A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF MATERNAL BELIEFS ABOUT PARENTING

by

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(Under the Direction of Anne Shaffer)

ABSTRACT

Researchers and clinicians have long assumed that parenting beliefs would predict parent and child behaviors, but quantitative research has often yielded surprisingly small and nonsignificant relations. One reason for the lack of associations may be that definitions and assessments of maternal beliefs about parenting are incomplete, and qualitative analyses of maternal narratives may address this gap. This study aimed to address limitations in the extant empirical literature by defining maternal beliefs about parenting through a qualitative analysis of mothers’ speech samples. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyze 103 speech samples from a racially and socioeconomically diverse sample of mothers of preschool-aged children. Racial differences were also analyzed. Sixty-two codes emerged that could be separated into five themes: (1) global evaluations of the parenting role (2) valued behaviors and characteristics for the mother, (3) valued outcomes for the child, (4) influences on the motherhood, and (5) self and other evaluations. Racial differences emerged in the frequency with which participants mentioned eleven codes. The implications of the themes and codes for quantitative research, measurement construction, and intervention are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Maternal beliefs, thematic analysis, qualitative analysis
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Maternal beliefs about parenting are assumed to directly and indirectly relate to parent behaviors, child outcomes, and environmental, cultural, and societal factors (Frank, Hole, Jacobson, Justkowski, & Huck, 1986; Holden, 1997; MacPhee, 1984; Murphey, 1992; Okagaki & Frensch, 1998). Psychological models, theories, and quantitative research have been predicated on that assumption for decades, but relations between maternal beliefs and family characteristics are often smaller and less consistent than expected. It is unclear, though, if the effects are truly small or if methodological problems in the extant literature have obscured research findings (Holden, 1997; Okagaki & Bingham, 2006).

A primary limitation in the literature on maternal beliefs about parenting has to do with how the beliefs are defined and assessed. Current definitions and measures may be biased by the researchers’ theoretical orientation or perspective because few studies have aimed to determine the scope of maternal beliefs or to define beliefs in mothers’ own terms. As a result, measures only capture the few specific beliefs that are considered salient to the study in language that may not resonate with the mothers (Newberger, 1980; Okagaki & Bingham, 2006). Thus, the following study aims to provide a more comprehensive and naturalistic understanding of maternal beliefs based on an inductive qualitative analysis of unstructured speeches.

A qualitative analysis is expected to complement the quantitative literature by elucidating beliefs that have not yet been considered and by clarifying the wording and content of definitions and categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Parker et al., 2012; Silverman, 2011). While a few
 qualitative studies and a few inductive studies on general maternal beliefs about parenting exist, the majority are decades old and are based on socially and culturally homogeneous samples. The extant qualitative studies are expected to be outdated because social and cultural changes in the past few decades have transformed the role of and norms for mothers. Additionally, the racial and cultural dynamics of the country have changed (Cohn & Caumont, 2016). As such, the current study aims to assess the scope and content of maternal beliefs about parenting that pertain to society today. Further, racial and cultural similarities and differences in parenting beliefs will be considered for the first time.

**Maternal beliefs**

Maternal beliefs are generally defined as “ideas, knowledge, values, goals and attitudes” (Bornstein, 2002, p. 16) about all aspects of child-rearing (Bornstein, 2001). More specifically, maternal beliefs are the thoughts and perceptions mothers have about the role of parents, their ability and skill in filling that role, their child, their relationship with their child, and influences on their parenting role and relationships. Maternal beliefs may be positive, negative, or neutral. There are two primary types of beliefs: instrumental and descriptive. Instrumental beliefs emphasize the relation between a behavior and a goal. Descriptive beliefs emphasize the quality of a target. Values, or evaluations of a target, underlie beliefs. In the case of parenting, values include goals, approved roles, and desired behaviors and outcomes (Stolz, 1967).

