On Mothers and Measures: The (Re)Production of Mothering Ideologies in Psychological Measures of Motherhood

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Abstract

Across disciplines, researchers look to motherhood as a site of theorization about the growth and wellbeing of the population because of their important role in biological and social reproduction. Psychologists frequently study motherhood and as such play an important role in producing an ideal maternal subject. Past research has shown that the measurement tools we use in psychology are laden with bias, stereotypes, and ideologies about the group being studied and as such are producing ideologically charged results that filter into the world under the semblance of scientific objectivity (McClelland et al., 2020). Using critical measurement analysis, I found that an item bank of psychological survey items that measure attitudes towards motherhood rely on neoliberal and essentialist ideologies to construct the maternal subject. Focus group discussions with a small sample of North American mothers suggests that ideologies are occasionally mirrored in the lived experiences of mothers, but that mothers also work to resist these ideologies and construct alternative narratives. Quantitative measures of motherhood used in psychological research dichotomize motherhood and provide us with a framework for categorizing the ideal maternal subject. However, mothers are adept at resisting and rewriting narratives of good motherhood. Expansion of best practices in survey development is discussed to mitigate the presence of ideologies in our measurement tools.

Keywords

Motherhood; ideology; attitudes; critical methods; feminist poststructuralism; anti-positivism
Summary for Lay Audience

The research performed by academics helps to shape our understanding of particular social groups. As this research leaks into the ‘real world’ it shapes public opinion and individual attitudes and beliefs. Because of the undeniable power of academic research to produce knowledge that shapes how we think and feel about different people, it is important that we scrutinize the tools researchers are using as they impact how we structure our social worlds.

Mothers are often studied by psychological researchers who look at various aspects of motherhood, including maternal mental health and child development. This means that psychologists play an important role in shaping our understanding of what a good mother should look like. With this work, I critically analyzed a collection of survey items gathered from psychological measures of attitudes towards motherhood. I found that these items house assumptions and biases about mothers that structure how individuals respond to the items. How individuals respond to items shape the understanding of motherhood that gets passed down to the public. This means that researchers are relying on narratives about what good mothering looks like and this is being shared to the public as scientific ‘truth’. Focus group discussion with North American mothers revealed that these narratives do shape their experiences with motherhood, but they also made efforts to resist and rewrite narratives of motherhood that did not reflect their experience. These results suggest that psychological research plays an important role in shaping our understanding of good motherhood and that psychological understandings of good motherhood affect the experiences of mothers in the ‘real world’.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii  
Summary for Lay Audience ............................................................................................ iii  
Acknowledgments .......................................................................................................... iv  
Table of Contents .......................................................................................................... v  
List of Tables .................................................................................................................. vii  
List of Appendices ......................................................................................................... viii  
Chapter 1 ....................................................................................................................... 1  
1 Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1  
  1.1 Framing Motherhood in Our Social Environments .............................................. 1  
  1.2 Feminists Conceptualizing Motherhood ............................................................... 2  
  1.3 Motherhood Research in Psychology ................................................................ 5  
    1.3.1 Using Surveys for the Quantitative Measurement of Motherhood .............. 9  
  1.4 The Academy as a Site of Knowledge Production .............................................. 11  
  1.5 The Current Study ............................................................................................... 13  
Chapter 2 ....................................................................................................................... 15  
2 Methods ....................................................................................................................... 15  
  2.1 Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................... 15  
  2.2 Critical Measurement Analysis ......................................................................... 15  
    2.2.1 Item Bank Development ............................................................................. 15  
    2.2.2 Analytic Strategy ....................................................................................... 20  
  2.3 Focus Group Discussions .................................................................................... 21  
    2.3.1 Participants ................................................................................................ 22  
    2.3.2 Procedure .................................................................................................. 23  
    2.3.3 Data Analysis ............................................................................................ 23
2.4 Social Location and Positionality ................................................................. 24
Chapter 3 ............................................................................................................. 25

3 Critical Measurement Analysis Results .......................................................... 25
Chapter 4 ............................................................................................................. 36

4 Focus Group Results ........................................................................................ 36
   4.1 Thematic Patterns in Experiences of Motherhood ........................................ 36
   4.2 Participant Engagement with Item ............................................................... 51
Chapter 5 ............................................................................................................. 56

5 Discussion ........................................................................................................ 56
   5.1 Critical Measurement Analysis ................................................................... 56
      5.1.1 The Good Mother as Productive Labourer Ideology ............................ 56
      5.1.2 The Mother and Child as Lovingly Interconnected Ideology ............... 57
      5.1.3 Motherhood as a Process of Identity Development Ideology .............. 57
      5.1.4 The Single Desirable Maternal Subject .............................................. 58
   5.2 What’s Reflected in the Experiences of Mothers? ...................................... 59
   5.3 What’s Resisted by Mothers? ..................................................................... 61
   5.4 What’s Missing in These Measurement Tools? ......................................... 62
   5.5 How are Mothers Interacting with Items? ................................................. 63
   5.6 Implications ............................................................................................... 64
      5.6.1 Building Best Practices in Measurement ........................................... 65
   5.7 Limitations and Future Research Directions ............................................ 66
   5.8 Conclusion ................................................................................................. 67

References .......................................................................................................... 69

Curriculum Vitae ............................................................................................... 94
List of Tables

Table 1. Measures of Attitudes Towards Motherhood................................................................. 17

Table 2. Participant Demographics............................................................................................ 22

Table 3. Theme 1: Good Mother as Productive Labourer Ideology............................................ 25

Table 4. Theme 2: Mother and Child as Lovingly Interconnected ............................................. 29

Table 5. Theme 3: Motherhood as a Process of Identity Development ....................................... 32

Table 6. Themes Across Focus Groups....................................................................................... 36
List of Appendices

Appendix A: Demographics Questionnaire and Letter of Intent ........................................... 83

Appendix B: Tentative Items for Focus Groups ...................................................................... 92

Appendix C: Tentative Focus Group Schedule ....................................................................... 93
Chapter 1

1 Introduction

The important role that the field of psychology plays in ‘producing motherhood’ is well established (e.g., Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). Motherhood has been heavily studied by psychologists since Freud, Watson, and Harlow started this tradition in the early 20th century. Since then, the gaze of psychological researchers has continued to rest upon mothers, and our understanding of how motherhood should look continues to be informed by psychological research.

Through a critical feminist lens, the present research seeks to trouble psychological constructions of motherhood and the perceived objectivity of psychological surveys, particularly those that measure attitudes towards mothers, to argue that these measures both rely on and reproduce ideologies of motherhood. Here, I draw from calls within the field to “question the unquestionability” of psychology (Fatemi, 2015). I also borrow from Audre Lorde (1984) who famously argued that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” (2) With this work, I challenge the master’s tools (i.e., our measurement tools in psychology) to dismantle the master’s house (i.e., destabilize potentially harmful knowledge production in motherhood research).

1.1 Framing Motherhood in Our Social Environments

Popular culture revolves around its production of the good mother archetype (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). One prototypical portrayal of the good mother is by the actor Jennifer Garner, who has made her career playing this archetypal character in every heartwarming movie that centers a family with a white, upper-middle class mother. Garner, among others in film, TV, and advertising, symbolizes the good mother ideal as being white, upper-middle class, loving, devoted, and well-balanced. We can see in these portrayals that an important facet of the good mother is her emotion profile, which is well-adjusted, happy, and focused on herself (while also prioritizing her child). Indeed, a quick online search of the Canadian magazine, Chatelaine, using the keyword “mom” produces a plethora of articles about how to be a happy mom, the longer life span of
working mothers (vs. stay-at-home mothers), and how to burn off the “baby weight” by walking with your baby. These discourses of good motherhood are widespread (Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Rock, 2007) and they, as most discourses do, operate at a level of imperceptibility. That is, it’s difficult to trace exactly who and what gave birth to our ideological constructions of motherhood. While the current thesis investigates how this discourse manifests in psychological research, and specifically within our measurement tools, it is important to recognize the wider circulation of these discourses within the culture where these tools are developed and used.

1.2 Feminists Conceptualizing Motherhood

Motherhood is a frequently visited site for academic theory and scholarship. Across disciplines, we speculate on the role, meaning, social situation, and wellbeing of mothers to think more broadly about the state of the world. We look to mothers as they come to represent the wellbeing and prosperity of the broader population, particularly because of their important role in biological and social reproduction. Feminist scholars think about motherhood as a way to challenge harmful ideologies, including patriarchal and capitalist ideologies, that often appear on a micro scale within the family. The present research draws largely from the theories of feminist scholars who think critically about social constructions of motherhood. Traditionally, feminist theorists have conceptualized motherhood as a social identity that is laden with stereotypes of women as natural caregivers who operate optimally within domestic spaces (e.g., Firestone, 1970). While these ideas are still foundational to feminist understandings of motherhood, modern theories of motherhood have become increasingly nuanced, pointing to specific ideological and systemic processes that work to actively constrain mothers. For instance, tenets of both Marxist feminist and eco-feminist thought conceptualize the reproductive body as a “natural resource” (Oksala, 2018). In this branch of thought, reproductive labour is situated within capitalist systems of power, where the reproductive body is understood to be a free resource for capital accumulation (Oksala, 2018). The perception of reproductive labour as freely available is intimately tied to the naturalization of the reproductive body, where reproduction is ideologically constructed as a process which is as freely available as “…air and water” (Oksala, 2018). This means that we not only
assume that motherhood is a natural state for women that they engage in freely and with ease, but also that we objectify maternal bodies by viewing them as a means of production to which we are entitled.

Given our reliance on the maternal body as a natural resource, it is unsurprising that we talk about the cleanliness or purity of maternal bodies, much in the same way we discuss the purity of our natural resources. Discourses of purity are inseparable from those of natural resources as made evident in constructions of “clean air” and “clean water,” which are distinct in their utility from “dirty” or “impure” air/water. Indeed, there is a large body of psychological research that explores the self-regulation of the maternal body to purify and perfect it (e.g., through weight control behaviours: Budds, 2021; Gillen et al., 2021). In this research, the maternal body is abjectified (Kristeva, 2018) – it is considered unruly and in need of control – and motherhood involves efforts to re-purify the body. For example, there is a distinct body of psychological research that investigates the effectiveness of certain interventions for addressing cannabis use during pregnancy (Groff et al., 2023). Whether the concerns about the effects of cannabis on fetal development are justified, the pursuit to disrupt maternal cannabis use is symbolic of our desire to ‘purify’ and control maternal bodies. As such, the naturalness of the maternal body is constructed as something to assert control over. The natural maternal body has its roots in ideologies of biological, psychological, and gender essentialism (e.g., Averett, 2021; Park et al., 2005). Biological and psychological essentialism rationalize the gendered division of caregiving labour by establishing ‘differences’ between the men and women as a product of biological sex and psychological predispositions (Gaunt, 2006). The ‘natural woman’ ideology is inseparable from essentialist constructions of ‘sexed’ bodies, where womanhood is associated with mothering as a product of the (cis, able-bodied) female body’s distinct ability to procreate. As a result, female bodies are equated with performances of mothering (Averett, 2021).

To disentangle experiences of mothering from ideologies of motherhood, it is necessary to explore how we employ these ideologies to govern reproductive processes and how this impacts the lived experiences of mothers. The ideologies that govern motherhood act through systems of power that regulate and constrain childbearing and
childrearing experiences (Mavuso & Chadwick, 2022). Reproductive governance occurs primarily through *repronormativity*, or the visibilization, normalization, and legitimation of certain reproductive subjects, trajectories, and narratives (Mavuso & Chadwick, 2022). Subsequently, those reproductive subjects who are made invisible or delegitimized are considered “undesirable,” “abnormal,” or “risky” (Mavuso & Chadwick, 2022). In other words, repronormativity provides us with guidelines for categorizing maternal subjects into dichotomous “good” or “bad” mothers. For example, more than 50% of children in Canadian foster care are Indigenous (Government of Canada), likely a result of our tendency to remove babies from Indigenous mothers immediately following childbirth. These mothers are often deemed “high-risk” by child welfare agencies (e.g., Hwang, 2022), both perpetuating and relying on the perception of Indigenous mothers as risky and unstable. Here, the real-world impacts of repronormativity on the lived experiences of mothers is made visible. Further, the high concentration of Indigenous children in Canadian foster care is indicative of the immense tangible power of racist, classist, and ableist ideological constructions of “good” motherhood. Indigenous mothers, who tend to be delegitimized, and therefore deemed “bad” mothers, because of their incongruency with upper-middle class, white, capitalist ideals of motherhood, are harmed by restrictive ideologies of motherhood. The present research seeks to explore these constructions of motherhood as they exist in psychological research, and how these ideologies shape the lived experiences of a sample of North American mothers.

It has been theorized that our understanding of “good” motherhood is heavily rooted in neoliberal ideologies (Thornton, 2014). Neoliberalism, a capitalist philosophy, broadly centers the individual and privileges constructions of autonomy and choice (Davies & Bansel, 2007). This means that individuals are encouraged to engage in self-improvement in efforts to be happier and more productive (Thornton, 2010). As neoliberal ideology has impacted our own self-perceptions so too has it altered the ways in which we conceive of “good” motherhood. The centering of individual responsibility under neoliberalism means that we view motherhood as a ‘one-woman-job,’ with the family being led and managed by the mother (Güney-Frahm, 2020). As evident across the countless cultural portrayals of mothers and motherhood, the good neoliberal mother is one who is managing the struggles of motherhood while taking care of herself, is looking
for ways to improve, and, most importantly, is having fun (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Thornton, 2010). As such, motherhood is largely a performance of “choice,” where mothers make ‘choices’ – however, constrained and highly regulated – in efforts to become both better versions of themselves and to become better mothers. For example, it is widely accepted that mothers may “choose” whether to go back to work after having a baby. Not only are these narratives of choice inseparable from neoliberal ideology, but similar motherhood ideologies that are informed by neoliberalism (e.g., attachment and bonding ideologies that rely on neoliberal constructions of individual responsibility and care) inform and constrain a mother’s “choice” to work. With this research, I aimed to explore the presence of neoliberal ideology in psychological survey items that measure motherhood and to investigate how these translate into real-world maternal experiences.

1.3 Motherhood Research in Psychology

Motherhood is of great interest to researchers across various sub-fields of psychology (e.g., developmental: Aureli et al., 2022, Smith & Pederson, 1998; clinical: Garcia et al., 2021, Layton et al., 2021; social: Lazard et al., 2019, Park et al., 2015). The first known quantitative measure of motherhood was developed by Rachel Hare-Mustin and Patricia Broderick and was published in 1979. The Motherhood Inventory was developed to study attitudes towards motherhood and contains items about a woman’s right to control her own reproduction and general attitudes towards the ideological construction of motherhood. Hare-Mustin and Broderick (1979) developed the Motherhood Inventory during the second wave of feminism, when researchers were focusing on attitudes towards women in their more “liberated roles” (p. 114). They theorized that attitudes towards motherhood, a sacred and idealized role, might not be progressing as rapidly as attitudes towards women more generally. Items measured respondents’ traditional (e.g., “Having a baby fulfills a woman totally”) and progressive (e.g., “A woman should have the right to abort without the man’s permission”) attitudes towards motherhood. Notably this scale was published in the *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, and represents a move towards the psychological study of motherhood using a feminist lens. Through the end of the 20th century, however, most psychological research on motherhood continued to pathologize certain maternal subjects (e.g., teen mothers: Barth et al., 1983; Brooks-Gunn
& Furstenberg, 1986; lesbian or single mothers: Golombok et al., 2006), uphold working mother narratives of separation anxiety and balance (e.g., DeMeis et al., 1986; Stifter et al., 1993), and view mothers as lone actors, where mothering experiences are boiled down to maternal identity (e.g., Smith, 1991) and maternal psychopathology (e.g., Ali & Avison, 1997). A review conducted by Schmidt et al. (2022) found that 21st century psychological constructions of motherhood continue to rely on ideologies of the ‘working mother,’ the ‘happy mother,’ the ‘present mother’ (i.e., the ‘attentive mother’), the ‘future-oriented mother’ (i.e., the ‘child-focused mother’), and the ‘public mother’ (i.e., the ‘in control mother’).

