

*What Kind of War? “Mommy Wars” Discourse in U.S. and Canadian News, 1989–2013**

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The “Mommy Wars” is a cultural frame asserting the existence of a battle between employed mothers and homemakers. We perform critical discourse analysis of U.S. and Canadian news articles using this term from 1989 through 2013 ($N = 402$). Building upon the concept of symbolic annihilation, we highlight how the frame distorts and trivializes mothers’ experiences. First, ironically, although some authors describe the Mommy Wars as not real, usage grows rapidly over time. Moreover, the meaning expands to include “alternative wars” on a multitude of childrearing differences and on disputes outside of mothering altogether (e.g., type of water used); this serves to equate trivialities like tap versus filtered water with work-family conditions, effectively rendering them equally inconsequential battles among “mommies.” Finally, the frame trivializes social problems through a focus on (middle-class) mothers’ individual choices as a solution to Mommy Wars. Privileging maternal “choice” with only passing mentions of fathers and the state absolves these groups of responsibilities for the next generation. The use of Mommy Wars rhetoric acts as a divisive, symbolic wedge, ultimately perpetuating a war against mothers.

Introduction

The media play a seminal role in creating, disseminating, and perpetuating meanings about motherhood (Zimmerman et al. 2008). Depictions of social groups in popular media, from magazine and newspaper articles to television shows, are powerful in their ability to infiltrate the public consciousness (Johnston and Swanson 2004; Milkie 1999) and can be oppressive—for example, in establishing standards of motherhood that are not attainable for most women (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Moreover, mothers may be cast in ways that can be said to “symbolically annihilate”—through absence, trivialization, or condemnation in media (Tuchman 1978).

The media discussion of the Mommy Wars is one key site of the cultural construction of motherhood. The phrase itself is provocative, calling attention to the maternal role but in an arguably trivializing way by referring to women with the term “Mommy,” a moniker relegated for use only by the most powerless social actor—a small child. It also calls to the imagination a bitter tension

and use of weaponry of mother against mother. The potential power of the term and its popularity make it a central site to examine the meanings linked to how mothers are depicted as “at war.” The placement of articles framed in Mommy Wars terminology within mainstream news media elevates the status and importance of the alleged problem (Kuperberg and Stone 2008)—making it ripe for examination.

In this paper, we build on the concept of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman 1978) by examining major news media in the United States and Canada (referred to jointly as “North America”) for usage of the term Mommy Wars from its first appearance in 1989, to the 2010s, examining trends over time in its frequency and meaning. We use critical discourse analysis to assess the construction of mothers in Mommy Wars discourse and illuminate key patterns in rhetoric. The Mommy Wars frame, we argue, distorts reality and trivializes central issues in mothers’ lives as it devalues maternal labor in the workplace and home. Rather than a war *between* women, the discourse of Mommy Wars, we argue, serves as a cultural war *against* women by acting as a symbolic wedge—a cultural frame that divides. Below we discuss feminist analysis of culture, the concept of symbolic annihilation, empirical work on depictions of mothers in popular culture, and the origins of the term “Mommy Wars.”

Background

Feminist Analysis of Culture

Feminist analysis of the cultural power to define women is important for at least two reasons (Dillaway and Paré 2008; Thorne 2006). First, this kind of sociological work uncovers the less visible hands that keep women “in their place” (Smith 1990). Making the hidden visible helps reveal the social power of cultural portrayals and definitions. For example, Foucault (1988) illuminates how the idea of “madness” was constructed as a way to define, differentiate, and degrade people who were outsiders—the mentally ill, as well as other undesirable groups like the poor.

Second, a critical feminist discourse analysis provides women with the tools to resist frames that are harmful and divisive. How mothers are constructed and framed as cultural objects constitutes a critical aspect of their lived experiences, as they wrestle with the contradictions and stressors of how they “should” feel and act (McRobbie 2009). Not only are their material and instrumental responsibilities in caregiving to children often immense, mothers’ struggles with the symbolic can be substantial, and the cultural pressures for living up to the “good mother” standard may be a heavy burden (Hays 1996; Milkie and Warner 2014; Zimmerman et al. 2008). Even when people disagree with and are critical of portrayals of their group, or believe them to be unrealistic,

these cultural images carry a powerful weight due to a common presumption that media influences *others*, who are thought to “buy into” or believe pervasive definitions (Hartley, Wight, and Hunt 2014; Milkie 1999). Analyzing media frames in a critical way, then, can reveal important social patterns in ways that help to empower marginalized groups.

Symbolic Annihilation: Media’s Power to Define, Distort, and Trivialize

The control of discourse and cultural definition of groups is a fundamental form of power in the social world. Symbols can serve to keep groups in a devalued place and can oppress through many means by defining and framing what specific groups of people are like, or should be like (Callais 2010). According to Gaye Tuchman (1978; see also Gerbner and Gross 1976; Gerbner 1972), what media do and do not say, and whom they do and do not include, acts as a form of “symbolic annihilation.” Tuchman defines symbolic annihilation as the absence, trivializing, or condemnation of a group. In her analysis of media, the lack of women depicted in prominent or high-status positions works to obviate women’s contributions and to disempower them as actors in the real world. Though her argument focused on 1970s portrayals, women today continue to be “annihilated”—they are less often the subject of fictionalized work compared with men, even in “family films,” and continue to be numerically absent and positioned in narrow ways similar to portrayals many decades ago (Davis 2014). Women’s magazines, too, tie women to a narrow range of domesticity that includes unrealistically beautiful women bound to the home and focused on consumption (Bulbeck 2010; Murphy 1994). Even “alternative” magazines emphasize a middle-class, beauty-driven, and consumerist woman (Murphy 1994).

Though Tuchman (1978) only briefly defines symbolic annihilation as the absence, trivialization, or condemnation of women, others have expanded on her ideas (Means Coleman and Chivers Yochim 2008). For example, *how* a group is absent—what activities they are *not* shown doing—compared to other groups is important to assess. Baumann and de Laat (2012) find that older women, compared to older men and younger women and men, are less often shown in distinctive socially valued roles, such as authorities in the occupational realm. Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie (1997) show that African Americans were not only almost absent from picture books in the 1960s after being present in prior years, but subtle stereotypes and a dearth of Black adults as central characters characterized their resurgence in the subsequent years, from the 1970s to 1990s (Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie 1997).

With other scholars, we argue that distortion is another key form of symbolic annihilation.¹ One main manifestation of distortion is stereotyping disadvantaged groups as looking like, acting like, or feeling in certain ways that are

“off” from objective social relations (Greenberg 1980; Lemish and Muhlbauer 2012; Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie 1997). Milkie (1999) shows that distortion from reality occurs in the form of unrealistic beauty and body images in media compared with average adolescent girls’ appearance; most girls recognize these as unrealistic and many dislike the distortion. Still, white girls are affected by these depictions because they presumed that the images influenced others. Even if distortions are not obviously negative, like African Americans disproportionately depicted in protector roles, they may decenter an objective reality and create misunderstandings about what groups “really” do and are like (Means Coleman and Chivers Yochim 2008).