While researchers use varying measures and conceptually related terms throughout the maternal beliefs literature (e.g., attitudes, cognitions, attributions, perceptions, representations, and ideas), for the purposes of this literature review, we consider all psychological studies focused on maternal cognitions about more than one domain of parenting: the parent’s role, child, relationship with the child, and relevant environmental factors (McGillicudy-De Lisi &
Limitations in the current definition and assessment of maternal beliefs

Maternal beliefs have been studied in various ways but almost always under the same assumption that beliefs relate to maternal and child behaviors. In fact, maternal belief measures were sometimes used as relatively easy to administer assessments of maternal behaviors and the family environment (Holden & Edwards, 1989). Paradigms that utilized and popularized the study of maternal beliefs include psychoanalysis, social psychology, parent interventions, cognitivism, constructivism, and developmentalism. For example, psychoanalysts proposed that parent behaviors and beliefs develop in reaction to the maternal attitudes the individual was raised with. Social psychologists hypothesized that beliefs indirectly affected parental behaviors and, thus, the child-rearing environment and child development. Parent education and parent intervention research is predicated on the assumption that changes to parent’s knowledge and beliefs will change their parenting (see review in Holden & Edwards, 1989). Additionally, cognitive, constructivist and developmentally oriented researchers prioritized the inclusion of parental cognitions in models of socialization as one of the factors that influences parental and child development (see review in Goodnow, 1988). Thus, there is a long history of assuming maternal beliefs influence family outcomes and reflect the family environment.

When researchers aimed to quantitatively test the assumed link between maternal beliefs and maternal and child behaviors, the relation was smaller and less consistent than expected. The quantitative findings are questionable, however, because there are theoretical reasons to expect a
stronger relationship and because there are methodological flaws in the research. The main methodological limitation is that researchers primarily rely on fixed item measures to assess beliefs. The measures were written by scientists based on theories and models, so the wording, categorization, and content may not be realistic for mothers. Maternal beliefs measures have also been described as vague, poorly worded, and excessively narrow in focus (Holden & Edwards, 1989; Holden, 1997). There are a few interview measures, but they use fixed coding systems based on the researchers’ theoretical orientation and potential biases. Therefore, it has been proposed that more naturalistic and realistic definitions and measures are needed (Newberger, 1980; Okagaki & Bingham, 2006; Quattrone, 1985; Rubin, Nelson, Hastings, & Asendorpf, 1999).

One way to improve the literature’s operationalization, measurement, and understanding of maternal beliefs is to ask the population of interest to define and explain them (Silverman, 2011). An open-ended qualitative analysis of mothers’ descriptions is considered an optimal method for capturing the psychological, social, and cultural definition, categorization, and analysis of the phenomenon (Silverman, 2011). Qualitative analyses can offer maternal perspectives on the causes, conditions, and consequences that influence the formation and maintenance of beliefs (Charmaz, 2006; Silverman, 2011). Such insight can guide future hypotheses about the relation between beliefs and behaviors. Further, unstructured speeches will yield language that is more realistic for mothers and will clarify a broader scope of the content of beliefs (Charmaz, 2006; Silverman, 2011). In sum, qualitative analyses can improve the wording and content of quantitative tools and can guide future research on causes and consequences of beliefs.
The qualitative literature

Despite the numerous advantages to qualitative research, few psychological qualitative studies on maternal beliefs exist. One of the first and most famous studies was conducted by Stolz in 1967. Stolz aimed to identify how parents’ beliefs, values, past experiences, and other contextual factors influence parenting practices (Holden & Edwards, 1989; Stolz, 1967). Stolz’s interviews with 39 pairs of parents led to the identification and categorization of 22,000 codes of values, beliefs, and other influences. While Stolz introduced the variety and complexity of beliefs and determinants of parental behaviors, the exact beliefs are not useful because the sample was small, not diverse, nonrandom, and the content is likely outdated for reasons that will be explained later (Mitchell, 1968).

Since Stolz’s research, there have been a few studies that used qualitative components to identify patterns of belief. A mixed-method study by Newberger (1980) aimed to qualitatively identify the cognitive schema that guide beliefs in order to create a quantitative measure. Newberger used parental interviews to identify four patterns of thinking that varied in complexity. Egoistic parents considered the child in terms of the parent’s needs, experiences, and power. Conventional parents focused on “social correctness” when considering their and their child’s behavior. Subjective-individualistic parents based their own role and evaluations on their child’s unique needs and perspective. Process/interactional parents emphasized the mutual relationship and interdependence of parents and children. Newberger’s resultant quantitative measure with four categories of belief patterns predicted observed and self-reported parenting style and behavior (e.g., higher level reasoning related to authoritative parenting and more positive child relationships; Deković & Gerris, 1992) and discriminated between abusive and nonabusive parents (Newberger, 1980). Notable strengths of the study were that it emphasized
the importance of analyzing beliefs for content, quality and patterns and showed that parenting beliefs predicted differences in behaviors. Unfortunately, however, the processes for coding and analysis were not explained so the influence of researcher bias is unclear. Additionally, there was a broad age range of offspring, which is problematic because child age has been shown to influence parental beliefs (Perez Rivera & Dunsmore, 2011). Finally, there is reason to expect the findings do not generalize to society today.

