

Good Working Mothers as Jugglers: A Critical Look at Two Work-Family Balance Films

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[ErikaKirby@creighton.edu](mailto:ErikaKirby@creighton.edu). This manuscript began as a compilation of individual papers presented at the 2014 National Communication Association Convention; the first author utilized the papers to create one overall manuscript and then worked closely with the second author to finalize the manuscript that was then revisited by all authors across several stages.

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**Good Working Mothers as Jugglers: A Critical Look at Two Work-Family Balance Films****Abstract**

We examine the portrayals of two good working mothers in popular work-family balance films—Melanie in *One Fine Day* (1996) and Kate in *I Don't Know How She Does It* (2011). Using a critical standpoint, we build on communication work-family/life scholarship to extend theoretical understanding of underlying ideological notions of the *good working mother*. In particular, we analyze Melanie and Kate's performances that reflect the underlying cultural ideologies of being an ideal worker, a true domestic woman, and an intensive mother. Further, we explicate how this juggling of identities portrays *good working mothers* as perpetually defensive. We go beyond the analysis of ideologies to lay out some of the consequences of the performance portrayals of the *good working mother*, in that she should (a) accept “punishments” from her children, (b) conceptualize fathers as secondary parents, (c) solve problems on her own, and (d) choose family over work.

Key Words: good working mother, work-family/life balance, ideal workers, intensive mothering, “true womanhood”

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*Melanie:* You probably think I'm a real control freak, and I'm not at all. Well. I mean, I do like things the way I like them, but who doesn't? And anyway, in my life, I'm the only one who ever does anything, so what does it matter?

*Jack T.:* Maybe you should let somebody help you out every once and a while.

*Melanie:* Definitely not. I've got all of these little balls up in the air. And if someone else caught one for me, I'd drop them all.

*Jack T.:* But you're not a control freak?

*Melanie:* No. I'm a **single working mother**.

This excerpt from the movie *One Fine Day* (Obst & Hoffman, 1996) directly reflects everyday vernacular for mothers engaging in paid work outside the home: they are **juggling**. While the broadest definition of juggling is to “continuously toss into the air and catch (a number of objects) so as to keep at least one in the air while handling the others,” the second most common definition is to “*cope with by adroitly balancing*, i.e. she works full time, juggling her career with raising children” (Oxford Dictionary, 2015). Indeed, “juggling” language is also used by work-life scholars; as one example, Golden (2001) notes how “multiple role-identities associated with work and family require juggling conflicting demands” (p. 233). Women in particular “juggle responsibilities” as they strive to be good workers and good mothers, also known as *good working mothers*<sup>1</sup> (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Buzzanell et al., 2005; Turner & Norwood, 2013). Notably, there is no parallel term of a *good working father*; since discourses of work-family/life issues often reflect gendered role expectations of work and private responsibilities, the personification of “balance” seems more targeted at working mothers, reflecting how work-family/life conflicts are sometimes viewed

as merely a “women’s issue” in the workplace (Drago, 2007; Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014).

We critically examine how mediated portrayals of the “juggling act” of the *good working mother* reflect the underlying cultural ideologies of being an ideal worker, a true domestic woman, and an intensive mother. Further, we explicate how this juggling of identities portrays *good working mothers* as perpetually defensive, laying out how these portrayals to teach women to (a) accept “punishments” from children, (b) conceptualize fathers as secondary parents, (c) solve problems on their own, and (d) choose family over work. Leading in to this critical examination, it important to describe our varied positionalities as people and scholars. Our working relationship began in a five-day work/life course led by the first author at the National Communication Association Institute for Faculty Development. We spent a week immersing ourselves in the work/life literature, watching these work/life films, and discussing ways to integrate this research into our teaching and indeed our lives. From this experience, the five of us decided to work together on a deeper analysis of the films we referenced in class. While not all of us are working mothers, we are all women who engage in paid work, and we could therefore relate to the ideologies of an ideal worker and a true domestic woman that we critically examine throughout this paper. And certainly, we all have experience with caregiving expectations for women, even if this is not always in the context of children and intensive mothering. Furthermore, we must be reflexive: we are all White middle-to-upper class women with male life partners, and so in many ways we embody the same privileged positions as the female protagonists in the films we critique.

Brummet (1984) contends that media messages have an “anecdotal” nature, which “arouse and satisfy our expectations of a good story, an unfolding drama” (p. 165). Since we know that artifacts of popular culture reflect broad cultural concerns, the “juggling act” of

work-family/life balance for mothers must have resonance with audiences in light of our opening dialogue. Two films that rely on that resonance as central plotlines are *One Fine Day* (*OFD*: 1996) and *I Don't Know How She Does It* (*IDK*: 2011). *OFD* was released in 1996; by that point, discourse on work and family was common enough that “balance” was a part of the vernacular, as well as the related metaphor of a juggling act. *OFD* capitalized on both as it showcased the lead characters passing back and forth their children around their work obligations. Fast forwarding to 2011, the juggling of responsibilities had not gotten any easier and the work-life landscape shifted as professional, highly-educated working women “opted-out” of the workforce in order to have more time with their families (cf. Stone, 2007). The release of *IDK* reflected these trends and provides a look at work-family/life balance issues 15 years later.

While numerous movies exist that “hit” on work-family/life issues (e.g., *The Pursuit of Happiness*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Working Girl*, *Baby Boom*, *Erin Brockovich*), we analyze these two films because of their *explicit* marketing pitches as work-family/life balance films that strongly feature the quest of women to be *good working mothers*. The trailer of each film frames it as an intentional/explicit/direct exemplar of the struggle of mothers trying to “juggle” paid work and family responsibilities as illustrated in the amazon.com Editorial Reviews of each: “Melanie Parker is **juggling** single parenthood with a career as an architect” (Amazon, 2015b) and “Based on the critically acclaimed bestseller by Allison Pearson, *I Don't Know How She Does It* follows a Boston-based working mother trying desperately to **juggle** marriage, children, and a high-stress job” (Amazon, 2015a). We take a critical perspective toward the quest of Melanie and Kate to be *good working mothers* in order to identify and challenge dominant ideologies about women’s identities at work and at home with the goal of

opening up possibilities of resistance that question organizational and individual assumptions.