Much of this research ignores the complex capitalist landscape within which mothers must operate, and instead relies on simplified and one-dimensional conceptualizations of motherhood. Within this literature, motherhood is most often conceptualized and measured as a ‘way of being’ with a set of assigned roles or duties. Many of the duties associated with motherhood are affective in nature. Just as in modern capitalist workplaces, wherein emotion management is an asset, motherhood necessitates “emotion work” (i.e., inducing or inhibiting emotions to be feeling ‘appropriately’; Hochschild, 1979). Under neoliberalism all experience can be commodified, emotions included, and certain emotions are valued more than others for their utility to capitalist systems (D’Aoust, 2014). Certain emotions are favoured by neoliberal capitalism, such as confidence, flexibility, and positivity (Gill & Kanai, 2023), and we see these emotions upheld by psychological motherhood research. For example, survey items ask mothers to reflect on their confidence levels regarding their ability to care for their child, with the expectation being that a good mother is confident in her mothering abilities. Relatedly, a focus on emotion work is mirrored in an interview study conducted by McCoyd and colleagues (2020) where it was found that women with high-risk pregnancies engaged in “emotion management techniques” to keep from inadvertently harming their fetus. Emotion management techniques included making a concerted effort to relax when faced with stress and an attempt to override negative feelings with excitement about their pregnancy (McCoyd et al., 2020). The employment of emotion management has also been documented in mothers in the post-partum period as a means by which to cope with feelings of guilt (Fielding-Cooper & Singer, 2022). Here, women participate in affective
or emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979) both as an investment in the development of the child and to be a “good” mother by prescribing to traditional narratives of the affective duties of the mother.

The notion that motherhood requires emotion work relies on neoliberal ideologies of ‘individual responsibility’ and the commodification of the self (or an emphasis on self-care and self-improvement). Responsibility is complex for mothers as individual responsibility involves caring for both the self and the child (Lazard et al., 2019), essentially conflating the two individuals. For example, pregnant teens reported increased engagement with safety-conscious behaviours after finding out they were pregnant (Shanok & Miller, 2007). Here, mothers’ self-care is directly related to the care of the fetus. Notions of maternal affective labour follow a similar pattern, where mothers must regulate their emotions in such a way that contributes positively to the emotional well-being of the child (Thornton, 2011). As a product of this conflation, motherhood is often conceptualized and measured in relation to the child (e.g., Evans & Porter, 2009). This means that the literature often views mothers as tools or resources to promote the healthy development of the child (e.g., in the attachment literature, maternal behavior is described as a means by which to ensure positive developmental outcomes: Calkins et al., 1998) and, more broadly, for the repopulation of the state. Here, mothers undergo a process of dehumanization and objectification. For example, psychological research on knowledge of and attitudes toward breastfeeding reduce women who are mothers to their bodies ability to produce milk (e.g., Davie et al., 2020). This research often links breastfeeding to positive outcomes for both the child and the mother (e.g., healthy growth and cognitive development: Wallenborn et al., 2021; improved maternal mental health outcomes: Yuen et al., 2022), but disregards the wide variability in this behavior, the context-dependency of this behavior, and women’s choice not to breastfeed. Indeed, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially recommends that infants be exclusively breastfed for the first six months of life, a recommendation informed by “sound scientific evidence.” The WHO notes that breastfeeding “...improves IQ, school attendance, and is associated with higher income in adult life.” One way to read this is that breastfeeding is the only way to ensure your child develops into a productive capitalist citizen. By putting out recommendations for breastfeeding, the WHO demonstrates our tendency to treat
maternal bodies as natural resources that are consumed by the larger population. Notably, this also means that the breastfeeding research is effectively filtering into the world in the form of public opinion and social policy, and ultimately social norms. As such, endorsing and circulating the common belief and rhetoric that mothers should breastfeed means we evaluate “good” mothers in terms of whether they breastfeed, engage in surveillance of how mothers feed their infants, and, in essence, reduce mothers and their effectiveness to the function of their body parts and their ability to breastfeed. When it comes to constructing and measuring motherhood, psychological research tends to rely on neoliberal ideals of individual responsibility and affective investments that legitimize white, upper-middle class, cis-gendered mothers as “good” and delegitimize the Other mother.

Notably, there seems to be a growing psychological interest in the ways in which mothers interact with their social worlds. For example, there is a body of research that explores how mothers navigate online spaces and social media (e.g., Capdevila et al., 2022; Orton-Johnson, 2017). This research often focuses on the digital space as a ‘stage’ (Goffman, 1959) for the performance of motherhood. By acknowledging the stifling performativity of motherhood, these researchers trouble the same ideological constructions of the family and mothering that Firestone (1970) was challenging over fifty years ago. Notably, ‘social motherhood,’ or the performance of motherhood in social contexts, often involves competition (Chae, 2022) and surveillance (Blackford, 2004), with a series of negative consequences for mothers’ well-being (e.g., anxiety, depression, social comparison, envy, less perceived competence) because of their exposure to these idealized portrayals of motherhood on social media (Coyne et al., 2017; Kirkpatrick & Lee, 2022). Thus, the entanglement of motherhood and neoliberal ideologies stubbornly persists with psychological conceptualizations of motherhood tending to focus on individual choice and self-regulation, even when these mothers are placed within their respective social contexts.
1.3.1 Using Surveys for the Quantitative Measurement of Motherhood

Traditionally, psychological research has relied on survey responses to measure and make meaning of motherhood. This research explores whether these psychological survey items reflect ideological constructions of motherhood described above that may serve to both surveil and constrain perceptions of mothers and the lived experiences of mothers. In particular, the extensive psychological literature around intensive parenting and the “good mother” ideology may serve to produce a dichotomy through which a set of discrete traits or behaviours comes to define mothers as “good” or “bad.” For example, an item from the *Motherhood Inventory* (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979) asks respondents to indicate their agreement with the statement, “A woman who doesn’t want children is unnatural.” Not only does this item uphold essentialist constructions of motherhood as something that should come “naturally” to women, but it also reflects our tendency to conflate female bodies with maternal bodies simply because of the cis-gendered female body’s distinct ability to reproduce, such that it becomes difficult to separate the female body from its utility as a means of (re)production. An essentialist narrative about the “natural” state of motherhood also contributes to the harmful discourse and stigma certain childless women face and pathologizes certain subgroups of women (e.g., mothers who seek out extra childrearing support).

More modern measures of motherhood continue this tradition of relying on ideological constructions of motherhood in their item development. For example, an item from the *Attitudes Toward Motherhood Scale* (“It is wrong to have mixed feelings about my baby”; Sockol et al., 2014) reproduces ideological constructions of the mother as necessarily skilled at emotion work and able to regulate away any negative feelings about their baby. Relatedly, this item relies on narratives of ‘blissful’ motherhood that are inseparable from the neoliberal favouring of positivity and flexibility. On a more applied level, the item does not provide the respondent with any context for these feelings and therefore does not allow insight into the complexity of postpartum experiences, meaning responses may not be reflective of the respondent’s attitudes towards motherhood or their own baby, but may instead be symbolic of their broader ideological values. The
constructions of the “natural mother” and the “neoliberal mother” by psychological survey items are just two examples of the ways in which social ideologies about what it means to be a “good” mother may shape the content of the items used to assess respondents’ attitudes.

It is also worth noting that the above item, like many others, forces respondents to make a constrained either/or decision about their ability to mother. These sorts of items lack nuance and enforce a dichotomous bad mother/good mother way of thinking. Surveys also have a tendency towards reppronormativity, with the marginalizing and delegitimization of teen mothers (“Teen mothers are generally irresponsible”) and transgendered mothers (“Breastfeeding increases mother-infant bonding”), for instance. Items rely on neoliberal and essentialist ideals of motherhood to indirectly privilege white, upper-middle class mothers (“I think a good mother should make time to care for her emotional health”; “Women instinctively know what a baby needs”).

Survey items also embed a range of descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes about mothers. Descriptive stereotypes reflect ideologies about how mothers are (e.g., “mothers are inherently caring”: Shanok & Miller, 2007), whereas prescriptive stereotypes reflect ideologies about how mothers should be (e.g., “mothers should be selfless;” McCoyd et al., 2019), serving as repeated social cues that shape who and what is imagined when participants are asked to respond to questions about mothers. These stereotypes draw upon racist, sexist, and classist tropes, most of which rely on neoliberalism and essentialism, about who is imagined to be a “good” mother. As such, the psychological literature produces an ‘ideal’ mother who is assumed to be white, middle-class, cisgendered, heterosexual, and able-bodied; any mother who deviates from this image is penalized (e.g., mothers with intellectual disabilities are more likely to have their child(ren) taken away; McConnell & Llewellyn, 2010).

McClelland and colleagues (2020) developed and used an analytic method referred to as critical measurement analysis to investigate how prejudicial stereotypes and ideologies can be “baked in and reproduced in the fabric of psychological research” (p. 25). Their work serves as a general call for researchers in psychology to pay greater attention to our
research practices. With this critical method, we can explore how psychological measurement tools render some identities and narratives more visible and other identities and narratives less visible or invisible. In their investigation of how prejudice is reproduced in surveys that measure attitudes towards abortion, McClelland and colleagues (2020) created an extensive bank of survey items, drawn from measurement tools used in research on abortion attitudes. Using thematic analysis, they identified several themes reflecting the imagery and tropes contained in the items. For example, they found that items contained stereotyped imagery of poor, racialized women that would likely colour responses by evoking specific ideological frameworks when responding to the items (McClelland et al., 2020). As such, our understanding of abortion attitudes as produced by these surveys – some of which were national surveys, used to inform abortion policy – is shaped by ideological constructions of mothers and demonstrate that these measures are not as objective as we perhaps perceive them to be.

1.4 The Academy as a Site of Knowledge Production

Feminist scholars widely regard the academy as a site of knowledge (re)production; it is understood that the knowledge that is produced by the academy is both shaped by and reifies the values and ideological beliefs of dominant systems of power (Mayorga et al., 2019). In 1970, French philosopher, Louis Althusser wrote about the Ideological State Apparatuses, an expansion of the Marxist State Apparatus. The State Apparatus (SA) includes state-funded systems that exercise control via repression, such as the government, the army, the police force, and the prison system. The Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), including the religious ISA, the family ISA, and most relevant to the present research, the educational ISA, operate as translators of dominant ideologies and exercise control by laying out a rigid system of values and beliefs that align with the goals and motives of those in power. ISAs are notably more covert than SAs and are arguably more dangerous, in that we are largely blissfully unaware of the ways in which power is being exercised through the channels of these institutions. Therefore it is more difficult to point to and challenge a perpetrator of violence who operates within our perception (e.g., the police force) as can be more easily done with the SA. As such, it is necessary to explore how the academy acts as an ISA to reproduce dominant knowledges
and assert power. The present research investigates the reproduction of motherhood ideologies in motherhood-centred psychology research and seeks to explore how these ideologies translate to the lived experiences of mothers.

Drawing on Foucauldian understandings of discourse and governmentality, this research relies on the idea that discourse shapes how those being spoken about act and feel. We may look to discourse as a means by which we structure society in accordance with the values and practices of those in power (Gavey, 1990). Meaning is actively produced through discourse, meaning that discourse shapes our understanding of an object (Gavey, 1990). As such discourse, and the knowledge it both relies on and reproduces, is the stage on which power relations are established and maintained (Gavey, 1990). Foucault notes, “Every point in the exercise of power is a site where knowledge is formed. Conversely, every established piece of knowledge permits and assures the exercise of power.” (p. 117) (Foucault, 1979 as cited in Miller, 1990) With this work, I look to the discourses being (re)produced by psychological motherhood research and consider the potential harms for the lived experiences of women and mothers.

Stemming from a growing anti-positivist movement in feminist academia (e.g., Wigginton & Lefrance, 2019), scholars have begun to question the centrality of objectivity in our understanding of ‘high quality’ research (see Harding, 1992). Anti-positivism in social scientific research reflects a move away from natural scientific constructions of objectivity, rationality, and truth; anti-positivists reject a research program that strives for ‘valid’ and generalizable knowledge, instead embracing the lived experiences of the individual and acknowledging the diverse number of ‘truths’ that exist (i.e., there is no single truth that can be unearthed by an objective researcher). With this, researchers have begun to ask questions about whether the methods we use in psychology are as objective and value neutral as we present them to be. While feminist researchers don’t strive for this value-neutrality, we acknowledge that by presenting our research as truth, we reproduce harmful ideologies under the guise of scientific objectivity.

McClelland and colleagues (2020) refer to this as the “dispersion of bias.” That is, the ideologies of motherhood being reproduced by motherhood research may be dispersed via public policy (e.g., laws about maternity leave), parenting advice manuals,
This critical movement has directed its energy, in part, towards the presumed objectivity of the surveys we use to study psychological phenomena. For example, McClelland and colleagues (2020) argue that survey items, specifically those that measure attitudes about abortion, rely on assumptions about reproduction and mothering and are therefore value driven. Through their critical analysis, McClelland et al. found that survey items rely on and reproduce racist and sexist ideologies. A particular focus on the language being used in the survey items revealed that the use of charged language (e.g., “wrong”, “poor women”) required respondents to make moral, sexual, and financial evaluations about the imaginary woman in the item. As such, results may not depict attitudes towards abortion, but may instead reflect respondents’ attitudes about race, gender, and class (McClelland et al., 2020). By emphasizing the power of language to sway participant responses, McClelland and colleagues highlight how ideology embeds itself, largely unknowingly, in our survey items, impacting how items are being responded to, and further, the knowledge that is being produced by the research.

### 1.5 The Current Study

Drawing from and integrating feminist theory on motherhood, and regarding the field of psychology as a site of knowledge production on motherhood, the current research aims to identify and critically analyze the ideologies and stereotypes operating in and shaping psychological research on motherhood. Specifically, I use critical measurement analysis (McClelland et al., 2020) to assess the content of survey items for whether dominant ideologies and stereotypes of motherhood are embedded in the measurement tools used in psychology research on motherhood. In addition, using focus groups, I explore individual interpretations of survey items that measure attitudes towards motherhood, and how the ideologies present in these items filter into the real world. Ultimately, this research investigates the ways in which psychology both constrains and surveils mothers, and contributes to the (re)production of systems of power through a “dispersion of bias” as these research findings accumulate and filter into the public domain under the semblance
of scientific objectivity, and contribute to ideologies and discourses of motherhood that likely predict the way mothers are perceived and how they perform motherhood.
Chapter 2

2 Methods

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This research is informed by feminist poststructuralist understandings of knowledge as unstable and socially produced (Weedon, 1998), with a particular emphasis on how this operates within psychological discourse (Lazard et al., 2016). I draw broadly from social constructionism, which argues that science does not reflect reality, but rather creates it, to explore the ways in which psychological research shapes the realities of motherhood. In the poststructuralist tradition, I look to the language used in this research to explore how meaning, and subsequently experiences, are produced (Wigginton & Lafrance, 2019).

