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“TAKING MAMA STEPS” TOWARD AUTHORITY, ALTERNATIVES, AND ADVOCACY

Feminist consciousness-raising within a digital motherhood community

Wendy K.Z. Anderson and Kittie E. Grace

Ten years ago, the task of blending work and motherhood was arduous, lonely, and painstaking. Most settled for face-to-face interactions or phone calls to friends and family for support. Sadly, frustrated conversations are still happening due to a lack of cultural acceptance, policies, and laws focused on blending work and family life. However, some women are turning to online spaces for social support. In 1991, Donna Haraway posited that online, affinity-based groups contain the potential for activism. Buoyed by digital social media possibilities for social support, we assessed feminist activism within a motherhood support group populated by women from various countries around the world. We found that consciousness-raising can further feminist activism within an online motherhood Facebook group by helping others learn to negotiate their choices, but economic stratification and educational divides still constrain social support; this suggests that digital connections influence affinity-based identities and feminist activism.

KEYWORDS consciousness-raising; motherhood; Facebook; social support; feminism

Women have been deluged by an ever-thickening mudslide of maternal media advice, programming, and marketing that powerfully shapes how we mothers feel about our relationships with our own kids and, indeed, how we feel about ourselves. (Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels 2004, 7)

Introduction

US mothers have been assigned a primary role as family caregivers; we are expected to make decisions about raising children in the current cultural context for which we may have little training or expertise. For instance, mothers who cannot fit, or do not desire to fit, into the June Cleaver model of motherhood are pressed to find other narratives to help shape identities. The "lean in" philosophy (Sheryl Sandberg 2013) espoused by many mothers who have earned job-related accolades does not work for everyone. The argument of pushing harder does not recognize the multiple cultural situations people come from.
and how “situated knowledges” (Donna Haraway 1988; Miglena Sternadori 2014) are often damaged through academic “refinement.” In both contexts, women are given an ultimatum—impossible ideals, with little to no regard for the individual navigating her life, culture, family, and communities. As Kathryn A. Cady (2013) explained, as a society we are not willing to change our concept of a workday to adhere to the needs of parenthood, in particular motherhood where the cultural default of parenthood resides. As the default of parenthood, motherhood receives no cultural recognition for “decision fatigue” (Charles Passy 2014). Mothers’ work is not valued outside of the household setting, unless it is task focused (Joanne Gilbert and Laura von Wallmenich 2014).

Mothers trying to find social support for balancing work, family, and every other obligation have become one of the most prevalent groups online. Through her close reading of two mommy blogs, Morrison argues that blogs can help mothers understand identity, community, and social practice online to develop emotionally reciprocal, intimate publics (Aimée Morrison 2012). Our study furthers her argument in that, contrary to dominant media narratives that perpetuate “Mommy Wars” or conflict among mothers (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Mary Vavrus 2007), cooperative and collaborative motherhood environments exist and influence the social construction of motherhood. Identity and community formed online provide a foundation for consciousness-raising in instances where educational hierarchies, economic privilege, and social cultural diversities are engaged.

Women who blog about motherhood “are developing their own voice for discussing motherhood” (Lori K. Lopez 2009, 743) as a form of validation. Writing one’s and reading others’ experiences help to form a strong community that can influence how other mothers view parenting (Lopez 2009), which is why we wanted to observe if Facebook provides mothers with a similar community connection. As a social media site, Facebook can offer a space for affinity-based, digitally networked connections for social support and validation (Jeremy A. Greene, Niteesh K. Choudhry, Elaine Kilabukand, and William H. Shrank 2011). Facebook can be utilized as a public agora for “lay-experts” (Kittie E. Grace 2010, 231), where individuals shape personal identity and group unity. Online sharing has allowed users to gain personal control on the web, blurring the line between the public and the private. Individuals who post online want to connect with their audience in some way and become a part of a social space (Laura Gurak and Smiljana Antonijevic 2008; Bonnie A. Nardi, Diane J. Schiano, and Michelle Gumbrecht 2004). Through sharing information and human experiences, the blogging community, and the Facebook community by extension, finds ways to “easily move between the personal and the profound” (Bonnie A. Nardi, Diane J. Schiano, Michelle Gumbrecht, and Luke Swartz 2004, 46). Through our “hosting” and research of a Facebook-based motherhood community, we found possibilities for modern consciousness-raising efforts (Karlyn K. Campbell 1973, 1999). By offering support, women validate themselves and their FOAF (Friend of a Friend) communities to enact “nuanced and effective” (Radhika Gajjala, Yahui Zhang, and Phyllis Dako-Gyeke 2010, 83) social change.

After examining discussion posts over three years within a motherhood Facebook group, we argue that feminist consciousness-raising efforts provide social support to its members, influence identities of motherhood, and encourage dialogic alternatives necessary for women to embody individualized change. Unfortunately, efforts are constrained by a perceived lack of social, educational, and economic capital. Social capital comes in the form of digital and critical fluencies and educational and economic privilege. Group size, topic relevance, class, economic, and educational differences constrain the social support
available to some members. Engaging in a critical conceptual analysis of “the ways of reading, negotiating, and producing meanings in everyday life” (Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen 2002, 8) within an online motherhood group, we contribute to the understanding of how women influence social change in their everyday lives.

Mediated Identities and Online Social Support

Within the last ten years, media outlets have paid extensive attention to motherhood. A New York Times article identified mothers in “the opt-out revolution” (Lisa Belkin 2003) where authors “preyed on maternal guilt, pitted stay-at-home mothers against working ones, reanimated old misogynist beliefs about women’s rightful place and inspired passionate debate across America” (Kim Akass 2012, 137). While media outlets portrayed women leaving work as making the best choice for their families, over half of the women who “opted out” expressed negative or mixed sentiments about leaving (Arielle Kuperberg and Pamela Stone 2008). Over one-third of the women who “opted out” of work outside the home actually worked part-time from home, indicating that the media falsely bifurcated the experience of motherhood creating an unnecessary division between working and at-home moms. Vavrus (2007, 51) explained that media stories emphasized the false “choice” that mothers have to enter the workplace or stay at home; family finances require them to work. The Bureau of Labor Statistics conveys that “the labor force participation rate—the percent of the population working or looking for work—for all mothers with children under age 18 was 70.5 percent” (2013, para. 8–9), showing that a majority of women are in the workforce.

Mediated notions of motherhood influence motherhood identities as well as the ways in which mothers engage each other. Gabrielle Hine (2013, 588) argued that “[we must think] further about how media perpetuate, reflect and circulate discursive constructions” of motherhood. Mediated white “feminism” (bell hooks 2013) in upper-class economic contexts cannot be the only voices. Further, mothers are judged more harshly than fathers in the parental roles. Douglas and Michaels (2004) argued that fathers are revered for taking on any parental duties, while mothers are scolded for un-exclusive parental focus and involvement. Online resources such as so-called mommy blogs (Aimée Morrison 2010) and Facebook have since become necessary as connecting spaces for validation and support between mothers to help develop means to negotiate (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 152) family and career, advocating for feminist agendas.

Although online access is still class and education based, digital spaces allow for connection. The web affords affinity-based groups spaces to thrive (Donna Haraway 1991). Although Haraway contends that “there is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women” (1991, 156), becoming a mother provides a ready connection with many other mothers. Whether it is experiencing pregnancy, late-night feedings, or culturally expected labor, motherhood becomes a basis for affinity with other women. The digital sphere and the mobile applications that support online communities can perpetuate a “networked individualism,” allowing mothers to mediate their various roles and identities (Julie Fizzo-Barker and Peter A. Chow-White 2012, 580). Women are able to show their individual stories while connecting with each other, generating inclusive rhetoric.

The same cultural structures that influence communities offline can reconstruct online. Sociocultural constructs such as race, class, and gender continue to be important factors when considering the digital divide (Samantha Blackmon 2007; André Brock 2011; Lisa Nakamura 2002, 2009; Kathryn Zickuhr and Aaron Smith 2012). Therefore, some people
have access and can participate while others cannot, which often reifies one's cultural offline experience online. However, due to increased possibilities of digital access (Thom File and Camille Ryan 2014), more stories of underrepresented voices appear and education can form in a new context.

Consciousness-Raising as Political Action

Consciousness-raising rhetoric is a primary means of feminist liberation (Campbell 1973, 1999; Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar 2004). According to Campbell (1973, 202), a consciousness-raising group “involves meetings of small, leaderless groups in which each person is encouraged to express her feelings and personal experiences. There is no sole leader, rhetor, or expert. All participate and lead; all are considered expert.” Feminists tell their stories to validate experiences and help others find their feminist narrative. The transition from second-wave feminist consciousness-raising rhetoric to third-wave consciousness-raising shifts from seeking social activism to seeking self-empowerment. Sowards and Renegar (2004, 548) explained:

A final implication of third wave consciousness-raising rhetoric is that it does not directly seek to generate social activism, protest, sisterhood, confrontation, or movement… Rather, third wave feminists share their stories, listen to others’ stories, consume popular culture in ways that they find empowering, and create new vocabularies to enhance their own lives.

Current consciousness-raising efforts share personal experiences, within a more public space, to provide focus on personal and social injustices. Carol Hanisch (2010) warns that consciousness-raising cannot stop with personal change, but the information learned must be spread to other groups to promote radical change and liberation. The feminist movement continues to show how “everyday experiences” of oppression help women develop their identity and voice (Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault 2001, 3). Consciousness-raising allows every woman to take everyday experiences and share them with other women, which leads to self-validation. Catharine A. MacKinnon (1989, 101) added, “Consciousness-raising by contrast shows women their situation in a way that affirms they can act to change it.” By sharing materials that address “legal, economic, and social inequality,” feminists move personal concerns within a larger feminist context (Campbell 1973, 1999).

Motherhood, as a locale for a major onset of caregiving and responsibility, offers a unique space for feminist reflection. Rather than focusing solely on one’s self, the journey into parenthood prompts multilayered consideration for women who are socialized to be the primary caregivers of children. Only through a balance of social support and personal authority does digital deliberation allow for consciousness-raising rhetoric. It is through the digital conversation that women start developing their feminist motherhood identities. It is here where we begin to consider the potential for cultural change through a digital context.

Analytical Lens and Method

We decided to engage “mama” spaces because of our navigation of scholar/mother identities. Wendy K. Z. Anderson is a critical media and rhetorical scholar who grew up in
a working-class suburban neighborhood. She decided to have her first child after she and her partner found jobs in their respective fields, post dissertation. She is the mother of two boys under the age of four. In contrast, Kittie E. Grace is a rhetorical scholar from a rural working-class mining family. She decided to start her family during the dissertating process. She has two girls under the age of seven. We are both women with educational (PhDs) and economic privilege with critical awareness of how education, race, and class have influenced our personal lives. We identify as white and here we are defining white as not only being visually marked as white with fair skin, but also coming from European ancestry with negligible/undetectable amounts of black blood (or the one-drop rule would apply). After repeated conversations on the phone during our pregnancies, which overlapped Wendy’s first and Kittie’s second pregnancy, we started a mama blog. On July 2, 2010, we created a blog to write about our experiences of motherhood. Only a few people participated, and we talked about losing our identity through becoming mothers. After three months, we decided to move the space to a context that was more heavily traversed and designed for “interactivity” (Noemi Sadowska 2002, 102). We moved the group to Facebook. Four days after Wendy’s first child was born, she created a private Facebook group called “Taking Mama Steps” to help her connect with others navigating motherhood. We chose the name “mama” because it is one of the first words that children learn to say and we were taking the first steps in becoming parents. The “add Friend of a Friend (FOAF)” feature was enabled to grow the network. Due to the quick and substantial growth of the group (the group that started with thirty women, as of May 9, 2014, includes 175 participants) and its corresponding materials (nineteen “Docs,” fifty-seven “Photos,” and over a thousand posts), the authors obtained IRB and consent form approval from the mothers to conduct qualitative and rhetorical ethnographic research within the group (Nancy Baym 1998; Leda Cooks, Mari Castañeda Paredes, and Erica Scharrer 2002).

Although past scholarship offered women voice by providing spaces for academic mothers to narrate their experiences (Elrena Evans and Caroline Grant 2008), none has gauged digital discussion and consciousness-raising efforts between women about the challenges they face. Our research assesses how the Facebook group is a part of the larger picture of social support for networked pregnant women/mothers and what collectivity in Facebook can mean for consciousness-raising and feminist activism. Unlike research on mommy blogs (Morrison 2010, 2012), research within a Facebook group lends itself to a more dialogic, rather than monologic, format. Facebook group discussion is not like blogs/forums in that the response patterns do not engage in informal comments (Ralf Caers, Tim De Feyter, Marijke De Couck, Talia Stough, Claudia Vigna, and Cind Du Bois 2013). As an institutional entity, Facebook’s existence depends on users providing and updating personal information and responding to others’ materials by “liking,” “following,” or posting a response comment (Caers et al. 2013). By providing and updating identity information and responding to others, Facebook users can feel as though they are sharing, almost co-owning, the space. The more Facebook users share and update information, the more fluent they become in translating their identity through Facebook (E. Bun Lee 2012). Individuals may feel more ownership or investment in the community because they are not assumed to be the primary author; Facebook can therefore provide infrastructure for a community-owned space for a larger group of people more so than a blog because of its multifaceted organizational identity (Caers et al. 2013). In addition, individuals who do not enjoy writing extensively may feel
inclined to post and/or comment on a post within a Facebook group due to the concise nature of posting.

Although the core of the group is made up of women in their early to late thirties, the women come from a variety of backgrounds, and about half of the group (52 percent) has earned doctorates in Communication, English, Social Science, or Math Education fields. The long-standing context and history of Facebook allowed for group expansion to people’s past networks (undergraduate school, high school, family, neighborhood friends, day care workers, and any other social contact made by a member who might identify as a “mother”). The FOAF network, as well as the identity information revealed by images and names within Facebook, offered us knowledge of the group’s racially, socioeconomically, and gender diverse composition. The statistical data we gathered about the group confirmed that information. In addition to academic positions, members hold positions as lawyers, actors, insurance representatives, high school teachers, students, and primary care givers. Incomes vary dramatically: some contribute to a household less than $20,000 (10.5 percent), and about 16 percent make between $35,000 and $49,999; however, most women (73.5 percent) contribute more explicitly to the household income, making from $50,000 to $74,999 (26.3 percent), from $75,000 to $99,999 (21 percent), or more (26.2 percent) a year. Most women have a young child or multiple children, age from zero to five years. Some women have no children, but are either interested in starting a family or have family members or friends with children and expressed interest in being added. Many of the women are located in the Midwest, but a few live in Europe and Asia.

For the analysis, we utilized critical discourse analysis (Norman Fairclough 2001, 2012) to understand how discourse within the community offered possibilities for consciousness-raising based on power dynamics and differentials. Through our critical discourse analysis of a group we formed and participated in, we chose to engage in what Haraway (1988, 583) calls feminist objectivity, which “allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.” Our digital survey and informal interview methodological approaches offered new ways for ethically studying online groups by using online consent forms, digital surveys, and informal digitally mediated and face-to-face interviews. From observations, we developed a study that included a survey (see Appendix 1) and interview questions. The survey was posted to the group on January 1, 2012, until January 21, 2012. Nineteen of the (then) sixty-seven members responded to the online survey. We retained the survey data within Survey Monkey. Using questions eight, nine, and ten as initial prompts, we conducted fifteen informal interviews with group members either in person or via Facebook chats. Follow-up questions were asked to gain clarification regarding issues of motherhood identity, privilege, and parenting styles. The follow-up interviews lasted anywhere from ten minutes to two hours. We recorded our informal conversations in Word documents and stored them on personal computers. We conducted a critical, textual analysis of the posts and comments from the inception of the group on April 30, 2011, until May 9, 2014 (over a thousand posts with comments ranging from zero to twenty in responses to the posts) as well as some back-channel conversations between the authors and the group members about the group itself. We went through all the posts and categorized them according to themes in a Word document and then organized content on the site’s “Collective Wisdom” page. We analyzed the conversations between group members to assess effort toward Campbell’s (1973) notion of consciousness-raising, where women are validated by sharing their stories and help others feel empowered as mothers.
Consciousness-Raising through Motherhood

Members appreciated the opportunity to post and read at their convenience. The group offered quick feedback at accessible times that created a sense of community within a supportive, "sounding board" environment. Similar to Cooks, Paredes, and Scharrer's (2002, 144) findings about the Oprah.com forums, we found many examples of women expressing "comfort, commonality, and unity" within Taking Mama Steps. Multiple members invited other members to join and indicated that they share information with people outside of the group. Our findings led us to see and assess the potential for consciousness-raising conversations within digital spaces; in particular we found that the group provided social support through collective experiences, acted as lay-experts, and provided space for local activism. We also found that forms of privilege constrain consciousness-raising.

Social Support through Collective Experiences

While many stories had consciousness-raising aspects to them, the stories of "authenticity" (Cook, Paredes, and Scharrer 2002, 150) and personal credibility were most pervasive. Individual stories created a sense of "collective experiences" (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 25) within the group.