Media’s power to annihilate lies not only in how groups are discussed, but specifically where and how they are absent, distorted, trivialized, or condemned. In this paper, we focus on the two forms of annihilation—distortion and trivialization—through the Mommy Wars frame, and ultimately, show how mothers are condemned by media.

Depictions of Mothers in Popular Culture

Research on maternal representations in media for and about mothers (i.e., non-fiction) shows complexities. Contradictory messages simultaneously affirm and condemn seemingly mutually exclusive roles: the good mother and the professional woman (Johnston and Swanson 2003a). Homemaker mothers are valorized—depicted as selfless and virtuous—even as they are defined only in relation to others, and as overwhelmed and superficial (Johnston and Swanson 2003a, 2003b). Comparatively, employed mothers are presented as independent and happy, but potentially jeopardizing family relationships through their work (Johnston and Swanson 2003a, 2003b). Mothers’ employment is discussed as a choice for white, middle-class mothers, with poor and working-class mothers and mothers of color relatively ignored in mainstream depictions (Johnston and Swanson 2003b; Keller 1994; Kuperberg and Stone 2008). Mothers are also increasingly portrayed as needing to do an incredible array of child-centered tasks and labor in order to be viewed as good mothers (Hays 1996; Kuperberg and Stone 2008).

Although attention is focused on mothers’ roles and emotions in media specifically targeted to mothers, less research focuses on depictions of North American mothers’ experiences in mainstream media targeted to a general, broad audience. One important exception is Kuperberg and Stone’s (2008) analysis of the “Opt Out” debate in mainstream news. They found that the media valorize elite women who leave professional jobs to stay home and suggest opting out is a trend among elites, even though demographic patterns show that these mothers are more likely to be working compared to their lesser educated counterparts.

A current instantiation of a cultural frame in which mothers are central and which has received some scholarly attention (e.g., Bulbeck 2010) is that of the Mommy Wars. We build on the knowledge of cultural symbols of mothers in North American culture through a focus on the framing of mothers as part of this alleged conflict. This is a unique case of the cultural construction of mothers in a prominent place in mainstream news media in recent years. Paralleling research on symbolic annihilation which examines how women are absent (Baumann and de Laat 2012; Lemish and Muhlbauer 2012), we focus on how mothers' experiences may be distorted and trivialized through the frame of Mommy Wars.

Mommy Wars: Origins of the Term

We identify a seven-page 1989 *Texas Monthly* article "The Mommy War" as containing the first use of the term. This piece discussed the ostensibly conflict-ridden relationship between mothers who worked outside the home and those who did not.² Jan Jarboe, the article's author and herself an employed mother as a Senior Editor at *Texas Monthly*, lamented what seemed to her to be a "natural" antagonism between these two groups of women as experienced in her own life:

So much for sister-hood. So much for tolerating another woman's choice of lifestyle. She was an angry stay-at-home mom. I was a guilty working mom. We were natural enemies. (Jarboe 1989:79)

Jarboe labeled this conflict a Mommy War, and the phrase garnered attention through its use in a 1990 *Newsweek* article. Though Hillary Clinton did not use the phrase, the term Mommy Wars was linked to a comment she made in 1992, which was re-broadcast on the television show *Nightline* (Williams 2000). She responded to a reporter's question as the wife of then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton by saying, "I suppose I could have stayed home and baked cookies and had teas, but what I decided to do was to fulfill my profession, which I entered before my husband was in public life" (Koppel and Judd 1992).

In terms of the timing of the term's origin, the late 1980s was a remarkable moment for women and mothers in the labor force. In 1989, the labor force participation rate of U.S. mothers had risen rapidly to nearly three-quarters of mothers (74 percent) with children ages 6 to 17 and over half (57 percent) of mothers with children under age 6 participating in the paid labor force, an increase of approximately 10 percentage points for both groups from just a decade prior (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Although mothers' labor force participation continued to rise incrementally until its peak in the mid- to late 1990s in the United States, the rapid pace at which mothers entered the public

sector in the late 1980s set these years apart demographically. The labor force participation of Canadian mothers of young children (age 0–5) followed a similar trend, increasing greatly between the late 1970s and 1980s, from 41 percent in 1978 to 69 percent in 1988 (Chaykowski and Powell 1999).

During this era, popular culture portrayed women’s and mothers’ struggles in the workforce in hit films, such as *Working Girl* (1988) starring Melanie Griffith and *Baby Boom* (1987) starring Diane Keaton. Academics were similarly interested in documenting mothers’ precipitous increases in the labor force and analyzing their experiences in greater depth. For example, Arlie Hochschild published her seminal work *The Second Shift* in 1989, shedding light on employed mothers’ “double shifts”—one full time in the public sphere and one invisible shift of labor on housework and childcare within the home.

Thus, the 1980s were notable for mothers’ rapid increase in the paid labor force and for the popular and scholarly attention that movement generated. It was in that period that the term “Mommy Wars” was conceived, and that set the stage for Hillary Clinton’s infamous cookie comment—and resulting media fervor—only a short while later (Williams 2000, 2010). In all, the coverage of mothers purportedly battling about what is best for children is arguably a manifestation of societal discord about women’s changing status. Indeed, the timing of the introduction and adoption of the term in the late 1980s and beyond may be part of the social backlash against the major advances women had made toward gender equality, especially in the workplace, through the 1990s (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011; Faludi 1991).

In sum, in this study, we argue that the cultural discourse about mothers is an important force in the everyday positioning of expectations about mothers, and their relations with each other. The Mommy Wars frame, beginning in the late 1980s, has been persistent in North American culture but under-analyzed by social scientists. Our study elucidates how the frame acts as a form of symbolic annihilation of mothers.

Data and Methods

Data

We sought the population of North American articles using the phrase “Mommy Wars” in news publications, employing a research strategy that attends to discovering meaning of a phenomenon through document analysis (Altheide 1987; Altheide et al. 2008). Using the search database Factiva, we selected all major news and business publications from the United States and Canada as sources.³ Factiva designates “major” news and business publications based on region, reputation, and circulation.⁴ After clarifying that the first pub-

lication of the term Mommy Wars occurred in 1989, we examined articles published from 1989 through 2013.

Using the search terms “Mommy War” and “Mommy Wars,” a total of 473 articles were identified. We excluded 71 articles because either the search phrase appeared only in a link to a related article rather than in the article text itself, or, in a small number of articles, the text was an exact duplicate of another article but with a different headline. From the 402 articles, we collected basic information, including the year of publication, the country of origin, and the publication source, as well as author information, such as whether the author identified as a mother, and whether the article was an editorial or opinion piece.

