's...he's a follower, he can let the kids outside encourage him, and he'll follow them, you know, do what they do. If they do something then at the end it'll all fall back on him...That's what I'm scared for him the most, that he'll be in prison like his dad. (*Interviewer: So you had him go to his grandmas so—*) (Kathie interrupts) Yeah, to stay away from all these kids and all that stuff. The first summer I moved over here that's what they were doing...so this summer he's going to stay constructive, I'll go pick him up for his little dance classes and then he'll go right back to his

grandmas...we're trying to find him a camp or something to do during the day. (*Interviewer: What else do you do to try to get him on track?*) I try to keep him busy. (Kathie, Black, 6 children)

For Kathie, intervening in her son's behavior now, keeping him "constructive," is important to avoid future incarceration. She makes use of two strategies: 1) removing him from the neighborhood and 2) keeping him as busy as she can given her financial and time constraints.

Middle-class parents see extra curricular activities as a way to help their children become "confident competitors" (Levey 2010: 351) who will have a greater chance of gaining entrance to an elite college and will have the drive necessary to advance in their chosen career field. For the mothers I interviewed, however, involving their children in some kind of formal or informal activity was seen as crucial to their ability to help their daughters avoid "looking for love" and getting pregnant and their sons and daughters turning to the "streets" for love and something to do (although the examples above are mostly mothers talking about their sons, mothers of daughters expressed similar sentiments). These goals, I argue, are necessary if not sufficient to their children's ability to take advantage of any opportunities that might become available to them, and, therefore, their purposes are at least as important to their children's future as are those of middle-class parents.

Self-Expression and Open Communication: Sharon Hays (1996) describes middle-class (but not working class) parents as working to develop their children's self-esteem so they will feel confident about their ability to take on challenges and aspire

to be the best. One of the ways they seek to accomplish this is for parents to have a relationship with their children in which the children are allowed to express their opinions, feelings and desires so they will 1) learn how to articulate their thoughts and emotions and 2) come to understand that they deserve to be listened to and have their opinions, feelings and desires respected. In contrast to Hays' findings that working class mothers emphasize obedience over self-expression, the low-income mothers I interviewed made an effort to listen to their children and encourage them to express themselves. The purposes they identified for boosting their children's self-esteem and ability to express themselves centered primarily on making sure their children were able to resist the influence of those around them who might lead them astray. Additionally, having a close relationship that includes open communications is framed by the mothers as a way to give children confidence in their mothers' willingness to help, rather than to punish, them when they make mistakes or confront difficult situations. This, the mothers hope, will lead their children to keep them informed about what is going on in their lives and make them more willing to follow their mothers' advice.

Ophelia, the mother of a son and a daughter, explained that she gives her children choices about what kinds of toys and clothes they buy so that they will be able to know their own minds:

(Interviewer: What is the most important thing you do for your kids?) Let them express themselves, what they want to do. I let them do what they want to do to some extent. *(Interviewer: Like what?)* Picking out their own clothes, what they play with and what they buy. I give them money and let them pick out their stuff, after all, they are going to be playing with it or wearing it. *(Interviewer: Why is that important?)* ...to be healthy and not

have any issues they need to know how to express themselves and not have somebody tell them. (Ophelia, Black, 2 children; from field notes)

Ophelia's statement implies a concern that her children might become dependent on others to tell them what to do, a dynamic that could lead them into trouble. Cindy expresses a similar concern—that her children learn who they are through self-expression:

I've always been a firm believer in communicating with them or them going to counseling. I have to say, they're pretty good. They do lash out at me when it concerns their father but that's okay—I made that mistake, on being with him, so I guess I need to deal with the consequences. So, I let them try to speak out as best they can cause I always grew up kids are not to be heard, they're only to be seen. That is, to me that is so wrong because then they can't develop their own character or their own personality, who they really are, it's like they have to hide and I think that creates more problems than what you're ready for. (Cindy, white, 3 children)

Cindy accepts the negative things her children may express to her with the expectation that this will allow them to figure out who they are and, thereby, avoid problems.

Helen expressed the hope that her open relationship with her 14 year old daughter will help her avoid early or unprotected sex:

I keep an open, honest relationship with her and I express to her that she'll never have to hide anything from me, she'll never have to worry about will I love her any less if she does this or does that...Cause a lot of kids, that's why they don't want to tell their mom that they're having sex or if they even think a guy is cute. They don't want to tell their mom because lord forbid she knows cause then I ain't going to be able to go outside...I don't want them to have to worry about hiding anything from me

cause that's something I worried about as a kid...I just keep an open relationship, I think that's the key. Cause I don't want my kids scared of me. (Helen, Black, 2 children)

Helen, as well as other mothers, works to ensure that her two daughters know they can talk to her about anything rather than fearing her reaction. Another mother, Lacey, fosters communication with her son in order to make sure he knows he is cared for. She explains that she expects that by “talking to him constantly...about his life” and “asking him questions” her son will feel that she’s “always on his side, always here for support” and so he will avoid turning to “other things to kind of fill that void—whether it be other, other kids, or substances” (Lacey, white, 1 child).

For many of the mothers a close relationship that allows the children to be open about their thoughts and feelings may protect them from bad choices because they will feel supported by their mothers and the mothers will have the opportunity to provide guidance to their children.

Treating Children with Respect: Implied by the mothers’ efforts to make sure their children feel loved and supported and able to express themselves is a blurring of the boundaries between children and adults. No longer endorsing a belief that kids are meant to be seen and not heard, low-income mothers in this study embrace the aspect of intensive mothering ideology that mandates that adults should focus on “responding to children’s needs rather than enforcing adult desires” (Hays 1996: 60), i.e., parents should not give directives to children but rather should prioritize the needs of the child. This mandate requires parents to treat their children as worthy of the respect and attention of adults.

