

RUNNING HEAD: Mothering with Grace

MOTHERING WITH GRACE: MILLENNIAL WOMEN'S INTENSIVE MOTHERING
DEEP IN THE HEART OF TEXAS

by

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ABSTRACT

Intensive mothering ideals set expectations for mothers to invest large amounts of emotional, physical, and mental energy and time into raising their children (Hays 1996). In the United States, intensive mothering is thought to be one of the most predominant mothering practices (Hays 1996). This study focuses on twenty millennial mothers in a culturally Southern region of East Texas. Extensive previous research finds parental involvement to be significant in the educational development of children. Similarly, it is assumed—from the decades of research—that mothers are the primary caregivers for children. I use a qualitative approach to investigate the influence intensive mothering ideologies have on a mother's educational beliefs, educational expectations for her children, and personal well-being. Mothers in this study varied across education levels, careers, and age. Participants showed consistent patterns of intensive mothering, shared positive feelings and experiences towards intensive mothering practices, and encouraged post-secondary education and general learning. While participants mirrored the findings of the intensive mothering literature—women feeling overwhelmed, tired, or falling short of expectations—the most significant finding of this study was how mothers coped with those feelings. The women in this study discussed mothering with grace and emphasized the importance of giving and receiving grace. In this study, grace was described as a form of patience and forgiveness. Grace was used as a response and coping mechanism when mothers and children fell short of intensive mothering ideals and expectations.

Key words: intensive mothering, parenting styles, educational expectations, millennials, qualitative interviews, grounded theory

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In this study, I want to understand how intensive mothering ideology plays a role in the lives of millennial mothers, regarding mothers' personal educational narratives and their expectations for their children's education. Intensive mothering is the belief that "ideal mothers" should invest large amounts of emotional, physical, and mental energy, as well as time and money, into raising their children (Hays 1996). While plenty of research examines millennials as a generation (Ray 2013; Steinmetz 2015; Garrett 2021), very little has focused solely on parenting millennials, specifically mothering. There is also little research examining the influence intensive mothering has on a mother's educational expectations of her child, particularly those from the millennial generation.

The research conducted on millennial parents finds them to be much more ethnically diverse, less worried about or tied down by traditional gender roles, tech-savvy, late-marrying, or less likely to marry (Steinmetz 2015; Pew Research Center 2020). Millennials wait to have children later in life compared to previous generations (Steinmetz 2015). In Garrett's (2021) book about millennial parenting, she finds that the role of a millennial parent is to walk the path with their child as children grow, change, and adapt to their surroundings. Garrett encourages shared responsibilities between parents and increased vulnerability between parents and children. Therefore, I am interested in examining how the millennial participants in this study align with Garrett's (2021) and Steinmetz's (2015) ideologies. As well as determine what future research is needed to enhance our knowledge of the millennial mother.

Specifically, I explore the influence intensive mothering has on a mother's educational beliefs and experiences. Further, how intensive mothering influences the mother's educational expectations of her children. The intensive mothering ideology

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emphasizes the role of mothering, claiming that it should be the woman's primary responsibility to take care of her child rather than her career or personal well-being (Hays 1996; Forbes, Lamar, and Bornstein 2021; Prikhidko and Swank 2018; Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla 2016). Hays (1996) argues that intensive mothering is the predominant mothering practice in Northern America. Many mothers—working in the paid labor market or not—experience feelings of fatigue, being overworked or overwhelmed due to their many roles as a mother, primary caregiver, significant other, or employee (Forbes, Lamar, and Bornstein 2021). Because intensive mothering is widely used today, we must study it as it pertains to millennial mothers—one of the biggest and most prominent child-rearing generations today. With little research identifying the relationship between education and intensive mothering, it is crucial that social scientists begin examining these relationships.

I interviewed millennial mothers—ages 26-41—with questions pertaining to self-sacrifice, feelings of being overwhelmed, partner's roles in child-rearing responsibilities, personal educational beliefs and experiences, and educational expectations of their children. This research adds to our knowledge of the demands intensive mothering requires from current—millennial—mothers. This project also explores the effects of the intensive mothering ideology on educational experiences and expectations for children.

In this thesis, I will outline previous research on millennial parents, intensive mothering, and parental educational influence. The theoretical approaches of intensive mothering ideology are examined in greater detail at the end of this section. This research project used qualitative methods in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews. All data was transcribed verbatim, coded, and analyzed using grounded theory. Due to the lack of information and data in this area of intensive mothering research, this study aims to provide a

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clearer understanding of the role intensive mothering plays in millennial women's educational narratives and academic expectations for their children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Millennial Parents

With millennials being the largest generation since the baby boomers, they have the potential to shape society by adjusting parenting approaches and educational principles. In 2018, millennials were found to be the second most ethnically and racially diverse generation of people next to generation z, according to the Pew Research Center (2020). A generation is a distinguishable group that shares birth years and similar life events during fundamental developmental periods (Kupperschmidt 2000). Millennials experienced many historical milestones while growing up: the internet take-off, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Desert Storm in Iraq, the election of our country's first black president, the economic recession of 2008, and the launch of the iPhone (Pew Research Center 2020; Elam, Stratton, and Gibson 2007). An article by Bruce Feiler of the New York Times (2017) states that five out of every six babies, or 82% of babies, are born to millennial mothers each year.

Research suggests that millennials tend to be more family-focused in comparison to the younger generation, generation z (Smith and Nichols 2015). Because individuals in the millennial generation are more family-oriented, they emphasize the need for a more balanced work life, allowing them to spend quality time with their family (Andert 2011). According to Ng, Schweitzer, and Lyons (2010), millennials gravitate toward the family more because of their experiences growing up, seeing their parents experience economic hardships, job dismissal, and spousal divorce. As a result of an increased interest in the family, it is no

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surprise that millennials are the generation most engaged in the intensive mothering ideology (Lerner 2015). Millennials also happen to be the largest generation of parents actively raising children today, spanning from ages 26-41 (Pew Research Center 2020).

Steinmetz (2015) compared millennials to previous generations, such as generation x and baby boomers. Some of the most compelling findings from these comparisons involved parenting practices. According to Steinmetz (2015), about 80% of millennial mothers believe it is important to be “the perfect mom,” while 58% of millennials, compared to generation x’ers and baby boomers, find that the amount of parenting material/information that is available is overwhelming to a certain extent. Similarly, Lerner (2015) found that millennial parents spend a lot of time researching parenting skills. Still, with such an array of digital information sources, these parents tend to become overwhelmed with the amount of available information. Parenting in itself can be a difficult and time-consuming part of life, yet, most millennial mothers are also working outside the house. According to the United States Department of Labor (2020), nearly 72% of mothers with children under the age of 18 are working a job outside of the home. Therefore, it is common for many working millennial mothers to experience fatigue and feelings of being overworked due to the many roles they play as employees, mothers, and primary caregivers.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement plays an important role in the life and education of children. Parental involvement and family roles tend to differ between mothers and fathers. It is important to note that many mothers consider themselves responsible for most caregiving within the family (Coltrane 2004). While there has been a recent increase in fathers spending more time with caregiving responsibilities, the parental role differential causes both parents

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to consider caregiving and child-rearing to be a mother's responsibility rather than the father's responsibility (Coltrane 2004). As mentioned previously in this paper, mothers are judged based on their children's outcomes but very rarely are fathers judged in the same manner (Rizzo, Schiffrin, and Liss 2013). In a recent 2021 study, Forbes et al. examined working mothers' experiences in an intensive mothering culture. These researchers found that expectations for fathers seldom met the same standard as their female counterparts—fathers receiving praise and congratulations for being hands-on with their children.

This is not to say that fathers are not interested in playing a key role in their children's lives; some argue quite the opposite. Looking again at Lerner's (2015) study, her interviews found that millennial dads want to be viewed as important and equally present as mothers are. There are many reasons why a father may not be able to provide equality in a parental partnership: long work hours, work travel, or even the societal assumption that child-rearing and household chores are a woman's job (Forbes et al. 2021). Millennial fathers have shown a heightened interest in work-family integration (Beutell and Behson 2018). Furthermore, millennial fathers are thought to seek out jobs that provide available and immediate work-family benefits (Beutell and Behson 2018). All to say, both mothers and fathers play an important role in their children's lives, with millennial fathers advancing towards a more balanced work-family life.

Parental involvement takes many different forms, one of them being parenting styles. An individual's parenting style can be defined as a system of attitudes or behaviors toward their children when trying to express emotions, communicate expectations, or even discipline their child (Darling and Steinberg 1993). Today, parenting styles usually fit into three main categories: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting. Parenting styles can play a

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significant role in developing children's academic achievement, motivation, and self-confidence (Gadeyne, Ghesquiere, and Onghena 2004). An authoritative parenting style emphasizes support and encouragement, clearly defines parents' rules, and promotes consistent discipline (Baumrind 1971). Authoritarian parenting styles are characterized as being high in demandingness. Parents tend to promote harsh and sometimes unnecessary punishment to emphasize the rules and obedience of their children. These parents rarely inform or talk through problems with their children (Baumrind 1971). The last style is permissive parenting. The permissive parenting style offers children little to no assistance or expectations. These parents exercise little control over their children's behavior (Baumrind 1971). Steinberg et al. (1992) discovered that young children whose parents practiced authoritative parenting reported higher academic performance and better school engagement than their counterparts. These same results transfer to teenage students; when describing their parents as authoritative, there were improvements in academic and overall school achievement. Researchers have proposed that people choose a parenting style based on the most important values they wish to promote to their children (Luster, Rhoades, and Haas 1989). Whether parents realize it or not, parenting styles and parenting behaviors influence children. It is also important to note that children's achievements and attitudes may influence parenting techniques, alluding to a reciprocal relationship between the two (Steinberg et al. 1992).

Another recognized form of parental involvement is fostering education at the home and school levels. This home-based involvement consists of helping with homework, reading to or with their children, and answering school-related questions. School-based involvement consists of volunteering at school, attending school events, and openly communicating with

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one's teacher. Fostering education at the home and school level is one of the biggest impacts a parent can have on their child's education (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001). Parental involvement at the home and school level have been positively linked to student achievement, lower drop-out rates, and high participation rates in advanced placement courses (Epstein and Van Voorhis 2001; Barnard 2004). Within the United States, mothers holding a college degree spend upwards of one and a half more hours on educational activities a week for their children in comparison to mothers who do not have a high school diploma (Hsin and Felfe 2014). In another study conducted by Gonzalez, Holbein, and Quilter (2002), researchers found that high school students who reported experiencing parental involvement in home-based or school-based learning showed higher motivation to complete complex tasks and enjoy their schoolwork.

Parental influence in the form of motivation is another strong predictor of children's educational awareness and performance. Ginsburg and Bronstein (1993) found when parents reacted to their children's grades with words of encouragement or praise, their children reported more intrinsic motivation. Students' intrinsic motivation consisted of an increase in wanting to learn and higher levels of curiosity. Conversely, Ginsburg and Bronstein (1993) also discovered that when parents reacted to their children's grades with extrinsic rewards such as gifts, treats, or awards, they reported extrinsic motivation to do well. It is important to note that extrinsic motivation can be considered counterproductive. Rewarding students as a motivation technique works to an extent but tends to come at the expense of one's interest and the quality of whatever they are working towards (Kohn 1994). Hall (2009) argues that once extrinsic rewards are given, children begin to believe they should receive a reward after every positive interaction, learning success, or responsible behavior. Though there may be

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differing opinions regarding intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, their purpose is to show that parents desire their children to do well and be successful in their endeavors.

Parental Educational Narratives

To foster education within the home and at school, parents must have their own experiences, expectations, and behaviors related to education. From one's educational experiences comes a set of personal narratives. This is not to say that parents with little educational experience do not create personal educational narratives, quite the opposite. I believe that any level of education, high or low, influences parental beliefs and feelings toward their children's education. Parents' educational narratives have both a direct and indirect influence on their children. Davis-Kean (2005) found that parents' education related to their children's academic achievement directly and indirectly. According to Koshy, Dockery, and Seymour (2019), parental educational background plays an essential role in shaping children's expectations for participation in higher education. Within those findings, Koshy et al. (2019) reported that parents with lower levels of education or years spent in school had fewer expectations for their children's participation in higher education. Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla (2016) allude that women with higher levels of education may choose to engage in intensive mothering practices rather than women with low levels of education. Mothers within the United States tend to engage in educational and organized activities more often. Such activities have been linked to positive child development (Hsin and Felfe 2014).

In Marchant, Paulson, and Rothlisberg's (2001) study, student perceptions of parental values regarding academic achievement had the most substantial relationship with student motivation. Students who thought their parents valued and placed importance on education

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had similar beliefs as their parents; they also prioritized their academic achievements and efforts. Suggesting that parental educational narratives influence how one's child views their schoolwork and the importance of their education. Alexander, Entwisle, and Bedinger (1994) suggest that parents with the ability and skills to form an accurate set of academic expectations for their children may experience better success rates in their children's schooling endeavors. Similarly, Gore et al. (2015) believes that parental perceptions represented by prior academic achievements helped shape realistic expectations for children's performance. While expectations can be a strong motivation for students, realistic expectations may be more helpful to a child's academic success than unrealistic expectations.

It is important to note that millennial parents are better educated than previous generations. In 2019, the Pew Research Center found that approximately 39% of millennials ages 25-37—today would be 28-40 years old—have obtained a bachelor's degree or more. In comparison, only around 25% of baby boomers and 29% of generation x obtained a 4-year college when they were that same age (Pew Research Center 2020). Specifically, millennial women have seen an increase in education, now surpassing men in the number of bachelor's degrees (Pew Research Center 2020). Education has become a means of implementing new mothering methods (Rizzo et al. 2013). This means that women with higher levels of education are more likely to spend a considerable amount of time mothering, providing intellectual incentives, and voicing academic ideas and opinions to their children (Lareau 2003).

Maternal Educational Impacts

Maternal education levels tend to be positively associated with children's academic outcomes (Harding, Morris, and Hughes 2015). During a child's first few years of life,

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mothers with higher levels of education will read, interact, and sing with their children more often than mothers with lower levels of education (Suizzo and Stapleton 2007). Sirin (2005) found strong and consistent associations between maternal education and children's grade point average (GPA), SAT scores, and overall educational achievement while in elementary, middle, and high school. At the high school level specifically, adolescents of mothers with high levels of education are more likely to graduate high school and attend a college or university (Choi et al. 2008).