Another study by Palacios’ (1990) was not qualitative but did take an inductive approach to define the development, parenting, and education of children. Hierarchical grouping of open-ended interview items from 276 Spanish parents produced three patterns of parental beliefs: traditional, modern, and paradoxical. Palacios classified parents as traditional when they expressed a view that child development is innate and parents are non-influential. Parents were considered modern when they believed child development is based on the interaction of nature and nurture. Parents fit into the paradoxical pattern when they expressed beliefs that development is based on the environment even though they did not perceive themselves as having a strong influence on their children. Despite the size and methodological strengths of the study, the demographics and timing of the study require follow up in current Western society. Additionally, the study does not identify the content or themes within mothers’ beliefs.

The only recent qualitative psychological study was conducted in 2012 and focused exclusively on emotion-related beliefs. Parker et al. (2012) conducted twelve focus groups with 87 parents of children between the ages of four to 12 in order to identify parental beliefs about emotion socialization and to analyze the effect of culture on those beliefs. The cultures selected were African American, European American, and Lumbee American Indian. The researchers took a deductive and inductive approach by coding for themes within three theoretically derived
dimensions while also expecting dimensions to emerge from the data. Parker et al. (2012) demonstrated that parental beliefs about emotions are varied, generally fall into five dimensions (i.e., value of emotion, socialization, controllability of emotions, the relational nature of emotions, and changeability of emotions), and are largely similar between the three groups sampled, though consideration of cultural comparisons is always important. The most notable cultural differences were that African Americans did not report valuing restriction of emotional expression for social reasons and European Americans reported valuing emotional control such that emotions would not interfere with daily responsibilities. Additionally, Lumbee American Indians were unique in that they thought parents should not argue or express anger in front of their children. Finally, Lumbee American Indians and some African Americans reported that their children should not have emotional privacy. Like Parker et al. (2012), the current study similarly aims to qualitatively identify maternal beliefs but with a few adjustments. First, the focus groups were conducted in Baptist Churches, which likely influenced the generalizability and topics that were raised (Parker et al., 2012). Second, the current study relies on independent interviews, rather than focus groups, as an alternative method of assessment. Third, the current study will code transcripts inductively and blindly to limit theoretical and racial bias. Cultural comparisons will only be conducted after the inductive analyses are complete. Finally, the current study will have a broader scope of analyzing maternal beliefs about parenting in general instead of focusing on beliefs about emotion socialization specifically.

Social and cultural changes in the past decades

The previously reviewed studies demonstrate the variety and complexity of maternal beliefs, which would be difficult to capture based solely on deductive research. And, while there are qualitative studies on maternal beliefs in general, it is unlikely that they generalize to
American society today because the studies that are on the content of beliefs are over fifty years. There have been numerous societal and cultural changes that have affected parents in the past few decades. For example, the rise of the internet and social media increased the accessibility of accurate and inaccurate parenting information. Parents are more likely to be better educated, but they are also more likely to be inundated by information and guidance about parenting, with the potential to be misinformed or over-informed. Parents also see more examples and more idealized portrayals of other parents through media and social media, which leads to increased pressure to exceed unrealistic expectations. As a result of the social pressure, researchers have found increased parental involvement, even to patterns of over-involvement such as “intensive mothering” or “helicopter parenting.” “Intensive mothering” and “helicopter parenting” refer to the relatively recent phenomena that mothers feel a need to sacrifice their time, money, and energy to create the perfect world for their child (Cline & Fay, 2006; Liss, Schiffrin, Mackintosh, Miles-McLean, & Erchull, 2012; Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013; Schiffrin et al., 2014). While not all mothers subscribe to these parenting attitudes, the research on “intensive mothering” is an example of the parenting beliefs and behaviors that can emerge based on social influences.

Another major change has been that more mothers are seeking higher education and employment. While stigma about working mothers is still prevalent, more mothers choose and have to work (Crowley, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2003). Women have more opportunities in education and occupations, which make both more appealing. Additionally, women have a greater need to generate income because of the economic recession, increased cost of living, and increased likelihood of living in a single parent home (Cohn & Caumont, 2016). Notably, more mothers are experiencing socially-induced guilt because they are spending more time outside the
home but they are also spending more time with their families (Dotti Sani & Treas, 2016). Clearly, the roles, duties, and lifestyles of women have changed.

