

PERCEPTIONS OF MOTHERHOOD: IDEOLOGIES, EXPECTATIONS AND  
EXPERIENCES OF OLDER MOTHERS IN THE SUBURBS OF NORTH  
ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA.

by

Anne Marie Munson  
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Committee:

\_\_\_\_\_ Director

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Department Chairperson

\_\_\_\_\_ Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

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Perceptions of Motherhood: Ideologies, Expectations and Experiences of Older Mothers  
in the Suburbs of North Arlington County, Virginia.

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts at George Mason University

By

Anne Marie Munson  
Bachelor of Arts  
George Mason University, 2001

Director: Linda J. Seligmann, Professor  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my mother, Mary Browne, whose love, wisdom and fortitude showed me how to be a mother at an older age, and in doing so enabled me to experience a sense of joy and love that I could never have imagined possible.

It is also dedicated to my beautiful daughters, Allie and Hannah, who have brought out a part of me that I never knew existed.

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Thanks to the women in my study who took the time to give me insight into meanings of motherhood at an older age. I have used pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

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## **ABSTRACT**

**PERCEPTIONS OF MOTHERHOOD: IDEOLOGIES, EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF OLDER MOTHERS IN THE SUBURBS OF NORTH ARLINGTON COUNTY, VIRGINIA.**

Anne Marie Munson, M.A.

George Mason University, 2015

Thesis Director: Dr. Linda J. Seligmann

This thesis describes perceptions of women in the suburbs of North Arlington County, Virginia, who chose to become a mother after the age of 35. It discusses how women who are older mothers view themselves and their identities in the context of the larger community of mothers in a white, upper-class community in North Arlington County, Virginia. This research explores the notion that socioeconomic indicators such as age, education, financial security, and social class structure a woman's positioning in the social space in which the cultivation of specific mothering communities take place. While similarities in mothering practices exist, the concept of age as a defining role in the formation of distinctive motherhood groups within the realm of common ground is observed and explored. It is often within these communities that mothers develop a sense of maternal identity—one that is influenced by socially-driven norms and values as well as individual and personalized practice. Unique characteristics of older motherhood are considered to understand the ways in which practice is shaped. These include career

choices, financial security, planning for retirement and college funding simultaneously, caring for elderly or aging parents.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Hugging the southwestern shore of the Potomac River, across from Washington D.C., in Virginia, is a 26-mile plot of land known as Arlington County. This vibrant community bustles with a diverse and productive mix of residential and commercial activity. It is the smallest self-governing county in the U.S. and home to more than 207,000 residents, according to the 2010 U.S. Census. In September of 2011, Bloomberg's Businessweek.com listed Arlington County as number two in its ranking of "America's Best Cities." Drawing from the 2010 census data, the study examined key socioeconomic factors and selected "metrics such as school performance, job availability, green space, and cultural amenities" to support its conclusion of the desirability of living in Arlington County, and particularly, North Arlington. This community has a significant upper middle-class population which is comprised of highly educated, salaried professionals in medicine, law, business, government contractors and academia ([www.boundless.com](http://www.boundless.com)). The transforming neighborhoods of Arlington County reflect how key socioeconomic metrics are woven into the socially-constructed fabric of suburban, upper-middle class community life across America. The U.S. Census Bureau reported that between 2007 and 2011 the median household income in Arlington County was \$99,651 compared with a national household median of \$52,762. The median owner-occupied home value was reported to be \$575,600 and over 46 percent of residents

are classified as homeowners. In terms of ethnic composition, Arlington County is predominantly white, hovering at 77 percent. Over 70 percent of the adult population reports having a Bachelor's degree or higher. Statistics like these suggest that Arlington County is predominantly a community of high-income households whose socioeconomic status is upper-middle class.

Unmistakably, Arlington County, particularly North Arlington, has become a much-sought-after location in which its residents have deliberately chosen to live. With its close proximity to Washington, D.C. and the Dulles Technology Corridor, lucrative employment opportunities, well-regarded public schools and family-focused neighborhoods, it is also home to many culturally enriching and attractive activities. As a resident who has lived and worked in North Arlington for over 20 years, and a graduate student of anthropology, I have curiously observed a profound makeover that began here in the late-1990s and continues unabated today. It is an ongoing adaptation that has jolted quiet, affordable neighborhoods of classic red-brick, post-World War II colonials into high-energy, fast-moving, competitive communities of custom-built homes with inflated price tags, salaries to afford them and families to occupy them.

The tree-lined streets in these neighborhoods radiate a sense of the deliberateness that makes this community flourish. Front yards are professionally landscaped and home exteriors show few signs of neglect—no overgrown weeds, hanging shutters, chipping paint or rusty old trucks in cracked driveways. Strollers, bikes, and countless other toys

casually litter sidewalks and driveways with a seeming lack of concern about possible theft. Parents push jogger-friendly, toddler-filled strollers that symbolize their determination to maintain balance between parenting responsibilities and personal fulfillment. The few seniors who remain, sit on their front stoops and reflect on the passage of time as the changes they are witnessing alter the landscape with which they are familiar. Empty-nesters explore a newfound, yet perhaps hollow, sense of freedom as their young adult children leave for college life, marking a uniquely American rite of passage. New parents embrace the anticipated joys and hidden challenges of having a child, while growing families renovate old colonials or move into much larger, more upscale new homes. Many North Arlington residents actively engage in neighborhood activities—walking dogs, running on paths, chatting with neighbors, visiting local coffee shops and farmers’ markets, and taking their children to parks and playgrounds—all with a driven sense of belonging and contentedness. The transformation from humdrum to high-end aside, North Arlington County somehow maintains the façade of a desirable, small-town community quaintness.

In this hospitable setting, family is integral to the social construction of community. Anthropologists and other social scientists have extensively studied the range of ways in which family is defined within the boundaries of parenting practices, and in particular, motherhood. For example, Alma Gottlieb used ethnographic method in her observations of the culture of caregiving in her study of Beng babies (Gottlieb 2004). Sharon Hays studied what she refers as the “cultural contradictions of motherhood” in her

examination of the social juxtaposition of motherhood and professional success (Hays 1996). Viviana Zelizer offers a brilliant historical and sociological analysis of the “changing social value” of children and the “commodification of motherhood” (Zelizer 1985), and Linda Seligmann delves deeply into the ways in which the concept of family, through adoption, is becoming “increasingly more detached from biological descent” (Seligmann 2013). Family often becomes a focal point to define a sense of parental identity and adapt a system of mothering practices to gain entrée into common ideological communities. My thesis research explores how women who become mothers after the age of 35—that is older mothers—view themselves and their identities in the context of motherhood within the greater community of North Arlington County. As an older mother, I found myself in playgrounds and coffee shops, struggling to connect with younger mothers and not always feeling as though I fit in. My circumstances had an added layer of complexity because my daughters are twins who were adopted from China. These experiences catalyzed my research, and my positioning as an older mother led me to question and explore meanings of motherhood among other older mothers. To my surprise, I found that, in fact, Arlington County is home to many women who made a conscious choice to delay motherhood until their late thirties or early forties. The average age of the mothers in my research is 43 and the average age of their oldest child is six years old. I noticed that the places in which mothers gathered—the same places I frequented—became common ground for mothers to cultivate their support networks. In other words, the ways in which mothers in this community utilized public and private

space influenced their ability to seek out and find membership within select mother groups by virtue of the connections they made on their common ground.

Playgrounds, coffee shops, community centers, and family rooms transform into common ground, providing mothers with a place to develop maternal “social space” (Anagnost 1997). Social space facilitates a deliberate association among like-minded mothers of similar age who seek to fulfill a need for camaraderie within the broad scope of mother networks. I observed how social space can reinforce a woman’s ability to attain membership within a specific socioeconomic group that supports her personal mothering ideology. I also observed that despite similarities in mothering practices, age played a defining role in the formation of distinctive motherhood groups within the realm of common ground. These observations seemed, to me, to warrant deeper exploration.