2.2 Critical Measurement Analysis

The first phase of this research included a critical measurement analysis. Consistent with McClelland et al.’s (2020) examination of the content of survey items that assess attitudes about abortion, the focus of this analysis will be on the patterns embedded in measurement items used to assess motherhood attitudes in contemporary psychological research. In their work, McClelland and colleagues (2020) found that survey items measuring attitudes towards abortion require the respondent to make moral, sexual, and financial evaluations. McClelland and colleagues (2020) note that the language used by researchers evokes certain imageries that are employed by respondents as they make these evaluations that make affect their responses (e.g., the term “poor women” is racialized and may lead respondents to imagine a woman of colour when making their evaluation). I look to McClelland and colleagues’ critical psychological approach to inform my analysis in the present research.

2.2.1 Item Bank Development

Using a systematic approach, I produced a dataset of items (i.e., the item bank) from psychological studies that have assessed attitudes about motherhood over the last decade (2011-2021) and were published in peer-reviewed psychology or psychology adjacent...
journals. I searched Google Scholar and PsycInfo for relevant measures using the following key words: “attitudes toward motherhood,” “beliefs about motherhood,” “attitudes toward mothers,” and “measuring motherhood.” Measures were also identified via citation mining of research articles on attitudes toward motherhood. From this search, I extracted 399 items from 21 surveys. Surveys were screened to ensure that they a) measured attitudes towards motherhood, b) were cited at least three times and were therefore presumed to be impactful on the field’s perception and construction of motherhood (n.b. this requirement was removed for surveys developed within the last three years or surveys with a very niche study topic, such as the Positivity Towards Teen Mothers Scale), and c) were cited within the last ten years. While surveys had to be cited within the last decade, surveys were not excluded based on the year they were developed. The oldest survey, the Sex Role Ideology Scale, was developed in 1978, whereas the most recent survey, the Attitudes Towards Mothers as Sexual Beings Scale, was developed in 2022. All items that referenced motherhood were added to the item bank. This means that not all survey items from each survey were included in the analysis (e.g., “Breast milk is less expensive than formula; “I handle myself well at social gatherings”; “Parents should take expert advice with a grain of salt”), and not all surveys from which items were drawn were explicitly about motherhood (e.g. the Iowa Infant Feeding Attitudes Questionnaire; the Sex Role Ideology Scale; the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire). Surveys that asked a general respondent to report on their attitudes towards motherhood (socially-oriented measures), as well as surveys that asked mothers to report on attitudes towards the self as a mother (self-reflective measures) were included (see Table 1). Surveys were primarily interested in quantifying both maternal wellbeing and social attitudes towards motherhood-related phenomena (e.g., breastfeeding, teen motherhood). As such, a majority of the measures were either clinical or social in nature. A small subset of measures were developed to explore the relationship between maternal beliefs and child development, and are therefore more developmental in nature.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale Title</th>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Items Analyzed/Total Items</th>
<th>Sample Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes Towards Motherhood Scale</td>
<td>Sockol et al., 2014</td>
<td>12/12</td>
<td>- If I make a mistake, people will think I am a bad mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Negative feelings towards my baby are wrong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes Toward Mothers as Sexual Beings Scale</td>
<td>Leistner &amp; Mark, 20222</td>
<td>11/11</td>
<td>- Compared to women in general, sexual activity for women who are mothers is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1 = much less important, 7 = much more important)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Sexual women who are mothers are more likely to be (1 = very bad mothers, 7 = very good mothers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes Towards Voluntary Childlessness Scale</td>
<td>Bahtiyar-Saygan &amp; Sakalli-Ugurlu, 2019</td>
<td>7/24</td>
<td>- Every woman should experience the feelings of motherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I support a woman’s decision to not have children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a Mother Scale</td>
<td>Matthey, 2011</td>
<td>13/13</td>
<td>Over the past 2-3 weeks...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I have felt close to my baby/toddler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I have felt alright about asking people for help or advice when I needed to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs about Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children Scale</td>
<td>Greenberger et al., 1988</td>
<td>24/24</td>
<td>- Children are less likely to form a warm and secure relationship with a mother who is working fulltime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Girls whose mothers work fulltime outside the home develop a stronger motivation to do well in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body Experiences During Pregnancy Scale</td>
<td>Talmon &amp; Ginzburg, 2018</td>
<td>28/28</td>
<td>- I felt my body was feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I felt that my body was alien to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scale/Derivation</td>
<td>Source</td>
<td>Scale</td>
<td>Items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Childbearing Attitudes Questionnaire | Ruble et al., 1990 | 36/60 | - I am concerned that I will not know what to do when my baby cries  
- I feel less attractive now that I’m pregnant |
| Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire | Liss et al., 2012 | 8/25 | - Although fathers are important, ultimately children need mothers more  
- It is harder to be a good mother than to be a corporate executive |
| Iowa Infant Feeding Attitude Scale | de la Mora et al., 1999 | 6/17 | - Mothers who formula-feed muss one of the great joys of motherhood  
- Fathers feel left out if a mother breastfeeds |
| Maternal Attitudes Questionnaire | Warner et al., 1997 | 14/14 | - I think my baby is very demanding  
- I resent the way my life has been restricted since having my baby |
| Maternal Gatekeeping Scale | Fagan & Barnett, 2003 | 9/9 | - If my child(ren)’s feelings are hurt, I think that I should comfort them, not their father (father figure)  
- If a decision has to be made for my child(ren), I think I am the one to make it, not their father (father figure) |
| Maternal Role Perception Scale | Bilgin & Alpar, 2021 | 23/28 | - Inadequacy in the role of motherhood affects the care of the baby  
- The maternal process and maternity role require sacrifice |
| Maternal Self-Efficacy Questionnaire | Teti & Gelfand, 1991 | 10/10 | - Compared to other mothers, how good a mother do you feel you are?  
- In comparison to other mothers in general, how good are you at understanding what your baby wants or needs? |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
<th>Items Used</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Self-Report Inventory-Short Form</td>
<td>Shea &amp; Tronick, 1982</td>
<td>26/26</td>
<td>- I am concerned that I will have trouble figuring out what my baby needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I worry about whether my baby will like me</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity Toward Teen Mothers Scale</td>
<td>Eshbaugh, 2011</td>
<td>21/21</td>
<td>- Teen mothers are a burden to society</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Teen mothers are neglectful of their child(ren)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prenatal Expectations Scale for Mexican Americans</td>
<td>Gress-Smith et al., 2013</td>
<td>17/17</td>
<td>- Your baby’s father will help you financially with the baby</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- You will be happy just holding and playing with your baby</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prenatal Maternal Expectations Scale</td>
<td>Colman et al., 1999</td>
<td>46/46</td>
<td>- My social life will be ruined when the baby is born</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I have a vision of the ideal mother that I plan to try to live up to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRE-MAMA</td>
<td>Ilska &amp; Przybyla, 2014</td>
<td>11/11</td>
<td>- Have you been worrying about hurting your baby inside you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Has the thought of wearing maternity clothes appealed to you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigidity of Maternal Beliefs Scale</td>
<td>Thomason et al., 2015</td>
<td>26/26</td>
<td>- Whether I breastfeed or not will affect my baby</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- I would feel guilty if I did not enjoy being a mother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Role Ideology Scale</td>
<td>Kalin &amp; Tilby, 1978</td>
<td>7/30</td>
<td>- A woman who dislikes her children is abnormal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- More daycare centers should be available to free mothers from the constant caring of their children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2.2 Analytic Strategy

I used thematic analysis to identify (1) patterns in items across a range of measurement tools and studies, and (2) potential ideologies about mothering and motherhood embedded in the items. I employed inductive coding methods to study these patterns in the survey items (McClelland et al., 2020). A constructionist framework, which places data within its sociocultural context, guided this stage of analysis (Braun et al., 2023). According to the guidelines for thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2023), each item was given an equal amount of attention, and codes were meaningfully attached to the items based on both the semantic and latent content of each item.

Reflexive thematic analysis guidelines as set forth by Braun and colleagues (2023) were followed. I began by familiarizing myself with the item bank by reading through each item and jotting down initial thoughts. Coding was then conducted in two rounds: an initial round of broad coding, and a second round of more specific and analytic coding. See below for a more thorough breakdown of the coding process. Codes were then grouped thematically. Subthemes were developed and then grouped into broader themes. Themes were indubitably inspired by past reading on motherhood and anti-capitalist feminisms. I then ensured that the coded items told a cohesive narrative within themes, and that these narratives were distinct from those being told by the other themes. Themes and subthemes were named, and notes were made on how I was conceptualizing each theme. Finally, a table was put together that outlined each theme and subtheme. Sample items were assigned to each, which allowed me to fully cement the narrative for each theme/subtheme.
Items were coded using NVivo. Coding was conducted in two rounds. In the first round of coding, items were coded for broad thematic similarities (e.g., items that referenced child development were grouped together and items that referenced the mother’s social life were grouped together). In the second round, items were taken with a more critical eye to explore the latent content of the items. Codes used in the first round were developed following a preliminary review of the item bank. Codes used in the second round were developed following the first round of coding. The second round of coding was motivated by an effort to further break down the broader, more descriptive first round codes. Items that were difficult to code in the second round were written down and revisited later. In some cases, these items were looked at by both myself and my supervisor. Where appropriate, items were coded under a second-round code (or subcode) that fell within a different first round code to ensure that items were represented as accurately as possible (e.g., an item originally coded under “bad mothering” in the first round, may have been coded under a subcode in “maternal wellbeing” in the second round). Items were often coded under more than one code. The unit of analysis consisted of each survey item and its response options.

2.3 Focus Group Discussions

The second phase of this research included an adapted version of a cognitive debriefing procedure with focus group participants to understand how these items are interpreted and how these interpretations relate to maternal experiences (McClelland & Holland, 2016). It is important to understand what people imagine when reading an item to better understand how individuals discern meaning from these surveys and respond to the items, as well as how this impacts the knowledge that is produced via these surveys. It is equally important to explore how the scientific construction of particular social identities informs the lived experiences of those who hold said identities. The focus group format allowed both for the exploration of collective meaning making processes and the analysis of performances of motherhood that may mirror day-to-day mothering performances. The collective nature of focus group discussions also allowed for the visualization of the important role that community plays among mothers.
2.3.1 Participants

Focus groups participants were recruited from social media and the community (e.g., libraries, coffee shops, childcare centers). To ensure the ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity of mothers in my sample, recruitment posters were dispersed in community centres and libraries across various neighbourhoods in London (i.e., not just in close proximity to the university). The decision to place recruitment posters within specific community spaces was purposeful and thoughtful. While the diversity of the study sample was of the utmost importance and our recruitment process reflected this aim, participants were primarily white and educated. Participants were told that they were participating in a study about perceptions and experiences of motherhood. Participants were considered eligible if they were over 18 years old and able to partake in a short focus group over Zoom. A total of three focus groups consisting of four to five mothers each were conducted. Thirteen mothers from across North America participated in our focus group discussions.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sexuality</th>
<th>Religious Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lilith</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Filipino Chinese</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Agnostic, non-practicing Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>American</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Catholic (vaguely)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevene</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Trinidadian and Hungarian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Church of Latter-Day Saints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olive</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>White, Jewish</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Jewish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Ashkenazi Jewish</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Non-Practicing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Sexual Orientation</td>
<td>Religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatiana</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Salvadorian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PJ</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>British Canadian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celeste</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Catholique</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. All demographic information is taken verbatim from the demographics survey.

2.3.2 Procedure

Individuals were given the opportunity to provide informed consent via email prior to focus group participation. At this time, mothers were also asked to fill out a short demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) to contextualize maternal experiences. I conducted the semi-structured focus groups, which each lasted approximately an hour. Focus groups followed a flexible schedule, consisting of sample survey items pulled from the item bank and follow-up questions about participant perceptions of and relationship to these items (see Appendix C). During the focus groups, participants were asked to describe their interpretations of a set of survey items selected from the item bank prior to the discussion as well as to explain how they would respond to these items and why. In this way, I aimed to explore what is not being captured in contemporary measures of attitudes about motherhood. Participants were also prompted to relate their interpretations of the items to their own experiences of motherhood. In this way we hoped to get an idea of how scientific constructions of motherhood translate into the lived experiences of mothers. Focus groups were recorded for transcription purposes. Participants were given a $20 CAD e-gift card as a ‘thank you’ for taking part in a focus group.

2.3.3 Data Analysis

Focus group data was analyzed following reflexive thematic analysis procedures (Braun et al., 2023). Focus group data was transcribed by myself and two research assistants. To further familiarize myself with the data, I read through each transcript twice, jotting down initial ideas and making note of any patterns. Following this process, excerpts of data
were coded using inductive coding. Coded excerpts were grouped thematically. Themes were then refined, by ensuring that data within themes told a meaningful narrative and that there were clear distinctions between excerpts coded in different themes. Finally, themes were defined, and theme names were finalized.

2.4 Social Location and Positionality

It is crucial as social researchers that we acknowledge our relationship to our research. As such, I situate this research within the context of my own identity, as well as my values and beliefs. I come from a white, middle-class family, and my own mother is highly educated. This means that almost all perspectives on motherhood presented in this research reflect a specific and privileged maternal experience. On the same note, I acknowledge that my interpretation of the item bank and the focus group data is rooted in a set of theoretical standpoints, and as such, my results represent a specific point of view. More specifically, I feel that it is important to acknowledge the feminist and anti-capitalist lens that I brought to this work, which influenced how I interpreted the item bank and the focus group data. My lens is inspired by my reading of *the Dialectic of Sex* (Firestone, 1970), as well as the work of classical Marxists (e.g. Fredrich Engels) and modern xenofeminists (e.g., Helen Hester and the Laboria Cubonicks collective). Specifically, I adopt their collective understanding of the family unit as a blueprint for our economic-cultural class system (Firestone, 1970), and as such echo their calls to disrupt the traditional family in an attempt to dismantle capitalist systems of power. Results undeniably reflect my effort to trouble narratives of motherhood that serve capitalism and further exacerbate restrictive class systems and gendered divisions of labour. Further, in *the Dialectic of Sex*, Firestone (1970) specifically points to the essentialization of the mother-child relationship as perpetuating the traditional family unit and the subjugation of women in this context. Themes from both the critical measurement analysis and the focus group discussions reflect my understanding of Firestone’s argument, including the Loving Mother subtheme and the Centrality of Mother(hood) subtheme, among others.
Chapter 3

3 Critical Measurement Analysis Results

Using critical measurement analysis, I explored the presence of motherhood ideologies in survey items assessing attitudes towards motherhood. This analysis revealed three major themes that centered around the depiction of an ‘ideal’ maternal subject: The Good Mother as Productive Labourer, The Mother and Baby as Lovingly Interconnected, and Maternal Identity Development as Central to Motherhood. I will discuss each major theme in turn. Each theme included three subthemes and each subtheme was representative of at least three codes. Note that due to the interdependent nature of these themes, there are a couple of codes that fall into more than one subtheme.