### **Two Juggling Mothers**

*OFD* sets the stage for portraying working mother as juggler when we see Melanie “multitasking” in the opening credits—paying bills while eating dinner, packing her son’s lunch for the next day before kissing him goodnight and falling exhausted into bed, lying on a toy truck. Beginning the next morning, the film focuses on “a day in the life” of Melanie and another single parent, Jack T., who go through a hectic day trying to balance their roles as caregivers to their children, Sam and Maggie, and ideal workers because of a missed school field trip that results in them having no childcare. The parents are essentially forced to come up with ways to keep their children busy so they can complete their paid work for the day—and this “day” coincides with a career-changing moment for Melanie, who is presenting her architectural model for an “adult amusement park.” Throughout the day there are explicit references to juggling, including our opening quotes where Melanie discusses having “all of these little balls up in the air” (Obst & Hoffman, 1996). Later in *OFD*, Melanie forgets to pick up the children on time, and when she begrudgingly admits needing help, Jack T. invokes the metaphor: “You are an arrogant ball juggler, baby” (Obst & Hoffman, 1996).

There are parallel ties to juggling in *IDK* in presenting the life and times of Kate, who is married to Richard, with two young children, Emily and Ben, and is desperately trying to be a *good working mother*. An early scene shows Kate lying in bed making a mental to-do list that is then “written” on the ceiling: “Things to buy: paper towels, toothpaste, pork chops. Buy a present for Jedda’s birthday party...” (McKenna, Ferguson & McGrath, 2011). She narrates how her lists—a parallel to Melanie’s balls in the air—make it hard for her to sleep. Kate’s juggling act intensifies when she lands an important account to advance her career in financial

management, but it involves traveling more than usual and working alongside a coworker, Jack A., who Richard grudgingly refers to as her “boyfriend.” At the same time, Richard secures a contracting project, and the high demands from their careers cause challenging situations and marital strain. Eventually Kate and Jack A. land the account, and Kate stands up for herself to her boss stating that she needs more flexibility to be with her family which (re)unites her with Richard. Some other moments that *explicitly* refer to juggling include the opening scene of *IDK* as Kate’s best friend Alison likens her to a juggler spinning plates, and when Richard closes the movie with responding that his wife Kate is a “juggler” when asked about her occupation.

So how do the identity performances of Melanie (*OFD*) and Kate (*IDK*) challenge or (re)produce ideologies of what makes a *good working mother*? In order to explore constructed expectations of good working mothers, we take a lens of how White, middle-class, professional identities are performed as Melanie and Kate are portrayed as trying to juggle identities of being an ideal worker, a “true (domestic) woman,” and an intensive mother. Furthermore, while the work-family/life struggle of mothers is an important family communication concern, what is often backgrounded are implications for other family members—family systems extend beyond the mother, and one member’s behavior has consequences for other family members (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006). Therefore, in the discussion, we take our analysis a step further, using a critical stance to examine the consequences that emerge from the central emphasis on Melanie and Kate trying to be *good working mothers* as they pass on lessons to (a) accept “punishments” from children, (b) conceptualize fathers as secondary parents, (c) solve problems on her own, and (d) choose family over work.

### **Grounding Literature and Theory: “Good Working Mother” Ideology(s) and Identity(s)**

Kirby and Buzzanell (2014) illustrate that popular culture influences ideology(s) of

family, work, and the balance between the two. Ideology refers to “representations of the social world: images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is, and why it works as it is said and shown to work” (Hall, 2003, pp. 19-20); ideologies thus promote a particular construction of reality. Hall (2003) furthers that the media are especially important sites for the (re)producing and transforming of ideologies, and so it follows that films such as *OFD* and *IDK* represent cultural ideologies—whether maintaining or challenging them.

In taking a critical perspective toward *OFD* and *IDK*, we examine the ideological assumptions about how the worlds of paid work and motherhood “really are” in these films by searching for standards for *good working mothers* shown in the identity work of Melanie and Kate—whether or not they achieve said ideals. Following Johnston and Swanson (2007), we discuss mothering as an *identity* rather than a role (i.e.: “Who am I? I am a mother”), and agree that “Mothering ideology is based on beliefs and values about mothering that mothers *must either embrace or reject, but can seldom ignore*” (p. 448, emphasis added). Building on the idea of juggling as a metaphor for performing multiple identities including mother, homemaker, and worker, in relation to societal ideals, our lens is to look for performances and negotiations of identity that reveal ideologies.

Indeed, Medved (2010) shows the prominence of the social construction of gendered identities as a frequent focus of work-life scholarship (see also Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014), and Golden (2001) asserts successful work-family management is as much an identity issue as it is a time management issue. Further, Wieland (2010, 2011) articulates identity construction as a normative activity through which socially acceptable ideals/ideologies of *who one should be* (i.e., how a good worker or a good mother should look, act, and feel) are woven into an individual’s understanding of *who s/he is*. In light of this, “ideal selves” act as resources for



identity construction. As Wieland (2010) notes, if identities are “constructed rather than given, the[y] become sites of struggle at which various values and interests meet and are negotiated. Certainly, *macro-contexts of Western culture, ideal workers and gender* shape processes of identity construction and what is considered acceptable or desirable” (p. 504, emphasis added). These identity performances are gendered based on expectations that men belong in the public/occupational sphere as breadwinners and women in the private/family/domestic sphere as primary caregivers. Hays (1996) illustrates how the logic of intensive mothering is inherently at odds with the logic of the marketplace, and as a result women struggle to negotiate a position that fulfills the ideals/expectations of both “spheres.” Indeed, Johnston and Swanson (2007) characterize what full-time employed mothers engage in to manage the tension between intensive mothering and worker identity as “cognitive acrobatics,” noting that the mothers they studied often “ricocheted” back and forth between the two identities, similar to juggling ideologies between multiple motherhood identities (p. 456).

Drago (2007) articulates a “motherhood norm” in the U.S.: a society-wide belief that women should be mothers, and perform unpaid family care and low-paid care for others in need. Consequently, mothers engaging in paid work are expected to have different priorities, to be less committed, to be less suited to the managerial role, to be more stressed, etc., and work-life problems are often considered “women’s issues” (Schulte, 2014). Thus, women who engage in paid work may negotiate identity performances as related to mothering to avoid negative career sanctions, using what Drago (2007) calls bias avoidance behaviors. This identity work to manage gendered expectations regarding work with corresponding ideal worker norms and caregiving with intensive mothering norms may be particularly salient in nontraditional occupations (such as in finance [Kate] and architecture [Melanie]).

Such identity management related to working and mothering is certainly a sensitizing concept surrounding the *good working mother*. This literature surrounds the transitions of predominantly White, middle-class mothers in and back to the workplace during and after maternity leave, including negotiations of childcare arrangements and leaves (Buzzanell & Liu, 2005; Buzzanell et al., 2005), breastfeeding (Turner & Norwood, 2013), and overall identity management in relation to discourses of intensive mothering (Johnston & Swanson, 2006, 2007). Essentially, this literature examines how working mothers discursively manage the tension between the identities of the good mother and the good worker, such as forsaking one identity for the other, cycling between the two, or altering meanings of mothering and/or work (see Turner & Norwood, 2013).

