Becoming Mom: Understanding Challenges and Presentations of Self Among Mothers

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Becoming Mom:

Understanding Challenges and Presentation of Self Among Mothers

Annakeiko Frink Reichel and Emily M. Boyd

Abstract

When a woman becomes a mother it is arguably one of the most life changing and defining moments of their lives. Becoming a mom and the emotions that are involved in the process are often a neglected topic in the United States. It is clear that the social world assumes mothers will automatically adjust to the role of being a mom without asking questions such as, what are the challenges moms face after having children? Or more importantly, how is a mother's identity shaped after having children and while adjusting to the role as mom? The first author (AR) became motivated to research this topic because, as a mother, she recognized the covert difficulties of one's identity changing after becoming a mother. To investigate emotion management and identity transitions the first author (AR) conducted and transcribed five semi-structured qualitative interviews with young mothers in Minnesota using the Grounded Theory method (Charmaz 2006). Both authors contributed to the data analysis. Each interview was then transcribed, coded, and thorough analytical memos were written, using the Grounded Theory method (Charmaz 2006), which contributed to the final data analysis. The most important finding in the study is that moms are constantly negotiating and projecting a perfected identity in an effort to assimilate to the idealized version of what a mom "should" be in the United States. Specifically, they do this with other moms in their friendship networks as well as through online sources such as Facebook. In conclusion, being a mom is a difficult process and these difficulties are clearly exacerbated by society's portrayal of the ideal version of a mom.

<u>Introduction</u>

If and when a woman becomes a mother it is arguably one of the most life changing and defining moments she will ever face. It is also one of the most challenging changes a woman will ever go through. It is evident that the social world assumes mothers will automatically adjust to the role of being a mom without asking questions such as: what are the challenges moms face after having children? Or more importantly, how is a mother's identity shaped after having children and adjusting to the role of a mother? What societal pressures encourage the adaption of traits labeled "motherly" in their identity as being a mom? It is evident that moms are bombarded with daily media messages that pressure them to project an image of themselves as mothers in an idealized version of the self. According to Douglas and Michaels (2004:329) these societal messages and pressures suggest that for women, to be viewed favorably, "a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children." With such pressures mothers are in a constant process of negotiating the self and pressured to project a perfected identity as a mother.

This paper is organized as follows: First, a brief literature review on identity formation through online social network sites, impression management of mothers, Goffman's (1959) theory of dramaturgy, and social expectation for mothers in the United States is presented. This literature helped guide the research on identity formation of mothers and the various challenges mothers face after becoming a mom. Next, the sampling and methodology is discussed. Then the authors define and analyze the data to understand the challenges and identity processes of mothers. Finally, the value of researching mothers in contemporary society and what potential future research can examine is discussed.

Literature Review

Within this research the authors are attempting understand not only the challenges mother's face, but also the processes they engage in to present themselves as mothers and manage their identities. According to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, individuals manage their behavior according to backstage and front stage regions. When one is in the back stage they are able to exhibit behavior that would be deemed unacceptable in front stage regions when an individual is "acting" toward an audience. Goffman (1959:65) also described the process of impression management as someone, "accentuating certain facts and concealing others." In this process, an individual imagines how others view him/her, and makes decisions about what information to reveal to the audience, hoping to favorably shape the impressions others make. As exhibited in Collett's (2005) research on impression management and the social construction of motherhood, mothers actively engage in a process of managing their child's physical appearance in an effort to simultaneously manage their own identity. In doing this, they are able to project to the front stage audience (Goffman 1959) that having a well-kept child is an indicator of their success as a mother. As stated by Collett (2005:329), "Impression management helps women convey competence to both self and the audience in a situation where they want nothing more than to be successful." For mothers, this success is measured through the appearance of their children and they are then able to gauge their success through interactions with other mothers and their children. There is also a distinction between the public and private spheres in relation to how a mother dresses her children (Collett 2005). Mothers will often let their children wear clothes that would be generally deemed unacceptable to the audience when they are in a private backstage region, whereas in a public front stage region such as church or school they will make sure their children are dressed appropriately (Collett 2005). By managing

a child's appearance mothers are able to engage in managing and developing their own identities as individuals and as "good" mothers.

In the process of presenting the self, Sociologists have found that impression management is utilized in a variety of social environments (Goffman 1959), including on the Internet (Waskul 2003), which suggests to the authors that mothers may also engage in impression management online. They are able to present to the audience a fine tuned identity, thus making sure the online audience will view them as competent and "well rounded" mothers. In research done by Waskul (2003:202) he asserts that the, "self on the Internet is something symbolic, communicated, presented and negotiated." Through online social spaces, individuals are able to manage their identities to other online participants, creating a performance for the audience (Waskul 2003). Identities can be negotiated and changed through interactions in online spaces, thus the fluidity of the self is even more flexible online (Waskul 2003). In this research the authors found that mothers also engage in presenting certain characteristics of the self that would potentially define them as a "good" mom. They would hide characteristics that they saw as flaws in their parenting because they wanted to online audience to see them as the "ideal" mom.