Having a well-educated mother benefits child development and academic achievement in many ways. A mother's education level does not necessarily make their child automatically intelligent. Rather, a mother's education level provides a means for success in a child's life. A well-educated mother can obtain a higher paying job than a less-educated mother (Card and Wise 1978). A high-paying job can, in turn, provide more income and access to resources. The amount of time a mother spends on at-home development reflects her level of education, according to Bradley et al. (2001). With mothers being considered the primary caregivers (Hays 1996), the mother provides much of the at-home development and learning. Highly educated mothers can use their knowledge and abilities to help children comprehend homework and other school-related assignments (Lareau 1987).

As previously mentioned, income and job security make it possible for women to afford resources for their child's development. In the United States, there is a large concentration of women working low-wage jobs, leading to what we know as the gender wage gap (Blau and Khan 2016). Despite the increase in millennial women's educational attainment—surpassing men in the number of bachelor's degrees earned (Pew Research Center 2020)—jobs continue to remain highly segregated by sex (Blau and Khan 2016).

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Women tend to work jobs that have lower prestige and pay less in comparison to the jobs men work (Hegewisch and Tesfaselassie 2019). In 2015, nationwide, women were 35% more likely than men to live in poverty (Tucker and Lowell 2016). Even though millennial mothers are simultaneously working and mothering, their income may not be sufficient to support their family, leading to increased stress on mothers.

How Do Parents Create Awareness?

Children seem to be aware of their parent's expectations, as mentioned earlier in Marchant et al.'s (2001) study, through the influence of parental involvement. But what are some other ways parents relay these expectations to their children? One universal way is through punishment or discipline. Parents use punishment to control behavior and implement discipline in their children's lives. Punishment can be used to change or alter behavior. In a study by Straus and Stewart (1999), parents reported that nearly 94% of children had been spanked by their fifth birthday. While punishment sounds harsh, it is not always physical; often, punishment takes the form of the loss of an activity or material item or the removal of parental attention (Kosslyn and Rosenberg 2002). Dupont (2014) finds that the Millennial generation and children are highly attached to technology. Therefore, using the removal of technology as a punishment may be the new spanking.

Disciplining one's child is usually the most challenging but necessary part of being a parent. Parents must employ positive yet effective discipline strategies to teach their children rather than forcing them to change without guidance. A 2004 Pediatrics & Child Health article shares healthy approaches to disciplining children. The article suggests effective discipline is respectful, consistent, and fair. Millennials struggle to find the most constructive form of discipline for their children. In Lerner's (2015) study, she found that millennial

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parents practice various disciplinary methods, from time-out to simply redirecting the child's actions. However, Lerner noted that most parents use physical discipline—a pop or quick spank—to redirect their children's behavior. Lerner explains that these “poppings” are not due to anger or lack of emotional control on the parent's end. Instead, the parents view them as an effective way to correct behaviors they deem unacceptable in public (Lerner 2015).

Within the United States and other Western cultures, authoritative discipline is associated with success in children (Baumrind 1978). Authoritative discipline emphasizes the adult perspective while acknowledging a child's individual differences and interests. When using authoritative disciplining, the parent implements reasoning and power to set a standard for future conduct or expectations while considering their child's personality (Baumrind 1978).

Millennial parents have started to revolutionize physical discipline and child-rearing practices. Steinmetz (2015) describes millennial households as “mini-democracies,” soliciting consensus from their significant other and children regarding decision-making. Millennials have expressed a desire to do things differently than their parents; they strive to break the cycle. These parents are working towards managing their emotional reactions and reducing the use of physical discipline and name-calling (Lerner 2015).

THEORY

In this study, I will utilize intensive mothering theory as the primary theoretical approach to my research. Within this section, I identify the most commonly used theoretical approaches to parenting—along with intensive mothering—and discuss why intensive mothering is the most appropriate for use in this research.

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Intensive Mothering

Motherhood can be an exciting, confusing, complex, and even frightening transition in a woman's life. Nonetheless, it is a transition that brings about a brand-new season of life, requiring a restructuring of lifestyle and responsibility for mothers (Laney et al. 2015). When developing one's identity as a mother, most women structure their identity around internalized norms and ideas regarding how society believes women should properly mother (Shelton and Johnson 2006). Many times, when mothers cannot live up to the "ideal" motherhood expectations, they experience feelings of guilt or failure (Forbes et al. 2021).

The intensive mothering ideology emphasizes the role of mothering; it should be the woman's primary responsibility to take care of her child, rather than her career or personal well-being (Hays 1996). According to Hays (1996), four main ideas are engrained as cultural norms for mothers. First, mothers are expected to place their needs behind the needs of their family. Second, mothers tend to be viewed as the primary caregiver in the family; to accomplish this, women must invest extensive time and energy into providing for their children. Third, it is a cultural norm for mothers to be wholly engrossed in investing their physical, mental, and emotional time and energy into their role as a mother. Fourth, mothers are to be uniquely judged for their children's physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral outcomes. Having such high expectations for mothers, both employed or stay-at-home, leads to issues relating to anxiety and stress that arise when unrealistic mothering expectations are placed on these women. Hays (1996) argues that intensive mothering is the predominant mothering practice in Northern America.

It is important to note that intensive mothering theory is not the only theoretical approach used in mothering and parenting research. The theoretical approach of role theory

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in sociology is commonly used for identifying social expectations and their consequences (Holden 2020). Ralph Linton and George Herbert Mead are the founders of role theory—a broad scope of interaction—but it has since been adapted to examine the varying roles and expectations within a family. As often seen in society, with role expectations come gender norms (Eagly, Wood, and Diekmann 2000). Gender norms and roles tend to mirror society’s expectations for men and women regarding what roles they should be taking on. Today, some women have the option to work, delay or not have children, or refuse to marry without nearly as much judgment as in earlier times in society (Holden 2020). In this context, women having the “option to work” speaks only for women who have the financial stability to stay at home. Many parenting theories ignore the economic necessity of women’s work.

Similar to parental role theory, feminist perspectives and theories have examined the role of mothering within the family. Many feminist theories analyze the subjection of women in mothering roles, presenting opposing ways of thinking about motherhood (Pascoe 1998). Feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow introduced her theory, as seen in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). In her book, she explores the relationship between mothers and daughters and how women internally generate those relationships (Chodorow 1978). Chodorow theorizes maternal subjectivity. She explains this as a mother’s conscious and/or unconscious experiences of being a mother and having a relationship with her children (Chodorow 1978; Chodorow 2000).

In the literature review of this paper, I discuss parenting styles and their potential roles within a family. Diana Baumrind first coined the theory of parenting styles—authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive—in 1971. Parenting styles theory is well-known in the realm of sociology. People perceive parenting styles as an essential developmental

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factor in children's behavior and interactions with others (Baumrind 1971). While the main theoretical focus of this study is intensive mothering, I will draw on parenting styles in my interview questions and literature review. I believe looking into parenting styles is crucial to understanding the role intensive mothering plays in the lives of my participants and their educational experiences and expectations.

While I examine maternal roles, perceived expectations, and norms in this study, I am most interested in taking the theoretical approach of intensive mothering because of its highly active role today in advising women how to “correctly” be a mother (Forbes, Donovan, and Lamar 2020). I will interview millennial mothers, currently one of the most active generations of practicing mothers. With such an extensive age range—26-41—of active mothers, I expect intensive mothering to be the most utilized theoretical approach in the daily lives of potential participants. Even more so, I am looking to explore the influence intensive mothering has on a mother's personal educational beliefs and experiences, as well as her academic expectations of her children. Unlike the previously mentioned theoretical approaches, I believe intensive mothering is an all-encompassing ideology, committing a mother's complete set of thoughts, resources, and energy into providing the best opportunities for her children. Hays (1996) describes intensive mothering theory as entirely and self-consciously committed to parenting. Intensive mothering is not just a set of norms, instead, it is a lifestyle that many mothers today actively participate in.

In their intensive mothering practices, millennial mothers often focused on how they develop the social, human, and cultural capital of their children. Social, human, and cultural capital may be developed by mothers to provide enrichment, opportunity, and life-long skills for children's well-being.

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Social Capital

Pierre Bourdieu introduced social capital in 1985 and defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (1985). In simpler terms, Bourdieu explains that networks or groups can provide value to their members. These networks/groups offer value by allowing their members access to the social resources that are found within the network/group. Previous literature compares social capital to the well-known saying, “It’s not what you know; it’s who you know” (Gauntlett 2011). Social capital consists of interpersonal relationships, shared identity, norms and values, and reciprocity (Pretty and Ward 2001). Social capital is set apart from other forms of capital due to its situation in the social structure of relationships between people (Tzanakis 2013).

James Coleman is well-known for connecting social capital to family and education. Coleman views social capital as a bonding mechanism that adds to social structures. Therefore, social capital is deemed a product of social structure, according to Coleman (Tzanakis 2013). Coleman’s primary focus involved researching the educational achievements of underprivileged students (Rogosic and Baranovic 2016). In regard to children, social capital is thought to be transmitted primarily by the family (Coleman 1988).

Bourdieu views social capital as a scarce resource, whereas Coleman sees social capital as a “potential public good” (Tzanakis 2013). Whether you are examining Bourdieu's or Coleman’s concept of social capital, the central idea underlying social capital is the created resources that personal networks and social relationships generate. Such networks and connections are used to develop valued outcomes for individuals (Croll 2004). Social

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capital is extremely important in providing children with access to opportunities that support optimal development and positive life outcomes (Parcel and Menaghan 1993). Social capital that derives from the family consists of shared relationships, values, and norms. Almost all research indicates that parental involvement in school benefits children's cognitive development (Cookson 1997). Researchers like McNeal (1999) find that children are less likely to skip, act out, or drop out of school when their parents are involved and engaging in school activities. Similarly, Bryk and Schneider (2002) see children from low-income, and minority households benefit significantly from parental engagement in school activities.

Human Capital

Humans are unique because we can pass down, teach, and preserve knowledge between generations. Shultz (1961) stresses the fact that individuals constantly invest in themselves, and the investments they make are very important. Human capital is the idea that education, training, and other forms of learning are investments that will pay off in the future (Deming 2022). It is important to note that human capital includes assets like education, intelligence, skills, and training. Human capital consists of many intangible assets and qualities. Such assets and qualities can significantly impact an individual's economic earnings and well-being. Research has found that investing in human capital can have substantial financial returns throughout childhood and adulthood (Deming 2022).

Parents directly influence a child's investment in human capital by facilitating a home environment that helps and encourages schooling (Galor and Tsiddon 1997). Examining human capital in terms of children's outcomes suggests that families with highly educated parents and high-income levels may invest more resources in children's education (Becker 1981). Within the United States, mothers holding a college degree spend upwards of one and

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a half more hours on educational activities a week for their children than mothers who do not have a high school diploma (Hsin and Felfe 2014). In another study conducted by Gonzalez, Holbein, and Quilter (2002), researchers found that high school students who reported experiencing parental involvement in home-based or school-based learning showed higher motivation to complete complex tasks and enjoy their schoolwork. In today's society, maternal education is found to have a more significant effect on children's educational outcomes than paternal education (Haveman and Wolfe 1995). Therefore, it is thought that maternal academic training—a form of human capital—may positively influence children's educational experiences. Such human capital may allow for improved ability to assist with homework, development of reading skills, role model effects, and overall navigation of the educational system.

Human capital can also take the form of economic growth and financial prosperity. Investing in human capital early yields high returns; because of this, families with a small amount of “investable funds” tend to pour all of them into their children's human capital. Whereas more wealthy families can invest in children's human capital and non-human forms and items (Weil 2015). Therefore, parents with higher levels of human capital may have better opportunities and access to acquire financial stability. Financial stability and wealth can provide non-human forms of capital for children, in turn investing even more in their children's education and overall success. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the lack of at-home resources is associated with a parent's level of education. Parents with low education levels may not have the proper financial means to help develop their children's academic development at home. Income, education, and occupation are associated with better

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parenting (DeGarmo et al. 1999). In turn, parental educational attainment may be associated with the level of human capital parents earn and pass down to their children (Becker 1981).

Cultural Capital

Cultural capital is the collection of symbolic elements such as credentials, skills, qualifications, mannerisms, and material goods (Longhofer and Winchester 2016). Cultural capital has been researched and examined since Bourdieu first introduced it, most often employed when studying relations to the education system. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists in three primary forms. The first form is the embodied state. Embodied cultural capital most commonly refers to the knowledge or skills an individual gains from their habitus (Bourdieu 1986). Bourdieu's concept of habitus refers to an individual's values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors from a particular social class. Bourdieu believed that the embodied form of cultural capital was the most important. The second form is the objectified state. Objectified capital is more tangible than embodied capital. Objectified capital represents the inherent value of cultural objects and media (Bourdieu 1986). The third and final form is known as the institutionalized state. Institutionalized capital is seen in the form of academic qualifications (Bourdieu 1986).

Cultural capital can be either tangible or intangible. Tangible cultural capital may include culturally significant locations, buildings, and art (Throsby 1999). Conversely, intangible cultural capital consists of cultural beliefs, ideals, practices, values, and traditions; such intangible capitals connect groups of people (Throsby 1999).

Cultural capital is thought to be a fundamental state. Research suggests that the cultural capital passed on through families can lead to educational and economic success (Bennet et al. 2009). Cultural capital tends to follow one into adulthood, providing

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individuals with a network of people with similar levels of knowledge and experience (Bennet et al. 2009).

The development of cultural capital in the lives of children is accomplished through the familial investment of time and financial resources. Like other forms of capital, cultural capital is associated with social class and is transmitted from parents to their children. Previous studies have identified many measures of cultural capital: reading habits, attendance at cultural events, and even parents' educational level (Halsey, Heath, and Ridge 1980; De Graaf, De Graaf, and Kraaykamp 2000). Halsey et al. (1980) identified parental educational level and qualification as an indirect measure of the amount of cultural capital within a home. They suggested that higher academic qualification equated to a higher presence of cultural capital and vice versa (Halsey et al. 1980). Similarly, Ball, Bowe, and Gewirtz (1995) found that parents differed in their possession of cultural capital. Differences in cultural capital among parents lead to differences in education-related endeavors and skills. The Gewirtz et al. (1995) study revealed that parents well-versed in cultural capital assets were better able to use/develop social capital networks, engage in their children's school life, and make more informed choices for their children.

METHODS

Through qualitative methods and in-depth interviews, I was able to gather rich personal narratives and experiences related to participants' mothering practices and educational expectations of children. Qualitative methods are the most appropriate research method for this study as I am exploring personal accounts of millennial mothers' educational expectations, mothering practices, and how they convey such expectations in their parenting.

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Qualitative methods, in this case, in-depth interviews, are the best option when gathering information regarding personal biography and accounts (Warren and Karner 2015:122). Rather than determining a cause and effect or prediction in quantitative methods, qualitative methods look to understand how people interpret and attribute meaning to their experiences (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). I gather personal narratives of mothering practices, personal educational experiences, and children's educational expectations from mothers (Warren and Karner 2015:122). I ask questions regarding parenting styles, intensive mothering culture, personal educational experiences, educational expectations, and social, cultural, and human capital. Questions such as these cannot be fully explored using quantitative methods. Qualitative methods are used to understand the meanings people bring to their social worlds (Warren and Karner 2015:6). I do not believe a survey, questionnaire, or poll could accurately explain how parents raise their children, foster their education, or describe their academic experience. I want participants to respond with their experiences, thoughts, and sentiments without feeling constrained by answer choices or character count.

Employing qualitative methods to better understand parent-child relationships is crucial. Asking parents about their influence on their child or vice versa tends to be most accurate if you hear it from them directly, as opposed to responding through a survey. Current quantitative research on intensive mothering, parental influence, parenting styles, and academic expectations have made important contributions to sociology. However, much of this research is overly generalized and places unique experiences into broad categories. As a social scientist and qualitative researcher, I intend to explore and understand the full story. Sociologists must work harder to uncover the relationships between parents and their children and employ the appropriate research methods.

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Sample Population. To be eligible to participate in this study, women were of or between 26-41 years of age. Mothers who participated fell under the age range of the millennial generation. The age range was determined by the Pew Research Center's definition of millennials, individuals born between 1981-1996 (Barroso, Parker, and Bennett 2020). The second eligibility criterion is motherhood. Participants had to be current mothers, preferably with school-aged children. In the United States, children begin school between the ages of 4 and 6 (National Center for Education Statistics 2020). If the participant's children happened to be younger than school age, mothers were still allowed to participate. Therefore, having school-aged children was not necessary since many parents begin thinking about their children's education before entering school. The final criterion stated that mothers must be from the East Texas region.

Study Location. All participants were recruited out of the East Texas region. This region begins east of the Trinity River, making its way deep into the Piney Woods (East-Texas 2022). The participants of this study spanned across four counties East Texas counties: Van Zandt, Henderson, Kaufman, and Smith county (see appendix A for county map).

U.S Census data finds that between 2017-2021, 31.5% of Texans 25 years or older hold a bachelor's degree or higher (Census 2021). Within the four counties that participants make up—Van Zandt, Henderson, Kaufman, and Smith—the percentages of those with a bachelor's degree are even lower. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in Van Zandt county from 2017-2021, 17.7% of individuals age 25+ years old held at least a bachelor's degree or higher (Census 2021). Similarly, Henderson County—from 2017-2021—saw 18.2% of 25+ year old's obtain a bachelor's degree or higher (Census 2021). Kaufman county—from 2017-2021—had 22.2% of 25+ year old's obtain a bachelor's degree or higher (Census 2021).

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Finally, Smith county—from 2017-2021—saw the highest percentage of individuals 25+ years old, 28%, obtain a bachelor’s degree or higher (Census 2021). Less than half of the population in each of these East Texas counties has obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher (see table 1 below).

It is also important to note that these four counties are predominately populated by white individuals. More than 90% of individuals living in Van Zandt County are white, 89.50% of Henderson county identifies as white, and more than 75% of individuals in Kaufman and Smith county consider themselves white (see table 1 below).

Census Data	Van Zandt	Henderson	Kaufman	Smith
Census Population April 1, 2020	59,541	82,150	145,310	233,479
Census 2017-2021 BA degree or higher, % of persons age 25 years+	17.70%	18.20%	22.20%	28.00%
Race and Hispanic Origin - White alone	93.50%	89.50%	77.60%	77.50%
Race and Hispanic Origin - Black or African American alone	3.10%	6.40%	17.20%	17.80%

Table 1: U.S. Census Bureau Data 2017-2021.

Another shared similarity between these four counties is the large population percentage of white Christians. According to the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), each county represented in this study has over a 50% presence of white Christians. The 2020 PRRI finds Van Zandt county to consist of 76% white Christians, Henderson county with 68% white Christians, Kaufman county with 57% white Christians, and Smith county with 51% white Christians (PRRI 2020). As a whole, the United States population is made up of 44% white Christians. In relation to the rest of the country, these four counties have higher percentages of white Christians living amongst them.

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Unlike other regions of Texas that house large cities such as Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston, and San Antonio, East Texas consists of very small cities and towns. I chose to recruit participants from this region of Texas due to its deep southern ties, lower levels of education, close-knit communities, religious beliefs, and small-town culture. Historically, the south has been slower to change their practices. Such evidence of slow change was seen during the desegregation of schools, Jim Crow laws, and most recently, new laws denying access to abortions (Shepherd, Roubein, and Kitchener 2022). According to the USDA (2021) less urban- located areas, such as those more rural cities and counties found in East Texas, may have lower levels of educational attainment among adults. In the case of intensive mothering, Hays (1996) states that intensive mothering tends to be adopted by well-educated mothers more often than those with lower levels of educational attainment. I am interested to see how a culturally southern region of Texas employed intensive mothering practices.

Millennials are the largest generation since baby boomers. Therefore, they have the ability to change and adapt parenting approaches. If millennials from this region of the South differ from other generations in the same area, this research may uncover some of the specific influences of parenting practices among millennials. This study situates current practices of East Texas millennial mothers, leading to potential future studies examining regions known for more progressive practices and parenting.

Recruitment. Twenty participants were recruited using convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling is a non-probability form of sampling. I used convenience sampling because of its low-cost and time-saving features (Stratton 2021). For convenience sampling, I reached out to a few mothers I already knew—that met the

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eligibility requirements—through email, text message, or Facebook Messenger. I introduced myself, gave a brief overview of the study, and ultimately asked individuals if they would be interested in participating. After gathering a few participants through convenience sampling, I transitioned to snowball sampling. Through snowball sampling, I generated a pool of eligible participants that were recommended by the convenience sampling participants (Crouse and Lowe 2018). It is important to note that the use of convenience sampling is not representative of all mothers and their experiences. Due to the nonrandom nature of this study's sample, the interview responses may not fully capture the experiences of all mothers throughout East Texas, the South, or the United States.

Participant Demographics. The average age of the mothers in this study was 35 years old, the youngest participant was 30 and the oldest participant was 41. Of the twenty mothers, participants had a total of 54 children, including biological and adopted children. The children's ages ranged between 4 months to 25 years old, the average age range consisted of 5–15-year-old children. Educationally, the mothers varied in degree attainment, from high school diplomas to master's degrees (see table 2 in appendix B). All participants in this study were heterosexual women, seventeen of them married, two married but in the process of divorce, and one was single. All but two of the mothers identified their race/ethnicity as white, one being Hispanic and one being American Indian (see table 2 in appendix B).

Procedure. After participants agreed to participate in the study, they were given an informed consent form—either a hardcopy or digital copy, depending on whether it was in-person or virtual interview—to read over and fill out. Participants were able to choose between an in-person or virtual interview. Following the informed consent form, participants

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completed a face sheet. The face sheet covered questions relating to gender, race/ethnicity, parental age, marital status, highest level of education, occupation, zip code, children's age, number of children, number of individuals living in the household, rent or own residence, rent or own car, and total number of cars owned by the family. After completing the informed consent form and the face sheet, participants continued with the interview by answering questions I had created in my interview guide (see Appendix B). There were approximately 30 questions on the interview guide, many followed with supporting questions. On average, most participants spent an hour and half answering questions. At the end of the interview, I gave participants the opportunity to ask me questions regarding their interview, the overall study, or just general questions. They were also given an opportunity to expand on anything they felt they did not get to convey fully. All participants were rewarded with a \$10 Amazon gift card for their time. Gift card incentives were funded by the University of Houston Sociology Graduate School Research Grant and the University of Houston Cullen Graduate Student Success Fellowship.

Analysis. I conducted 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews to explore any themes that arose that I might not have been expecting or I was interested in pursuing further. Participants responded to open-ended questions that consisted of core questions followed by associated questions relating to the core questions (Jamshed 2014). All interviews were audio recorded—with the permission of each participant—transcribed, coded, and analyzed using grounded theory. I developed codes based on the participant's accounts and responses. I then grouped the developed codes into main themes. Finally, through memo writing, I developed my analysis into themes. Using this inductive approach allowed me to further investigate the “meanings, intentions, and actions of the research participants” (Charmaz 2001:337).

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Grounded Theory. Grounded theory is an exploratory method often used in qualitative research methods. With grounded theory being an inductive research method, the data guides theory and analysis. It differs from other research methods because it derives its theory from iterative data collection and analysis (Charmez 2014). Grounded theory is used to develop new theories, when there is no theory, or a lack of data for an existing theory. If there is no existing theory to explain what an individual is studying, then one should use grounded theory. Similarly, if an existing theory lacks the appropriate data or participant population, one should use grounded theory (Charmez 2014). In the case of this study, there happens to be an existing theory—intensive mothering—but no data had been collected from the participant group I examined: millennial mothers. There was also little data examining how intensive mothering theory affected mothers' educational expectations or how they conveyed those expectations through their parenting. I also engaged theoretical sampling within qualitative grounded theory during my in-depth interviews, providing real-world accounts and experiences of participants.

Ethical concerns. All facets of this study were approved by the University of Houston Internal Review Board before data collection began. All participants remained anonymous after their data was gathered. Participants were able to choose their own pseudonyms; if the participant did not want to choose their own, I chose one for them. Any mention of parental partners or children's names were replaced with phrases such as husband, spouse, partner, daughter, son, or children. All persons mentioned during the interview portion remained anonymous. By providing pseudonyms, family information remained confidential to the individual. All information is protected and cannot be shared with anyone else. The only exception to confidentiality, as required by the University of Houston Internal Review Board

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(IRB), was if a participant shared intentions of hurting themselves, hurting others, instances of child abuse or neglect, or domestic abuse, but no incidents occurred. Though there were no expected risks to participants taking part in this research, some questions may have evoked negative feelings when asked about past educational experiences, mothering expectations and pressures, or family dynamics within the home. From the 20 interviews conducted, it did not seem as though any participants experienced negative feelings due to the questions being asked. There were two participants that cried due to their heart-felt emotional response when asked, “Can you describe to me what being a mother means to you?”

Positionality statement. As a 23-year-old unmarried and childless individual, I have no first-hand experience of what it is like to be a parent. I have never experienced the responsibilities, duties, or expectations of being a parent. While I am not a parent, I am a daughter. I have a mother and father who raised me to work hard, care for others, and enjoy life to its fullest. I have experienced parental influence throughout my life and my education. My parental influences are unique to me and may not translate the same for other people. I have lived a much more privileged life than others; I am a white female, an only child, and a daughter of married, never-divorced parents. As a graduate student, I have been allowed to further my education more than others. My parents have college degrees, my mother holds a bachelor’s degree, and my father has an associate degree. Undoubtedly, my experiences and preconceptions will differ greatly from others who were never offered the same opportunities that I have had. I have experienced and created educational narratives of my own based on my personal experiences. With this study, I want to better understand the viewpoints, experiences, and expectations from the parental side of the situation.

FINDINGS

Using qualitative interviews with twenty millennial mothers from East Texas, I was able to take a deep dive into the lives and stories of the women involved in this study. My hopes at the beginning of this study were to better understand how millennial mothers from a culturally southern and more traditional region of the United States employ intensive mothering practices. I found that all participants showed patterns of intensive mothering and shared positive feelings towards these experiences. The mothers found great joy in involving themselves in their children's lives, each placing their children at the forefront of their lives. Like much of the intensive mothering literature, these mothers shared feelings of being overwhelmed or felt as though they had fallen short at times. After interviewing participants and utilizing grounded theory to develop codes and engaging in memo writing, three overarching themes were created: first, mothering with grace, second, children come first, and third, parental attitudes toward education.

The mothers in this study shared strong feelings regarding the meaning of motherhood and the responsibility that comes with raising children. Meredith—a single and working mother of two—found motherhood to be an all-compassing job. Meredith was a participant in the pilot study and was reinterviewed in 2023. In Spring of 2022, the prior year, Meredith stated, “My kiddos are my life. That’s... I’m here for them. My time will be whenever they go off and do their things.” Similarly, McKenzie shared her view of the importance of motherhood as a life-long responsibility. When asked what it means to be a mother, McKenzie—a working mother of two—said:

It's your legacy. It's your responsibility. I mean, it's a huge responsibility. And you have a, I don't know what the right word is, an obligation to do it. Right. Because this is the next generation, and you have crappy moms, and they repeat the cycle and yeah... it is a, why can't I not find words today? It's a gift, but it's also a burden too.

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But more than a gift, it's a lot of responsibility. It's a lot of responsibility and a lot of, am I doing it right? Am I screwing up? And then you think, oh my gosh, no matter what you do, at some point she's going to be on her own and make her own decisions and have I equipped her to make the right decisions? Then you see families that have multiple kids, and they were raised the exact same way, and one's a screw up and one's great. And it's like, what? I mean, at some point it's out of your hands. And that's terrifying too. Yeah. Oh my gosh, yes.

McKenzie and Meredith provide passionate responses to what it means to be a mother. All twenty participants shared a similar enthusiasm and sentiment towards motherhood and the importance of the roles, responsibilities, and duties that come along with it.

When examining these responses using an intensive mothering lens, we see that all mothers share similar beliefs regarding Hays' (1996) theory: "child-centered," with children being the center of importance and responsibility in all the mothers' lives. These mothers have emphasized the importance they place in their role as caregivers, teachers, and stewards of their children. As seen when Abby—a working mother of three and pilot study participant—told me during our follow-up interview in Spring of 2023, "So, I have a saying that my greatest accomplishment may not be somebody I am, but somebody I raise." The mothers of this study care deeply for their children, consistently placing them and their well-being at the center of their lives.