Coding and Analysis

Using NVivo10 Qualitative Data Analysis software, each article was coded for several items including: the definition/type of war(s), causes and solutions discussed, and whether the war was described as “real.” We allowed for multiple types of Mommy Wars to be present in each article; moreover, for the articles ($N = 68$ or 17 percent of the total) that mentioned the term in passing but did not indicate a clear description of what the term meant, we did not assign a definition code. We identified causes for or solutions to the conflicts discussed. We coded the article “real” if we could identify a piece of text in the article that illustrated the writer’s assumption of the reality of a war and coded the article as “not real” if the author outright stated the war was fake or only media hype.

In order to systematize the process and address the reliability of the coding, the authors constructed coding rules and definitions. The authors separately coded a sample of articles and compared and refined coding guidelines until all authors were in agreement about how to code the articles. Throughout the coding process, as complex articles posed challenges, authors consulted with each other to ensure agreement about coding decisions.

For a second part of the analysis, using an inductive approach, the authors sought to identify patterns through a critical discourse approach, attending to issues of social inequality structures such as gender, race, and class (Fairclough 1995; Wood and Kroger 2000). Taking a constant comparative approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967), we organized recurring phrases and comparable arguments into clusters to create structure in the emerging patterns. The authors identified patterns of meaning contained in the articles, such as discussing the war in terms of “choices” and the ways phrases such as “so-called” were used as qualifiers describing the war. Similarly, events, issues or ideas that prompted each article were qualitatively captured and then inductively categorized into groups. For example, articles primarily discussing new books, such as Amy Chua’s *The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* and Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In*:

Women, Work, and the Will to Lead were coded as articles about books, whereas articles about welfare reform, tax breaks, child care policy, or media reactions to political statements/gaffes were coded as political articles. In addition to those on books or politics, articles focused on several other topics, including elite women like Hillary Clinton or Marissa Mayer (the CEO of Yahoo!), descriptions of the Mommy Wars conflict, social science research about mothers or children, Mother's Day, and more.

The study has limitations. First, although major newspapers identified by Factiva are an important source of data, it is possible that newspapers and business publications outside of the scope of this search engine had fewer uses or different patterns within articles using the term "Mommy Wars" than those sampled through Factiva. Second, we could not find substantial uses of the term "Mommy Wars" in publications or blogs directed toward women, but there may be a somewhat different approach for those used within media aimed at women or other targeted audiences. Third, while it is appropriate to generalize our findings to major U.S. and Canadian newspapers and business publications, the use of the term in other countries may differ. Finally, textual analysis cannot provide information about how mothers or others in the society understand and make meaning of the term "Mommy War," nor what they believe about it. Our data do not provide insight into what effects, if any, the term or its increased use has on people, though future research attending to this issue is warranted.

Results

Three important patterns are revealed through the textual analysis in relation to how the Mommy Wars are portrayed. We highlight these as forms of symbolic annihilation: (1) Even as some articles question the actual existence of these wars among mothers, use of the term has grown, arguably distorting reality, (2) Through the great broadening of the term over the last 20 years to describe a plethora of issues, concerns about mothers' labor at work and in the home are trivialized, and (3) Mothers' choices are spotlighted, as both a cause *and* a solution to the Wars, trivializing a social problem. We argue that a focus on women's choices underscores mothers as individually responsible for children, with others, including men and the state, exempted from greater involvement in the care of children and families. We discuss these patterns in detail below.

Annihilation through Distortion: A War that is "So-Called," but Increasingly Common

The veracity of a battle between mothers was called into question from the early years by a small but significant portion of articles. Although the

Mommy Wars described conflict between women, with material consequences and potential solutions, some authors openly doubted the existence of a feud between actual North American mothers. Authors expressed skepticism that the Mommy Wars are real or outright stated that they are only media hype in 11 percent of the 402 articles. Qualifiers such as “so-called,” “political,” and “media-fueled” were stated in 14 percent of the articles. Whereas some used the qualifiers to question whether the term was the proper label to describe a potentially real problem of perceived judgment and condemnation of one group of mothers regarding another, other authors went on to question the authenticity of the phenomenon altogether. Notably, articles in the early years of describing the war were as likely to use a “so-called” qualifier as more recent articles. These early articles primarily applied qualifiers for introducing the term to describe what the author indicated was a potentially real problem. For instance, this 1992 article describing the experiences of women who exit the labor force temporarily to raise children concluded:

That kind of mutual tolerance—the antithesis of the so-called “mommy wars” —will help to change stereotypes, Bullen says. She also expects demographics to help. “Once people realize how many of us are out there, I hope we’ll stop being so invisible.” After all, she adds, staying home “doesn’t mean forever anymore.” (Christian Science Monitor 1992)

Note above, the author portrayed doubt about labeling a conceivable tension as a war. The qualifier was also included early on in authors’ appeals to not start a war and in reference to battles already fought. For example, in 1992, a *Boston Globe* author stated, “By the 1980s, more of us were working. But the struggle over women’s roles was fought out in the so-called mommy wars.” Some articles include suggestions that the war does not really exist, as in this article: “‘There is no ‘mommy wars’; the media made it up,’ said Julie Newman, 38, mother of a 5-year-old boy. ‘Some guy made it up,’ she added with a snort” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 1996).

A frequent subtopic of these articles was to discredit the existence of the war by citing statistics about the rise in numbers of employed mothers, the history of mothers in the workplace (especially women of color), and the fluid identity of individual women as they transition in and out of the workplace and between part-time and full-time employment. Not infrequently, when the war was assumed to be real, authors critiqued the war as being about white, elite mothers and the resulting invisibility of the reality and hardships of poor and working-class mothers, particularly mothers of color, as illustrated here:

Black women have watched the mommy wars (“the media-fueled at-home- versus at-work-mom conflict,” as Parker, a Washington Post reporter, defines it) from the sidelines because, for most, the outcome has already been decided. Black mothers work, end of story. It’s a backhanded gift from American history, left over from slavery and the Jim Crow laws that

made it illegal for a black woman to stay at home and not toil as a sharecropper alongside the rest of her family. (The Washington Post 2005)

Authors' attempts to shift the focus to issues of class and racial inequality perpetuated the usage of the phrase. For instance, authors called for moving the conversation away from contentious commentary about middle-class mothers to focusing on class disparities among mothers, such as in this quote by an author describing her exasperation with the persistence of the Mommy Wars:

If our attitudes toward the job of mothering are ambivalent when we talk about the middle class, we become schizophrenic when we talk about the poor. When was the last time that anyone—certainly any politician—described a welfare mother as “working in the home”? Who was the last teenager praised for listing “mother” as her occupation? (Boston Globe 1994)

Other articles suggested the Mommy Wars were a distraction from a needed conversation about growing class inequality, such as the inclusion of this quote in an article:

“We’re in a period of diversion right now,” said Faith Wohl, president of the Child Care Action Campaign, a New York-based group. “The president was talking about real issues. . . the cost [of child care] for parents and the quality for children.” But opponents, she said, “are blowing a smoke screen. Should women be working and is child care good for children? These are very visceral, ideological, class-based issues.” (The Washington Post 1998)

Even as the existence of the war was questioned, solutions were offered, as in this example from a 2009 *Globe and Mail* article:

“To the degree that the mommy wars aren’t just a fiction of overheated imaginations, universal services of early learning and care for all children help ease any strains that might exist among women from different family situations,” she says. (Globe and Mail 2009)

Paradoxically, the persistent ambivalence of the reality of the Mommy Wars is overshadowed by the continual and intensifying conversation about the wars: who the alleged warriors are, how it operates, its consequences, and the possible solutions.