I mean besides being there...I try to communicate with my kids. Like, when I was growing up, my parents were like okay this is the parents, you're the kid (she gestures with her hands, one above the other palms down). You know, kids go in this room, parents go in that room and I try to do things where we can all be together and communicate with them and laugh and joke. They didn't do that when I was growing up and I was more fearful of my parents and...I don't want my kids to be scared of me but I want them to respect me. I tell them there's a difference.
(Tashieka, Black, 3 children)

Tashieka's concern that her children not be afraid of her leads her to interact with her children on a more equal footing than she experienced with her own parents. This, she believes, is important in order for her children to know she loves and supports them.

Kate's statement below points out that speaking to children more respectfully and kindly will help to avoid resentment:

I didn't want to treat a child like a child, like seen and not heard kind of thing. I've always treated her like another person. So right off the bat we've developed a really great relationship...So, often times I see parents that really talk down to their children and, unfortunately, my fiancé is a big person like that, he talks like his parents talked to him. I'm like, you're talking very demeaning...don't say "go to your room it's a mess, you need to pick it up now!" Just say..."your room's a little dirty, let's go in here and I'll help you as much as I can for a minute and then you gotta get it clean"...don't talk to your kids in a demeaning way because they'll notice it and they'll get resentful. (Kate, white, 1 child)

Kate informs her fiancé that directives lead to resentment whereas making suggestions and participating at least initially in the chore is a better approach. The women explained to me that they are eager to avoid the fear, rebelliousness and resentment they felt towards their own parents in the hopes that this would increase

the chances that their children would take a path that involved less struggle than they experienced.

Although Lareau's (2003) findings indicated that working class and poor parents maintain a distance between adults and children, just as Tashioka experienced during her childhood, the mothers I interviewed clearly do not ascribe to this dynamic. Instead they make sure to talk with, listen to and spend a great deal of time with their children in order to facilitate open communication and increase the chances that their children will stay "positive" and avoid self-destructive behaviors.

Being a Leader Not a Follower: Mothers' described using strategies designed to develop their children into leaders rather than followers. Kathie's comments above about her 10 year old son include a concern that her son follows along with the mischief the neighborhood boys get into and she hopes that her strategy of moving him away from the boys and keeping him busy with other activities will help him avoid the consequences of his tendency to follow along. Furthermore, in the quotes above when Lacey voices her concern that children who do not feel supported by their parents try to "fill the void" by turning to "other kids," and when Ophelia states that she wants her kids to know what they want "without being told" by others, they, too, express a concern that their children lead their own lives without being unduly influenced by others.

Kendra clearly articulates this concern, which is shared by many of the mothers:

(Interviewer: What do you worry about for him?) Um, I guess right now, it's more so, going along with everyone else. Not really being a leader. I can see leader tendencies, and see, like, when they're playing with other kids as far as leadership, but more so him going for what everybody else says...because everybody else is doing it, or because it's cool, or something like that. So I think that's my biggest worry. My biggest thing is trying to teach him to be his own person and not care what other people have to say about what you have on, or, or how you do certain things, I think that's my biggest thing that I'm dealing with now, and probably will be dealing with for quite some time. (Laughs)...I think I'm more afraid that he'll be influenced by others to do things that maybe he normally wouldn't do. Or, hitting someone...things can get dangerous at some point.
(Kendra, Black, 1 child)

Middle-class parents seek to shape their children into leaders in an effort to ensure that their children are adequately ambitious and successful in their professional lives. For low-income mothers, however, the stakes of instilling leadership qualities in their children are much higher given that they are raising them in environments where drugs and alcohol are readily available, criminal activity sometimes appears to be the most available route out of financial struggle and police enforcement in their neighborhoods and sentencing of Blacks are disproportionately harsh.

Discipline: Discipline is a difficult part of parenting for every parent. For low-income mothers, how they approach discipline is shaped in part by the current social norm that disapproves of spanking or yelling at one's children (Hays 1996) but is seen by them as a way to teach their children about proper behavior and avoid the resentment or rebelliousness that might lead to the very behaviors they hope to prevent.

Cindy and many other mothers echoed the responses Sharon Hays (1996) heard: that they don't spank their kids unless there is a grave danger involved and other measures such as "time out" are used instead:

I don't spank my kids except once when [my 2 year old son] ran into parking lot I spanked him on his butt. But other than that my kids don't get spankings. We talk, or the discipline is doing the time-out...I'm a firm believer you don't need to go to that length [spanking]. The only time you need to go to that length is if they are endangering somebody or themselves, other than that there's no need. I think the time out thing and then [standing in corner] is the best. And then after, you talk to them and you let them know why they're there. That, that I would say is really cool, cause...they get a hug and they get kisses so things are better and they understand...you're just in the process of teaching them...I don't want to put negativity onto my kids. (Cindy, white, 3 children)

Cindy explains that the reason she does not spank but uses the "corner" or time out instead is because she wants her children to not feel "negative" but instead to learn something from the punishment and to know that they are still loved. A belief that discipline should teach children rather than simply punish bad behavior is apparent among these mothers. For instance, Christy states that yelling is not productive given that children often don't know why they are being yelled at:

Sometimes people don't realize that little kids don't learn the same way as...adults learn, and sometimes when they do things wrong they don't...mean to do things wrong. I remember once my little sister [who is younger than Christy's child] went into our neighbor's garden and took some...flowers out of her garden to give to my mom. They don't realize that that's not okay—they're not trying to be bad. And [my mom] was like yelling at her and I'm like, she doesn't realize that that's...wrong and you're disciplining her and she thinks she's doing something nice...[if I were dealing with this situation I would] just explain to them...we don't take things from other people's gardens—

you have to ask first or [I would] just explain to them why it's not ok. You don't just yell because sometimes they don't know.
(Christy, Black, 1 child)

For Christy and Cindy as well as other low-income women, mother should explain right and wrong to their children and not use harsh discipline. Children should not be punished without explanation and whenever possible they should learn from the experience.