**Theme 1: Good Mother as Productive Labourer Ideology**

Table 3 provides an overview of the Good Mother as Productive Labourer ideology that emerged from analysis of the item bank. This theme encompasses the emotion and behavioural work (including self-surveillance and regulation) that mothers are expected to perform. This theme is further broken down into three subthemes or sub-ideologies – Managing Emotions, Regulating Behaviour, and Cultivating Citizenship – that are representative of a collection of codes (see Table 3).

**Table 3. Theme 1: Good Mother as Productive Labourer Ideology**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Sample Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managing Emotions</td>
<td>(In)Appropriate Affects</td>
<td><em>Negative feelings towards my baby are wrong</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Worry and Anxiety</td>
<td><em>I worry about whether my baby will like me</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maternal Wellbeing</td>
<td><em>Motherhood brings much joy and contentment to a woman</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme</td>
<td>Item</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affection and Nurturance</td>
<td><em>I think a good mother should show a lot of physical affection towards her child</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(In)Appropriate Maternal Behaviour</td>
<td><em>A mother who occasionally drinks alcohol should not breastfeed her baby</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Behavior Predicts Child Development</td>
<td><em>Ultimately, it is the mother who is responsible for how her child turns out</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restriction of Social Life</td>
<td><em>The birth of my baby will restrict my lifestyle</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The (Il)Legitimate Maternal Subject</td>
<td><em>Teen mothers are a burden to society</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional Engagements</td>
<td><em>I think a good mother should have connections to expand her child’s learning</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State Intervention</td>
<td><em>The government should financially assist teen mothers</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparing Working and Non-Working Mothers</td>
<td><em>Children of working mothers are less well-nourished and don’t eat the way they should</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Productive Citizenship</td>
<td><em>Children of working mothers grow up to be less competent parents than other children, because they have not had adequate parental role models</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subtheme 1a: Managing Emotions

Items contributing to this subtheme described the important role of affective labour to our understanding of ‘good motherhood.’ This includes reference to (in)appropriate maternal affects, the gendered division of this labour, as well as the prevalence of specific affects associated with motherhood such as worry and affection. Items that reference appropriate affective experiences are prescriptive in how they describe how a mother should or shouldn’t feel about her child and the broader experience of mothering. This
interpretation is substantiated by items that ask mothers to report on their agreement with statements such as, “It is wrong to feel disappointed by motherhood.” Items that ask mothers more indirectly about their attitudes towards motherhood (I am disappointed by motherhood), prescribe appropriate affective experiences, although more covertly—that is, in reading this item, and contextualizing it within a social world that places motherhood as the pinnacle of female fulfillment, it is obvious that we are meant to understand that it is wrong to be disappointed by motherhood. Mothers are especially expected to regulate their feelings of anxiety and affection such that anxious emotions are tamped down and affection is performed frequently and enthusiastically. Notably, emotions valorized for their utility in neoliberal economies are referenced with a particular emphasis on feeling confident and being flexible (e.g., I feel confident in my ability to raise a happy healthy baby; as a parent I must be flexible all the time). This labour is gendered, in that mothers are placed as the more suitable emotional caregivers and are thus expected to engage in emotion work to a greater degree than fathers.

Subtheme 1b: Regulating Behaviour

Items in this subtheme represent a tendency for surveys to emphasize the importance of self-surveillance and behavior regulation in the performance of good motherhood. In a subset of items, maternal behaviour is directly linked to child developmental outcomes (Young children learn more if their mothers stay at home with them). Here, a judgement is being made by the respondent about the mother based on whether the mother is hurting her child’s ability to succeed in school by going to work, and therefore the respondent is being asked to evaluate the mother’s ability to effectively parent, which will undeniably require the respondent to pull from their own ideological beliefs about gender, race, and class. This judgement translates to the real-world surveillance of maternal behavior by others, where what is being done (or not done) to foster the learning and overall well-being of the child becomes the business of the broader population. In order to avoid this judgment, and care ‘appropriately’ for the child, it is implied that the mother will regulate and restrict her behavior to ensure child wellbeing, which may mean dedicating all her time to caregiving. Items that make a distinction between appropriate and inappropriate maternal behavior similarly emphasize the association between maternal behavior and
evaluations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ motherhood. Inappropriate behaviours (e.g., drinking alcohol while breastfeeding), which represent an inability to self-discipline and self-regulate, indicate a ‘bad’ mother.

Subtheme 1c: Cultivating Citizenship

Items in this subtheme describe the work that mothers put into appropriately navigating relationships with institutions (schools, doctors, etc.) and their communities. A group of items reference the entanglement of the mother and the state, which ask respondents to reflect on their expectation that mothers be willing and capable of interacting with their child’s institutions for the benefit of the child (e.g., school: *I think a good mother should have good connections to expand her child’s learning*). A smaller group of items asks respondents to reflect on the role of the state in caring for the child (e.g., *More daycare centres should be available to free mothers from the constant caring of their children*).

Similar to the ways in which items distinguish between inappropriate and appropriate maternal behavior, respondents are implicitly asked to consider the difference between legitimate and illegitimate maternal subjects (e.g., *I think a good mother should have financial resources to ensure her child’s academic success; Teen mothers are a burden to society*). In these items, the legitimate maternal subject is one who contributes to society, and thus is a productive citizen; the illegitimate maternal subject is one who does not contribute adequately or appropriately to society, and thus is an unproductive or burdensome citizen. Additionally, the legitimate maternal subject is one who ensures her children develop into functioning and productive citizens. More specifically, a subset of items compares the legitimacy of working and non-working mothers by asking whether working mothers can raise strong, healthy, independent children. One important aspect of this distinction is the presence of non-working mothers vs. the relative absence of working mothers. This, in turn, affects the mother’s ability to teach her child productive citizenship through absence of a parental role model or through the modeling of work behavior.

**Theme 2: Mother and Child as Lovingly Interconnected Ideology**
Table 4 provides an overview of the mother and child as lovingly interconnected ideology identified in the item bank. This theme describes the presumed natural and loving relationship between the mother and her child. This theme is broken into three subthemes: The Natural Mother, The Abject Mother, and The Loving Mother. Each of these subthemes are representative of a collection of codes (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Theme 2: Mother and Child as Lovingly Interconnected**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Sample Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Natural Mother</td>
<td>Comparing Mothers and Fathers</td>
<td><em>A mother knows more about her child, therefore being the better parent</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gendered Division of Emotional Labour</td>
<td><em>Mothers have a stronger emotional bond with their children</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inherent Maternal Knowledge</td>
<td><em>Women instinctively know what a baby needs</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maternal Behavior Predicts Child Development</td>
<td><em>Ultimately it is the mother who is responsible for how her child turns out</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Abject Mother</td>
<td>The Leaky Maternal Baby</td>
<td><em>Breastfeeding the baby affects the development of the role of motherhood</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support in Raising Child</td>
<td><em>If other people help me look after my baby, I feel like a failure</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Loving Mother</td>
<td>Love from Baby</td>
<td><em>I am confident that my baby will love me very much</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Love for Baby</td>
<td><em>I expect to feel a great deal of love for my baby at birth</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bonding with Baby</td>
<td><em>Breastfeeding increases mother-infant bonding</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Subtheme 2a: The Natural Mother

The Natural Mother subtheme refers to the tendency for items to construct motherhood as a process and identity that comes naturally to women. The ‘natural mother’ is defined partially in contrast to the effortful and inadequate labour of the father (e.g., *Although fathers may mean well, they are generally not as good at parenting as mothers*). Items highlight the propensity for mothers to care emotionally for their child(ren). The gendered division of emotional labour assumes that mothers are better suited for the love and affection that is necessary for childrearing (e.g., *Mothers are more nurturing*). The gendered division of emotional labour is supported by items that directly compare the natural ability of mothers to provide affective labour to the effortful labour of the father (e.g., *Mothers are more affectionate towards their children*). This item lacks sufficient context (i.e., mothers are more affectionate towards their children under what circumstances) and assumes that mothers are naturally more affectionate than fathers regardless of context or individual differences, perpetuating gender essentialist beliefs about who can parent better. Similarly, items describe the inherent ability of women to know and understand how to mother (e.g., *I trusted my body to know what to do*). This effortless -- and idealized – maternal identity is only afforded to legitimate maternal subjects (e.g., *Most teen mothers know little about parenting*). In this example, teen mothers are illegitimate maternal subjects in their divergence from the ideal maternal subject (i.e., one who is white, middle class, married, etc.) and are therefore not afforded this ideology of effortless maternal omniscience.

Subtheme 2b: The Abject Mother

This subtheme was developed in tandem with my reading on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. These items describe the blurring of boundaries between subject and object, mother and child, and mother-child dyad, and others. Items reference the tendency for
maternal bodies to leak (primarily breastmilk, but also vomit or blood). It is made clear that the baby subsists on the mother’s bodily fluids both in utero and post-partum. Here, the leaky maternal body disrupts the apparently rigid boundaries of the body and connects the child and the mother, where maternal biological properties (e.g., breastmilk) are being linked to child wellbeing. Items that link maternal behavior to child developmental outcomes similarly acts to blur the boundaries between mother and child. Where the behavior of the mother is so closely related to the development of the child, we see a fusion of the two individuals (e.g., *If I am relaxed with my child, he or she will eat and sleep well*). Maternal behaviour either pollutes or purifies the behavior of the child. Healthy child development is not a certainty but something that hinges precariously on the mother. Items that blur boundaries between mother and child act to fuse these individuals into a single subject. A separate subset of items refers to the blurring of boundaries between this subject and those outside of this subject. Items referencing seeking external caregiving support confuse the construction of the omnipresent and omniscient mother by placing a symbolic wedge between mother and child (e.g., *Teen mothers tend to depend on others to care for their children*). In contrast, some items in this subset act to further solidify this subject by providing support in non-childrearing related tasks, such that the mother may be available to her baby (e.g., *After your baby is born, family members will help take care of things, like cooking and cleaning, so you can stay focused on your baby*).

Subtheme 2c: The Loving Mother

Items in the Abject Mother subtheme highlight the ways in which survey items uphold the sanctity of the mother-child relationship. The present subtheme doubles down on this effort. Items in this subtheme rely heavily on constructions of love and affection. Items reference both the importance of a mother’s love for her baby and the inevitable love the mother will receive in return from her baby (e.g., *The complete and pure love that one receives from a child is unequaled in other relationships*). This item makes the relationship between the mother and her child seem spiritual, inevitable, and exclusive. To facilitate this cycle of love, mothers must put focus on bonding with their baby (e.g., *I think a good mother should spend quality time each day with her child*). A broader group
of items emphasizes the importance of the mother-child relationship in constructing the ideal mother (e.g., *A mother is needed in a child’s life for nurturance and growth*).

**Theme 3: Motherhood as a Process of Identity Development Ideology**

Table 5 provides an overview of the motherhood as a process of identity development ideology identified in the item bank. This theme is symbolic of the identity work that is regarded as central to good motherhood. This theme is broken into three subthemes: Development of a Maternal Identity, Development of the Maternal Body, and Development of a Maternal Self-Concept. Each of these subthemes are representative of a collection of codes (see Table 5).

**Table 5. Theme 3: Motherhood as a Process of Identity Development**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subthemes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Sample Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development of a Maternal Identity</td>
<td>Maternal Identity Development</td>
<td><em>Has the thought of wearing maternity clothes appealed to you?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comparison to Past Self</td>
<td><em>I worry that being a mother will replace the real me</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Skills and Knowledge</td>
<td><em>I seem to have an endless need for information about being a mother</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accumulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Mystical Baby</td>
<td><em>I have ideas about the type of personality I hope my baby will have</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of the Maternal Body</td>
<td>Body Awareness</td>
<td><em>Maternity requires compliance with healthy living behaviours</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Body Alienation</td>
<td><em>I felt as if my body had been taken away from me</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexuality and the Maternal Body</td>
<td><em>I feel that the fact that I had sex was registered on my body and known to all</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Development of a Maternal Self-Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternal Self-Concept</td>
<td><em>If I find being a mother difficult, I feel a failure</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Maternal (In)Adequacy</td>
<td><em>I worry that I will not know what to do if my baby gets sick</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of Judgement</td>
<td><em>It is important to me that others think I’m a good parent</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with Husband</td>
<td><em>My boyfriend/husband will respect me more after I give birth</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfillment</td>
<td><em>A woman is not truly fulfilled until she has been a mother</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Comparison</td>
<td><em>Compared to other mothers, how good a mother do you feel you are?</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subtheme 3a: Development of a Maternal Identity

Items in this subtheme emphasize the centrality of motherhood to our understanding of mothering experiences. These items reflect the construction of a maternal identity through comparing the self as mother to the self before becoming pregnant, the effort that goes into learning about good motherhood, and situating the self as mother in relationship to an imagined baby. Items in this subtheme are largely self-reflective (i.e., written for mothers about their experiences of motherhood) and ask mothers to think about how they have changed since becoming a mother (e.g., *I worry that being a mother will replace the real me*). Part of this change is reflected in the mother’s efforts to gain relevant knowledge or caregiving skills (e.g., *Parenting education affects motherhood role success*). Items like this imply that motherhood is a process of neoliberal self-improvement and works in tandem with ideologies of the good mother as an effective labourer. The above item also symbolizes a distinct and privileged maternal subject: One who is upper-middle class (i.e., can afford parenting education) and likely White, able-bodied, and cisgendered (i.e., the ‘blueprint’ that is drawn upon in many of these items).
This change is also represented by the mother’s tendency to imagine how they will behave with their unborn baby and to construct a maternal identity in response to it (e.g., "I imagine myself holding and cuddling my baby for long uninterrupted periods of time"). Broader reference to maternal identity is also included in this subtheme (e.g., "I expect that being a mother will strengthen my sense of self").

Subtheme 3b: Development of the Maternal Body

Items in this subtheme reference the physical and physiological changes that often accompany pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. It is worth noting that most of the items operated on the assumption that mothers would endure pregnancy, childbirth, and subsequently, the postpartum period. Reference to a dichotomy of body awareness and body alienation demonstrate the tendency for psychologists to hyperfocus on the physical maternal body. Body awareness refers to the self-awareness that a mother (or pregnant individual) is expected to have of their body (i.e., awareness of the appearance of their body: Sometimes I feel embarrassed by the shape of my body now that I’m pregnant; and the regulation of their body: Women should not breastfeed in public places such as restaurants). Items that reference body alienation ask pregnant individuals to reflect on experiences of discomfort with and disconnection to their physical body (e.g., I was uncomfortable in my own body/skin). This perpetuates the objectification and mechanization of the pregnant body, wherein pregnancy transforms the body into an unfamiliar vessel for the carrying of the child. Overall, items referencing both body awareness and body alienation symbolize our tendency to disregard the maternal body as an independent actor, in favor of conceptualizations of this body as inherently attached to the subjectivities of the child. Encompassing themes of both body awareness and alienation, a unique subset of items references the relationship between sexuality and motherhood (e.g., I feel I am less interested in sex now than I used to be; Sexual women who are mothers are more likely to be...very good mothers OR very bad mothers). These items symbolize an incongruency between sexuality (sexual desire, sexual behavior, etc.) and good motherhood. They draw a connection between sexuality and irresponsible motherhood which further marginalizes mothers who belong to groups that are already associated with irresponsibility, such as poor mothers, single mothers, or queer mothers.
Subtheme 3c: Development of a Maternal Self-Concept

Items in this subtheme differ from items in the maternal identity subtheme in that they ask participants to reflect on who they are as mothers. Where maternal identity development focuses largely on the performance of motherhood and the evaluation of this performance by others, maternal self-concept emphasizes the process of evaluating one’s own worth as a mother through the eyes of others. Items ask respondents to reflect on their perceptions of their own maternal identity, particularly as seen through the eyes of their peers (e.g., *If my baby misbehaves, then other’s will think I’m a bad parent*) and their partners (e.g., *My boyfriend/husband will find me less physically attractive after the birth of our baby*). These items also highlight the tendency for mothers to compare their performances of motherhood to those of other mothers (e.g., *Other mothers are better able to comfort their baby*). These social comparisons, coupled with the anticipation of judgement that is captured in these items, are related to feelings of maternal inadequacy. Broader reference to maternal self-concept is also included in this subtheme (e.g., *I am certain that I will be a good mother*).
Chapter 4

4   Focus Group Results

I used thematic analysis to examine the data from the focus group interviews. Specifically, this phase of the study aimed to address the following research questions:
(1) How do the stereotypes and ideologies about motherhood that are embedded in our measures of attitudes towards mothers and motherhood match and shape the lived experiences of mothers? (2) How are mothers interpreting survey items that measure attitudes towards motherhood?

