



## The 1990s Shift in the Media Portrayal of Working Mothers<sup>1</sup>

Joanna Motro<sup>2</sup> and Reeve Vanneman<sup>3</sup>

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*A cultural theme of distressed working mothers depicts working mothers as caught between the demands of work and family in an unforgiving institutional context. Susan Faludi first identified this theme as a conservative backlash against feminists' attempts "to have it all." But a similar narrative helps support demands for more flexible work–family policies and more significant housework contributions from fathers. We explore the actual trends and prevalence of this distressed working mothers theme by coding 859 newspaper articles sampled from the 1981–2009 New York Times. Articles discussing problems for working mothers increased in the mid-1990s and have continued increasing into the twenty-first century. Other themes about problems and benefits for working mothers show quite different trends. There is also an unexpected mid-1990s shift in attention from problems working mothers are having at home to problems at work. The increase in the distressed working mother theme coincides with the mid-1990s stall in the gender revolution. The simultaneity of the cultural, economic, political, and attitude trends suggests that the rise of the distressed working mother theme and the stall in the gender revolution may have mutually reinforced each other over the last two decades.*

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**KEY WORDS:** content analysis; culture; feminism; gender; working mothers.

### INTRODUCTION

Anne Marie Slaughter's much-discussed June 2012 *Atlantic* article, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," detailed her personal struggle of balancing work and family as the director of policy planning at the U.S. State Department. Her story incited controversy because it was easily read as yet another media example of denying women's equality in the workplace by pushing them toward a mommy track. The *Atlantic* article came two decades after Susan Faludi's (1991) *Backlash* argued that the 1980s media had consistently attempted to blunt the feminist movement by portraying negative images of women trying to "have it all."

Both Slaughter's personal memoir and Faludi's analyses identified a similar media theme of the distressed working mother. Central to this theme, stress is the inevitable result of mothers' attempts to combine careers and parenting in today's unforgiving environment. For Faludi, the media image of stressed-out mothers represented a conservative backlash against women's entry into the labor force. For Slaughter, the reality of stressed-out mothers was evidence that progressive reforms were needed in the workplace and the family to accommodate women's legitimate

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742; e-mail: joanna.motro@gmail.com.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Sociology, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742.

vision of gender equality. The ability of a single image to appeal to such disparate political agendas has guaranteed it a pervasive place in contemporary culture.

The rise of the theme of distressed working mothers in popular media may help us better understand the 1990s stall of the gender revolution. A broad range of gender indicators including mothers' labor force participation, occupational and educational integration (Cohen, Huffman, and Knauer 2009; Cohen 2012; England and Li 2006), the gender wage gap (Hegewisch et al. 2010; IWPR 2012), female elected officials (Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics 2012), and even time spent on household chores (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006) have documented a mid-1990s stall. Attitudes on gender also ceased becoming more egalitarian in the mid-1990s (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001) and have shown minor change since then (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011). While the stall is now a generally accepted fact, explanations for it have not been so readily developed. We demonstrate below that the popular media's adoption of the distressed working mother theme coincided with and may have reinforced the stall in gender outcomes.

We trace the prevalence of a distressed working mother theme in the *New York Times* between 1981 and 2009. We code 859 systematically sampled articles and find that references to *problems* for working mothers increased in the mid-1990s. Attention also shifted in the mid-1990s from problems working mothers had at home to problems working mothers had at work. This growth in distressed working mother images soon overshadowed an earlier critique that their *children* are hurt by mothers' work outside the home. And although feminist themes of the benefits of careers for working mothers also rose briefly in the mid-1990s, the feminist themes fall back to pre-1990 levels in the early 2000s while the distressed working mothers theme continued to increase into the twenty-first century.

### *Popular Culture and the Theme of Distressed Working Mothers*

Faludi's (1991) *Backlash* argued that the media were portraying a new, negative image of mothers trying to "have it all": that combining successful careers and primary caregiving at home only led to stressed-out mothers. Faludi interpreted this media image as an attack on feminism, an often explicit argument that feminist reforms were only injuring the very people they were supposed to have helped. She also argued that this new media image of distressed working mothers had replaced an older critique that identified their children as the main casualties of women's new career orientation.

Other media analyses reinforced this indictment of the popular media's resistance to women's entry into the labor force. Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels's (2004) *Mommy Myth* noted the rise of "the new momism," which put demands on working mothers beyond what any woman could realistically fulfill. Arlie Hochschild's (1989) memorable image of the "second shift" popularized the idea of the double burden on working mothers and showed how persistent male resistance could be. Lisa Belkin's 2003 *New York Times Magazine* article on her Princeton classmates "opting out" of high-powered careers documented how work conflicts pushed mothers out of their careers but was also seen as a narrative about

guilty mothers distressed at leaving their children in others' care (Williams, Manvell, and Borstein 2006).

### *Work–Family Balance*

The conflict between careers and parenthood was echoed from a very different perspective by the growing attention to work–family policy. Advocates for reform argued that trying to combine a successful career and responsible child-rearing was especially difficult for American women. Working mothers were rightfully distressed by the painful choices they were forced to make because of the lack of institutional and spousal support for working mothers. However, the promotion of work–family reforms almost necessarily invokes an image of distressed working mothers that can unintentionally reinforce the conservative narrative that women “can’t have it all.” Some feminists have identified structural reasons why work–family reforms might backfire against gender equality (Bergmann 2009; Mandel and Semyonov 2005). For example, work–family benefits encourage employers to engage in statistical discrimination against women because men are likely to be less costly and more job devoted (Mandel and Semyonov 2005). But work–family reform advocates also face a potential cultural problem. A broad acceptance of the distressed working mother image could justify employers' favoritism of men on the demand side and heighten women's own reservations on the supply side. Thus, a growing concern about distressed working mothers in the 1990s may have supported both the initial modest efforts at work–family policy (i.e., the Family Medical Leave Act of 1993) and a conservative backlash that underlay a stall in the gender revolution.