For example, Buzzanell et al. (2005) examined how women in managerial roles described their transition back to work and the resulting need for childcare. They found these women reframed the good mother into a good *working* mother, “differentiat[ing] themselves from good mothers, in general, and stay-at-home mothers, in particular, through their arrangement of childcare...they experienced pride through their acts of locating others to mother their children and in managing their complex lives” (p. 267). Buzzanell and Liu (2005) examined less positive transitions back to work, and how women struggled to construct productive identities for themselves to be seen *as* good workers once they were pregnant/mothers, as they found themselves blamed, demoted, and denied raises/promotions when they were held up to the “ideal worker” images of masculinized evaluation systems.

Turner and Norwood (2013) examine how women negotiate breastfeeding in the workplace in their examination of good working mother discourses, because while breastfeeding is viewed as a practice that allows them to be “good mothers” in spite of being

away from their children, they must decide how to (or not to) fit their lactating bodies into professional spaces and time. In performing “bounded motherhood”, women restricted their bodies to fit professional norms and values, concealing their breastfeeding as much as possible and squeezing it in to times and spaces that might not be ideal. In contrast, women who performed “unbounded motherhood” inserted breastfeeding habits and practices into their workplace in ways that did not follow the underlying masculine rules (pp. 397-398).

As a whole, analyzing representations of Melanie and Kate in their quest to be *good working mothers* in *OFD* and *IDK* is important in illustrating how portrayals of family roles in popular culture can impact our expectations for family performances of identity, especially that of the *good working mother*, in “real life.” This is consequential:

[Since] the good worker and good mother discourses serve as the culturally dominant standards in larger U.S. culture, women who do not meet these expectations are often implicated by others as deviant...as working mothers are accountable to both discourses, they may struggle to construct coherent identities in the face of competing messages. (Turner & Norwood, 2013, p. 400)

As a precursor to our analysis, we must note that in the films, two White, middle-to-upper-class, professional women in male-dominated fields are performing these identity negotiations. This context is important, as their portrayed experiences do not speak for all women. To begin, Buzzanell et al. (2005) have illustrated that “professional” women may experience greater tensions and have more complex emotion and identity management in having “joint allegiance” to traditionally incompatible ideologies of motherhood and career (p. 263). While it is implied that both women must work to support their families, as one is single and one has a self-employed spouse, they seem to be financially stable. However, for differing

socioeconomic classes and racial groups, integration of the identities of good worker and good mother may be more natural or even a nonissue (i.e., “women just work”—whether they are mothers are not). Coontz (2000) shows how mothers have not always been framed as sole or primary caregivers, since family members, friends, neighbors, and “fictive kin” have also historically provided care. Furthermore, Lareau (2003) illustrates how socioeconomic class also influences parenting/mothering practices. While middle-class parents plan/schedule activities and events in a process of “concerted cultivation” designed to draw out children’s talents and skills, working-class and poor families rely on child development to unfold more spontaneously via “the accomplishment of natural growth” (pp. 11-12). Additionally, the scheduling of middle-class children also entails scheduling commitments to juggle for middle-class parents. Overall, economic, political and historical context plays an essential part in worker-mother identity construction (Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2007).

We now move to our analysis: *How do the identity performances of women in OFD and IDK (re)produce ideologies of good working mothers?* In our discussion, we then further explore how women’s identity performances and negotiations of the *good working mother* are shown to influence their relationships with their children, partners, and supervisors, to ultimately (re)produce intensive mothering.

### **Analysis: (Re)Producing Ideologies of Good Working Mothers**

#### **Good Working Mothers and the Ideal Worker Ideology/Identity**

Given that we argue these films are exemplars of juggling worker-mother identity construction, the portrayals of mothers cannot be fully understood outside the context of how these women are also striving to be ideal workers. Thinking about Western cultural norms of the ideal worker grounded in capitalism, Montoya and Trethewey (2009) illustrate how

employees who want to be seen as ideal will often take on work activities that are not sustainable for the long term, such as...

putting in long hours, coming in early and leaving late, not calling in sick....taking on extra tasks...having an unreasonably full calendar, being accessible even when technically on vacation or off the clock...picking up slack for co-workers, and prioritizing the job over family, friends, hobbies, or volunteer service. (p. 4)

Underlying these behaviors is an ideology that one can never do enough at work—termed a discourse of excess (Wieland, 2011) and no limits careerism (Lucas, Liu & Buzzanell, 2006). An ideal worker must be able to be present at work in order to have face time (Hochschild, 1997), as many supervisors link the hours spent at the workplace and the assumed productive effort, and they must not be burdened by childcare responsibilities. Furthermore, another expectation of being an ideal worker in both architecture (*OFD*) and financial management (*IDK*) involved “schmoozing” with clients, which meant taking them out for drinks and dinner meetings in the evenings instead of being at home.

For some women, identity performances may be even harder when/if they feel they have to “hide” their families altogether to avoid being seen as a “mommy tracker” (unproductive bias avoidance: Drago, 2007, p. 64). In *OFD*, Melanie’s performance of the ideal worker identity involves pretending to her boss that Sam is NOT her son when she has to bring him to work, allowing her to avoid being inscribed as a mother in the workplace. When this tactic fails, and Melanie doubts the safety of the drop-in daycare where she left Sam, she calls Jack T. and asks him to pick the kids up, asserting “I would definitely jeopardize my career and by extension, my entire life if I picked them up right now” (Obst & Hoffman, 1996).

Since *IDK* followed a season of time rather than just one day, struggling to juggle the

ideal worker identity emerges multiple times for Kate. Early on, she performs identity work with her boss in using the fake excuse of a mammogram for being late to work when she actually had been dropping off her kids (bias avoidance). And multiple times, she is portrayed as privileging work over family as she frequently travels, works into the late night, abruptly leaves the family on their Thanksgiving vacation, and continually refers to her “unused” vacation time. Since her mothering identity was not hidden at work, Kate’s coworkers freely talk about her children, but never in a positive manner. Instead, conversations implied she was not performing her identity well enough to keep their influence out of the office (i.e., uncombed hair, pancake batter on her shirt, calling to check on them over lunch instead of working) or conversely, trying to make her feel guilty for working too much. As an example, Kate’s coworker Bunce congratulated her *children* on “having more time with the nanny” when she was awarded a new account that involved more travel (McKenna et al., 2011).

A poignant example of juggling the roles of ideal worker and ideal intensive mother was narrated by Alison in *IDK*—she proselytizes how “a man announces that he’s going to leave the office to be with a child, and he is hailed as a selfless, doting, paternal role model” but if “A woman announces that she is going to leave work to be with a child on his sickbed...she is damned as disorganized, irresponsible, and showing insufficient commitment” (McKenna et al., 2011). This statement illustrates that as Melanie and Kate struggle to perform identities of ideal workers, they also are held to ideal standards in the private sphere.