The highly associative and socially-influential nature of motherhood was also intriguing to me. As I sat in playgrounds and coffee shops, I sensed awkwardness from other women (mothers and nannies) who glanced quizzically at me, too polite to ask if my spouse was Asian and uncertain as to how to raise the issue of adoption. This experience and my continuing observations of mothering practices propelled my exploration of the choices older mothers make in their daily routines. Did their feelings in any way coincide with my feeling of not fitting into what I perceived to be a traditional network of mothers in their mid to late twenties? My observations might imply that older motherhood is a common occurrence. However, I caution that my theory is based only

on information gathered from women in my community—women who are highly educated, financially stable, and white—who made the choice to become mothers in their late-30s or early-40s. Interestingly, my interviewees intimated that older motherhood was normal among their circle of friends in the upper middle-class communities of North Arlington. Although older, the women I interviewed did not necessarily experience feelings of not fitting in, primarily because they could easily find mother networks comprised of women who were of similar age. This observation supports the notion that socioeconomic indicators such as age, education, financial security, and social class precede a woman’s positioning in the social space in which the cultivation of specific mothering communities take place. It is often within these communities that mothers are able to develop a sense of maternal identity. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Gupta and Ferguson 1999) suggest that “identity [and alterity] are produced simultaneously in the formation of “locality” and “community,” where “community is “never simply the recognition of cultural similarity or social contiguity but a categorical identity that is premised on various forms of exclusion and constructions of otherness” (1999:13).

### **The Research Problem**

The subject of motherhood and mothering ideology is one that has been and continues to be examined as social scientists seek to understand and explain social and cultural implications of mother-child bonding, child-rearing norms, the psychological and developmental effects of mothering on children, family life, fortification of class membership through mothering practice, “maternal citizenship” (Anagnost 2004) mothering universals and so forth. Social scientists contend that the ideological and

socially-constructed exclusivity of the mother-child relationship in the U.S. is based on an “historical model” that recognizes the “attachment of innocence to children” which paved the path for “maternal indulgence” (Hays 1996). Anthropologist Maxine Margolis describes post-industrial motherhood as a “cult” which emerged because of factors including shifts in domestic production within the home as a result of industrialization, smaller family size, and a decrease in the number of young, working children (Margolis 1984). The refining of mothering ideology into the prevalent mother-knows-best principle over the past two centuries evolved from the increasing awareness that maternal care is an important and necessary factor in a child’s development. Margolis observes that,

The cult of motherhood is usually associated with the middle class and late nineteenth century, but we can see its roots in the prescriptive literature of the very late eighteenth century and the first decades of the nineteenth century. During these years the earliest hints of a special and distinct maternal role began appearing in sermons, domestic guides, medical volumes and child-rearing manuals, for the first time writers began stressing the critical importance of maternal care in early childhood (1984:22).

Child-rearing and household management had been a shared task among all family members and the idea of a mother devoting time primarily to the care of her child was not only impractical but financially untenable:

The cult of motherhood did not exist because it would have been incongruous in this [colonial] setting. Women were far too busy to devote long hours to purely maternal duties, and fathers, older siblings, and other adults were also on hand to see to children's needs and discipline (1984:22).

In my exploration of both social theory and popular practices of motherhood, I sought to understand perceptions of the role of maternal age, particularly among older mothers. How did mothers feel about being perceived by society as being "older?" The average age of motherhood is on the rise, as reported in "The New Demography of the American Mother" (Taylor, et al. 2010): "The average age for U.S. mothers who had their first baby in 2008 was 25, a year older than the average first-time mother in 1990. Among all women who had a baby in 2008, the average age was 27, up from 26 in 1990. Although in some cases the number of births is small, the rate increases have been sharpest for women in the oldest age groups – 47 percent for women ages 35-39 and 80 percent for women ages 40-44, for example. The research findings also indicate that the delay in age of motherhood is associated with delay in the age of marriage and with growing educational attainment (2010). From this trend, one can surmise that older motherhood and the practices that ensue from such a choice have inevitably influenced changes in cultural and social characteristics that define motherhood ideology. This point, however, begs an important question. Does the same social safety net available to younger mothers exist for older mothers? And if it does, how is it created and how does it function?

Cultural and social characteristics of mothering ideology, such as the desire to nurture and protect a child, are set in motion when a woman engages in the practice of motherhood, regardless of age. As mothering ideology evolves within shifting sociocultural constructs, the essence of modern attitudes towards motherhood are reflected in the transformation. At the same time, when prompted to discuss their decision to become a mother, the women in my research responded more subjectively, expressing an inherent need to embrace motherhood—a feeling derived from what they described as natural maternal instinct. My informants espoused the existence of the naturalness of motherhood as maternal instinct, but were reticent in acknowledging the notion that such a feeling is, in fact, a socially constructed practice. Undoubtedly, maternal instinct is deeply rooted in the subjectivity of a woman’s visceral desire to be a mother. It is worth noting, however, that my analysis does not compare mothering practices of women outside my informant group because such a review requires research that extends beyond the scope of this study. The goal instead is to pay close attention to the choices older mothers in Arlington have made in an attempt to understand if age influences her perception of motherhood as well as her engagement in different aspects of mothering ideology.

### **Woman as Mother, or Not?**

The role of mother is intimately “entwined with idealized notions of the family,” (Arendell 2000) where the mother-child relationship is venerated and the mother’s authority remains relatively unchallenged. Symbols of motherhood, from Raphael’s

*Sistine Madonna* to modern-day mommy tattoos (mommytattoos n.d.) pay homage to the mother-child relationship and symbolically go so far as to imply that women have an instinctive desire to be mothers. Yet, scholarly research suggests otherwise, documenting that the practice of mothering ideology in different social settings derives from culturally-driven norms and social practices (Anagnost 2004, Apple 1995, Arendell 2000, Margolis 1994, Scheper-Hughes 1992). “Cultural and economic contexts variously shape mothers’ activities and understandings. Mothering takes place within specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race, class and gender (Arendell 2000:1165).” In modern U.S. society, the significance of a mother’s role in the lives of her children might well be construed to be superior to other kinship roles, such as fathers, siblings, grandparents, that serve the well-being of a child. Evidently, the American legal system supports this assumption in the way it affords protection of maternal (to a lesser extent paternal) rights using the same legal principle as proprietary rights or rights of ownership (Taylor, Layne and Wozniak 2004). This point is an important one because the proprietary nature of motherhood in a society like America’s is protected, and “where the right to own and therefore to control one’s property is among the most valued of rights” (2004:21). Political scientist Rosalind Pollack Petchesky uses the example of a woman’s reproductive rights to underline the idea that “how we think about the concept of “property” in one’s own body or person and it may vary greatly depending on how we understand property in general” (Pollack Petchesky 1995). Ironically, this implies irreproachability in the role of mother as primary nurturer and her child (or children), yet any violation of that role is socially unconscionable.

Insofar as citizens value the right of ownership, mothers (and fathers too) passionately value their proprietary right to their children. Anthropologist Barbara Katz Rothman argues that children are socially and politically protected as an extension of one's property in the form of rights of ownership of one's own body and rights to one's own child (Katz Rothman 2004). At the same time, she stresses that narrow perceptions such as this one are "inappropriate and morally wrong (2004:21)." Katz Rothman believes the "responsibility ethic" rather than the "rights ethic" is worthy of support and warns against treating children as property. She further argues that it only "encourages commodification of children in some of the least desirable ways" (2004:29). This socially-entrenched value further compounds the ability for a woman to assert maternal expertise in her adoption of mothering ideology where maternal rights are at its core. Such notions support my earlier point that mother identity depends on sociocultural characteristics of the concept of family where society's ability to reproduce itself depends upon family as a cultural cornerstone (Donzelot 1997).

Reference to maternal instinct as a natural part of womanhood and supporting the "biological model of woman as nurturer" is a widely-held value across cultural boundaries and worth examining (Gottlieb 2004:50). Yet, the assignment of maternal instinct is not apparent in all women, which only further complicates the complexity of the conflicted parallelism between womanhood and motherhood. All mothers are women yet not all women are or want to be mothers. A woman's decision to forgo motherhood

is often an incredulous notion to women who choose motherhood. They view a woman's choice to be without children as an indication of one validating characteristic of womanhood. Another significant factor and one largely overlooked is that a woman's decision not to have children unequivocally negates her ability to be a member in any kind of mother group. This exclusionary effect amplifies the exclusivity of motherhood and the social and cultural values that structure it.