### *Content Analyses of Gender Trends in the Media*

We would like to know about *prevalence* as well as thematic meaning of the media examples of distressed working mothers. Were media claims about working mothers' stress more prevalent in the 1990s than before, and were they more prevalent than the feminist themes of the self-fulfillment women find in their careers? Earlier media analyses, such as Faludi's, identified a shift toward a distressed mother narrative that was impressively wide ranging, drawing content from newspapers, television, films, novels, and a broad variety of popular culture sources. However, as insightful as these analyses may have been about the media backlash, it is possible that their examples may have been well-chosen but unrepresentative illustrations. A more systematic examination of the media's portrayal of working mothers needs to examine both negative and positive images, and it needs to measure prevalence from a more standardized sample of sources.

Quantitative content analyses of popular culture find content about women tends to parallel trends in feminist activism. Studies of children's books, for instance, found a greater prevalence of female characters and less stereotyping after the activism of the 1970s than before (Clark, Lennon, and Morris 1993; Gooden and Gooden 2001; Kortenhaus and Demarest 1993). Similarly, most analyses of

women's magazines found changes toward more egalitarian themes after 1970 in both fiction (Demarest and Garner 1992; Loughlin 1983; Peirce 1997) and nonfiction content (Brown 1978; Geise 1979).

Longer analyses of content spanning a century show that changes have not always been in a unilinear feminist direction. Studies of the first half of the twentieth century found *declines* in egalitarian content. Friedan's (1963) classic *The Feminine Mystique* was based in part on evidence that female characters in women's magazine fiction had become *more* stereotypical between 1939 and the 1950s. Griffith (1949) found a similar shift away from careers toward housewives for an even earlier time period of women's fiction.

This earlier downward trend in the career-oriented content of women's magazines is corroborated by the curvilinear results found in counts of female characters in children's books. Both Grauerholz and Pescosolido (1989) for 1900 to 1984 and McCabe et al. (2011) for 1900 to 2000 found that a U-shaped curve best fit the trends in the prevalence of female characters. They attribute the high points in the early and late parts of the century to the rise of women's movements at the time; in contrast, the low point in the middle of the century coincided with the political eclipse of these movements. By extension, the decline of feminist protest after the 1982 defeat of the Equal Rights Amendment (Barakso and Schaffner 2006; Costain 1992; Minkoff 1997) might lead us to expect a retreat from the feminist themes of the 1970s media. This downward trend in feminist themes was exactly what Faludi's (1991) *Backlash* argued had happened in the 1980s.

While suggestive of the nonlinearities of gender trends in popular culture, the content analyses of women's magazines and children's books have rarely examined more than the presence or absence of female characters. We seek to extend these types of quantitative methods to reflect themes identified by media analysts' more qualitative analyses. We borrow from the quantitative analyses their emphasis on systematic sampling and coding, but the content we focus on is the theme of distressed working mothers identified by the more qualitative media analysts. We compare trends in these distressed working mothers themes against alternatives, for example, the more conventional feminist advocacy of the benefits of the self-fulfillment of careers, the successful role models this work provides for their children, and the frustrations for both mothers and children of mothers' lives circumscribed by purely family concerns at home.

## METHODS

### *Sample*

We selected articles from the *New York Times* between 1981 and 2009 to track working mother themes over time. The *Times* is, of course, a narrow slice of elite culture, and we make no claim for its representativeness. It might be argued that the *Times* is a "cultural gatekeeper" (Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie 1997) and thus especially worth of early attention. But the relationship between trends in the *Times* and in less elite newspapers or in the many other popular culture media that Faludi reviewed must remain an issue for future study.

We interpret the *Times* mainly as a particular *sample* of elite media culture, not necessarily as a specific agent of cultural change. It was not so much that people read distressed working mother themes in the *Times* and then changed their expectations about combining work and motherhood, only that trends in the *Times* likely reflect (and perhaps anticipate) more general trends in popular discussions of working mothers. It is these more general expectations about working mothers that may have an inhibiting effect on gender equality. Our cultural sampling interpretation would seem more plausible than making causal claims about any impact of this one newspaper.

A computer search in Lexis/Nexis of the *Times* for articles with any mention of either working mothers or stay-at-home mothers identified 7,953 possible articles.<sup>4</sup> The articles included daily news articles, op-ed opinions, letters to the editor, book reviews, articles in the *Times Magazine*, and everything in the Metropolitan section whether for the New York, New Jersey, or Connecticut editions. In most of these articles, the mention of working mothers or stay-at-home mothers was only incidental. For example, a biographical article might say, “his mother worked as a baker.” To focus on articles that would be most likely to reveal the qualitative descriptions we sought, we limited the sample to articles where the search terms appeared at least three times. That restriction identified 859 *Times* articles that were read and coded. Of these, 40 were eliminated because they were not relevant to working or stay-at-home mothers despite including the word “work” close to “mother” (e.g., “Mother Teresa worked...”); 11 others were duplicates of articles in other editions of the *Times*. Of the remaining 808 articles, 461 had no positive or negative image of working or stay-at-home mothers. These articles were about everything from welfare-to-work programs to women in advertising. These articles mention working and stay-at-home mothers often, but the content did not reveal either stresses or benefits of working or staying home.

Our final analytic sample includes the 347 articles that had at least one coded mention of the problems or benefits of mothers’ working or staying home for mothers themselves or for their children. Articles with coded references are spread over all 29 years of the sample, varying from only one article in 1991 to 29 in 2006. Per year, therefore, these are small samples so the pattern over individual years includes much random noise. We resolve this, as do most quantitative analyses of media trends, by analyzing averages over time, in our case calculating a moving average of the number of stories in the previous five years. Our measure for the year 1995, for example, is the average number of stories coded for each theme between 1991 and 1995.

### *Coding*

Each article was coded for eight themes related to working or stay-at-home mothers. Our principal focus is on the problems encountered by working mothers. We compare this theme to other themes about the benefits for working mothers, problems and benefits for stay-at-home mothers, and problems and benefits for children of either stay-at-home mothers or working mothers. Figure 1 provides an

<sup>4</sup> The exact search string used in the Lexis/Nexis database was (work! OR employ! OR career OR housew! OR homemaker OR stay at home) w/2 (mom OR mother!).

For Mothers	Problems	Benefits
Working Mothers	Problems for working mothers of combining work and family (Code 1)	Benefits of work for working mothers (Code 3)
Stay-at-Home Mothers	Problems of not working for a stay-at-home mother (Code 2)	Benefits of being home for a stay-at-home mother (Code 4)

For Children	Problems	Benefits
Working Mothers	Problems for children of a working mother (Code 5)	Benefits of a mother's working for their children (Code 7)
Stay-at-Home Mothers	Problems for children caused by a mother's not working (Code 6)	Benefits for children of a mother's staying home (Code 8)

**Fig. 1.** Schematic representation of eight codes for problems and benefits of working and stay-at-home mothers.

overview of how the eight themes are related. Four codes described problems or benefits of work for the mothers themselves; four described problems or benefits for their children. Four described issues about working mothers; another four about stay-at-home mothers. And four described problems while four described benefits.

Articles usually have more than one code. For example, a 1997 article describes one working mother, “She did not enjoy being a homemaker and is happier now that she is back working full time as the marketing manager” (*New York Times* 1997). This sentence is coded for both problems for stay-at-home mothers and benefits for working mothers. Although an article might contain several paragraphs with the same theme coded, counts were simplified to presence or absence in each article and then aggregated to the year level to produce an annual count of the number of articles that contained each theme. We considered developing percentage-based measures of these themes, but decided to focus on absolute counts of articles because of the difficulty of defining a denominator (all *Times* articles? all *Times* articles referencing working mothers?) and because concerns about the relative prevalence of a given theme are best addressed as comparisons of the prevalence of different, contrasting themes for which absolute counts are the best measure. The following describes our eight codes in more detail.<sup>5</sup>

(1) *Problems for Working Mothers* The most basic code incorporates Faludi's emphasis on the stress, guilt, or other problems for mothers combining work and parenting. For example, a 2003 article provides this first-person description: “‘And the working wives, well, you know what they feel guilty about. At least 50 percent of me—in spirit—is always at home,’ Mrs. K said, ‘wondering what the kids are

<sup>5</sup> A more detailed description of these codes and many more examples can be found on our website (<http://vanneman.umd.edu/papers/SocForumAppendixTables.pdf>).

doing and worrying about them” (New York Times 2003). An article had to cite more than just the difficulties of combining work and family—it also had to claim that the difficulties resulted in some stress or guilt for the mother.

This code was also disaggregated into four subcodes indicating whether working mothers’ problems originated in the home, at work, both, or the location was not specified. Belkin’s much discussed 2003 *New York Times Magazine* article about opting out, for instance, actually downplayed the maternal draw theme, but instead, recognized that the mothers were escaping impossible work demands:

... the exodus of professional women from the workplace isn’t really about motherhood at all. It is really about work. “There’s a misconception that it’s mostly a pull toward motherhood and her precious baby that drives a woman to quit her job, or apparently, her entire career. . . . As often as not, though, a woman would have loved to maintain some version of a career, but that job wasn’t cutting it anymore. Among women I know, quitting is driven as much from the job-dissatisfaction side as from the pull-to-motherhood side.”

(2) *Problems for Stay-at-Home Mothers* A contrasting theme from problems for working mothers are stories describing problems for at-home mothers including boredom or frustration from not having a career or sufficient interaction with other adults; or longing for the excitement or challenge of work. Problems for at-home mothers were the major message of Friedan’s (1963) *Feminine Mystique*. A 1985 article provides an apt example: “Women who are bound to the home and who feel themselves victims of what Dr. Pearlin calls ‘role captivity,’ suffer the strongest psychological symptoms, partly because they feel helpless and unable to change their lives” (New York Times 1985).

(3) *Benefits for Working Mothers* Another contrast to the problems for working mothers theme is the benefits mothers receive from working, especially mothers’ sense of fulfillment or self-confidence provided by work. A 2008 article about a working mother was typical: “Ms. Cuevas, 39, [a factory worker] so relished the independence afforded her by working that a few years ago she took a second job” (New York Times 2008).

(4) *Benefits for Stay-at-Home Mothers* The final mother-focused code complements the first code’s problems for working mothers by identifying the benefits for stay-at-home mothers. Most commonly, articles referred to a strong sense of identity, pride, or accomplishment as a mother; the stimulation of working with and developing children. For example, a 1996 story about former business women who quit their jobs noted that “these days, Ms. Forest takes pride in just making a trip to the post office with her daughters, Jocelyn, 20 months, and Gabrielle, 3 months” (New York Times 1996a).