### **Good Working Mothers and the Ideology(s) of Domesticity/“True Womanhood”**

What often remains implied or unspoken in (re)presenting the worker-mother identity negotiation, is the parallel path alongside childrearing: the “cult of true womanhood,” often referred to as the ideology of domesticity. While different arguments about the genesis of the

ideology of domesticity exist (i.e., as a response to industrialization versus as a justification to further exclude women from participating in paid labor—see Medved, 2007, Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004), the ideology “prescribed ideals for femininity that *glorified and extended women’s duties at home*” as “women were framed as uniquely qualified to perform domestic labor and the newly venerated duties of childrearing” (Medved, 2007, p. 228, emphasis added).

*OFD* and *IDK* accentuate that another identity to juggle in being a *good working mother* is to perform “true (domestic) womanhood.” The women of *OFD* and *IDK* perform and dichotomize two archetypal White, middle-class gendered mother identities: privileged, full time, “stay-at-home” mothers versus frantic professional mothers working outside the home. Through these contrasting portrayals, traditional domestic divisions of labor and notions of femininity are reinforced and the “Mommy Wars” simmer just beneath the surface (see Johnston & Swanson, 2004). Notably, in both films, stay-at-home mothers assert that they *do* indeed “work.” Medved and Kirby (2005) illustrate that stay-at-home mothers have a complex identity negotiation and often tie their identity to the language of the working world through terms such as Family CEO. Indeed, in *OFD*, Melanie’s sister Liza passionately explains: “I do work! I am the CEO of this household” (Obst & Hoffman, 1996). Liza’s chief responsibilities are to attend to her children, volunteer at the school, organize fundraising events, and manage the household while her husband financially supports the family.

In *IDK*, Kate is portrayed as struggling to perform her idealized view of “true womanhood.” In the first scene, she returns from a work trip, purchases a store-bought cherry pie and proceeds to smash it into one of her pie plates, dusting confectioners’ sugar on top to make it appear homemade. When Richard questions this behavior, she admits being desperate not to repeat her mother’s mistake of taking a “store-bought item” to a school bake sale. Kate’s

voiceovers reveal that she is afraid of the reactions of “The Momsters,” her slang term for at-home moms who act like “a tiny army of mini Martha Stewarts”<sup>2</sup> (McKenna et al., 2011). Kate introduces one of the Momsters, “Wendy—I do everything perfectly—Best” as “in charge of terrifying working mothers with her domestic prowess” (McKenna et al., 2011).

Further, throughout the movie Wendy’s narratives about organizing birthday parties and the “right” way to pack for family trips criticize working mothers as they contrast starkly to the chaotic events in Kate’s life. These exaggerated voiceovers reinforce that stay-at-home mothers clearly are the domestic experts, and show mothers as being “in powerful competition with each other, in constant danger of being trumped by the mom down the street” (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 5). Unfortunately, these portrayals of mothering identities perpetuate a divide and create extreme characterizations of domesticity—especially when the other working mom in *IDK*, Alison, takes an upset bowl of Jello to the bake sale.

Not only do stay-at-home mothers demonstrate and compete over domestic duties, they are also sexualized, reflecting feminine ideals of beauty. While caring for children can be messy (spilling food and getting lice), challenging (juggling babysitters and working on never ending to-do lists), and painful (tripping over toys and being ignored when kids are upset), the stay-at-home mothers in both films exude physical attractiveness. In *OFD*, Liza’s hair is carefully curled and makeup perfectly applied as she talks on the phone to Melanie in her silk bathrobe. In contrast, one of Sam’s antics makes Melanie spill juice on herself and she ends up wearing his dinosaur t-shirt under her blazer.

Performances of feminine attractiveness are echoed in *IDK*. As Kate and Alison are leaving the school bake sale, “the Momsters” arrive to deliver their home-baked goods—and they are captured in a sexualized slow motion shot. Wendy Best boasts how her appearance



requires effort: she drops off her children at school and then meets her trainer at the gym to work out between 7:45 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. (over six hours per day), and Kate describes Janie Lo Pietro as having “total body fat: 8%” (McKenna et al., 2011). This is contrasted to Kate’s haphazard appearance, complete with tousled hair and pancake mix on her lapel. After exchanging awkward pleasantries, as Kate walks away, the Momsters criticize under their breath “brush your hair” and “Did you see what she was wearing?” (McKenna et al., 2011). Ultimately, the working mother fails to perform “true womanhood.”

In order for stay-at-home mothers to perform “true womanhood,” they have ample resources to support this lifestyle, provided by their working husbands. Issues of class are present in both films as the stay-at-home mothers occupy the upper echelon. In *IDK*, Wendy has a personal trainer, hires party planners to organize her children’s birthday parties, and does not need to worry about packing child gear (i.e. strollers) because she simply buys two of everything. Kate also has income at her disposal, but her house is unorganized, the carpeting on the stairway needs to be repaired, and her kids contract lice. Similarly, in *OFD*, Liza has a housekeeper and a nanny to assist her; in contrast to her sister, Melanie cannot afford a nanny and must rely on drop-in childcare at the 9<sup>th</sup> Street Drop-Off Center where her son Sam is miserable because the kids bully, fight, and swear. In both *OFD* and *IDK*, Melanie and Kate fall short of the ideal of domesticity and instead are implicitly blamed because they have pursued a career.

### **Good Working Mothers and the Intensive Mothering Ideology/Identity**

Certainly, no performance of mothering identity for White, middle-class women can be “judged” outside of the ideology that a mother should engage in intensive mothering as the primary caregiver of her children (Hays, 1996). Intensive mothering expectations require a

large time allocation and physical presence in creating an “expert-guided and child-centered... emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive” child-rearing philosophy (Hays, 1996, p. 46). Johnston and Swanson (2006) show that mothers alter their construction of intensive mothering expectations to reconcile its demands with their work status choices. For example, in their study employed mothers constructed maternal accessibility as *emotional* availability (whereas at-home mothers constructed maternal accessibility as *physical* presence).