It is also important to note that most women in this study identify and practice the monotheistic religion of Christianity, a religion that embraces traditional gender norms. In fact, seventeen mothers claim to attend church at least once a month—most attend weekly—with their children. Therefore, it is important to examine religion's influence on these women's lives through their role as a mother, wife, and adopter of intensive mothering. Many women responded to my question that asked what an "ideal or textbook mother" meant

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to them with reflections of faith and Christian ideals. For example, when Addison was asked to describe an ideal or textbook mother she said:

Umm. Like a Proverbs 31 woman. Someone who just has all the patience, who instills Godly values in their kids before anything. Who shows them [her children] love through everything as hard as that is. Sometimes, as frustrated as you are- People that can show that love without anger amaze me. But really, just a parent that's there. Don't ever give up. That's really the textbook, just being there in the good and the bad times. Being consistent, I think that's a huge role as a parent.

Addison was not the only woman to respond to this question with the response of a Proverbs 31 woman. Similarly, when Abby was asked what she considers to be an ideal or textbook mother, she said:

Honestly, I believe that an ideal mother would be someone who walks and follows Christ first, loves her husband above her kids, but also is there and has the high expectations and is patient and shows grace. I think patience is really the thing that most moms struggle with the most, especially if you're a working mom and you get tired, but patient and kind. But first and foremost, just really have a heart for Jesus. A Proverbs 31 woman.

Proverbs 31 speaks about a wife and mother of noble character, almost a blueprint for being a mother. Verses 26-29 of Proverbs 31 read, "She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all (NIV Bible)."' For almost all of these women, intensive mothering is not necessarily viewed as form of parenting, rather it is a Biblical command of lifestyle/motherhood. In Christianity, children are considered a gift from the Lord (Psalm 127:3-5) and mothers are expected to provide availability, involvement, and teaching to their children.

While only a couple of women explicitly referred to Proverbs 31, all women shared similar responses that connected "ideal" mothering to fostering faith. The role of religion

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may serve as an explanation for their adoption of the parenting practice known as intensive mothering for women in the South. This may also explain why all mothers, despite educational attainment, partake in intensive mothering practices.

Mothering with Grace

Interestingly, themes also arose that differ from much of the intensive mothering literature today. While participants in my research mirrored the findings of the intensive mothering literature—women feeling overwhelmed, tired, or falling short of expectations—the most significant finding of this study was how mothers coped with those feelings. The women in this study discussed mothering with grace and emphasized the importance of giving and receiving grace. In this study, grace was described as a form of patience and forgiveness. Grace was used as a response and coping mechanism when mothers and children fell short of intensive mothering ideals and expectations. For most participants, religion played a large role in their lives, many attending church weekly with their children. Therefore, the type of grace utilized by participants stems from a religious basis. Within Christianity, the religion practiced by all twenty participants, grace is defined as “the unmerited favor of God toward man” or more simply, undeserved favor (Graham 2022). The women in this study use the religious concept of grace as a mechanism for child-rearing and as a response to prescribed societal pressures, expectations, and norms associated with intensive mothering.

Intensive mothering expectations tend to place unrealistic pressures on mothers, many times causing feelings of stress, pressure, and being overwhelmed (Hays 1996). Over the last couple of decades, there has been an increase in the amount of time a mother spends with her

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children. According to Bianchi et al. (2012), the amount of time and involvement spent with children has doubled from 1975 to 2010. Many researchers believe that increased time, involvement, and effort has been linked to the rise of intensive mothering practices (Bianchi et al. 2012). Hays (1996:54) states that intensive mothering can be explained as a “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive.”

Intensive mothering cultivates high personal and societal expectations of mothers. While this is not necessarily a bad practice, it can at times be harmful to a mother’s well-being and mental health. Surprisingly, the mothers in this study showed themselves grace even when society and those around them did not. To get a better understanding of participants’ experiences of such unrealistic pressures, participants were asked if they had ever felt like a “bad mom” before. All twenty mothers expressed feelings of being a “bad mom” at some point in their journey of motherhood. Despite mothers’ feelings of guilt due to falling short of expectations, all participants consciously recognized and voiced that they consistently try to be the type of mother their children deserve.

When Georgia—a stay-at-home mother of three—was asked if she had ever felt like a “bad mom,” she provided a beautifully spoken response:

Oh yeah. Yeah. I think every mother does [feel like a bad mom] though. We just have too high of expectations for ourselves and don’t give ourselves enough grace. But if I do sit back and think, I’m like, no, I’m not a bad mother. I’ve done and said some hurtful things or not met my own super high expectations, but I can tell myself, no, you’re a good mother because you’re consistent and you’re still trying. And that’s what makes a mother good, someone who doesn’t give up.

Georgia, among other women, introduce this idea of grace, giving and receiving grace. The type of grace mentioned by participants is many times used as a mechanism for coping. The use of grace as a redemption for individual shortcomings was common among the women of this study.

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Lisa provided a similar response—introducing the idea of grace—when asked if she felt that there is a lot of pressure put on mothers to be perfect. Lisa responded by saying:

I feel like there's a lot of pressure put on them to be a certain type [of mother]. I feel like people don't give enough grace... not everybody mothers the same. Whether you're a stay at home [mother] or you go to work, or whether you spank or you only do timeout, or whether you- you know what I mean? I feel like the pressure is when people are different. Everybody wants people to parent the way that they parent. And if you don't, then there's pressure for... “Oh, you do that? Well, I don't...” kind of thing.

Though the mothers in this study felt like there were an array of societal pressures and norms regarding motherhood expectations, they were able to show themselves grace, understanding, and patience. While still maintaining an awareness of expectations, these mothers were able to adopt a realistic attitude about motherhood and their shortcomings. Some, but very few, of the mothers indicated that they had felt serious emotional or mental consequences due to falling short of culturally prescribed mothering expectations.

The notion of giving and receiving grace looks to be common practice among the twenty women in this study. As mentioned previously, most individuals from this culturally southern region of East Texas identify as white Christians. Within this participant sample, grace is a form of forgiveness and patience that not necessarily earned but given. In the context of these women, grace situates itself similarly to Biblical grace.

Mothering Role, Duty, and Responsibility

All twenty mothers in this study claimed to be the primary caregiver of their children. The mothers identified, claimed, and explained their duties and responsibilities regarding child-rearing. It is difficult to determine what exactly accounts for the acceptance of these responsibilities by the mothers, it may stem from religious traditions and teachings or perhaps the southern/small-town culture of where they live. Nonetheless, it is very

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possible that the idea intensive mothering claims about child-rearing being the ultimate and all-encompassing role may explain the mothers' acceptance of such household, child-rearing, and family-related responsibilities.

The roles, duties and responsibilities of mothers in this study lined up closely with traditional gender roles and norms, as well as intensive mothering expectations. While many mothers expressed gratitude for their significant others and their involvement in their children's lives, a majority of mothers still held traditional female roles, duties, and responsibilities around the house and with the children. Most mothers stated that their husbands helped around the house when asked or prompted, helped with children's homework, and shared responsibilities regarding the children's night-time routines. Still, mothers claimed that the husbands were primarily "in charge" of outside tasks such as lawncare, repair work, and taking out the trash, while the mothers were primarily "in charge" of caring for the children and keeping up the inside of the house. Kendall—a working mother of two—shared the following response when asked what her husband's responsibilities were regarding household chores and the children:

So, I take him [her son] to school in the morning and then I go in to work, but he [her husband] wakes them up in the morning and gives them a hug and a kiss goodbye. And he lets the dogs out for us. And then my son will feed them and then we just take turns on laundry or dishes or whatever. Usually I have to tell him, "Hey, I need help with laundry." He doesn't... he's not self-motivated [to do any chores], he needs me to tell him what to do and then he'll do it, which is bizarre to me. But I've learned in my marriage, that's all it takes. So, that's easy enough. But he does all the outside stuff, so he mows. I don't take the trash out. He'll always take the trash out. He takes care of the vehicles. There's certain things that I do. I take all the kids to the doctor's appointments because I just know them better because I'm around them more than he is. But if it's a big doctor's appointment, he comes along, I'll tell him, "Hey, I need you here for this one." And he'll come. He coaches all of our kids' sports. And like I said, I go into work late and he comes home early, so he's the one that's home with the children until I get home. And he'll take our daughter to gymnastics. So yeah, I don't want to say it's 50/50, but he's a good man.

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Kendall's experience is not unique to only her, as many women shared similar experiences regarding household management duties and responsibilities. For Kendall, she shares that her husband does not involve himself in household chores unless prompted to. While Kendall does not find the household roles, duties, and responsibilities to be split evenly between her and her husband, she still believes him to be helpful enough compared to her friend's relationships.

Cultural gendered norms and roles are often deeply ingrained and go unquestioned in certain families, regions, and countries (Mahalik et al. 2005). The United States has seen a shift towards increased egalitarian relationships throughout the past years (Rice and Coates 1995; Gerson 2011). Such a shift can be seen as mothers in this study describe the increased involvement of their husbands in the education and lives of their children. But the shift was not completely towards egalitarianism in the case of these women, as men were not as active or self-motivated to complete household chores. Instead, men seemed to claim responsibility of outside chores and duties as seen in Hochschild and Machung's 2003 book, *The Second Shift*.

There seems to be reoccurring and consistent evidence from previous research (Coltrane 2000), that shows unequal gender division among household chores and responsibilities may lead to negative mental health outcomes in women. Surprisingly, the married mothers of this study did not find their household chores and child-rearing responsibilities to be unfair or bothersome, most claiming that it was just another part of their job and that their husbands were in charge of their own—more male focused—chores and responsibilities.

Societal Pressures and Expectations

I asked all twenty of my participants if they felt as though there is a lot of pressure put on mothers to raise their children “properly” or “the right way.” As stated by Steinmetz (2015) and Learner (2015), a majority—80%—of millennial mothers find it is necessary to be “the perfect mom,” spending copious amounts of time researching parenting skills. From these participants, fourteen acknowledged they either personally felt or observed pressure, four that were on the fence, neither declaring yes or no, and two who had not felt or observed outside pressure. Addison—a working single mom of two—responded by sharing her perspective on maternal pressures, expectations, and experiences:

Yes, I do [believe that mothers experience pressure]. You don't ever hear people talk about the dads, it's always... I feel like it always falls on the mom. That's just the society we live in. The mom is responsible for everything. So, I do feel like there's a lot of pressure on me, because I'll remind my kids before they all get the car every morning, what comes out of your mouth, your responses, everything you say, is a reflection of me, your faith and of God, so please make sure they're good. So, I do feel like there's a lot of pressure there with that.

Addison gives us an inside look into the mind of a mother. In this quote, Addison specifically states that her children’s actions, words, and choices reflect on her as a mother. If Addison’s children were to misbehave, she believes that others would view the bad behavior as a parenting error on her part, rather than a mistake made by the child. Many of these participants share a similar feeling of responsibility and pressure for their children’s actions and behaviors. About half of the women worried that mistakes and bad behaviors of children would reflect more poorly on them, as mothers, than on the fathers. Rae made a comment regarding societal views regarding fathers and child-rearing, “Because I feel like myself, I would also, I feel like if I see a dad out with kids being crazy, I'd be like, look at him. He's bringing the kids out. Go him! And then if I see a mom [and her kids are being crazy], I'm

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like get your mess together, lady. Come on! Why is that? Do we have that? Why do you have that kind of mindset? I don't know.” Rae’s personal narrative is just one of many examples of the societal stereotype and expectation differences of mothers and fathers regarding child-rearing.

When it comes to Western societies such as the United States, motherhood is thought to be a common and many times, expected achievement in one’s life (Christler 2013). Furthermore, Hays (1996) posits that motherhood and the incorporation of intensive mothering norms encourages mothers to devote and bear primary responsibility of their children’s well-beings. Previous research finds that mothers fear falling short of motherhood standards/norms and being perceived as a “bad mom” (Henderson, Harmon, & Houser 2010). One prominent way mothers “fall short” of such standards and expectations is by working and cutting short their maternity leave (Okimoto and Heilman 2012). Such an instance is seen in a conversation Emme—a working mother of 3—had with her sister-in-law about not breastfeeding and choosing to go back to work, “She felt like she was being a bad mom because she went back to work and didn't want to have to jack with all the stuff [breastfeeding]. So, it was more of a “selfish reason” [used of air quotations]. But that's okay! It's not like she wasn't taking care of her kid. So yeah, I think moms have a lot of pressure. I think they also have a lot of pressure to compare their kids to others.” Emme’s experience with her sister-in-law is an example of going against the social norms and standards of mothering with a newborn. Mothering norms expect women to take full maternity leave and, in some cases, even more time than the allotted maternity leave. Breastfeeding, as mentioned in Emme’s response, has become an increasingly more judgmental decision for women. Lois (2013) examines breastfeeding variations and beliefs

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throughout the twentieth century, finding that middle-class women and white women are more likely to breastfeed when compared to working-class and African American women. Contemporary rules find American mothers who do not breastfeed to be “bad moms” (Lois 2013). Like most instances in which norms are challenged, the individuals challenging and changing those norms, in this case Emme’s sister-in-law, experienced feelings of disconnect and self-guilt.

All twenty mothers expressed feelings of being a “bad mom” at some point in their journey of motherhood. Such feelings surfaced due to actions like raising their voice, losing their temper, going back to work, and feeling burnt-out due to their sizeable responsibilities regarding children’s extracurricular activities, household chores, and work-family balance. In motherhood, especially within an intensive mothering culture, women are faced with the struggle of identity. Mothers must learn to balance and structure their identity to align with what culture, society, friends, and even family believes motherhood should be (Prikhido and Swank 2018). Doing such may lead to increased feelings of guilt, self-blame, and increased notions of personal shortcomings (Prikhido and Swank 2018). Madison—a working mother of three—illuminates the mental and emotional consequences feelings of falling short and guilt play alongside her diagnosis of depression. As mentioned earlier, the mothers in this research use the concept of grace to help them cope with such feelings of guilt.