4.1 Thematic Patterns in Experiences of Motherhood

To address the first research question, four core themes were identified across the three focus group discussions: The Neoliberal Mother; The Centrality of Mother(hood); Mother in the World; and the Learning Mother. Each theme had to be identified in all three focus groups to be included. Not all subthemes are equally represented across focus groups. Some subthemes are featured more heavily in some focus groups than in others. This is to be expected as differing group dynamics elicit unique story telling spaces, which in turn trigger distinct conversations. Each theme will be discussed in full.

Table 6. Themes Across Focus Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Neoliberal Mother</td>
<td>Self-Care Improves Mothering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tendency Towards and Resistance of Maternal Comparison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entreprenuralization of the Self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality of Mother(hood)</td>
<td>Utility of the Maternal Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Labour of Mothers vs. Fathers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother as Vessel</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Childcare is a Collective Effort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme 1: The Neoliberal Mother

This theme was born out of both implicit allusion and explicit reference to the entanglement of motherhood values and neoliberal discourses of competition, self-care, and self-improvement. Within this entanglement, three subthemes were identified: Self-Care Improves Mothering; Comparison; and Entrepreneurialization of the Self. Each subtheme will be discussed in full.

Subtheme 1a: Self-Care Improves Mothering

Participants described a relationship between their ability to take care of themselves and their ability to take care of their child. Reference is made to how taking the time to rest and “recharge” makes for a better mother. Participants also described the tendency for others to suggest surface-level self-care techniques (e.g., going for a bath, taking a walk, drinking a smoothie) to solve issues such as maternal burnout and pregnancy complications. At the same time, there was an acknowledgement that taking care of one’s health (e.g., by eating well and exercising) does make you a better parent. Also housed in this theme is a general dissent to traditional discourses of motherhood that center selflessness and resilience. Instead, participants argued that they needed to be their “best self” to parent well.

For example, Amy responds to the item “Maternity requires compliance with healthy living behaviours” in a way that differs from the way in which her peers were engaging with the item.
Like when I take time to exercise, when I take, when I'm not like eating her leftover goldfish crackers on the bottom of my- [laughs]. Or like not- you know or like, making sure that I'm going to sleep at a regular hour now that like she sleeps well and all of that. Like I do think that helps me be a better parent, like when I prioritize myself and my own health (Amy, 36 years old, one child)

While others argued that health and ‘wellness’ behaviors are pushed on mothers particularly during pregnancy and responded to the item with a touch of disdain, Amy interpreted the item with more grace and agreed that prioritizing her own health and wellbeing (i.e., by eating and sleeping well) makes her a better parent. Both interpretations of the item align with neoliberal discourses that link self-care and good motherhood, though Amy’s statement directly links her ability to mother to her own health and wellbeing in a way that explicitly highlights the centrality of self-care to modern constructions of motherhood.

Further, Lilith describes the inadequacy of the postpartum depression screening process, explaining sarcastically that shallow and trendy self-care techniques (i.e., taking a bath) are often put forth as the solution for postpartum depression.

I think they're just making sure we're not, like, super depressed and like, if we're like a little depressed, then that's OK, like, light a candle, take a bath, you know, that will fix everything (Lilith, 40 years old, three children)

In this case, medical professionals emphasize the importance of self-care with a focus on their ability to improve caregiving abilities.

Subtheme 1b: Tendency Towards and Resistance of Maternal Comparison

Participants described the tendency for mothers to engage in comparison, their resistance to this tendency, and the harmfulness of social media for promoting comparison. Comparison, working hand in hand with competition, both key actors in neoliberalism, are part of the described experiences of mothers.
Carmen explains that while comparison is common among mothers, it’s not something that happens instinctively. She argues instead that over time mothers adopt this tendency towards comparison.

*I don't think it's something you instinctively do right off the bat. I think that's just something that you kind of fall into when you settle into your own routine or pattern* (Carmen, 41 years old, one child)

Mothers discussed their resistance to maternal comparison. Here, Tatiana describes how she fights the urge to compare by acknowledging that people have different skillsets:

*But I think as long as you come to the realization, OK, you know-maybe they are-they are really good in that part but maybe actually I'm really good on a different part. Right, so. We're all different, you know?* (Tatiana, 42 years old, two children)

Social media was frequently referenced as being a “toxic” source of comparison. Like Tatiana, Natalie expresses the need to make a conscious effort at cultivating an environment where you don’t feel the need to compare:

*I think that overall it's on a moment-to-moment basis, and it's about...cultivating an environment where, like you don't have a lot of comparison, and I'm I like I'm...pretty much off social media, except for my like work and I and I was reflecting on this the other day that like I have- when I ask like friends for advice, they'll like send me screenshots of like ‘Mom influencers’ and I'm like “oh, I kind of wanted to know your experience.”... I've just like totally removed myself from social media* (Natalie, 38 years old, one child)

Participants acknowledge that while the default is to compare yourself to other mothers, efforts can be made to resist this tendency and a large part of this resistance is removing yourself from social media. Carmen, Natalie, and Tatiana respond to the item, “I’m worried that I am not as good as other mothers”.

Subtheme 1c: Entrepreneuralization of the Self
Participants conceptualized themselves as productive neoliberal workers. This included reference to appearance, expertise, and self-improvement. In essence, participants drew a connection between performances of motherhood and the formation of self as both product and means of production.

In a discussion about whether a good mother should be “physically attractive” (The Good Mothering Expectations Scale), Nancy recalls that when she was a kid her friends would be embarrassed to invite others over if their parents weren’t attractive or “good looking.” This sentiment is conducive with ideological links drawn between health, appearance, and productive citizenship; an unattractive mother – who seemingly cannot take care of herself – is a bad mother.

*You know, as a kid, though, some of my friends would be embarrassed to bring friends over if their mother... or parents weren't like....the cleanest...or like good looking like if they were like-overweight and stuff. I know they'd be ashamed to bring friends over.*  (Nancy, 37 years old, four children)

Natalie discusses a key aspect of the professionalization of motherhood: the acquiring of information and the development of an expertise in childcare:

*...You know, like I read books and things like that...* (Natalie, 38 years old, one child)

This goes hand in hand with conceptualizations of mothering as encompassing certain roles or duties, as explained by Carmen below:

*My role is to nurture her and take care of her and teach her.* (Carmen, 41 years old, one child)

PJ also notes the importance of self-improvement (e.g., seeking out hobbies, retaining a sense of self, being someone beyond ‘mom’):

*Like as a mom, I think you still need to have...autonomy and you need to, you know, find other things that fulfill you as well* (PJ, 41 years old, two children)
Both Carmen and PJ respond to the item “A woman is not truly fulfilled until she has become a mother.”

**Theme 2: Centrality of Mother(hood)**

Participants made frequent and consistent reference to the central role – or at least the perceived centrality – of the mother. ‘Mother(hood)’ refers to both the centrality of the mother to the caregiving labour and the centrality of motherhood as an identity to the mother. Four subthemes were identified: Utility of the Maternal Body; Labour of Mothers vs. Fathers; Parenting Burden on Moms; Mother as Vessel; and troubling the above, Childcare as a Collective Effort.

**Subtheme 2a: Utility of the Maternal Body**

Participants referred to the unique utility of the maternal body to grow, sustain, and connect to a child. This is often discussed in the contexts of maternal responsibility (i.e., the mother’s biology means she takes on more caregiving responsibility) and child-mother bonding (i.e., the mother’s biology allows her to bond more seamlessly with her child).

For example, when the group was discussing whether mothers are generally better parents than fathers (in response to the item from the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire, “Although fathers may mean well, they are generally not as good at parenting as mothers”), Amy noted that:

>You know my husband will be like, “well, it’s so much easier for you to put her to bed”. I’m like, “well, yeah, I have boobs.” But, and that’s, you know, a biological difference we can’t overcome. (Amy, 36 years old, one child)

She explains that her husband claims that she is better at putting their baby to bed. She responds sarcastically, to laughs from the rest of the group, that she’s only better at this job because she “has boobs.” Particularly notable is the hint of resentment as she calls this a “biological difference” that they can’t “overcome.” This language suggests that
Amy is frustrated with the extra responsibility she is expected to take on because of the unique ability of her body to feed and comfort a baby.

Similarly, Trevene brings attention to the role that breastfeeding plays in allowing her to feel connected to her babies:

*You know, you're breastfeeding, you're so connected to your children, you just want them to be OK* (Trevene, 44 years old, four children)

Subtheme 2b: Labour of Mothers vs. Fathers

Participants explain that the father plays a caregiving role that is different from the role that the mother plays (i.e., these roles cannot be compared) but just as important. They note that this difference is largely situational/contextual. Here, participants both imagine the mother as having unique abilities to care for the child and displace the mother as the sole caregiver/dispute the idea that fathers are ineffective parents. Participants note that caregiving expectations rest largely on them and explain that the father does not face these same expectations.

*I think like my child has a beautiful connection with both myself and my husband, but for different things, right? Like I'm definitely like softer, so she will come to me if, like, I don't know, her feelings are hurt let's say. But he's way more brave than I am. So if they decide to like, try and you know, skateboard off a ramp. I'm not the human that she's connected to with that activity. She'll immediately go to him.* (Carmen, 41 years old, one child)

Lilith highlights the unique skillset that her husband has, arguing that he is better than her at caring for little things. Lilith rejects the notion that mothers are naturally better caregivers:

*My husband's a farmer. He's so much better at, like- and he-I grew up with no pets. Like I-he knows how to, like, hold little things like he's better, like in terms of that instinct, like much stronger than me when it comes to taking care of little things.* (Lilith, 40 years old, three children)
Beth, along with others in her group, disagree that the father’s role is perceived by others to be equally as important as the role of the mother:

*You know then that the natural expectation is that, you know, we'll take on more of the burden, be the default parent.* (Beth, 30 years old, 1 child)

She argues that mothers are expected to take on a disproportionate amount of the caregiving labour. The term “burden” is used by Beth (and others) to discuss the caregiving expectations that are placed on mothers. Participants in Beth’s group also frequently referred to themselves as the “default parent” further highlighting the central role of the mother to the caregiving effort.

Part of this idea is the notion that mothers have an inherent connection with their babies that fathers lack:

*Especially if you're nursing, especially if you carried like, that dynamic is really different and like I know my husband, for example, like...became a much more involved father when she, like, started smiling and like you know, all that like that was like more difficult for him in the beginning.* (Natalie, 38 years old, one child)

*Like this baby, has known me for nine months. And he's like meeting you for the first time. So, like I have this head start like we are connected in a way we know each other in a way that like-, so there's just like, a sense of calm because I am his home. I have been his home for the past nine months. And like, it's going to take time for you to build that relationship and to find out like what works.* (Danielle, 33 years old, two children)

**Subtheme 2c: Mother as Vessel**

Participants describe situations in which the mother both figuratively and literally drains herself to support her child. Part of the understanding of the mother as a vessel for the development of the child (both during pregnancy and post-partum) is the idea of the “Normal Struggle” or the ritualization of maternal suffering for the wellbeing of the
child. Similarly, participants note how their wellbeing is often measured by their child’s wellbeing.

So I think too, when it comes to pregnancy- because I eat primarily like vegetarian and I like again, there’s a lot of opinions around that-, when I started, like being pregnant and everyone’s like, [in a mocking tone] “how's your iron?” And I'm like “fantastic.” (Danielle, 33 years old, two children)

In describing others’ concern with her iron levels while she’s pregnant, Danielle highlights the way others position her as a vessel for her child. In this case, Danielle’s health is of concern to others as it reflects the adequacy of the baby’s first home.

Further, Lilith references the connection between her own energy and resources and her child’s wellbeing:

I'm like digging into like the trenches of like my available energy like I'm like pulling this like-it's like-I'm like, you know, when you like, give birth and your body like, you know, you actually you're really tired when you're pregnant and you're like, oh my god, it's because, like, this baby is, like, sucking all the nutrients out of me, and it's like, literally taking my energy and my food and everything to-and, and then they do that when they come out, right? (Lilith, 40 years old, three children)

As she pulls from the “trenches” of her “available energy” to support her child both during and after pregnancy, she drains herself to ensure the wellbeing of her child. As Trevene further shares:

Literally nobody asked me how I was doing... it was literally about if I was making milk and how to do that, and it was all about the kids. (Trevene, 44 years old, four children)

In these ways, a link is drawn between the mother’s wellbeing and the child’s wellbeing that positions the mother as a vessel for the development of the child.

Subtheme 2d: Childcare is a Collective Effort
Participants work to decenter the mother by referencing the importance of caregiving support. Caregiving support came from immediate family, in-laws, waged caregivers, and, in one case, the child themselves. Participants reject the centrality of the mother, emphasizing the collective nature of effective childcare:

*My first reaction was like... I felt lucky that I had people to help me. Like my parents were close and would take her for a little while so that could like take a shower and rest...* (Natalie, 38 years old, one child)

*I-in my heart, I'm like, this was never a two-person job like this wasn't* (Katherine)

*And like my mom had passed away so I didn't have anyone or sisters or I didn't have anyone close to be able to kind of help through that period so it was just her and I and we figured it out and thankfully it all worked out well.* (PJ, 41 years old, two children)

PJ paints a picture of the collective nature of childcare where the support comes from her child. She explains that she didn’t have much adult support (PJ had also noted that her husband went back to work soon after their baby was born). Instead, PJ describes a solidarity that grew between her and her baby, and seems to credit this, at least in part, for her ability to give care.

**Theme 3: Mother in the World**

Participants discuss how their own maternal bodies move through their social worlds. There is also reference to narratives of motherhood, how these change across space and time, and how they inform standards of good motherhood. Finally, participants gave advice for how to best support mothers, including validating their suffering and minding their business.

**Subtheme 3a: An Abundance of Motherhood Narratives**

Participants discussed how expectations of mothers has changed over time. There was an emphasis across groups on generational differences in how mothers and fathers
are expected to behave. Participants touched on the contradictory nature of motherhood narratives and expressed a “you can’t win” attitude.

