

# Work of Full-Time Mothers: Putting Voice to the Relational Theory of Working

Ae-Kyung Jung and Mary J. Heppner

The purpose of this qualitative research was to explore the work experience of middle-class, Korean full-time mothers in their 50s. Interviews, observations, and photographs were collected from 11 Korean full-time mothers to understand their work and career experiences. The data were analyzed by a case study qualitative method of inquiry. The themes that emerged from the data were paths to becoming full-time mothers, multiple working roles from relationships, dialectical characteristics of work, meaning of full-time mothering, and regrets and internalized biases for full-time motherhood. The findings illustrate how full-time mothers experience a sense of meaning and mattering from their work; how relationships and work are intertwined in their lives; and how gender, social class, and culture influence the work and relationships of full-time mothers. Implications for counselors and researchers are discussed.

*Keywords:* qualitative study, unpaid work, work experience of women, full-time mother, relational theory of working

Women and gender issues have long been a focus of theory development and research related to work and career counseling (Choi & Kim, 2010; Farmer, 2006; Fitzgerald, Fassinger, & Betz, 1995; Heppner, 2013; McMahon, Watson, & Bimrose, 2012). Particularly, the issues of women from diverse backgrounds who were working in the paid labor force have been highlighted by researchers (e.g., Ahn, 2012; Lindstrom, Harwick, Poppen, & Doren, 2012; Smith, Santucci, Xu, Cox, & Henderson, 2012). Considering that research indicates that for many years there was insufficient attention to women's work in general (Walsh & Heppner, 2006), this trend toward greater acknowledgment of women's work is an important accomplishment. At the same time, vocational studies have been slow to address issues related to the unpaid work of women (Richardson, 2012; Schultheiss, 2009), such as full-time mothering.

The reason for this may be that all forms of unpaid work tend to be undervalued by researchers (Richardson, 2012). Major career theories generally include only paid work in their consideration. Therefore, full-time motherhood has been mostly excluded (Schultheiss, 2009). The work of full-time mothers is addressed in the career literature only when it is compared with seeking or maintaining paid work. This perspective

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reflects cultural biases that indicate (a) mothering is a barrier to paid work and (b) having a (paid) job is more valuable and desirable than staying at home (e.g., Valian, 1999; Vejar, Madison-Colmore, & Maat, 2006).

For most married women with children, unpaid care work at home occupies a considerable part of their work (Miranda, 2011). Particularly, motherhood is one of most unique and prevalent experiences of women (Schultheiss, 2009). Various statistics (e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) have demonstrated that a considerable number of women are involved in full-time motherhood and will “define motherhood as a career” (Schultheiss, 2009, p. 26). Attention to the work of full-time mothers allows researchers and counselors to acquire a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the work experience of women with regard to their gender, social class, and culture.

## Theoretical Framework

To understand full-time mothers’ experiences of work, we used the relational theory of working (Blustein, 2011) to guide the analysis and interpretation. A growing number of studies have highlighted the various degrees of volition in choosing occupations and suggested the use of the term *working* for addressing various activities of individuals related to their social and economic contributions (e.g., Blustein, 2011; Hoppner & Jung, 2013; Richardson, 1993, 2012). By integrating critical perspectives in vocational studies and the relational perspective, the relational theory views “working as an inherently relational act” (Blustein, 2011, p. 1), conceptualizing relationships as the main motivation for work (Savickas et al., 2009). The relational theory also acknowledges the social and cultural contexts that allow different levels of accessibility to resources and occupations among people (i.e., Blustein, 2006; Schultheiss, 2007) and underscores the role of culture, race, gender, and social class in the experience of work and relationships (for a full description of the theory, see Blustein, 2011).