Feelings of Being Overwhelmed

This study interviewed sixteen working mothers and 4 stay-at-home mothers. It is important to note that three out of the four stay-at-home mothers were actively homeschooling their children. It is easy to downplay the workload of stay-at-home mothers but in the case of these participants, most stay-at-home mothers were the primary educators

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for their many children. The working mothers of this study all held full-time careers, receiving a yearly salary.

Between working and stay-at-home mothers, there were shared feelings of being overwhelmed due to motherhood throughout the study. The majority of women—both working and stay-at-home—shared that they had felt overwhelmed by the task of raising their children. For example, Rae—a fourth grade teacher, mother of two, and a participant of my pilot study—when asked in Spring of 2022 if she had ever felt overwhelmed by the task of raising her children, she responded with, “Oh, heavens yes! Oh yes! We [Her and her husband] often sit down at night after they’ve [the children] gone to bed and just look at each other and go... “What did we do?!” No, I’m just playing. No, it is overwhelming a lot of the time and if I can be completely honest, we never really felt that with my oldest daughter by herself.” In a follow-up interview with Rae in Spring of 2023, when asked the same question she responded with, “Oh gosh... Oh yeah. Oh yeah. Even more so now. When did we last talk?” In both interviews with Rae, it was obvious that she adores her children, constantly sharing silly stories about her girls. Despite the incredible amount of love Rae has for her children, she claims to be constantly overwhelmed by the roles, duties, and responsibilities associated with motherhood.

Similarly, Jane—a stay-at-home mother of five—when asked the same question, responded with, “Oh yeah. I mean every day. It’s just so much, being talked to by five different kids or being touched by five different kids. There’s definitely... I’m tripping over toys... So, I mean yes, I definitely feel overwhelmed. I mean, every day, in some capacity, every day.” Jane is not only a mother of five children but is also the primary educator of each of her children. Mothers who choose to homeschool their children provide an even deeper

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look into intensive mothering as they have also chosen to become responsible for educating their children full-time. Jennifer Lois (2013) claims that homeschooling is a direct manifestation of intensive mothering due to the emphasis of placing children's educational needs first and growing the mother-child bond.

Almost all of the mothers in this study expressed feeling of stress and being overwhelmed due to their children's events and busy schedules. Many mothers, like Julianne—a working mother of three and participant in the pilot study—expressed such feelings due to her children's activity schedule and her husband's busy work schedule. She finds that her husband's long work hours leave her responsible for a majority of the children's extracurricular activities. Julianne was part of the pilot study, then reinterviewed in 2023. When asked again in Spring 2023 if she had ever felt overwhelmed by the task of raising her children, she responded:

Oh yeah. And especially since there's three different [aged kids], because the older two are involved in things. I'm a hermit. I like to stay home. I don't like to go anywhere. And now they have practices on different days, and then games. And then my husband is a coach. So tonight, he's got three games after school. The last one [game] is at 8:00 pm. So, on his game days, he leaves at 7:00 in the morning. He doesn't get home until 11:30 [in the evening]. So, he's working. That's another reason [why it gets overwhelming]. My sister starting out, her very first job in customer service is a nine to five position. Gets Wednesdays off, gets weeks off every quarter. Well, they [her sister and their company] get to work remote, and she's making way more than he is. And he's working 14 to 16 hour days and missing their [the children's] first practices, their [the children's] first tee-ball games. So, he's just like busy all the time, so then it's all on me, which is fine.

Like many mothers, Julianne feels overwhelmed by the responsibilities and duties that come with being a mother of three. In Julianne's experience, feelings of stress stem from her husband's work commitments and her children's busy activity schedule, leaving her as the sole caregiver in between his work hours and their activities.

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When Madison—a stay-at-home mother of three—was asked if she had ever felt like a “bad mom,” she provided a beautifully spoken response:

Oh yeah. For sure. I do. I have depression, so I do struggle. I go through highs and lows. And not that my lows are super low, but I do have lows where I just want to go lay in bed and I just want to lay there in the dark... I know I've got to work through it and work out of it, but I do have those moments where I feel like I just shut down. I just don't want to parent right now. Don't come to me with your problems. I just need a minute. And I do, do that sometimes. And I hate when I do that because I feel like I'm not as available as I should be. And so that's hard, just dealing with my own problems. It's so hard for me to just focus on the marriage and then the kids, and work. You have to come to work every day! I just feel like there's not enough of me to deal with all the things. So that is hard. I feel like I reflect on those bad times more than the times when I am good.

In Madison’s experience, it was easier for her to feel disappointed in herself, rather than proud of herself for making it through the difficult times. Madison is currently going through a divorce, therefore she is the primary caregiver when she has her children. At times, Madison becomes overwhelmed with the task of raising three children on her own, feeling guilty for those moments when she needs to take time to herself. When Madison does take those brief moments to herself, she becomes less available to her children, causing feelings of guilt. Madison’s experience is just another example of how the norms and expectations related to intensive mothering are so deeply ingrained that falling short can effect women’s psychological well-being.

On the other hand, Meredith—a working mother of two and participant in the pilot study—explained in Spring of 2023 that she does not normally feel overwhelmed by the task of raising her children, but did express that her children are her life, stating motherhood to be her job. Meredith said if she was ever overwhelmed, those feelings were a normal part of motherhood:

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No. I mean, it's a lot sometimes, but I don't, like I said, they're good kids, so I don't have to... I mean I worry about my daughter moving on into the teenage stage and those type things, and that might be a little bit challenging, but come back in a couple year [laughs]. But overall, no. I mean, I like it's normal [to be overwhelmed] and that's my job. My kids are my life, so I'm going to do what I can do for 'em. But no, I never feel [use of air quotes] overwhelmed. With the way things are now [referring to her active process of divorce], I actually miss them and I'm like... I wish they were back home all the time.

Whether women stated they were less overwhelmed, like Meredith, or more overwhelmed, like Julianne, all participants shared the same ideology when it came to child-rearing: it is their job and duty. Within participants, we see motherhood to be highly valued by working mothers, similar to findings by McQuillan et al. 2008 and Damaske 2013.

Previous research also examined those feelings of stress, pressure, and being overwhelmed can be exacerbated by women who work (Forbes et al. 2021). While this rang true for most employed women, it is important we do not downplay the experiences of stay-at-home mothers. Three of the four stay-at-home mothers homeschool their children, meaning that they interact with their children more hours of the day than working mothers. While these stay-at-home mothers do not work for compensation, they expend most of their daily time and efforts teaching, cultivating, and caring for their children. Despite employment status, mothers strive to be attentive to their children (Hays 1996).

Children Come First

Another common theme among the participants of this study was the increased emphasis on children's lives. Like intensive mothering suggests, all twenty women in this study place the needs and well-being of their children above their own. Some mothers express the importance of child-centered decision making, taking the well-being of children into consideration before making an important decision. Other mothers place emphasis on

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their children's lives by taking on the role as the primary caregiver, being open and available to their children's needs inside and outside of the home.

Self-Sacrifice and Caregiving Balance

As mentioned before, all twenty mothers consistently placed the needs and well-being of their children at the center of their lives. Within the act of mothering and caregiving, we see scenarios of self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice is a constant theme seen among the participants in this study. In this context, self-sacrifice can be defined and viewed as mothers giving up or sacrificing personal interests, time, effort, or decisions to benefit the well-being of their children. Different levels of self-sacrifice are seen among participants, from day-to-day decision making to taking on the majority of parenting responsibility. Interestingly, when women were asked about caregiving duties—regarding the children and the home—participants alluded to the increased sharing of responsibilities between themselves and partners. Still, most women considered themselves the primary caregiver of their children while engaging in self-sacrifice.

For example, Addison's response regarding decision making shows us the type of self-sacrifice mothers involve themselves in on a regular basis. Addison stated that her children are the first thing she thinks about before making a decision, and she is concerned with how her decision will affect her children. Addison responded, "I mean, they're the first thing [her children] I think about when I'm making a decision. How's that gonna affect them? Is this the best thing for them? Everything I do in life, I wanna make them [her children] happy. I want them to succeed, and I wanna do whatever I can to help them succeed. So really, I mean, that's what I live for. Every day is for being their mom." Like many mothers in this study, Addison centers her life around her children. Addison is a single

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mother of two, therefore she claims the role of primary caregiver for her children. She also sacrifices much of her own time, energy, and emotions for the betterment of her children. According to Hays (1996), many of these participants would fall under the intensive mothering ideology; their primary responsibility is to care for their children, putting them before themselves.

Fifteen participants stated that they consider themselves their children's primary caregiver. Similarly, thirteen participants claimed to be the primary caregiver of their family/home. The women who do not consider themselves the primary caregiver of their children or family stated that their husbands split the duties and roles 50/50. For example, Rae—a working mother of two—was one of the participants who did not define herself as the primary caregiver of her children or family. When asked if she considered herself the primary caregiver of her children, she replied:

Oh, not really. I mean, I would consider my husband and I really the same. Because I mean, we both clean. We both cook, do the laundry. If one of the kids happens to be sick, he usually stays home with them because it's easier for him to take off because he owns his own business. Or if they need to go to the doctor, he'll take 'em to the doctor. So really, I feel like it's a very equal balance that we have. Luckily now I really want to not work and retire so that I can be that [caregiver]. Cause I want to be that [caregiver]. I want to be the one who is taking my kids to talk to the doctor. I want to be the one who is staying home with them when they're sick, I don't know why. I just craved that wanting to be the one who does all that. But I'm very thankful that my husband does do a lot. He does a lot around the house a lot. I have to ask him to do it, but it's okay. He gets it done. It absolutely gets done.

Rae's experience shows that her husband is an important asset to her and the children's well-being. Though she finds her role as a caretaker to be split evenly between her and her husband, Rae states that she craves the responsibility that comes with being a primary caregiver. Rae is not content with her current level of self-sacrifice; she is currently unable to put forth more time and effort towards her children's well-being. While Rae and other

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participants clearly show intensive mothering practices, some women want to become even more involved in their children's lives. Responses like Rae's suggest that intensive mothering, self-sacrifice, and caregiving is not necessarily a practice but more of a lifestyle and life goal.

Financial position and privilege also play a role in the lives of women who adopt intensive mothering practices. Many women, like Rae, want to take on even more caregiving responsibilities and roles but are unable due to their financial need to work. While on the other hand, some women in this study have the financial privilege to stay at home with their children. To an extent, it requires a financial privilege for one to incorporate higher or more extreme levels of intensive mothering.

Some women only claimed to be the primary caregiver due to their partners' work commitments and busy schedules. For example, Emme considers herself the primary caregiver of her children and family only because her husband often travels for work, "Yes. Only because he travels. If he didn't travel, we'd be completely equal." Because her husband travels and cannot be home during some weekdays, she is home with the children more often than he, therefore making her the primary caregiver. Many women who stated that they were the primary caregiver shared similar reasonings, such as Kendall who stated that she was the primary caregiver of her children due to her flexible work schedule versus her husband's more intense work commitments:

I mean, as I said, I have a really, really good husband. Most of my friends would say yes [to being the primary caregiver of their children]. I mean, I would say, I guess slightly [responsible for being the children's primary caregiver]. So, my husband and I, we split it [child-rearing] down the middle. So, I do all education for our children. He does all sports, athletic, anything. I do anything girl related, getting my daughter dressed or buying her clothes. He does boy related things. So, when he [her son] needs new clothes, I'll obviously go with them, but he'll pick out what he should wear. And they talk about stuff like that. I take my daughter to get a haircut. He takes

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my son to get a haircut. So, I mean, I guess I'm a little bit more [considered the primary caregiver] just because of my job versus his job. But for the most part, we're pretty 50/50.

Though Kendall is technically viewed as the primary caregiver, she still believes that the child-rearing duties are split evenly among her and her husband. Kendall was sure to mention that she only believes she is the primary caregiver due to the flexibility and less-intense time commitment of her job.

Conversely, some women with the perception of being the primary caregiver recognized their husband's role as more financial and in less involved in caregiving matters among children. I asked Brady if she considered herself the primary caregiver of her family/house, to which she replied, "I don't really know how to answer that. I mean, I guess I would say yes. 'Cause I mean, I'm the one that cooks and cleans, so I'm the reason we have food. I mean as far as cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, and all that. But as far as financially, it'd be my husband." Brady shared that her husband would help take kids to doctor and dentist appointments, but overall, she felt she was responsible for caring for their major needs.

It is important to note that one woman in this study is single, while two others are in the process of a divorce. All three of these women stated that they are the primary caregivers for their children. Madison is one of the mothers currently going through a divorce. Madison shared the difficulties she has faced with parenting since her husband moved out of the house:

He did help me. He did. He would break up fights with the kids and make the kids- If I asked him to do something they [the kids] didn't do, he would step in and he's there to help me parent. And that's hard because now I feel like I'm doing all of the housework and all of the parenting, and I don't have that backup. So that's hard.

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Experiences such as Madison, Meredith, and Addison's—the single and divorcing women—provide a basic understanding of single mothers' daily difficulties. At the end of the day, women found themselves primarily “in charge” of the children and family's well-being. Participants tended to take primary responsibility of child-rearing duties and view themselves as the household managers or primary caregivers of the family. Similar to primary child-rearing duties and roles, women are often times viewed as the household managers, providing emotional and moral work, supervision, and inter/intra household duties and responsibilities (DeVault 1999; Doucet 2001).

Learning only the basic differences between the child-rearing responsibilities of married and single/divorcing women, single mothers face increased levels of responsibility when caring for their children. Therefore, when single working women employ intensive mothering practices, they may be investing more time and energy than they have available compared to married women. This is not to downplay the roles married women occupy as mothers but to shed light on the increased struggles many single women face without a partner to support them. The married women in this study seemed to be extremely appreciative of even the smallest help they received from their partners, over half of them still considering themselves the primary caregiver of both the children and family. Many married participants viewed their significant others as helpful and important figures in their child's development. In the case of this study, partners may play an important role in reducing the negative effects of intensive mothering.