Mothers were also worried that yelling and/or spanking could lead to their children behaving badly. Raina describes her concerns about yelling and the impact it has on children when she tells me about her sister's disciplinary methods:

I'm a soft spoken person, I can raise my voice without yelling, but she YELLS all the time at the children. And she disciplines out of frustration and anger. And so now all the kids, they lash out at you and they out of control. They be just doing stuff they ain't got no business doing...that's not okay. (Raina, Black, 6 children)

Other women also stated that they believed that the use of yelling and/or spanking would lead children to hit, yell and become disrespectful and rebellious.

Low-income mothers struggle to find a balance between leniency and strictness. They fear being too strict will lead to rebellion (this is often based on their own experiences as children) but at the same time they fear that if their children are "spoiled" and allowed to do whatever they want they will end up in trouble. In the quote below Sue, the mother of a 13 year old daughter, describes her struggle with this issue:

I spoiled her WAY too much. And it's like when I try to discipline her she tries to manipulate...and does stuff to try to make me feel bad but I have to be strong with her because I don't want her to go down the wrong road...*(Interviewer: So when you say "go the wrong way," what would that look like?)* I mean just to the point where she's hanging out with, like, the wrong kind of crowd that likes to drink and do drugs and...I'm hoping that she just kind of stays on the athletic level, compared to some people that go, like overboard with their addiction or whatever. (Sue, white, 1 child)

As was seen in the quotes above, Sue hopes her daughter's participation in sports will help to keep her from falling in with the wrong crowd and becoming addicted to drugs or alcohol. At the same time she has decided that she must become more firm in her discipline. She goes on to describe how she has given her daughter a pre-paid cell phone and she refuses to add minutes unless her daughter has been completing her chores and behaving respectfully but she struggles to balance her new-found efforts to hold her daughter accountable with open communication and a trusting relationship:

Communication and love [is important]...that your kid can...know that they can trust you and that they can come to you with anything no matter how bad or how good but then also that they can't walk on you. And that's like a big issue. Because you can...give them an inch and they try to take a mile and you gotta come and, like, half in between there and it's hard, you know, without hurting somebody or hurting their feelings or trying to be too strict. (Sue, white, 1 child)

Balancing concerns about discipline with efforts to teach children why certain behaviors are not acceptable and a belief in the importance of a close relationship that allows children to express themselves and feel loved and supported is difficult for all mothers, but, again, the stakes for low-income mothers are high given that they and

people close to them have suffered serious consequences for their misbehavior (i.e., the father of Sue's daughter is in prison).

Strategies Beyond Concerted Cultivation: The mothers interviewed for this study reported the use of strategies that go beyond those used for concerted cultivation: 1) symbolic indulgence; 2) the provision of real world information to children; and 3) concerns stemming specifically from race dynamics and stereotypes. Identification and analysis of these strategies and the mothers' goals in using them provide evidence of additional work that low-income mothers do.

Symbolic Indulgence: In Allison Pugh's book *Longing and Belonging* (2009), she explains that low-income parents purchase for their children the "goods and experience that would yield the most social impact for their dollars" (124). They attend to the "economy of dignity" (6), in which children gain an acceptance in their peer community through the possession of particular objects. This concept allows us to understand the purchase of things like Playstations as not simply things children desire but rather objects that allow children to be full citizens in their social world.

As Ana describes what she provides her children it becomes clear that she feels her provision of these items goes beyond fulfilling their desires:

They have the Nintendo...cell phones...I think they're well rounded kids, I don't think they're spoiled actually, now that I think about it. I mean they have, they're regular kids, they have what everybody else has. (Ana, Black, 4 children)

Ana's children are able to be like "everybody else" given their possession of cell phones and video games.

For Vicky, providing fashionable clothing and toys has the potential to ensure safety as well as acceptance:

[I try to make] sure that they stay well adjusted without anybody hurting them. Cause people—even other little kids—can be very hurtful. And I know that because I grew up—we never had money, we never had the new shoes or the new things, so we ALWAYS got picked on. And I think just making sure he feels—well especially now [that he's been diagnosed with a learning disability], I mean, we don't have a lot of money, but making sure that he doesn't feel that he's an outsider or different. (Vicky, white, 1 child)

Based on her own experiences, Vicky wants to ensure that her son does not stand out as different on the basis of his shoes and clothing and, thereby, becomes a target for bullies at school or in the neighborhood. Corinne and other mothers express a concern that if their children do not have access to the popular toys and clothing they may turn to criminal activity to get the money to purchase them:

Because when are you a kid and you in school and other kids have nice things and you don't, that's where the problem comes in at. Cause I know that with my kids' father, he didn't have ANYTHING and that's why—at first he started out cutting grass and shoveling snow trying to make extra money before he turned the age to get a job. And then once that wasn't getting what he needed, he started dealing drugs. So that's why I'm like, if I do this NOW and make it to where they can have nice things then they won't even—there won't be no reason for them to, to, do those things. (Corinne, Black, 3 children)

Corinne's personal experience informs her understanding of the importance of providing her children with the latest items. Sophia also describes the risks of children not having the things the media and her children's peers frame as necessities:

A lot of the young boys, like my son's friends that he went to [school with], they like smoke weed and sell drugs and I refuse to allow my son to get involved in it. And if that means, like, I have to work another double [shift] or something just to get him something instead of him thinking I can't provide it, I'll do it. Because I don't want him to be like the other people...I got to work so hard because...I try so hard to provide the right ways because I remember all the stuff I used to do just to make it. And I don't want my son to go make it, and I don't want my daughter to feel like she has to be with somebody so that she can eat for the night. I don't WANT them to live that life. (Sophia, Black and Mexican-American, 3 children)

Low-income mothers like Sophia and Raina believe from their own experience that if they do not provide their children what they must have to be "normal," they may be drawn to selling drugs or "being with somebody" as ways to buy the items that confer social dignity and worth.

