

# Perceptions of Mothers' Work Choices

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## Abstract

When they become mothers, women must choose whether they will pursue a career or stay home, or choose to do both. This research looks at stay-at-home mothers and part-time working mothers to view their perceptions of the decision. It asked what factors influenced their decision and if they are happy with their choice. Quantitative surveys of 169 mothers across the United States provided insight into why women chose to stay home with their child/children full or part time and whether they felt they were better mothers by staying at home. In-depth qualitative interviews with three Midwestern mothers took place to see if the women were happy with their choices and to identify any benefits or drawbacks they felt from the choices they made. Results showed the major reason women stayed home was to be a better mother, childcare savings, their child preferred they stay home or their husband influenced their decision. Mothers were found to be happy with the decision, and the majority found few drawbacks, believing they were better mothers for choosing to stay home full or part time.

**Keywords:** parenting choices, sensemaking, stay-at-home mother

## 1. Introduction

Research has focused on society's perceptions of mothers in the area of work and family (Bridges & Orza 1992, 1993). This research expanded on those ideas by looking at stay-at-home mothers to understand why they chose to stay home full time or part time, whether they felt happy with the choice and whether they felt any drawbacks. Past research suggested that women felt burdened by society's expectations and parenting practices (Cappuccini & Cochrane, 2000). This research examined whether mothers felt that society or past parenting practices influenced their choice in staying home.

The sample of this study was mothers who chose to stay home or to work only part time. The three survey questions addressed in this study were (a) Do I feel I am better mother staying home to care for my child/children than working, (b) Do I feel I am or would be a better mother working part time rather than staying home to care for my child/children and (c) Why did I chose to stay home or work part time because, ranking seven different factors. This research, unlike others, did not compare mothers who made different work choices; rather, the study was an examination of the mothers' perceptions of the choices they made.

Working mothers have been viewed in the past as less communal, compared to mothers who stop working to stay at home or took short maternity leaves (Bridges & Orza, 1993). The study advocates neither choice, nor does it include mothers working full time or management views about women who choose to leave work to raise children. This study was a search for the mothers' personal viewpoints concerning why they took time away from their careers to raise children, their happiness with their choices, and any drawbacks they felt.

### 1.1 Perceptions of Mothers

Many mothers may feel a need to stay at home and care for their child in the belief that a mother staying at home full time helps the child. Research has determined that parenting plays an important part in the development of children (Bornstein & Bradley, 2003). The idea has been that spending more time with the child creates a positive impact on the child's success and behavior but may cost moms financially, emotionally, and socially.

The stimulus for women may differ in their determination of whether to stay home with their child/children and on their impressions post-choice. The motivation for stay-at-home mothers may center on being a good parent, while career-oriented women may be motivated by achievement or recognition within the workforce (Giele, 2008). Some mothers feel resentment in their decisions to change from career-oriented to full time mothers, while others feel

satisfied (Blair-Loy, 2003).

Mothers may feel they are creating a better environment for their children by choosing to stay home, but this may create a stressful atmosphere in the home. Stressed parents have displayed negative or harsh behaviors along with less support and interaction with their children, causing more childhood behavioral problems (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2007). Parents without an outlet for their stress may be hampering instead of helping their children.

Parental stress and social support can influence parenting abilities (Degarmo, Petras, & Eap, 2008; Sepa, Frodi, & Ludvigsson, 2004). Social support can alleviate the stress felt by mothers and have a positive effect on the ability to parent (DeGarmo et al., 2008). Both stay-at-home mothers and working mothers need to consider stress when making their choices. Some mothers who return to work do so for the mental stimulation and social support (Khalil & Davies, 2000). Stay-at-home mothers may utilize mothers' organizations while working mothers can gain support from childcare centers or nannies.

Childcare has become one of the highest rated stressors for mothers who report high stress and low relationship satisfaction (Horowitz & Damato, 1999). The Pew Research Center (2009) found 50% of mothers believed too many children were being raised in daycare centers. The belief that a mother can provide better childcare may be a reason mothers choose to stay home, although the costs to a mother's career and emotional wellbeing may be too high for mothers who choose this path.

### *1.2 Part-Time Work*

Many mothers in the United States work full or part time for a variety of reasons. Mothers may choose to work due to financial reasons or personal desire. Whatever the reasons chosen, these working mothers are different from their full time employed counterparts without children. Employers may view part-time working women differently and provide them with different opportunities, duties, and compensation, which can reinforce how vulnerable and marginalized they feel as part-time employees (Webber & Williams, 2008).