A critique of the intensive mothering theory is that placing the needs of one's children—a form of self-sacrifice—above a mother's may be harmful or detrimental to the mother's physical and emotional well-being. Child-rearing is something that these mothers

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are proud of and find joy in, even if it is overwhelming and exhausting at times. While these participants often feel overwhelmed by raising their children, they share that motherhood is one of their greatest accomplishments in life. Participants do not envy their children for consuming their time. The mothers in this study allude to motherhood as an honor. These women may have internalized motherhood so deeply that the identity, roles, and self-sacrifice of intensive mothering are not considered consequences or negative experiences. Instead, like mothering with grace, motherhood as an honor is another contribution of this study to the intensive mothering literature. The women in this study balance their self-sacrifice and honor the work they are doing to raise their children.

Alone Time

At the same time mothers are placing a noticeable priority on their children's needs, a few are also setting boundaries and allocating personal time to themselves and their relationships with their partners. Mothers discussing personal time and boundaries was a bit of a surprise considering how invested these mothers were in their children's well-being, education, extracurriculars, and day-to-day lives. Although questions pertaining to mothers' free time and personal boundaries were not asked during the interviews, some mothers did not express a daily practice of setting boundaries and allocating personal needs. Still, many desired a break from their children and some time to themselves. The mothers who shared their experiences with actively setting aside personal time did so most often in response to the questions asking if they felt overwhelmed or feel like a "bad mom." Jane shared with me the boundaries she put into place with her five children:

But yes, I do need time away from my children to reset. My husband and I are very adamant about our evenings together. So, the kids will go to their rooms before it's bedtime for them to read or play quietly so that my husband and I don't have to stay up until midnight in order to get a few hours to have to ourselves, you know what I

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mean? And so, they'll listen to the radio up in their room, or like I said, look at books, and they'll have an hour and a half of doing that so that it allows my husband and I to start our time together, so our marriage doesn't struggle. This is the last thing you need to have going on in the midst of raising five kids. So, little things like that, where we've had to prioritize our schedule to make sure that everybody's emotional needs are being met, including our children, but that their needs aren't the only needs in the house.

Though only about half of the participants expressed desires for free time and personal boundaries, it is noteworthy that it goes against intensive mothering practices. Jane was one of the few mothers to specifically share the measures she takes to set boundaries and provide herself with personal time. It is important to note that Jane's personal time and boundaries are not because she dislikes spending time with her children. Quite the opposite, Jane is a stay-at-home and the homeschool teacher for all five of her children. For Jane to continue providing and investing her time, energy, and well-being into her children, she shared that she needs time to recover, rest, and reset to be the best version of herself for her children.

Similarly, Gracie—a stay-at-home mom and homeschool teacher to her three children—shared that she takes time to herself on busy days. Gracie explained that since she is home with her children all day, every day, there are times when she will take some time to herself to avoid feeling overwhelmed or burnout. Gracie described these breaks as short moments spent outside, just to decompress from child-rearing stresses: "As a homeschool mother, I literally don't have a break away from them. They are with me every day, all day long, you know? So, there are times that I will just step outside for a little bit, you know?" Like other homeschooling mothers in this study, Gracie takes short periods of time to gather herself and rest, in order to provide her children with the most helpful version of herself.

Rae is another one of the mothers who desired personal time, claiming that after a long day of work, she only wants to come home and take some time to herself. Rae said,

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“And I feel like being a teacher makes it hard also to be a mom because I’m exhausted and tired up here [at work]. So, when I leave, I don’t want to go home and talk to anybody. I just want to sit alone and decompress from the day. I don’t want to talk to my husband either.”

While Rae, and other participants find great joy and pleasure in their many roles as wives, mothers, teachers, caregivers, and employees, many of them long for some personal time. The stay-at-home mothers who doubled as homeschool teachers were the most vocal about prioritizing time to themselves to avoid negative feelings related to spending considerable amounts of time around their children. In comparison, working mothers seemed to express more of a want than an actual need for personal time and boundaries. These trends are most likely due to the amount of time a day working and stay-at-home mothers spend with their children. Stay-at-home mothers spend significantly more time with their children each day. Although half of the mothers shared a desire for free time and personal boundaries, very few actually set time aside for themselves and their personal interests. The women in this study continue to show high levels of self-sacrifice for children and low levels of leisure and personal time for themselves, despite the desire for such in the responses of half of the participants.

Investment in children’s capital

Another way the mothers in this study prioritized their children was by creating opportunities to invest in children’s social, human, and cultural capital. Social, human, and cultural capital are ways in which mothers can invest and develop their children’s futures. Each type of capital overlaps and plays a crucial role in children’s educational and career development. Participants in this study invested in their children’s capital by encouraging

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and fostering education, involving and providing support in their extracurriculars, and encouraging them to build friendships and social networks.

These mothers contribute to their children's social, cultural, and human capital by involving them in extracurriculars such as sports, private music lessons, band, and church attendance. Sixty percent—12—of the mothers have public library cards and access to all learning resources at their local public library, seventy percent—14—have a membership or season pass to local attractions, museums, or cultural events, and almost all—17—mothers attend church with their children at least once a month (85%).

Social capital is a way for individuals to build social ties like networks and groups. Membership in these networks and social groups allows the members to access the social resources and availabilities within the groups (Bourdieu 1985). Social capital is thought to be crucial in providing children with the necessary tools for future success and positive life outcomes (Parcel and Menaghan 1993). All twenty participants have their children in some form of extracurricular activity. From these involvements, children can build social circles, learn and grow with other children, and gain knowledge relating to academic, cultural, and worldly events.

Human capital is the idea that education, training, and other forms of learning are investments that will pay off in the future (Demming 2022). Human capital includes assets such as education, intelligence, skills, and training. According to Galor and Tsiddon (1997), parents can directly influence children's investment in human capital by facilitating a home environment that helps and encourages learning and education. Similarly, cultural capital is accomplished through the familial investment of time and financial resources. Parents with cultural capital tend to better engage in their children's school life and make informed

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decisions for their children (Gewirtz et al. 1995). All 20 mothers shared an interest and emphasized learning in their homes. Jane describes learning as a lifelong activity, stating that it does not stop when school ends; instead, one continues to learn throughout their lifetime.

Jane describes her “motto” on life:

Honestly, I mean, my motto in life is just always learning. You know what I mean? It [learning] never stops. It’s continuous. And it’s not necessarily school exactly. Learning doesn’t equal school. Just learning about people, your beliefs or somebody else’s beliefs, or cultures, or whatever it is. It’s just... constant. It’s never-ending. And I do think that there needs to be a hunger and thirst for it. I don’t think people should want to be stagnant and just look back on the last ten years of their lives and just be like, “Oh, everything’s been the same.” No, I think we need to constantly be growing our minds, you know what I mean? And learning new things and challenging our perspective. So, I don’t know... stay curious, I guess, is another motto.

Jane, like other participants, encourages education and learning in many different facets, not only within academia. Jane encourages her children to learn about new and differing perspectives. Encouraging such learning and open-mindedness helps children become more comfortable applying and gaining capital throughout their lives.

As we will see in the following section, the mothers in this study are very much involved with at-home and at-school-based learning. In today’s society, maternal education is found to have a more significant effect on children’s educational outcomes than paternal education (Haveman and Wolfe 1995). Therefore, it is important for the development of children’s human and cultural capital for mothers to promote learning, emphasize the importance of education, and become involved in at-home and at-school-based learning.

It is also important to note that human capital can take form through economic and financial growth (Weil 2015). In this study, eighty percent (16) mothers work full-time careers. Having stable careers allows these mothers to invest financially in their children’s

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human capital. Of the four mothers who do not hold jobs, their husbands support them financially and have similar financial resources to give to their children.

Parental Attitudes Toward Education

The participants in this study were asked a plethora of questions regarding their children's educational expectations, college attendance expectations, and personal educational experiences. Across the board, these mothers expressed high yet realistic expectations for their children's school performance, college attendance, and overall academic attainment.

Mothers emphasize the importance of college

All twenty mothers were asked whether they were encouraging post-secondary education for their children, despite their children's age. Fifteen mothers, three quarters, responded positively to post-secondary encouragement. The mothers who supported post-secondary education shared similar hopes and aspirations for their children. Many state that despite their children's young ages, they actively speak about the possibility of college in the future, some even attending college tours before entering high school. Those who were not actively encouraging post-secondary education were not against their children obtaining a post-secondary education, rather they did not want to create unnecessary pressures and expectations for their children now.

When Abby was asked if she was encouraging post-secondary school for her sons, she responded, "Yes. I wouldn't say I'm encouraging it. I would say it is an expectation." Abby holds a master's degree and works as a communication director for a school district. While Abby shared a firm stance on post-secondary encouragement, some mothers who

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support further educational attainment were not as forceful with their expectations. For example, McKenzie—a working mother of two—shared a more balanced level of encouragement and understanding for her children:

It's not that I'm not [encouraging post-secondary education]. We do encourage it. I mean, we tell her, we talk about college, we ask her [about college] because she's so into cheer. We're like... Hey, you can get a scholarship! You could get a scholarship for cheer! She's actually very, very good at it. I'm not saying that just because she's mine and you could get a scholarship for this, or you could cheer in college because she's really interested in that. And so, it's like I want her to go, but I also understand if that's not the path she takes, it's not end all be all. That's [post-secondary education] not going to be forced. I'm not going to force her. I'm going to guide her to make the best decision for her. I do hate how- that's one thing I hate about the school system as a whole, is that we shove college down these kids' throats. And not that it's not important [college]. It is important [college], but that's not a realistic path for all kids. So, they need to know that there are other ways. It's not all, "if you don't go to college, you're a loser." They don't need to feel like that.

McKenzie holds a bachelor's degree and works as an intermediate schoolteacher. Most mothers who claim they actively encourage a college education do not have as strong of a stance/expectation as Abby. Many simply encourage conversations and questions about college. Some mothers even provide real-life insight into college. For example, Lori—a working mother of four—shared that she and her children have attended college tours, stopped to walk around college campuses, and actively engaged in conversations regarding college attendance. When asked if she was encouraging post-secondary education, Lori responded:

Yes... with the other three [kids] we've we talk a lot about, you know college, we've actually done like college visits where you do like a tour and all that. But also, if we're driving past somewhere we may stop and be like hey, this is Baylor [University]. Let's stop here and look at it. Just kind of those types of things so they can see what a college looks like and what that actually means. And then with the oldest one, he'll be a freshman next year, like next school year. And so, you know, they'll start picking school paths and looking at all of that good stuff. GPA starts to count. So, a big, big, big change right there. So yeah, definitely already encouraging that [college] and looking at what are the options they have.

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Lori holds a master's degree and works as an assistant principal of an early childhood center. Lori has four children. As mentioned, the oldest is not yet in high school, but she still encourages and shares the importance of what a post-secondary education can provide for her children.

All eight mothers with master's degrees stated that they actively encourage post-secondary education for their children. The remaining seven mothers who encourage post-secondary education have varying levels of educational attainment: three mothers hold bachelor's degrees, two have GEDs, one has some college experience but no degree, and one has a high school diploma.

The remaining five mothers shared similar explanations between each other regarding their lack of post-secondary encouragement. Many of them shared that they did not want to create unnecessary expectations of pressure for college attendance, like McKenzie, but also clearly stated that they were not encouraging college at the moment. It is important to note that the mothers who did not actively encourage post-secondary education were not against education in general. Many believed that college might not be the path for their child and that other learning opportunities exist that do not consist of attending college. All mothers continued to support educational endeavors, just not in a post-secondary form.

Julianne responded to the question by saying, "Education's important but to an extent. And definitely, I'm not pushing college. It's worked out for me just fine and I know plenty of other people who college just wasn't for them. I would still say we are instilling education [in our children] but it's more about the everyday life and figuring out what's important and holding to that." Julianne holds a bachelor's degree in education but works as an operations coordinator/home-building consultant. While Julianne does hold a bachelor's

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degree in education, she does not use her college degree for her current occupation. She stated if she had known what career field she would end up in, she would not have spent the time and money getting her education/teaching degree.

The educational backgrounds of the five mothers who are not actively encouraging or expecting their children to obtain a post-secondary education have an array of different education levels. Three mothers have their high school diploma, one holds a bachelor's degree, and one has some college experience but no degree.

It is also important to note that over half of the participants (55%) are employed as teachers, principals, assistant principals, paraprofessionals, or instructional interventionists. On top of that 55%, 15% work in a school/educational institution as a secretary, computer technician, and communications director. Therefore, 70% participants work either as an educator or in an educational institution. Because this study examines mothers' expectations for their children's academic success, having 70% of participants in the education field, in some form or fashion, may have led to different educational expectations of children than someone with a differing occupation may not necessarily expect from their children. An occupation in the field of education may have influenced how participants raised their children and responded to questions.

Marchant et al. (2001) found that students who believed their parents valued education tended to have similar beliefs as their parents, placing a high priority on education themselves. While each participant may not agree on whether they expect their child to attend college, all twenty mothers share a similar belief that education is vital. Participants, whether they actively encourage post-secondary education or not,

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share a similar goal of teaching and instilling the importance of education into their children.

Current academic expectations

Regarding intensive mothering's role in children's educational expectations, women shared similar expectations for their children. The consensus of expectations was that children would perform to the best of their abilities. Mothers stated they did not have unrealistic expectations for their children's school performance. For example, some mothers expected A's from one child but not from the other. These twenty mothers catered and cultivated different expectations for different children, whether all children could make straight A's determined a mother's expectation for all A's. This individualized practice of expectations requires more time and effort from mothers than a single expectation for all children would. The use of individualized educational expectations alludes to the adoption of intensive mothering practices, creating one-of-a-kind expectations and goals for each child requires self-sacrifice, time, and increased effort.

In the following quote, Meredith—a working mother of two—shares her expectations for her two children's academic performance. Meredith's oldest child struggles with reading and English Language Arts (ELA), while her youngest attends resource classes at school due to an auditorial processing disorder. Meredith said, "I just want them to do the best they can do. I don't expect them to make all A's. You can't have under a 95- No. It's realistic, but for us in our world, it's not realistic." Meredith acknowledges that her children struggle academically due to individual factors that cannot be completely resolved. Like all twenty of the mothers here, Meredith provides realistic and obtainable educational expectations for her children concerning their prior performance and academic disabilities. Gore et al. (2015) find

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that parental academic perceptions represented by prior academic achievement helped shape realistic expectations for children.