While it can be argued that gender roles have been contested over the last 15 years between the release of these films with almost half the workforce being comprised of women (United States Department of Labor, 2014), these changes are not reflected in *OFD* and *IDK*. Both films (re)produce ideologies of intensive mothering that working mothers selfishly “choose” their career over family and as a result abandon their children with nannies, at daycares, or with sitters. In *IDK*, Richard owns his own business, so Kate contributes to the necessary household income during the recession as evidenced in their discussions about her “working less” once he gets a new contract. Yet rather than framing her income as contributing or necessary, Kate’s work is intimated to be a selfish “choice” she is making because she loves her career. Her mother-in-law criticizes:

When our kids were little I don’t think Lou changed one diaper. Men just didn’t do that...Ah, but that was a simpler time. Everybody knew their place, what they had to do. Lou made the money. I changed the diapers. If we couldn’t pay the bills, that was Lou’s fault. The kids were crying, that was me. Boy, you all, if something goes wrong it’s everybody’s fault. I don’t think that does anyone any good. (McKenna et al., 2011)

Interestingly, “everybody’s fault” actually translates into *Kate’s* fault as she is later implicated in her son Ben’s failure to talk at age two. Kate’s financial contribution is invisible, yet her

mother-in-law applauds Richard's domestic contributions noting, "He really is incredible with them isn't he?" (McKenna et al., 2011). While a father taking on traditionally feminine childcare roles is to be commended, a woman taking on traditionally masculine breadwinner roles is a cause for blame; indeed, mother blame is prevalent in U.S. society (Garey & Arendell, 2001). As Schulte (2014) notes, a "strong, insidious, and sometimes unconscious cultural belief, *that working mothers are bad mothers*, and the pressure mothers feel to prove they aren't, drives much of working mother guilt" (p. 180). Mother blame and "Mommy War" rhetoric (see Johnston & Swanson, 2004) is even narrated by "Momster" Wendy snidely commenting that, "for me, when I decided to have kids, *I wanted to be the one to raise them*. But you know, women make different choices in their lives and I don't judge. I try not to judge" (McKenna et al., 2011).

In *IDK*, "mother guilt" is evident in multiple instances, including in Kate's feelings about Emily's snubs when she travels, and in her horror when she returns home hours late to find that Richard hired an older babysitter who fell asleep while the kids were still awake. Several "first" events are also emblematic of Kate's inability to perform ideal intensive motherhood, including missing Ben's first haircut and when his first words are "Bye bye Momma," after which her mother-in-law immediately mutters "that'll come in handy" (McKenna et al., 2011). Another missed first occurs when Kate leaves her family's Thanksgiving vacation and is unable to build the first snowman of the season with Emily. To compensate for times she is unable to physically be with her children, Kate establishes routines and rituals to reassure her children of her love. Routines are a family's predictable activities; rituals are repeated actions that take on additional symbolic meaning (Bruess, 2006). Kate kisses her children as they leave for school, calls every night when she's out of town and sings

to her children over the phone at bedtime. Such acts reflect Johnston and Swanson's (2006) findings that mothers alter their construction of intensive mothering expectations to reconcile these demands with their work status choices: in this case, substituting emotional presence for physical presence.

In *OFD*, Melanie's mother guilt is less prevalent, as it was not her fault her son Sam missed the field trip. But she feels guilty for how she is continually trying to pawn him off on others because of the situation, including her sister, her mother, and her office receptionist (all female). When they decline to help, Melanie brings Sam to work at her architecture firm and asks him to sit quietly. But he plays as he sits—and his remote control vehicle causes her to fall and break her architectural model that is central to her presentation later that day. This leads to the moment where she denies that Sam is her son, a moment riddled with mother guilt. She also is visibly conflicted when utilizing the 9<sup>th</sup> Street Drop-Off Center; her guilt is compounded when Sam calls to report that the children there are talking about LSD/acid.

For both Melanie and Kate, their desire to correctly perform the ideal intensive mother identity is reflected in physical form via the symbolic nature of what should be in a "mother's purse." In *OFD*, Melanie's bag has vitamins, healthy snacks, an extra t-shirt for Sam, and enough supplies to create superhero costumes for the kids at the daycare. In *IDK*, as Kate is searching for something she pulls out Emily's ballet leotard, Ben's pacifier, various toys, and a snack container of Cheerios. These scenes reinforce that a mother should be prepared and equipped to meet all of her children's needs—these items would certainly not fit in a man's wallet. Overall, the struggles Melanie and Kate face challenge the myth embedded in the intensive mothering ideology that being a mother is "eternally fulfilling and rewarding...the best and most important thing you do" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004, p. 4).

**Good Working Mothering in Action: Juggling (Identities) as Perpetual Defensiveness**

As illustrated, *OFD* and *IDK* portray Melanie and Kate juggling identity performances in light of being an ideal worker, a “true (domestic) woman”, and an intensive mother. Johnston and Swanson (2007) illustrate how most employed mothers in their study still maintain a “perpetual dichotomy” between employment and motherhood, and as a result engaged in “cognitive acrobatics” to manage the tension between identities (p. 456). They characterized working mothers as being in “a state of perpetual disequilibrium in which they are ricocheted back and forth” between identities (p. 456), and the women did not find this a satisfactory resolution to their identity tensions. Our read of Melanie and Kate is consistent with this finding, as we interpret their “ricocheting” identity performances make them perpetually defensive. When we perceive or anticipate a threat to our identity, we expend a great deal of energy defending ourselves.

Defensiveness is a response to threat-evoking communication, which attacks and identifies a flaw within the other. Feelings of defensiveness emerge in part as a result of face-threatening acts—the subsequent communication of the defensive individual likely depends upon the intensity of attack, the extent of the flaw, and the demands placed on the individual to manage impressions. (Stamp, Vangelisti, & Daly, 1992, p. 180).

Further, increases in defensive behavior correlated positively with losses in efficiency of communication (Gibb, 1961). Both Melanie and Kate have multiple moments where they defend their performances of identity, “shielding oneself or a familial relationship from attack, justifying it, or maintaining its validity against opposition” (Galvin, 2006, p. 305).

Overall, Melanie and Kate become defensive when they struggle to juggle identities.

Chandler (1996) noted that juggling is not a positive work-life metaphor:

“Juggling the kids and career” invariably carries the connotation of frantic activity, a strained effort to keep the whole shebang from crashing to the ground...“Juggling” has become the metaphor for life’s major hassles...“Life juggling” is a defensive activity. It’s not a skill for keeping the objects flying, but a *strategy for fending off disaster*.

There’s no sense of style here, no joy in the mastery of moves. (¶ 6-7, emphasis added)

The notion of juggling as a defensive activity—versus a positive life enterprise—is evident in the identity performances of Melanie and Kate. In the competitive and individualistic contexts within which they are operating, Melanie and Kate do not really even question whether it is fair to be expected to juggle these identities/ideologies; instead each attempts to be the *good working mother* and experiences moments of personal failure when she cannot.

In *IDK*, we see perpetual defensiveness in Kate’s voiceovers when: she reflects on feeling judged by the Momsters; she responds to her assistant’s questioning of her professionalism at work; and in pointing out that she only has two kids when coworkers grudgingly say “I don’t know how she does it with all those kids.” Indeed, Kate’s *modus operandi* in much of the film is to operate defensively.

Perpetual defensiveness in *OFD* surfaces for Melanie when: she pretends Sam is not her son at her workplace; she talks to Liza about why she does not have a nanny; and when she rejects Jack T.’s insinuation she is a “control freak” because she does not want additional help, justifying her behaviors with “I’m a single working mother” (Obst & Hoffman, 1996). But there are three especially poignant contexts where Melanie and Kate feel/perform defensiveness: (a) interactions with their children, (b) interactions with the children’s’ fathers, and (c) interactions with their bosses.

**Defensiveness in Interacting with Children.** The ongoing apologies and promises Melanie and Kate both make to their children because of work exemplify some of this defensiveness. For example, in *OFD* Melanie tells Sam, “You are the most important thing to me in the entire world.” Sam responds, “Your job is” and then Melanie assures, “No, you are” (Obst & Hoffman, 1996). Similarly, in *IDK* Kate has to take a business trip for one night. When she breaks this news to Emily, she assures her “You can call me any time.” Emily responds with “Whatever, Mom” (McKenna et al., 2011).

In interacting with their children, Melanie and Kate continually make apologies and promises for the future. Melanie explains, “I know I’ve been a crazy person today but it’s going to be better tomorrow, I promise” (Obst & Hoffman, 1996). And when leaving the family Thanksgiving vacation for work, Kate apologetically tells Emily “The very next time there’s snow, we’re gonna make a snowman, I *promise* you” (McKenna et al., 2011). And when she returns and apologizes for leaving, Emily responds, “Yes, you missed it, just like you missed all the other times... You talk on the phone and take an airplane to New York. And someday we’ll make a snowman together... *but probably not*” (McKenna et al., 2011). Clearly, Sam and Emily interact with their mothers in ways that perpetuate defensiveness in the performance of identity.

**Defensiveness in Interacting with the Child(ren)’s Father.** We see the women of *OFD* and *IDK* also exhibit defensiveness toward their children’s fathers—for different reasons. For Kristen in *OFD*, her (defensive) question of “Why do I always have to be such grownup where you always get to be the little boy?” implies that her ex-husband Jack T. has always been “the fun dad”: a father who loves Maggie, but who does not have a clue about taking care of her. Because of this, Kristen tries every child care contingency before asking Jack T. to care

for his daughter. Then, Kristen not only provides a written list to him, but also rattles off information about doctors, babysitters, neighbor's phone numbers, and pre-arranged rides to school. Her attention to every detail and anticipation of Maggie's needs indicates she does not believe she can rely on Jack T., reflecting intensive mothering ideologies and that she operates defensively to compensate for "fun dad." Indeed, Kristin is justified in her defensiveness through later portrayals of Jack T. happily giving Maggie a piggyback ride through the streets of New York City and feeding her a hamburger and milkshake for breakfast, but being clueless about where her school is or what time class starts, (re)inscribing the expectation that women know how to properly nourish and care for their children and men do not (Obst & Hoffman, 1996).

For Melanie in *OFD*, she is defensive in dialoguing with and protecting Sam from his "absentee dad," Eddie. Numerous lines of dialogue are dedicated to whether or not Eddie will show up at the final soccer game of the season. Eddie does come, but only to tell Sam that he will not be able to take him on the summer fishing trip they had planned, once again reinforcing that she *should* be defensive.

Kate does not show as much defensiveness toward Richard, but there are moments. Clearly, he is an "involved dad": While Kate flies back and forth on business trips he holds the household together fairly seamlessly with an unpredictable nanny. The division of caregiving for kids seemed to be split fairly evenly between Kate and Richard; it could even be argued that Richard took on more responsibility since Kate was frequently out of town on business. But Richard still makes Kate feel defensive when he (somewhat justifiably) constructs Jack A. as her "boyfriend" and mocks all the lists that she makes but never completes. Perhaps because of this, Kate blames Richard when Ben trips on the carpet because she had told him to fix it on



one of her lists. This blame occurs even though he was the parent who took care of Ben after the accident and he could not reach her by calling her or her assistant, and finally must actually call Jack A. to get a hold of her. This is one place where the movies diverge—*IDK* shows Richard as a much more stable father than either Jack or Eddie in *OFD*.

**Defensiveness in Interacting with Supervisors.** Melanie and Kate have multiple moments with their supervisors that show them operating defensively. Clearly, the most blatant exemplar is when, in front of her boss Mr. Leland, Melanie pretends to find a little boy that should be taken to his mom—and the boy is *her son*, Sam. But there are more micro-instances as well, like when Kate uses the “mammogram card” to explain to Clark why she was late for work, instead of the real reason, her parenting obligations, and when Melanie makes excuses about why the adult amusement park model is not available for Mr. Leland to see, as she broke it when tripping over Sam’s toys.

But as the juggling identity act continues, each woman realizes she cannot keep up without sacrificing something, and each works up the bravery to demand work changes from her respective supervisor. Ultimately, both movies climax in the same fashion: Melanie and Kate put their jobs on the line for their families. In *OFD*, Melanie reaches her breaking point at drinks with clients when she should have been going to Sam’s soccer game:

You know, I can’t do this now.... Yes, Mr. Leland, that is the little boy from this morning, only he’s not lost—he is my son. I have a child and he has a soccer game in twenty minutes. If he’s late, he doesn’t get the trophy. And because I’m in here with you, he’s probably going to be late.... Gentlemen, if you are smart, you’ll want me as much for my dedication and ability as for the fact that I am going to ditch you right now and run like hell across town so that my kid knows what matters to me most is

him. And, Mr. Leland, your real grounds for firing me should be if I were to stay here with you. (Obst & Hoffman, 1996)

In *IDK*, Kate's breaking point comes after her boss tells her she must fly to Atlanta on a Friday night when she had family plans. She interrupts a meeting he is having with three other men and asks to speak in private, and when he refuses, she says in front of all four men:

Look, I've given everything I have to this job and I love it, I do, but I can't dump my family at a moment's notice anymore. I won't do it! If what I have to give is not enough for you, then fire me. ...I won't quit. I will not...I can't give up. (McKenna et al., 2011)

Thus, in both *OFD* and *IDK*, at the pinnacle of work success these women put their jobs on the line for the benefit of their family, and luckily the defensive outbursts end up creating happy endings. Melanie's clients note that they "like her" as a result of her ultimatum, and Kate is allowed to delay the trip until Monday, narrating that her family situation is "still a mess, but it's our mess" indicating a momentary sense of control (McKenna et al., 2011).