Throughout the research process the authors noticed that mothers engage in establishing standards for themselves that are unrealistic and cause challenges throughout their new journey of becoming a mother. According to Douglas and Michaels (2004) these pressures are fueled by the idea in the American society of the, "new momism." The new momism is characterized by the media through a pervasive propaganda campaign that a mom must dedicate her self to the role as a mother entirely, and if she does not do this, she is stigmatized as being an inadequate mother (Douglas and Michaels 2004). The American media is engaged in a propaganda

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campaign to "redomesticate the women of America through motherhood" (Douglas and Michaels 2004:332). These unrealistic expectations have caused women to be in a constant state of managing their selves because they are trying to avoid being cast as a "negligent" mother. Results from our study show that mothers engaged in actively managing their impressions so the audience would see them as a certain "type" of mother; this typology ranges from the "Leave it to Beaver" mom, the working mom, the stay at home mom, the active mom, the crafty mom, and the relaxed mom. Mothers would actively engage in labeling themselves and others in accordance to how they viewed themselves as moms. Douglas and Michaels (2004) would argue that this happens because of the societal pressures for moms to fit in to the new momism and therefore are expected to sacrifice the self for motherhood.

Methodological Procedures

In order to understand the challenges mothers' face when becoming new moms and how they present themselves as mothers, the first author (AR) conducted five semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with moms. The respondents were recruited by word of mouth and snowball sampling in a midsize midwestern city. The interviews were conducted in a private study room in the library or in a private office lasting from 90-120 minutes in length. It was important for the interviews to take place in a private location so the moms felt comfortable responding to the questions. The sample population was fairly homogenous. There was an age range between 24-40 years old, and all were Caucasian mothers. The one variable that remained consistent was that all the women had children around the same age; all of the respondents had children under the age of three years old. Three of the respondents stayed at home full time with

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their children, one of the respondents worked full time, and one was a college student. They ranged from working class to upper middle class in socio-economic status, and all of the mothers were in committed relationships with the fathers of their children.

Each of the interviews was taped using a digital tape recorder and then transcribed afterwards. Interviews were semi-structured and guided by general research questions, but open for probing for new information and unexpected experiences. Examples of the questions that were asked to the respondents were: During interactions with other mothers do you discuss interests of your own or is the dialogue about your children? Do you interact with other mothers much? Where/when? What kinds of stuff do you talk about? Do you ever talk about stuff that isn't child related? What kinds of things? Do you use online networking sites such as Facebook? If so do you purposefully post certain things about being a mom that are positive and hide the negative parts?

To analyze the data the first author (AR) used the inductive method of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006); meaning she started with the interviews and let the themes of the research emerge through the interviewing process. Both authors utilized Charmaz's (2006) text, *Constructing Grounded Theory* as a guide in processing the qualitative data. To code NVivo software was used, which helped organize the data. From there comprehensive memos were written, which helped identify and process the major reoccurring themes throughout the data. These were utilized in the final data analysis.

Findings

The findings are organized in two sections: First, challenges of a new mom are explored. The three major challenges the authors found were changing friendships and finding other "mom"

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friends, feelings of isolation, and changing relationship with their partners. The next challenge found was presentation of self as a mom. The three major ways mothers presented themselves to the social world was by managing their identity online, managing their children's appearance, and finally by comparing themselves to other mothers.

Challenges as a new mom - By *challenges as a new mom,* the authors mean that there are challenges that each new mom faces after the birth of her child. The respondents presented similar challenges throughout the data. These challenges, some expected and others unexpected, made the new role of becoming a mother even more difficult. Their challenges overall were at a personal or individual level, but were surprisingly consistent with the other moms who were interviewed. Thus, the category of challenges of a new mom can be analyzed in three parts: a) changing friendships and finding other "mom" friends, b) feelings of isolation, and c) relationship with their partner.

Changing friendships and finding other "mom" friends. By *changing friendships and finding other "mom" friends,* the authors mean that moms after they have children often find that friendships they had prior to having a child change and they find themselves in the process of trying to develop friendships with other moms. It is also difficult for moms to maintain contact with friends who do not have children because they feel they no longer have similar interests. It is as if once a mom has a baby she is thrust in to this new world of managing her emotions of her changing friendships and having the perceived task of finding new mom friends that will share similar experiences with them. Moms often talk about the challenges of trying to maintain the friendships they had before having children. One of the moms interviewed, Joni, discusses how her friendships have changed since having children and how it is difficult to have conversations with friends who do not have children because their lives are just "so different." She describes is

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as being in different worlds and how prior to having children it was easy for her and her spouse to have conversations with their friends who also did not have children, but now they just have a hard time relating to those friends:

> It's [not having kids] just a totally different world. I remember being there. Before I had kids the whole idea it's just a different world. So they listen respectfully but it's not where they are in their life and that's totally cool, we don't relate as well in our conversations they're more forced because our lives are just so different.

Liz also discusses the challenge she faces of trying to keep a relationship with her friends that are single and do not have children. Specifically, she talks about how it is difficult to maintain contact with friends when she has the responsibility of taking care of her child. Trying to find time to spend with friends is challenging and she feels that her single friends had a hard time understanding why she could no longer spend her free time with them:

> I think you lose some of that contact with friends that you used to spend 3 hours a week with and now especially single friends because that's difficult for them to understand that I can't just take 3 hours, it's just 3 hours of your day, but especially when you're a working mom 3 hours of the time you get to see your child is huge.

Not only do moms find it challenging to maintain conversation and find time for their friends without children, but Ava described how her best friend did not even contact her after she had her baby. This left Ava feeling alone and isolated because her friends who did not have children no longer showed interest in her life because of her new role as a mom:

> Well and like the friend stuff, I mean it was like not having them around was really fresh because I wanted a friend and someone to call. Like, "oh you had a baby, oh I used to be your best friend!" Like I didn't talk to the people who were my best friends, they didn't see her when she was born, and they didn't care. Someone told me later it was basically my fault, she said, "It didn't seem like you wanted me to come over!"

Not only are moms dealing with the challenges of their old friendships changing, but they also feel the need to build friendships with other moms who have children. Often times they want to find friends with kids who have similar interests and parenting goals. The interviewees

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discussed the process of finding mom friends within a community of mothers they could fit in to and relate with. Joni describes trying to find which group she fits in to like being a new high school or college student. For a short time, you hang out with other moms just because you want other mom friends, but soon you want to meet people that are like you. She wants to assimilate in to the culture of a specific group, but also explains how difficult it has been for her to find a group to fit in to since her move back to the Midwest:

> It's just meeting new people and figuring out where you fit in. I feel like it's like you're in high school or in college and like the friends you meet when you first get there are just [your friends] because they're also freshmen. Then you get to meet people that are a lot like you. I had moms in Florida that I stopped hanging out with and then just really found great friends, and it [finding new friends] is just so much work. And I need to just get over it and meet new friends, but it's been tough. It's hard to meet new folks and get yourself out there.

Kayla describes how she has made friends with other moms through classes with her child and has also reconnected with people from high school who also have children. The interesting point that Kayla made is that because these former classmates have children is why they hang out and have "play dates;" otherwise, if they did not have children they would not make an effort to see each other. Their common role of being moms has given Kayla reason to hang out with former high school classmates:

> I have a handful of friends I've met because of my kid. Because of doing things like ECFE [early childhood education] classes or play groups, or someone I reconnected with from high school who I would have never been friends with in high school and we have play dates with our kids, we talk obviously about stuff that's not about our kids, but we wouldn't hang out if it wasn't for our kids.

Liz shared how difficult it has been for her to find new friends that are also moms after her neighbor, who had a child as well, moved away. She felt that she didn't have to rely on the other friends who did not have children because she was able to find a niche with her neighbor that moved:

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> So I miss those close relationships too because I think when Sara was born I had them so I didn't rely so much on my other friends because I had something very much in common with my neighbors, we were all about the same ages and our kids were [too]…and then they move. Then what do you do? Because I'll tell you it's hard to get in to another little social group when you have children. If you're not already in an existing friendship or have kids around the same age that you have in common, where else do you build those friendships?

Liz also discussed the challenges of not fitting in with the mom group in her neighborhood because she is not a stay at home mom. Specifically, Liz was left out of an event that the mommy group in the neighborhood held and then had to hear about it during times her and her child did socialize with this group:

> Or I think of one event, and it was just the mommy group that went out. It was my neighbor who was a stay at home mom, so she belonged to that mommy group and she would invite us to things, and they would take the mommy group I remember for someone's 40th birthday in a limo, and so they talked about that consistently at the pool. I wasn't part of that mommy group limousine trip for someone's birthday so that was an uncomfortable conversations, and I'd sit there and nod and giggle at the appropriate times while my child played in the pool.

Liz and the other mothers interviewed are facing the challenges of learning to care for a new child, changing friendships, and concern over finding other mothers they "fit in" with to relate their struggles to. It is as if immediately after women identify themselves in their new role as mom they no longer have a lot in common with friends who do not have children. Thus, they take on the task of developing new friendships with other moms which itself is a challenge because moms want to find a specific community of moms that they fit in to and have similar interests. Therefore, if you are a working mom like Liz, it is challenging to assimilate with those moms who are stay at home moms.

Feelings of Isolation. By *feelings of isolation* the authors mean that new moms face the challenge of feeling isolated and alone. Moms throughout the interviews described how they would feel isolated not only in the initial months of being a mom, but throughout the time they

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have had children. These feelings of isolation were often accompanied by feelings of not having

a group of other moms that they fit in to. Feelings of isolation were prevalent and all of the

moms at one point felt isolated in the role as mom.

Kayla describes the isolation she felt the week after her the birth of her child when her

father left to go back to Alabama and her husband was going back to work. She talks about it

being scary and that she did not know what to do with her child all day and she was even more

isolated by the fact that she did not have transportation or any way to leave her house:

> But then after my dad was here from Alabama, and my husband was off of work for a
> week…and the same day my husband went back to work and my dad went back to
> Alabama and not like I've had a great relationship with my dad and not like he was doing
> a ton, but he got me food, and my dog food, he was just there and the fact of him leaving
> and my husband going to work it was so sad, and so scary at first. Because my husband
> was working 2-10pm, and in the winter it is just dark the whole time and we only had one
> car and so that was really daunting and scary. Like what am I supposed to do with this
> child all day?!

Joni described initially right after she had her child that she did not experience feelings of

isolation because of her great community in Florida. However, since the move and after

transitioning from a working mom to a stay at home mom she feels isolated. She spends a lot of

her day alone with her kids. These are similar emotions that all three stay at home moms felt

when making the transition from working to staying at home with their children. Joni had a job

where she could go and talk to people during the day, but now since she stays at home and is in a

new state with few friends it's been isolating:

> I've felt isolated from moving from a working mom to stay at home mom because um, I
> spend most of the day at home with the girls and because I don't know folks here yet, I
> don't have folks I can call and be like hey do you want to go to the zoo! So that's been
> more so isolation moving from working mom to stay at home mom, that's been a huge
> adjustment for me.

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June discusses her feelings of isolation growing because of her job as a stay at home mom she has few breaks and does the same job day in and day out. She also described throughout her interview of not having a consistent group of friends who were also moms, so she spent a lot of time alone with her kids. In the beginning for June the feelings of isolation were not present because the role of being a mom was new, but as the years have passed she feels more isolated:

> It has gotten harder as the years have gone by. Like the first year I didn't really mind it [being a stay at home mom] because it was something new to me and now it's just kinda like the same thing I do EVERY day, day in and day out with no breaks.

Finally, Ava feels that she is lacking a supportive community of parents who have similar parenting ideologies. It is evident that Ava feels isolated as a mom because of the lack of community that she can relate to. Her isolation comes from not having a supportive group of moms she can engage in activities with. Ava describes how she plans on moving once she is done with college to find a community where she will be able to assimilate with:

> Yeah, it sucks I don't like this town; I'm only here for school because I like the school and my teachers and it's a good program. We're moving as soon as I graduate I need to be in a community with supportive parents and parents who have similar mind sets.

For every mom interviewed, feelings of isolation in their lives was a challenge they all encountered within their role as being a mom. Feelings of isolation are present for new moms, and it seems to be a common theme whether it's initially after you have a child or throughout the years of being a mom. Finding a community seems to be important for moms so they have find a place to fit in and thus combat feelings of isolation.

Relationship with partner- By *relationship with partner,* the authors mean that after having a child there are challenges that moms deal with within their relationship with their spouse or romantic partner. Having a child can put stress on even the strongest of relationships

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and it is evident throughout the interviews that negotiating and managing a changing relationship with a partner was a challenge the moms faced. In understanding their new role as a mom, they were also trying to negotiate how their relationships were changing because of having a child. All of the moms had to figure out what role their partner was playing in the parenting process as well as learning how to effectively communicate with their partners and gain the support they needed from them. Within their relationships there were some feelings of resentment present because some of the moms felt they were bearing the majority of the responsibility of taking care of their children.

Ava describes how her relationship with her partner has been challenging since they have had a child because they lack a support system, which has left them isolated and dependent on one another. She also states that her partner does not like talking about feelings and emotions because it stresses him out, thus she also has to suppress her emotional expression so he does not "freak out." Ava also says that she manages the challenges in her relationship by staying positive and the pure fact that she felt like she needed to survive and had no choice:

> No, all the people that would come and visit they were worried because they were like do you have a support system and I was like no, my family is away and they came and visited for an afternoon, [but other than that] it was pretty much me and Dave. So that's difficult on a relationship for sure. He was the only person I could talk about feelings with, like bad stuff and good stuff and I still can't really talk to him about stuff that stresses me out. For one he hates education and so he doesn't really understand or tries to understand like right now when I come home and am stressed about work and studies s and what I'm doing I can't really say it to him because he freaks out. So that was stupid and it sucked, and so I don't know. That why you really have to stay positive like really! It wasn't an option, it was a primal thing, like I had to survive and this is how it's going to be.

> June describes in her interview of managing many responsibilities throughout the day as a stay at home mom. She gets little assistance with household chores and when she does ask her

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partner to do a chore it is usually left undone. This has made June resentful, and she's come to

view her relationship with her spouse as another burden she has to bear:

> I do all the jobs except when I ask him [her husband] to take out the garbage, then you know half the time that doesn't end up happening or I do it anyways…

> Ok well all day long I'm doing stuff for two babies and then my husband gets home and I'm doing stuff for three babies.

Liz talks about how she felt that having a child would change her relationship and her

partner. She described feeling that if her and her partner had a child then he would stop drinking

and become a "family man." Once they had a child and he still was drinking, it began to bother

Liz because there was now a child in their life dependent on both Liz and her partner. She stated

in the interview that at times before her husband committed to being sober that she felt like a

single parent, which led her to feeling resentful toward him. In this quote Liz describes how she

hoped having a child would change her husband:

> Oh yeah, and that didn't start [feelings like she had a nuclear family] until he [her husband] stopped drinking, and really the funny thing is we were going through all these fertility treatments and in my mind I thought if we had a child it would be better, right? Because that would make us a family that would make it all better. I'm sure people thought well why would you try to have a family with a man who is an alcoholic? Because you love them and you do think it'll get better and you don't think it's that bad until you have someone who's relying on them. Once I had a baby then I was responsible so then it did bother me because I was responsible for somebody else.

In each situation above, the mothers interviewed discussed the challenges they faced

being a new mom which were adjusting to old friendships changing, finding new "mom" friends,

dealing with feelings of isolation, and managing their relationships with their partners in their

new role as a mom. This data shows that moms after having children face many challenges in

different areas of their lives that affect their identity as not only a mom, but their overall sense of

self. Becoming a mom is a major transition in a woman's life and moms not only have to adjust to their new role as a mom, but also manage all the challenges that come with it.

Presentation of Self as a mom- By *presentation of self as a mom* the authors mean that moms present themselves in a certain way because they now identify themselves in their new role as mom. As described by Goffman (1959) in his theory of Dramaturgy, individuals present themselves differently in certain settings whether it be in the front stage or back stage; moms manage how they present themselves to the front stage audience and conceal backstage behavior. They change certain things about who they are to fit in to what they see as a "good" mom. Moms also project and present themselves in a particular way so that people will identify them as a mom. The moms interviewed described how they managed their presentation of self so their peers would view them in a certain way. They also would engage in managing their child's appearance because they viewed their children as a reflection of themselves as mothers. Finally, moms would compare themselves to other moms as a measurement of what they needed to "tweak" about themselves to be the best mom they could be. The ways in which moms present themselves are a) Managing presentation of self-online, b) managing child's appearance, and c) comparing self as a mom to other moms.

Managing presentation of the self, online- *Managing the presentation of the self, online* refers to a mom's process of managing how her identity is portrayed through online social networking sites such as Facebook and chat rooms. While this was not the initial research question, every mother interviewed mentioned her involvement in online social spaces. Social media sites have become integrated in to our lives, our families, and even more importantly our identities. By posting about their experiences as new mothers and the progress their children are making, moms create an online cyberself (Waskul 2003) or version of themselves that is relayed

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to friends and family. For moms it is a process of molding and shaping their identity as a mom

and then projecting it to their online communities. Joni describes this process in her efforts to fit

in to a certain community of moms that have similar parenting ideology as she does. However,

Joni manages what she posts to these other moms because she is afraid they will judge her for

her decision to give her children vaccinations:

> I spend way too much time on Facebook, and then the mommy's group I'm in has a website with a discussion board, and I spend way too much time on there because I can spend time with my old mommy friends [from Florida]. Also the yahoo group I joined is a natural attachment parenting group, the get togethers are farther away from me, but I just need to go. I just worry I'm not going to be granola or crunchy enough, like I give my kids vaccinations, but I also feed like them healthy foods, organic. I just need to get over it because people aren't going to judge, and I'm not going to judge other people. So I've signed up and will go sometime.

Now that social media sites like Facebook have become such a huge part of a mother's

life, it also has a huge part in the formation of a mother's identity. Through online networks,

moms can also gauge how they feel they are performing as a parent. Moms will then feel badly

about their identity as a mom when they do not match the societal expectations of mothers. Joni

describes this phenomenon in comparing herself to one of her friends who she describes as being

the idealized "leave it to beaver" mom:

> And then like sometimes there's the moms who like paint a picture and I'm sure they're not perfect and they have the picture like the "leave it to beaver mom" everything is perfect and their little blog and they have their super cute coordinating decorated house and their cute kids and little outings they have. When you read those blogs you, you realize you're not going to post about your crummy days. That's hard too; you have to remind yourself, I'm sure they struggle too. But what they put out there you're just like really?! I have one specific friend who I read her blog and I'm like I want her life! Then I realize this is just part of her life that she chooses to publicize.

June describes how she projects herself online; she wants to be seen as a "hands on" mom

and a "good" mom. To portray this, she limits her posts that are negative and mostly projects the

image of doing fun things with her children. The data illustrate that these mothers are holding

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themselves to these societal standards of what the "perfect mom" is and imagining others judging

them based on their online activities. They are then actively adjusting the self, online via posts

so that their friends will think they meet society's standards of what a good mom is. June gives

an example of how she does this on Facebook:

> Well of course I want people to see me as the perfect person you know so really I've maybe posted a few things when I'm like, "AAHHH this person is really annoying me, or like I need a vacation" or something, but normally it's like, "oh I love my kids!" or "me and my kids are doing this!" so hopefully people see me as or I hope they see me as a good hands on mom, you know? That likes to be with her kids and not complaining about them all the time.

Liz also describes how she manages how she portrays herself to others online. She talks

about how she has an online Mommy group where she can post anything uncensored, but a lot of

what she posts on that group she would not post on her normal Facebook page for everyone to

see. Liz has found a safe place in her anonymous online mommy group where she can be

herself, but she continues to utilize impression management (Goffman 1959) and keep

potentially discrediting information backstage, away from friends and family:

> The negative stuff, you don't want to dwell on that so much you know, that I screamed at my child, "no we don't do that sit in time out!" Then I see my child do that to her babies. Yeah, I see her mimic me every day and so those things or I would never post on Facebook how my daughter learned how to say dumbass. I would never post that!

> Who wants Facebook friends to know you've got a filthy house?! But I will post for my mommy group, "yeah Sarah was watching the dust fly around and she's like look mom pixie dust!" Pixie dust! I wouldn't post that for the rest of the world to know, yeah, I've got a bunch of dishes in my sink and dust flying around.

According to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, individuals manage their behavior

according to backstage and front stage regions. When one is in the back stage they are able to

exhibit behavior that would be deemed unacceptable in front stage regions when an individual is

"acting" toward an audience. Ava discusses her frustration with people projecting a "fake

coolness" through their online postings. She feels that people post on Facebook to get reactions

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from others and to feel good about themselves. What's interesting is that Ava said she rarely

posts on Facebook, so although she has intense feelings about others who post and spend time on

Facebook, she herself chooses not to participate in posting because she thinks it is a self-

fulfilling activity. Although she's not actively managing the self through her own posts, she is

managing the self by consciously not engaging in posting on Facebook. She does, however, play

the role of the audience for others' online postings or presentation of self:

> I don't know maybe, I guess if I thought they cared I'd do it. Yeah posting online is totally self-fulfilling, for sure, but hey I'll do it once in a while because it's amusing almost to watch the stuff that happens you know. It's just so strange. It's some strange science experiment….then you think about the way people portray themselves, and the way they look at it too and what they're getting out of it. I just hate the fake coolness and the words people use it just bothers me aahhh it's annoying! It's amusing almost you know?

It is evident that moms use social networking sites to actively manage the self as well as

gauge their parenting strengths or weaknesses based on other mom's projections. Although these

portrayals of the perfect self-online can be self-destructive because when moms are constantly

comparing themselves to unrealistic standards of what a "mom" is it creates conflict in their

identities. Projecting the self online creates the illusion of the ideal self, which then causes

moms to question their abilities as a mom as well as who they are as a person. This could

potentially have major impacts on identity and the self. It is like comparing yourself to a model

that's airbrushed on a magazine cover; many know it is photo shopped, and moms need to

understand that unrealistic projections through social networking sites are similar illusions of

what a "good mom" looks like.

Managing child's appearance- *managing child's appearance* refers to the process in which moms

actively manage their child's appearance because they see their children as a reflection of who

they are as moms. Throughout the interviews, the respondents expressed how they are always

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making sure their children are clean and "put together." They felt that when other people see their children they are a reflection of their abilities as mothers; therefore, it is important for them to have clean, well-dressed children. If their children were not well dressed or clean, they would find themselves apologizing for their unclean child because they did not want others to think they could not keep their children clean or well dressed. Kayla describes this in regards to an ugly pair of shoes that her mother-in-law gave her child. She felt that her mother-in-law would purposefully take her child out in public with these ugly shoes and then other people might wonder why Kayla would put her child in such ugly footwear:

> My mother-in-law got these really ugly shoes for my kid and I was convinced my mother-in-law was going to take her to the park one day wearing those shoes and I thought no way I'm not gonna want that, because I figured someone I knew would be at the park and see my kid and be like WHAT?! What is Kayla doing with these shoes on her kid?! I didn't want that.

As Kayla explains, she envisions others seeing her child and attributing her child's appearance and behaviors directly to her. Liz also talks about how she wants her child to look clean and put together, she does not want her child to look like a "ragamuffin" because people may think she cannot adequately take care of her daughter. There seems to be expectations for moms that their children should look a "certain" way and Liz describes wanting her daughter to look presentable:

> I think she [her daughter] should look a certain way and shouldn't look like a ragamuffin, even though she looks like a ragamuffin when I pick her up every day because they play out in the leaves and there's food down her shirt, but I tell you if she had food down her shirt I'd change it before we leave because I don't want people to think I let her go around with food down her shirt. Even though that's what three year olds do!

Joni describes her desire to project a certain image of her family through the clothes she puts on her children. By projecting a particular image they are portrayed as being responsible and "succeeding" in life because they can keep their children clean and well clothed:

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I want to project to the world that we're a middle class family and we have what we need that my kids weren't going to wear random sweatpants and t-shirt.

Finally, June also describes how she thinks about having her children clean and well dressed even when they are going to bed. For her she doesn't want to be "caught" not having clean and well-dressed person because others might judge her. In her interview she describes judging other moms who did not have clean children and she does not want that for her and her children. Again, she views her kids as a reflection of her abilities as a mom:

All the time even when I get them ready for bed and put their pjs on I'm like ok what if we have a fire and have to go in the middle of the street what are the neighbors going to think if they are in raggedy pajamas?!

Yeah because I judge mothers that are out in public who have mismatching clothes on [their children] or [their children are] really filthy or their noses are running and it hasn't been wiped, I'm going to admit I judge, it's disgusting. How hard is it to keep your kid clean? It's not hard- give them a bath and wipe their face.

It is evident that for moms it is important to manage their children's appearance because in doing so they are managing their identity as a mom. If their children are not clean or well dressed the social world might view their parenting as flawed because of their "un-kept" children. Moms want to project a certain image through how their children are presented. Essentially, for the mothers interviewed, their children are a reflection of who they are as a person and their abilities as a parent.

Comparing self as a mom to other moms- *Comparing self as a mom to other moms* means that moms compare who they are as a mom to other moms they interact with, and then gauge their abilities as a measurement of what they needed to change about themselves to be the best mom they could be. Another form of this comparison is moms engaging in "sizing each other up" and judging one another at initial interactions. Moms engaged in this because there seems to be a desire to be the best parent and have the best children, so when they met a new mom that

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they felt challenged their abilities then moms would to compare themselves to one another. Joni describes this in an interaction with a mom she had never met at a class she was taking with her child:

> Just as human being we do it, whether it's as moms or walking in to a high school class, or walking in to a new job with new people who try to figure them out based on what you can see there. Then of course when you get to know folks they're different. Like this one mom who seemed super put together, I kind of had this idea of her being that mom who had her kid scheduled and everything was wonderful and perfect for her, and she was the one who was bawling when it was kid separation time [in an class they took together]! I just walked out and was like Carly [respondent's daughter] have fun! But this mom was in tears and she didn't know how she was going to be away from her child. This idea that I had of her based on this 30 second snap shot was that she really knew what was she was doing and overhearing her talk to the teacher like she knew what she was doing and seeing he break down, I was like oh ok, we're all real!

June describes how she compares herself to a friend who is heavier than her and wonders if other people see her as being heavy as well. So June is actively comparing herself to a friend then gauging whether or not other people see her as being overweight as well:

> There is one friend that I have that's bigger and she has two kids and I wonder if I look like that to people? You know, I just don't know how I look to other people because I have this visual of myself in my mind, but I don't really know what I look like to other people.

Kayla talks about an incident of seeing someone at the gym and feeling bad because the mom said her child should be sleeping through the night at three months. Kayla became defensive and later on compared herself to the other mom, considering that she breastfed her child and the other mother did not. In this comparison, Kayla constructed breastfeeding as the catalyst for her child's "different" behaviors, allowing herself to feel like the "better" mom:

> Like before my daughter slept through the night someone I remember being at the gym with my friend and someone she knew was there and I had had a rough night before and I looked like I had and she [her daughter] was like you know around 3 months, [the person Kayla's friend knew said] that's the age [three months] when they'll sleep through the night! I was just like you know, ok, maybe your kids did, and that's when I did and still almost do think well guess what you weren't nursing!

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Liz talks about comparing her abilities as a parent to her partner's sister who has seven well-behaved children. She describes this in a daunting tone as if she feels pressure to have a well-mannered and "perfect" child:

> Then I see Bill's [respondent's husband] brothers and sisters and the one [sister of her husband] who has 7 kids, she's perfect. You know her kids are perfect, they are! They are well mannered, they're quiet, they're adorable and so there is that expectation that Sarah [respondent's daughter] will rise to that too. I don't know how she does it, but they're perfect.

Ava discusses how she compares her parenting to other parents and would like to find a group of moms that she could fit in with who have similar parenting ideologies. In doing this she also feels that these moms will not judge her negatively. Ava compares herself to other moms to validate her choices as a parent:

> Yeah, I mean the parenting for sure [she compares herself to other moms] just because that's a big part of who I am. For parenting that's why I like having friends that have similar views, and I tried to be friends with that one group. I could learn from them and bounce ideas off of them and tell them what I'm doing without them judging me negatively, because like with the other people [parent's who don't have similar views as Ava] if I told them stuff they see it in a negative way.

Ava and all the moms interviewed discussed times in their role as a mom where they would compare themselves to other moms as a measurement of how they looked or their abilities as parents. They also did this in an effort to manage how they looked to the social world and their abilities as a parent.

Discussion

The authors have presented evidence about the various challenges that mothers encounter after they become a mom, including negotiating their changing friendships, finding new "mom" friends, processing feelings of isolation, and trying to understand how the relationship has

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changed with their partner since having a child. They also presented evidence that identifies the process women go through as they present themselves as moms to the social world. There are three ways in which the moms manage their presentation of the self: through online social networking sites, by managing the appearance of their children, and by comparing themselves to other moms. This research indicates the pressures and challenges moms face in our contemporary society. It is evident that moms are constantly negotiating and projecting a perfected identity in an effort to assimilate to the idealized version of what a mom "should" be in the United States. Not only are moms engaging in this process in "real" life, but also through online social networking sites such as Facebook. By engaging in this process moms are creating stratifications between one another by labeling the self as a certain "type" of mother, whether that be a Leave it to Beaver mom, a hands on mom, a relaxed mom, or a "crunchy, granola" mom. They are then managing and projecting an idealized version of the self, online and thus reinforcing the pressures of the media and society to be the "perfect" mom. It is also important to understand the various challenges moms go through after having a child so our social world can learn how to support women after they become a mom. All of the mothers interviewed had similar challenges after having children and also engaged in identity work to take on the new role as a mother.

For future research it will be important to further investigate how various online social networking sites are affecting a mother's identity, self-esteem, and parenting. This research could potentially open new doors to understanding the detrimental affects the Internet can have on a mother's identity. It would also be interesting to see if my conclusions apply to mothers of different cultural and racial backgrounds. A potential limitation was that all of the respondents were Caucasian and it would be interesting to investigate if moms of different cultural and racial

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backgrounds would respond differently to the questions of managing the self-online. The Internet is now in almost every facet of our lives in the United States and it is important to get a clear understanding of how the Internet can have such a profound affect on an individual's identity.

The authors feel that the data collection method of qualitative one on one interviews were effective in collecting data on a mother's challenges and identity management. However, it would be interesting to possibly have a focus group of moms that could talk with each other about how they utilize the Internet and how they project their identity as a mom. They suspect that some moms in a focus group would engage in managing their identity as a mother and project to the focus group their perfected version of the self as a mom. It would be an interesting and possibly helpful interaction to witness.

Overall, the authors feel that they have collected data that contributes to an understanding of the challenges that moms face and the identity formation of mothers. The first author (AR) would like to continue interviewing moms and focus my questions specifically on how the Internet is affecting a mom's identity. It is evident that being a mom is a difficult process and that these difficulties are clearly exacerbated by society's portrayal of the ideal version of a mom; it is important to understand how this process affects contemporary mothers in the United States.

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Student Biography

Annakeiko Frink Reichel is a native of Mankato, Minnesota. While attending college at Minnesota State University-Mankato, she was able to present research at the Undergraduate Research Symposium where she received the honor of "best presentation" in her session. Reichel was also selected to present her research at the first annual Minnesota Conference of Undergraduate Scholarly and Creative Activity. She recently graduated with a B.S. in Sociology in the spring of 2012. In the fall of 2012 she will continue her education at Minnesota State University-Mankato pursing a Master's Degree in Sociology while working as a graduate assistant in the Department of Sociology. Reichel hopes to successfully complete her Master's Degree and continue on to pursue a Ph.D. in Sociology.

Faculty Mentor Biography

Emily M. Boyd received her Ph.D. in Sociology from Florida State University in 2007. Her research and teaching interests include gender, popular culture, qualitative methods, and symbolic interactionism. She was recently tenured and promoted to Associate Professor of Sociology in the Sociology and Corrections Department at Minnesota State University-Mankato.

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