### **Age Unexamined**

The ways in which a woman approaches her role as mother, caregiver, caretaker and home manager depends heavily on a subjective and methodical application of personal, albeit culturally-influenced, practice. Mothering is constituted through the "habitus" of mothering ideology within the "fundamental structuring principles of practices and the perception of practices" (Bourdieu 1984). In the "habitus" of motherhood, a woman's approach to mothering is sometimes "grounded in their different social positions and different cultural worlds" (Hays 1996:72). The existing literature investigates the role of age in mothering from a variety of perspectives, such as the impact on children, family, society as well as health and medical implications, to name a few. Yet, when considering how a woman truly feels about older mothering, age as a component is, for the most part, unexamined at the structural level of "habitus" in the practice of modern-day mothering ideology. This thesis examines the role of age as a factor in the habitus of mothering ideology and the establishment of boundaries in motherhood communities of upper middle-class women. Not surprisingly, and as I have mentioned above, older motherhood in the neighborhood where I conducted my research

aligns with higher levels of education, financial stability and social status. These factors influence a woman's ability to choose motherhood at an older age. At the same time, adherence to popular maternal practice that has been influenced by social and cultural values reflects a mother's desire to be a part of a community that reinforces her "measure of value, self-worth, and citizenship in the community of motherhood (Anagnost 2000).

Focusing on mothers in white, upper middle-class neighborhoods in North Arlington County, Virginia, and within an anthropological framework, this thesis seeks to understand what it means to a woman over 35 to be a mother with young children and one whom American society labels as "older." I examine the history of motherhood as a backdrop to my study of modern-day perceptions of mothering ideology and the ways in which older mothers practice motherhood. My analysis examines notions about age and asks whether it is a factor in a mother's behavior during her initiation into and ongoing membership in her motherhood community. More specifically, it seeks answers to these questions.

- What is the meaning of motherhood to a woman who is considered older?
- Does personal perspective influence a mother's feelings about socially-held beliefs about mothering considering her older age?
- Does a woman's age have any bearing on membership in the community of motherhood?

- Is a woman's practice of motherhood and membership in a mother's group socially constructed around factors such as age, education and socioeconomic status?
- Does practice beget conformity to or exclusion from membership?
- Does a woman's older age predefine her experience in the motherhood community?
- What is an older woman's experience as a mother in her day-to-day practice and how does this validate her mother identity?
- Do older mothers perceive their role to be distinct from younger mothers? If so, in what ways?
- What do older mothers view to be the advantages and disadvantages of choosing motherhood at an older age?

While many of the women I interviewed expressed deep satisfaction with motherhood, they were mindful of sociocultural considerations associated with becoming a mother that are less than positive. These include risks of leaving one's career (or off-ramping) and losing their competitive edge in the job marketplace; the parallel demands of financial planning for retirement and college funding, lack of a support network from grandparents or having to care for elderly parents; establishing a viable network of same-age parents; achieving a sense of belonging in a mother-centric culture of women who are younger, and most importantly, meanings of motherhood to a woman over the age of 35.

## Literature Review

I examined an extensive body of sociological and anthropological literature as well as literature on the history of motherhood and family to help me understand sociocultural factors that have influenced the structuring of mothering ideology in the U.S. My purpose was to discern historical, social, and cultural elements that contribute to the transformation of mothering ideology over the years, as well as to appreciate the ways in which mothering ideology is practiced in upper-middle class community in U.S. society today. I attempted to gain insight into the influence of prominent factors, like age, education, and financial security, on a woman's decision to postpone motherhood until her late thirties or early forties (defined herein as an older mother). As well, I probed reasons why women practice mothering the way they do, and more importantly, what it means to a woman to be considered an older mother.

Merriam Webster's dictionary defines the term ideology as a systematic body of concepts especially about human life or culture' and a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture. Ideology is the basis from which practice takes shape and practicing motherhood is the manifestation of multiple ideologies/values/beliefs that then become its structure, or as Pierre Bourdieu suggests, the "habitus" of mothering ideology (Bourdieu 1994). Bourdieu implies that "habitus" depends upon itself to supply the form for that which is being structured: "Habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgments and the system of classification (*principium divisionis*) of these practices. It is within the relationship of the two capacities that habitus is defined, that is, the capacity to produce classifiable

practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices.” (1994:170). Bourdieu is concerned with the development of class structure, distinctions that create the boundaries between categories, and the formation of relationships to what he calls the “space of life-styles” (1994:171) where class and lifestyle dependently co-exist. For purposes of this research, Bourdieu’s argument informs the manner in which societal manipulation of “habitus” structures “practices and the perception of practices” (1994:170). In other words, “habitus” influences the transformation of systems of behavior into distinctive classes or “tastes” derived from education level, social and cultural exposure, consumption, economics, etc. This theory aptly explicates how established ideology solidifies functional practice from a social and cultural perspective yet is strangely and necessarily adaptive to change. Mothering ideology is a clear example of this process and one that anthropologist Ann Anagnost considers in her study of adoptive parents who are part of the “citizenship of parenting” which “has become a newly intensified domain for the production of middle-class subjectivity for the adult” (2000:391).

It is important to consider the intricate influence of a sense of community on the perception of identity as it relates to motherhood. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson refer to the “tension between commonsensical notions of “rooted” localities and communities that imply a primordial and essential group identity and notions of identity which rely on the sovereign individual subject and which imply that it is something nonessential, an instrumental and strategic choice made by pre-constituted (often styled “rational”) social

actors (1999:13). Gupta and Ferguson further offer that identity “is a mobile, often unstable relation of difference” that “neither grows out of rooted communities nor is a thing that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors” and instead “identity and alterity are therefore produced simultaneously in the formation of “locality” and community” (1999:13). Among the older mothers who participated in my research it became evident that the landscape in which their ability to choose and be comfortable with the identity of older motherhood is unique in the “habitus” of the upper-middle class lifestyle in North Arlington.

To understand the evolution of mothering ideology in a post-industrialized society such as the U.S., one must be familiar with its history. Medical, sociocultural, and economic factors shape the practice and performance of motherhood as well as its transformative moments in society. Ample evidence supports theories of positive and negative effects of mothering ideology on society, family, child, and community. Yet it is challenging to extract factual analysis from the literature that sheds light on what motherhood means to women, and especially older mothers. Although the scholarly literature documents important and influential contributions to the structuring of motherhood well, sociologist Terry Arendell points to a lack of cohesiveness in the literature that integrates the “conceptual and empirical approaches” (1984:1193). Simply put, there is a gap in the literature as it relates to a woman’s personal narrative on the relationship of her role as *woman* and her role as *mother* especially when one investigates how older woman feel about motherhood.

Sharon Hays introduces an ideology called “intensive mothering” which describes the concentrated dedication of a mother to her child’s physical, social, emotional and cognitive development where every action of mothering is understood to have potentially damaging consequences (1996). Hays attributes three critical elements to intensive mothering: a mother is the central caregiver; a mother puts her child’s need above her own; and it is logically impossible to compare child rearing to paid work. Her argument implies that the notion of the “self-less” mother exists in tension with the strongly-held American value of individual self-interest. She further suggests that the combination of holding on to a career and engaging in intensive mothering, where mothering takes precedent, is of lesser value than professional success in U.S. society. Hays views the social production of mothering as an historically-constructed ideology and provides an in-depth look at the transformation of mothering ideology in industrialized societies from the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to the present day. She draws an instructive analogy, referring to motherhood as “sorting the mail” (1996:71). That is, a woman’s sense of mothering is unique but nonetheless, there are systematic group differences among mothers, grounded in their different social positions and different cultural worlds. Hays argues that the cultural contradictions inherent in intensive mothering increase in complexity in accordance with the prevalence of market dynamics: “The more powerful and all-encompassing the rationalized market the more powerful becomes its ideological opposition in the logic of intensive mothering” (1996:97). Hays examines intensive mothering and the societal contradictions that arise from balancing motherhood practice

and professional pursuits. Her investigation into these contradictions provides valuable insight into the social constructions of motherhood and the many challenges women face in choosing to become a mother.

Anthropologist Maxine Margolis directs the focus of her examination of women and motherhood to middle-class American women as mothers, wives and workers (1984). Like Hays, Margolis gives an historical account of motherhood, she takes a cultural-materialist approach to explain the transformation of motherhood throughout history. Margolis maintains that “over time, changes in a society’s material base will lead to functionally compatible changes in its social and political structure along with changes in its secular and religious ideology, changes that enhance the continuity and stability of the system as a whole.” She contends that mother-child exclusivity is not universal. However, she concedes that “in every culture, people believe their approach to the child-parent relationship is proper and their child-rearing techniques are unique. Margolis’ central point supports the notion that social and cultural adaptations in mothering ideology, such as placing emphasis on nurturing the mother-child bond or exclusivity, “permanently revamp the maternal role” (1984:107). While she surmises it is presumptuous to define “how motherhood will be defined in years to come” (1984:107), her materialist assumptions lead her to argue that individual financial stability will stimulate a conducive environment for this mother-child exclusivity and is therefore a paramount component in upper-class notions of mothering ideology. Given the likelihood of financial security among older mothers, they are more suitably positioned to

embrace motherhood more readily and confidently than younger mothers in less secure financial conditions.

## **Methodology**

As an older mother with young children, I had preconceptions about the experiences of older mothers and presumed that my approach to mothering was quite different from that of my younger counterparts. To gain insight into a woman's perspective on being an older mother, I employed a variety of research techniques. They included qualitative interviews, participant observation and informal electronic questionnaires. A combination of these tools provided me with a structural framework on which to anchor my focus on the day-to-day practices, thoughts, and feelings of older mothers, specifically as they relate to personal choice and culturally-influenced behaviors. I explored women's feelings with respect to the advantages and challenges of older motherhood which they believe might or might not be relevant to younger women. I received permission from a local mother's listserv to solicit informal participation in my research and received enthusiastic responses of interest from 32 mothers. Of these respondents, 19 mothers answered my electronic questionnaire and provided me with substantial material for my research. It was from these responses that the upper-middle class demographic profile emerged in my informant group—white, upper-middle class mothers, over the age of 35, in two-parent heterosexual households, English-speaking with a Bachelor's degree or higher, and successful careers prior to becoming a mother. I also conducted five extended personal interviews with mothers who are a part of my personal social network.

I asked my informants standardized questions to probe why they waited to have children; details about their daily activities including involvement in mother groups that shared their parenting philosophy; concerns about aging with young children while simultaneously planning for retirement and college; concerns about aging parents; and perspectives on societal notions of motherhood. My informants conveyed their beliefs and provided me with accounts of the greatest challenges and rewards they have experienced as mothers. And, in every interview I conducted, mothers revealed many details about their daily practices including sharing parental and household responsibilities. Many of their responses implied that their spouses also played an active role in raising children. To this point, it should be noted that consideration of the spouse's perspective, while it is an important one, is not within the scope of this project.

I categorized my informants' responses around the following themes:

- Meanings of motherhood
- Expectations towards entering motherhood
- Perceptions about caring for children
- Day-to-day activities
- Group participation
- Roles related to parenting/household management
- Career goals
- Concerns about financial stability, college and retirement funding
- Grandparent participation and involvement
- Concerns about being perceived to be an older mother

At times, the mothers' responses surprisingly contradicted some of the assumptions I made based on my personal experience as an older mother. For example, I expected that older mothers would feel their daily maternal experiences were different from those of younger mothers, but in fact, many expressed that they did not think a substantial difference existed. That is, their role as primary caregiver of their children came with the same daily trials and tribulations, regardless of age.

While my informants provided insight into their practices of motherhood, there are important limitations to the methods I used that are worth noting. The electronic surveys gave me information about perceptions of motherhood. However, the responses were void of the emotional component that can only be obtained from face-to-face interviews. As I reviewed responses to the electronic survey, I realized the demographic makeup of my informant group was fundamentally limited based on the socioeconomic setting in which I unintentionally chose to conduct my research. I had not anticipated this outcome when I began the research and instead, had expected to interview a range of informants from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. And, while fathers and partners play a critical role in older parenting, their perspective has not been considered in this research to any extent. Lastly, my research is not a comparative analysis between older and younger mothers, but addresses, more narrowly, the experiences of older mothers solely among women who are white and whose socioeconomic status is upper-middle class.

## **Structure and Analysis**

The following chapters draw from my informants' responses to corroborate key elements of their perceptions of motherhood. Mothers tell their stories and their responses portray their experiences. Chapter 2 offers a review of mothering ideology over the past two centuries to highlight how key factors such as industrialization, scientific advancement, and child mortality have influenced the contextual shaping of mothering ideology. Chapter 3 describes experiences of mothers as I examine meanings of motherhood specifically in the expressions of white, upper-middle class women in North Arlington. I also examine social and cultural elements that factor into their decision to become mothers later in life, and consider the conditions in which older motherhood might occur. This chapter portrays modern attitudes of motherhood ideology where views on the "right" way to practice motherhood are subjective yet often reflect popular discourse. The examination considers questions related to prevailing notions of maternal instinct and mother desire but does not attempt to validate such beliefs. Central to chapter 4 are conclusions drawn from my observations and interviews of the older mothers I interviewed, who describe issues that they consider to be distinct to older mothers. These include, but are not limited to, parallelisms in planning for retirement and a child's college education; coping with aging parents; remaining viable in the workforce, and their inability to rely on a safety net, in contrast to younger mothers who might have more options available to them.

## CHAPTER TWO: MOTHERHOOD AND MEANING

### **History, Science and Mother**

This chapter provides an historical framework of motherhood ideologies and how they have structured women's roles as mothers from the late 1800s to 2015. These ideologies lend insight into the shifting attitudes that affect social and cultural change in the transformation of motherhood. Studies of mothering ideology point to the onset of industrialization as a pivotal factor in the changing role of the mother (Hays 1996, Margolis 1984, Thurer 1994). Until the mid-1800s families in agrarian communities operated as extended units. Family members, regardless of age or kinship role, contributed to household activities and domestic production (Margolis 1984:22-23). These activities ranged from textile making and farming to services provided in the local community, such as farrier services. However, industrialization had a dramatic impact on the ways in which people produced goods and services and as a consequence, changed the way people worked, consumed and participated in the family unit. As industrialization exploded and the Progressive Era (1850-1920) took hold, the movement further eroded the ties of the extended family and it became increasingly difficult for families to sustain an agrarian livelihood. Fathers, mothers and children took jobs in factories and joined the socially-stratified rank-and-file working class where control over how they spent their time was commoditized, as E. P. Thompson observed, "Time is now currency—it is not passed but spent (Thompson 1965)."

## **Shifts in Recognition**

As dramatic changes took place in cities, towns and communities across Europe and the U.S. during the Progressive Era, a shift among the academic, scientific and medical experts towards the proper practice of mothering was also underway. This period also marked a change in the way society began to value its children. Viviana Zelizer argues that the “dramatic change from useful worker to sacred child between the 1870s and the 1930s” placed the “new sacred child in a special and separate world, regulated by affection and education, not work or profit” (1985:209). This phenomenal shift, one that Rima Apple defines as the onset of “scientific motherhood,” insisted that women rely on scientific and medical advice of experts to raise healthy children (1995). These experts included psychologists like John Dewey (c. 1859-1952) and Sigmund Freud (c. 1856-1939) who began to turn their attention to mothering practices, especially among the middle-class—educated and professional citizens with some measure of disposable income. Working-class families such as the uneducated poor had little time to devote to childrearing since the burden of supporting the family fell on the shoulders of all family members including children (Hays 1996). The experts increasingly argued that the preservation of childhood innocence assured a child’s physical and emotional well-being. Yet, this newfound awareness sharply contrasted with reports of rampant child abuse in factories where poor and working-class children endured horrendous conditions as cheap labor—conditions that incidentally prompted social and political action to enact protective regulation (Tuttle 2007).

Throughout the Progressive Era, the same experts specifically targeted their message to middle-class mothers who were expected to stay home and assume responsibility for the nurturing of their children while fathers went off to work each day. A shift in thinking about the well-being of children and the role of the middle-class mother as the most suitable caregiver was in full swing:

Motherhood was, in fact, being revamped. Duties that had once belonged to both mother and fathers or to fathers alone were now becoming the near exclusive province of mothers. One historian of the period notes that “now fathers began to recede into the background in writings about the domestic education of children.” Treatises on the treatment of childhood diseases, diet, hygiene and exercise for young children now addressed mothers alone (Margolis 1984).

### **The Scientific Approach**

Advancements in technology, science and medicine contributed to the transformation of perceptions of motherhood and the role of mother during this time, but overwhelmingly it was print media—especially journals and magazines, such as *Perfect Womanhood for Maidens-Wives-Mothers* (1903)—that affected the ways in which the experts disseminated information to educate women on *how* to be mothers (Apple 1995:161). Women were expected to educate themselves in the proper, scientific application of their childrearing practice (1995:162). Growing reliance on and acceptance of such expertise gave mothers a fabricated sense of confidence in their

ability to be good mothers. Furthermore, mothering ideology was legitimized from a scientific standpoint, but at the same time, this emphasis on applying scientific, albeit unproven, standards to the practice of motherhood substantially elevated the pressure on a mother to produce physically, emotionally, and intellectually sound children.

Apple discusses this central change in the approach of the experts at the turn of the 20th century as one that focused on *directing* rather than *advising* mothers on how to raise children. This methodology essentially revoked a mother's control over asserting her personalized childrearing practices and diminished her confidence in her ability to be a good mother. Apple calls this a "tension-laden contradiction that made mothers responsible for the health and welfare of their families, but denied them control over how mothering should be accomplished. Women were both responsible for their families yet viewed as incapable of shouldering that responsibility autonomously" (1995:162). Instead, in order to be successful in her role, a mother was expected to self-educate on appropriate childrearing techniques and apply this learned, socially-popular knowledge to raising her children appropriately. Such an encroachment on individualized practice invariably altered a mother's prevailing reliance on and the fundamental importance of intuition. Intuition came to be considered unreliable and experts discouraged mothers from depending on it (Thurer 1994). Mothering ideology grew increasingly complex. Science steered mothering practice onto the path of *professional mother* who assumes responsibility for securing society's future and cast aside the parochial practices of the

*individual mother*. In short, a good mother willingly and capably followed the direction of the experts.

Once scientific mothering became a popular methodology for raising children, the demands on a mother to guide and protect the progression of her child's development towards productive adulthood intensified. Even though these developments shaped mothering ideology and the social construction of childrearing practices, they marginalized any consideration of a mother's needs as a woman. Sociologist Sharon Hays identifies this social burden as the impetus from which "intensive mothering" developed. Hays writes, "A mother's reliance on experts did not make her job easier. She had to have all the latest information on physical, emotional and cognitive development, be consistently attentive to her child's stage of development, keep a tight rein on her displays of affection, and be objective, detached and insightful in responding to her child's needs" (1996:44). The formation of support groups and childrearing seminars to help mothers learn about and engage in best practices of motherhood flourished.

The influence of a scientific approach to childrearing and a "surge in the growing awareness of the importance of children" (1996:41) correlated with the "sacralization of child life" or a "new exaltation of their sentimental worth" as evidenced in the changing societal perception of a child's death (Zelizer 1985:23). Until the early 1800s, a child's death was a "minor event, met with a mixture of indifference and resignation" (1985:24).

By the 19th century, and particularly in upper- and middle-class European and American families, the death of a child began to be “considered a tremendous and painful loss and the least tolerable of all deaths” (1985:24) attributing the cause of death as a reflection of parental and social neglect. This perspective further validated the social value placed on the “preservation of child life as a national priority” (1985:25) and inspired the development of social and political advocacy movements specifically aimed at protecting the well-being of children. Mothering ideology now encompassed a sociopolitical element in advancing the welfare of children regardless of social class (Thurer 1994:234). The establishment of the National Congress of Mothers in 1897 solidified recognition of the “social and political component of motherhood” in childrearing (Thurer 1994:233). The formation of the U.S. Children’s Bureau in 1912 was established to support children on the heels of the creation of the National Congress of Mothers. The mission of the Bureau was to monitor working conditions; regulate schools; oversee the juvenile system and further the increased interest of government in the protection of children (Hays 1994:41; Zelizer 1985:29).

### **Pathways to Adulthood**

With the onset of the Permissive Era (1920-1980), major changes directly affecting the role of women in society dovetailed with changes taking place in mothering ideology. In much greater numbers, women began attending college, joined the workforce, postponed marriage, fought for the right to vote, and had fewer children. Shari Thurer refers to the effect of these changes as the “true Victorian woman” giving

way to the “new permissible woman.” For Thurer, the period began with a boom (the baby boom) and ended with a bust or “zero population growth” (1994:247). In terms of mothering ideology, scientific techniques mandating non-indulgent practice started to fade and a mother’s intuition was once again considered a valuable characteristic in her mothering practice. Indeed, the role of nurturing mother was revitalized where “new rules of conduct for child rearing turned 180 degrees away from earlier prescriptions and earlier astringent techniques were abruptly jettisoned in favor of cuddly, twenty-four-hour permissiveness” (1994:247).

Popular discourse in publications such as the *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* as well as other alleged “scientific” studies began to promote the relevance of a mother’s love and attention in the lives of their children. Concerns surrounding the potential for overindulgence in the practice of motherhood hovered, but a more permissive approach emerged and which provided mothers with a gentler road map to balance discipline and indulgence, most notably from pediatricians Dr. Benjamin Spock (c. 1904-1994) and later, Dr. T. Barry Brazleton (c. 1918-). Mothers were encouraged to be attentive to their children’s needs whose health and happiness depended upon their full-time care. Mothers were discouraged from working outside the home, even though women increasingly had been joining the ranks of “maternal employment” for over two decades (Margolis 1994:106). Consequently, this targeted attention resulted in the needs of the child beginning to dominate a mother’s attention in what Sharon Hays refers to as the “conception of the child-centered family” (1996:45). She further attributes today’s

intensive mothering practices to a regenerated awareness that mother's role is a substantive component in both promoting *and* stabilizing the path of her child's (or children's) well-being all the way into adulthood.

The adaptation of mothering ideology over the past 150 years has been a steady and profound progression, beginning with the onset of industrialization as the sociocultural landscape of the close ties of the rural family dispersed. This ongoing transformation saw significant changes during the Progressive Era during which the science of motherhood gained prominence and mothers were expected to heed expert advice in the care and nurturing of their children. The Permissive Era dismissed many of the principles of scientific motherhood and re-ignited respect for a mother's intuition, in which the nurturing mother took center stage again. New expertise supplanted the old, and notable pediatricians promoted the value of a kinder, gentler approach to childrearing, and mothers could once again begin to trust their own abilities to raise happy, healthy children. Present-day mothering ideology in the U.S. is tenaciously embedded in the adage that "mother knows best" but this social construction is unstable. Society places the role of mother on a high pedestal for which there is no safety net. That is, the welfare of a child is firmly planted in the authority of the mother (and often the father) and with this comes an immense sense of responsibility.

### CHAPTER THREE: AGE MATTERS OR DOES IT?

Mothering ideologies factor only partially into a woman's decision to become a mother at an older age, but they do figure into how younger or older women understand their respective roles as a mother. Sociocultural shifts in mothering ideology are important but only tangentially influential in a woman's decision to embrace motherhood at an older age. Nonetheless, transformational shifts in mothering ideology, such as single motherhood, international adoption, and modern reproductive technologies (Neal 2011) present alternatives that propel social acceptance of motherhood at an older age and the ability of women to pursue options other than pregnancy if they so choose. A Pew Research Center study entitled *The New Demography of American Motherhood* examines the "changing demographic characteristics of U.S. mothers by comparing women who gave birth in 2008 with those who gave birth in 1990," suggesting that the age of mothers of newborns are older now than their counterparts were two decades ago (Taylor, et al. 2010). The study also reported that the average age of first-time motherhood hovers at age 27 (Taylor, et al 2010). This growing cultural shift speaks to changes in the instrumentality and control a woman possesses over her body (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995), but it does little to address questions pertaining to a woman's decision to choose motherhood at an older age. In fact, the concept of motherhood at an older age is a relatively unexamined social dimension that warrants closer consideration.

The choice to become a mother at an older age probes questions about meanings of motherhood especially for older women. Is maternal age a factor in a woman's approach to motherhood? What does a woman's decision to become a mother at an older age bring to bear on her maternal experience? Does age preclude her membership in the community of motherhood where membership is socially constructed by factors like appearance, age, ethnicity, education and socioeconomic status? Does practice drive conformity to or detachment from membership? Should or does a woman's older age predefine her experience in the motherhood community? What is her safety net and is it readily available and supportive? In short, what is an older woman's experience as a mother and how does it help form her maternal identity?

### **Content and Confident**

A nascent theme in the stories from mothers I interviewed revealed their immense satisfaction with achieving a level of self-awareness, professional fulfillment, and financial security prior to motherhood, specifically *because* they chose to postpone it. Many offered that their accomplishments gave them a distinct advantage over younger mothers and enabled them to draw from a wider net of experiences to achieve a higher level of satisfaction with their engagement in and practice of motherhood. Jane, age 41, explained, "*I feel that I have a certain knowledge and understanding of things (at least more than I did in my twenties). I also believe that I am surer of myself and who I am which has to help in my parenting.*" Intellectually, their appreciation for the amount of time, energy and expense involved in raising children was less romanticized in the sense

that they were honest about it. Many also expressed having had the option to make the choice either to stay home to be primary caregiver for their children or to continue in the workforce, conceding that role to a nanny or daycare provider. This option was one of the key differences that distinguished older mothers from younger mothers simply because they felt younger mothers might not be able to afford to stay home, both from a financial perspective and losing ground in developing their careers.

Many of the older mothers had enjoyed a satisfying career before leaving the workforce, making the choice to stay at home with their children an easy and welcome one. Choosing motherhood at an older age was a natural progression for them after fulfilling career objectives, achieving a greater sense of financial security, and embracing what they perceived to be a healthy life balance. Allison, age 41, who decided to stay home and focus on raising her child said, *“I am not conflicted about the motherhood-career dilemma because I have already been there and done that.”* And Lisa, age 43, candidly expressed, *“I doubt I would have felt comfortable staying home if I had not already worked for many years and I doubt we could have afforded it”*

For those who continued to work outside the home, some conveyed little regret in doing so as Sherri, age 42 with a three- and a five-year old, offered, *“I returned to work because I felt like I needed a little bit more than being a stay-at-home mother. I enjoyed working and missed that aspect of my life. I knew that I wanted to be with my children as well. I figured the best way to have both things was to look for part-time flexible*

*employment that was also in my profession. I was lucky enough to have found that.”*

Counter to these sentiments, however, was the struggle that some mothers who worked outside the home experienced in finding the right balance between working full time and taking care of their families, as Laura, age 42, admitted, *“Work can be a challenge in trying to balance having a great career and having a great environment/home life for my child.”* Her concerns, and those expressed by others in a similar position, reflect Sharon Hays’s reference to the cultural dilemma of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996:98), defined as the active engagement in producing and reproducing, shaping and reshaping, the ideology of appropriate motherhood while creating conflict for mothers who seek balance between a demanding career and family life (1996:99).

Nevertheless, these women’s responses generally acknowledged a prevailing sense of achievement that reinforced their freedom to focus on motherhood with an attitude of “letting things go,” a concept they felt might have been difficult at a younger age. Susan, a 41-year-old mother with a single child, said, *“As an older mother, I appreciate the gift of motherhood to a much greater extent [than a younger mother], and can be more “in the moment” of it and trying to remind myself to really enjoy it.”* She further speculated, *“Younger mothers are probably not yet aware enough to achieve the same level of contentedness specifically because of their age.”* Megan, age 42, who dismissed the idea that age played some sort of defining role in her identity as mother said, *“Actually, some of my friends who have older kids but are my age think I’m lucky because little ones keep you younger. I think I have to agree. I don’t think of myself as*

*middle-aged at all. Plus my kids are still young enough to adore me rather than say, "Oh, Mother, you don't know anything!"* And Monica, who relocated to Arlington, Virginia from Texas, implied that in different geographic areas, age can be a sociocultural indicator of a woman's role in her community, *"When I was living in Texas someone once thought I was a young grandmother. Yikes!"* and added, *"I love that more moms here waited to have children later."* Linda, a 42-year-old-mother with an adopted child, expressed her consideration of maternal age this way, *"I am comfortable with who I am as a person and I think this translates to a sense of comfort and peace. I also feel that since I was married later in life, I achieved a successful level of independence before I was married and it is important to me to teach my daughter to be self-reliant."*

While many of the women I interviewed felt their older maternal age was advantageous from the perspective of self-fulfillment, Amanda, age 42, discussed the challenge of dealing with physical and hormonal changes that younger mothers would not have to face while raising young children. She described her difficulty with handling premenopausal symptoms of irritability, lack of sleep, bouts of weepiness and was concerned that it might adversely affect the well-being of her children, *"Menopause runs early in my family and I remember when my mother was going through it, she was crazy. Luckily, I was a teenager so I was consumed with my own world and didn't take any of her moodiness personally. Well, a three- and a five-year old (when it started for me) aren't that lucky to retreat into their world. I'm sure they don't remember some of my worst days but I do and it makes me sad. I'm trying to avoid taking hormones, so I've*

*done a lot of experimenting with supplements. I finally found a combo that works for me.”*

### **Different? Perhaps Not.**

Generally speaking, all of the mothers who participated in the research provided thoughtful insight into what the role of motherhood meant to them. A majority indicated a strong propensity for *wanting* to be mothers, without attributing their desire to a natural drive or maternal instinct. Many who mentioned struggles with infertility acknowledged that assistance from reproductive technology, while extremely stressful, was worth every minute. Others expressed subtle regret that they waited to have children because age inhibited their ability to have multiple children. Ironically, many mothers who suggested younger women had the obvious advantage of being able to have multiple children actually had two or more themselves despite their age. A few admitted that embarking on motherhood at an older age was not their choice but rather a matter of life circumstances.

My inquiries probed women’s feelings about whether or not they perceived their role as a mother to be different because of their age. Their responses uncovered a myriad of attitudes about personal fulfillment but the consensus suggests that daily activities are probably the same as those for most mothers. For example, some mothers did not think their approach to motherhood was any different from younger mothers, yet many confidently expressed satisfaction with achieving a genuine sense of self-satisfaction before choosing to become a mother at an older age. The implication was that even

though daily or functional mothering experiences might be the same, an older mother could fulfill a level of personal achievement before motherhood that younger mothers might not be able to experience. Sherri speculated, *“I can’t be sure of course but I imagine that a younger mother would have some concern about fulfilling other dreams or goals outside of raising a family, especially if they chose to stay home.”* Age and experience enabled older mothers to cast aside aspirations of perfection in their approach to child-rearing and parenting responsibilities as Anne, age 44 and married for a long time with one daughter age 5, opined, *“I think they [younger mothers] are mostly the same. But, I think I worry less about a lot of child-rearing issues because my life experiences have given me more confidence. I think I am more financially secure than a lot of younger people. I have been married a long time and experienced ups and downs of a long-term relationship—that’s a big benefit.”*

Several mothers cautioned that while functional mothering experiences at an older age are probably the same as those of younger mothers, becoming pregnant at an older age is often times more difficult and stressful. Anne talked about the problems she had getting pregnant and quite honestly admitted, *“It is probably easier to get pregnant when you are younger because of infertility issues that hit you as you get older, without realizing it.”* And Nancy, age 41 with six-year old twin girls, said, *“We tried having children for a number of years and suffered from infertility. It took about 4 years of diagnosis and treatment to have children. The choice to have children under the age of nine in my forties wasn’t a choice. It was our circumstance.”* Nancy did not elaborate to

any greater extent, and even though her circumstance had a positive outcome, it also prompts one to question the role of biology versus adoption with *motherhood* as the ultimate goal.

### **Motherhood and Membership**

At about three o'clock on a weekday afternoon, elementary school children across Arlington County run from the rigors of learning and rule-following into the arms of their caregivers. With tired faces and disheveled hair, they fall in line behind their teachers who lead them outside the school halls to greet awaiting caregivers. Moms, dads, grandparents, and nannies meet them with hugs and smiles and earnestly ask, "*How was your day?*" Many escort their children to afterschool activities, music lessons or directly home for a snack and homework. Moms, in particular, drift towards select groups of other mothers to chat idly with each other about play dates, concerns about their child's progress in school, or simply to catch up for a few minutes while their kids run around together with carefree abandon. This school pick-up ritual seems innocuous but it is, in fact, a major activity in facilitating a woman's choice to seek and find membership within a group of mothers who share like-minded mothering ideology. More often than not, defining characteristics, such as older age, influence their choices.

When asked to comment on involvement with mothers' groups, play groups and interactions with younger moms, the prevailing sentiment among the women I interviewed reflected their desire to interact with moms in similar age groups. Melissa,

age 44 with two children (ages seven and five) said, *“I would say I definitely prefer play groups with moms my age. I’m able to relate to women who are about five years younger, but any younger than that and the gap in what we have in common gets pretty wide. I am happy to be friends with that age group but haven’t established any friendships in that age group.”* Anne commented that the importance of sharing candid conversations related to dealing with the challenges of motherhood comes easier to older mothers, *“It helps to discuss the older-mom concerns with like-minded moms especially during pregnancy with all the concerns that entails. I’ve met a couple of moms in their 40s that I meet up with and we share ideas, plan activities, and commiserate.”*

Membership in any particular group did not appear to be a priority for Annette, age 44 with two biological children, ages six and four, and one step-daughter, age 20, who joined a group on the recommendation of a friend. Instead of deriving a sense of belonging from her experience, she found it to be polarizing and decided to quit, *“I joined a play group initially but didn’t fit in. I was much older, much more laid back, and they were really interested in teaching my kid sign language and wearing kids using wraps and such. I was definitely a bjorn-baby carrier and stroller girl and fell out of step with these moms so I quit. I enjoy social gatherings but once I returned to work they no longer fit my schedule.”*

At the same time, being a part of a mothers’ group gave Allison the type of support she needed to validate her daily practice. She implied that younger mothers did

not perceive the same value in leaning on others for support, and might even be less attentive in their role as mother, *“I think that sometimes younger mothers don’t feel they need to meet up with other moms or share experiences, good and bad. We all are willing to tell about our bad days and when we haven’t been the best mom so we can get help and hear from the others how they’ve been through the same situation. I know a couple of young moms (late 20s) who don’t do any playgroups and aren’t on any mom listservs and they are fine with that. They don’t really feel the need to ask questions of anyone or ask for help. I also think they aren’t as tuned into kids’ activities and keeping the kids busy.”* Allison’s observations shed light on the notion of self-fulfillment that older mothers have achieved and younger mothers are perhaps still trying to sort out.

### **Money on their Minds: Saving for Retirement and College**

The assumption could be made that motherhood at an older age (and older parenthood in general) presents an added challenge of simultaneous planning for both retirement and college tuition for their children, something younger parents do not contemplate with the same sense of urgency. With respect to these issues, responses from my respondents varied, and while many reported having achieved a sense of financial security, others reported they also had to focus on retirement planning. Laura offered that, *“Luckily, when I started working professionally in my early 20s, (I always contributed to my 401k savings account to prepare for retirement early. Unfortunately, my husband did not do the same – so we are playing catch-up with his retirement plan. Honestly, we can’t contribute as much as we would like to both plans (retirement plan*

*and child's education plan). So we are splitting the difference and putting half of what we can save in retirement and the other half in a college fund.” Beth, age 44, with two children under age six, whose parents were older when she was born, was not influenced by social norms. She discarded the idea that her age had any bearing on her role as a mother and further rejected the notion that she was “middle-aged.” She explained, “I had older parents and it never bothered me, my dad often said that he wouldn't be around for my entire life and so he needed to teach me to make good decisions while I was young – a perspective I am passing on to my kids. I was taught budgeting by getting an allowance once a month, I was taught how to make decisions and look at options and plan to do that with my kids actively when they get a bit older. I also made sure to name a guardian, and make plans in case I don't live to see them grow up which is a horrible thought, but one that I think older parents are more willing to plan for than younger ones.” Anne did not elaborate on her concerns related to this challenge but simply offered, “We started college savings plans when the kids were born and we'll continue to contribute to them and our retirement.” She implied financial security makes addressing this challenge easier, “One good thing about being an older mom...compound interest and planning for retirement in my 20s and now putting away in 529 for college!” At the same time, some mothers were not as confident in their ability to achieve retirement goals and college tuition funding simultaneously as Carolyn, age 41, with twin girls, age six, emphatically offered, “This is an overwhelming task and often feels unreachable to me. My husband and I had to make a choice and decided to save for our retirement. We save for college*

*but that is secondary right now. There are other options for paying for college when the time comes, but there are no other options for retirement than saving NOW.”*

The more pressing issues for older mothers (and parents) appeared to be the added burden of caring for, or overseeing the care of, aging parents while raising young children. Consequently, the safety net of being able to rely on active and healthy grandparents for childcare or financial support is often unattainable for older mothers. Several mothers resoundingly expressed concern about dealing with aging parents while trying to raise their young children. Susan said, *“Yes [concerned about aging parents], both of my parents have had recent health concerns and it is very difficult to manage that on top of an already full plate of commitments. This is especially true when they are not near you.”* Sheila, age 43 who was divorced, expressed concern that she would bear the responsibility of her aging mother, *“I do worry about my mother aging and needing help. My mother and brother (who lives in CA) are estranged, so if something happens to my mother, the burden is on me.”* Monica, who had relocated from Texas said, *“The thing I worry about most is that my parents live far away, so I’m not sure how I will deal with it. My sister is also in Texas, but I don’t want her to handle all the responsibility.”* Lisa, age 43, whose parents were deceased, was very concerned about the financial impact on her family if faced with caring for her in-laws, *“I am concerned about my in-laws, because my parents are deceased. They don’t have a lot of savings and I wonder what economic sacrifices we’ll have to make when they are no longer able to take care of*

*themselves.” Anne, age 44, seemed to evade answering and said simply, “I don’t have time to think about this. We’re fortunate that our parents are all in good health.”*

### **Motherhood and Function**

Perhaps the question that provoked a visceral and insightful response towards the way older mothers feel about their role as mother was, “What does it mean to you?” Many of their comments acknowledged that their role was one that brought with it an immense sense of satisfaction, and at the same time, played the most important role in preparing their children for be productive, self-reliant and happy adulthood. Several quotes that support this observation are included below:

Lisa offered, *“While motherhood doesn’t come with any fancy business cards with fancy titles, no doubt, it is one of the greatest roles I play. If I had to do it all over again, I would approach motherhood the same way. I have no regrets and could not ask for anything more.”*

Melissa was more frank and said, *“Motherhood has been the most meaningful job in my life. I would not change a thing!”*

Susan suggested, *“The role of motherhood just means doing my best for my child and being present and aware in her life. Yes, I would do it the same way again.”*

Amanda assigned a more altruistic dimension and said, *“Motherhood means raising our children to be self-sufficient adults who are capable of loving relationships and who care about making the world a better place. I quit my job because I could (financially) and I knew it would give me the ability to focus on helping my kids.”*

Nancy envisioned her role as one that provides provide exposure and experience, *“To me, the role of motherhood means being the primary caregiver to my children. It means helping them experience new things, places and activities. Housework is not as important as playing, reading or teaching my children. I will be completely involved in their school and sit with them during homework time to ensure their success. I will happily take them to all their activities, let them try whatever they want to try, and raise them to be thoughtful, caring and good citizens of the world.”*

Anne saw the meaning of motherhood to be part of her path, *“Motherhood has been my greatest journey and I know it will continue to be so. I might take side excursions to explore other things like writing children’s books, but this is my main path.”*

Beth was somewhat regretful but direct, *“It’s what I’ve always wanted to do. It’s hard to say if I’d do it the same because if I did it differently I wouldn’t have the kids I have. But, I do think it would have been nice to start about five years earlier. But honestly, I don’t think of myself as an “older” mother, or really ponder any of the questions you asked, other than just trying to answer them for you.*

Many mothers expressed that they felt the differences between the ways in which both they and younger mothers engage in daily, functional mothering practices are non-existent. They also emphasized, somewhat idealistically, that providing their children with a loving, secure, active and stimulating environment that promotes their physical, developmental and psychological well-being is of the utmost importance. And, most

mothers concurred, as described in their quotes, that motherhood is perhaps the ultimate journey in achieving a truly complete sense of fulfillment. Nonetheless, there were clear indications that their overall engagement in mothering practices infused a deep sense of satisfaction and fulfillment.

### **Realities of Motherhood at an Older Age**

The reality that older mothers can achieve a greater level of personal accomplishment precisely because they wait to have children is a characteristic that they felt distinguished them from younger mothers. The ability to embrace motherhood with such a strong self-awareness ideally positions older women to focus on their role as mother without being distracted by feelings of insecurity, or as many mothers implied, “missing out.” At the same time, however, older mothers certainly face challenges that are unique to being older. These include concerns about caring for aging or elderly parents while raising small children, lacking the safety-net of grandparents on which they can rely for assistance with child care or financial support, parallel planning for college funding and retirement, and dealing with their own aging process such as perimenopausal symptoms, lack of energy and health issues that might arise because of older age.

Another emerging concept from their responses was the idea of *fitting into* mothers’ groups where the “habitus” in which older women embrace motherhood depends on commonalities such as infertility, adoption, education, socioeconomic status,

and of course, age. The mothers' responses provided some evidence that age is an undeniable factor in their choice to become engaged in similar motherhood communities. Many expressed discomfort after joining groups of younger mothers' because they felt they had nothing in common with them, but instead of feeling marginalized, they simply quit. Unequivocally, the reinforcement of their "measure of value, self-worth, and citizenship in the community of motherhood" (Anagnost 2000), was derived from the sense of camaraderie they achieved with other mothers who are the same age.

From this analysis, one could surmise that the upper-middle class demographic of North Arlington actually cultivates the landscape for older motherhood, and as a result older mother communities and networks are more readily available and accessible than in other parts of the country or in lower socioeconomic areas. As a result, this observation, together with the fact that the national average age of motherhood is 27, suggests that older motherhood is anomalous in the general population of mothers in modern-day U.S. society, and only further examination can validate such a conclusion.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION – OLDER WORKS WELL**

### **Research Revisited**

I began my research on the subject of this thesis after I became a mother of twin daughters whom my husband and I adopted from China. Based on my observations of other mothers in different settings, I felt that as an older mother, I lingered outside traditional constructs of motherhood, and my age was a contributing variable in the emergence of my perceptions. My situation did not conform to what I thought were existing norms of motherhood, that is, mothers who were considerably younger than me, and I wanted to examine this notion further through an anthropological lens. Sociological and anthropological studies of motherhood suggest that, historically, the transformation of the role of mother into the pre-eminent actor in a child's successful progress from infancy into productive, self-reliant adulthood is profound. Terry Arendell argues in her analysis that mothering has even become the foremost identity of adult women and that both motherhood and womanhood are intertwined to the extent that they are considered "synonymous" (2000:1192).

Yet, studies that focus specifically on a woman's choice to enter into motherhood at an older age have not been seriously considered or extensively undertaken. Recognizing that a key functional and daily characteristic of the practice of motherhood is the nurturing and care of one's child for both younger and older mothers, I sought to

explore underlying attitudes of what motherhood means to a woman who becomes a mother at an older age. I learned that older mothers idealistically feel that being older has an insubstantial bearing on their role as a mother. At the same time, I considered the challenges an older mother faces and the various coping mechanisms she employs to deal with issues that could very well be construed as unique to older motherhood. These issues include saving for college and retirement simultaneously, caring for aging or elderly parents, choosing motherhood over career or a combination of both, dealing with perimenopause symptoms, and lacking a social or financial safety net during difficult times.

Among the upper middle-class mothers who were the subjects of this study, they were well-educated; many had been in satisfying professional careers or chose to continue working in high-paying management positions after having their children; and all except for one mother were married and their spouse played an active parenting role; and all of the women were over 35 years old with two or more children. Undoubtedly, these sociocultural characteristics appear to have a positive influence on a woman's perception of her maternal identity at an older age. With this in mind, I probed whether or not my interviewees felt that society perceived them to be different because of their age and whether or not social perceptions even mattered to them. I also considered if perceptions about motherhood were formed from a sense of identity through membership in a specific community of mothers in what Gupta and Ferguson refer to as produced through exclusion and the "constructions of otherness" (1999:13). The group of mothers

who were the subject of this study, for the most part, did not discern any conceivable differences between their practices of motherhood and those of younger mothers.

However, they clearly exuded a sense of self-fulfillment that comes with older age. Even though my initial findings provide a only a glimpse into factors that influence the social construction of motherhood at an older age, more extensive and important examination is yet to be done to shed light on perceptions about age and motherhood in the context of traditional mothering ideology and especially as more women choose to become a mother at an older age.

In the neighborhoods of North Arlington, “social space” (Anagnost 2000) is an important component in facilitating a mother’s ability to fulfill her need for camaraderie through chosen motherhood communities that endorse her maternal identity. In my research, qualitative interviews and informal electronic questionnaires, participant observation in a variety of settings that represent social space and a review of anthropological and sociological literature on motherhood informed my analysis. These techniques provided a strong structural framework on which I was able to gain an understanding of the daily practice, feelings and perceptions of older mothers.

Unexpectedly, my participant base resulted in the narrow composition of women who are white and live in upper-middle-class neighborhoods of North Arlington. The majority of my informants had achieved higher levels of education, financial stability, and successful careers before becoming a mother, and the unexpected association between these characteristics and the ability for a woman to choose motherhood at an older age

emerged. The systematic comparison between older and younger mothers, and comparison across class and racial strata are important future directions that can fruitfully build on this initial research.

Over the past two centuries, changing mothering ideologies have been influenced by the adaptation of the role of the child in the family and in society, at large. Viviana Zelizer calls this a transformation from ‘worthless child’ to “sacred child” and one that was cultivated in large part through popular sociological and anthropological discourse that pushed the importance of a mother in her child’s life (1985). This changing role of the child has also invariably influenced the role of the mother, helping to elevate her to the exalted position of chief nurturer within the family unit, but more importantly, to one on which society places immense value as a characteristic of womanhood. And, the changing role of mother has also contributed to what Zelizer calls the commodification of motherhood (V. Zelizer 2011). Allison Pugh addresses this concept in her examination of what she refers to as “cultural deals,” where she points to the toy industry and its use of targeted advertising to appeal to mothers who are striving to provide the very best for their children. Pugh notes that mothers are sold the notion that skills-building and educational toy products allow them to do the work of mothering *well* despite competing social directives (Pugh 2005).

Another important distinction is the centrality of financial security is an important concept that suggests a key difference between the concerns of older mothers versus

those of younger ones. For younger mothers, it is possible that financial security has more to do with satisfying the immediate needs of the family or in facilitating what they perceive to be the social reproduction of the household. Older mothers, on the other hand, must take a more realistic approach and consider an entirely different set of needs, such as caring for aging or elderly parents, saving for college and retirement simultaneously, and the likelihood that they might not have a viable safety net on which to rely as they raise their young children. This reality does force the issue of having to make profound choices between competing demands brought about as a circumstance of older motherhood.

Current motherhood ideologies reflect commonalities between younger and older mothers where the mother's role is inextricably bound to the care and well-being of her child, and *mother* is perceived to be the one who knows what is best for her child. When considering this perception, one might surmise that age is irrelevant in a woman's ability to meet this expectation. At the same time, it has become apparent through this research that mothering ideologies--even as they are applied to the functional level--are somewhat age-centric in the sense that a symbiotic chasm exists between how older mothers and younger mothers relate to each other. An example of this gap is the motivation of older mothers to partake in mothers groups for purposes of camaraderie, and their perception that younger mothers are averse to sharing their pain points. While further examination of the content of group activities is warranted at a more granular level to inform a more educated conclusion, such as what mothers talk about, how they act etc., older mothers

seem to value the earned companionship they achieve from sharing the joys and challenges of motherhood, rather than participating to hone their mothering skills or to promote their idea of good mothering practices.

These observations speak volumes about the ways in which younger and older women perceive their respective identities as mothers. Perhaps a fundamental divide exists between them. Nevertheless, just as mothering ideology has transformed and adapted up to the present day, it may someday result in an acknowledgement of the importance of collaboration between younger and older mothers, whereby younger women come to value lessons learned from older mothers rather than projecting they must not only demonstrate, but prove they are able to go it alone.

The End

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Anne Marie Munson was born in San Francisco, California and moved to Ireland with her family when she was 14. Munson graduated from high school in Ireland and at the age of 17 began working as an administrative assistant in the town of Ennis, County Clare for a German-owned factory that manufactured video games. Munson returned to the United States when she was 19 and worked as an administrative assistant in New York City at the World Trade Center for an engineering company. She then moved back to San Francisco, where she decided to begin the process of obtaining a Bachelor's degree. She began classes at the local community college while working full-time to earn a living. In 1991, she relocated to the Washington DC metropolitan area, where she has lived and worked ever since. In 2001, Munson received her Bachelor's degree in Anthropology from George Mason University. Munson's professional career is in association management where she is an executive-level manager. She resides in Arlington, Virginia, with her husband and two daughters, their dog, Cheddar, and a few other pets.