Although the veracity of a battle between mothers has been questioned, ironically, the “Mommy Wars” as a phenomenon has increased considerably over time. The total number of articles containing the phrase “Mommy War” or “Mommy Wars” was 21 in the period from 1991 to 1995. Comparatively in a recent 5-year period, from 2006 to 2010, 150 articles containing the phrase were identified, seven times as many as in the earlier period (see Figure 1). Although there was a small spike in the number of articles in 1998, the rise in the Mommy Wars frame grew dramatically in 2005, and in a single year, 2012, nearly 80 articles in our sample of North American news media discussed the Mommy Wars.

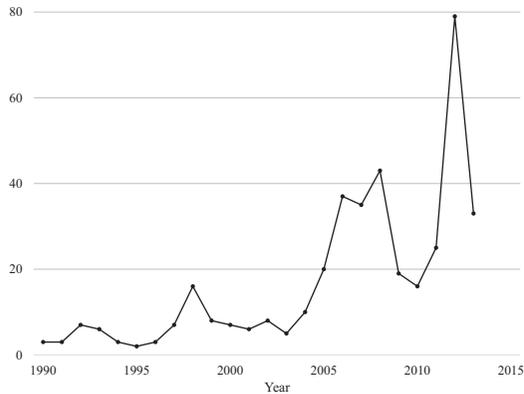


Figure 1 Frequency of Mommy Wars Articles 1989–2013.

It is beyond the scope of this study to comprehensively analyze how certain exogenous events—such as changes in mothers’ labor force participation, family leave policies, presidential politics, or big “news” events—are linked to the periods of large increases in Mommy Wars discourse. Still, we speculate briefly here. For example, the spike around 2005 could be related to bifurcations surrounding the conservative climate for women more generally at the time, or perhaps it was linked to the rise of the Internet.⁵ In one instance, Linda R. Hirshman sought at the time to explain the overwhelming interest in the topic of the “Mommy Wars” after receiving significant backlash for her 2005 *American Prospect* article arguing that women who left the labor force to mother full time were making a mistake:

I doubt that an article in an elite policy magazine would have become one of the most talked about and e-mailed pieces of social commentary in recent years without the Internet. Before, a controversial article would have generated letters to the editor, and maybe some follow-up in other traditional media. The Internet enables people who would never have passed that narrow gate to add their voices, it makes the voices expand exponentially—and there’s never a down moment. But it cannot just be the power of the Web. I have come to believe that I tapped into something in the culture that was waiting to happen. (The Washington Post 2006)

The increase in articles around 2005 may also be linked to the large number of popular books published that year about the Mommy Wars, another testament to the power of the growth of the symbolic feud between mothers at that time. The lead paragraph in a 2006 *New York Times* article listed a few of the recently published books on the topic, including *Mommy Wars: Stay-at-Home and Career Moms Face Off on Their Choices, Their Lives, Their Families*; *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars: Who Decides What Makes a Good*

Mother?; Mother in the Middle: Searching for Peace in the Mommy Wars; The Mommy Chronicles; The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined Women; and Confessions of a Naughty Mommy.

Together, ongoing and increased discussion of the Mommy Wars keeps the frame alive. Such coverage portrays mothers as perennially at war with each other, even though some articles include skepticism as they write about the Wars. Moreover, the symbolic war continues even without clear evidence of it in the objective relations among mothers. Survey research and interview data suggest that mothers respect and do not harshly judge each other (Hays 1996; Reeber and Caplan 2014), and that values about mothering do not differ based on mothers’ employment status (Erickson and Aird 2005). Thus, the media discussion of Mommy Wars are likely a distortion, and mothers are artificially pitted against each other at two extremes.

Annihilation: Trivializing through Expanded Meanings of Mommy Wars

Not only has the number of discussions of an alleged War between mothers increased over time, the term has expanded in meaning to encompass a great variety of topics. The Mommy Wars has become repurposed to describe debates beyond the original definition of a war between stay-at-home mothers and employed mothers, some having little or nothing to do with mothering at all. The rise in the use of the term Mommy Wars to refer to these wide-ranging issues, what we refer to as “alternative wars,” accounts for a significant portion

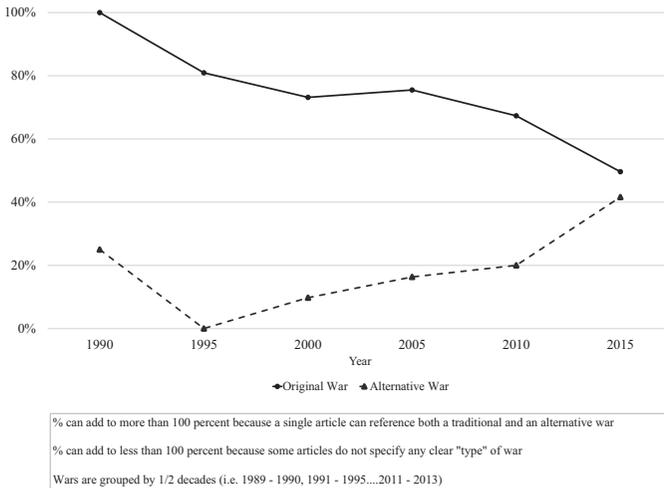


Figure 2 Original and Alternative War Types.

of the increase in the use of the term overall (see Figure 2). Figure 2 shows a strong trend for the Mommy Wars label to be increasingly applied to these alternative conflicts, and a parallel decline in discussion of the “original” war involving employed versus stay-at-home mothers. Overall, 25 percent of our sample described at least one alternative form of a “Mommy War.” By the most recent period of analysis, 2011–2013, it is almost equally likely that an article containing the phrase Mommy Wars referred to the original war (50 percent of the 137 articles during that period) as it did to an alleged alternative feud between mothers (42 percent of the 137 articles). Note that a single article could contain both a reference to the traditional and to an alternative war, or more than one type of alternative war; additionally, as noted, some articles ($N = 68$ of 402, or 17 percent) used the term “Mommy Wars” only in passing, and could not be coded as referring to either the traditional or an alternative war because the term was used without providing enough detailed information.

The analysis revealed four types of alternative wars relating to: (1) the work and family realm beyond stay-at-home versus employed mothers (8 percent of the 402 total articles), (2) birth and labor decisions (3 percent), (3) an array of parenting ideologies (10 percent), and (4) topics completely outside of motherhood (7 percent).