*It's also like if you're even a somewhat involved father like his, his grandma is just like [rolls eyes] “you know you have the best partner in the world because, like, you know, 50 years ago, no 70 years ago when I had kids like, I had to raise my three kids by myself and my husband didn't even know how to change a diaper”*

*And you know, and you're just like, yeah, so, like, being- changing diapers is not uh like- that's like very low on the- it's like, I don't know, you don't get a point.*

(Lilith, 40 years old, three children)

*Like, I think I think our parents’ generation just thought, you know, when you're in your mid 30s and you're juggling careers and kids, it's just hard and you suck it up and you get through it [shrugs shoulders].* (Amy, 36 years old, one child)

*Yeah, I feel like that's so much of motherhood is that you just sort of like, are told that you're wrong, whichever way you do it. Like, if you like, put her, if you like, put your kid in childcare, it's like, “well, you're ruining their attachment.” But if you don't and you stay at home, it's like, “Oh well, like, do you not know that, like, women are allowed to have careers now, like, why are you staying home?”* Like with my friends who have chosen to like not go back to work or have like also gotten a lot of like negative comments about that, I just feel like something so much of it is like there's no...winning. (Olive, 35 years old, one child)

Mothers also challenged traditional motherhood narratives:

*And I-so you know, in the times that I was met with acceptance for those emotions as messy and as unpleasant as they were, and as much as they didn't match the you know the narrative of like, ohh, motherhood is supposed to be like, blissful, and you're only supposed to have positive feelings about it and towards your child...* (Beth, 30 years old, one child)
Participants have unique motherhood experiences, and this is reflected in the imageries they conjure and the narratives of motherhood that they draw from:

Ella: OK, I'm going to move on to another item. So this is from the Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire. The item is, “Although fathers may mean well, they are generally not as good at parenting as mothers.”

Trevene: Absolutely. [Katherine nods exasperatedly and gives a thumbs-up]. I 100%... I agree. Like my ex-husband is my ex-husband for a reason and he- I feel like we were fine before kids and he was like fun... And then when you have kids, it's like, oh, this isn't really cool anymore. Some-something changes within you and he would just, like, let the kids run across the street. And um you know yell, yell at them or you know it... a lot more than that, I've been through a lot, but...Totally agree. And my kids would agree too.

[...]

Lilith: That statement it annoys me because it makes it seem like it's something biological when it's societal, [nods from Beth, Katherine raises hands in agreement] it's like, no, it's like we don't expect our boys and our men to be equal partners.

Subtheme 3b: Maternal Body as Invitation

Participants described the tendency for others to insert themselves into caregiving decisions. There was discussion about invasive and inappropriate questions, as well as unsolicited advice.

It's a free pass when you have a belly, right? When you've got the free pass for strangers to touch you and... ask you inappropriate questions (PJ, 41 years old, two children)

And like, yeah, I also like struggled to get pregnant and like had losses along the way and like, everyone’s like, “well, like drink green juice and like, have this amount of like vitamins and this amount of stuff and like, don't exercise too much,
but like, you still have to be like really skinny or else like, you're not gonna get pregnant cause whatever [shrugs throwing hands up]. Just like- I feel like there's a lot of, like, [heavy on the air quotes] “health” stuff that’s like, pushed at you now when you’re trying to conceive, when you’re pregnant, especially when you're pregnant, I think is like when you get it the most. (Olive, 35 years old, one child)

Both PJ and Olive share stories that highlight how we treat mothers as a means of production to which we are entitled. The mothers produce a resource (a child) that we, as a broader population, benefit from, and as such, we invest ourselves heavily into the wellbeing of mothers and react to maternal bodies with a level of intimacy that is unwarranted.

Subtheme 3c: Supporting Mothers

As part of the focus group schedule participants were asked how they felt that researchers, as well as their own communities, could be better supporting mothers. Ideas included the validation of tough emotions and being open-minded about what mothering can and should look like. Here, there seemed to be consensus that mothers needed to be made more visible.

What tools can we give our bigger circle on how to support moms, and I think maybe I might need help on how to verbalize, like how to communicate what we're feeling, like to put words to it, that- and then for people to understand what those words mean. (Lilith, 40 years old, three children)

But... the times that I was met with like acceptance for my feelings, which included like a lot of sadness and frustration, but also sometimes anger because of how sleep deprived I was and how, you know, I couldn't get a single thing done without somebody saying “he's crying, he needs to be fed”. Or, you know, whatever it is, there's always something like that with parenthood. And I so you know, in the times that I was met with acceptance for those emotions as messy and as unpleasant as they were... made me feel better, even though it didn't change
anything about the actual situation and what I needed to do. (Beth, 30 years old, one child)

So, I would just say that there needs to be more time spent being open-minded about the role-who’s doing the role because everybody’s situation is totally different. You know, it’s no longer necessarily a father who’s a male, a woman who is a mother. And there are three children, It-that’s done. You know, we-we have to redefine everything... (Celeste, 55 years old, one child)

Subtheme 3d: The Mother Club

Participants highlighted the importance of developing and maintaining a community of mothers. Participants also referenced an inherent and somewhat spiritual connection that mothers have with each other and talked about the respect they have for other mothers. Participants spoke with reverence about being a mother and were proud to be part of this ‘club.’

But like I'm like there's a heaviness that that- and like it's like, it's like that idea of like, game sees game, right, like in sports and stuff but it's like the heaviness of moms like sees the other heaviness of moms... (Katherine, 32 years old, two children)

But I think that's I think that's the key, is like trying to not judge everybody. One of our good friends like she does everything different than us in terms of like how she's feeding and that's- but like we're great friends because we just respect that we do it differently and it doesn't matter. (Danielle, 33 years old, two children)

And I have to run to another meeting... but yeah good to see everybody. Call or text if you need anything else... Super proud of you guys. Really good luck. (Katherine, 32 years old, two children)

Katherine’s sign-off highlights the inherent community that seems to be built into motherhood. While the other participants in her focus group were presumably strangers
prior to that morning, Katherine offered her support and kind words to the group as if she had previously established relationships with everyone.

*PJ*: I just want to say I hope I haven’t discouraged you from wanting children. That it’s still an incredible experience [laughing]

*Ella*: Yeah. I believe that. I do. [laughing]

*Carmen*: Yeah, best, best, best experience of my life.

PJ and Carmen work together to construct a positive narrative of motherhood at the end of our focus group discussion (which consisted largely of critique and calls to action).

**Theme 4: The Learning Mother**

Participants offer a counter-narrative to the ‘natural mother’ ideology (i.e., the idea that a mother naturally knows how to take care of her baby). They discuss how learning how to take care of you baby is an experimentation process that involves getting to know your baby. There was also discussion of the idea that the mother is more in tune with the baby’s needs because she spends the most time with him/her, rather than because of her biology. Two subthemes were identified: Mother Knows Best and Getting to Know Your Baby.

**Subtheme 4a: Mother Knows Best**

Participants discuss how mothers tend to know more about their baby’s needs because they are often the ones who spend the most time tending to these needs. With this, comes an emphasis on a ‘practice makes perfect’ approach to mothering:

*It's cause I took all of the parental leave and I spent hours every day doing it. It was practice and like “if you just try harder and practice, you can do it too.”*  
(Amy, 36 years old, one child)

*Like I remember when we were in the hospital and the nurse was like [puts on voice] “you'll just like, know what your baby needs.” And I was like and later our*
midwife came in and she said, “well, that's bullshit because this is like essentially a stranger. You don't know them ...and they don't know you. So I don't know why she'd even say that to you”. She's like “literally the first year of parenting is just like keeping your child alive and trial and error. So you don't have to have the answer.” (Carmen, 41 years old, one child)

Subtheme 4b: Getting to Know Your Baby

Participants explained how a large part of learning how to parent your child is getting to know them. They rebuke the idea that mothers instinctively know how to take care of their child, instead explaining that they have to become acquainted with their child first. The baby is sometimes referred to as a “stranger.”

People just like, assume we know what to do. But like you don't. Like, it took us like 12 hours to figure out how to, like... swaddle our child so she would go to sleep, right? Like it- it took us like, you know, 15 different soothers to figure out what she likes. So, I think there's, like, you know, you're like, [euphoric voice] “I'm having a baby. It's going to be great” and like of course it's great, it's fabulous, but it doesn't mean there's [not] hiccups that we can't just own as humans and be like. “You're a stranger. I'm a stranger, and we're still getting to know each other.” (Carmen, 41 years old, one child)

Just because you've mothered one kid doesn't mean you know exactly what your next kid wants, either, because you still have to get to know them, right? (Nancy, 37 years old, four children)

4.2 Participant Engagement with Item

To address the second research question, three core themes were identified across the three focus group discussions: Issue with Item Construction; Items Lack Care for Respondent; and Playful Shock and Disgust at Item. Each theme had to be identified in all three focus groups to be included.

Theme 1: Issues with Item Construction
Participants often expressed dissatisfaction with the wording of an item or the language used within the items. Vagueness, lack of context, and leading questions were discussed. Particular attention was drawn to the implications that this has on both our interpretation of the item and our understanding of motherhood.

*I wonder again about the kind of the way that that’s phrased about the ‘real me’... like my question is I don’t know what that means* (Beth, 30 years old, one child)

*That [air quotes] “healthy living behavior” is very vague* (Amy, 36 years old, one child)

Beth and Amy draw attention to the vague wording of the items and suggest that the phrasing of the key phenomenon (i.e., this idea that the “real me” is replaced by motherhood or the idea that mothers should comply with “healthy living behavior”) is unclear. In both cases, the implication seems to be that interpretations of this item will vary based on the person (another participant brings attention to the role that past experiences will affect interpretation of survey items). A tone of annoyance is undeniable.

Lilith responds to the item, “Although fathers may mean well, they are generally not as good at parenting as mothers”:

*The statement it annoys me because it makes it seem like it’s something biological when it’s societal* (Lilith, 40 years old, three children)

Lilith expresses annoyance at the way that the item implies that effective parenting is biological. Again, a resentment for the natural mother ideology is present. Lilith is acutely aware of the potential for this discourse to promote this ideology and has clearly faced this assumption in her experiences as a mother. Later, Lilith notes that this sentiment lets fathers “off the hook” and claims that boys are not raised to be in tune with the needs of others in the same way as girls are which is likely partly to blame for a less than adequate ability to parent.
Natalie responds to the item, “Children are less likely to form a warm and secure relationship with a mother who is working full time”:

*It could be asked in a less leading way, more open-ended about how people feel about work and motherhood, or the balance, and not about like, necessarily very much planting the idea that it could impact bonding* (Natalie, 38 years old, one child)

She notes that the item is leading, planting the idea in the respondent’s head that being a working mother could impact mother-child bonding. With this, Natalie acknowledges the ability of these items to translate values about motherhood to those reading the item.

**Theme 2: Item Lacks Care for Respondent**

Participants note the tendency for items to offend respondents. The potential negative affective responses stemming from engaging with the item is discussed. The invasive nature of the items is also touched on.

Natalie responds to the item, “A woman is not truly fulfilled until she has been a mother”:

*I struggled for a long time with infertility and I think… filling out a survey like that, that would not make me feel good at the time* (Natalie, 38 years old, one child)

She points to the existence of both external and internal pressures [to have children, presumably] as reasons for her potential distress in response to this item. Danielle notes that this sentiment causes her friends who choose not to have children feel like they have to justify why they don’t have children. In a different group, Celeste explains that she was “made to feel different” for not having children until later in life. Natalie, Danielle, and Celeste (all responding to the same item) acknowledge how this sentiment ‘leaks’ into the real world and colours the way that others understand the necessity of motherhood to womanhood. Carmen responds to the same item below, resisting the idea
that all women need to have kids. Carmen also had a hard time getting pregnant and this is clearly, and justifiably, impacting her readings of this item.

... *I find that to be really offensive for people that don't have kids or choose not to have kids like we're not privy to any of that information, nor should we be.*

(Carmen, 41 years old, one child)

Danielle and Amy respond to the item, “If other people help me look after my baby, I feel like a failure”:

*Again, it's like leading to like make you feel a bit guilty about like leaving your kid.*

(Danielle, 33 years old, two children)

Like some of my friends have postpartum anxiety and I can imagine a question like that would be really triggering

(Amy, 36 years old, one child)

They note how reading this item may make the respondent feel guilty or anxious. By evoking these negative responses, it’s clear how the sentiment, that the mother should not require caregiving support, is a pressure that mothers face and must resist in their day-to-day lives. If this sentiment was not leaking into the real world, participants would likely not associate it with feelings of distress.

**Theme 3: Playful Shock and Disgust at Item**

Items often elicited shocked and disgusted responses that were followed by giggles, playful eyerolls, and collective head shaking. While there was a light-heartedness to these responses, participants were visibly unhappy with the questions that were being asked.

Ella: *So the item is, “I’m worried that that I’m not as good as other mothers”*

PJ: *Oh my goodness [disgusted look, shakes head]. Yeah that’s not a good start [laughing]. Oh my goodness! That question. Yeah, we need to get rid of that question. It should not be asked.*
Ella: *How do we feel about asking people this [I'm worried that I'm not as good as other mothers]?*

Amy: *Gross.*

Both Amy and PJ seem exasperated by the items shared. There is a tone of exhaustion in their responses that leads me to believe that they are faced with these sorts of assumptions about motherhood on a regular basis. That mothers should be comparing themselves to other mothers is not a novel concept to them.
Chapter 5

5 Discussion

This research was split into two distinct but interconnected parts: the first, a critical measurement analysis, investigated how ideologies and stereotypes about mothers and motherhood are being (re)produced in the measurement tools we use as psychologists to study motherhood; the second part used focus groups to explore both how these ideologies translate into the lived experiences of mothers and what unique readings mothers would pull from a small subset of the items that were analyzed in the critical measurement analysis. I will first breakdown the results from my critical measurement analysis before integrating them with findings from the focus groups.

5.1 Critical Measurement Analysis

Through a critical analysis of measurement items, I identified dominant key motherhood ideologies that were being relied on and reproduced by the quantitative study of motherhood in psychology. Three key themes or ideologies emerged from my thematic analysis of the item bank: the Good Mother as Productive Labourer Ideology, the Mother and Child as Lovingly Interconnected Ideology, and the Motherhood as a Process of Identity Development Ideology. Items portrayed a motherhood that was blissful and full of love, despite the heavy emphasis on the emotional and behavioural regulation – a form of labour – that is expected of them. Items centered the mother as an individual who is defined by her maternal identity and her child’s behaviour and development.

5.1.1 The Good Mother as Productive Labourer Ideology

Items housed in this theme reference the mother’s ability to self-regulate, self-discipline, and professionalize unwaged maternal labour. The labour that mothers are expected to engage in is three pronged, involving emotion work, behavior regulation, and citizenship cultivation for both herself and her child. This reflects a general commodification of the self that is necessitated by neoliberal economies, a process that is particularly salient for mothers who act as both labourers and the means of production (i.e., mothers are both products and producers) and are therefore uniquely enmeshed in the wellbeing of the
neoliberal state. Motherhood is constructed according to neoliberal values of productivity, citizenship, and individual responsibility. As such, the good neoliberal mother as constructed by these items is confident and happy, in control of herself and her child, and well-connected.