Information About the World: Although the intensive mothering ideology posits children as innocent, sacred and pure and, therefore, in need of protection from the harsh realities of the world, low-income mothers must work hard to find a balance between protecting their children's innocence through the withholding of information and protecting them from the dangers just outside their front door by giving them information about how to avoid those dangers.

During interviews the women reported they either had already or planned to talk to their children about sex in age appropriate but comprehensive ways in order to

help them avoid early parenthood. For some mothers like Helen, this involved trying to make sure her children were not “naïve...make sure they know exactly what can happen and what’s going on and how things really are” in the hope that the information would ensure “they don’t believe some guy when he tells them this fairy tale Romeo and Juliet story. Hopefully they don’t go for it, hopefully they’ll be like: ‘man, please!’” (Helen, Black, 2 children). Helen not only tells her daughter about sex but also advises her about the ways men might try to manipulate her.

Jane and Nora make an effort to inform their daughters about the dangers of drugs so they will not be vulnerable to misinformation they may hear. Jane states that she told her daughter “people will tell you anything and everything to get you to try drugs” (Jane, white, 3 children), and that they are dangerous and someone can die from an overdose even the first time they take it. Both she and Nora also voice concerns about trying to balance how much information they give. Jane says she tries “to be open, but not too open” while Nora goes into more detail about how much information she has given her 10 year old daughter:

She knows that there are people who do drugs, and she knows enough words to be able to know that if these words come up you need to walk out of the situation. But does she know what weed smells like? No. Does she know, um, the street slang for it? Absolutely not. Does she know how likely it is that anybody in this apartment complex could have it? No...she doesn’t know that cocaine is a powder, she doesn’t know that weed is a plant. But she knows that if someone says “hey smoke this,” or “take this pill,” or “put this up your nose,” she knows that she’s supposed to say no even if they say it’s...just a pill that will help calm you down...she knows she’s only supposed to take pills from either nurses or doctors or adults that take care of her. And to me that’s all she needs to know. (Nora, Black, 1 child)

Mothers are aware of the imperative that they not expose their children to too much information too early for fear the information will corrupt their innocence, but low-income mothers are also aware that their children may well encounter drugs while they are still quite young, and they feel equally responsible for preparing them for those situations.

Cindy does this by being honest and open with her children about the consequences of her father's alcoholism (he's been incarcerated numerous times for public drunkenness among other offenses). She explains that her children are aware of how her father's alcoholism "hurts the family," which is important because this means "they see the bad part [of alcohol abuse] and not the fun part because I don't want them to EVER think it's that fun because it's really not" (Cindy, white, 3 children).

Marsha describes the provision of information as important to helping her children recognize people they should not trust, an important part of ensuring her children do not unwittingly follow someone who means them harm:

I worry about them going out in the world and getting hurt, or going out in the world and not knowing how to handle themselves. So I try to teach them how to be PREPARED for things. I tell them: you got THIS kind of person, you got THAT kind of person, you got a slick person that can talk you out of all your money, you got a person that can just use you or play you and you gotta learn the difference between a good person and a bad person. And so, I know I did well with [16 year old daughter] because...the teacher told me that she hangs around only good kids, so I'm trying to teach [the other kids] the same thing—you gotta learn who to be around and who not to be around. Because a person can take to the worst parts or places in your life, or they can get you on drugs, or another person can take you to good places. And you have to learn to be a leader, don't follow people. So I teach them ALL those things

about...the world because you just don't know who you can walk into, somebody could just lead you somewhere to get hurt. So you gotta learn how to be...a leader, you have to know what you're doing, who you're doing it with and why. (Marsha, Black, 5 children)

Marsha incorporates the sharing of information with efforts to encourage her children to be leaders and she has evidence from her daughter's teacher that she is successful thus far in guiding her daughter to find "good kids" who will help her get to good places instead of dangerous ones.

Although middle-class mothers express concerns for their children's safety, they typically live in safer neighborhoods and their children's lives are often full of (relatively expensive) structured and well-supervised activities; therefore, their social context itself provides protection to their children. This is a luxury many low-income mothers do not have, as they often cannot afford to live in an upscale neighborhood and the quality schools that often accompany them, nor can they afford back-to-back activities to fill their children's time. These mothers, therefore, feel that they must provide their children with information that will enable them to walk away from dangerous people or situations.