First, a common type of alternative war focused on work and family issues, but included conflicts broader than the original employed versus stay-at-home mother dispute, such as the debate over whether women could really “have it all” or what kinds of work patterns were acceptable. Subtle differences between this alternative war and the original war included a focus on when and how to work for pay, and how successful (morally, health wise, and so on) mothers could be in combining work and family. For example, a 2008 *New York Times* piece titled “Palin and the Mommy Wars” opened with the sentence: “How is this really going to work?” said Karen Shopoff Roof, an independent voter, personal trainer and mother of two in Austin, Tex. “I don’t care whether she’s the mother or the father; it’s a lot to handle.” The voter’s questioning of Sarah Palin’s ability to mother five children as a U.S. Vice Presidential candidate was set in a frame of warring as to whether women can “do it all.”

Altering the battle lines of the conflict also highlighted the more complex work patterns of mothers as not fixed as either a stay-at-home mother or employed mother, but rather as moving in and out of the workforce. In one article, the author explicitly tells the reader that the warriors from the original Mommy War have changed, pointing now to issues with mothers’ interrupted employment patterns: “The Mommy Wars debate is still, regrettably, with us. The fight now is not just between mothers who work and mothers who don’t, but mothers who worked and then decided not to” (*Toronto Star* 2004). Note a

slight distinction is made in which the conflict described was between employed mothers and mothers who left the paid labor force to focus full time on mothering, rather than those who were always homemakers.

Second, the expansion of the term went beyond work and family issues altogether. For example, the Mommy War frame was used to describe conflicts focused on childbirth and breastfeeding. Mothers were described as at war in this realm in multiple ways: mothers who gave birth at home versus in a hospital, mothers who find infants challenging versus those who do not, mothers who breastfeed versus those who prefer formula and so on, as evidenced in this quote:

The new moms are getting to know each other at a baby play group, and the conversation in this weird, new social setting—Mommyland—often revolves around a seemingly benign question: ‘What’s your birth story?’ Welcome to your introduction to the endless, pernicious Mommy Wars. (Washington Post 2011)

A third form of alternative war was linked to parenting ideologies centered on different views about raising children. Moms who were strict were said to be at war with permissive moms; the age at which women had chosen to become mothers was declared a war, supposedly between those who had children at older and younger stages of adulthood; differences in approaching teenage sex were described as another war; and addressing children’s mental health issues was discussed in a war frame. Different parenting (really, mothering) approaches within many different arenas were labeled as new types of Mommy Wars.

In a fourth form of alternative war, authors borrowed the term for a discussion *unrelated to mothering altogether*, such as conflicts between those who garden and those who do not, African American women who chemically straighten their hair and those who prefer to keep it natural, and people who use filtered water versus those who drink tap water. In these articles, the only seeming criterion for use of the term was that there happened to be mothers mentioned in the articles. In the excerpt below, a Mommy War frame was invoked only because two women candidates, one of whom was identified in the article as a mother, were running for political office:

In a Minnesota mommy war for a House seat, Democrat Patty Wetterling, whose own son had been abducted and never found, was one of the first to use the Mark Foley page scandal against Republican Michele Bachmann. Now Bachmann is accusing Wetterling of palling around with the Taliban crowd. (Boston Globe 2006)

Positioning women as “mommies” in a context where it is irrelevant, such as between politicians Patty Wetterling and Michele Bachmann, perpetuates maternal divisiveness as it simultaneously renders women first as mothers. It is

unlikely that a similar description of two male politicians would be called a “Daddy War.”

The expansion of the phrase serves to equate trivial issues such as tap versus filtered water with mothers’ work-family conditions, effectively rendering them equally inconsequential issues for and battles among “mommies.” Similarly, the topics are flattened and seemingly less complex than they really may be, perhaps due to reducing every topic to a simple binary and a “cutesy” sound bite. Such indiscriminate use of the term, we argue, serves to trivialize major life concerns related to combining work and family. Its common and generalized usage also implies that mothers feud with other mothers about everything. This may create mistrust that prevents alliances between mothers (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Williams 2000).

Annihilation: Trivializing the Social Problems of Work and Family by Focusing on Individual Choices

Understanding the intricacies of the choice rhetoric (Kuperberg and Stone 2008; Williams 2000) is central to the dynamics of Mommy Wars discourses. Here we focus on work and family wars (the original war and “having it all”) and exclude those articles about birth and labor, parenting ideology more generally, and “other” wars outside of mothering such as those on gardening.⁶ We discuss how choices are identified as a cause of the work-family “war problem” for women, with a focus on mothers’ difficulties being about the “choices” individual mothers make that other individual mothers then judge as morally unacceptable. We next discuss how choices are described as a solution. Finally, we show how, in a way that marginalizes mothers as a group and fractures the collective, the structural difficulties of combining mothering with paid employment are often dismissed.

Dialogue about mothers’ choices was a significant part of the discussion of the wars, prevalent in 37 percent of articles about work and family issues. Relatively early in the era of Mommy Wars discussion, the centrality and changing nature of the discourse of choice was identified, such as in this summary piece from a 1995 article discussing how welfare reform would push poor mothers into the workplace:

Fast forward to the 1950s when the cultural pressures were overwhelmingly in favor of full-time motherhood. Fast forward to the late 1960s when the women’s movement first broke through those domestic boundaries. Even then, feminists self-consciously, deliberately, insisted that they were in favor of choice: a woman’s choice to stay home or go to work. Fast forward again, at dizzying speed, through the 1970s and ‘80s when a tidal wave of mothers went to work, not to exercise their choice, but because they had no choice. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch 1995)

Blaming Mothers' Choices: The Start of Wars

Although choice in how to manage responsibilities at home and support the family economically was seen as a long-sought-after outcome by the feminist movement, this opening of options was also viewed as the origin of the battle between mothers. This viewpoint included assertions that the number of choices available made things difficult, was unwelcome, and was the root cause of the judgment and feuding in the Mommy Wars. In fact, the *Texas Monthly* article with the inaugural reference to a war between mothers cites the availability of choices as problematic:

“Sometimes I think we are a generation cursed by choices,” she had said. “I feel resentful because my mother was able to be happy with her choices, without having to justify them.” Whether or not our mothers were happy is not the point. The point is whether our generation—with so many choices to justify—can make the choices that fulfill us and those we love. (Texas Monthly:117)

The internal dilemmas of mothers about whether to work for pay were portrayed as causing unnecessary stress. This was explicitly stated in a 2012 *New York Times* opinion piece, “Women have so many choices that they’re overwhelmed by the stress of so many choices.” If mothers did not have varying options on how to raise their children, the argument went, there would be no wars. However, there were few calls for a return to situating mothers’ role as solely in the home, and the one reference to a call for all mothers to work received much negative backlash in subsequent articles. Other angles, such as claims that mothers do not want to work outside the home and therefore do not need choices, were also illustrated, as in this excerpt:

Marilyn Quayle irritated employed mothers when she extolled her own choice to give up a law career and accused liberals of being “disappointed because most women do not wish to be liberated from their essential natures as women.” (St. Louis Post-Dispatch 1992)