5.1.2 The Mother and Child as Lovingly Interconnected Ideology

Items reference three entangled mothers – the natural mother, the abject mother, and the loving mother – who reflect our construction of the mother-child relationship as innate, impenetrable, and blissful. Items rely on essentialist constructions of the maternal body as naturally emerging from the cis-gendered female body, simply because of the body’s ability to reproduce. The mother’s natural ability to parent is central here, as is the fusion of mother and child in a loving and exclusive bond, where the two are so tightly intertwined that maternal behaviour is tied directly to child development. This is where we see a connection drawn between the mother-child relationship and the ‘leaky’ maternal body, where the body both leaks literally (e.g., breastmilk) and figuratively (e.g., a mother’s stress will leak into and pollute her relationship with her child, affecting the child’s sleeping habits). Together, these constructions reflect the natural mother narrative.

5.1.3 Motherhood as a Process of Identity Development Ideology

Relying on neoliberal constructions of the self and the body, items here reference maternal self-concept and identity. Having a clear idea of who you are is crucial for marketing the self and is therefore integral to successful neoliberal motherhood. Items often put mothers in competition with each other, by asking them to compare their own mothering abilities to those of other mothers. This informs the maternal self-concept and perpetuates the judgement and surveillance of maternal behaviour. In feminist research on motherhood, a distinction is often drawn between the act of mothering and the institution of motherhood (see Gumbs, 2016); mothering is simply to engage in childcare (early childcare workers will mother, extended family will mother, neighbours will mother) and motherhood is a system of ideologies that ensure those who care for our children raise a functional future workforce (Lewis, 2023). Items in this theme center
motherhood and therefore focus on the internal world of the mother (i.e., Who is she as a mother? Is she a good mother? Who is she compared to other mothers?).

5.1.4 The Single Desirable Maternal Subject

Taken together, these items produce a single desirable maternal subject (i.e., the “good” mother) who is white, upper-middle class, married, able-bodied, and cisgendered. This is to say that survey items make ‘legible’ or legitimize this maternal subject by relying on imageries often associated with whiteness, wealth, heterosexuality, and health. For example, items that reference being a working mother operate on the assumption that mothers have the choice to stay home. Additionally, frequent reference to mother-child bonding assumes a mother who can afford to take time off of work to spend time with her child, or that the mother works in a full-time, fairly well-paying job that awards a generous maternity leave. Again, these items make legible the white, upper-middle class maternal subject as these are the individuals who are stereotypically associated with these jobs. Items that reference the mother-child relationship evoke imageries of this mother, who, because of the links drawn between the white, upper-middle class mother and good motherhood, is loving, kind, patient, and skillful in her ability to develop this bond. Relatedly, items that compare motherhood to fatherhood make assumptions about the sexuality and relationship status of imaginary mother presented in the items, cementing the visible – and subsequently, good – mother as heterosexual and married. Items that mention breastfeeding, birth, and the pregnant body make a similar assumption about gender identity by assuming the mother is a cisgender woman with breasts and female-typed sex organs. When we normalize the white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, cisgendered mother we code this as ‘good’ or the motherhood that every mother should strive for. Mothers who do not fit this image, then, are read as ‘bad’ mothers. This is to say that to be made legible as a subject is to be seen, respected, and validated (Sweet, 2019).

As McClelland and colleagues (2020) note in their analysis of abortion attitude measures, the language that is used in these items is important for shaping the imaginary woman who the respondent is being asked to judge. Reference to “lifestyle” for example (e.g., The birth of my baby will restrict my lifestyle) conjures an image of a particular
mother who has a lifestyle consisting of some amount of luxury or leisure that she is at risk of losing. As such, we visibilize the white, upper-middle class, married mother, as it is this mother – and not the poor, racialized, single mother – who serves capitalist systems of power, and it is this mother who is normalized within discourses of motherhood. Items reference opportunities that are exclusively available to this ‘ideal mother,’ including parenting classes, access to “connections” to ensure her child’s academic success, and the luxury of treating parenting as a “unique opportunity to journey through childhood again.” Additionally, items directly reference the “good mother” in essence making a value judgement about the mother presented in the item and drawing links between good motherhood and certain mothering behaviours, such as spending time with her baby, putting her baby’s needs before her own, and remaining well-adjusted. By using the phrase ‘good,’ survey items also suggest that there is also a bad or incorrect way to mother.

5.2 What’s Reflected in the Experiences of Mothers?

In our focus groups, mothers described experiences that aligned with the narratives of motherhood being constructed by the survey items. This suggests a two-way dispersion of bias, where ideologies being (re)produced by our research filter into the real world and embed themselves in the beliefs and attitudes of the public, and our measurement tools are relying on the ideologies of motherhood that exist in our culture. Psychology as a field has put forth its fair share of problematic and since debunked theories about marginalized social groups that have directly impacted the social treatment of these groups. In the early 1900s, Freud suggested that hysteria was a psychological disorder that resulted from a girl’s loss of her ‘male sexuality.’ Hysteria was listed in the DSM until 1980 (McVean, 2017) and discourses of the ‘crazy woman’ (e.g., Glamour, 2015) are inseparable from this history. Psychological research on race differences in intelligence has suggested that the IQs of White people are generally higher than those of Black people (Lynn, 1991; Rushton & Jensen, 2005). As this research has filtered into our beliefs and attitudes about race, it has affected how Black individuals are treated, with 60% of Black Americans reporting that they are treated like they weren’t smart because of their race (Cox, 2019). In one focus group, mothers discussed the importance
of others validating their “messy” emotions. They explained that their “struggles” were not often taken seriously and any excess energy they put into mothering – in effect, draining themselves – seemed to be perceived as inevitable. I trace this narrative – particularly of the “normal struggle” and our discomfort with maternal distress – to discourses of the natural and loving mother being reproduced in items that discuss the blissful relationship between mother and child and items that suggest that mothers are naturally more caring, attentive, and knowledgeable than fathers. These experiences, along with mothers’ negotiations of guilt and failure, are also reflective of the emotional labour that we expect mothers to do.

A subset of items makes a distinction between appropriate (e.g., confidence) and inappropriate (e.g., irritation) emotional experiences and this distinction is reflected in maternal descriptions of their own experiences navigating their emotions. When Beth describes the need to have her emotions validated, she lists the emotions she was feeling at having to cluster feed her infant with little support and is visibly hesitant to admit that she was feeling angry. This is consistent with Hochschild’s (1979) description of emotion work, where inappropriate emotions are suppressed. Broadly, we restrict mothers to a very specific narrative of good motherhood and that means we constrain what feelings they are allowed to express without judgement. I argue we surveil this process for mothers with particular scrutiny as we cannot separate the mother’s actions from the success of the child’s development (evident in items that link maternal behavior to child wellbeing) and we rely on the child’s healthy development for the prosperity of the broader population. Children who are not raised well and develop unsuccessfully are drains on the economy and are less functional workers. Mothers discuss the tendency for others to make their childbearing and childrearing practices their business by providing unsolicited advice, asking invasive questions, and inappropriately touching their pregnant bodies. The maternal body as a vessel narrative is mirrored in items that discuss feelings of body alienation during pregnancy, where the body becomes a machine for reproduction and is no longer familiar.

Items that reproduce neoliberal ideals of motherhood are constructing narratives of good motherhood which were reflected in the experiences of mothers. Emotion work is
undeniably an important facet of the neoliberal mother and highlights how ideologies of the natural mother and ideologies of the neoliberal mother are co-constructed and leak into the maternal experience as a cohesive narrative. In our focus group discussion, mothers discuss the importance of self-care for their ability to parent. A professionalization or entrepeneuralization of the self (i.e., the self as both worker and product) is discursively reproduced in items that discuss behavior regulation, cultivating citizenship, and development of maternal identity and self-concepts. This is reflected in participants’ discussion of maternal comparison and the utility of the maternal body. Mothers point to their body and its functions as a place of growth for the fetus and a food source for the baby as helpful in uniting the mother and the child and naturally building the mother-child relationship. For instance, Danielle notes that she has a unique connection with her child because they’ve been acquainted for the nine months of her pregnancy. Similarly, Trevene and Katherine point to breastfeeding as the reason they felt so protective of their babies, the reasoning being that breastfeeding helps to bond the two individuals. Indeed, survey items that discuss breastfeeding often reference its utility for bonding (e.g, Breastfeeding increases mother-infant bonding). Discussions of the unique utility of the maternal body, particularly to connect with and care for the baby, reflect objectifying narratives of motherhood that shape the maternal body as a resource for the development of the child. This process of objectification is mirrored in the dehumanization of waged labourers in capitalist workplaces; the mother and the waged labourer are both necessarily reduced to a means of production. In a couple of instances, mothers credit their biology for the different – and occasionally unequal – parental roles that they take on, wherein they seem to agree, at least in part, with the natural mother narrative. For example, Natalie explains that her husband became a much more involved father when their baby started to smile, suggesting that Natalie had a natural connection with the baby, but her husband needed a push to establish that connection with the baby.

5.3 What’s Resisted by Mothers?

Mothers are savvy and understand how to rebuke and resist the narratives of motherhood being produced by the items discussed. Construction of the ‘learning mother’ narrative appears as a direct rebuttal to the idea that mothers are naturally the best parents, and as
such, mothering should be a one-woman job. While a subset of items suggests that women “instinctively know what a baby needs” and that mothers have an inherent bond with their child, participants argue that it takes time to learn how to take care of your baby and that this is a process of experimentation that involves getting to know your baby. Participants also directly challenge the notion that mothers are naturally better caregivers, sometimes presented to them by their partners to shirk responsibility, by arguing that they only appear to know more about their child’s needs because they are often the one tasked with providing care. Mothers acknowledge the tendency for others to place them as the ‘default parent’ and note how they often take on this role but are resistant to the idea that this is biologically, and not socially, driven. Despite the tendency for these measures to center the mother, focus group participants also relayed the importance of community for caregiving support.

5.4 What’s Missing in These Measurement Tools?

After speaking with participants about their experiences with motherhood, several gaps were notable in the experiences of motherhood being assessed by these measures. Across all three focus groups, mothers discussed their respect for and connection with other mothers. The community that was established simply from being a mother was obvious and heartwarming. While items that focus on maternal identity touch on the importance of being part of a community of mothers, which was an idea expanded upon in our discussion of the “mother club,” these items tend to neglect the collective experience of mothers, and in line with neoliberal values, center the individual. In our focus group discussions, mothers were emphatic about the respect they had for other mothers and worked together to make meaning out of their collective maternal experiences. They provided support for each other when a difficult story was shared. This is contrasted with items that often focus on competition between mothers, meaning these measures are constructing a motherhood characterized by a competitive mentality when that doesn’t seem to be the case for real mothers. However, despite its apparent importance to mothers, this community is rarely explored in our measures of motherhood, and while psychology is indeed a field that tends to focus on the individual, it is undeniable that we
are moving towards a more socially situated psychology and our measurement tools should reflect this shift.

5.5  How are Mothers Interacting with Items?

Focus group participants discuss the role that their past experiences with mothering have on their interpretation of the survey items, meaning that they are inevitably drawing from these experiences as they interpret the item. It is clear that respondents come to these items with feelings and experiences that we often disregard as we analyze these results, taking them instead as an objective and static truth. Just as we take the objectivity of our measurement tools for granted, so to do we seem to assume that respondents come to these surveys with objectivity, and this is evidently unreasonable. As such, caution is required when presenting survey results as truth.

Notably, mothers interact differently with the same item. Responding to the item, “Maternity requires compliance with healthy living behaviours,” Olive talks about the health advice she got from others when she was trying to get pregnant. She talks sarcastically about the power of green juices to help you get pregnant and the “health stuff” that’s pushed on women, particularly as they’re trying to conceive. If taking this survey, Olive would have likely disagreed with this statement. On the other hand, Amy interpreted the item differently and argued that she feels like she can be a better mother when she takes care of her health. If taking this survey, Amy likely would have agreed with this statement. As a researcher interpreting these results, it appears that one participant is agreeing with the statement and the other is disagreeing, when in reality they are responding to two very different interpretations of the statement. Similarly, Nancy responds to the item, “A woman is not truly fulfilled until she has been a mother”, by agreeing that you need to have first-hand experience to really understand what’s involved in motherhood. Nancy interpreted the item as a reference to a person’s ability to give parenting advice before they are parents themselves. PJ and Carmen, on the other hand, argue that being a woman should be fulfilled by more than just motherhood. Again, these participants would respond very differently to this item, but not because they necessarily have different attitudes towards motherhood; Nancy, PJ, and Carmen simply interpreted the item differently.
Finally, it is worth noting that participants were often insulted or offended by the survey items as I read them – Lilith even says at one point, “I don’t feel as offended by this statement as the other ones” in reference to the statement on maternity and healthy living behaviors. Psychology researchers have started to call for a critical participatory action approach to survey design, where those who belong to the group you are hoping to target with your study play a key role in developing the survey items (see Fine & Torre, 2019 for an example of this with queer youth designing a survey to study the experiences of marginalized queer youth). Given the emotional reactions to the surveys and the disconnect between the narratives woven into the items and the experiences of mothers, it is perhaps worth considering to include mothers in the measure development process, such that these measures better reflect their experiences and capture what mothers think is important to be captured.

5.6 Implications

The psychological discourse on motherhood, at least as represented by quantitative measures used to study attitudes about motherhood, produces a dichotomy for motherhood that categorizes mothers as either good and productive or bad and dysfunctional. In their work on repronormativity, Mavuso and Chadwick (2022) note that in (de)valuing certain reproductive subjects and narratives, we are directing the flow of resources (such as parenting classes, expensive fertility services, and quality childcare) towards groups whose reproduction we respect and value and away from those whose reproduction we disregard or demonize. In essence, quantitative research in psychology on motherhood constructs a good mother who is not only deemed worthy of more tangible support (such as access to high quality healthcare) but is also awarded a disproportionate amount of caregiving resources.

These discourses are additionally employed to regulate reproductive bodies by constructing normative and non-normative maternal subjects and experiences (Mavuso & Chadwick, 2022). Here we see how capitalist systems of power are exercising control over maternal experience through the various research channels offered by the academy. In the Marxist feminist tradition and inspired indubitably by the seminal work of Shulamith Firestone, a subsect of feminism has called for the abolition of the family and
the liberation of women from the binds of motherhood (see Firestone, 1970; Hester, 2018; Lewis, 2023). With this movement comes an increased awareness of the performativity of motherhood. We acknowledge that performing motherhood is akin to performing labour in a waged workplace, and as such, this performance is dictated and surveilled by capitalist systems of power.

As McClelland et al. (2020) argue in their critical analysis of abortion attitude measures, the surveys we use in psychology rely on stereotypes and assumptions that shape our understanding of who is being studied and, further, the knowledge that filters out of this research. This work supports that argument. I identified many neoliberal and gender essentialist ideologies being reproduced in a set of approximately 400 psychological survey items that measure attitudes about motherhood. This research adds to the growing critiques within feminist academia that argue against claims of objectivity and value neutrality in the social sciences.

5.6.1 Building Best Practices in Measurement

With this work, I hope to encourage an expansion of best practices in quantitative psychological research, particularly research that is focused on historically under-/misrepresented groups. While the present work has largely acted as a critique of quantitative psychological research, and I agree with feminist scholarship that argues achieving true objectivity and value neutrality in the social sciences is not possible (nor is it something we should necessarily be striving for), there are steps we can take to make our measurement tools align more closely to feminist values of inclusion and representation. McClelland and colleagues (2020) argue that an expansion of best practices should cover the researcher’s ability to be historically minded, aware of socially-derived meanings, and use qualitative analysis as a necessary component to the survey development and testing process.