-----Insert Table 1 about here-----

### **Discussion: Lessons in these Portrayals of the "Good Working Mother"**

We have illustrated how the movies *OFD* and *IDK* draw on the ideologies of ideal worker, a "true (domestic) woman," and an intensive mother to show the identity negotiations for good working mothers. In our discussion, we go beyond the analysis of identities/ideologies in the films to lay out some of the consequences of these identity performance portrayals. Essentially, we ask from a critical family/organizational communication standpoint, *what deeper discourses lurk within the ways Melanie and Kate are shown trying to be good working mothers? How do these portrayals/narratives function as agents of social control (and change)?* We explore how Melanie and Kate's identity performances and negotiations teach

several lessons that we in turn question about the *good working mother*, in that she should: (a) accept “punishments” from her children, (b) conceptualize fathers as secondary parents, (c) solve problems on her own, and (d) choose family over work.

### **The Good Working Mother Accepts “Punishments” from Her Children**

The first lesson is that the *good working mother* accepts snubs and punishments from her children. Sam and Emily are represented as being keenly aware when their wants, needs, and feelings take second place to those of their working mothers when they are being ignored, placed into daycare, and left behind for work travel. When this happens, the children emotionally “punished” their mothers. We have noted several examples of “promises” being made to the children to compensate for prioritizing work over them; yet no matter how rude their children were, Melanie and Kate just “took it” without question and often kept apologizing. Interestingly, these apologies continually give power and preference to the children rather than affording parenting control to the mothers. This recurring theme has implications for relationships and expectations of family management of daily life (Galvin, 2006), as it implicates the working mother as the transgressor of family. She “deserves” such treatment because she is the one who cannot be relied on, the one whose promises should not be trusted, and the one whose absence is felt the most.

What this “transgressor” framing does not include is the child’s role in creating or contributing to work-family/life conflict and the natural authority parents have to know what is best in the long-term for their children. For example, it may be more important for Melanie to meet with her client in order to keep her job, rather than for Sam to get a soccer trophy. Yet, Sam’s trophy takes precedence, causing her to give her boss an ultimatum. Further, both the children’s resentment and the mother’s apologies negate all the things that Melanie and Kate

*actually do* for their children.

While it is natural for children to want parental resources and attention (Floyd & Haynes, 2005) and social norms in the United States focus on the needs of the child (i.e., the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has been termed the “Century of the Child”; Stearns, 2003, p. 1), the dialogue accentuates it is the *mother* who is at fault for their children’s dismay, especially because *OFD* and *IDK* lack any dialogue from the children reciprocating the love or affection of their mothers. Melanie gushes “I love you a million, billion, zillion” to Sam, but rather than reciprocating he asks if she also loves his dad (her ex-husband) (Obst & Hoffman, 1996). Kate gets hugs from Ben her two year old, but notes that Emily plays a game of “snubs and punishments” with statements like “I want daddy to take me to school” and “I don’t like hugs” (McKenna et al., 2011). The children in both films hold mothers to impossible expectations of pleasing them as the first priority; this extends the expectations of intensive mothering and places children in the center of the work-family/life struggle not as the cause of conflict, but as the judge of appropriate motherhood practices.

From a critical standpoint, we recognize this framing as problematic. How could this “lesson” reframe family communication practices? Perhaps we must begin by asking, is a parent’s, and in this case a mother’s, role to please children or to care for and provide guidance to help their children grow into adults? By putting children as the “center” and “most important” in the family, is an apologetic and appeasing mother really all that different from a “fun dad” in the end? In both cases the desires of the children take priority, which may have longer term problematic implications for the children’s expectations as they become adults.

Ultimately, children in both films are portrayed as problems, ungrateful and unloving. In response to this, both Melanie and Kate navigate ways to help their children recognize that

they are the “most important.” However, by struggling to meet intensive motherhood identity norms, both Melanie and Kate downplay all that they do for their children by providing income to meet essential needs, and jeopardizing their careers to attend soccer games and build snowmen. These sacrifices are “expected.” This perpetuates unrealistic expectation that the *good working mother* should prioritize her children above everything and providing children with increased power and control in family relationships.

The portrayals of children objectify them to some extent into obligations and negate the ways that parents and children interact in productive ways within family systems, such as sharing chores and entertaining one another, etc. While Melanie and Kate verbally and nonverbally communicate that they love their children, there are very few moments in these films where children are depicted as more than an obstacle or problem (with the exception of Kate’s assistant glowing over her new baby). Yet, children can bring a great deal of joy and enrich family life, prompting different priority systems and creative solutions to meet family needs. Rather than looking at how a *good working mother* can do everything, we might ask ourselves how other family members are part of the system and what creative solutions are possible other than mothers constantly apologizing for disappointing demanding children.

### **The Good Working Mother Conceptualizes Fathers as “Secondary” Parents**

Another lesson shown in performing *good working motherhood* is to conceptualize the child(ren)’s father as a “secondary” parent. In Buzzanell et al.’s (2005) study, mothers “selected” cues of intensive mothering in their discussions of parenting and finding childcare arrangements (that they were naturally equipped for such choices, etc.), and in the process fathers were “de-selected.” Fathers “[we]re neither situated as responsible partners nor even present in most participants’ discussions of parenting. When mentioned, fathers are portrayed

as childlike and irresponsible (i.e., in need of constant reminders)” (p. 277). This echoes how the mothers related to their children’s fathers in *OFD* and *IDK*: fun dads, absentee dads, and involved but underappreciated dad. An interesting point about fathers as secondary parents is that the character of Jack T. *did not even exist* in the original draft of the *OFD* script (Hruska, 1996).

Editing out and downplaying fathers in the family systems in these films, increases the expected burden on *good working mothers* and eliminates possibilities for fathers to contribute and enjoy family care rituals and caregiving relationships with their children. As noted, fathers are part of family systems and have become increasingly involved in caring for children with some even staying home full time as their wives financially support the family (Medved & Rawlins, 2011; Petroski & Edley, 2006). Indeed, Slaughter (2012) articulates a basic question: *Why are men not identified as “working dads”?* She points out that “working mother” connotes a dual status of being both a breadwinner and a caregiver. Extending this, talking about “working fathers” as well as “working mothers” can help (re)define work-family issues as a social and economic issue rather than a women’s issue. Furthermore, as Johnston and Swanson (2007) illustrate, one way that women can successfully reframe intensive mothering is by constructing the source of intensive *nurturing* to include fathers and caregivers. If we open the possibilities of work-family/life juggling to family systems that include fathers, this alleviates the pressure for women to be the sole jugglers and also allows fathers some of the benefits of parenting, including potentially deeper relationships with their children.