The few articles that embraced the standpoint of choices as problems appeared mainly early in the Mommy War discussions, but the underlying message that a mother’s place is in the home did not appear to dissipate. For example, judgments that employed mothers did not really need to work for money, but did so because they preferred a higher standard of living at the expense of time with their children, were routinely attributed to stay-at-home mothers. More recently, articles captured a change in perspectives, with elite women depicted as choosing to stay at home with children rather than to remain in the workforce, as summarized here:

The chic thing to do now, though, is to be able to work but to CHOOSE to stay home with your children. That is seen as the morally superior thing to do. But very few mothers can do that. Most moms work because they have to. (USA Today 2004)

Linked frequently to the *opt-out* debate (see Kuperberg and Stone 2008), commentary on mothers choosing to stay at home was a regular topic in articles. Authors included descriptions of women with high social and economic status deciding to quit their jobs to be with their children. The articles contained portrayals of others touting this as evidence that mothers are unable to work outside the home and be good mothers at the same time. For instance, one author commented: “Some see this motherly conflict as a failure of feminism, a movement that told women they had choices but forgot to tell them just how hard it is to balance motherhood and a career” (*Atlanta Journal-Atlanta Constitution* 1990).

Still, elite mothers were described in some articles as removed from mainstream society for choosing to stay at home, an option not open to the vast majority of mothers. Articles pointed out that the realities of Black mothers’ lives were mostly ignored in the Mommy Wars debate, and suggested that all but the most privileged groups of mothers have no choice but to work. A 2006 *New York Times* article on the topic of how race complicates work and family issues pushed beyond race disparities, stating, “Some white working-class and middle-class women have complained that both sides of the opt-out debate have an elitist tone. Recently members of a group called Latina Mami in Austin, Tex., vented about the lack of perspective in many of the motherhood books in bookstores.” Responses to the suggestion that women from higher-income families have a feasible choice about workforce participation contained critiques of the implied magnitude of the proportion of mothers choosing to exit the labor force and brought about a repeated assertion that the majority of North American mothers have to work to support themselves and their families.

Peace through Choice

Although the availability of choices in family and work arrangements was described as the point of origin and centrality of the Mommy Wars, ironically, giving more mothers more choices was an often emphasized solution to the war. In a rare consensus, the promotion of expanding choices was used in opinion pieces and editorials supporting both sides of the debate. The full embrace of choice was repeatedly held up as the way to end the Mommy Wars, as shown here:

You could say, “Hmm, it’s nice to have choices.” Choices being the currency of peace among mommy warriors, since it’s agreed (if not deep-down believed) that it’s not about having one right or wrong way to do things, it’s about being able to choose. Ya? So it’s a peace-lover’s bird-flip.
(WashingtonPost.com 2011)

Articles often included messages of heralding choices as a positive step toward women’s equality, and calls to end the Mommy Wars frequently

instructed mothers to respect the individual choices of others, such as in this quote: “Added Snowe: ‘It is not about pitting one group against another or starting a ‘Mommy War.’ It is about helping parents do the best they can for their children, no matter what choice they make’” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 1998).

Agreeing to disagree regarding mothers’ preferences for child care-taking and producing income was a common solution offered to settling the debate. Whatever side of the debate the author or their sources were on, most seemed to be in agreement that expanding the availability of choices was necessary to ending the war, as revealed in this excerpt:

For at least two decades, every brief truce in the mommy wars has come when both sides agree, with or without clenched teeth, that mothers should be able to “choose.” What about a little focus on what makes those choices easier? (Boston Globe 1999)

Peace through choice was common ground across the political divide. In 2005, for instance, reporting included Republican politician Rick Santorum’s statement:

“Clearly I’m an advocate for families and staying home with your kids, but I’m very specific about not saying which [parent] should and which shouldn’t [stay home]. I’m saying women should have more choices not to be forced to work to have social affirmation.” (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette 2005)

When progressive and feminist opinions were represented, it was often as advocates for opening up choices for *all* mothers, not just white professionals and elites. As described in a 2012 *New York Times* article, authors highlighted the constrained choices facing the majority of mothers today. Although respecting other mothers’ choices was seen as a resolution to the wars, the insistence that this debate was very narrow in scope and did not reflect the reality of most mothers’ lives was articulated repeatedly. The economic reality of paying for child care and women’s low wages, as well as the number of single mothers without a partner to provide income, were showcased as limiting choices. This quote from the *Toronto Star* exemplifies the call for recognition of the struggles of lower income and single mothers:

What’s more, all this ignores how difficult it is for women with no choice, who drag themselves to work, packing their children off to school (or in the care of who knows whom?) whether they are sick or well – and who can still barely make ends meet. (Toronto Star 2011)

At least some of the articles pointed to unequal struggles in balancing family and work responsibilities:

Yes, some of us actually work outside the home by choice and not solely by economic necessity. For those of us who choose to work outside the home, we probably are in professional jobs with greater flexibility. For those of us who work as a result of economic necessity, we

are more likely to be in lower-paying jobs with little flexibility. To condemn those women for working while they have small children is reprehensible. They, too, would like to at least have the opportunity to choose whether to work or not; they cannot do so. (Atlanta Journal and Constitution 1991)

It is conceivable, and in fact likely, that journalists' invocation of choice rhetoric when discussing solutions is not intended to trivialize mothers' work but instead may be an attempt to intervene in this trivialization. Although it is unlikely that individual journalists, especially feminist writers, are knowingly complicit in what we consider a dimension of symbolic annihilation, it is also the case that the choice rhetoric is pervasive across the analysis period, and, despite authors' intents or objectives, may come across to readers as the ideal, favored, or, simply most realistic solution in lieu of any substantial discussion of changes to structural and policy-oriented supports. Paradoxically, while the narrow scope of who was embattled in a war (only those with true choices available) was criticized above, allowing more women to be included in the conflict was presented as a solution.

Changing the Structure and Changing Fathers as Solutions: Mentioned and Discarded

Despite the high frequency of choice rhetoric, skepticism about change to the cultural status quo persisted. Even though some authors called for structural changes, several authors doubted their development and offered advice for individual coping in its place, as shown in this 2005 excerpt from the *Washington Post*:

Ultimately the women divide between those who agree with Warner that there must be an Answer—that if only we had enough paid maternity leave and decent child care and progressive taxation we could get out of “this Mess,” as she calls it—and those such as Cavendish who think this conflict can't be wished away, that on days we work late or take a kid-free vacation we should accept guilt as the price of our satisfaction. (Washington Post 2005)

Articles cited cultural and structural solutions, mainly in single perfunctory sentences, but emphasized and often concluded with individual-level solutions, such as calls for less judgment of self and others. The lack of structural supports⁷ was repeatedly described as problematic to women, and therefore, authors implored women to fashion their own solutions to address competing work and mothering demands, as illustrated in this 2008 *Boston Globe* article:

These challenges are a major reason why some women who can afford it stop working. But lots of women can't afford it, and lots of women want to work for reasons other than financial necessity. So while we're waiting for laws and employers to catch up with us, we do what we can. Some of us stay home when our children are younger, some of us work part time, some work from home one or 2 days a week, and everyone who is able to depends on

a safety net of child-care providers, relatives, and friends. “We all rely on each other,” says Delori. “We build up our networks.” (Boston Globe 2008)