Women with children have been known to move to part-time employment, which can negatively affect their earnings and increase the gender pay gap (Anderson, Forth, Metcalf, & Kirby, 2001; Manning & Petrongolo, 2004; Walby & Olsen, 2002). Employers may feel part-time workers are less committed to their careers, which causes organizations to provide fewer advancement or training opportunities to those working part time (Bonney, 2007).

Some mothers may feel part-time work is better than no employment due to the financial benefits, training, and social support (Bonney, 2007; Webber & Williams, 2008). Researchers have determined that most part-time working mothers prefer fewer hours of employment to allow additional time for family duties (Abramson, 2007).

Husbands of part-time working mothers qualitatively view their wives differently than if the mothers had full time employment (Duffy & Pupo, 1992). Part-time working mothers must balance earning an income and caring for their children, which may cause strain on the mother's time, energy, and attention to their variety of roles (Nomaguchi, 2006; Roxburgh, 2005). A mother's choice affects not only her career, but also her family life.

### *1.3 Mothers' Stress*

Mothers feel stress no matter what career choice they make. Mothers often feel underprepared and inundated by the demands of having a child (Francis-Connolly, 2002). Women take on more of the traditional household duties after the birth of their first child (Gjerdingen & Center, 2005), and as household and child-rearing duties increase, many women feel a lack of free time to relax. Mothers report higher stress, greater depression, and lower self-esteem after the birth of a child, compared to the fathers (Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Gallant, 2000).

Role strain is the demands of taking on multiple roles and the coping strategies used to deal with the strain (Goode, 1960). Researchers differ in how much role strain mothers have. Many women feel role strain when they combine work and family (Aneshensel & Pearlin, 1987). Other women have felt the dual roles of both mother and employee outweigh the strain and provide them self-worth (Marks, 1977).

The choice of whether a mother should work if she is financially stable is one more issue that causes debate and brings forth the concept of a good mother versus a bad mother. The media show the progression of the stay-at-home mother of the 1950s to the current version of the mother who can do it all. This do-it-all mentality entails managing a successful career while maintaining an idealistic portrayal of a mother.

Socially, mothers may feel overwhelmed with the desire to be the best mother possible. Such a feeling can determine whether she chooses to reenter the work force or stay at home. The Pew Research report of 2012 found 40% of people felt mothers should work only part time, while 12% believed full time work was best and 42% felt mothers should not work at all. Mothers were found to feel happy working, with 85% of full time employed mothers feeling

*happy* or *very happy* while 80% of part-time employed mothers felt *happy* or *very happy*. Concerning stress, 86% of all mothers felt stressed *sometimes* or *frequently* (Pew, 2012).

The stress may lie not only in parenting ability but also in financial factors. Mothers were found to be paid on average \$11,000 less than their counterparts (Pew, 2012). Hispanic mothers were not found to have a pay disparity, yet both Black and White married mothers were found to be penalized (Glauber, 2007). Such discrimination hurts women both financially and emotionally, because choosing to have a child may cost them raises, jobs, and upward mobility within a company. If a woman chooses not to work outside the home while her child is young, the wage disparity may await her later when she returns to the workforce.

#### 1.4 Maslow's Hierarchy

Women have both biological and social impacts that affect their choices. Maslow's hierarchy depicts the basic needs, security for the mother and child, along with higher-level needs such as a career or accomplishments (Maslow, 1943). Maslow discussed his hierarchy at the basic level needs of food, shelter, and sleep while identifying the needs of security and social/friendship. These levels influence mothers in the choices of how to care for their children and the social support they feel in raising a family. This research looks to see if mothers who take time away from their career, full time or cutting back to part time, are able to feel more secure and happier.

#### 1.5 Sensemaking Theory

When women make the shift into motherhood, they need to make sense of their new role. Sensemaking has been defined as the ongoing formation of beliefs by individuals about circumstances in an attempt to rationally comprehend them (Weick, 2001). Sensemaking helps individuals create meaning out of past or current situations (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) by enabling them to determine what is significant and helping them decide what is important. Sensemaking, though used primarily during crises or extreme events, can spotlight the comprehension of major life events such as childbirth and new motherhood. Sensemaking can provide guidance to new mothers dealing with the stress of young children, sleepless nights, overwhelming advice, and constant media input of what motherhood means. Women are forced to reexamine their perceptions and beliefs surrounding motherhood and choose whether to work or to stay home. This study looks into the sensemaking of mothers to determine if they believe their choice is correct and what factors influenced their decision.