The family unit has also changed over the past few decades. The economic recession has led to a wider gap between the middle and upper socioeconomic classes, fewer resources for middle and lower classes, decreased stability, and increased stress. With limited resources and more debt, adults live with their parents for longer and delay starting a family. The number of divorces has decreased over the past twenty years but so has the number of two parent households. Additionally, the United States has grown more racially and ethnically diverse but the impact of race and ethnicity on parenting is still not well understood (Cohn & Caumont, 2016). While these are only some of the societal and cultural changes that have shaped families and parenting in the past few decades, it is enough evidence to show that there are reasons to expect that parenting beliefs may have changed in the years since the last qualitative analyses were conducted.

The current study

In response to methodological limitations of the quantitative literature and to update the qualitative literature, the current study aims to conduct a qualitative analysis on maternal beliefs about parenting. After initial, blind coding, the current study will also assess cultural, socioeconomic, and employment status similarities and differences. Because the current study will take an inductive approach, specific hypotheses about themes and domains cannot be made a priori.
CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Participants

Participants in the original sample included 110 mothers and their preschool-age children (range = 3 to 5 years). Of the original sample of 110, four of the recordings malfunctioned and three mothers did not complete the task so 103 interviews were coded. Videos for four of the participants ended early but, because more than half of the response was completed, the participants were still included. There were no significant demographic differences between mothers who completed interviews and those who did not. All names and other identifying details were changed to maintain confidentiality when coding.

Of the 103 included participants, mothers ranged in age from 21-43 (M = 31.03, SD = 6.05) and their children ranged in age from 3-5 (M = 3.50, SD = 0.52). Most of the sample was college educated or higher (47.6%) and 27.3% of mothers were under age 20 at the age of their first child’s birth. Most mothers had 2 children (39.1%), but 27.3% of the sample only had one child. Almost half the sample was married (47.1%), but a sizeable proportion of mothers had never been married (42.2%). The sample was racially diverse (46.6% African American, 42.7% Caucasian, 4.9% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 4.9% other). The sample was also socioeconomically diverse (40% income less than $20,000 per year, 27% $20,000-$49,999, 16% $50,000-$79,999, 17% more than $80,000).
**Procedure for data collection**

Mothers and their children were recruited through fliers posted in the community. They were required to be fluent in English. Mothers were excluded if they were currently pregnant and children were excluded if they had a developmental disability that would impede verbal communication.

Mothers were mailed packets of measures that they completed at home and brought to their laboratory visit. Mothers and their children came to a psychology laboratory together. Upon arriving, consent and assent were obtained. The dyads then participated in a variety of tasks. The task that is relevant to the current study is a speech task in which mothers were told to prepare and deliver a speech about their philosophy of parenting. All tasks and speeches were video recorded. Parents were compensated $100 for their participation and children chose a small prize as a token of appreciation.

**Measures**

**Maternal Beliefs.** Maternal beliefs were assessed using a semi-structured speech task. Mothers were told they had two minutes to prepare a five-minute speech on their “philosophy of parenting,” the kind of mother they think they are, and their strengths and weaknesses as a parent. They were told they were not allowed to use their notes during the speech and that they would be observed and videotaped. Of note, this task was originally designed as a stress-induction task modeled after the Trier Social Stress Test (Kirschbaum, Pirke, & Hellhammer, 1993). If the mother paused for longer than 20 seconds during the speech she received one of the following prompts: “What in particular is the biggest strength you have as a parent?” or “What is your advice to other parents of preschool-age children?” All video recordings were transcribed for coding purposes.
Procedure for data analysis

**Qualitative analysis.** Maternal interviews were analyzed using a phenomenological qualitative analysis, aimed at investigating the mothers’ experiences, perceptions, representations, and/or constructions of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative method was a Thematic Analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Thematic Analysis involves identification and analysis of themes across texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was taken so that themes emerged from the data and were less biased by the researcher’s assumptions (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). The theoretical drive was contextualist, meaning that the way mothers made sense of their experience was considered in relation to social factors (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Analyses were conducted on transcriptio
tions of the interviews to control for coder bias. The principal investigator and two research assistants familiarized themselves with the interviews before coding. Then, initial codes were independently generated using a line-by-line, open-coding approach (Charmaz, 2006). Coding was conducted independently to allow for different interpretations and verification of codes, but regular coding meetings occurred to ensure continuity and agreement (Patton, 2015). Emergent codes and interpretations were discussed and differences were resolved by referring to the text and reflecting on individual biases (Harrison, MacGibbon, & Morton, 2001). Data corpora were any length, irrespective of grammatical symbols, but limited to text that was directly relevant to the code. Codes were inclusive, with the possibility that more than one code could apply to one data corpus.