(5) *Problems for Children of Working Mothers* This code recognizes any educational, emotional, interpersonal, or other problems for children of working mothers; less supervision or quality interaction with children by working mothers. For example, an editorial from 1987 on teenage suicides raises problems for children of working mothers as a “legitimate concern”:

What explains the recent teen-age suicides in New Jersey? With mothers gone to work, no one has time to talk to young people. Why do children in day care show higher insecurity than children at home? Institutional care can never replace mothering. If only women weren't working, there'd be less drug abuse, less isolation in modern life. These are legitimate concerns. (*New York Times* 1987)

(6) *Problems for Children of Stay-at-Home Mothers* In contrast, children of at-home mothers could face educational, emotional, interpersonal, and other problems or poor child-care quality because of stay-at-home mothers' emotional state. Illustrating this theme, an article from 1988 about intensive parenting concludes, "You can find damaged children in families where the mother stays home. Haven't you seen it before? The mother is at home, but her head is someplace else, and she can't mother the kids properly" (*New York Times* 1988).

(7) *Benefits for Children of Working Mothers* The benefits to children of their mothers' work was coded for her being a role model, her children's pride in a mother's accomplishments; increased independence of children of working mothers; or positive benefits of day care. A 1996 article on company policies quoted Vice President Gore's claim that "female employees who are supported in the workplace usually repay with loyalty and efficiency and project a positive image for their children" (*New York Times* 1996b).

(8) *Benefits for Children of Stay-at-Home Mothers* The final child-focused code identifies benefits for children of stay-at-home mothers. A mother in a 2009 article articulates this theme: "This morning, we baked cookies together. I have time to help them with homework. I'm attending church. The house is managed by me. Just a lot more homemaker-type stuff, which I think is more nurturing to them" (*New York Times* 2009).

These eight codes capture much of how the *Times* discusses working and stay-at-home mothers. These codes enable us to compare the trends in these distressed mother themes with trends in more conventionally feminist themes or with themes that formed the earlier defense of the traditional family. For ease of presentation, we generally collapse the eight codes into four types. The pairs of codes along each of the diagonals of Fig. 1 represent similar critiques or defenses of working mothers. Articles on the problems for working mothers imply much the same message as do discussions of the benefits for mothers of staying home. These are the two sides of the same narrative about working mothers.

The distressed working mother code combined with the benefits of stay-at-home mothers code can be contrasted with codes celebrating the benefits of work for mothers or criticizing the limitations of staying home. We label this second theme the feminist defense of working mothers. A third theme identifies articles discussing either the problems for children of working mothers or the benefits for children of stay-at-home mothers. Like the distressed working mothers narrative, these two codes carry an antifeminist message, but they reflect what we believe is an older resistance to feminism that focused on problems for children rather than for the mothers themselves. We label this third theme the conventional family critique of working mothers. Finally, the codes for benefits for children of working mothers

and for problems of the children of stay-at-home mothers carry a pro-feminist message, but they are usually a secondary feminist argument, often made in response to accusations about the dangers of mothers' work for children. We label this the feminist defense of children of working mothers.

All articles were coded by the first author. Half of the original sample of 859 articles were recoded by two undergraduate students to estimate reliability, each student coding a separate subset of articles.<sup>6</sup> The coders agreed on between 80% and 90% of the articles for each of the codes. But because all coders found that many of the articles had none of the themes, we can expect high intercoder agreement by chance given these marginal frequencies. Cohen's (1960) kappa controls for agreement due to chance where 0 means all agreement is due to chance and 1 means complete agreement. We found moderate levels of reliability ranging from .43 to .50 with the first undergraduate and .47 to .59 with the second undergraduate. Another standard measure of association, gamma, shows a higher level of association ranging from .84 to .93 across coders. None of these tests showed a noticeable pattern of some themes being more reliably coded than others or better agreement with one of the two student coders.

## RESULTS

Table I presents the total counts of articles for each of the eight codes and four themes across the 347 articles and 29 years. Problems for working mothers, the distressed working mothers theme, is easily the most common of all the themes in the *Times*. Two hundred eleven articles included some mention of problems for working mothers or benefits for stay-at-home mothers. Problems for the children of working mothers is the next most common code, found in 91 articles. It should not be a surprise that the news concentrates more on current problems than current benefits.

### *Distressed Working Mothers*

The distressed working mothers theme includes discussions of working mothers' stress, guilt, or other problems, the most common of the eight codes, as well as the less common references to benefits for mothers of staying home with their children. The benefits for mothers of staying at home only appeared 13 times throughout the three decades compared to 211 times for the problems for working mothers code. As predicted by earlier media analysts, this distressed working mothers theme arose more often than the three other themes combined. However, our primary interest is not in the totals over the whole period but in the trend over time (see Fig. 2). A steady increase in the number of distressed working mother articles began only in the mid-1990s. The previous decade had witnessed a stable average rate of about six such articles per year. That stability ends in the mid-1990s when the frequency of these articles increases quite steadily until 2009, the end of our observations. This increase reached a temporary peak in the early 2000s at about 10 articles

<sup>6</sup> A table of all the intercoder reliability tests can be found on our website (<http://vanneman.umd.edu/papers/SocForumAppendixTables.pdf>).

**Table I.** Total Number of Articles with Eight Codes and Four Themes

	1981–2009 Annual Totals					
	Articles	Percent of Total	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
1. Problems for Working Mothers	211	61%	7.24	4.13	1	21
2. Problems for Stay-at-Home Mothers	46	13%	1.59	1.55	0	6
3. Benefits for Working Mothers	50	14%	1.69	1.51	0	6
4. Benefits for Stay-at-Home Mothers	13	4%	0.41	0.57	0	2
5. Problems for Children of Working Mothers	91	26%	3.10	1.90	0	6
6. Problems for Children of Stay-at-Home Mothers	9	3%	1.59	1.55	0	6
7. Benefits for Children of Working Mothers	73	21%	2.48	1.98	0	6
8. Benefits for Children of Stay-at-Home Mothers	20	6%	0.66	0.77	0	3
1 or 4: Distressed Working Mothers	218	63%	7.52	4.19	1	22
2 or 3: Feminist Defense of Working Mothers	87	25%	3.00	2.20	0	8
5 or 8: Conventional Family Critique of Working Mothers	106	31%	3.66	2.02	0	7
6 or 7: Feminist Defense of Children of Working Mothers	77	22%	2.66	1.91	0	6
Total Number of Articles With Any of the Eight Codes <sup>a</sup>	347					

<sup>a</sup>The total number of articles with any of the eight codes is less than the sum of the articles with any of the eight codes because multiple codes can occur within one article.

per year and then rose again so that by the late 2000s the *New York Times* wrote about problems for working mothers close to 12 times per year on average, over twice as often as in the mid-1980s. The difference between the number of articles about distressed working mothers through 1995 (Mean = 5.93) and after 1995 (Mean = 9.21) is statistically significant ( $t = 2.19$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

Figure 2 also shows that the early 1980s had even fewer articles on problems for working mothers than the late 1980s, suggesting that the increased attention to distressed working mothers may have begun in the 1980s as Faludi asserts. It is impossible to evaluate this for certain without data from the more feminist 1970s, before easily searchable online versions of the *Times* are available. But even if the first examples of distressed working mothers against “trying to have it all” could be seen in the 1980s, it is clear that only after the mid-1990s did this theme grow into a steady increase that dominated the discussion of working mothers.

The subcoding of problems for working mothers, whether those problems originated at work or home, provides a more in-depth analysis of how the theme changed over time. Almost half of the “problems for working mothers” occurrences were subcoded as problems working mothers were having at home (47%) whereas

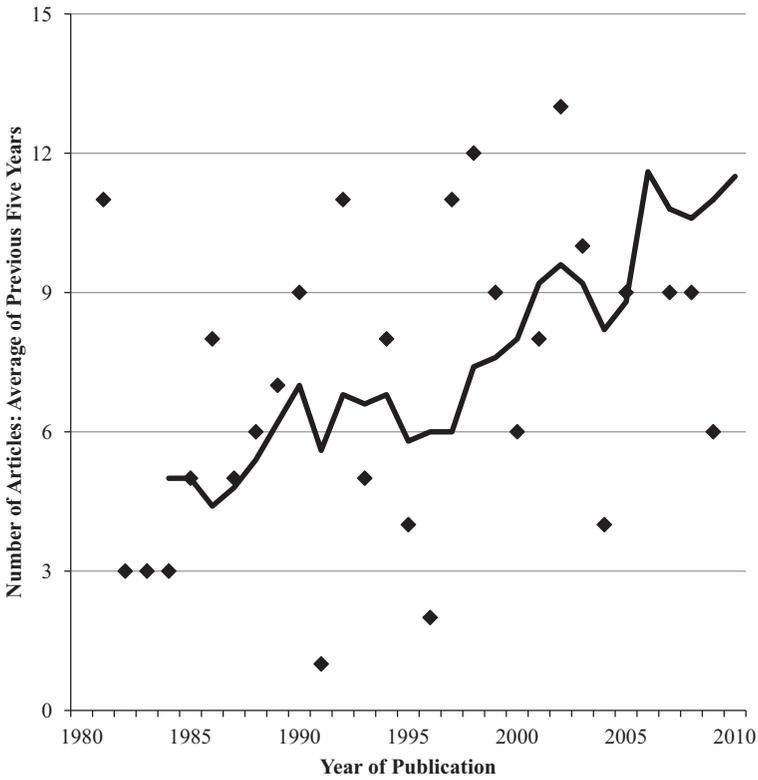


Fig. 2. Counts of articles including a distressed working mothers theme in the *New York Times*: 1981–2009.

only 11% were coded as originating at work. The remaining occurrences were split evenly between the number of times the problems focused on both work and home or the problems did not specify work or home (23% and 19%, respectively). This “family-centric” emphasis is consistent with Kuperberg and Stone’s (2008) and Williams et al.’s (2006) analysis of opting-out stories in the media.

Nevertheless, over time there is a shift in focus from problems that mothers were having in the *home* to problems they were having at *work* because they were primary caregivers. Of the 28 articles in the 1980s that were identified as problems originating only in the home or only at work, 25 of these were coded for problems originated at home. However, in the mid-1990s there is a shift to more articles on problems mothers face in the workplace such as getting fired or struggling to move up the corporate ladder. Twenty-one of 28 articles with a subcode as “problems originated at work” appeared after the mid-1990s. For example, an article from 1996 says,

If only corporate America would make it easier for women to take care of their duties at home, they could at last compete on an equal footing with men in the workplace—and rise to the top. (*New York Times* 1996c)

The new picture starting in the mid-1990s portrayed women trying to work, but having difficulties there. The problems with childcare and the guilt from working were still present in the *New York Times* after the mid-1990s, but the changed trajectory resulted from additional discussions of the problems working mothers faced at work.

It may seem surprising that the increase in distressed working mothers stories results more from work problems than family problems when much of the sociological analysis has emphasized the growth in intensive mothering (Hays 1996) and concerted cultivation (Lareau 2003). But Stone's (2007) interviews with "opting-out" mothers showed that while mothers often first framed their choices to leave as the pull of home factors, more probing usually revealed problems at work such as demanding and imperious bosses. Sarah Damaske (2011) reveals the same pattern of women explaining their choices in terms of *family* needs when empirical analyses reveal that it is more often *work* demands that shape mothers' labor force participation decisions. The 1990s shift in the *Times* also picked up this priority of work factors in creating stress for working mothers. The shift also coincided with the passage of the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) which helped turn attention to the inflexibility of work arrangements as a source of mothers' stress.

### *The Conventional Family Critique of Working Mothers*

The trend over the three decades in stories about problems for *children* of working mothers (or the benefits for children of stay-at-home mothers) is dramatically different than for the problems for mothers themselves. This code covers educational or emotional problems children have because of their mothers' work. Discussions of less time or quality interaction with working mothers are typical. In the 1980s, these themes are almost as common as problems for the mothers themselves. In the 1990s the two trends diverge: while "distressed working mothers" themes increase over time, the "conventional family critique of working mothers" does not, although the apparent decline (see Fig. 3) is not statistically significant. However, the increasing gap between the two themes is significant. The average annual difference in the number of articles through 1995 (Mean = 1.93) compared to the average difference after 1995 (Mean = 5.93) ( $t = 3.19$ ;  $p < .01$ ), suggests a change in focus toward distressed working mothers and away from problems for children of working mothers.

This widening gap after the mid-1990s supports Faludi's insight that the critique of working mothers shifted to problems for the mothers themselves rather than the more conventional reservations that working was harmful for her children however fulfilling a career might be for her. The new critique argued that working was bad also for her, and as this backlash against working mothers grew, the earlier critique stayed stagnant. The newer attention to problems of trying "to have it all" may have provided a more compelling argument against combining work and family than did the familiar reservations about children. But the emphasis on working mothers' own problems also reflected the growing concern with U.S. work-family policy in order to relieve the "second shift" American women faced.

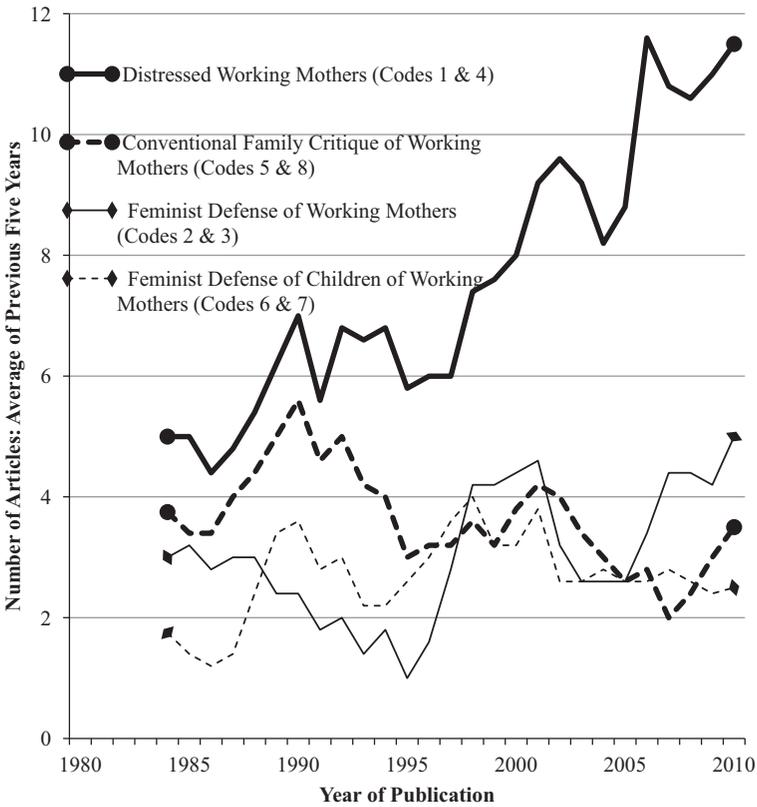


Fig. 3. Five-Year Moving Averages of Counts of Articles with Four Themes about Working Mothers.

*The Feminist Defense of Working Mothers*

On the opposite side of the distressed working mothers theme is the conventional feminist advocacy of working mothers: a sense of fulfillment provided by work in contrast to the boredom faced by stay-at-home mothers. This classic feminist theme showed yet a third pattern over the three decades. Feminist arguments declined gradually throughout the 1980s until the mid-1990s, the only theme of the four considered here that showed a consistent decline in the 1980s. However, these feminist themes enjoyed a short revival just as the distressed working mothers theme began to grow in the mid-1990s. Similar to the distressed working mothers theme, the number of stories that had the feminist defense of working mothers theme after 1995 (Mean = 3.86) is significantly different than prior to the mid-1990s (Mean = 2.20) ( $t = 2.11; p < .05$ ). The similar pattern of increases in stories about both problems and benefits for working mothers might have been a journalistic attempt at balance. In fact, these seeming opposites do often occur in the same story. Of the 87 articles that were coded for benefits for working mothers or problems for at-home mothers, 46 also were coded for problems for working mothers.

But this attempt at balance did not last long. As the problems for working mothers continued to become the predominant focus of stories about motherhood in the new century, the feminist theme was eventually eclipsed. While never falling back entirely to the low levels of two stories a year as in the early 1990s, feminist themes never rose much above their late-1990s high of four stories a year. Meanwhile, stories with the distressed working mothers theme continued to increase so that recently they outnumber the feminist stories by two- or three-to-one ( $t = 3.62$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

### *The Feminist Defense of Children of Working Mothers*

While much of the feminist advocacy for working mothers centered on the benefits to the mothers themselves, feminists also argued that a working mother provided an excellent role model for her children who often took pride in their mother's accomplishments. The children often enjoyed a new sense of responsibility because of their increased independence. These themes could be found in the *Times* at a remarkably even pace of two to four stories a year on average since 1990. There had been a small increase in the mid- to late 1980s, but since then the range has been fairly narrow in comparison to the changes for the other three themes already discussed. As noted above, the maintenance of these low levels led to a convergence over time so that since the mid-1990s there have been about equal number of articles criticizing and defending the children of working mothers.