Similar to the brief mentions but ultimate lack of emphasis or rejection of structural solutions, also left unexplored was how fathers could ease tensions for mothers, and, thus, bring some resolution to the Mommy Wars. Discussion about the role of fathers, how they impact mothers’ choices, and fathers’ own choices about work and family obligations were minimal. While 29 percent of articles about work and family mentioned fathers, men’s parenting and family conflicts were marginally described. Some articles made brief statements about the need to refocus the discourse to include fathers, others said the war should not be between mothers but between mothers and fathers, and still other authors told readers that mothers could learn from fathers or that they are a source of support. With few exceptions, articles that mentioned fathers’ roles in families’ efforts to balance work and family responsibilities did so in passing. As in this 750-word *New York Times* article, the author included only one prior sentence about men’s role in family obligations before ending with this conclusion:

Fathers help create those demanding proto-humans, too, and it’s long past time we stopped assuming that women are the default provider of that 24/7 care. But as long as we still do, the only way for more women to be in Ms. Mayer’s position, or to succeed at any job while supporting a young family, is to be honest about what it takes to provide it. That’s going to be a conversation worth having for a long time to come. (New York Times 2012)

As illustrated in this example, fathers’ part in the solution to alleviate the stress of raising children and working for pay is mentioned. Yet, the author immediately refocuses the readers’ attention to vague strategies for the collective (women) to carry out. At times, calls for paid paternity leave and breaking down cultural stereotypes of parenting were contained in the articles, yet they were rarely discussed at any length and details of how to bring about that change were absent. Overall, representations of fathering as solutions to the Mommy Wars were glossed over and muted.

Discussion

Analyzing news articles that use the term Mommy War(s) since the inception of the phrase, we demonstrate that the discourse contains and expands our understanding of key aspects of symbolic annihilation. In this section, we extend the ideas of symbolic annihilation of women (or other disadvantaged social actors) through building on the idea of distortion as a form of annihilation, and illuminating how mothers are trivialized. In addition, we place our analysis in relation to work on “egalitarian essentialism” and to that on media power, positing that the Mommy Wars frame creates a cultural wedge that divides mothers.

The symbol of a “war” is arguably distortive. Indeed, the existence of a war itself has been frequently called into question, with reporters and authors in mainstream news media expressing doubts about its reality in women’s lives, even as they increasingly frame stories in that way and write in detail about it. And survey research (Erickson and Aird 2005; Reeber and Caplan 2014) and interview data (Hays 1996) show that women share the same values across employment status and do not condemn, but mutually respect, others. Yet, ironically, given its tenuous link to an objective reality, Mommy Wars discourse has not only continued but increased over time, underscoring its cultural power and reach. Although it is certainly possible that some mothers feud about employment status, more research on the topic that uses representative samples of mothers and/or assesses complex views of mothering is needed.

The symbol of the “Mommy Wars” also trivializes mothering work—both care in the home and labor in the public sector—in three ways. One aspect is that the term itself is trivializing. The labeling of women as “mommies”—classifying women from the perspective of the least powerful social actors, namely young children—in mainstream media news stories may function as a code to read the pieces as about “light” topics rather than about central issues in the fundamental aspects of work and family lives of adult women.

Second, we argue that the use of the term has trivialized mothers’ work and family issues as it has expanded considerably to refer to a myriad of conflicts, some not linked to employment at all, and even on occasion completely outside the realm of mothering. Not only is mothers’ work status a purported wrench between women, but everyday decisions about raising children and contributing to their development is described as a battle between mothers. The rendering of all types of differences between mothers as “Mommy Wars” makes fundamental work and family challenges seem equally inconsequential as the choice between using tap versus filtered water.

Third, the analysis underscores that part of the symbolic annihilation of mothers lies in trivializing core work-family issues as attributable to and solvable by choice. On the one hand, if mothers are individually responsible for “choosing” to work for pay or not (an option which some articles clearly noted was only available to elite mothers), then they are responsible for causing the war by not only making their choice, but by judging others who did not choose as they did. On the other hand, the rhetoric of choice is often proffered as the best way to end the Mommy Wars. It suggests that mothers should privately make their choices and then move on with their arguably difficult parenting lives (notably, they should not judge as they choose). Such an emphasis on choice deemphasizes the *social* aspect of the problem, instead individuating the problem and its solution to mothers themselves, thus leaving the weighty burden of responsibility for mothers to bear alone—and a symbolic wedge

between them and other mothers. This serves to focus societal expectations about who is responsible for the development, health, and well-being of children onto individual mothers and away from other agents, namely men and the state.

The prominent focus on the panacea of choice in the Mommy Wars discourse is consistent with the cultural frame of “egalitarian essentialism” (Charles and Grusky 2004; Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011), which combines “support for stay-at-home mothering with a continued feminist rhetoric of choice and equality” (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011: 261). This frame aligns tightly with and exacerbates the American ethos of individualism in which everyone is responsible for her own success and should not count on others in the community or society for help. We found that the Mommy Wars discourse relied heavily on the rhetoric of choice (the egalitarian part) but seriously considered few other methods for effectively combining work and home lives. Even though we did not observe an unwavering call for mothers to stay home, by implicitly and explicitly suggesting that the burden of work-family conflicts and management should be handled by mothers themselves—and only offhandedly or perfunctorily mentioning men or structural state supports—the Mommy Wars discourse contains a traditionalist current that, we argue, underscores the egalitarian essentialism frame. Moreover, our analysis suggests that the Wars are not necessarily only about mothering. Rather, it has perhaps become a useful and convenient trope to wield in larger political and social battles, and its common and increasing use in news directed to a general audience (not just mothers) may carry important cultural weight.

We suggest that the Mommy Wars may be one such materialization of media activity that has become a “social fact” (Durkheim 1982) despite a continued discounting of the phrase from within the mainstream reporting itself, and lack of discussion of Mommy Wars among mothers themselves in women’s magazine or on social media (see endnote 3). It has materialized and been reified by media as a social problem, albeit one whose solutions are decidedly individualistic in nature. The interplay of individualistic and gender essentialist ideology render individual choice solutions hollow, as structural changes are necessary to bring about any real change. Important issues surrounding employment and raising children, and the combination of these fundamental institutional roles, are reduced to condemning (righteous) individual mothers for judging other (righteous) mothers. Indeed, this reduction leads to blaming mothers for social problems—this is symbolic annihilation.

The power of the mainstream media to construct reality should not be overlooked, although we can only speculate on how its effects are manifested. Many scholars contend that mainstream media have considerable power to create and empower certain concepts and frames in which to package social reali-

ties (Andersen and Collins 2013). In other words, media, and especially the prominent mainstream news media outlets we examine in this analysis, are not mere reflectors of reality but rather self-interested corporate actors (Mantsios 2013; McChesney 2004). If we approach the media in this way, then it is worth considering whether the Mommy Wars discourse, and its pointed focus on mothers and their choices, is altogether coincidental. According to McChesney (2004:98), there is considerable “corporate and conservative bias built into the media system,” a bias which may make certain frames for presenting work-family problems (e.g., blaming mothers) more palatable or publishable than other frames (e.g., blaming social or corporate policies). We suggest that the timing of the introduction and proliferation of the term may not be coincidental but rather part of the social backlash (Faludi 1991) against the major advances women had made toward gender equality, especially in the workplace, through the 1990s (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011).

Like many cultural constructs, the “Mommy Wars” may have materialized via a catchy, simplifying term that captured deeper cultural contradictions (Hays 1996; Williams 2000). But arguably in the process, through media repetition and pervasiveness, it is, despite its constructed nature, real in its consequences. As Milkie (1999) points out in the theory of presumed influence (Hartley, Wight, and Hunt 2014; Milkie 1999), an important power of media is its pervasiveness and the belief that *others* “buy into” and/or are influenced by what is said or shown. Even if most women do not participate in a reality of judging others, do not believe it to be a “real war,” and see mothers as much more aligned in their goals of raising children (Hays 1996), women may be impacted by a culture which frequently and prominently renders mothers as at war with each other (Johnston and Swanson 2004; Peskowitz 2005), making it more difficult to focus on the interests of mothers as a group. It is possible that the media framing mothers as warring makes women who do not experience conflicts firsthand to believe it to be true and “out there.” They thus may be affected by the rhetoric, sensing that other women are a force against them rather than aligned with them in the raising of the next generation (Johnston and Swanson 2004). With the prolific term “Mommy War” for reporters and writers to draw upon (even as some disbelieve its appropriateness), and with its continual and growing use, it is possible that the presumed influence on others of “a war” is greater than it would have been without the trivializing term.

The Mommy Wars rhetoric as symbolic annihilation of mothers may be an important case of cultural production. The term Mommy War itself may be powerful in framing debates in ways that prevent women from being united in their interests of responsibility for children’s outcomes. Potentially, vague aspects of deep cultural contradictions may take on a new life by the reification of conflicts through wedge phrases that divide women with symbols such as a “war.” In that

sense, the Mommy Wars is a case of a larger phenomenon of frames with specific wedge terms that authors and the public can grab onto, marginalizing issues, and potentially factionalizing groups. Another such case of a cultural wedge is articulated by Susan Douglas (1994), who shows how the term “catfight” in the 1970s was a news media creation. The term diminished women’s political discussions related to the Equal Rights Amendment, emphasized competitive individualism, and divided rather than united women. Such symbolic wedges—encapsulated by a specific term that injects the cultural meanings with a rigidity that polarizes factions or debates and potentially exacerbate cultural conflicts related to gender, race, sexuality, or age—deserve research attention.

We encourage other researchers to consider and build upon the concept of symbolic annihilation of marginalized groups through media and other cultural constructions (Baumann and de Laat 2012; Tuchman 1978). The distortion of women in media and the trivialization of problems, including individuating the actual work that mothers do in the labor force and in the raising of a critical social good, namely healthy children is critical to understand; similarly, other aspects of annihilation and others groups are important to assess. Theoretically expanding the ways that specific forms of symbolic annihilation of women and other groups exist in media and are received by audiences can help scholars as they examine key patterns in social media, newspapers, magazines, or video. Focusing on how dynamic phrases related to the portrayal of social groups, what we discuss as cases of symbolic wedges that can crystallize and exacerbate contradictions and conflicts in the culture, is a promising avenue for future research.

The cultural production and perpetuation of the Mommy Wars discourse over recent decades may be consequential in setting a frame of women against women. In the expansion of a war that pits mothers against mothers in almost any arena, in its focus on individual choice and its ultimate exclusion of men and the state from the discussions surrounding raising children, the “real” war against mothers is a cultural one that pushes them apart and polarizes the community of mothers.

ENDNOTES

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¹Tuchman (1979) suggests a complex understanding of distortion is important. It is not that the media should perfectly represent reality, particularly in fictional accounts. But we argue that media’s ability to undercut and devalue through distorting particular realities—for example, depicting groups in certain ways through stereotyping, dismissing, or ignoring “real” bodies, peo-

ple, or concerns—should be examined. Tuchman (1979) points to the fact that media's sorry depiction of women underscores and exacerbates one key reality: their lack of power in society.

²We identified the origin of the phrase "Mommy Wars" to be in a 1989 *Texas Monthly* article. The use of the initial phrase has also been attributed by a March 15, 2006 *Salon* piece to a late 1980s *Child* magazine article, which we could not locate, and to a 1990 *Newsweek* story, which came after the *Texas Monthly* article (and did not cite it). Notably, the *Salon* article, not part of our sample, stated that the term Mommy Wars "has been overused by an eager media that seems intent on pitting women against each other."

³Initially we identified "mommy blogs" as a potential data site. Upon analysis of top blogs written by and for mothers (identified as popular by third-party sources), we discovered the phrase Mommy Wars was rarely used, and the content of these blogs focused primarily on lifestyles and contained many advertising products for mothers rather than discussion of work and family challenges. Next, we attempted to construct a sample from magazines targeting women. Using multiple research databases that contained magazine results, we identified very few articles (under 10) that contained our search terms. We looked at magazine websites with women as the target audience, which also produced a small sample. It is telling that mainstream news media appears to be the central location for Mommy Wars discourse.

⁴The full Factiva definition is: "Sources covering general news and business news that are considered key publications in their region by virtue of circulation or reputation." In our sample, six sources each comprised five percent or more of the sample: *Boston Globe* (11%), *Globe and Mail* (6%), *New York Times* (11%), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (6%), *USA Today* (6%), and *Washington Post* (21%). Note that the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today* are in the top 25 circulating daily newspapers in the United States, with the first two considered especially prominent. The *Globe and Mail* is a top newspaper in Canada.

⁵Testing whether the increasing number of articles could be explained by the rise in online publishing, we performed a second analysis (data not shown) solely on print publications, excluding all web-based sources, such as *New York Times* blogs and *WashingtonPost.com*. The trend in expansion in this select print-based sample mirrored the pattern found in the full sample reported in the findings.

⁶Choice was mentioned in articles about all types of wars, but was most prevalent in articles about work and family issues. Overall, rhetoric about choices was present in 30 percent of the total sample; 37 percent of articles about work and family wars (traditional and "having it all"), and 15 percent of articles about wars other than work and family.

⁷The lack of supports was also mentioned in articles that did not focus or mention the term "choice." Patterns followed suit: they were peripheral, brief, and discarded as a focus. In terms of state supports, it is interesting that we did not find substantive differences in how U.S. and Canadian newspaper articles discussed effective solutions to the Mommy Wars. Despite its more expansive national system of support services, including extensive paid maternity and parental leave, the Canadian press prioritized choice and women's individual behavior in much the same way as the American coverage, with no statistically significant differences in mentions of structural support between the two countries.

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