Race: The Black mothers in my sample described concerns and strategies that revolve around their race as much as their class status. For instance, only Black mothers of boys discussed the hope that their sons "become strong men" (Ana, Black, 4 children). Ophelia works to be sure her son won't think he has to play football or basketball just because he's Black. Although she supports his athletic endeavors, she also tells him that "he can be a judge or something like that" (Ophelia, Black, 2

children; from field notes). Ana and Ophelia as well as several other mothers express a realistic concern about their sons' futures as low-income Black men in a society that disadvantages and penalizes them disproportionately. Corinne makes this concern explicit and extends this concern to her daughter when she describes (quoted above) her concern that her sons will be in trouble because they are "little black boys" and her daughter will end up pregnant and, therefore, "a statistic". Tashieka describes a concern that is somewhat more specific, but points out that there are a wide variety of pressures that Black youth face:

She looks a lot different than the other two kids, she's very fair skinned and she's got red hair, freckles...she looks just like her dad, but, my concern for her is he hasn't been around so she really doesn't feel like there's anybody that she can identify with. Like, we tell her all the time, you're beautiful, people dye their hair your color, your freckles are just beauty marks, but she doesn't feel that way...I'm really concerned about her relationship with men or, boys, how that's going to be affected... she's so fair skinned they tease her about it so she tries even harder to prove that she's black, you know, so she wants to be, I hate to say it, but she wants to be with all the wrong kids, doing all the wrong things and I'm just afraid that's gonna, you know, snowball. So I'm trying to catch it. (Tashieka, Black, 3 children)

Corinne and Tashieka make visible the work that mothers of Black children must do to help their children resist racial stereotypes outsiders and the children themselves may apply to them. Tashieka's concern about her daughter's efforts to prove she's Black by aligning herself with "the wrong kids" touches on a complicated and classed process of racial identity that these mothers must navigate.

Both middle-class and low-income mothers of Black or mixed race Black children must deal with and/or prepare their children to deal with these kinds of race-

specific dynamics. Low-income mothers, however, have a more difficult battle than those with middle-class resources at their disposal.

Cleanliness/Manners: Two other race-related concerns Black mothers were more likely to raise are cleanliness and good manners. Kendra (Black, 1 child) includes hygiene and dressing in matching clothes in her response to my question “*What do you think is the most important thing that you do for your son?*” while Raina (Black, 6 children) describes scolding her daughter when she forgets to put on her deodorant. These mothers seek to help their children avoid public embarrassment that may arise from their clothing or hygiene. While explaining why she refused to seek more public assistance, Corinne reports what these mothers imply: people expect low-income Blacks to dress poorly and have bad hygiene:

[The social workers at the welfare office] just kinda like was looking at me, like, why is she in here? Because a lot of the girls, I’m not being funny but a lot of the females that go in there, they go in there with their hair sticking up out they heads, they kids got snots and everything running off their face and I’m not about to go in there to put on a show for these people to get anything. So it’s like, I get like the bare minimum. (Corinne, Black, 3 children)

Corinne distinguishes herself and her well-dressed children from the other “females” that go to the welfare office and makes clear that being unkempt will reinforce a negative stereotype about low-income Black women and their children.

Similarly, Raina and other mothers explain that it is important that they teach their children to be respectful and well-behaved to avoid being perceived as troublesome or aggressive:

[having consistent discipline] helps so that when they DO go to school you don't have the, the teachers calling you like: your child is out of control...I try to do what I can while they're still at the house so that when they walk out the door they won't be acting crazy. (Raina, Black, 6 children)

Christy's comment indicates that the mothers must not only tailor their children's behavior but their own as well:

My mom has like a really, like nasty attitude, like she has attitude for no reason, and like get smart with people all the time for no reason, so I'm more, like polite, I don't act like my mom at all. (Christy, Black, 1 child)

Although the mothers do not specify their concerns about behavior and appearance as based on race, the fact that Black mothers disproportionately raised these issues, and given the history of this concern within the Black community (Higginbotham 1993), there is evidence that race is a driving force. Of particular relevance to this study is the fact that concerns about their children's appearance and behavior in order to avoid racial stereotypes create yet another layer of work required of these mothers.

Finally, it should be noted that race plays a role for mothers of white children in that they derive at least some benefit from being white so although they must work to resist stereotypes about poor and working class young mothers, they do not have to contend with those associated with race.

Conclusion

Low-income mothers embrace the ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays 1996) and the practices of concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003). The differences

between their performance of these practices and those of middle-class mothers have been attributed to their socioeconomic constraints, rather than from their attitudes or beliefs. Although low-income mothers are unable to achieve the same level of concerted cultivation given their lack of resources, there is much more to their story. By listening to voices and perspectives of low-income women as they define their goals and the needs of their children, I have described and analyzed their own, equally valid, form of intensive mothering and cultivation strategies.

These mothers report similar practices as middle-class mothers but different logics and goals driving those strategies. For instance, instead of cultivating competitiveness through extra curricular activities, these mothers cultivate the ability of their children to resist the traps inherent in disadvantaged neighborhoods and schools. They report treating their children respectfully, encouraging their children to have an open and trusting relationship with them and disciplining their children in constructive and intentional ways, in an attempt to ensure that they will be aware of and able to effectively advise their children about precarious situations. They work to encourage their children to see themselves as leaders, not followers, in the hopes that they will not fall victim to people who might lead them into trouble.

Significantly, these mothers go beyond these socially endorsed strategies to further their goals of keeping their children from falling into drug use or dealing, other criminal activity and/or young parenthood. They work hard to provide their children with at least a few material items like popular clothing and toys that are required in order to fit in and earn the respect of their peers. These mothers balance between the ideology of the sacred child (Zelizer 1985) that demands that children's

innocence be protected and the reality that they live in a social context that will challenge and tempt their children early and often with a multitude of pit-falls. By arming their children with what they deem to be enough, but not too much knowledge, they do double duty: protecting their children's innocence while protecting their children's futures.