## DISCUSSION

The four themes about working and stay-at-home mothers show four different patterns since 1980. The distressed working mothers theme has appeared more often than the other codes and is the only one to rise almost continuously since the mid-1990s. In contrast, the feminist arguments on behalf of working mothers, which had been declining in the 1980s, briefly revived in the mid-1990s coinciding with the rise of the distressed working mothers theme, but feminist themes fell back again in the new century and are consistently less common throughout the three decades. The more traditional critique of feminism, that mothers' work might harm their children, did not change significantly through our time period of interest and ended at a much lower level than the distressed mothers theme. Finally, the feminist defense of children of working mothers shows a steady, low level of frequency, at least since the late 1980s.

The steady rise in the distressed mothers theme since the mid-1990s is particularly interesting because this increase coincided with the end of the long rise in mothers' labor force participation. In this discussion, we address the possible causal relationships between these cultural and structural changes (Vaisey 2009). First, however, we review some important methodological questions raised by our content analysis.

*Methodological Considerations*

Content analyses of the popular media have a long history in sociology. Two distinct approaches have competed over the years. One is a careful analysis of a small sample of popular culture that digs deeply into the meaning of some carefully selected cultural products. In this approach, sampling is less important and tracking change over time is difficult because of the small and often unrepresentative texts analyzed. The other approach takes larger samples to track changes over time, but the content that is studied is necessarily somewhat superficial such as the counts of female characters in children's books. The current wave of interest in "big data" takes this approach to new heights.

In this article, we have tried to chart a course somewhere between these two poles. We have drawn a more systematic sample, but not the thousands of cases used in the century-long analyses of children's books or the millions of cases available with "big data." However, we have paid more attention to the content of our samples than is possible with those very large samples. Our approach builds on the past success of both small- and large-sample approaches and could not be successful without their contributions. The specific codes derive from the insights of the more intensive qualitative analyses such as Faludi's or Douglas and Michaels's, and the historical context is provided by the more quantitative analyses of large samples. We believe that this systematic coding of a well-defined sample of cultural products provides great promise for content analysis research.

Although our middle ground of qualitative codes of large samples offers promise for tracking cultural change, much is left for future work. Our single news source, the *New York Times*, is certainly not representative of all media. Indeed, it has been shown to have a liberal slant on political coverage (Puglisi 2006), and its readership is disproportionately white, middle class, Eastern, and older (Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006; Peiser 2000). Analyses of other news sources could test the generality of the trends reported here and would also alleviate the problem of the small annual samples that prevent finer detail on timing.

Moreover, other media—women's magazines, television shows, "expert" parental advice, novels, and films—have been useful in the past for content analyses of gender norms and should be equally revealing for tracing trends in themes about working mothers. Each medium samples the popular culture in somewhat different slices, so much is to be gained by broadening the design. Extending the analysis back to the 1950s would also promise important insights. Faludi contended that the backlash rose in the 1980s, but the easily searchable samples available on Lexis/Nexis only begin in 1981, so we cannot compare our results to earlier eras.

*Cultural Schema*

Our results demonstrate that the analysis of trends in a cultural theme such as distressed working mothers should be placed within the context of alternative schema such as feminist themes of the benefits of combining work and family. The

correlations among these themes over time are not immediately predictable. The initial growth of the distressed working mothers theme seems to have temporarily reignited rather than smothered the contrasting feminist theme about the benefits of working. And the rise of an emphasis on the problems of working mothers overshadows the, seemingly similar, antifeminist theme about problems for *children* of working mothers.

If culture is best understood as a collection of conceptual tools people draw from to understand their lives (Swidler 1986) rather than a unitary whole that everybody shares (Swidler 2001), then content analyses of the media need to capture this full range of available themes circulating in society. And because people can hold simultaneously conflicting ideas and reject other consistent ideas, we should not be surprised that the rise of any particular theme in the media can also stimulate greater attention to its cultural opposite.

Extending the analysis beyond the four issues coded here would enrich our understanding of the full cultural foundation supporting the stalled gender revolution. Themes of the so-called “opt-out revolution” (Belkin 2003; Kuperberg and Stone 2008; Williams et al. 2006), intensive mothering (Hays 1996), and mommy wars (Douglas and Michaels 2004) probably reinforced an image of stressed out working mothers. While each theme has distinct content and each is grounded in somewhat different institutional changes, together they form an identifiable cluster of themes that mutually reinforce each other (Bachrach 2014). Alone, each cultural theme might not have sustained itself on an upward trajectory since the mid-1990s. Together, they represented a coherent challenge to both the dominant feminism of the 1970s and the domestic familism of the 1950s.

The dominance of a new idea often depends on its capacity to incorporate elements of past conflicting frames. We believe the distressed working mother theme succeeded in part because instead of taking clear sides in the culture wars between feminism and traditional familism, it provided a third alternative that was distinct from both and yet validated elements of each. The backlash borrowed from feminism the idea that women should have the freedom to make the important choices in their lives (Williams 1999). And it borrowed from traditional familism mothers’ essentialist need to nurture children (the need to care for husbands rarely entered into the discussion in the 1990s as it had in the 1950s). Because of this seeming compromise in the debates about work and family, the distressed working mother theme eventually eclipsed both the traditional critique and the feminist advocacy of working mothers.