As mentioned above, it is crucial that we develop measures that better reflect the lived experiences of the groups that we study. If we include individuals from these groups in the survey development process, we will likely find that our items rely less on ideological constructions of these groups and are instead reflective of lived experience. In
the meantime, we may consider removing particularly charged language from pre-existing or future items (e.g., “good mother” and “bad mother”) that affects the dichotomous construction of motherhood and may impact the responses gathered from these surveys.

As noted by McClelland and colleagues (2020), abortion attitude measures often lack adequate context. A similar tendency towards the ignorance of context is present in motherhood attitude measures. In our focus group discussions, mothers emphasized the importance of adding context to our generally vague measurement tools. For example, Natalie urges researchers to include reference to timing, arguing that answers to questions about bonding and parenting abilities would change depending on what point in time you were imagining when you answered.

Finally, McClelland et al. (2020) suggest researchers fortify quantitative findings with explorations of how respondents are interpreting survey items. The present research employed a form of cognitive debriefing to investigate how mothers were interpreting survey items and how this was affecting how they connected it to their own lived experiences. By studying how individuals interact with our measurement tools, researchers can document the often-invisible ways that respondents make meaning of items and how this differs across individuals (McClelland et al., 2020).

5.7 Limitations and Future Research Directions

There are several limitations to consider when interpreting the results of this study. First, only English language measures were included in the item bank. As such, results represent constructions of motherhood as they exist primarily in the Global North. Measures used outside of the Global North, where different cultural values and practices dictate expectations of mothers, would likely rely on different motherhood ideologies leading to different results. Surveys were collected following a review of the psychological literature on motherhood. While this review was systematic it was in no way exhaustive and there are likely measures that I missed and are therefore not included in this analysis. I also recognize that my theoretical lens affected my reading of the item
bank. Researchers with different theoretical positionings would likely interpret the same items differently.

Given the small sample size with the focus group results, it is important to acknowledge that the items may have been interpreted differently by other samples of mothers, and not all maternal experiences could have been represented by this sample. Additionally, the mothers in this sample were primarily white, educated, and middle class. While the experiences of these mothers are incredibly important and worth studying, it is worth noting that these results represent a narrow maternal experience. Future research should consult a more diverse group of mothers about the content of psychological measures of motherhood and their relationship to the narratives being produced by the items housed within.

Finally, focus groups only contained mothers and therefore we only got one perspective on the ideologies embedded in the item bank. As such, it would be of interest to see how men and non-mothers interpret items and how this differs from the interpretations of those with mothering experience. It is worth exploring whether these individuals would recognize the stereotypes and ideologies embedded within these items to the same degree that mothers were able to pick up on them.

5.8 Conclusion

The field of psychology plays an important role in constructing and reproducing both academic and cultural understandings of motherhood. The present research explored the ideologies embedded in psychological quantitative measures of motherhood and found that survey items rely on neoliberal and essentialist ideologies to construct the ideal maternal subject. Focus group discussions, wherein a sample of mothers shared their interpretations of a subset of items from our item bank revealed the relationship between motherhood narratives embedded in the survey items to the lived maternal experiences of the participants. While some neoliberal and essentialist ideologies were mirrored in these experiences, mothers also fought back against constructions of the natural mother and the narrative of motherhood as a ‘one woman job.’ While community was important to focus group participants, reference to community was missing from measures of motherhood.
Psychological measures of motherhood can be seen as working to regulate maternal experiences and provides a framework for dichotomizing motherhood that is disseminated through the literature and can make its way into policy. These findings have implications for how we think about ‘good’ motherhood and how we design our measurement tools in psychology.
References


Kalin, R., & Tilby, P. J. (1978). Development and Validation of a Sex-Role Ideology Scale. *Psychological Reports, 42*(3), 731–738. [https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1978.42.3.731](https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1978.42.3.731)


Appendix A: Demographics Questionnaire and Letter of Intent

Q19 Project Title: “Perceptions of Mothers and Motherhood”

Researchers:
Rachel Calogero, PhD, Principal Investigator Email: rcaloger@uwo.ca  Ella Keogh, Masters Student, Co-Investigator Email: ekeogh3@uwo.ca

1. Invitation to Participate
You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Dr. Rachel Calogero and Ella Keogh from the Department of Psychology at Western University.

2. Purpose of this Letter
The purpose of this letter is to provide you with information to allow you to make an informed decision regarding participation in this research.

3. Purpose of this Study
We are interested in perceptions of mothers and motherhood and how these perceptions are studied by psychologists.

4. Inclusion Criteria
Participants must be over 18 years old, identify as a mother, speak conversational English, and be able to attend a one-hour focus group on Zoom.

5. Exclusion Criteria
Participants will be excluded from the study if they do not meet the criteria listed above.

6. Study Procedures
Participants in this study will be involved in a focus group of 4-5 people discussing the topic of mothers and motherhood and answering a series of questions about the way we think about mothers and how we study them as researchers. Focus groups will be led by the lead researcher on the project (Ella Keogh) who is a student at Western. Focus groups
will last approximately 60-90 minutes. Focus groups will be audio and video recorded by the researcher using Zoom’s ‘record meeting’ feature to later be transcribed and coded for consistent themes between and among focus groups. Audio recording is necessary for transcription purposes. The video recording of the focus group will also be used to help with transcription (i.e., to link comments to individuals), but will be deleted as soon as transcription is complete. All information regarding your name, location, or any other potentially identifying information will be de-identified before presentation or publication of the data.

Prior to attending the focus group, participants will be given the opportunity to create a pseudonym. This ensures their quotes remain anonymous. Pseudonyms will be linked to email addresses, as well as demographic data (including age, gender identity, ethnicity, race, sexuality, number of children, and religious affiliation). You are under no obligation to provide any demographic information that you are uncomfortable sharing. You’ll be sent the transcript to review before analysis begins. At this point, you can note anything you wish to expand on or would like to ‘strike’ from the record. This additional activity is optional for you and should take no longer than 30 minutes. Transcripts will be sent to you via email.

7. Possible Risks and Harms

If you consent to participate, none of the questions posed in the focus group will expose participants to subject matter that is not readily available or discussed in newspapers, television, magazines, radio, surfing the web, online social media networks, or their daily lives. If you experience distress from one of these questions, you are not obligated to stay for the remainder of the focus group. Following the completion of the study, a list of resources will be provided to you in the debriefing form that can be accessed online. If you do feel any distress or discomfort following participation, you may utilize the resources below.

Resources:

- Canadian Mental Health Association: https://cmha.ca/find-help/find-cmha-in-your-area/
8. Possible Benefits
You may not directly benefit from participating in this study, but the knowledge gained from this study may help to better understand stereotypes of motherhood.

9. Compensation
Participants will be compensated with a $20 CAD e-gift card of choice. Participants will be compensated to the equivalent of Canadian dollars regardless of the country they are located in. The e-gift card will be sent via email.

10. Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may decide not to participate at any time. You do not waive any legal rights by consenting to this study. If you decide to discontinue the study at any time, you will still be compensated. If you wish to withdraw your data for any reason, you may do so by contacting the lead researcher, Ella Keogh (ekeogh3@uwo.ca), to withdraw your data from the study up until the submission of my masters thesis in the spring/summer of 2024. If participants reach out after this time, data will remain in my masters thesis but will not be included in any future publications/presentations. Once any data is published it will not be possible to withdraw it. In the event you choose to withdraw from the focus group during or after the session, we cannot guarantee that comments made in the focus group session will be removed from researcher’s notes (as they may be necessary context for understanding the comments of others).

11. Confidentiality
Please be advised that although the researchers will take every precaution to maintain the confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents the researchers from guaranteeing confidentiality. However, all of your responses will remain anonymous. Quotes will be linked to your selected pseudonym, as well as to your responses to the
demographic questions. The researchers would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

Your consent and survey responses will be collected through a third party, secure online survey platform called Qualtrics with servers located in Ireland. Qualtrics uses encryption technology and restricted access authorizations to protect the privacy and security of all data collected and retained, including personal information. Please refer to Qualtric’s Privacy Policy (https://www.qualtrics.com/privacy-statement/) for more details about Qualtric’s information management practices. The data will then be exported from Qualtrics and securely stored on Western University’s server. Please note that despite the strong security measures in place, we acknowledge that nothing connected to the Internet is 100% secure.

The focus groups will be recorded through Western University’s hosted Zoom platform and will be saved on the local hard drive of the researcher (Ella Keogh) until it is transcribed. Once the interview is transcribed, it will be deleted from the researcher’s local hard drive. The Zoom privacy policy can be viewed here: https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/

All electronic documents will be kept on a secure university network. The data will be kept for a period of 7 years in accordance with Western University policy.

Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

12. Contacts for Further Information

If you would like to receive any further information regarding this research or your participation in the study, you may contact Ella Keogh (ekeogh3@uwo.ca). You may also contact the principal investigator in this study, Rachel Calogero (rcaloger@uwo.ca). For any questions regarding the conduct of the study, or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Human Research Ethics at Western University, 519-661-3036, 1-844-720-9816 (toll-free), or ethics@uwo.ca.
13. Publication

If the results of the study are published, only anonymized dialogue (i.e., identified by your pseudonym) will be used. Note that dialogue may be linked to one or more of your demographic characteristics. You are under no obligation to provide any demographic information that you are uncomfortable sharing. You’ll be sent the transcript to review before I begin analysis. You may note anything you wish to expand on or would like to ‘strike’ from the record. You may print this form for your records.

See the question below to either provide consent or to opt out of participating in this study. To provide consent, check the box that says, “I agree to participate in the focus group”. To consent to the use of your comments in future presentations of this data (i.e., via conference presentations, journal publications, etc.) please click the next arrow and check the box that says “I consent to the use of my comments in future presentations of this data”.

Q17 I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me, and all questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate. I understand that by checking ‘I agree’ below, I am indicating my consent to participate.

☐ I agree to participate in the focus group. (1)

☐ I do not agree to participate in the focus group and would like to opt out. (2)
Q16 Comments made in the focus group may be anonymously shared in future presentations of this research. I understand that by checking 'I agree' below, I am indicating my consent to the use of my comments in future presentations of this research. If you do not indicate your consent, you are still welcome to participate in this study.

☐ I agree to the potential use of my comments in future presentations of this research. (2)

☐ I do not agree to the potential use of my comments in future presentations of this research. (3)

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Q3 Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! The following are a handful of questions that allow me to get a better feel for who you are. This will help me to better understand your perspectives on motherhood. The information you provide may be used in my analysis of our focus group discussions. Please feel free to skip any questions you don't feel comfortable answering.

Q13 How old are you?
Q4 How would you define your gender? (e.g., woman, non-binary, two-spirit)

Q5 Race refers to a socially constructed category based on a person’s physical characteristics (e.g., White, Black, Asian, Latinx). How would you describe your race? You may type in more than one race.

Q6 Ethnicity refers to a shared cultural heritage that distinguishes one group of people from another including ancestry, a sense of history, language, religion, foods, and clothing (e.g., Japanese, Eastern European, Nigerian, Greek, Canadian). How would you describe your ethnicity? You may type in more than one ethnicity.

Q8 How would you define your sexual orientation? (e.g., heterosexual, bisexual, queer) See here for a broader list of sexual orientations!
Q14 If you identify as religious or spiritual, which religion or spirituality do you practice?

________________________________________________________________

Q7 How many children do you have? If you are currently pregnant with your first child, please indicate this!

________________________________________________________________

Q10 Do you currently have access to someone who helps you with childcare? (e.g., a partner, family member(s), childcare services, etc.)

________________________________________________________________

Q11 Is there anything else that you think is important in shaping your understanding of and experiences with motherhood?

________________________________________________________________
Q15 Following your participation in the focus group, I may follow up with you to clarify some of your quotes and/or to ensure that you are happy with how your quotes have been transcribed. Please provide the best email address to contact you at!

__________________________________________________________________________

End of Block: Block 2

Start of Block: Block 3

Q13 Below is an opportunity for you to create a pseudonym (a made-up name) that will be used to refer to you in the transcription of our focus group discussion. This will ensure you remain anonymous in any future write-ups of this research. This name can be anything you want, as long as it is different from your real name!

__________________________________________________________________________

Q14 I would like my pseudonym to be...

__________________________________________________________________________

End of Block: Block 3
Appendix B: Tentative Items for Focus Groups

1. If other people help me look after my baby, I feel like a failure (Maternal Attitudes Questionnaire)
2. Although fathers may mean well, they are generally not as good at parenting as mothers (Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire)
3. Fathers feel left out if a mother breastfeeds (Iowa Infant Feeding Questionnaire)
4. Women should not breastfeed in public places, such as restaurants (Iowa Infant Feeding Questionnaire)
5. Children are less likely to form a warm and secure relationship with a mother who is working full time (Beliefs about the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children Scale)
6. A woman is not truly fulfilled until she has been a mother (Sex Role Ideology Scale)
7. Maternity requires compliance with healthy living behaviours (Maternal Role Perception Scale)
8. I am worried that I am not as good as other mothers (Being a Mother Scale)
9. I worry about being able to fulfill my baby’s emotional needs (Maternal Self-Report Inventory)
10. Mothers have a stronger emotional bond with their children (Traditional Motherhood Scale)
11. I worry that being a mother will replace the real me (Childbearing Attitudes Questionnaire)
12. I seem to have an endless need for information about being a mother (Childbearing Attitudes Questionnaire)
13. Ultimately, it is the mother who is responsible for how her child turns out (Intensive Parenting Attitudes Questionnaire)
14. I think a good mother should be physically attractive (The Good Mothering Expectations Scale)
Appendix C: Tentative Focus Group Schedule

Following presentation of survey item:

1. What images come to mind when you hear this statement?
2. How would you respond to this item? Why?

Potential follow-up questions:

- Do you have any strong feelings about this item?
- How does this item make you feel?
- How does this item relate to your own experiences of motherhood?

Questions about experiences of motherhood:

- Tell me about your experiences with motherhood.
- Do you feel external and/or internal pressures to behave in a certain way as a mother?

Focus Group Schedule:

1. Introductions – Describe who I am and what my project is. Give participants the opportunity to introduce themselves (using their pseudonyms).
   a. Tentative Introduction: Hi everyone. Thank you so much for being here! I’m a graduate student at Western University in London, Ontario and am interested in how we perceive and understand motherhood. I’m particularly interested in how psychological research shapes motherhood in potentially harmful ways (I’m going to share some survey items that are used in psychological research to measure motherhood in some way, and I look forward to hearing your thoughts on these items). You all are the experts on this (being mothers yourselves) so I really look forward to hearing your thoughts. I want to emphasize that you are all teaching me and that I value your lived experiences and your unique knowledge greatly.
   b. Please ensure that whatever is discussed in this room, stays in this room. Respect your fellow participants’ privacy. This is a safe space.
2. Present items and ask participants to share interpretation of item, as well as to relate item (if relevant) to own experiences of motherhood.
3. If there is time (or if mothers seem disinterested or unengaged with the survey items), ask mothers about their experiences with motherhood.
4. Thank participants and encourage them to share opportunity with those in their community. Debrief participants. Compensate participants.
Curriculum Vitae

Name: Ella Keogh

Post-secondary Education and Degrees:

Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
2018-2022 B.A.

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2022-24 M.Sc.

Honours and Awards:

Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship
2022-23, 2024-25

Related Work Experience:

Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2022-23

Graduate Advisor
Western Undergraduate Psychology Journal
2022-23, 2023-24

Conference Presentations:
