PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE

OF OPTING-OUT

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On my honor

I have neither given nor received

unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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Abstract

This study explores how upper and middle-upper-class married mothers living in the United States frame and understand the personal and professional implications of opting-out. Opting-out entails women leaving high-profile jobs for more flexible work arrangements or to stay at home. These women have heavily invested in their educations and have promotion opportunities, which makes their decision to opt out of high-powered positions perplexing. Structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism frame this research question. Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* links both theories to show how women "do gender."

In-depth interviews were conducted with 12 working mothers who opted out to raise their children. The study found that for interviewees the ideal American mother is a working woman who is obsessed with her children's success. It also confirmed the friction between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers, known as the "mommy wars." For stay-at-home mothers the cost associated with their choice is a career penalty; for working mothers it is the feeling of guilt of being partially present in their children's upbringing. This study argues for policies that aim for a better work-family balance and shared parenthood and which diminish the penalties, both financial and tacit, for working mothers and mothers returning to the workforce.

KEYWORDS: (cultural capital, fast-track, habitus, helicopter parenting, higher-quality children, mommy track, opting-out, positive assortative mating, social facts, second-tier, social capital, symbolic interactionism)

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"Nothing prepares you for the guilt of motherhood, especially if you are a working mom."

(Personal Interview)

The entry of women into the workforce in the late nineteenth century reinvented the US labor market (Goldin 2006). While women have become more involved in their careers, most are still the primary caregivers. Thus, many women must juggle time spent between work and family, leading some of them to opt out of the workforce (Hochschild 2012; Mason and Ekman 2007). Opting-out is defined as women with high-profile jobs who shift to less demanding jobs or leave the workforce to raise their children (Moe and Shandy 2010; Moen 1992; Stone 2007). Mothers who have opted out retain the possibility of returning to the workforce later in life.

One must distinguish between women who never opt-in—defined as those working pink collar jobs that facilitate plans to balance work and home—and women who opt out (Goldin 2006). While the former is more common than the latter, opting out has recently gained traction among upper-class mothers dedicated to providing high-quality childcare (Moe and Shandy 2010). While mothers belonging to a lower socioeconomic class (particularly single mothers) work full-time due to financial necessity, upper and upper-middle-class mothers (many with a well-to-do spouse) have the freedom to slow down their careers to raise their children (Bertrand et al. 2010). The latter group of mothers is the primary focus of this study.

The careers of many upper-class women shape their identities and dictate much of their self-worth in a Western culture (Jones 2012). Considering the importance of a career-based identity to professional women, this study aims to answer two main questions. How do highly educated women living in the United States perceive their decision to opt out of high-profile jobs to be stay-at-home mothers or to choose flexible work arrangements for raising children? This study argues that women who opt out reframe their sense of self and construct a new identity better adapted to their different social network and new position in the "social space." (Bourdieu). How do these women experience work-family balance? This study also argues that

women who opt out are less time constrained because their jobs allow them to prioritize childcare, making them feel less guilty by being more present in their children's upbringing.

This study takes its motivation from a prior sociological research project and an economics undergraduate thesis, both performed by this researcher. These studies looked at factors that influence women's decision to opt out and household utility maximization models. The studies found that while spouses' work status is a significant contributor to women's decision to opt out, other factors have greater impact—such as the number of children, the presence of preschoolers, women's education and their type of job. The research also found that women's personal satisfaction regarding opting out depends upon the combined utility maximization of her and her partner through an agreed division of labor.

This project extends these prior quantitative studies with qualitative interview research. Applying qualitative methods allows for a better understanding of how women frame their decision to opt out, how they understand their implications of opting-out in terms of identity, and how they experience work-family balance. Using a sociological analysis of women's narratives, it is possible to evaluate how structure interplays with agency, conditioning women's decisions and experiences of opting-out. Qualitative research reveals how social members construct meaning and determine social action within the context of larger socio-historical structures, allowing us to grasp the relationship between agency, institutions, and social milieu.

This study first draws on a literature review that applies theoretical sociological frameworks, including the application of social facts and symbolic interactionism to the opting-out phenomenon. The methods section explains the sample—women who have opted out or who are planning to do so—and the methodology, in-depth interviews. In the discussion of findings, I analyze the interview data and assess women's ideas about mothering, identity before and after childbirth, past and current workplace, and balancing work and family.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Opting-out is but one sliver of the literature exploring traditional gender roles, the loss of high-achieving female role models in the workforce, skills obsolescence, a new self-imposed glass ceiling, and career penalties for mothers returning to the labor force. Opting-out has been analyzed in several academic disciplines, yet there is little literature available that applies foundational sociological theoretical frameworks to women's decision to opt out. This study enriches the literature on opting-out by proposing that two foundational sociological theories can be applied to explain the phenomenon: Émile Durkheim's social facts theory that is the base of structural functionalism, and Herbert Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory that is the foundation of social constructivism. The literature review illustrates the debate between structure and agency applied to opting-out, while integrating literature on the phenomenon.

Social Facts: A Durkheimian Explanation for Opting Out

To what extent are women with opportunities for career advancement and who have highly invested in their education influenced by social facts to opt out? Durkheim would argue that while women make autonomous decisions when choosing to be stay-at-home mothers or jobs with flexible arrangements, these decisions are made in a context of social facts.

Social facts constitute society and have a coercive power that is unnoticed by the individual. Social facts are defined as "any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint" (Durkheim in Calhoun et al 2012:209). Social facts comprise laws, institutions, and beliefs that ultimately constrain individuals' actions and choices. Individuals live in an illusion believing that they make autonomous decisions, yet these decisions have been externally imposed upon them. "Social facts are material things;" hence, individuals have no control over them (Durkheim ibid.:201). The individual does not realize the presence of social facts, yet that does not mean social facts are not prevalent in everyday life.

This project proposes four social facts that potentially influence women's decision to opt out: socialization, social attachment, economic and social constraints. Socialization is a lifelong learning process through which individuals are made social beings (Stark 2007). Socialization can be primary and secondary. Primary socialization is the process of learning and accepting cultural norms and rules of conduct, which is mainly initiated by the family (Stark 2007). Education also plays a crucial role in primary socialization since it teaches children about normative understandings of gender roles, for example, by story-telling. Socialization is a social fact because it exerts a constraint over individuals by specifying ways of behaving, thinking, and feeling—which depend on, but are not limited to, their sex. These ways of acting and being are almost unconscious for the individual (Durkheim 1895).

Gender roles originate in primary socialization and are tied to the division of labor. The division of labor is in turn a social fact that limits individuals' choices. Durkheim (1893) claimed that with the rise of capitalism came the separation of the private and public spheres. The emergence of separate spheres could exist due to "organic solidarity" that held their interdependent members together—the principle of structural functionalism (Durkheim 1893). The segregation of these spheres made women devote more time to housework and childcare than men. Hence, for many years socialization occurred in two different settings for men and women, which in turn influenced their expectations and life-paths.

While currently there is a blurred line that divides the public and private spheres—represented in the dual-earner household trend—women are still the primary caregivers of children, the elderly, and the household. Hence, women are constantly making a trade-off between their careers and their household obligations that could lead them to opt out. In her book *The Second Shift,* Hochschild discusses the double workload for mothers. A mother claims, "You're on duty at work. You come home, and you're on duty" (2012:6). The prevalence of

women taking the greatest portion of housework and childcare—despite their greater involvement in the workforce—is rooted in socialization (Stark 2007).

Similar to primary socialization, social attachment together with secondary socialization act as binding forces for mothers who want to deviate from the group's norms. Secondary socialization creates rules of conduct within a smaller social group that become normative constraints (Stark 2007). Socio-economic class acts as a social sub-group of secondary socialization, leading some upper and upper-middle-class couples to believe in high-quality childcare. A respondent in Moe and Shandy's research on opting out exemplifies this point: "The ultimate benefit of me staying at home is the quality of the upbringing my children are receiving" (2010: 93). Positive assortative mating explains the shared belief of these couples who have similar interests, education levels, and cultural values.

This belief is accentuated by the fact that these couples concentrate in neighborhoods where they form a cohesive social network that becomes a support group (Moe and Shandy 2010). Given that the group is closely attached, the belief of devoting more time to childcare acts as a "collective conscience" (Durkheim 1895). In fact, Connelly and Kimmel (2010) affirm that "the production function of high-quality children takes substantial amounts of maternal time—time that cannot be purchased in the marketplace"(p. 64). Devoting substantial time to caregiving in turn fosters women's decision to opt out.

Providing a good quality upbringing to children does not only involve time commitment, but also financial investment—especially with the increasing costs of education and childbearing. Economic constraints are social facts that exert an external coercive power on mothers, including the price of childcare, the financial penalty for women when returning to the workforce, and the greater financial penalty for fathers when asking for paternity leave (Goldin and Katz 2011). For mothers of large families, opting-out is almost inevitable due to the high

cost of childcare. On average, women earn less than their husbands; thus, the mother's salary is often compared against the price for childcare, potentially influencing her to quit.

In addition, the high financial penalty when re-entering the workforce discourages some women from leaving their "opting-out status" knowing that they would follow a "mommy track" in their jobs—characterized by limited career advancement and lack of benefits like pensions and health insurance (Moen 1992). Even if women choose part-time work, some employers perceive them as subordinate in an enterprise—often labeled "the second-tier" (Moen 1992). A mother declares, "I feel like not being available to work late, come in early, and work weekends every weekend has 'mommy tracked' me" (Moe and Shandy 2010:7). The scarce scope for travelling is another contributor to the "maternal wall" (Jones 2012). Since some employers see working extra-time and travelling as commitment, women working part-time are segregated to an underpaid, reduced-hour schedule with few opportunities for promotion and recognition.

To a certain extent, employers are used to maternity leaves, but paternity leaves or men looking for flexible work arrangements seem to signal lack of work commitment. Moe and Shandy (2010) report that "even if men feel pulled between job and children, it's less socially acceptable for men to admit to, or to act on, these feelings" (p. 85). Significantly, Bertrand et al. (2010) found a significantly higher penalty for fathers than for mothers in the corporate sector when taking time off or having a reduced work schedule. The unspoken rule of higher penalty for fathers make some women assume the largest portion of child-care responsibilities. Thus, fathers accept more demanding jobs to compensate for the mother's foregone salary. It could be argued that women can choose to work less time, yet fathers do not seem to have the option to spend more time with their children without being penalized for deviating from the norm. To summarize, couples face a constrained set of choices that are outlined by economic forces, which makes women more likely to opt out than men.

Social constraints are experienced as normative binding forces that limit the individual's choices. The literature suggests that the main social constraints women face are (1) the belief that mothers are the primary caretakers and (2) the belief that caregiving time cannot be solely bought in the marketplace but that it has to be complemented with parental time. With regard to the second social constraint identified, Zelizer (2009) claims that to capture the multiple relationships of ordinary people it should be acknowledged that intimate relationships and market relationships are intertwined. In other words, childcare together with parental caregiving aids to the raising of "higher-quality children." The two social constraints are captured in the ways parents spend their time, which often indicate their personal preferences.

By exploring the current time use of mothers, Connelly and Kimmel (2010) claim that the nature of the household tasks performed by women often contribute to family and work conflicts. Most of their tasks need to be done daily, such as bathing a child or cooking, versus mowing—an activity more likely performed by men during the weekend (Connelly and Kimmel 2010). In addition, women's time is highly constrained by their children's schedules, including childcare, school, extracurricular activities (which differ by children), and homework. Moreover, mothers focus on developmental childcare—involving activities like arts and crafts and reading—whereas men report more "fun time" when taking care of their children (Connelly and Kimmel 2010). Reflecting upon this task overload, Hochschild (1997) claims that working women reported feeling more at home and a sense of belonging when at work, and dreaded going home to their "second shift." Social constraints—based on gender expectations—make women more likely than men to have an overlapping schedule between work and family.

To sum up, it is true that women make autonomous decisions when opting-out, yet these decisions are made in a context of social facts, which create a world that encourages certain decisions while discouraging others. Through primary socialization, women learn that

their gender roles are to be the primary caretakers of the household, children, and the elderly. Thus, some women are willing to sacrifice their careers to fulfill gender roles. While motherhood is a biological reality, it is also a social creation. Similarly, social attachment and secondary socialization—materialized in upper-class neighborhoods—create a coercive power for couples who deviate from the norm of raising "higher-quality children," for whom women are mainly responsible. Economic constraints are experienced as pragmatic concerns for the individual who takes a cost-benefit approach, for example, when women opt out to not pay for childcare. Social constraints make women be the first line of call for their children and be in charge of the household. These constraints are external to women and channel their decisions to opt out.

Change in Self: A Symbolic Interactionist Explanation for Opting-out

The previous section argued that while women are making autonomous decisions when opting-out, these decisions are made in a context of social facts. Social facts act as a structure that pushes women to fulfill their family and household responsibilities. This section, conversely, will focus on a symbolic interactionist perspective to explain opting-out. It also draws on the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu) to link the micro-social realm with macro-elements of structure, analyze how women and society normalize motherhood, and talk about the routine actions embedded in "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman). The discussion touches on women's selves and identities after opting-out. It also refers to the low social prestige attached to part-time jobs—sometimes labeled "the second tier"—that affect women's positive self-worth. This section ends with an explanation of high-quality childcare that fosters the creation and reproduction of "cultural and social capital" in children (Bourdieu 1983).

To explain the opting-out phenomenon, this section draws on a variety of social theorists, specifically George Mead, Herbert Blumer, Erving Goffman, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, and Pierre Bourdieu. This section first presents an explanation of symbolic

interactionism and social constructivism, followed by an analysis of opting-out through these lenses. What are the changes in women's self and identity, if any, that opting-out entails? The aforementioned theorists would presumably argue that childbirth demands the creation of a new self to better adapt and give meaning to a new body. This new self grows out of a new stage of life and a new social network that brings a different set of interactions. This social network validates a woman's decision to opt out and aids in the creation of habitual processes of thought and action. In these routines women "do gender" (West and Zimmerman) and create a "commonsense knowledge" (Berger and Luckmann) that make the opting-out phenomenon seem natural, while in fact it is the product of a socially constructed reality.

Theoretical framework: symbolic interactionism and social constructivism. Symbolic interactionism views the attachment of meaning to objects as a social product: "arising in the process of interaction between people" (Blumer 1969:4). People attach meaning to objects by how they act towards them; hence, they are active participants in the construction of reality rather than passive respondents to social facts as claimed by Durkheim. The meaning-making process originates within the self and takes into account "significant others" and the "generalized other" (Mead 1934). The self develops and exists subject to the relationships to other selves who belong to the same social group and who are in influenced by society. Thus, the individual experiences himself indirectly from the ways other members of the social group define him. He becomes an object of his own action through role-taking (Bourdieu 1990). The self is simultaneously subject, producing reality, and object, internalizing reality.

The individual and the interaction with himself involve a process of symbolic communication in which language aids the development of the self. The individual presents himself with gestures and he plans the response of others to the meanings of his gestures. He thinks before he acts, taking into account others' reactions (Blumer 1969). The individual also

asks himself: Which self am I going to be? The chosen self is dictated by the social experience. To maintain his "face," the individual engages in "impression management"— defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman 1955:5). Through the use of language, he embodies an identity that would match others' expectations of him and his self-image.

While the individual's "face" is a personal possession, Goffman (1955) claims that "it is only on loan to him from society" (p. 10). Thus, the individual has to do "face-work" and acquire "poise"—which is "the capacity to suppress and conceal any tendency to become shamefaced during encounters with others" (Goffman 1955:9). The concept of "face" can be unfolded into "I" and "me." The "I" represents the self and the "me" refers to the identity of the individual, product of social interactions and his social milieu (Mead 1997). The "I" reacts and reflects on the "me," adding meaning to his experience and interpreting the world. Interactions are rituals in which individuals seek to "maintain face" and avoid "being out of face" (Goffman 1955).

Symbolic interactionism is embedded in a social constructionism framework articulated by Berger and Luckmann. These authors state that reality is constantly being produced through interaction, although "everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world" (1996:19). Reality is perceived through different layers of experience and structures of meaning. These layers are laid out by institutions that have established patterns of interaction, specifying the ways things are done. These patterns have created rigidity, order and hierarchy in social interactions (Berger and Luckmann 1996). Through institutionalization, individuals are presented with an externalized reality that they accept, understand, and take for granted.

This reality, however, only transcends generations through a process of internalization that involves socialization. Through internalization, the individual legitimizes the external reality

and the set of conducts dictated by institutions. Thus, the micro-realm (agency) and the macro-realm (structure) are linked. Legitimization justifies routines by telling the individual "why he should perform one action [and] why things are what they are" (Berger and Luckmann 1996:94). Legitimization creates a "commonsense knowledge" that contains habitual processes, which have been normalized—referred as *habitus*. Bourdieu defines h*abitus* as "the relatively stable dispositions that are shaped by experiences of actors in particular positions in the social structure, which generate and organize practices and representations" (1991:329). H*abitus* is a cognitive schema shaped by larger social structures; hence, it bridges structure and agency drawing on an unconscious process of acting and being. H*abitus* ultimately denotes the individual's understanding of the world and the way he acts towards it.

Application of symbolic interactionism and social constructivism to opting-out.

Goffman would argue that the integration of childbirth requires the mother's creation of a new self that better adapts to her current lifestyle. Berger and Luckmann (1996) call this process "habitualization"—a method that releases tension from individuals through narrowing their choices and establishing patterns of action. The development of a new self involves "face-work" and the formation of routines to maintain positive self-worth after opting-out. Childbirth also entails a shift in the "social space" in which a woman occupies a different position that would change her dispositions and "role-taking" in her interactions (Bourdieu 1991).

The creation of a new self and the shift in the "social space" have to be understood in the context of a Western culture. In this culture, people's self-worth and identity are largely dictated by what they do, mostly determined by their occupation, and by people's opinion of them (Moe and Shandy 2010). Opting-out can only be explained in a specific "life-world," where cultural understandings arise through symbolic communication (Habermas 1996). Ultimately, these mutual understanding become "commonsense knowledge." This discussion uses the

Western culture as a background of "commonsense knowledge" to analyze the meaning that mothers—who have opted out—attach to their selves through social interaction.

Some stay-at-home mothers or mothers working in the "second-tier" state feeling socially invisible. This feeling is sharpened due to their dependence on their husband's earnings, the scarce value attached to their jobs, and the little attention they receive in social settings compared to the one at their previous jobs (Moe and Shandy 2010). The following testimonial expresses "the line" (Goffman 1955) commonly acquired by stay-at-home mothers that explains the root cause of their social invisibility: "We often rank each other on the basis of our occupational identity […] It's hard on my ego to be a stay-at-home mom […] It's painful to see people's eyes glaze over when I say what I do" (Moe and Shandy 2010:116). Stay-at-home mothers comprehend the "commonsense knowledge" in which occupational identity gives people a sense of tangible value; hence, they know that their new status as stay-at-home mothers is characterized by scarce social recognition.

These women have also assimilated the expectations of the "generalized other" to be the primary caretakers and to be responsible for the household. And they are constantly acknowledging the beliefs of their "significant others" such as their friends and their husbands. As previously explained, many upper-class couples believe in raising "higher-quality children" through "intensive mothering practices"—"whereby mothers spend inordinate amounts of time and energy in nurturing their children's developing senses of autonomy and self-esteem"(Jones 2012:40). As research on this topic has shown, women are pushed by two opposite forces (Blair-Loy 2005). On the one hand, women acknowledge "the commonsense knowledge" in which their sense of value is dictated by their occupations. On the other hand, women realize the need to fulfill the expectations of their "generalized and significant others." Women "maintain face" by fulfilling gender roles, while struggling to maintain social visibility.

To gain social visibility and to cope with devaluing comments, women engage in "poise." Women learn to navigate in a new setting of social interactions. Topics of conversation in this setting (e.g., losing post-pregnancy weight) differ from their talks in the past. Research demonstrates that this situation can be challenging for women, as illustrated when the stay-at-home mother in Stone's study comments, "I miss the intellectual challenge and discussion and excitement" (2007:148). To maintain positive self-worth, women attend husband's work events and engage in community and children's extracurricular activities (Moe and Shandy 2010). By being active, women fulfill the expectations of productivity of the "generalized other" while also conforming to the expectations of the "significant other"—the upper class—to raise "higher-quality children." In their self-presentation, women engage in "impression management" by portraying an image of being socially productive while concealing information about their feelings of social invisibility.

In the long term, the feeling of social invisibility is usually overcome with the help of a reference group—a network of high-income mothers who have opted out—that becomes a self-support group. Moe and Shandy (2010) call the changing socioeconomic demographics of stay-at-home mothers "the professionalization of motherhood." These women, who share similar educational and aspirational backgrounds, state that their "networks allow [them] to help one another out and engage in reciprocal relationships" (Moe and Shandy 2010:121). Justifications among this circle of mothers for opting out include less stressful lifestyles, the lack of a stay-at-home husband, the possibility of returning to work later in time, but above all the desire to provide a good quality upbringing to their children (Jones 2012).

Many mothers who have opted out consider a privilege to go beyond "just mothering" to provide their children with "cultural capital" that they can realize in a network with high "social capital" (Bourdieu 1983). Cultural capital has been institutionalized with education

degrees. It is the embodiment of a series of practices that are an integral part of a person. These practices are *habitus*: "acquired through repetition, like a habit; we know it in our bodies not just in our minds" (Bourdieu 1983:329). Social capital captures the benefits an individual can yield by being part of a specific network (e.g., upper class). Through high-quality childcare, some mothers expect their children to get into Ivy League Schools and competitive jobs.

Motivated to provide high-quality childcare, mothers who have opted out often have difficulty finding their identity in their past social networks, where career is a priority. Moreover, in their previous social networks they can find mothers of preschoolers who have kept their high-paying jobs. Thus, mothers who have opted out take an "avoidance strategy" to "maintain face." They change their social network to one of mothers who share their situation and can sympathize with them (Stone 2007). This network in turn models their identity. Since individuals find reassurance through a "tactful support of their intimate circle" (Goffman 1955:43), mothers maintain the boundary of their social network, which becomes almost an exclusive group.

The justifications of women who have opted out are threatened by women who stay in the workforce while raising their children—particularly by feminists (Jones 2012). These two groups have created the "the mommy wars" which, "pits at-home moms against employed moms, allegedly in battles over who does better by their kids" (Moe and Shandy 2010:125). The conflict stems from how society evaluates women's choices—either to work or to stay at home. A belief that is reinforced by the reference group to which they belong. To "maintain face," women surround themselves by people who accept the self that they are trying to construct and who can validate one another's decisions and concerns for childrearing. The sparse interaction between groups in turn reinforces the homogeneity of the reference group.

Although women who have opted out have the support of their reference group, they struggle to "maintain face" because of the lack of economic and social recognition of part-time

jobs, and emotional labor—illustrated in labels such as “the second-tier” and “the mommy track.” These labels typify the experiences that mothers face in their work, in which “[they] apprehend [employers] as a type and [they] interact with [employers] in a situation that is itself typical” (Berger and Luckmann 1996:31). Some employers have objectified mothers as undedicated employees who cannot work overtime, travel, or work on weekends (Mason and Ekman 2007). Part-time working mothers have also typified their interaction with their employers and often expect a subordinate role in the business, reduce pay, and few promotions. Language generates labels (e.g., mommy track) and institutionalizes experience, creating a common understanding of motherhood and their expectations in the workplace.

To summarize, a symbolic interactionist explanation for opting-out embedded in a social constructionist framework explains that childbirth disrupts a woman’s reality. Thus, she needs to create a new self that accommodates her new position in the “social space.” After childbirth, women struggle to “maintain face” and claim a feeling of social invisibility. After some time, women normalize their new reality through “habitualization,” in which their reference group—mothers who have opted out—provide reassurance to their decision. Full-time working mothers, however, struggle to make sense of other women’s decision to opt out given their career potential and believe these women are acting in a “wrong face.” Regardless of their work status, women engage in habitual processes of interaction that reinforce their sense of identity and belonging to a group that sympathizes with them. Mostly unconsciously, women “do gender” by engaging in a historical division of labor, which makes opting-out seem a natural outcome based on a desire to nurture and raise children. While in fact opting-out, is the product of a socially constructed reality that contains structural and cultural constraints.

The approach of this section oscillates between a Bourdieu-ian position and a symbolic interactionist perspective. Bourdieu postulates that women who opt out take roles made

available to them within the “social space” they occupy. Alternatively, a symbolic interactionist perspective argues that women struggle to make new roles in a social milieu with conflicting expectations. By showing that opting out could be analyzed through both lenses, this literature review has presented the debate between structure and agency. The link between the two is *habitus*, which is both constraining and enabling. Whereas *habitus* allows for the reproduction of institutions though an unconscious schema, it also allows for agency and social change. The next section aims to bridge the gap between structure and agency by showing how women's interpretative and descriptive narratives are highly influenced by their social milieu.

METHODOLOGY

The participant sample derived from a large population of upper and upper-middle-class women living in the United States who at some point in their careers opted out (or are planning to do so) to raise their children (see appendix A for interviewees profile). The 12 participants were mothers, with the exception of one participant who was pregnant, within the age range of 32 to 63 years old. Eight participants were Americans, and four were foreign nationals of whom two were Hispanics, one Middle Eastern, and one European. Seven interviewees held a Ph.D., four had a master's degree, and one a bachelor's. Eight were currently married and four were divorced. The number of children per woman varied from one to five, with children's ages ranging between two to 33 years old. Mothers reported annual household income ranging from $85,000 to $400,000. Their involvement in the workforce varied, with the sample including one stay-at-home mother, two part-time workers, six full-time exempt employees[1], and three full-time non-exempt[2]. These women worked in industries such as higher education, healthcare, the corporate sector, information technologies, and nonprofits. Although males were not in the sample, they are discussed in the findings of this study in their roles as fathers and husbands.

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[1] An exempt employee exercises discretion in the hours and place of performance of his/her duties.
[2] A non-exempt employee is required to be present at the office during business hours. (About.com 2014)

I used purposeful sampling to select women of different profiles to reach a diverse sample. However, 75 percent of women in the sample worked at a selective liberal arts institution. The sample also lacks racial diversity. Thus, the findings of this study may reflect the specific institutional and racial context in which the study occurred, and cannot be generalized to the US population. The participants were recruited through social networking sampling. I contacted potential participants via email, explained my research topic, and provided a preview of the interview topics. Once the potential participant agreed to participate, I arranged a face-to-face interview or a Skype conference at a time and place convenient to the participant.

In-depth interviews with open-ended questions were conducted to gain a better understanding of mother's opinions of the professional and personal implications of opting-out. The in-depth interview was the selected method because it provides the type of rich and detailed narratives that help reveal subjects' interpretative frameworks, supporting the analytic goals of linking individual women's experience with their social context. Moreover, it is the method of choice for sociologists and anthropologists to analyze opting-out (Hochschild; Jones; Mason and Ekman; Moe and Shandy; Stone). The interviews lasted from thirty minutes to one hour and a half. Participants were asked 25 open-ended questions—including ideas about mothering, identity, work history, and work-family balance—and seven demographic questions (see appendix B for interview schedule). The interviews themselves were conversational in nature. I used the literature and repeated topics to code for themes (e.g., ideal American mother, identity changes, and family-friendly workplace). Analysis of themes follows.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This project explores how upper and middle-upper-class married mothers perceive the personal and professional implications of opting-out. Research findings point to several

implications of opting out, with mothers in this study describing consequent ideas about mothering, identity, career, and work-family balance.

Ideas about Mothering

This section explores the evolution of the ideal American mother from a woman devoted to the household and her children to a working mother obsessed with her children's success. Drawing on interview data, I discuss how women perceive motherhood expectations, the best and hardest parts of being a mother and a working mother, and the "mommy wars."

***When mothers realize that Superwoman is single and childless*.** Historically, the American idea of the perfect mother has changed. Lisa says, "We moved from a family-support network back in the 70s to a woman who needs to be a superhero." The idea of a superhero is a common theme used to describe the ideal US mother. Allie explains this ideal type as "a mother who has a cleaned house, cooks, is very organized, volunteers, and takes care of all of her husband's and children's needs." Aware of the "perfect mother" trope, interviewees suggest this mother likely never existed, and would be especially unlikely today with women's active participation in the labor force. Pointing to an important extension of this idea of the "perfect mother," Marisa adds that "the idea of the perfect mother is becoming the perfect parent." By incorporating fathers into caregiving, the notion of a mother as the sole caregiver is fading.

Compared to past generations, parents are spending more time in caregiving (Connelly and Kimmel 2010). Thus, the contemporary ideal mother stereotype involves intensive mothering practices. Consistent with the literature, Emma affirms that upper-class women struggle more at being perfect mothers compared to other mothers: "Because some upper-class mothers have the option to not work, they start viewing staying at home as their job, and that it has to be perfect." In fact, Allie, when she was a stay-at-home mother, claims, "I did all of the

housework and caregiving because I felt it was my job." Some upper-class mothers try to closely control every aspect of their child's life—called helicopter parenting. Lindsay explains:

> A helicopter parent is one that is involved in all aspects of their child's life. I saw this as a college professor when parents called to see how their kids were doing. A parent would order all the books of his child and read them herself, so she can help her child in class. A parent would even take classes to help their children with class or to write papers.

Intensive mothering practices can even continue after college, as Beth illustrates: "This is the first generation that the mother calls the boss to talk about the performance of her kid as an employee." In the main, interviewees are critical of the helicopter parenting trend and believe that motherhood is not heading in a good direction.

From the fairy-tale to the real world. ***From the fairy-tale to the real world***. When asked about how the idea of the perfect mother compares to their experience, mothers say it was very different. Lisa, a director of events, tried to be the perfect mother while also working full-time and she needed to hire a full-time babysitter. Even stay-at-home mothers, particularly of preschoolers, struggle maintaining their self-image in relation to the "perfect mother" model. For example, Molly, a stay-at-home mother, says, "We all run around with ponytails and we can barely brush our teeth." In fact, Molly apologized for being in her sweatpants in the interview. As a justification for neglecting their self-image—valued by the "generalized other" (Mead)—one of the mothers in this study explains: "It's so busy because you are going in different directions with more than one kid." Yet two interviewees explicitly note that they do not try to live up to the perfect mother stereotype. Sophie challenges the idea of putting her kids first, yet she also acknowledges that in her "life-world" (Habermas) that is not the norm

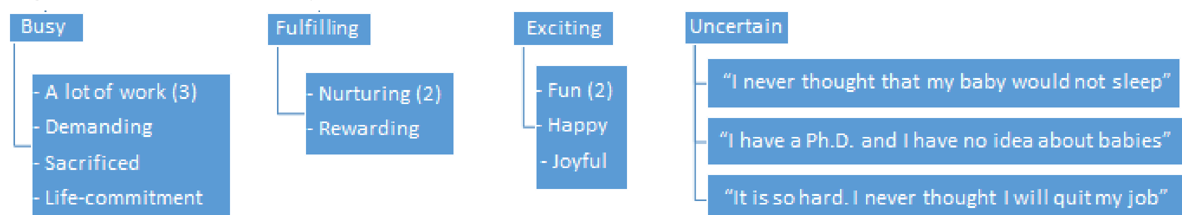
> We take turns being on the front burner. I think not by my own measures, but by tradition and culture, I am supposed to put myself on the back burner. I tell my kids, I always come first because if there is no me, what can I do for them?

Alyssa, who is the primary breadwinner of her family, states, "My situation is far from the idea of the perfect mother because I have a career and I am not the primary caregiver." Women

have different reactions towards the stereotype of a perfect mother, depending on whether they succumb to or reject society's "common knowledge" (Berger and Luckmann).

Joy overcomes hard work. Past experiences—mainly babysitting and remembering what her mother did as a child—influence motherhood expectations. Sociological theory states that primary socialization shapes future expectations. Using interview data, Figure 1 captures these expectations and divides them into four semantic fields: busy, fulfilling, exciting, and uncertain.

Figure 1: Motherhood Expectations



Note: Number in parenthesis indicates frequency in interviews. If parenthesis is not included frequency equals one.

Women know that motherhood entails hard work, but it is also a joyful experience. Georgia captures this point: "I never thought it would be so hard and so rewarding at the same time." Since pregnancy and motherhood vary from case to case (e.g., resulting in preeclampsia or a disabled child), unpredictability is part of women's discourse as the quotes show in Figure 1. Women overcome uncertainty by thinking of motherhood as a unique experience.

Imitating while challenging their mothers' approach to caregiving. Women's approach to motherhood is both similar to and different from their mother's. Many saw their mothers as role models. Emma says, "She was my first teacher," indicating primary socialization. While some women echoed their mothers (e.g., gradually getting back to work), others did not follow the same path. Beth states, "She was a stay-at-home mom and she pushed me never to be." Thus, Beth strives to be a role model of a working mother. Women in the study also understand that their mothers' time and circumstances were different. Thus, these women imitate their mothers while looking for ways to raise their children in a different social milieu.

The emotional roller coaster of being a mother. Mothers struggle to put into words the love they feel for their children and the joy in seeing them grow. As Georgia expresses, the best part of being a mother is to "raise your children how you want." Mothers feel responsible for their children's upbringing and therefore for "contributing to the world outside from work." They engage in a lifelong mission of raising a well-rounded person who can deploy his or her "cultural capital" to succeed. Through their children's realizations, mothers do their civic duty.

Mothers also emphasize that "the best part of motherhood is when we are together as a family." Family is particularly important to the foreign nationals in this study. As Vanessa, a Hispanic, puts it, "I believe that it takes a village to raise a kid: from aunties, to grandmas, to ex-partners, to teachers, to nannies." In contrast, some American mothers would only allow a babysitter to raise her children if they are controlled with a contract. Lindsay, an American, says:

> Some of my colleagues have long and complicated contracts with their nannies. They are trying to parent through somebody else and want to maintain control. A friend's contract stated that the nanny wasn't allowed to be beyond arms-reach of the children. These nannies stay for a year so the child doesn't get attached.

Lindsay quit her job to raise her children without a babysitter. Regardless of women's approach to motherhood—which differs by their ethnicity and nationality—they enjoy family time.

Women indicate that the hardest parts of being a mother are: (1) being in charge of the household and caregiving, (2) lacking time for themselves, and (3) dealing with their children's issues. These conflicts result from women not relinquishing some duties to their husbands. Beth states, "If you are working full-time and now you have this second job as a mom, how can you do it all in both jobs?" By framing motherhood as a second job, she refers to the "second shift" (Hochschild 2012) and conveys the constant tradeoff women endure. Emma, mother of a disabled child, says that the hardest part is **"**not having the handicaps and needs of one person overwhelm everybody else." Women agree that motherhood is very hard.

By trying to be present for all family members, mothers often forget about themselves. Beth, still pregnant, predicted that "balancing motherhood with my old self will be the hardest part." Mothers, particularly of newborns, neglect their old self, devoting themselves entirely to their children. Vanessa, mother of a seven-month-old, says, "If I am lucky, I sleep five hours a night, but not in a row." In fact, Lindsay, who had five children in less than three years, affirms, "I developed a chronic illness due to years of not sleeping." Sleep deprivation is a big complaint. Mothers also resign themselves to not having discretionary time. Vanessa states, "Making a schedule for yourself is pointless. It is like I am going to the gym, if they don't call me that the kid is sick." The word "if" shows that mothers' lives are conditioned upon their children.

Ultimately, mothers complain about the everyday challenge of raising a child. Georgia says, "Any mom that has not thought about killing her kids is lying to you." Georgia recognizes social desirability bias while conveying that children constantly test their mother's patience. Along these lines Lisa affirms, "They get under your skin and who can push your buttons the best that someone who is like you." Knowing that their children are "little them," mothers feel a great responsibility for raising them. They also struggle with letting their children make mistakes. As much as mothers love their children, it is hard dealing with them.

The constant juggling act. Working mothers juggle their jobs and caregiving, yet they enjoy financial independence, intellectual stimulation, and adult socialization. Mothers like earning money and relieving stress from their husbands to provide financially. Also, they like to maintain their identity outside of the house. Lindsay affirms, "You feel that there is another part of yourself." Goffman claims that people embody multiple selves that arise subject to the type of interaction. Working mothers divide their self into mother and professional. To fulfill their professional selves and "don't get stuck in the mommy brain," working women go to seminars

and events where they are “intellectually stimulated and enjoy adult interactions.” To maintain the old self, some working mothers challenge the all-encompassing bubble of motherhood.

Another positive aspect of being a working mother is to feel justified in the decision to work, since society tends to invalidate women who opt out. Georgia affirms, “People do think lesser of you because you don’t have some sort of career or professional life.” The “generalized other” (Mead) has created a career-based identity that looks down upon stay-at-home mothers. Lisa explains this belief by saying that women in the United States have fought for workplace equality for many years; hence, “if you are choosing not to work, there is pressure to come back right away.” Society sees working mothers as role models—which differs from the 1970s idea of the perfect mother. In fact, Marisa states, “I am a better mom because I work.” Working women think that being personally and intellectually fulfilled makes them better mothers.

Can women fulfil three roles: mother, wife, and professional? Being a working mother has also its downside. Working mothers do their best to juggle their “serial careers,” yet they feel guilty. Women describe the “mommy guilt” as a feeling that they are at work while their children could be needing them. While tearing up, Marisa states, “The guilt is on many levels. It is not only about time, it is what you wish you could do for them and you can’t.” Mothers also struggle with feeling guilty when they cannot measure up to the “good-mom” stereotype, as Sarah conveys, “When I miss moments, it is hard.” Also, mothers don’t want their children to be a “latchkey kid,” who is a child raising himself with no support. Berger and Luckmann claim that the use of labels—such as “mommy guilt” and “latchkey kid”—institutionalize experience and creates a common understanding. The “mommy guilt” shows that there is something specific about this guilt that only working mothers could relate to.

Working mothers of preschoolers or disabled children confront a bigger challenge. Vanessa, who put her two-month-old baby in childcare, describes, “There is nothing nice having

to work the first year of your baby's life." Revealing the practical difficulties of this situation, Vanessa, a professor, explains how she struggles with preparing class with a newborn: "I put my baby on my lap on top of a pillow and I would read on top of him with a little light that wouldn't wake him up." Alternatively, Emma did not finish her Ph.D. due to the constant time and attention that her child with disabilities required, but she does not regret her decision:

> I never regretted my decision to not finish my Ph.D. It was very difficult trying to find resources for her. I put in 18 years of living with my kid with a learning disability. Believe me, the researcher in me, the higher educated woman that I am, left no stone unturned.

This testimonial shows that whereas working mothers embody different selves—professional, educated women, and mothers—the last one would take over the other selves, if necessary.

Stay-at-home mothers and working mothers: the formation of cliques. The concept of "mommy wars" resonated in the interviews. Lindsay states, "I didn't understand women who didn't work. I hated stay-at-home mothers!" Marisa explains the hostility between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers by saying, "A mom is a mom, but as a working mother the challenges are different." These two groups of mothers are exposed to motherhood in different ways—mainly due to time constraints—which creates scarce mutual understanding.

Since many of these women have the option not to work, staying at home depends on if it matches their beliefs. A working mother affirms, "I will never be able to be with my kids seven days a week. I will kill myself." Conversely, a stay-at-home mother declares, "I put my son on daycare for a week. I couldn't do it. It just not who I am." Both women believe that they would have acted in a "wrong face" (Goffman)—the former if she did not work and the later if she did. These two groups of mothers poorly comprehend each other due to the different meaning they attach to motherhood. Moreover, their decision to opt out is consistent with their beliefs.

This section explores the evolution of the ideal American mother, showing its current focus on working mothers and helicopter parenting. It discusses how mothers are motivated to

raise their children, yet motherhood exhausts them. Working mothers, immersed in a constant juggling act, often feel guilty for not measuring up to the "good-mom stereotype." The mommy wars show the gap of understanding between mothers with different reference groups.

Ideas about Identity

This section focuses on identity changes due to motherhood: body changes and new social networks. It describes strategies women use to maintain a productive self. It should be kept in mind that motherhood often comes with marriage, influencing women's identities.

Coming to grips with your body changes and work it out! Applying Berger and Luckmann's concept of "habitualization," women go through this process to incorporate body changes that have arisen from maternity. As part of normalizing motherhood, women learn to politely manage inappropriate comments or ignore them. Beth highlights how people treat pregnant women differently: "People assume you can't do things. A student goes, I don't know if you would say no to this because you are pregnant, but would you be able to check my essay." A pregnant woman conveys an instant message; she is a sign by herself. Beth claims that pregnancy is not a disability and that she ignored this comment—showing what Goffman refers to as "poise." Another common social assumption is that women are worried about post-pregnancy weight. Yet, for some mothers weight was not a challenge. And for those for whom it was, they hired a personal trainer or used creative tactics. For example, Molly walked up the hill of the zoo pushing the stroller. Mothers use "face-work" to cope with devaluing comments while also engaging in different "habitualization" practices to adapt to their new self-image.

Yet coming to terms with a new appearance is not easy. Women in this study not only resign to changes in their body, but endure physical pain for their children. Beth explains, "After a certain point, especially if you get a health scare, you think as long as the baby is healthy, I don't care how I look." One mother called herself a "Disney-hippo," while Lindsay, who eight

months after having triplets got pregnant again, says, “We are not made to have litters.” Lindsay spent 14 weeks at the hospital in labor and neglected to put her health first: “In the hospital, they gave me a medicine that stopped my muscles from working, but it could also have stopped my lungs. There was no choice! My triplets are wonderful!” The love for their children leaves mothers without a choice. Women act as their own social fact.

Reframing your old self: new lifestyle, new friends, and new interactions. A new social network of people sharing a similar situation originates as part of “habitualization.” Beth, who is still pregnant, reflecting upon her friends who are mothers, says, “These women had their own language, their own little circle that simply did not fit me.” Mothers have other concerns, resulting in different topics of conversations and interactions. From a symbolic interactionist point of view, these mothers have created their own world of meaning.

As women enter this circle, they withdraw from their previous ones. Molly says, “Friends who didn’t have children, I didn’t see them as much.” Yet finding a new circle is not immediate. Vanessa, a mother of a newborn, struggled adapting to be a mother without a social network: “My family isn’t here, my friends all work, my colleagues don’t know anything about babies, and my husband works. I feel like a single mother. It has been brutal!” With the attention that newborns entail, along with the demands of work, mothers have little time to socialize. However, slowly but surely, their social network becomes their children’s social network. Lisa explains, “Everything centers on the fact we had children. When we hang out with friends, we prefer them to come to our house. I am always stressed out if I go to their house.” Lisa told an anecdote about her two-year-old girl finding a samurai sword in her friend’s house, which explains her stress on inviting her friends to her house. Childless families do not understand the challenges of having children. Thus, a mother’s social network is mainly one of other mothers.

As Connelly and Kimmel (2010) suggest, upper-class mothers look for neighborhoods that allow them to form a support group. Sarah looked for family-friendly residences when moving in and claims, “It was pretty idyllic for our children. We looked for that situation.” Mothers actively look for “kid-friendly neighborhoods,” allowing their children to benefit from the “social capital” of the upper class. Yet, mothers also seek a support group for themselves, sometimes unconsciously. This group lets them engage in activities they enjoy. Molly states, “We trade babies with friends for an afternoon to get things done and volunteer.” Along these lines, Lisa says, “We need that to keep us sane.” Mothers form a cohesive social network that allows them, for a moment, to go back to their old self. These mothers revisit their old self through a membership in a collective group and on the support it provides.

In the neighborhood, mothers build friendships that fill the void created by a lack of family support. Mainly because of work, couples move to cities, leaving their family behind. Thus, friends become family, as Lisa suggests: “Some of my neighbors and a coworker are part of my back-up list. We all fill in for each other.” Some upper-class mothers have formed a close-knit social network that has replaced the 1970s-era family support system. The support of friends facilitates the juggle between work and family while shaping women’s identities. Mead would say the “I” reflects and reacts towards a different “me,” which in turn transforms the “I.”

Keeping alive the productive self: coping strategies. Neighbors act as a support group while also helping mothers who have opted out to maintain a productive self. After giving birth, Molly “sought out a group in the community of other moms that wanted to get together and do stuff.” To balance their old and new selves, mothers engage in “face-work” and develop strategies to be content with their new lifestyles. Since their productive selves cannot stay alive through working, mothers who have opted out, fully or partially, engage in different activities that make them feel useful. The need to contribute to society and be active are social facts.

As a reaction to these social facts, mothers who have opted out volunteer, are self-employed, have hobbies, and study. A stay-at-home mother for 15 years says, “I volunteered at school of both kids. I was the soccer team manager.” Allie affirms volunteering was so busy that she would have liked to take what Moe and Shandy (2010) call “a domestic sabbatical.” Alternatively, Molly and Georgia continue practicing their profession, maintaining a certain degree of financial independence. Molly explains, “I started a clothing business,” while Georgia says “I got more involved in my family business.” Lisa runs as a hobby and did a half-triathlon. Lindsay got a second master’s degree and affirms: “It was a real blessing that I was forced to stay home, but I felt it had to be more.” From a Durkheimian perspective, Lindsay refers to the coercive power of social facts—of life circumstances when she had triplets and then had an unexpected pregnancy. Yet to fulfil her productive self, she decided to study. Mead and Goffman would argue that the “I” reacts towards the “me” to “maintain face.” Through these activities, mothers fight social invisibility and fulfill the social expectation of productivity.

A new life perspective: looking to the world through a kid’s eyes. Motherhood can have positive and negative impacts on women’s identity. Mothers identify a change in perspective—consisting of being less superficial and self-centered—as the most positive one. Vanessa states, “When it comes to body image, it is like really? This is what you get! Take it or leave it! I don’t care.” Before childbirth, mothers prioritized their physical appearance, yet children gave them perspective, showing them “what really matters in life.” Vanessa conveys that priorities change: “You realize that work comes to a second level. Making this baby survive is my number one job.” Motherhood also affirms a woman’s sense of purpose, as Beth conveys: “It makes you examine your identity more deeply.” Motherhood makes a woman evaluate her identity and priorities, shifting the attention away from herself.

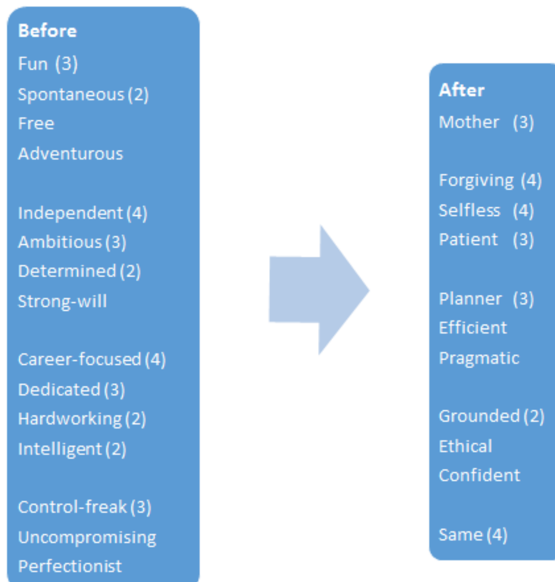
When "I" becomes "my kids." As a result of devoting themselves to their children, some women almost lose their old selves. Vanessa states, "You become the twin's mom." Allie, a stay-at-home mother for 15 years, makes a similar point: "I have no interests because my interests are my kids." Allie sees herself in her children's realization, but herself as an individual is lost. Lindsay explains the loss of self by saying, "You abuse yourself because you can never give enough." A loss of self goes with "losing your life and your independence," especially for mothers of newborns and preschoolers. Yet Sophie criticizes the idea of a loss of self:

> For some women, motherhood comes with a loss of self, postponing dreams and goals. I think it is absurd! As if being a mother cannot coexist with self-love and self-care. But it makes sense because that's what they have been taught.

Aware of socialization, which acts as a structural force, Sophie embodies agency. She proposes that women can fulfill their roles as mothers while taking care of themselves, demonstrating how people's agency can constantly challenge structure in everyday practices.

To sum up this identity section, Figure 2 shows the words these women use to describe themselves before and after childbirth. Four women declare that the descriptors did not change.

Figure 2: Words describing women before and after childbirth



Note: Number in parenthesis indicates frequency in interviews. If parenthesis is not included frequency equals one.

Before children, women declare taking a more *laissez faire* approach to life while being career-focused and perfectionist. Conversely, once mothers, they are more planners while also being selfless and more patient. The words describing motherhood draw a fine line between being caring and efficient—the latter often omitted by society which focuses on emotional work. The word “mother” is used as an adjective and works as a label. It creates a common understanding for mothers of the identity changes they go through—something that only they understand.

This section explains the identity changes that motherhood entails. While some women neglect their old self, others engage in coping strategies to fulfill their productive selves and form new social networks. Ultimately, women transform themselves to become mothers.

Work History and Current Work

This section explores the decision-making process of couples opting out—either switching jobs or leaving the workforce—and deciding on the primary caregiver. It discusses women’s jobs before and after childbirth, women’s transitions back to the workforce, and family-friendly policies. It assesses the career and personal implications for women to opt out.

Buying unlimited diapers while assessing their careers. Some couples start planning job changes before childbirth while other mothers state feeling “very clueless” about parenting, thinking that they can keep up with the workload. Allie states, “I thought I would continue to work, but raising children is too much work.” Similarly, Georgia says, “I thought I would switch jobs. Then, I was out of the workforce for seven years.” Reminiscent of Bourdieu’s point about the enduring quality of *habitus*, both women describe how hard it is to leave a role of a stay-at-home mother with established routines to be a working mother. Both quotes also convey that expectations often differ from reality in a new stage of life such as parenthood.

As a response to childbearing expectations, women are often the ones who switch jobs. After childbirth, Beth will move where her husband lives, although that decision would make her

lose four years of work to obtain tenure—now needing two more years. Beth explains her decision by saying, "You have to think of your family. It is not fair for me to stick in the job I love. I will not raise this child by myself." Mothers often sacrifice their careers to raise their children, which is not the case for most fathers.

Subconsciously, women feel socially constrained to be the primary caregivers—acting as a social fact—which often makes them put their career aside. Yet when switching jobs women deploy their agency to stay working in the field they like. Vanessa says, "I thought about changing my job, but I never thought about changing my profession, that was never an option." Women stay in the same field because they are personally and professionally invested in it—especially because they have made significant investments in higher education to attain these jobs. In fact, Lisa decided to stay at home and realized she disliked it. While some women succumb to the tradition of mothers staying at home, others feel that "the mommy world" is not for them. As a process of normalizing motherhood, women take different roles until they realize which one (i.e., stay-at-home mother, part-time or full-time worker) suits them.

Deciding who would be the first line of call. Before childbirth, couples discuss how to split parenting, for which personal and financial reasons are considered. In these discussions, parents compromise on something that hopefully both consider fair. Molly, when pregnant, talked to her husband if it was feasible for her to stay at home. After childbirth, Molly affirms, "It didn't make sense for me financially to go back to work with how much was the cost of childcare." Social facts—captured in economic constraints—shape women's decisions. The mother's rational self compares the cost of childcare to her salary while the emotional self tells her that her caregiving would be better than that of a daycare. Thus, some mothers opt out.

While economic constraints entail a cost-benefit approach, quitting a career is not easy. After having five children, it made financial sense for Lindsay to stay at home, yet it was hard: "It

was very difficult to give up my work, my career. When I quit work, I was the one making most of the money. I had the benefits. I had the career. My husband had a job." Lindsay says that her husband left the decision to be the primary caregiver up to her. Reflecting upon her decision, she states feeling more biologically adequate to be the one staying at home: "I felt that I was a better caregiver. I was the mother. I could nurse them. And I would have felt deprived if I didn't do it." The rational self influences women's decisions by drawing a direct connection between them as "the source of food" and the newborn. Yet women's acceptance of being the primary caregiver goes beyond a biological reality, it is a social construction.

Socialization makes women willing to sacrifice their careers, while most fathers do not want to stay at home. Most men feel compelled to provide financially. Sarah illustrates this point: "I remembered asking my husband if he wanted to stay at home. He said no. So I thought I would be the primary person at home. There wasn't any question about that." Sarah's decision to stay at home seems to be by default—a natural decision arising from a conversation. While Sarah and her husband think they made autonomous decisions, social facts channeled their choices toward what is conventional. Conversely, Alyssa challenges the status quo by having a husband working part-time and being the primary breadwinner. Some upper-class men accept being primary caregivers, mainly if their wives have high-paying jobs.

Enjoying being a workaholic. Interviewees described their jobs prior to childbirth as well-paid, engaging, fun, and their focus of their lives, mirroring the idea of a career-based identity. Lindsay illustrates this point: "It was great job! I was really having fun! I was in an executive fast-track program for an executive position in a big corporation." Some women opt out knowing that they have a bright career future ahead—which many desire. Similarly, Lisa says, "I worked in a Fortune 500 company. I went to conferences and travelled. I had people

who reported to me and a really nice paycheck." The question becomes how to incorporate motherhood in a woman's primary working years to allow them to advance in her career.

Mommy track. When pregnant or after childbirth, women often feel "mommy tracked." Moreover, some employers try to persuade women not to get pregnant, arguing that their career would be jeopardized. Emma, who worked at a bank, illustrates this point: "I was strongly encouraged by everybody and told overtly: 'You are ruining your career, you are ruining your work life if you decide to get pregnant now.'" In her late thirties, Emma could not postpone having children any longer—which is the case for women who deal with the "biological clock." For women, their primary working years coincide with their last fertile years, making some of them take a step back in their careers.

When easing off the gas in their careers, women create a mismatch between their work commitment and their employers' expectations. This mismatch fosters labels like the "mommy track." Georgia states, "After I got pregnant, I was getting played out in my work by my boss." Similar to Georgia's boss, Marisa's boss also discredited her performance after having children: "My boss thought I wasn't dedicating enough to the firm. I went from being graded 4/4, to being graded 3. It was the whole expectation! I was doing the job, I just wasn't there as much." Before, Marisa worked 70 hours per week, which would be unsustainable for a single mother of twins. Employers have expectations of these "type A employees", who raised the bar too high. The "mommy track" raises the possibility that mothers are discriminated against in their jobs.

The struggle to get back on the horse. After raising their children, some women decide to return to work, yet leaving "the stay-at-home mother status" is hard. Bourdieu would argue that stay-at-home mothers occupy a different "social space" than working women; hence, it is tough for them to be at the same level. Allie, a stay-at-home mother for 16 years who now works in Information Technology, states, "Technology has changed a lot. I had to re-learn so

much." Likewise, Georgia claims, "People see you as part of something that existed before, and not fitting in now." Due to the rapid changing world and society's perception that mothers who have opted out have obsolete skills, mothers need to work very hard to gain recognition.

Women who are trying to get back to work acquire "poise" and challenge themselves to break old routines and engage in new ones—creating a different *habitus.* Women describe needing to let go their egos and stop comparing their previous jobs to the current ones. After staying at home for seven years, Georgia describes lowering her expectations in her job search: "When I came back to work, it was really tight to get a job. I took what I could get. I went from being an associate director of a nonprofit organization to a staff assistant." Like many women, Georgia had to do "face-work" when returning to the workforce and made her way up. Coming back to work is challenging, yet it can be done. Agency can fight structure.

The price of motherhood. After returning to the workforce or switching jobs, women settled into positions that suited them better as mothers. However, mothers can also obtain a higher-level job—especially if they did not fully opt out. Lisa has an "eight-to-five job" that allows her to balance work and family. Emma left the corporate world and went to academia, where she felt she "could have a very balanced life." Conversely, Alyssa is the president of a college, working more than 80 hours per week. She describes a typical working day:

> Today I woke up at 3 a.m. because I am still jet lagged from a trip I made. I left the house at 6:45 a.m. I had a meeting at 7 a.m. I will get home by 6 p.m. I have a 6:30 p.m. event at my house. People will leave around 9 p.m. I would do emails for another two hours.

Alyssa's husband is the primary caregiver, allowing her to hold a leading position. After having children, the jobs mothers hold depend on their interests, career plans, and life situations.

Informal practices more effective than federal regulations. Women believe that tacit practices are better than formal policies at building a family-friendly workplace, showing that agency challenges structure in a daily basis. Marisa says, "My department is family-oriented."

Similarly, Georgia did not feel judged if her children went to the office. Sophie showed the flip side of the coin by describing routines (*habitus*) that foster the traditional division of labor.

> Faculty meetings are at 3:00 p.m. once a month. Why they cannot be at noon? I think this rule was imposed by a man 30 to 40 years ago that either didn't have children or have to worry about them. And now we are until this day!

Habitus relates strongly to gender because meetings at 3:00 p.m. works for men who do not carry the responsibility of picking up their children from school. Sophie's observation conveys Bourdieu's proposition that *habitus*—and its gender composition—is constraining. Fixed meeting schedules, conflicting with pick-up time, show how structural constraints are embedded in institutions. The lack of innovation creates a mismatch between institutional rules and a new social milieu of dual-earner households, explaining the need for tacit practices.

Going back to work with a newborn: not here, not there. Interviewees claim that current family-friendly policies are not ideal—particularly for women. After Beth was denied a class-schedule change, she is teaching at a university level at 38 weeks pregnant. She states, "The intensity of our jobs is not family-friendly." People think they work in a family-friendly environment, yet sometimes their job is not conducive to a family. Likewise, Vanessa states, "I had to come back to work with a two-month old. He was sick the entire time he was in daycare. His sleeping patterns got messed up. I am exhausted!" Similarly, Lisa, who brought her one-month old son to work, affirms, "I felt that I was not being good at either." Workplace policies need to suit a new era where women actively participate in the labor force.

If mothers could ask for a workplace paradise, what would it look like? Mothers would want a longer parental leave, more job flexibility, and better childcare accessibility. Vanessa argues that maternity leave should be for at least six months, be granted automatically and not be decided only by one person. Vanessa, who was born in Europe, was shocked when her husband only received a two-week paternity leave. Moreover, Sophie claims that "there should

be penalties for men who don't take paternity leaves like in Sweden." Sophie advocates for structural changes that force fathers to take paternity leaves to aim for shared parenthood.

Since working women feel usually time-constrained, they would like to have more job flexibility—particularly when their children are sick. Molly states feeling more productive at home knowing that her child is well taken care of. She states, "Companies don't see that your productivity decreases because your mind is not there." Molly's point shows the mismatch between institutional practices and women's needs. To tackle this mismatch, Marisa proposes working four days for ten hours or four days for nine hours, and every other Friday-off. Flex time allow mothers to run errands when children are at school without having to take time-off.

Mothers also advocate for better childcare accessibility and affordability. Sarah proposes on-site daycare and claims, "If women feel they have more accessibility to their babies, it would help them to relax at work." On-site daycare or worksites partnering with local daycares can help mothers feel less anxious and reduce the "mommy guilt." Along these lines, a complaint among mothers is the price of childcare and the wait list—to which Sophie replies: "If a university cannot figure something out, I have no hope for the world. We are supposed to be smart!" Industries like higher education, healthcare, and nonprofits, together with big for-profit corporations, should serve as role models implementing a truly family-friendly workplace.

This section talks about the personal and financial cost of motherhood—particularly for women. It also addresses the need to create a family-friendly work environment and policies that aid mothers to transition back to the workforce and that fosters shared parenthood.

Work-Family Balance

This section describes the household division of labor and how couples arrive at this arrangement. It explains how couples "do gender," what working mothers value most and least about their husbands, and what strategies women devise to balance work and family.

Meet me halfway: I am late, make dinner. The most common ways couples split household tasks are (1) women doing it all, (2) outsourcing help, and (3) children and husbands pitching-in. Stay-at-home mothers tend to take over all of the household duties, thinking that it is their job. Even before having children, most of the women in this study declared doing "90 percent of household work." Georgia, for instance, explains that housework decreased after she got divorced: "It is unbelievable the amount of mess a man can do." Apparently, some men not only do not help with the household, but impose a heavier workload on their wives.

With some couples, women fulfill traditional gender roles while with others they actively reject "doing gender." Alyssa's husband "does most of the childcare, and takes care of doctors' appointments, extracurricular activities, and the kids' shopping." Alyssa's case is an example of inverted gender roles. Likewise, Sophie takes an active approach to challenging gender roles: "There are times I won't cook for a whole week. I am like 'you have to figure something out.' And I have to go over the guilt of not caring that it is hot dogs from the gas station." Sophie could cook and not have to eat fast food, yet she stopped "doing" gender to provoke a reaction. Although Sophie has a progressive and feminist thinking, she still mentions guilt. Individuals like Alyssa and Sophie challenge a socially constructed reality based on gender.

Dual-career couples often decide to outsource help—particularly cleaning and logistics. Daycare is a must for mothers, while part-time babysitters are less frequent. Alyssa says, "Like many professional couples we tend to outsource many of the household duties and eat out." Often mothers have a series of babysitters to call—who range from family members to professionals—in case they have a social event or work commitment. Moreover, mothers leave work at around 5:00 p.m., yet most daycares close earlier and children need to be taken to extracurricular activities. Thus, mothers often hire someone to do the logistics.

Mothers hire outside help while splitting housework among family members. Allie claims, “now that I work, I expect my kids to help out.” Yet she stills put her children’s clothes away—although they are 17 and 14 years old. Allie is what Emma labeled a “tiger mom”—which is a form of helicopter parenting. Conversely, Sophie taught her two-year old son the colors by making him sort his clothes. Older children often help with housework and caregiving.

Mothers also expect their husbands to help. Molly states, “We back each other up.” In fact, sometimes it is a matter of whoever is available to do the task. Divorced interviewees share the child custody 50/50, evenly splitting childrearing with their husbands. While some mothers manage to evenly split childcare, housework poses a challenge. Beth states, “My husband doesn’t believe in the value of cleaning.” While men help, women do most of the housework.

Putting the cards on the table. Couples agreed on splitting household arrangements either naturally and talking it through or by force. Some couples describe “naturally” splitting house chores based on preferences. Lisa affirms, “We naturally gravitate towards what we like.” Lisa does most of the childcare and her husband most of the gardening. Lisa’s case show that *habitus* acts as an unconscious schema. People do not realize that what they enjoy is socially constructed based on gender roles. Sophie challenges gender roles: “This gender does this thing is not sustainable.” As a Feminist and Gender professor, Sophie is conscious of the subtle ways in which women “do gender,” questioning the “natural” division of labor.

While some couples “naturally” divide household tasks, others go through a more mindful process of talking. In this study, all mothers state that they would like to compromise on something with their husbands that both consider fair. Molly tells of the discussion she had:

> We talked about the stuff that needs to be done to maintain a house. Yet we also talked about that I need time for myself to exercise and to have lunch with my girlfriends. He also needs time to go biking with his buddy or have a beer. We were fair about that!

Molly mentions a crucial aspect that some mothers forget, which is the woman's self and what she likes to do. Couples should also keep in mind that a 50/50 household arrangement is an "ideal type" (Weber), which Sophie believes "is a fantasy." Communication is key to finding a balance in splitting housework and childcare in whichever proportion couples consider fair.

In the two previous cases, either naturally (by gender) or by talking, couples arrive at a division of labor. Yet due to life circumstances, some women and men are forced to do specific chores. Georgia's ex-husband did not do anything; thus, she did it all and says, "It is whoever has the least tolerance for messiness and chaos that it would end up doing it." Vanessa, on the other hand, cannot keep up with housework while nursing; thus, her husband does most of it. After Lindsay, mother of five, quit her high-paying job, she describes:

> My husband was now the main income earner and our expenses skyrocketed. We figured out that the only way we can take care of a family this large was for him to be totally committed to his work, which meant I will be committed to home.

Financially it made sense for Lindsay and her husband to specialize. While the division of labor is masked due to financial reasons, there is still a gender bias. Lindsay was originally the breadwinner of the family with a career, yet she still decided to stay at home. These testimonials show the power that social facts exert over women, narrowing their choice set.

Prince charming. Working mothers look for supportive husbands who back them up, who are there for their children, and who do household work. Beth goes beyond a need of support to say that a woman needs "someone who believes and respects them enormously." Women look for true partners who understand what they are going through. Yet as Vanessa captures, "understanding is hard because men don't have their hormones raging." Men's selves do not need to quickly transform to adapt to a new body as women do. Women not expect husbands to fully understand them, yet they seek their support.

In addition to support, women want their husbands to be present for their children—emotionally and financially. Sarah states, “My husband was there when our children did things.” Marisa appreciates that “financially it has never been an issue” with her husband. Lindsay values her husband’s effort to quit his job and start his own company “to be around as the kids were becoming young men, especially with their sports.” Molly affirms that fathers’ involvement in their sons’ sports, as children become more independent, is part of the American culture. Yet she does not mention fathers being hands-on with their daughter’s sports (e.g., helping them with their ballet moves). Through these actions, couples “do gender” and perpetuate the stereotype that certain activities are for fathers to do with their sons and vice versa.

Moreover, women appreciate it when their husbands partake in housework. Allie states, “They cannot come home expecting not to do any work.” As Allie affirms, the “second shift” (Hochschild 2012) should be for both men and women. In fact, Sophie’s husband would tell her not to do all the housework: “just because you are home it doesn’t mean you cannot just chill.” Sophie says she has to be more mindful about not doing it all. Significantly, Alyssa’s husband “runs the house and doesn’t care about the ego of not being the primary breadwinner.” Women value shared parenthood and men overcoming gender roles.

The notion of shared parenthood is class specific. Because many highly-educated women see their jobs as careers, they seek support of their husbands—indirectly making them overcome gender roles. Conversely, most women from lower social backgrounds do not strive to be the primary breadwinners. Though, indeed, lower-class women can be the sole breadwinners in single parent households, the lower-class culture does not carry the same valuation on women providing financially as does the culture of the upper class. The circumstances described and thus interviewees’ responses reflect a certain level of resource access and class privilege.

When prince charming turns into a frog. Interviewees also disliked some aspects about their husbands. Marisa says, "You cannot expect dad to do the same thing you do. My ex-husband forgot about pajama day and my kids felt bad." Marisa's quote portrays how gender socialization makes people handle situations differently—as carefree fathers or controlling mothers. Alternatively, Vanessa wishes her husband would improve his emotional support: "He would say 'I am so tired,' but he slept for seven hours. That makes me angry when I slept two." Both parties need to incorporate parenthood into their daily routines, but women experience more changes. Thus, they expect their husbands to be considerate. Lisa wishes she would have her husband's freedom, but she accepts that picking her children from daycare was her decision: "I do it to myself. In a logical level I know that, but on the emotional one I want his freedom." Lisa is conscious that in the way she has set up childcare, she is the first line of call. Yet the independent woman inside her struggles with being constrained by her children's schedules. Logically women understand that their husbands handle situations differently, do not undergo physical changes, and have more time flexibility, yet their emotional selves envy their husbands.

Circus: the balancing act. Some interviewees are satisfied with their work and family balance, while others are less satisfied. Molly, who has her children half of the time, claims, "I don't think I need to balance because I will have that downtime." Molly runs errands and spends time with her fiancé in the days her children are not with her. Likewise, Marisa states, "If my children are with my ex-husband, I can take another a half hour at lunch and read a book." Both women show that time flexibility is crucial for mothers, consistent with the literature.

Some mothers, however, do not enjoy that flexibility and struggle finding a work-family balance. As a single mother of twins, Marisa has accepted that her house cannot be organized: "My house is a filth. A saying goes: your house needs to be dirty enough to be happy, and clean enough to be healthy. That's what I strive for." Like many other mothers, Marisa needs to let go

and “choose which battles to fight”—leaving away what Georgia calls “the OCD part in you.” Lisa also raises the point that “the way the week is set up with only two days for family is not conducive for a balance.” Furthermore, Vanessa declares she has not reached a balance. She is in the process of normalizing motherhood and adapting to her new role in the “social space.” She says, “Right now there is only the baby and whatever I can get done the two and a half hours that the nanny is here.” She is stressed because she has to write her sabbatical report and learn to be a mother. Vanessa conveys that normalizing motherhood is not immediate. These accounts show that mothers find themselves constantly struggling to reach a balance.

Acrobatic tricks. Women have strategies to balance their obligations as professionals and mothers, which mainly focus on choosing family-friendly jobs and having a set of attitudes that contributes to such balance. Allie worked part time when her children were little and declares, “It was the best of both worlds.” Similarly, Sarah states, “Part-time employment makes me a good mom, an accessible one.” Literature indicates that since the 1930s part-time work has been the solution for mothers who want to work while being present in their children’s upbringing (Goldin 2006). Likewise, Emma, who works part-time, says, “I deliberately do not take on job responsibilities that lead to promotion.” Goldin et al. (2011) find that often women do not hold leadership positions because of time constraints. Part-time work and less time-consuming jobs are often tactics women use to strike for a balance.

In addition to work choices, women have different tactics to reach a balance. A common strategy is to put their children first and accommodate other needs accordingly. Lindsay states, “I treated my day as if I was packing a suitcase. The first thing I put in was taking good care of my children. In the outside pockets, it was my work. I fitted it where I could!” Most mothers get creative with their time, feeling that they are doing the best to fulfill family needs and job obligations. Another strategy women use is to evenly distribute the attention they dedicate to

work and family. Vanessa says, “Sometime family comes first, sometimes work does.” Sarah also challenged the notion of a perfect balance: “If everything is going really well at my office then something at home is not so great, and vice versa.” A perfect balance is an “ideal-type” (Weber); thus, mothers assign their time in a way they consider fair.

While society perceives that working women struggle to have a work-family balance, most interviewees claim that working *allows them* to have a balanced life. Alyssa states, “If I will be home all day, I will go crazy. If I didn’t have the kids to pull me home at night, I would work all the time.” The balancing act itself helps women to avoid “the mommy brain” and being workaholics. Even Alyssa, who works for 80 hours per week, feels that she has a good balance. She takes advantage of the limited time she has with her children even if that is 15 minutes with her son in the car. While working women are immersed in a constant juggling act, most enjoy it. This enjoyment could be because these women are fulfilling the two main parts of their selves. They are complying with a career-based identity while fulfilling their gender roles as mothers.