We chose the relational theory because of its particular relevance and usefulness to understanding the participants of this study and their work context. The theory highlights the power of relationships and the culture to work, which is essential to explore in the work of Korean full-time mothers in their 50s. This specific group of women possesses distinctive characteristics in their work trajectory, which is not well understood or articulated by existing career theories that emphasize personal actualization through paid employment. The participants in this study present culture-specific traits that may help deepen the understanding of the cultural mechanisms that affect relationships and social contexts in work experiences. For example, participants in this study were born between the 1950s and 1960s, just after the Korean War (1950), when South Korea was dependent on assistance from developed countries. Secondary education began to be common for young women after the 1960s (Jang, 2006). When the women in this study became full-time mothers (approximately 1970s–1980s), the domestic economy was improving dramatically and a burgeoning middle class had formed, which increased the overall wealth in the society (Song, 2006). In terms of culture, the participants were born and raised in a collectivistic, patriarchal, cultural

context. As the Korean society became Westernized, participants also experienced the societal changes to a relatively individualistic, egalitarian, nuclear family culture.

The current study used a qualitative design to understand more nuanced details of the experience of full-time mothers. Qualitative studies are often conducted to explore the issues of an understudied population, especially when there are only a few conceptual studies in the area. Guided by the relational theory of working and cognizant of the cultural context of these women, we explored the following research questions using a case study method: (a) In what ways do these full-time mothers create a sense of meaning and mattering in their work, if any? (b) How are work and relationships conceptualized in the lives of these full-time mothers? and (c) In what ways do gender, social class, and culture influence their relationships and work?

## Method

### Participants

We purposively sampled full-time mothers from an upper-middle-class town (District A) in Seoul, South Korea. Because one of the main characteristics of being a full-time mother is one's social class, we used the geographic boundary, which guarantees a certain level of household income because of housing costs, to confirm the participants' social class. To ensure homogeneity within cases, we used two strategies. First, we developed and applied the following recruitment criteria: (a) heterosexual, married Korean women with child/children and (b) women in their 50s who worked as full-time mothers for more than 10 years at the time of data collection. Considering recent Westernization and individualistic culture in Korean society, we chose a limited age range for participants to explore the influence of traditional gender role expectations on work. In addition, after the first author identified an individual who was interested in the study, this individual was encouraged to invite others from her social circle who may qualify for the study (i.e., word of mouth, snowball sampling). As a result, 11 individuals participated in this study.

The average age of participants was 53.9 years old (range = 50.0–58.0 years) with an average of 28.3 years (range = 25.0–32.0 years) of marriage. Seven participants completed high school, two had college degrees, and two had graduate degrees. Although one participant never worked for pay outside the home, 10 participants had done so and stopped around the time of their marriage. Two participants reported short-term paid work experience after marriage.

### Procedure

If a participant indicated interest in taking part in this investigation, a time was arranged to conduct the interview. All interviews were conducted at the home of the first author. To obtain more observation data, we originally suggested conducting interviews at the homes of participants. None of participants, however, preferred meeting at their homes. Before the interview, participants were read an informed consent statement and asked for their verbal consent. We collected two different types of data from participants. First, the first author conducted interviews in Korean,

lasting between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. The interview contained six demographic questions and 15 semistructured interview questions, which related to work experience and also potentially influential factors as specified in the relational theory of working (e.g., meaning). Sample questions include “What do you think are the special characteristics of full-time motherhood as an occupation?” and “What was your greatest moment in being a full-time mother?” We added follow-up questions to investigate details of full-time motherhood (e.g., roles of culture, beliefs) as the interview progressed. At the end of the interview, we asked participants to choose a pseudonym. The recorded sessions were transcribed verbatim by a hired transcriber.

The other data used in the analysis were photographs, memos, and journal entries. Either at the beginning or end of the interview, we asked participants to send representative pictures of their lives that depicted the meaning of their work as a full-time mother. As part of the triangulation process, their photographs, memos, and interviewer journal entries offered an opportunity to verify or further elaborate on the information they shared in the interview.

### Data Analysis

We used the case study method of inquiry (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) for data analysis. Yin (2009) argued that, unlike other qualitative methods, the case study method is most appropriate when a researcher is interested in knowing the how and why regarding one’s research questions. Considering the nascent stage of the topic of this study, we chose a single-case design with multiple participants (Yin, 2009). In our single-case design, we used the representative or typical case to “capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday or common place situation” (Yin, 2009, p. 48). To enhance credibility, we developed codes in five specific ways. Specifically, the first author (a) read the transcripts for overall understanding, (b) developed codes for the data (e.g., relationship, contextual factors, work) and coded each transcript, (c) reanalyzed the transcripts and created specific codes for every expression relevant to motherhood experiences, (d) compared initial codes and second-round specific codes to ensure consistency among codes and interpretations, and (e) formulated concise and meaningful units using second-round codes. Finally, the themes emerged from these categories. We used the qualitative analysis software RQDA (Version 0.2-2; Huang, 2011) to create codes and categories. To enhance internal validity, the first author triangulated the data to explore them from different perspectives (e.g., through observations, interviews, journals, and photographs). Throughout the process, we met and discussed findings on a weekly basis.

To build further trustworthiness in the current study, we used two more methods to enhance the credibility of the data analysis: peer debriefing and two rounds of a member-checking process. During data analysis, to step out of her own view and seek more objective perspectives, the first author often shared her feelings and perceptions about her data analysis and interpretations with professional colleagues who were not involved in this study. For the first round of member checking, participants received their interview transcript and were told to let us know if they found any inaccuracies. A total of eight participants out of 11 responded. For

the second round, three participants agreed to assist in verifying our interpretation of the data and the findings, including the themes. They agreed that the results explained well and accurately their experience as full-time mothers, and they believed that the findings also represented the experience of many Korean full-time mothers in their 50s.

## Findings

On the basis of the findings, we discovered five themes. These themes were (a) a path to becoming a full-time mother, (b) multiple work roles emanating from relationships, (c) dialectical characteristics of work, (d) meaning derived from full-time mothering, and (e) regrets and internalized biases for being full-time mothers.

### A Path to Becoming a Full-Time Mother

Participants reported having a paid job after at least secondary education, yet the societal atmosphere gave them the clear message that the job was only temporary until they got married. Employers did not prefer to hire a married woman. This message was sometimes subtle; the participant Fabi described the unsupportive and uneasy work atmosphere for a married woman. Other times, married women like Smile faced more obvious discrimination against continuing a paid job:

I was going to keep my job [after marriage], but I was asked to move to a trivial position. I told them, "Why do married women receive this unfair treatment? I can work exactly the same as before I married. Getting married doesn't mean I can't work. I want to keep my position." So they sent me to a very difficult department. I couldn't bear it. It was so tough. I was pregnant, and the work was difficult. I couldn't get over it, and finally I submitted a letter of resignation.

Work harassment also had a significant influence on some participants who welcomed marriage as a way to leave their paid work. Some work environments were oppressive to single women. Flower shared that a woman's age and single status was the subject of unpleasant touch and jokes. Without sexual harassment policies, she had to deal with the constant harassment and resultant feelings, which led her to conclude that she was not a good fit with the work.

Another condition that influenced their decision was associated with their pay and social status as middle-class working women. The fact that they did not work for survival allowed them to voluntarily resign. Some resigned from work without much reluctance because they felt that their pay was not adequate compensation for their time and effort. Considering the substantial gender inequity in pay (Kim, 2009) and the historical heritage that honorable women did not work, working outside the home was not a particularly attractive idea to some participants.

Other relationships such as with parents, husbands, and family-in-law members also played a significant role in determining participants' work patterns within and outside the home. Participants' paid work was considered as unnecessary or an extra social experience before marriage. Some participants were even asked to sacrifice their careers or career aspirations to take care of their families. For example, Young, who married as soon as she graduated from college, reported that she

did not even think about working because of the pressure for marriage from her mother:

I am the first child of a family with three daughters and one son. When I was young, maybe starting when I was in high school, my mom would say that the first daughter should get married well and married quickly. I heard these words continuously. . . . Marriage was the solution. . . . I actually thought [my mom] had raised her kids in order for them to get married.

Some participants were receptive to the social pressure and expectations to become a full-time mother. One reason is that participants embraced a strong belief in the importance of “raising their children in mom’s hands,” as Fabi noted. They believed that children raised with full-time mothers are more emotionally stable and well behaved than ones from employed mothers. As a result of existing barriers and their internal desire for mothering, most participants resigned from their paid work around the time of their marriage or the birth of their first child.

### **Multiple Work Roles Emanating From Relationships**

Common perception holds that the main work of full-time mothering is to provide care for one’s family. However, participants perceived that raising and educating children was their most important work. Their daily routines highlight the central role of caring for children: waking them up, providing meals and snacks, helping them prepare for school, picking up or dropping off their children between places, or waiting for them at home. All participants made a comment about the importance of “mom being available.” In fact, children’s needs and growth changed the type and load of work and the level of availability of full-time mothers.

Participants stated that their personal needs and interests were often ignored or received low priority, especially early in their marriage when children were young. We noted several societal factors that influenced their experiences. For example, in 1983 in South Korea, the average working hours per year for paid workers was 2,911 hours compared with 1,895 hours on average in other developed countries (Bae, 2012; Hong, 2012). This contributed to the women’s working spouses not being available at home and prevented these men from participating in parenting. In addition, the personal characteristics of their working spouses, which were influenced by the patriarchal culture, prevented them from participating in parenting. Thus, the participants were often the only care provider and found it exhausting and demanding.

By definition, a *full-time mother* is a woman whose main occupation is taking care of her children and operating her household (“Full-Time Mother,” n.d.-a, n.d.-b; “Housewife,” n.d.). According to this definition, the husband and children seem to be the only significant people for full-time mothers. However, the culture intervenes in determining for whom full-time mothers work. Influenced by the Confucian conceptualization, Korean culture often no longer considered women’s family of origin as their family, whereas their family-in-law became their family. Thus, their family-in-law was included within the range of their work.

For most participants, caring for family-in-law members became a significant part of their responsibilities. In this strongly patriarchal so-

ciety, it was common that married sons were obliged to support their family of origin. However, in reality, daughters-in-law were responsible for all the actual work. Aremi reported that most participants lived with their family-in-law:

I had stayed [with] my family-in-law's for a week right after I had gotten married. . . . My father-in-law asked me to pack his clothes and such. Because he ordered it, so yes, I did it. . . . Oh my! I never knew he was following us to Seoul (my house) the same day.

Aremi lived with her father-in-law for 24 years until he passed away. Kimheja, who had to take care of her cousin-in-law and sister-in-law and her child, also exemplifies the range of relatives included in their care roles, often without the simple consideration of asking for their consent. The only one who did not live with her family-in-law was Flower whose husband lost his parents before marriage. Sometimes family-in-law members interfered with the management of the household and took control over the participants.

Cultural expectations for obedience negated any possibility for resistance to unreasonable requests from the family-in-law. Participants conformed to the demanding situation of living with the family-in-law because they thought it was their responsibility and/or the cultural value placed on family harmony. Others seemed to embrace their challenges more actively. Suni, who raised and supported the education of her brother-in-law and sisters-in-law, emphasized the importance of understanding and having mature attitudes to deal with these complex relational issues.

### **Dialectical Characteristics of Work**

Dialectical characteristics of full-time mothering (Oberman & Josselson, 1996) were clear when participants described their work. For example, full-time mothers enjoyed exercising their autonomy and flexibility, although they often felt constrained by a lack of their own income and personal freedom. Flexible use of time was considered the most beneficial aspect of working as a full-time mother. The workload tends to decrease and influences the quality of their lives as their children grow. Compared with the demanding work when children were young, many participants appreciated time and space for themselves. Fabi referred to this freer time as the “golden age” of her life. Full-time mothers now had the luxury of making their own plans for doing routine housework.

Because of the flexibility of their time, all participants were involved in different activities, adding to their full-time mothering. Their extra activities could be leisure or another type of unpaid care work (e.g., volunteer work). Participants felt empowered by this freedom in their lives. We find it interesting that some participants selected pictures of these extra activities as representative of their full-time motherhood. Aremi took pictures of her dance performance, explaining that she now could invest time in her passion of dance.

Yet it seemed that their actual daily work routines were contradictory to their reports of flexibility and freedom of choice. In fact, the participants had a much more fixed and organized schedule when reporting a specific timeline for their daily routines. Most participants

had a list of daily, monthly, and annual tasks, which were strongly influenced by the needs and schedule of family members. Regarding a work–life–leisure balance, the prioritization of work is obvious. The participants made sure that they finished all tasks before going out for other activities or responsibilities.

Another dialectical characteristic of work is related to financial issues. Full-time mothers shared the income of their paid working husband to operate the household. This role of an economic agent consumed a great part of their work time. Most participants reported that they had freedom in their economic decisions as long as they stayed within their budgets. Some participants were skilled at investing in real estate or stock markets, and, in that way, they contributed to the wealth of their households. However, a lack of direct financial compensation for their care work made full-time mothers often think that they had fewer rights and less power over income compared with their paid working partner, which caused frustration and annoyance. When the husband was reluctant to share control over his income, the full-time mother's negative feelings were amplified.

### **Meaning Derived From Full-Time Mothering**

It appeared that participants valued and had faith in the uniqueness of care work. They also had a high degree of self-appreciation for doing quality work. These were common contributors to helping participants feel that their care work gave them a sense of meaning. Participants felt proud of their full commitment to their families without being distracted or interrupted by other responsibilities outside the home. There were difficult times working as a full-time mother, but some participants embraced these experiences and found meaning from their service and survival. For example, Veronica took care of her mother-in-law, who suffered from dementia, until her mother-in-law passed away at home. She spent sleepless nights and lost weight from the stress of the situation. However, she believed that those years that she served and helped her mother-in-law live in peace and comfort gave her a sense of worthiness about her work and roles.

Acknowledgment from family about the participants' work is a significant source of meaning. Despite effort and time, the work of full-time mothers is often indirect and invisible from the outside and their accomplishments are rarely compensated by any tangible or material rewards (Schultheiss, 2009). Thus, being recognized for their contributions by family members has considerable impact on enhancing pride and satisfaction of participants with their work. Gaining compliments and trust from family were often presented proudly in the interviews.

The common index for gauging success and ultimate meaning of full-time mothering is the success of their families. Participants believed that they contributed to their families' achievements through their support and care. Instead of setting individual goals for their lives, participants, directly or indirectly, felt assimilated goals with those of their families. Angel described her role with a metaphor of fertilizer: "I am fertilizer, decomposing to become fertilizer for the blooming flowers that we [she and her family] want."

In addition to visible success, relational depth and satisfaction with their children and spouses also played an important role in how mean-

ingful they felt their work to be. Having good relationships with their children was a powerful way that these participants' found meaning in their lives. For example, Smile proudly stated that she became a trustworthy mother to her children. They built intimate relationships and worked together on their important life tasks. Her children's trust in her judgments provided a sense of meaning for her work. Some participants also experienced positive changes in the relationship with their husbands in accordance with changes in life stages. Many times, the relationship started out as one of greater hierarchy and less partnership. In the beginning of their marriages, it was common for their husbands to insist on trivial things and to not participate in parenting or household tasks. Nevertheless, their bond often became stronger as they understood and appreciated each other more. In South Korea, because of the economic recession, most participants experienced their husband's retirement. With increasing health issues of full-time mothers, husbands now spent more time at home and were more engaged in housework, which altered the dynamics of the relationships in some cases.

Two women, Flower and Pretty, questioned the meaning of their work. One commonality between them was the perceived distance from their children. Both regretted their parenting styles, which they thought caused negative consequences between them and their children. Compared with other participants who established good relationships with their children, they felt relatively isolated from their families and less satisfied with their work.

### **Regrets and Internalized Biases for Being Full-Time Mothers**

Participants revealed that full-time mothering is undervalued as work even among full-time mothers. Some regretted their choices of becoming a full-time mother. The most obvious example of this underestimation is that participants described their work as "idling" or "doing nothing." Aremi, who had four children and described the demanding nature of full-time mothering, simply defined what she was doing as "idling" and "resting," not working. Veronica, a former teacher who had a difficult time caring for her family and mother-in-law with dementia, said that she "just stayed at home" because she did not have particular talents (for paid work). Veronica also felt sorry for full-time mothers with a college education, who "studied hard but are staying at home" because, for her, they seem to be wasting their precious education.

The main reasons for the participants' underestimation of full-time mothering were associated with perceived characteristics of the non-professionalism of care work. Full-time mothers' work was considered "boring" by the participants and often requires the same routines at home. Although the participants acknowledged improvement of their skills and knowledge over time, they believed that everyone could do housework. Particularly in comparing their work with that of paid working mothers, the participants pointed out that paid working mothers can do both paid and unpaid work, which further devalued what they were able to do. They also believed that they have limited life experiences and that their views and thoughts are narrower than those who "work in the society." Aremi shared her negative perceptions of full-time mothers in comparison with "career women": "We feel like we are out of date; we

feel like something is clogged. We think we are old-fashioned compared with career women.”

The negative perceptions and undervaluing influenced how participants felt about their work and lives in general. Because they “did not work but idle,” as Flower noted, some described themselves as being lazy, incompetent, and complacent. Some believed that they gave up their potential and wasted their time and lives without personal accomplishment. In addition, the notion of idling had a strong impact on their emotions. Some participants felt guilty and shameful and reported low levels of confidence and self-esteem.

How their work was perceived in the world seemed to be directly related to feelings of having led a life that mattered. Participants said their work was unappreciated in society. Pretty shared her feelings of helplessness caused by the notion that mothers do not matter:

Despite how much I cried out that I’m smart, the recognition of a mother is limited to the mom who stays at home and does nothing but that. In a word, there is something I can’t explain no matter how much I say that I am good enough, because there is no result.

The lack of mattering was often exacerbated when participants realized that their families also underestimated their work. Financial dependence significantly disheartened these women and made them question how much they truly matter at home and in society. Another discouraging factor was children’s negative perceptions about full-time mothers’ work. For example, Smile, who once dreamed about becoming a teacher but had to give up that dream so that she could support her family, shared her story about her children’s perceptions of paid and nonpaid working mothers:

I wish I had a job when my kids told me this when they were young: “Mom, at my school, a friend’s mom is a school teacher, and aunts are all teachers; why aren’t you a teacher?” So I realized that kids love a working mom more; they think of it as ability. I’m sorry when I think that. I’m regretful that my kids may see me as a mom who has no capability to work so she does housework at home.

In essence, there were many different sources that conspired to make full-time care workers feel that their work mattered less to the world.

## Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to provide an in-depth understanding of the work experience of middle-class, Korean full-time mothers in their 50s. With the relational theory of working (Blustein, 2011), which highlights relational experience at work within the sociocultural context, this study aimed to explore full-time mothers’ work experiences by focusing on their sense of meaning and mattering; understanding their work in the context of relationships; and integrating the influence of gender, social class, and culture on their work and relationships. On the basis of the results of this study, three issues emerged for discussion: the roles of relationships in full-time mothering, the invisibility of full-time mothering as work, and the impact of the cultural context. First, the findings from

this study empirically support the relational theory of working, which contends that relationships are the main axis of work and work-related experiences. As the theory predicts, there was considerable impact from the participants' relational experiences on their work-based decisions and processes (Blustein, 2011). When conducting these interviews, we sensed some ambiguity as these mothers reconciled the mission of finding meaning in their own lives and the patriarchal values associated with their mothering. In addition, changes in their relationships, such as life events, influenced their work experiences and workloads.

Consistent with relational theory (Blustein, 2001b, 2011; Schultheiss, 2003), the findings from this study revealed that the influences of relationships can vary and are often complex and multifaceted. The nature of full-time mothering (i.e., that work is to serve their significant others' needs) provides a powerful example of the strong impact of relationships on their work and well-being. It is noteworthy that relationships were the main source for the meaning of the participants' work because they felt great meaning from seeing enrichment in their families and in-depth intimacy in their relationships. These findings are consistent with and support previous theoretical arguments that relationships can be the main source of work meaning and work satisfaction (Richardson, 2004; Schultheiss, 2003, 2006; Schultheiss, Blustein, & Flum, 2003) and that meaning can be a relational outcome (Blustein, 2011). However, despite experiences of empowerment, validation, and meaning created from relationships, centering their work on satisfying others' needs was not always positive. In this patriarchal society in which opinions of their family-in-law members and husbands were more prioritized, full-time mothers sometimes were expected to sacrifice their needs to serve their family members, which negatively influenced their well-being and life balance.

Second, full-time mothering was rarely conceived of as real work among participants. During the interview, some participants had a hard time recognizing the activities or responsibilities that they performed as work. Despite their work routine and the level of hard work they demonstrated, the participants described their work as "idling," "not doing something special," and "just staying at home," which depicted the devaluing and invisibility of their work.

This deprecation of work might have originated in how society defines work or career. The widespread belief that career or work should be paid, be consistent with one's interests and abilities, and provide ongoing opportunity for development and achievement over time (e.g., promotion, increased skills, knowledge, compensation) may not fit with most people's experiences (Blustein, 2001a; Richardson, 1993). Indeed, this notion of career becomes an issue for full-time mothers who did not experience a fit of interests or any ongoing achievement from their work, which may prevent them from using the term *work* to describe their work experience.

A narrow definition of work might discourage work satisfaction and a sense of self in full-time mothers. Work occupies a considerable portion of an individual's sense of self, and the loss of work negatively influences self-esteem and self-confidence (Amundson, 1994; Waters & Moore, 2002). The lack of acknowledgment of work and the subsequent use of self-deprecating words may harm full-time mothers' sense of self.

Further studies are needed to investigate the relationship between their perception of work and their life–work satisfaction and self-image.

Finally, the present results suggest that work path and experience of work should be understood with consideration of both the ecological context and individual coping and actions in the given context. Women’s work should be understood in the context of environmental influences (Cook, Heppner, & O’Brien, 2002) that shape relationships and work and provide a base for coping strategies (Blustein, 2011). For example, the Korean culture, which is steeped in patriarchy, defines much of what is expected in these women’s lives, the highly salient role of motherhood, and the secondary roles of anything else. Despite dramatic social changes in women’s rights, Korean society has become more individualized and underscores the material value of human resources. Therefore, the mattering of full-time mothers has been even more threatened by their lack of income and their interpersonal goals. Most participants internalized the stereotype of rigid gender roles and the lack of appreciation that these roles provide (e.g., “idling”). In contrast, the lives of full-time mothers as depicted by the voices in this study also demonstrate that they are not just victims in the society. The findings from this study indicate that working as a full-time mother can be understood as one of the most accepted ways to conform to their social class identity as middle-class women in the society. These behaviors are consistent with what Heppner and Jung (2013) described as ways individuals cope and navigate in their given society based on their intersecting social identities.

Several limitations should be noted. First, our sample was limited in geographic location, sexual orientation, racial/ethnic diversity, and age. Full-time mothers in different age groups might have yielded different work and relational experiences. Second, the first author solely conducted the interviews and most of the analyses. Despite several strategies (e.g., peer debriefing) used to bracket her biases and assumptions, data collection, analysis, and interpretation might have been influenced. Finally, this study depended mostly on retrospective stories from participants, which may have not reflected their experiences most accurately.

### **Implications for Counseling**

Despite these limitations, this study highlights the complexity of women’s feelings about working as full-time mothers, which range from shame about their lack of accomplishments in the marketplace to joy at having raised a successful family. Because the participants in the present study did not conceptualize what they were doing as work or a career, the likelihood of full-time mothers seeking career counseling is low. However, counselors might provide outreach and encouragement to full-time mothers when possible (e.g., parent–teacher conference). Career counselors often work with young women who are making decisions about motherhood. It is important for counselors to understand this complexity and help them make authentic decisions. The constructs of meaning and mattering seem central to work with women contemplating full-time mothering. Women in the sample often wished they had some of their own accomplishments to draw on to help them feel that they mattered. It may be useful to help clients think about how they derive meaning and mattering in work (Schultheiss, 2009).

Counselors can talk with women about macrolevel biases that often marginalize, devalue, or make care work invisible (Heppner & Jung, 2013). It is important for counselors to be able to help clients understand the socio-political and economic reasons for this invalidation and to help validate the importance of caregiving roles to the broader society (Cook et al., 2002). Clients may benefit from learning that these messages are often internalized at an individual level. It was striking that simply being a participant in this study helped to validate the participants' feelings of the importance of their work; one of the participants poignantly stated, "I thought I did nothing. But hearing it makes me feel that I have lived well enough."

To offer this type of authentic exploration of the advantages and disadvantages of assuming a caregiving role, counselors must be aware of their own biases toward those who work in unpaid positions. Depending on the cultural context in which the counseling takes place, the messages of that society have likely become internalized by counselors as well. Thus, examining these biases and heightening one's awareness about how implicit and explicit societal learning may affect the counselor is critical to performing effective counseling with these women (Gysbers, Heppner, & Johnston, 2014).

### Implications for Research

There are several tasks for researchers that may contribute to social change regarding the social status of unpaid work, especially unpaid care work such as full-time parenthood, as legitimate work. First, researchers should actively use the term *work* when referring to different types of care work, such as managing households, raising children, and caring for older adults. Second, more studies that investigate the characteristics of unpaid care work and the influence of unpaid care work on individuals' lives should be encouraged. For example, topics such as biases and stereotypes of unpaid care work, work identity, and work satisfaction can demonstrate how unpaid care work is perceived and constructed. Third, the present research emphasizes the "cultural shaping of meaning making through relationships as central to understanding of work in people's lives . . . and highlights the significance of culture in human action" (Schultheiss, 2013, p. 51). Additional research that places culture at the center and conceptualizes how it shapes working lives would be helpful in the further elaboration of the relational theory. Fourth, the central principles of meaning, mattering, and dignity need further psychometric and conceptual work in understanding what mechanisms within people's working lives help to foster these critical variables. Fifth, diverse samples of full-time mothers of all ages, races, sexual orientations, and economic statuses need to be included to understand the nuances of this group of workers and to test the current findings with other samples. Finally, researchers should acknowledge and address societal factors that perpetuate the invisibility and underestimation of unpaid care work.

In summary, the findings of this study have extended the understanding of how Korean full-time mothers experience their work and relationships within the context of gender, social class, and culture. This study provides support for the relational theory of working with a case study methodology that can help counselors understand and empower people whose work has gained little attention from researchers and counselors in the past.

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