Low-income mothers, then, are burdened with *two* tasks: 1) keep their children intact in a potentially perilous environment and 2) prepare them for the possibility that they will be able to attend college and gain the middle-class life a degree might enable. Middle-class mothers are under pressure to shape their kids into the "best of the best," and they do a great deal of work trying to accomplish this task. At the same time, they generally have the luxury of living in a social context that provides protection for their children within their neighborhoods, in their schools and in the places their children participate in activities. Although middle-class youth can and sometimes do become addicted to drugs, engage in criminal activity or become young parents, the resources of their parents remediates the potential long-term effects of their missteps to some degree (Geronimus 2003), whereas low-income mothers' lack of access to resources prevents them from being able to do the same, making the stakes of prevention perhaps higher. Additionally, statistics validate the low-income mothers' belief that their children are at risk: rates of victimization and incarceration are high among the working class and poor, especially those who are also Black and the economic, psychological and familial consequences of being victimized or incarcerated are dire and long term (Wheelock and Uggen 2008). The

stakes of low-income mothers' efforts to keep their children on the straight and narrow, then, are enormously high.

It is important that studies reveal that these women show both constraint *and* agency: they take up the middle-class parenting goals and strategies disseminated in the media and in institutions (e.g., doctor's office, parenting programs) but use the strategies for their own, important purposes. They know better than more affluent women, including scholars, what their children need and it is the power of the image of "welfare queens" and the hegemony of the ideology of intensive (good) mothering that has obscured this fact from them, scholars and the public. They are constrained, therefore, not only because they lack access to economic and cultural resources, but also because the ethic of personal responsibility prevalent in the U.S. makes the challenges of their social milieu illegible to mainstream society.

Although scholars like Hays (1996) and Douglas and Michaels (2004) call for an outcry against the undue gendered burden of motherhood in order to push forward policies that would remediate this burden, young low-income mothers are unable to fight this fight because of the way the discourses of motherhood are constructed. In other words, if low-income mothers themselves were to point out to a congressperson or someone in the grocery store the extra work they must do to remediate the dangers and pit-falls of the world in which they are raising their children, the question they would be asked is not: "Wow! How do you do it all!?" but: "Then why did you have children!?"

Chapter 7

Conclusion & Implications

The dominant discourses of motherhood are powerful and hegemonic enough to eclipse data indicating that it is poverty and the disadvantages accompanying it that are the biggest factor in the negative outcomes so closely associated with low-income and teenage childbearing. As a result of the mobilization of the ideology of individual responsibility alongside stereotypes of gender, race, class, age and sexuality, motherhood discourses keep society focused on finding the causes of poverty and financial instability within the behaviors, attitudes and beliefs of individuals. I have demonstrated that this misdirection affects and is perpetuated by not only politicians and media pundits but also scholars and mothers.

In this study I demonstrate that the reality that early childbearing is a small part of low-income women's inability to gain financial stability is invisible even to those who are low-income. This invisibility, made possible by the discourses of motherhood, allows the public to continue to ignore the fact that the way our society is structured creates barriers to mobility. Only by acknowledging that many low-income mothers are working hard to prepare their children to catch one of the rare breaks society provides will there be the possibility of an understanding that these women and their children deserve access to, at the very least, quality health care and education, including post-secondary education.

The Power of Dominant Discourses of Motherhood

It is important that scholars bring a critical lens derived from the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups to bear on dominant discourses. As we do so, the particular ways the discourses operate will become clearer and, therefore, easier to successfully challenge. Through my analysis I was able to articulate the complexity of how the good and bad motherhood discourses operate to perpetuate a belief in the centrality of teenage and low-income childbearing in the persistence of poverty.

Through the discourse of good motherhood society is led to believe that being a good mother requires only female-ness and the willingness to sacrifice everything for one's child. The good mother discourse emphasizes the sacredness of emotionally, financially investing in another person as the highest moral behavior. Furthermore, gender ideologies posit that to be a true good woman, one needs to be a mother. Through this focus, the economic and class-based requirements of good motherhood are obscured. Although the discourse of good motherhood is apparently low-income mothers' primary source of understanding of what they can and should do as mothers and the rewards they can expect will follow from those efforts, the complexity and logics behind concerted cultivation strategies are not articulated in the discourse of good motherhood. While the necessity of resources, including money and cultural capital, are hinted at in concerted cultivation strategies and in the discourse of bad motherhood, they are not part of the good mother ideology and, therefore, remain invisible to low-income women who focus their efforts on resisting the welfare mom/teen mom stereotypes (*push*) through their embrace of the intensive/good

mother ideology that promises (but fails to provide) a certain amount of social respectability (*pull*).

These mothers embrace an intensive mothering (good mother) ideology which lacks an explicit acknowledgement of both the expectation that good mothering leads to (at least) middle-class adulthoods and that class and race privilege are necessary for getting into or remaining in the middle-class. This dynamic keeps the mothers, the public, politicians and even scholars from understanding that low-income parents may benefit from alternative goals along with material assistance and that even these efforts may still not work because of continuing structural inequality.

These data suggest that many low-income mothers work just as hard, love just as intensely and sacrifice at least as much as many middle-class mothers. When the women's perspectives on their lives are the center of analysis, i.e., their understanding of themselves as hard working, loving, deliberate and self-sacrificing are accepted, then the statistics mean something different than what politicians and media pundits say they mean. For example, the lack of college degree attainment among low-income mothers does not mean they do not desire or understand the value of higher education, but rather that there are too many barriers to their successful completion of even a two year degree program and that one of the barriers is the imperative of intensive mothering. And the fact that so many sons of low-income women eventually enter the criminal justice system is likely less about poor parenting and more about the lack of opportunities for quality education and living wage employment. We must begin to understand that no matter how hard a mother works and how much she sacrifices for her children, her efforts will often not pay off given

the health, education and economic disadvantages low-income people face. Thus we can begin to understand that no matter how hard they work as individuals they will never be “successful mothers” unless changes are made to the social, cultural and structural barriers that make class mobility nearly impossible and financial stability increasingly unlikely for the poor and working class.