#### 1.6 Feminist Theory

Feminist have viewed the choices of mothers for over three decades and advocate that motherhood is not essential to being a woman; rather, when or if to raise children is a choice (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010). Cultural beliefs, background, and religious beliefs can play roles in whether a woman chooses to have children and how she mothers them. How a mother raises her children should be primarily a parental choice, yet many factors affect the final decision. Childcare choices have been found characteristic of the mother's family beliefs or values while considering the society's attitude on childcare (Weber, 2011).

Feminists proclaimed mothers have a right to choose to stay home, have a career, or do both, though Landau and Arthur (1992) warned if a woman's choice includes dropping out of the workforce, she may be financially dependent on her spouse, while potentially losing job skills and benefits. Mothers need to determine the roles they want to take on, which include the choices of whether to stay home, work part-time, or work full time. This research provides a lens to determine what influences a mother's choice, including pressures from those around her, and to examine a woman's own perceptions of her choices.

## 2. Methodology

The quantitative survey was an examination of the perceptions and beliefs of stay-at-home mothers and part-time employed mothers. The voluntary survey obtained by mothers via e-mail contained questions of how happy they were with their choice and what factors they used to decide whether they would stay home. Surveys were distributed via an online service to 100 volunteer mothers who met the work requirement, and 69 additional women were group members of two mothers' organizations within the researcher's local area.

Mothers who chose to take the survey were asked to provide demographic information. The demographic information showed all mothers had children under the age of 18. The sample was from every region of the United States, with higher percentages from the Midwest where the researcher was located. The women were between the ages of 18 and 60, with the majority (54%) between 34 and 44 years of age. Most mothers (46%) had one child in their household; 36% two children, and 11% three children. Mothers with four or more children made up 7% of participants. The income levels of the mothers ranged from below \$25,000 to over \$150,000. The majority of mothers' household

incomes were \$50,000-\$100,000 (24%) or \$25,000-\$49,000 (23%). Nearly all mothers had some higher education: 34% had some college, 35% had associate or bachelor degrees, and 24% had graduate degrees.

The qualitative interview sample was composed of three Midwestern mothers who were all in their late 20s to mid-30s, had middle income, and had at least a bachelor's degree. All of the mothers had worked full time prior to having children and currently were full time stay-at-home mothers. Qualitative participants had the opportunity either to discuss the qualitative questions with the researcher or to have a hard copy of the questions on which they could write down their answers. All participants were able to think over their answers and ensure they correctly provided thoughtful answers. Questions asked of them helped to determine their perceptions of staying at home, of the benefits, and of the drawbacks.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Quantitative Results

Participants scored questions on a 5-point scale of *agree* to *disagree*, with a midpoint of *neutral*. Results from the quantitative survey indicated many mothers felt they were a better mother by staying home, but not all mothers believed part-time work would or did make them happy. The mothers stated the option of staying-at-home full time made them happy with, 36.7% *agreed* they were better mothers, while 29.6% *somewhat agreed* with the statement. Results indicated 17% were *neutral* and 10.6% *disagreed*. Mothers viewed the option of working part-time made them happy but only, 13.2% *agreed*, 28% *somewhat agreed* and 21.3 were *neutral*. Mothers who *somewhat disagreed* with this option comprised 21.3% and 20.1 % *disagreed*. The difference in responses for full time staying-at-home versus part-time working may be mothers that currently stay home full time did not feel working part-time would make them happier. See Table 1 and Table 2 for data details.