Many women shared personal stories of their children experiencing the same issues, allowing women to feel united. One group member, who does not currently have children, posted the following message to the group:

Hi everyone. Just wanted to say thanks for being a part of this group. I am grateful to have a resource like this for asking questions and sharing ideas. I haven't posted much so far, but my hubby and I are hoping to start a family in the next year. I know going into it that it will be challenging—daily injections due to past blood clots: So it is heartening to have a place to talk about baby stuff and all the joys and pains that go with it.

Her post illustrates what the group is all about. Her willingness to share personal information while gaining information from others helped prepare her for motherhood. One mother, who responded to the survey, explained about the website, "I value the support system, honesty and privacy." Each woman on the Facebook group provides personal information about herself to help authenticate her experiences.

Concerns posted about behavioral issues such as autism, potty training, and sleep routines evoked authentic posts with empathetic statements, personal examples, and suggested resources. It is the connections each woman feels with the actual experience of the behavioral issues that make the posts relevant to the other women. Autism was a continued and anxiety-producing topic within the group where a few mothers with extensive experiences posted consistently. One mother of three, and a college instructor, offered a detailed example of her struggles with her autistic child, prompting other mothers to offer concern. Within her post, she stated,

My older son ... was diagnosed with PDD-NOS last November. This is an autism spectrum disorder. It has required a lot of extra research and time and paperwork so far, and I fear this is just going to get worse, even though he is very high-functioning. Bottom line? We need me to quit my job. I want to quit my job. I want to be with my kids and feel it is the best thing for them, for me, for us as a family and for our marriage. If we continue at
this stress level I honestly think there’s a good chance we will get divorced or that I will become depressed.

This mother was open with the group regarding her frustration. Another woman, an insurance agent with two children, one a twelve-year-old with autism, posted,

We did not have [our daughter] diagnosed until midway through kindergarten, and it was I who presented the diagnosis, not our doctors or teachers . . . my friend had seen and taped a program on children with autism that aired on Discovery Health. I cried my eyes out when I watched it. It was as if I had been watching my own child being played by another in a movie. I brought the tape into school and they had a psychologist evaluate and diagnose her.

Through her post, this mother helped others through her personal experience and she provided a source to help educate and mentor others. Additionally, requests for back-channel communication served as a means to individually mentor. In addition to personal stories, others posted resources from national sites such as http://www.autism-society.org/ and other autism resources, helping raise the consciousness of any woman willing to read the materials.

Potty training continued to be another discussion laden with empathetic statements and suggestions to “wait until the child is ready” or try the “potty prize box.” One mom even felt comfortable sharing her joy of overcoming a milestone when her child finally made it one day without wetting his underwear. The thirty-six-year-old assistant professor and mother of one said,

Sharing my parenting victories for the day. Big victory: my son—2 years, 9 months successfully [sic] wore underwear ALL DAY LONG! Small but still significant victory: he also ate the teeny tiny top of a baby carrot. What were your big wins today Mamas?

This mother offered her personal story and she encouraged others to share stories.

Sleep concerns prompted support to tired and stressed parents based on resources and humor. As one thirty-seven-year-old woman who was about to give birth to her second child humorously quipped, “Please, please continue to sleep in while I eat breakfast quietly and read a book for fun (when is the last time I did that!;) . . . Here’s hoping that you all have a wonderful Saturday!” The women also suggested good research-backed books to help with sleep situations and would end most posts with “Good luck” in empathetic support.

Mothers as Lay-Experts

The group offered many suggestions on how to help women cope with motherhood from positions of experience, showing the “lay-expert” (Grace 2010, 231) positions of the women. One woman offered a birth plan as a resource for others so they would not face birth decisions unprepared. Another woman provided her modified vaccine schedule giving an alternative to traditional inoculations. Concerns posted about medical issues (ear infections, congestion, diaper rash, eczema, and allergies) were followed with prompt empathetic, detailed comments of personal experience and possible remedies to consider. In the case of ear infections, many women provided successful examples of taking children to a chiropractor rather than using extensive drug regimens. In another example,
an independent scholar provided a post asking advice about how to get rid of severe diaper rash and received advice from ‘‘painting on’ Mylanta’ to using baking soda. A mother, who works at an alternative learning center, responded, ‘‘Probiotics helped my daughter a lot.’ These examples illustrate how the mothers offered and used alternative, experiential-based means to controlling rashes rather than traditional Western-based medicine options.

Many posts offered alternatives to taking one’s child to the doctor, which can be costly or unhelpful according to the mothers on the Facebook group. For example, one woman posted on Christmas morning out of town with a concern about being sick while breastfeeding. When she contacted her doctor, the doctor insisted that she and the baby come into the emergency room for care. Group members offered suggestions such as drinking water and Gatorade for the mother. The members also suggested following breastfeeding with Pedialyte for the baby to help the mother and baby work through the situation. Medical professionals lean on the side of caution to ensure the health of their patients; however, in this case, support from multiple mothers who had experienced similar situations offered effective lay-expertise.

Localized Activism and Social Change

In addition to medical advice, through their choices of text, posts about recent institutional or organizational responses to mothers navigating public spaces (e.g., flying with breast milk), and personal experiences of navigating institutions, the group offers means for local activism and social change. Group members routinely posted materials to develop critical awareness in children regarding gender identity and issues of race. Texts such as ‘‘Why You Should Buy Your Little Boy a Princess Costume’ (Jacoba Urist 2012), 25 Empowering Books for Little Black Girls (http://www.forharriet.com/2013/10/25-empowering-books-for-little-black.html), Henry’s Freedom Box: A True Story of the Underground Railroad (Ellen Levin and Kadir Nelson 2007), and All the Colors of the Earth (Sheila Hamanaka 1999) were suggested by the group to develop critically and racially aware children. Some mothers even posted images of their little girls in Spiderman costumes. In response, other mothers excitedly posted ‘‘Love!’’ ‘‘Love it!’’ or some variation of ‘‘Thank you (I love this group)!’’ The group members also posted many articles and texts, including ‘‘Middle Class Children: Squeaky Wheels in Training’ (http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/08/120819153847.htm), ‘‘Spoiled Rotten’’ (Elizabeth Kolbert 2012), ‘‘Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In’’ (http://thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973/), and Nurture Shock (Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman 2011) to help develop critical perspectives about parenting styles and influence social change regarding families. In response to the article ‘‘Dig Deep,’’ one expectant mother said, ‘‘Maybe it is pregnancy and anticipating my first child. But this range [sic] true to me. I just don’t see getting more hours in my day and some of my priorities are going to have to shift.’’

Mothers also provided current event conversations surrounding motherhood. In one example, an assistant professor and mother of one posted an article titled ‘‘Map of the Day: The State of Maternity Leave around the World’’ (Maya Dusenbery 2013) expressing how far behind we are as a nation. Other examples focused on responses to breastfeeding in public. Some women expressed concerns over covering up while breastfeeding but felt outraged that potential breast exposure might trump the need to feed a hungry baby. A thirty-year-old mother of one child, who works as an office and customer service manager, posted a Huffington Post article titled ‘‘What You’re Really Saying When You Tell Moms Not to
Breastfeed in Public” (Mandy Velez 2014). She posted: “If you’d like to get really mad, start reading the comments. Apparently people on the internet consider feeding a child comparable to ‘public masturbation.’” Through controversy, the mothers encouraged social change through critical commentary.

**Privilege Constraints on Consciousness-Raising**

Although some women find their voice in the group, constraints curtail consciousness-raising efforts. Specifically, diversity between member income and educational background created overt divisions, or conflict, between the mothers. However, that does not mean that the group is devoid of racial identification tensions, just that group members more explicitly expressed financial discrepancies. In cases where conflict existed, the digital, asynchronous medium offered reflection time, which may quell mommy wars that could ensue as the women wait to comment or even opt out of the conversation. Sometimes just being able to write (verbalize) concerns is enough for people to identify their situation, though without support (in the form of a “like” or comment) from other group members, individuals sometimes felt isolated and alone. Due to the lack of social capital—including income and educational backgrounds—divisions between the mothers and their choices for their children occurred. One mother working her way through an MA program even commented that “class/socioeconomic differences often leave me feeling different/isolated” with the group. She noted in a later response that, instead of vocalizing to the group, “frustrations with class differences I would share with my husband just to vent.” For example, one mother asked advice about purchasing a stroller. Some mothers responded that the “Bob stroller” is really the only option for a quality stroller. Other mothers responded directly to the post, and through informal interviews, that they could never afford a $300 stroller.

Educational privilege became another difference among group members as the group varied by educational background, from those who had finished high school to those who had completed doctorates. Some of the women would offer advice in ways that conveyed the idea to “Follow your instincts, but . . .” asserting that the mother “should” handle the situation in a particular way. One of the mothers, whose older children were no longer using bottles, even left the group because of her frustration with being told what she should do with her kids. For example, the group began discussing the problems with using plastic containers for children’s food (e.g., BPA leaching). During an informal interview following the online discussion, the mother explained that she left the group because she “couldn’t handle” all of the stress and frustration she felt trying to justify her position of using plastic. Overt conflict even arose when one woman posted a concern about leaving her child for a weekend. Two women, both professors, piped in with differing viewpoints: one with an attachment parenting style (stay with the kid and don’t go on the trip) and the other with an independence style (find a sitter you trust and travel). The mothers deliberated and even provided their academic titles in order to show credibility. During an informal interview with one of the conversational participants, she asserted that she even looked up the other woman’s credentials to verify her academic rank. Competition for who is the “best” example of motherhood (Douglas and Michaels 2004, 6) occurs within “Taking Mama Steps”; however, the constant justification of the motherhood identity is tempered by other group members either attempting peaceful resolution in the comments (by thanking them both for their perspectives) or by posting new, pro-social articles that
lighten the mood in the group, or embody a form of politeness to “mitigate or minimize disagreement” (Rhiannon Bury 2005, 135). That noted, discussion between group members offers agency for all participants as multiple perspectives offer alternatives for people to make decisions critically for themselves and their families.

Constraints on Third-Wave Consciousness-Raising

From our analysis, it became evident that consciousness-raising efforts allowed for personal growth and child advocacy; however, group members’ social capital constrained consciousness-raising possibilities. The group offered validation to mothers in and outside of the workforce, allowing women to value and develop means to navigate the multiple motherhood identities. Instead of reinforcing existing divisions, group members encourage each other to believe in their lay-expertise even when they do not agree with each other. However, examples of women choosing to not vocalize concerns may support Morrison’s (2010) conclusions about mothers withholding comments that might negatively influence community cohesion, critical decision making, and agency necessary for consciousness-raising.

Further, the group provided awareness of social structures and institutions not yet ready for empowered mothers. Texts such as birth plans, alternative vaccination charts, and materials that offered models for building critical feminist and critical race awareness brought new perspectives to each mother, facilitating social change. Unfortunately, social activism and change efforts are constrained by the women’s locale and free time. Through the “Taking Mama Steps” group, women may feel more inclined to request spaces for breastfeeding or demand protection of their privacy, which increases consciousness-raising and helps to change their local environment; however, the group has yet to organize protest events for larger political change. For example, due to varying geographic locations, no “nurse-ins” (Velez 2014) or collective labor actions (Ellen Reese and Garnett Newcombe 2003) have been organized. Online groups help to spread social, cognitive, and individual attitude change, but more research needs to be conducted on the long-term changes and social action of group members based on attitude change.

Economic, educational, and social cultural privilege among group members presents concerns about how far consciousness-raising efforts may expand. Women from households with less education and less income than the average group family income sometimes feel more distant from the group majority. A few members even asserted that they do not post in the group because they might write an incorrect statement, feel vulnerable, or offend someone. Those mothers who recognize structures of privilege or underrepresented viewpoints often feel intimidated by women within the group and may hold back from engaging the group as a result. The group’s many academics may limit the group’s reach by focusing on issues raised by those privileged by their written “linguistic capital” (Pierre Bourdieu 1977).

When it was suggested that the group become inclusive to all parents, many members articulated that they would struggle to share the space with men, potentially furthering Douglas and Michael’s (2004, 13) assertion that “[w]e resent men for not helping us more, but also bask in the smugness that at least here, in this one role, we can claim superiority.” As feminists we become contained by our different experiences if we continue to seek out the “best” examples of idealized motherhood (“liberal feminism”) rather than being vulnerable enough to learn from and appreciate difference.
Further research on the international mother population might help develop in-depth understanding of cultural and racial constraints within the group. One mother noted in the survey, “I originally come from a foreign country, so the practices in this country (insurance, prenatal/postnatal care, baby products) are very different from friends and family back home. So their advice is only marginally helpful and limited to very generalized issues.” By directly engaging issues of race and international identity, we may be able to assess how people experiencing a culturally different context may feel obligated to provide arguments about one’s identity. Further alternative approaches to organizing online surveys can aid in more explicit study of cultural identities and media engagement. Associate Professor of Communication Studies, Catherine Squires (personal communication with first author December 2014) argues that placing open-ended questions and long-answer questions toward the front and posing racial and ethnographic fill-in-the-blank-style questions later in the survey may dramatically influence the amount and type of feedback related to cultural identities. As the group evolves, there will be dynamic changes in our connections to one another and our community.

Motherhood Identity

Assertions of “mommy wars” become a way to identify the resistance of homogeneous categorization—every mother is unique, and the experience of motherhood is different for everyone. Just because we are different does not mean that we cannot coexist and continue to learn from one another. Learning requires conflict. We all have different ways of knowing, which offer different means (and even mediums) that help us learn. Facebook began within a university context; its original intent marked us as “other” because of the objectification of women from which it emerged (Steve Campbell 2010). Facebook created an infrastructure, but it is the feminists within the group who perpetuate the work. Our study shows that in many situations women are willing to support one another, provide consciousness-raising as mothers, and offer substantive parenting advice. Yet, when our roles as mothers are questioned, we recognize how idealized notions of motherhood are unobtainable. Mothers want to protect our ethos as mothers and career women, defending our choices, helping to solidify our identity as “mom.” By discussing the many issues within a FOAF Facebook group, women were able to embody their identities as mothers, career women, and feminist activists. If we seek to further feminist scholarship through interdisciplinary goals based on collective experiences, critical steps toward consciousness-raising will ensue. If we challenge ourselves to continue learning and keep our minds open to alternative and inclusive approaches to parenting and negotiate workforce positions, our identities as mothers will strengthen. In motherhood a true balance will never be obtained; however, advocacy and negotiation are necessary to understand our authority and alternatives as we work to understand motherhood within feminism.

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**DISCLOSURE STATEMENT**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**NOTE**

1. We are using this term of “mother” loosely in that women in the group could be mothers, women considering motherhood, mothers-to-be, or even aunts.

**REFERENCES**


APPENDIX 1. TAKING MAMA STEPS SURVEY

1. Age
   - ☐ I am not 18 years of age or older
   - ☐ 18–25
   - ☐ 26–30
   - ☐ 31–35
   - ☐ 35–40
   - ☐ 40+

2. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
   - ☐ Less than high school degree
   - ☐ High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
   - ☐ Some college but no degree
   - ☐ Associate degree
   - ☐ Bachelor’s degree
   - ☐ Master’s degree
   - ☐ Doctorate of Philosophy

3. How much total combined money did all members of your HOUSEHOLD earn in 2010? This includes money from jobs; net income from business, farm, or rent; pensions; dividends; interest; social security payments; and any other money
income received by members of your HOUSEHOLD that are EIGHTEEN (18) years of age or older. Please report the total amount of money earned—do not subtract the amount you paid in taxes or any deductions listed on your tax return.

☐ Less than $20,000
☐ $20,000 to $34,999
☐ $35,000 to $49,999
☐ $50,000 to $74,999
☐ $75,000 to $99,999
☐ $100,000 to $149,999
☐ $150,000 or More

4. If you have children, what ages are your children?
   none
   ☐ 0–1
   ☐ 2–3
   ☐ 4–5
   ☐ 6–7
   ☐ 8–9
   ☐ 10–11
   ☐ 12–13
   ☐ 14 +

5. What times do you read the materials on “Taking Mama Steps”?
   ☐ early morning (3 a.m.–6 a.m.)
   ☐ morning (7 a.m.–12 p.m.)
   ☐ afternoon (12 p.m.–5 p.m.)
   ☐ evening (5 p.m.–9 p.m.)
   ☐ late evening (9 p.m.–midnight)
   ☐ night (midnight–3 a.m.)

6. What electronic device(s) do you use to view “Taking Mama Steps”?
   ☐ Personal Computer (desktop, laptop)
   ☐ Smartphone
   ☐ PDA or handheld device (iTouch, Xoom, etc.)
   ☐ Tablet computer (iPad, Kindle Fire, xyboard, etc.)
   Other (please specify)

7. Have you posted or commented on “Taking Mama Steps”?
   ☐ yes
   ☐ no
8. What do you find valuable about the group? What do you find less useful about the group?

9. Have you communicated about materials within “Taking Mama Steps” outside of the group to group or non-group members? If so, why?

10. Excluding your experience with “Taking Mama Steps” (if they qualify), how would you describe the support you have had with motherhood?