This study challenges theories that posit cultural differences as the source of behavioral differences. My findings show that it is not a “culture of poverty” nor a “Black culture” that leads women to bear and raise children in apparently non-normative ways that are then blamed for negative outcomes: there were more similarities in parenting logics and beliefs than differences across race and the mothers embrace the dominant good mother ideology not a mythical “culture of poverty” version. By bringing the perspectives of low-income mothers to bear upon dominant cultural discourses, I demonstrate that the confluence of misleading dominant discourses and structural inequality serve to create the *illusion* that low-income women and their behaviors are deviant and the source of social problems.

In order to challenge and interrogate dominant discourses, ideologies and norms, my analysis centers the experiences and perspectives of low-income mothers. Moreover, low-income women are positioned here as “social thinkers” (Young 2004) who actively engage with dominant culture as they construct a sense of self and an understanding of their role as mothers rather than social deviants or passive victims of circumstance. Through this research approach it was possible to begin to understand what low-income mothers do that is constructive and how we might re-conceptualize success and the appropriate strategies and logics to achieve that success. It is

important for researchers to push against the idea that middle-class norms and practices are always the best ones regardless of social contexts and one of the most effective ways of doing this is to shift the center (hooks 1994) to give analytic weight to the meaning-making processes of marginalized groups.

Through this approach, this study constructs with the interview participants a *co-narrative* of motherhood. As I have shown, these women position themselves as good mothers through their embrace of the good mother discourse and resistance to the bad mother discourse. In both their embrace and their resistance, these two discourses are left unchallenged, however my analysis shows that these women's narratives of their own mothering provides a narrative to add to these. This co-narrative tells the story of a mother who works hard to help her children rise into middle-class economic and social stability while simultaneously helping her children to navigate the difficulties arising from their current class and race positions. And this mother does these complex tasks in a social environment that denigrates her and fails to provide the support she would need in order to transcend existing structural barriers. This narrative frames these mothers as deserving of respect and support by incorporating the good mother discourse with a new acknowledgement and description of the obstacles low-income mothers must contend with as they devise parenting strategies.

Implications for Feminist Critiques of Mothering Ideology

Feminists have long argued that the ideology of good motherhood places an undue burden on women as it requires them to shoulder the burden of keeping their

children safe, healthy, intellectually stimulated, loved, etc. without adequate support expected of their (presumably) male partners nor society (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Instead mothers are expected to find a way to “do it all” by practicing intensive mothering as they strive to advance in their careers or to sacrifice career advancement in order to devote themselves entirely to their children (Hays 1996).

Many feminist scholars and activists of motherhood argue that with more social support for parenting in general and male parenting in particular, parents could share equally in a more realistic level of childrearing work and so both be able to pursue satisfying, meaningful and well-paying work. This could be accomplished, they propose, through policies that encourage both mothers and fathers to take time off of work to care for their children, thereby potentially remediating the gendered stigma of doing care work (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996; Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

These solutions, however, would have little immediate effect on low-income women and would fail to address their most pressing concerns. Feminist critiques of motherhood ideologies denounce the ways in which poor mothers and mothers of color are vilified as mothers, however they presume that the solutions best for middle-class mothers are also best for low-income mothers. As a result, they have not looked closely enough at the particular ways in which ideologies of motherhood shape low-income women’s experiences beyond the policy implications and compounding of their struggles. Despite strong critiques from scholars like bell hooks (1994) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) decades ago, feminists have not yet fully incorporated the experiences and perspectives of low-income women and women of color in their

critiques of mothering. Their analysis may include women of diverse races and classes, however, their solutions reflect a continuing underestimation of how class and race shape the experience of motherhood and how the good mother discourse can be useful as well as harmful to low-income mothers.

Through the privileging of low-income mothers' perspectives and experiences, I have demonstrated that their engagement with the discourses of motherhood is complicated and has significant consequences for these mothers and for society's understandings of motherhood. I challenge feminist and other motherhood scholars to study this population (and other populations of marginalized mothers) from their *own* perspectives. By de-centering middle-class experiences, the complex and specific ways different groups of mothers are disadvantaged by motherhood ideology will be better understood and the feminist critique of mothering ideology will be broadened and strengthened.

Policy Implications and Future Research

It is important that policy makers and service providers understand that many low-income women are highly motivated to be good mothers because this is one, apparently achievable, way to claim social respectability. If programs and policies were developed from an understanding of low-income and young women as mothers who *want* the tools (information, assistance, training) they need in order to provide better opportunities for their children, the programs and related policies would be more effective in serving the needs of this population.

As long as there is only one accepted version of good mothering, low-income mothers will continue to be framed as deficient. More studies, especially ethnographic studies involving observation like Lareau's (2003), that center the perspectives and concerns of low-income mothers themselves will help scholars to create a counter-narrative that may break the "one size fits all" monopoly of the intensive mother ideology.

Future research might also investigate the material effects of the use of and resistance to dominant cultural discourses of motherhood. For instance, are mothers who actively engage with the good mother narrative more or less like to seek and obtain assistance and resources? This would provide additional insight into the ways in which dominant cultural narratives materially affect the lives of young low-income mothers.

Finally, it is important that scholars unpack and investigate other powerful dominant cultural discourses that create and define categories of people. This would give scholars a better understanding of how cultural narratives built on intersecting ideologies operate, how they shape social processes and the mechanisms through which they resist challenges to their dominance and therefore, to social change.