Similarly, Abby—a working mother of three—explains that her expectations consist of all A's. Abby expects her children to make A's in school because she knows her boys can do so, as they have achieved A's throughout their academic careers thus far. Abby has warranted high expectations due to her children's prior academic performance. Yet, she acknowledges that children may fall short of expectations now and then. When asked about her expectations, Abby responded, "So, one is to get the best grades to your ability. For most, well really for all of my kids, that would be an expectation of an "A" average. Now, as they get older and classes get harder, you know, we may look at making different expectations. But the expectation is for them to do their best, to make the best grades that they can."

Similar to Abby's expectations, literature suggests that parents with the ability and skills to form an accurate set of academic expectations for their children will find that children are believed to have a better chance of success in their post-schooling endeavors (Alexander et al. 1994). Conversely, parents who create unrealistic and unattainable educational expectations may have their children's best interests at heart, but children will unlikely meet such expectations. While each mother in this study expected different academic outcomes for their children, they all shared an expectation to "do your best." Expectations were instilled and put into place by the mothers of this study, but expectations tended to be realistic and obtainable.

Regarding intensive mothering and children's educational expectations, existing literature suggests that highly educated mothers adopt intensive mothering

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practices more often than less educated mothers (Hays 1996). Research also finds that children with highly educated parents have higher academic expectations than children with less educated parents (Augustine 2017). Therefore, it may be assumed that those who practice intensive mothering would have high expectations for their children's school performance. Here, we examined Abby, who has a master's degree, and Meredith, who has only a high school diploma. While Abby's expectation for her children is to make A's, she claims that she expects this because her children are capable of doing so.

Conversely, Meredith's children are not expected to make A's, as it is unrealistic for them due to their individual disabilities. Yet, a common theme among the mothers here is to get the best grades to your ability. Despite maternal education levels, all twenty women shared the expectation for their children to do the best that *they* could. While many participants differ in their educational experiences, they all shared that they wanted the best for their children. All women alluded to education as important and being successful in school as a priority but catering to expectations differently for each child. Participants expected a lot of their children with respect to the fact that children are not perfect, and each child has their struggles.

Because all participants engaged in some level of intensive mothering and held unique expectations for each child, this may suggest that intensive mothering serves as a mechanism for curating and cultivating realistic individualized expectations. Intensive mothering as a whole is a child-centering practice, an ideology that submits a mother's energy and time into providing the best opportunities for her children (Hays 1996). Research shows that realistic and flexible expectations best support children's academic success (Gore

et al. 2015). Therefore, intensive mothering may be an important parenting practice—shaping realistic and individualized academic expectations—for children, potentially leading to increased academic success in children. According to Bentsen (2022), excessive parental expectations may have damaging effects on children’s self-esteem, causing them to be much more critical of themselves when they fail. Unrealistic and excessive parental expectations may be detrimental to young children during their educational endeavors. Instead, mothers provide realistic expectations and grace for their children’s educational growth; potentially creating a healthier relationship between children, school, and parents. This study shows that children’s educational expectations and cultivation are formed with an intensive mothering-like mechanism: individualized, child-centered, and resource/energy intensive.

Parental involvement and investments in children’s education

Contrary to the mixed opinions regarding post-secondary expectation and encouragement, all participants showed encouragement and involvement in their children’s current school performance. As seen throughout all aspects of intensive mothering, mothers were more likely to be involved or to consider themselves responsible for most of their children’s academic involvement. It is important to note that all but one mother—Claire—considered themselves the main caretakers of their children’s education. Still, Claire—a working mother of three—was involved but stated that her husband had more responsibility than her regarding the children’s education. All mothers with children enrolled in school shared that they have a clear line of communication with their children’s teachers, whether via email, cell phone, school phone, or a messaging app such as “Remind.”

When Brady—a working mother of two—was asked if she helps her sons with homework, she replied, “Yes. Yeah. Sometimes math is crazy. My husband’s an accountant,

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so sometimes he helps with math homework. I don't do math, so a lot of time we'll have to take it to the teacher for extra help or clarification." Brady also shared that she usually attends her sons' class parties and field trips. I asked Brady if she had a clear line of communication with her son's teachers. She descriptively explained her line of communication:

Yes. So, the teacher- 'Cause a lot of times the teacher sends out messages [on Remind], but then as a parent, I'm on it [Remind] for the principal. So, the principal sends out a message, I get duplicate messages. It's because the teacher sends out a message saying for example, "We're out of school for Martin Luther King Day." But then the principal sends out the same message. So, it's like a duplicate kind of. But hey, I'd rather get it [messages] too much than not enough.

Brady has a high school diploma and works as a paraprofessional. Clearly, Brady stayed involved and active in her sons' educational endeavors. Investing in at-school forms of education such as field trips, volunteering at class parties, and communicating with teachers; and investing in at-home forms of education such as helping with homework and seeking out the teacher's help when homework is difficult or unclear.

Similarly, Lisa—a working mother of three—shared similar levels of educational investment in her children. Lisa holds a master's degree and teaches at an intermediate school. Lisa said she takes work off to attend her children's field trips and school award ceremonies. Because of her job, she cannot volunteer and attend her children's classroom parties, but she does go out of her way to provide materials for her children's teachers if requested, "I will send things. If they [the teachers] need something, I'll go buy it and send it with them [her children]. If the teacher wants help cutting stuff out, they can send it home [with her children]. But as far as volunteering in the classroom, I can't with work." Lisa also shared that she invests copious amounts of time in helping her three children with homework when they seek help. She explains how each child requires different explanations and

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approaches to homework help: one needs to see it written out with pencil and paper, one needs breaks in-between questions to avoid getting upset, and one only finds her homework “interesting” if it is explained creatively, like using sidewalk chalk to complete math problems.

Brady and Lisa’s responses show that investment from mothers in at-home and at-school education is a common practice among all participants. Nineteen of the mothers consider themselves to be “in charge” of their children’s educational investments. For all but one, these mothers dedicated large amounts of time and effort towards their children’s academic development, providing support for developmental opportunities such as at-home homework help, additional tutoring from teachers, and active involvement at school-related events.

Personal Educational Experiences

All participants were asked various questions regarding their personal educational experiences. Mothers were asked if they believed their education had impacted the way they view their children’s education, how their academic experiences have shaped their personal educational narratives, whether they feel it is their job as a mother to make sure their children succeed in school, and whether they believe their education has impacted their mothering practices. These questions caught many of the mothers off guard, stating they had never thought of or been asked such questions before. With mothers being considered the primary caregivers, providing much of the at-home development and learning (Hays 1996), it is important to better understand the relationship mothers may have with their personal education and how this may affect their mothering practices and expectations for children’s education.

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Gracie—a stay-at-home mother of two—shared her educational experiences in detail. Gracie holds a high school diploma and has never attended a college or university. Initially, Gracie did not feel that her educational experiences impacted the way she viewed her children’s education, stating, “The reason why I say no is because I mean it was so long ago...” after a bit of silence, she went on to say, “...but I just- Most of my high school was just me being in trouble. So, if [my education] has impacted [how I view my children’s education] at all, it’s me trying to- I don’t want my kids to be me. I didn’t really have like anyone to encourage me in education and encourage me even to go to college or invest in me really. I was just kind of like you know... out of sight, out of mind.” While Gracie may not have received support during her schooling years or hold a post-secondary degree, she still spoke about the investments she tries to make toward her children’s education.

When Gracie was asked if she might parent differently had she attended a four-year university, she responded with the following:

Yeah, I probably would. I feel in my mind, I feel like I would be more... What’s the right word? I feel like I would be more... Hmm... What’s the right word? Academic? That’s not the right word, but I feel like I would invest more in the resources that I have. I don’t know how to explain that. I feel like I would know more of what’s out there and really implement more than what I’m doing now. But... that may or may not be true. I really don’t know.

Though Gracie may not initially strike one as a “textbook” intensive mothering mom due to her low level of educational attainment, she actively invests the resources and capabilities she has. Gracie wishes for her children to have the best opportunities possible and responded, “Yes. Absolutely.” when asked if she felt it was her job as a mother to ensure her children succeed in school.

On the other end of the educational attainment spectrum, Sarah—a working mother of two—holds a master’s degree. When Sarah was asked if she believed that her education has

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impacted how she views her children's education, she replied, "Yeah. I would say definitely yes." When asked to elaborate Sarah responded:

I think whereas if I was uneducated, it [her children's education] would just be this thing we have to do whereas I understand what this [her education] has done for me. We are going to make it a priority in our family for education, essential to the things that we do. I think my education has made sure involvement in theirs [her children's education] more of a priority for sure. If we [her and her husband] were not education, I don't think I would see it nearly as important as it is.

Following Sarah's response, I asked her if she thought she would parent differently had she not attended any post-secondary school. Sarah said, "Hmm. I mean I think we're probably more intentional about education as opposed to just, hey... I got my high school diploma. You know? I think we're definitely more informed. I think we definitely consider education more of a priority than we would have had we stopped at high school." Just like Gracie, when Sarah was asked if she felt responsible for ensuring her children succeeded in school, she quickly responded, "Yes. Yeah. 100%."

When examining the differences between Gracie and Sarah, it is obvious that the main differences include the women's occupational and educational statuses. Gracie has a high school diploma and is a stay-at-home mother, whereas Sarah has a master's degree and works a full-time career position. As with many highly educated women, Sarah greatly emphasizes her children's education. Their education is not simply a responsibility for the children to work towards and uphold, but it is also a responsibility of Sarah's. At the same time, Gracie—less educated—also greatly emphasizes her children's education, so much so that she chooses to homeschool them. Because she is a stay-at-home mother, she can invest large amounts of time and energy into her children.

Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla (2016) note that women with higher levels of education may choose to engage in intensive mothering practices more often than women with low

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levels of education. Similarly, Koshy et al. (2019) find that parental educational backgrounds and attitudes play an important role in shaping their children's expectations for participation in higher education. This practice of encouraging post-secondary education is actively seen in the lives of all seven mothers who hold master's degrees and three out of the four mothers who hold bachelor's degrees. Intensive mothering is thought to be a mothering practice adopted most often by well-education women (Hays 1996; Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla 2016). Lareau (2003) explains that intensive mothering practices are more commonly seen in mothers with higher educational attainment, women who commit to time-intensive forms of mothering, and concerted cultivation approaches. Concerted cultivation embodies heavy parental involvement in children's academic and enrichment activities (Lareau 2003).

Despite the differences in educational attainment among the mothers, all twenty noted that they actively support their children's education, nineteen of them stating they were the primary parent involved in their children's education. Mothers noted that they shared at-home and at-school involvement with their children: attending field trips, having open lines of communication with teachers, and helping with homework and projects. It is important to note that many fathers actively fostered their children's at-home and at-school educations. While mothers invested more time and energy into their children's educations, fathers were not absent in their children's academic lives. Increased academic involvement by fathers is a more recent trend and is seen heavily among the millennial families in this study.

Though some mothers did not reach high levels of personal educational attainment, at the end of the day, the less educated mothers still invested similar amounts of time and energy into their children's education. Three mothers in this study homeschool their children: Jane, Georgia, and Gracie. Jane has some college experience, while Georgia and Gracie have

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high school diplomas. When these three women were asked why they chose to homeschool their children, they all shared that they wanted to provide individualized learning. Instead of enrolling their children in public school, where each child is slightly more ahead or behind the next, they chose to cater to their children's individual educational levels. Jane shared, "Thankfully, I'm able to stay at home and I homeschool my children. So, I am able to cater to their needs. I am a firm believer in different needs for different kids, and my kids are aware of that." Each homeschooling mother responded similarly, claiming that individualized learning was the best opportunity for their children's education. So, while intensive mothering is thought to be practiced more often by highly educated women, there is clear evidence from the women in this study that investment levels are not bound by maternal educational levels or experiences.

While most mothers shared similar intensive mothering beliefs regarding involvement in their children's education, not all women possessed the same level of resources and investment opportunities, as mentioned earlier by Gracie. Therefore, we must not disregard the less educated women as less invested, involved, or likely to adopt intensive mothering practices. Rather, we recognize that well-educated women may have more resources, experiences, and opportunities to invest in their children's education and overall expectations.

Limitations

For this study, I aimed to examine what role, if any, intensive mothering played in the lives of millennial mothers in the deep south regarding their education experiences and their children's educational expectations. An obvious limitation of this study was the lack of racial

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and ethnic diversity among participants. All but two participants were White, non-Hispanic women. Therefore, this study does not significantly account for potential racial differences between intensive mothering practices, educational expectations of children, and personal educational narratives. While racial and ethnic diversity is lacking among participants, for the intended sample region—East Texas—it is important to note that there are lower levels of racial and ethnic diversity throughout this region compared to other parts of Texas. As mentioned previously, the four counties represented in this study—Van Zandt, Henderson, Kaufman, and Smith—are predominately white. Van Zandt has the highest population of white people out of the four counties: 93.5%; and Smith has the lowest population of white people out of the four counties: 77.5%.

Similarly, all twenty participants were heterosexual women. This project does not have any LGBTQ+ representation within sample participants. Therefore, we are not able to identify any similarities or differences among intensive mothering practices for non-heterosexual women. It is also important to note that seventeen participants are in heterosexual marriages. There was only one never-married single mother and two recently divorced women. Because the majority of participants are in heterosexual marriages, it is difficult to differentiate the different experiences single and married women face, in regard to parenting and child-rearing.

While diversity among race/ethnicity was lacking, my main focus was to examine the variety among participants' educational backgrounds. Regarding academic diversity, I believe this small sample size provided room for variation, diversity, and comparativeness between participants' educational backgrounds.

Future Research

Further qualitative research is needed to better understand what differences are examined between the opportunities, education, and resources of children with less educated and highly educated mothers who have adopted intensive mothering practices. We must understand the implications intensive mothering can have on a child's academic expectations, outcomes, and resources among less educated mothers. Therefore, similar research should be conducted comparing the opportunities, education, and resources of children with less educated mothers who do not partake in intensive mothering practices compared to less educated mothers that do partake in intensive mothering practices.

Further research should expand to more progressive-minded communities, cities, and people for optimal learning. Conducting a similar study in a larger metropolitan area is important for data comparison and understanding. Without another community to compare the current data, it is unclear what may be the cause of the increased adoption of intensive mothering in small East Texas counties. Further research should also be conducted examining the religious affiliations of women and whether that has significantly affected how they view child-rearing in their lives. Implementing longitudinal research studies on mothers and children over the course of a child's academic career may also yield a better understanding of how parenting practices affect a child's academic expectations and overall outcome.