Table 1. Feel better staying home

	<i>f</i>	%
Agree	62	36.7
Somewhat Agree	50	29.6
Neutral	29	17.2
Somewhat Disagree	18	10.7
Disagree	10	5.6
Total	169	100.0

Table 2. Feel better staying home by part-time workers

	<i>f</i>	%
Agree	22	13.2
Somewhat Agree	48	28.4
Neutral	36	21.3
Somewhat Disagree	29	17.2
Disagree	34	20.1
Total	169	100.0

When mothers were asked why they stayed home, 67.5% ranked highest that they felt they were a better mother in choosing that choice. Those mothers that did not state being a better mother in first place still ranked it second with 20%. Mothers also ranked saving on childcare (22% first place and 26% second) along with that their child preferred they stay home (5.9% first, 34.3% second) as reasons to do so. Some mothers also mentioned that their spouse preferred them to stay home, ranking that highest in a third (26.7%) or fourth spot (30.8%). Many of the mothers stated they did not stay home due to societal views or religious reason, ranking them 4-7 in significance. A few mothers felt that their mother staying home influenced their chose. Most mothers ranked having a mother that stayed at home as a child as somewhere between the 3 – 6 ranking (see Table 3).

Table 3. Ranking of reasons to stay home

	<i>F</i>	%	Ranking
Childcare Cost Savings	37	22.0	1
	44	26.0	2
	30	17.7	3
	25	14.8	4
	23	13.6	5
	7	4.1	6
	3	1.8	7
Better Mother	114	67.5	1
	34	20.1	2
	15	8.9	3
	2	1.2	4
	3	1.8	5
	1	.6	6
	0	0.0	7
Religious Reasons	1	.6	1
	8	4.7	2
	11	6.5	3
	13	7.7	4
	18	9.5	5
	31	18.3	6
	89	52.7	7
Spouse Prefers	3	1.8	1
	16	9.5	2
	45	26.7	3
	52	30.8	4
	25	14.8	5
	21	12.4	6
	7	4.1	7
Child Prefers	10	5.9	1
	58	34.3	2
	49	29.0	3
	30	17.8	4
	16	9.5	5
	4	2.5	6
	2	1.2	7
Tradition: Mother was Home	3	1.8	1
	8	4.7	2
	18	10.7	3
	35	20.7	4
	52	30.8	5
	37	21.9	6
	16	9.5	7
Societal Beliefs	1	0.6	1
	1	0.6	2
	1	0.6	3
	12	7.1	4
	34	20.1	5
	68	40.2	6
	52	30.8	7

### 3.2 *Qualitative Results*

The qualitative sample discussed happiness with their decision to stay home. All three mothers stated they were happy with the decision, yet acknowledged drawbacks. The emerging themes showed mothers felt they were better caregivers, and both mother and child were emotionally happier, while drawbacks included financial and emotional issues.

#### 3.2.1 Happiness with the Decision to Stay Home

Mother 1 with two children stated, she was 95% happy with the choice to stay home with her two children. There are days I am with two kids under 3 all day and they are nagging and yelling, and I wish I could get out of the house for the day and that would give me a bit of a break.

Mother 2 with one child and one on the way mentioned, I am very happy with it, though there are times I miss being with other adults and miss working. I decided to join a Moms club group and that helps a lot. I just wanted to be sure that if I stay home with my child, I also have my adult time with my friends.

Mother 3 with two children stated, Yes. I am happy that my husband and I made the decision for me to stay home. I feel that it is beneficial to my children to have me providing their care to them. It is important to me to provide a secure attachment for them and to be available to them at all times. I want them to be the top priority in my life, and staying home with them allows me to do that.

#### 3.2.2 Reasons to Stay Home: A Better Caregiver Philosophy

Mother 1 with two children stated, basically, I worked at a daycare; small, privately owned daycare. For daycares, this was the one that you could send your kids to, but my coworkers had no business raising kids. I got jaded by the whole experience; I feel they have no business watching children. I left a big engineering career to stay home. A big opportunity cost. I just felt I could raise my kids better than the daycare could. I think I am doing a better job than most daycares could.

Other mothers took a similar view of wanting to be the one raising their children. Mother 2 with one child and a second on the way explained why she stayed home. I want to spend time with my child. I love taking care of her instead of having someone else do it. I love getting to see how she grows up and I want to feel close to her. My mother also stayed home when I was little so, I always wanted to do the same with my child.

Mother 3 with two children stated, I chose to stay at home in order to have the first hand in raising my children. Spending time with my kids is so important to me that if I had been unable to stay home with my children, I would have strongly considered not having children. It is important to me to spend this time with them because I believe that the time during their formative years will have a lifelong impact on them and affect their personalities, abilities, and emotional healthiness tremendously. I feel that it would be impossible for another adult providing care to my children to be as invested in their well-being as I am as their parent.

#### 3.2.3 Benefits of Staying Home: Emotionally Happy Mother and Child

Mothers discussed the benefits of staying at home with their child/children. Mother 1 with two children stated her children were, happier children, more adjusted children. My oldest child never learned to bite or hit or talk back or any of that. She never got sick. It's easier on schedules to have one parent stay home all the time. Once the kids are in school, someone can be there when they are sick.

Mother 2 with one child and expecting a second stated, "To feel close to my child and be there for her when she needs me."

Mother 3 with two children gave a more personal reason, the benefits for me include getting to see my children grow each day and getting to watch them experience the world during this early stage of life. I am able to take lots of pictures and videos to share with relatives and I am able to relay experiences such as first steps, etc. with my husband immediately when they happen.

Mothers believed the benefits for both their children and themselves outweighed any financial or career sacrifices.

#### 3.2.4 Drawbacks: Financial and Emotional

The drawbacks to staying at home included not only financial losses but also emotional issues. Some mothers felt drawbacks were nonexistent while others described the monetary and career setbacks.

One mother mentioned the lack of respect mothers get from society and their own children on bad days.

Mother 1 with two children saw some minor problems with her choice to stay home. "Money, and days when I am

going crazy.”

Mother 2 with one child and one on the way did not see any drawbacks to staying at home.

Mother 3 reported, obviously, there is a financial sacrifice made as well when a mom chooses to stay home. In addition to lost earnings potential, re-entry into the workforce will be at a pay grade that could have been higher had I been receiving ongoing training and experience within the field during the time that I stay home. Mother 3 described the lack of external rewards from being a mother, stating,

In the workforce, I had reviews from upper management to let me know if I was doing a good job. When I was self-employed, I received monetary compensation and praise from my clients that reassured me of my value to them. As a stay-at-home mom, those reassurances are unavailable and there are no clear guidelines or expectations, aside from the ones that I create for myself. That can be a drawback because, although being a mom can be very rewarding emotionally at times, it can also be hard for me to clearly see my value or gauge my success as a parent at times as well. There are no promotions, no paychecks, and often times no praise. There is no quantitative way to measure my success in this role at the end of each day, and for me, that is sometimes difficult.

Mothers mentioned they felt some drawbacks from staying at home with their child/children. Nonetheless, all three felt the choice to stay home was the best choice for them personally.

#### **4. Limitations and Implications**

This study was limited to only a 169 mothers from across the country that were working part time or had stopped working and were now full time mothers. This research was also limited by the 3 Midwestern mothers for the qualitative part of the research. Limitations included unspecified part time hours which allowed for a variance in what mothers determined part time for their career. Mother's education or profession was also not a factor nor was the number of children she had. Mothers with multiple children may have has a more economic reason to stay home. Mothers with a higher education or specific profession may have felt more pressure to work. These factors were not examined and may play a role in future research.

#### **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

The quantitative and qualitative finding showed mothers believed they were being better parents by staying home to raise their children themselves. They felt they were better parents by spending more time with their child and felt they and their child both benefitted from the choice. The qualitative data showed the choice to stay at home could be a financial hardship for mothers.

Society views a successful career using the male career model, which does not take into account marriage, pregnancy, and raising children (Waumsley & Houston, 2009). The mothers participating in the study reexamined their own determination of career success and family balance and believed they had made the right choice.

Some mothers may choose to continue in the same line of work with similar hours as before having children, while other may choose to go to part-time work. Other women may feel the need to change careers after having children. One factor may include the ability to provide financially for the family while allowing more time with the children. Others may feel the social need of working part time due to the potential stress of raising younger children. Whatever the mother's motivation, the choice needs to be hers to decide.

A woman's choice to stay at home or work is a personal decision, and again, the research seemed to confirm mothers preferred one of the three types of family/career focuses. The three types of career patterns established include family centered, work centered, and work/family centered (Qinghai, El-Khouri, Johansson, Lindroth, & Sverke, 2007). Women who value their family over their career total only 10% to 30% of the population, while work/family centered women make up 40-80% (Hakim, 2000). Whatever choice a woman makes should be hers to determine, and she needs support to ensure that her decision is the correct one.

Mothers need to have support to ensure they can succeed in all aspects of their lives. Many stay-at-home or part-time employed mothers feel being at home with their child makes them a better mother: this choice should be supported by their families, friends, and communities.

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