Appendices

Appendix A
Participant Description

	Age at Preg	Child Age	Number of Children	Mom Race	Child's Race	Marital Status	Education Level
Alice	16	8	1	Black	Black	Single	Some university
Ana	15	12	4	Black	Black	Divorced	Associate + some university
Annette	18	10	1 + 2 step	White	White + Mex	Married	GED + some college
Christy	16	8	1	Black	Black	Single	Diploma
Cindy	15	14	3	White	White	Engaged	GED
Corinne	15	9	3	Black	Black	Single	GED
Darcy	14	14	4	White	White + Mex	Single	GED + some college
Haley	18	15	1	White	White + Black	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Helen	14	11	2	Black	Black	Single	GED
Jackie	18	13	2	White	White	Married	GED + some college
Jane	18	14	3	White	White	Divorced	GED + some college

	Age at Preg	Child Age	Number of Children	Mom Race	Child's Race	Marital Status	Education Level
Justina	17	14	1	White	White	Divorced	GED + some college
Kate	14	9	1	White	White	Single	Almost complete Bachelor's Degree
Kathie	16	11	6	Black	Black	Single	No Diploma or GED
Kaya	16	13	1	White	White	Single	BS + RN
Kendra	17	8	1	Black	Black	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Lacey	18	10	1	White	White	Married	Diploma
Leena	15	13	1	White	White	Single	Bachelor's Degree
Leslie	17	9	1	White	White	Single	No Diploma or GED
Marsha	17	16	5	Black	Black	Divorced	No Diploma or GED
Nora	18	11	1	Black	Black	Divorced	Diploma + Some college
Ophelia	18	8	2	Black	Black	Separated	Some college + certification
Phoebe	18	14	1	White	White	Divorced	Master's Degree
Raina	18	14	6	Black	Black	Married	Diploma
Sophia	14	16	3	Black + Mex	Black + Mex	Single	Diploma + Some college
Stacy	18	16	5	Black	Black	Married	No Diploma or GED

	Age at Preg	Child Age	Number of Children	Mom Race	Child's Race	Marital Status	Education Level
Sue	17	12	1	White	White	Single	GED + some college
Susan	18	14	4	White	Black + White	Single	GED
Tanya	15	11	5	Black	Black	Divorced	Diploma + Some technical college
Tara	17	10	3	White	White	Married	Diploma + Some college
Tashieka	16	12	3	Black	Black	Married	GED + Some college
Teresa	15	14	1	Black + White	Black	Single	Diploma
Tess	17	17	2	White	White	Divorced	Diploma + Some college
Vicky	16	10	2	White	White + Mex	Single	GED + Some technical college

Appendix B
Interview Schedule

1. Where did you see my ad or hear about this study?

Life before motherhood:

2. What was your life like when you were a kid, before you had a baby? E.g., family, school, friends.
3. How had you pictured your future? What were your plans for the future?
4. Did you picture yourself as a mother in the future? Did you want kids?

Pregnancy:

5. What reaction did you have when found out preg? What were the reactions of other people around you? Your parents? The baby's father? Your friends?
6. What were your fears and hopes?
7. Did you consider options other than keeping the baby? Please tell me about that.

Birth:

8. How did the birth go? Did you know what to expect?
9. How were you treated at hospital?

Early Motherhood:

10. What was it like to have a baby in your life once she/he was born? How did things change?
11. How did the first child compare to your other pregnancies (if appropriate)
12. Did you use day care/child care? What did you look for in care provider?
13. What was a day in your life like?—if need more specifics

Motherhood:

14. What is the best thing about being a mom? What is the hardest about being a mom?
15. What has surprised you about being a mom? What has not been a surprise?
16. Most important thing you do for your kids?
17. What do you worry about for your kids?
18. Do you worry about your kids becoming young parents? Have you talked with them about this concern? Have you shared your experiences as a young mother with them? Have you talked with them about birth control?
19. How parent differently from or similarly to your own parents?
20. How discipline kids? Where got that idea (if diff from own childhood)?
21. Where have you gotten parenting advice from?
22. What do you want for your child's future? How helping them get that?
23. What's the best future you can imagine? What's the worst? (*these questions added about half way through the interviews)

24. Are your kids in extra-curricular activities? Why? How do you think activities help them?

Self-Reflection:

25. How would you compare yourself to other moms? What are you proud of about yourself as a mom?

26. What would you change about yourself as a mom if you could? How would that change things/help?

27. How would you describe the ideal mother? Is there someone you know that you think of as a great mom? What's she like?

28. Was it difficult to date and be a mother? (* added about ½ way through data collection)

29. How do you think having a baby when you were young shaped your life or affected you?

30. Where do you think you would be if you hadn't had your child when you did?

31. What would have helped made things easier for you as a mother?

32. What do you want for yourself in the future?

33. What advice would you give a teenage girl who is about to become a young mother?

Stereotypes:

34. What do you think the stereotype of a teenage mother was when you were had your baby?

35. Do you think people look at black teen moms differently than white teen moms?

Rich vs poor? (This questions was added about 3/4 of the way through data collection)

36. (If use any kind of assistance) When you got aid, did you feel people were judging you?

37. Have you had to deal with other stereotypes? Single mom?

38. Did/how did this/these stereotype(s) affect you?

39. Is there anything I didn't ask about that you think is important for people to know about young mothers?

Demographic questions asked at end of interview if they had not already been answer in the course of the conversation:

40. How old were you when you were pregnant? How old are you today?

41. What year in school were you?

42. Where did you live while you were pregnant? (city, state, country)

43. Where did you spend most of your time growing up? (city, state, country)

44. Highest level of education you obtained?

45. What work have you done during your life?

46. How would you identify your race/ethnicity?

47. How would you identify your parents' race/races? What generation are you?(if appropriate)

48. What, if any, was your religious affiliation when you were a child? How often did you attend religious services?
49. What, if any, is your religious affiliation today? How often do you attend religious services?
50. What jobs did your parents do when you were growing up?
51. What is the highest level of education your parents/guardians obtained?
52. Current marital status? Ever married?
53. What is the highest level of education & occupation of your partner/spouse obtained?

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