There are many other themes that future content analyses need to consider for understanding the cultural narrative around working mothers. Themes about fathers’ positions in work and family life are also important to trace over time in the popular culture (see Milkie and Denny 2014). Gender equality requires the movement of both women into the workplace and men into home responsibilities (Goldscheider 2000), but during the quarter century of change after 1970, most of the movement came from women (England 2010). Our analysis has also neglected the class and racial/ethnic origins of the women being discussed in the media. Part of the growth in media attention to mothers’ problems may have been a shift in

focus from the welfare debates of the 1980s and 1990s to the middle-class angst more common in today's coverage (Kuperberg and Stone 2008).

### *The Stalled Gender Revolution*

In the 1990s, many economic and social gender indicators unexpectedly stalled from their previous upward trajectories (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2004; England 2010; Gerson 2009). In 1997, the labor force participation rate for married mothers aged 25 to 54 peaked at 73% after almost a half century of steady increases. It has remained within one or two percentage points of this peak ever since. A broad range of other gender indices revealed a similar mid-1990s stall.

Many of the structural trends associated with the spread of gender equality in the 1970s did not change significantly backward in the 1990s. For example, neither contraceptive availability nor fertility rates changed much as they had earlier (Goldin and Katz 2002). Nor was there a shift in the occupational or industrial structure away from the "female jobs" that had expanded earlier to pull women into the labor force (Oppenheimer 1973). There was no economic recession in the 1990s pushing women out of the labor force. And gender differences in education (Smith and Ward 1984) were one of the few trends that failed to stall in the 1990s (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006), so human capital explanations are unlikely to offer an explanation for stalls in other gender trends.

Political changes might have been a better explanation if the gender revolution had stalled in the more conservative 1980s under Reagan and after the 1982 defeat of the ERA. But gender attitudes diverged from broader conservative political ideology during the 1980s (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004). As political culture returned to more traditional values, gender attitudes maintained their egalitarian trend and married mothers continued to enter the labor force in increasing numbers (Cotter et al. 2011; Mason and Lu 1988).

Legislatively, the passage of the FMLA of 1993 might have been expected to increase, not inhibit, mothers' labor force participation. But, weak in comparison with European policy efforts to ease work-family conflicts (Gornick and Meyers 2003), the FMLA had little impact on mothers' labor force participation (Klerman and Leibowitz 1999; Ruhm 1997). While some have documented that extended parental leaves are often associated cross-nationally with *wider* economic gender gaps (Mandel and Semyonov 2005), it seems unlikely that the very weak American version of parental leave policy could have had such a direct negative impact. Because so few working mothers used their new (unpaid) parental leave, women's loss of human and social capital and employers' use of statistical discrimination against women would not have changed much either.

Our results suggest yet another pathway by which family policy might have had an inadvertent negative impact on gender equality: the cultural prominence of the distressed working mothers theme that supported agitation for better work-family policy also supported the conservative message that working mothers "can't have it all." The post-1995 shift to problems at work rather than problems at home may have reflected the growing feminist concern with inflexible work. But without

significant reform of work arrangements and with fathers' contributions to housework also stagnating in the mid- to late 1990s (Bianchi et al. 2012), the conservative implications of the distressed working mothers theme may have convinced women and their employers alike of the difficulties of combining careers and motherhood.

The 1990s rise in the distressed working mother theme coincides remarkably well with the stall in married mothers' labor force participation and the stagnation in favorable gender attitudes. Although Faludi dated the backlash to the 1980s, our data suggest that the prevalence, if not the origin, of these themes is better located in the 1990s. This timing renders a simple unidirectional causal interpretation problematic. An earlier, 1980s, rise in the distressed mother theme would have strengthened a causal explanation for cultural change; a later, 2000s, rise would have supported an explanation that culture followed the changed behavior. But the results do not support either clear causal explanation. Instead, the near simultaneity of the two shifts suggests that the distressed working mothers theme may have played *both* a motivational and an interpretive role in the stalled gender revolution (Vaisey 2009).

The opportunity for these cultural influences may have been enhanced by the lack of strong structural forces supporting more gender equality. The decline of feminist protest in the 1990s removed one of the imperatives for further gender change that had energized the 1970s (Barakso and Schaffner 2006; Costain 1992; Minkoff 1997). Policy initiatives no longer emphasized equality in the workplace but instead sought a better work–family balance that turned out to have little impact on increased employment (Burstein and Bricher 1997). The disproportionate growth of female occupations had ended (Cotter et al. 1998). Many middle-class occupations had become well integrated by the mid-1990s while working-class gender integration continued to be hindered by the apprenticeship routes to entry (Bergmann 2011) and by the lack of growth in high-paying blue-collar jobs (England 2011).

Without sufficient economic or political pressure to advance a gender revolution, a space may have opened up for a cultural backlash. The development of a cultural frame that did not directly challenge gender equality (as had traditional familism), but nevertheless supported a retreat from employment, gave working mothers a new “tool” to explain their distress and provided employers a convenient rationale for discrimination. Moreover, concerns about the inflexibility of American workplaces lent the distressed working mothers theme an additional feminist support that appealed to a quite different political agenda than a conservative backlash. This enhanced image of distressed working mothers could easily have discouraged mothers' employment. As the employment trends stalled, the media theme of stressed mothers became a more plausible explanation of mothers' choices.

This scenario of mutually reinforcing cultural backlash and stalled gender revolution was never inevitable, nor is it necessarily predictive of the future. The response to work–family stresses in Europe has been to adjust public policies, not the cultural image of working mothers. One can also imagine scenarios in which men responded to work–family stress rather than public policy or mothers absorbing most of the change. Tracking these cultural shifts in a more systematic manner

to incorporate the full multidimensional array of alternative themes is one of the challenges for the future.

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