How can mothers improve the balancing act? Working mothers want job flexibility to spend more time with their children and their husbands. To have that time and achieve a better balance, interviewees proposed different strategies. Beth states, “I would like to break my day in discrete periods when I do different things, and not let them overlap.” Beth, who is still pregnant, proposes to compartmentalize time, which other interviewees consider impossible since newborns are all encompassing—something that Beth will soon find out.

Alternatively, working mothers claim that the balancing act could be improved if they have more time flexibility. Marisa states, “I would love to work for one hour less in the afternoon, so it is not rush, go home, cook dinner, go to bed.” Allie explains women’s desires to pick up their children from school: “This is when children want to talk about stuff. When I get

home after work, they are doing something else." Mothers agree on their need for time flexibility and their desire to pick up their children to check how they are doing in school.

In addition to being less time-constrained, working mothers want to spend more time with their children. Sophie says, "I rarely feel it is too much family. It is mostly too much work." Lindsay, who shares a similar feeling, states, "And that tells you where your priorities are." Although these women have been shaped by a career-based identity, the part of the self that is a mother is more important than any other obligation. Similarly, Lisa affirms, "I wish I could be more present when I am with them." Lisa shows that the struggle is not only between work and family. It is also when women are at home doing housework while trying to spend quality time with their children. Women wished they could be less workaholics to enjoy more family time.

Women also want to spend more time with their husbands and be better wives. Alyssa states, "I make the right amount of time with the kids. I wish my husband and I would have more spousal time." Trying to excel at being a working mother—the twenty-first century ideal mother stereotype—women often neglect their role as wives. Likewise, Lisa shares, "I want to be a better wife. I am a great employee and a great mom, but the person who ever gets the last part of me is my husband." Lisa portrays the different roles women take and the many ways their selves are divided. Some working women feel that they have neglected their marriage.

Molly, however, is more proactive at creating spousal time: "We always have a date night." Molly thinks it is important to foster love and claims, "If you don't do that, you would end up living with a perfect stranger." Molly's statement is consistent with literature that shows that after raising children some couples divorce (Jones 2007; Moe and Shandy 2010; Stone 2007). Interviewees put in the effort to be better wives, claiming that they miss the "old times."

This section argues that highly educated mothers continue "doing gender"—often in an unconscious way embedded in their *habitus.* The situation is changing with more fathers being

the primary breadwinners and helping with housework, yet this progress is specific to the upper class. While some women reached a work-family balance through opting out, others found that working actually allows them to have a balanced life. Women are continuously looking to improve such balance, particularly by being better wives.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study supplements the literature on opting-out by showing that the phenomenon can be understood through two lenses: social facts and symbolic interactionism. *Habitus* link both, bridging the gap between structure and agency. In other words, individuals are born into a reality that has already been created for them and that shapes their decisions, yet they also help model the world. The aim of this study was to assess how upper and upper-middle-class married mothers living in the United States frame and understand the personal and professional implications of opting-out of high-powered jobs. This study also explored how these women experience work-family balance. Keeping in mind the theoretical framework, the two objectives, and the class and the cultural specificities of my findings, this study concludes the following.

The idea of a mother being a superhero has changed, but has not disappeared. The ideal American mother has evolved from a stay-at-home mother in charge of the household and her children to a working mother obsessed with her children's success. Working mothers are immersed in a constant juggling act, balancing their serial careers as professionals, mothers, and wives—often forgetting about themselves. On the other hand, stay-at-home mothers have their children as their main focus of time and attention, which has fostered "helicopter parenting." Both groups of mothers want their children to get into prestigious schools and into competitive jobs. However, there is friction between these groups—which has led to the "mommy wars." Working mothers and stay-at-home mothers are judged by each other and by society for their

career choices to help raise "higher-quality children." Thus, both groups of mothers surround themselves with women who share similar situations, reaffirming their choices.

When trying to excel as mothers, women, particularly those who have opted out, almost lose their old self. The ambitious, career-oriented, and independent woman starts to be a story of the past. Conversations are no longer intellectual, but revolve around their children. All mothers experience identity changes after childbirth. Yet women who have opted out often re-construct their selves to one that better adapts to a new social network and lifestyle. These mothers try to maintain their productive self through volunteering, studying, being self-employed, and having a hobby. The career-based identities that these women embody fosters the need to constantly feel productive in order to overcome feelings of social invisibility.

Ironically, women who opt out of high-profile jobs are highly educated and have opportunities for promotion. To find an explanation for opting-out, family policies in the workplace should be assessed. Women want longer and paid maternity and paternity leaves, flexible schedules, and childcare accessibility and affordability. Their demands for work-family balance have been unheard for years, pushing some women to opt-out and fostering "the professionalization of motherhood"—a term that captures the changing demographics of stay-at-home mothers. By opting-out and engaging in a traditional division of labor, highly-educated professional mothers "do gender," an idea that has been criticized by the upper class.

Women who opted out could have occupied leadership positions, serving as role models and contributing to gender equality in the workplace, which has been fought for over decades. Opting-out shows the current mismatch between obsolete institutional policies and a new social milieu where women are actively involved in the workforce. This mismatch has promoted tacit practices in the workplace to facilitate a work-family balance. Social policies need to innovate and aim to overcome the "chilly climate" for mothers in the workplace.

The shortcomings of this study are the racial homogeneity of the sample and the overrepresentation of interviewees working in the same institution. Reflecting upon these limitations and the findings of this study, future research should address these questions: How do women's approaches to motherhood vary by ethnicity and nationality and what are their implications in an interconnected world? How does raising "higher-quality children" foster social inequality? Another direction for future research could be, how does the dynamic of opting-out differ in homosexual couples? In addition, studies could examine when does the wage gender gap become "the mommy-track" in which women are limited in the promotion track due to their current or potential status as mothers? How do workplace policies perpetuate the traditional division of labor? Finally, future research might explore what are men's thoughts on being the primary caregivers and how do they experience the transition into parenthood?

As a final thought, society has defined two parallel paths for women: one based on a career, the other on family. Yet women seem to challenge the idea of a linear experience in which they go to college to build a career, separate from family. A spiral appears to have developed in which women move back and forth between family and career. Sadly, stay-at-home mothers are heavily penalized when returning to work while working mothers feel guilty because they cannot be present when their children need them due to fear of employer reprisal. Action is needed. Motherhood can no longer be an obstacle to economic equality for women.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEWEES PROFILE

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Annual Household Income ($)	Nationality	Education	Job held and Work-Status	No. of Children	Children's Ages and Sex
Alyssa	48	Married		American	Ph. D	College President (full-time exempt)	2	13-year-old son 15-year-old daughter
Allie	53	Married		American	Bachelor's	Director of Frontline IT Services at a college (full-time non-exempt)	2	14-year-old son 17-year-old daughter
Beth	32	Married	179,000	Middle Eastern	Ph. D	University Professor (full-time exempt)	0	Pregnant with a girl
Emma	63	Divorced	90,000	American	Two master's	English as a Second Language Specialist at a college (part-time)	3	30-year-old daughter Twins (33-year-old daughters)
Georgia	40	Divorced	85,000	American	Ph. D	Programs, Initiatives and Data Manager at a college (full-time exempt)	2	9-year-old son 11-year-old son
Lindsay	53	Married		American	Two master's and a Ph.D.	University Professor (full-time exempt)	5	19-year-old son Triplets (20-year-old sons) 21-year-old son
Lisa	39	Married	90,000	American	Master's	Director of Events at a college (full-time non-exempt)	2	2-year-old daughter 4-year-old son
Marisa	41	Divorced	90,000	Latin American	Master's	Senior Budget Analyst at a college (full-time non-exempt)	2	Twins (6-year old sons)
Molly	42	Divorced	300,000	Latin American	Master's	Stay-at-home mother	1	14-year-old son
Sarah	59	Married	400,000	American	Ph. D	Dentist (Part-time)	2	21-year old daughter 23-year old daughter
Sophie	32	Married	100,000	American	Ph. D	University Professor (full-time exempt)	2	7-year-old son 9-year-old daughter
Vanessa	36	Married	140,000	European	Ph. D	University Professor (full-time exempt)	1	7-month-old son

Note: Blank indicates that interviewee preferred not to answer the question. Alyssa is the primary breadwinner. Emma has one child with disabilities.

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

A. Introductory Questions

Tell me a little bit about your family? (Children, Spouse/Partner)
Tell me a little bit about your current work situation? (Job, duties, hours)

B. Ideas about Mothering

Before you had children, what did you expect mothering would be like?
How would you describe American culture's idea of the 'perfect mother'? How does this compare to your experience of being a mother?
What do you think are the best parts about being a mother? The hardest parts?
What do you think are the best parts about being a working mother? The hardest parts?
How does your approach to mothering compare to your own mother's/primary caregiver's approach?
How are household duties and childcare divided in your family?
How did you and your partner came up with this arrangement?

C. Ideas about Identity

What do you think would be three words people would have used to describe you in the time before you had children? Explain?
What do you think would be three words people would use to describe you now? Explain?
In your opinion, what are positive changes women go through when they have children? Less-positive changes?
Do you think you've changed as a result of having children? Explain?

D. Work History and Current Work

Tell me about the job you had before you had children? Likes/Dislikes?
Tell me about your current job? Likes/Dislikes?
How does your current job compare to the job you had before you had children?
Are there family-friendly policies in your current workplace? Explain.
Have you taken advantage of any of these policies?
Are there other family friendly-policies you'd like to see? Explain.

E. Balancing Work and Family

When you were pregnant, did you and your partner plan on making any job changes? Do you plan on making them in the future?
What do you think makes for a good spouse/partner if you're a working mother? A less good spouse/partner?
As a working mother, what do you most appreciate about your partner? Least appreciate?
How do you balance your work and family responsibilities?
How do you feel about the time you're able to designate to family and to work?
If you could change anything about the way you balance work and family, what would it be?

D. Demographic Questions

What is your age?
What is your education?
What is your approximate household income?
What is your marital status?
How many children do you have? Ages?
Do you plan to have more children?
What are your future career plans