Overall, this study has shed light on a small population of millennial mothers from the East Texas region. This study has shown that intensive mothering has been adopted by all 20 mothers ranging from low to high levels of educational attainments and differing occupations, age, and marital status. Despite the limitations of this study, the key findings

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illustrate how some of the most traditional of the millennial generation is conceptualizing and practicing intensive mothering. The findings of this research add to the literature on intensive mothering and are well situated to be used as a comparison study for future research that is more racially and ethnically diverse, located in more progressive areas of the country, or has more diverse family forms.

Conclusions

Through qualitative methods, I explored the lives and experiences of twenty millennial mothers from East Texas. Qualitative methods can help researchers understand parent-child relationships, parenting practices, and education expectations. As a social scientist and qualitative researcher, I strived to uncover the relationships and parenting practices between parents and children, while employing the appropriate research methods capable of doing so.

The goal of this study was to understand how millennial mothers in a culturally Southern region of Texas employ intensive mothering practices in their daily lives and within their children's educational expectations. I found that participants showed consistent patterns of intensive mothering, shared positive feelings and experiences towards intensive mothering practices, encouraged post-secondary education and general overall learning, and found grace for themselves when they did not meet intensive mothering expectations.

I also found, contrary to the literature, most of the women in this study did not adhere to much of the "millennial framework." Research finds millennial parents to prolong childbirth/child-rearing, be more ethnically diverse, less worried or tied down by gender roles, and late-marrying (Steinmetz 2015; Pew Research Center 2020). Fourteen women in

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this study gave birth to their first child before age 25, all marrying soon after or before the birth of their first child. As noted in the limitations, all but two participants are White, non-Hispanic women. Furthermore, I found that most participants still partake in traditional gendered roles such as cleaning, cooking, feeding, caring, and watching after children.

Despite the lack of similarity among millennial gender roles, childbearing, marriage timelines, and ethnic diversity, there were still great similarities in other aspects regarding parenting. Most obviously, these mothers adopted intensive mothering practices as Hays (1996) and Lerner (2015) predicted. All participants placed their children at the forefront of their lives, despite the mothers' ages, educational attainment, career, and relationship status. Child-rearing was something that each woman found meaning, joy, and pride in.

Unlike Hays' (1996) and many other researchers' theories that highly educated women adopt intensive mothering practices more often than less educated women, these participants—some with only high school diplomas or GEDs and others with master's degrees—all shared a clear acknowledgement that their children come first. According to Hays (1996), the intensive mothering ideology emphasizes the idea that it should be a woman's primary responsibility to take care of her children. Indeed, for these women, intensive mothering is not just a set of norms, instead, it is a lifestyle that each mother actively participates in.

Intensive mothering practices position mothers as primarily responsible for child-rearing and caregiving. Despite the negative feelings that were associated with intensive mothering practices—feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or tired—many participants expressed a similar coping mechanism: grace. This idea of mothering with grace—providing patience and forgiveness when falling short of intensive mothering expectations—is unique to this study

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and to the personal identity of these women. Religious influence, Southern culture, and small-town locality may play a factor in the increased use of grace as a coping mechanism for intensive mothering expectations.

Continued research for intensive mothering is important to better understand what types of support women need going forward regarding child-rearing. Unlike most women in this study, many women do not have the same amounts of marital/spousal support in child-rearing, leaving some mothers solely responsible for the emotional, financial, and physical well-being of themselves and their children. Such research may uncover the mental health ramifications intensive mothering may have on women. Continued research and understanding of mother's well-being can be helpful to mental health professionals and policies. Such research helps support specified treatment approaches for mothers' mental health, advocacy programs supportive of reduced-price child-care, and creates an overall understanding of the work-load mothers' face on a daily basis.

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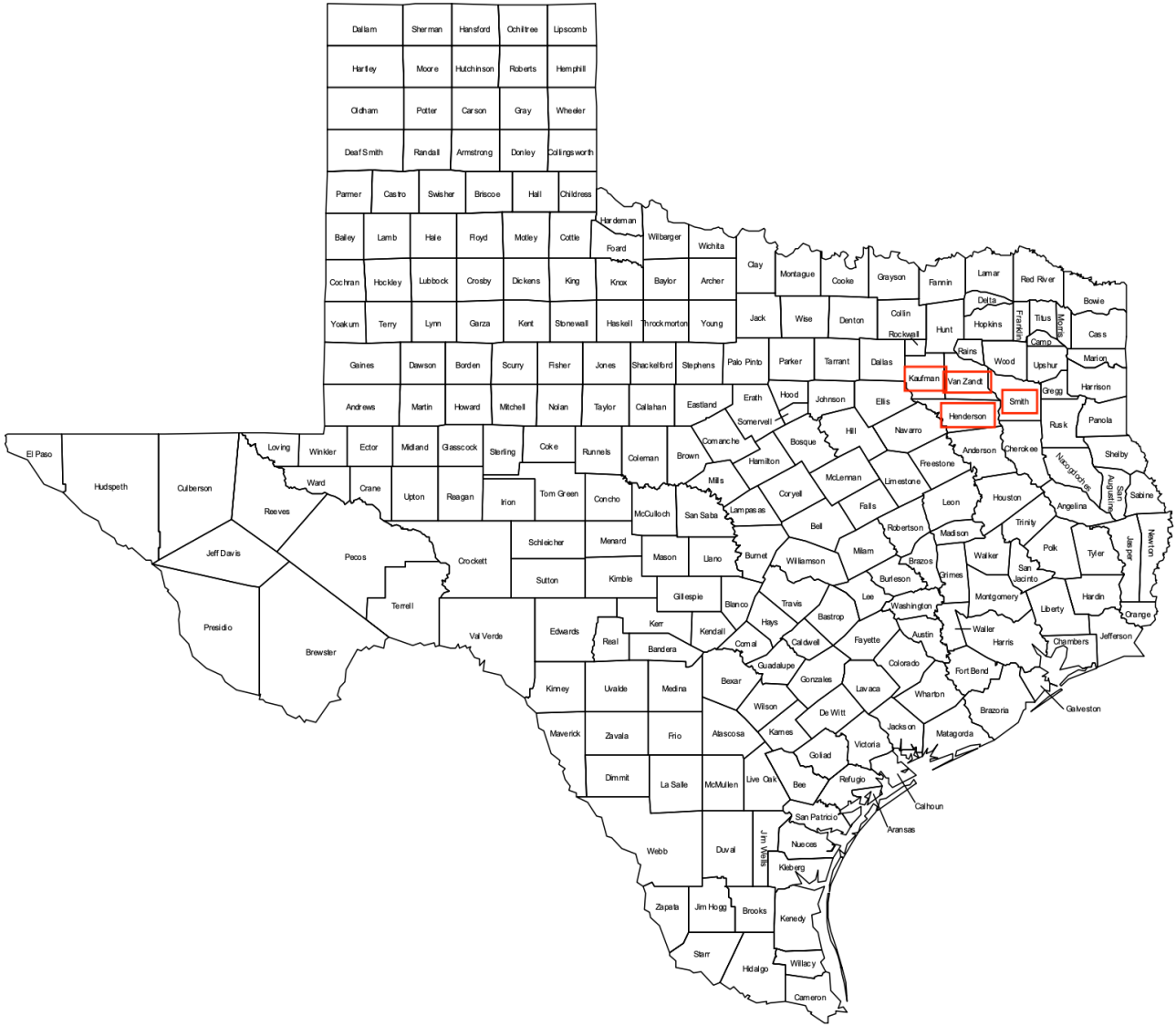
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Appendix A: Texas County Map – Van Zandt, Henderson, Kaufman, and Smith county are outlined.



Appendix B: Table 2: Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Relationship Status	Number of Children	Maternal Age at First Birth	Race/Ethnicity	Education	Employment
Julianne	30	Married	3		23 White	Bachelor's	Operations Coordinator/Home Builder Consultant
Jane	31	Married	5		23 White	Some College	Stay at Home Mom
Anna	31	Married	3		19 White	Some College	Computer Technician
Georgia	32	Married	3		19 White	High School Diploma	Stay at Home Mom
Kendall	33	Married	2		23 White	Master's	Instructional Coach
Madison	33	Single - Divorced	3		21 White	Bachelor's	Teacher
Claire	34	Married	3		15 White	GED	Social Media Director
Raini	34	Married	2		21 Hispanic	Master's	Reading Interventionist
Addison	34	Single - Never married	2		21 White	Bachelor's	Teacher
Abby	35	Married	3		25 American Indian	Master's	Communications Director
Meredith	35	Single - Divorced	2		20 White	High School Diploma	Registrar/Secretary
Rae	36	Married	2		29 White	Master's	Teacher
Sarah	37	Married	2		32 White	Master's	Teacher
Lisa	37	Married	3		24 White	Master's	Teacher
Lori	38	Married	4		24 White	Master's	Assistant Principle
McKenzie	39	Married	2		27 White	Bachelor's	Teacher
Brady	39	Married	2		27 White	High School Diploma	Paraprofessional
Camdyn	39	Married	2		18 White	GED	Stay at Home Mom
Emme	40	Married	3		21 White	Master's	Principal
Gracie	41	Married	3		30 White	High School Diploma	Stay at Home Mom

Appendix C: Recruitment Message

“My name is Carli Copell. I am a second-year graduate student at the University of Houston and am currently working on a project for my master’s thesis. I am looking to interview 20 mothers between the ages of 26-41. I plan to ask you questions regarding your educational experiences, your children and their educational experiences, and your mothering practices. I expect the interview to last between an hour to two hours. If you are interested and eligible, I would love to set something up with you. If you are willing to participate, you will be given a \$10 Amazon gift card. I’m sure that you have a very busy schedule with all of your little ones, but if you are able within the next week or so to meet with me, we can do an in-person or virtual interview (I can do whatever is easiest for you!). I have a pretty flexible schedule. Of course, I do not want you to feel obligated to participate if you do not want to or do not have time to. Thank you in advance.”

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Appendix D: Interview Guide

Getting to know you:

- Tell me about your children
 1. How many do you have?
 2. How old are they?
 3. What are they like?
- How old were you when your first child was born?

Parenting Style:

- Describe your parenting style.
 1. Are you strict about certain things and lenient about other?
 2. Describe how you are strict or how you are lenient.

Personal Education:

- Tell me about your educational experiences.
 1. What is your highest level of education?
 2. Did you enjoy your time in school?
 3. How do you believe your educational experiences influenced your life?
- What was your biggest takeaway from your time in school?
- What does education mean to you?
- What does education mean for your child?
 1. What does education mean for their future?
 2. Why do you want your child to be educated?
- Are you encouraging post-secondary education for your child/children?
 1. College, university, trade school, etc.

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- Do you believe your education has impacted the way you view your child's education?
 1. To what extent? In what ways?
- Do you think you parent differently than you would if you had not attended school?

Your role in your child's education:

- Do you feel like it is your job as a mother to make sure your child succeeds in school?
 1. Why do you believe this?
- Have you set clear expectations for your children's school performance?
 1. Are your children aware of your expectations for them?
 2. How do your children respond to your expectations?
- Are your children self-motivated to do well in school?
 1. How do you support or encourage them to be motivated about their education?
- Tell me about your involvement in your children's education.
 1. Do you help them with homework?
 2. Do you volunteer at their school?
 3. Do you have a clear line of communication with your child's teacher?

Household Composition:

- Who lives in your house at the current moment?
- How would you describe your household in levels of conflict?
- Let's discuss adult relationships in the household
 1. Describe the relationship between you and your partner.
- If you and your partner were to have a disagreement, fight, etc., would you work this out in front of your children or away from your children?

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- How is your partner involved in your children's education?
 1. Do they help them with homework?
 2. Do they volunteer at their school?
 3. Do they have a clear line of communication with their child's teacher?
- Does your partner help with caring for the children?
 1. Do they cook/feed them?
 2. Do they help clean up around the house?
 3. Do they take them to school?
- Do you wish you had more help around the house from your partner?
 1. If so, what do you wish they would help with more?
- If no partner – Do you wish you had help around the house from a partner?

Experiences as a mother:

- At times, do you ever feel overwhelmed by the task of raising your children?
- Do you consider yourself the primary caregiver of your family?
- Do you consider yourself the primary caregiver of your children?
- Can you describe to me how you are as mother?
- Can you describe to me what you believe to be an ideal or textbook mother?
 1. Would you describe yourself with that same description?
- Can you describe to me what being a mother means to you?
 1. How or where do you believe you developed your ideology of motherhood?
- Do you feel as though there is a lot of pressure put on mothers to raise their children “properly” or “the right way”?
 1. Can you give me an example of pressure you have felt from others?

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2. Do you think mothers feel this pressure more frequently than fathers do?

- Have you ever felt as though you were a “bad mother”?
- Are you mothering your children similar or differently to how you were raised as a child?

Social, Cultural, and Human Capital:

- Are your child/children involved in any extracurriculars?
 - Sports, art, music, clubs?
 - Do you and/or your partner attend their activities?

Closing Questions:

- Is there anything that I did not cover about your educational experiences that you would like to tell me about?
- Is there anything that I did not cover about your children’s educational experiences that you would like to tell me about?
- Do you have any questions for me?

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Appendix E: Demographic Face Sheet

1. What is your gender? Male: ____, Female: ____, Non-binary: ____, Other: ____
2. What is your age? _____
3. Current marital status: _____
4. How many children do you have? _____
5. Age of your child/children:
 - Child #1 _____
 - Child #2 _____
 - Child #3 _____
 - Child #4 _____
 - Child #5 _____
6. What is your highest level of education attained: _____
7. Do you work for pay? If so, what is your current job title or position?

8. How do you identify your race or ethnicity? _____
9. Zip code: _____
10. Do you own or rent the place where you reside? Own: ____, Rent: ____, Other, please explain:
11. Who lives in your household? Please specify if that includes your children, spouse, immediate family, friends, or anyone else who may live with you.

12. Do you own a car? _____
13. How old is the car? _____
14. Do you have car payments? _____
15. How many cars are owned by the household? _____

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16. Do you have a public library card? _____
17. Does your family have memberships/season passes to local attractions, museums, or cultural events? _____
18. Do you and your children attend church together at least once a month? _____