### **The Good Working Mother Solves Problems on Her Own**

Across *OFD* and *IDK*, a continual theme is that Melanie and Kate need to solve work-family/life problems on their own, and they multitask, make lists, and carry overstuffed bags to

accomplish this. This individualized problem solving is especially highlighted as related to finding childcare arrangements for Sam, Emily, and Ben. Certainly, one hope for help in balancing work and family is finding reliable and trustworthy childcare. But both films make it seem that for a *good working mother*, this is almost impossible. In *OFD*, Melanie asks for help from family (this is presumably acceptable to still be a *good working mother*), but she is refused and her option of the 9<sup>th</sup> Street Drop-In Daycare is portrayed as an awful place where the kids bully each other and talk about LSD/acid. In *IDK*, Paula the nanny is shown as unreliable—she shows up after surfing, whatever time that is. And the babysitter that Richard chooses literally falls asleep on the job.

From a critical standpoint, this problematic portrayal eliminates options to seek additional resources and question larger societal systems. When it is portrayed that childcare arrangements cannot work unless the mother is in total control, this reifies intensive mothering and limits the agency of women and men to explore the full complement of childcare options. In their study of good working mothers, Buzzanell and colleagues (2005) found that as the women did or arranged much of the childcare themselves, they did not “see that their seemingly unquestioned acceptance of this female role aspect *constructs a family system in which they function as (un)equal partners*” (p. 269, emphasis added). Johnston and Swanson (2007) offer one small linguistic change with big implications: to reframe intensive mothering as *intensive parenting*, such that intensive functions can be jointly accomplished by mothers, fathers, and other caregivers. While we know that just changing language does not automatically change practices, continually replacing “mothering” with “parenting,” intensive or not, makes space for multiple forms of caregiving.

But even beyond individual communicative choices, there are possibilities for policies

and joint political action. Multiple sources bemoan that work-family/life issues could be politicized, yet have instead been privatized and characterized as the responsibility of individuals (cf. Kirby, Golden, Medved, Jorgensen & Buzzanell, 2003; Kirby & Buzzanell, 2014; Simpson & Kirby, 2006). Rather than “push for general provisions for everyone in the United States who has children...the decisions become privatized and based on race, gender, and especially socioeconomic status. And they are called ‘choices’” (see rabiasb, #27-10/24/03 in Simpson & Kirby, 2006). When *good working mothers* operate as if they should solve problems on their own, the potential to work together for collaborative solutions for the good of the individual, the good of the children and/or the good of organization is removed (see Hoffman & Cowan, 2010).

### **The Good Working Mother Chooses Family over Work**

The final lesson shown is that a *good working mother* chooses family over work. And this lesson cuts two ways: (a) in that a working mother will quit her job “for” her family, and (b) in marginalizing women for whom work might come first. At first blush, the fact that their bosses “came around” after Melanie and Kate put their jobs on the line seems like it should be celebrated. It is, after all, a key component of their “happy endings.” And yet this choice reifies gender norms that a woman’s first priority should be family, as well as implies that the only way for women to negotiate different work-family/life possibilities is to defensively put forth an ultimatum threatening the ideal worker norm. We agree that Melanie and Kate could not continue to simultaneously maintain the identities of ideal worker and ideal mother as they had constructed them—this identity construction was untenable. But both women put their futures in the hands of their bosses without first asking for any *intermediate steps* at alleviating work-life conflict. Indeed, Melanie went from her boss not knowing she had a child to threatening to



quit on his behalf on the same day. Again, this demonstrates the *good working mother* trying to solve problems on her own. While this makes for an intense plotline, we would argue it is not an advisable life choice.

The second facet of this lesson is that no *good working mother* could ever “choose” work before family. Is it possible that a *good working mother* could so love her job that she trusts her partner to take care of her children and does “privilege” work over family? Such a discourse is never spoken in the U.S. culture of intensive mothering. And for some women, the way to provide for family is to choose work, even when working conditions are not ideal.

From a critical standpoint, we find problematic the suggestion that women, because they are “ricocheting” between being an intensive mother and ideal worker, must actually put their jobs on the line to get the respect they need in their jobs. What if Melanie and Kate had been fired? Of course, the ending would not have been as happy, but given the resources we see them have, they likely could have found work again. This is not the case for every woman who is struggling to be a *good working mother*. As Medved and Kirby (2005) illustrate, the choices of low-income women are constructed differently: the “best thing” they can do for their children is get a job, indeed they *must* under welfare reform—not stay at home with their children even if they wanted that choice. Furthermore, we wonder what it would look like if anyone dared question the overarching ideology that “family always comes first.”

### **Conclusion**

Using a critical standpoint, we identified underlying ideologies present in Melanie and Kate’s performances of the *good working mother* identity. We articulated how Melanie and Kate “juggle” the identities of being an ideal worker, a “true (domestic) woman,” and an intensive mother, and how this juggling portrays good working mothers as perpetually

defensive. We then explored how Melanie and Kate's identity performances and negotiations teach several lessons deserving of critical examination about the *good working mother*, in that she should: (a) accept "punishments" from her children, (b) conceptualize fathers as secondary parents, (c) solve problems on her own, and (d) choose family over work. Such analysis is important because while viewers enjoy the entertainment value of following Melanie and Kate strive to be *good working mothers* throughout these films, they also (dis)identify with the characters and make assumptions about work-family/life discourses.

Thinking about our (re)positioning as scholars after conducting this critical family communication research, when we moved beyond the first pass of articulating the ideologies we saw these women reflecting, and completed the analysis of the consequences/lessons embedded in the ideologies, we developed a deeper understanding of the cultural (re)production of notions of the *good working mother*. Across our back-and-forth, the biggest revelation was coming to a more robust appreciation of how creating this ideal for women consistently disadvantages and marginalizes men, when the contributions they make as fathers are left invisible or when they are shown as not even being able to contribute. We also now recognize that the lesson that working mothers deserve to be snubbed etc. is inherently White middle-upper class, and premised on the notion that women "choose" to engage in paid work. Overall, while the identity constructions throughout *OFD* and *IDK* essentialize characterizations of mothers, children, and fathers in ways that may ring true, these constructions have consequences as they limit the possibilities of work and work-family systems and occlude the potential of collectively addressing work-family/life balance issues.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> While we use the term “working mother,” we must note Johnson’s (2001) critical review of this very term. She illustrates that since there is no parallel of working father, the assumption is that fathers work and the “contextual linking of the adjective working to mothers also has an exclusive meaning that is essential to the paradox. The term as used implies that when mothers are employed, their role as mothers weakens or diminishes” (p. 22). Furthermore, she articulates the socioeconomic class and race arguments included in our article—that some women do not have a “choice” to opt to be mothers or “working mothers.”

<sup>2</sup> Martha Stewart is an American businesswoman, writer, and TV personality; Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia centers on the home and garden industry and includes *Martha Stewart Living* magazine.

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