All of the data corpora with the same codes were compiled and a code book was created (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codebook included the name of the code, instructions, and
examples (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). Codes were expanded and collapsed as needed and agreed upon by the principal investigator and research assistants.

After the codebook was created, the principal investigator looked for themes by analyzing the relationship between codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Flick, 2009). Themes and coded data extracts were analyzed for internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity and codes were further discarded and/or broken down where appropriate (Patton, 2015). Following the establishment and clarification of themes and codes, the principal investigator and research assistants reevaluated the entire data set to determine if codes were missed, if themes matched the data, and if saturation had been achieved (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 2015). Themes were then defined, named, and interpreted to better understand underlying patterns, meanings, assumptions, and implications (Flick, 2009).

**Analysis of cultural similarities and differences.** After all of the interviews were coded blindly, a count was created of the presence or absence of each code by participant. Racial differences in the presence of codes were analyzed using chi-square analyses. Differences in content of codes were analyzed by the principal investigator. A similar approach has been used by other researchers interested in determining the relevance of beliefs to various cultural groups (e.g., Parker et al., 2012).
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Coder characteristics

All interviews were independently coded by three coders. While all coders were trained to approach coding as objectively as possible and all codes were based on a group consensus to minimize the threat of researcher bias, it is important to describe characteristics of the coders. All three coders had worked with families in research and clinical settings. The coders were not involved in data collection for the current sample, which minimized biases related to participant characteristics. The coders were also culturally and ethnically diverse: two were Caucasian but one was American and the other Canadian. The third coder was Indian American. None of the coders were parents. All were young adults in their early 20s. Two were undergraduate students and the principal investigator was a graduate student.

Weekly meetings were held to discuss emergent codes until saturation was reached, after about 45% of the interviews had been coded. Interviews were then coded and re-coded independently. The principle investigator compiled the codes. Consensus on discrepancies was reached by all coders before the data were included in the codebook for 33% of the interviews. Consensus was considered to have been reached for the remaining interviews if at least two coders provided the same codes. Intercoder reliability was calculated based on the 33% of interviews that were selected at random.
Overview of the thematic analysis

In all, 62 codes emerged through independent coding and consensus. The codes and their frequencies are summarized in Table 1, organized by overarching theme. The most common codes were beliefs about maternal characteristics and behaviors. Specifically, patience, love, and time were most heavily emphasized, as evidenced by their frequency among participants and within responses. The least common codes were beliefs about chores, overprotectiveness, putting importance on the parent’s needs, limiting television and media for the child, and teaching children about religion. These codes fit into five themes: (1) global evaluations of the parenting role (2) valued behaviors and characteristics for the mother, (3) valued outcomes for the child, (4) influences on the mother, and (5) self and other evaluations.

Even though five codes had reliabilities that were fair (management $\kappa = .35$; responsibility $\kappa = .35$; concern and encouragement of relationships with non family members $\kappa = .36$, and negative view of the child $\kappa = .36$) and two had reliabilities that were poor due to low frequency (placing importance on the parent’s needs $\kappa = .15$; obedience $\kappa = .2$; Landis & Koch, 1977), they were retained because the percent agreement was greater than 80%.

To orient the reader, mothers’ global evaluations of the parenting role as enjoyable and/or hard were analyzed first. Next, valued behaviors and characteristics for the mother will be summarized followed by valued outcomes for the child. Valued maternal behaviors and characteristics were subdivided into teaching and supporting behaviors, disciplinary behaviors, providing behaviors, and relational behaviors. Valued outcomes for the child were divided into general success, outcomes with intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits, intrapersonal outcomes, and interpersonal outcomes. Next, beliefs about influences on the mother will be described. These were divided into child effects, coparenting effects, extended family effects, and
contextual effects. The final theme will be maternal self and other evaluations, because a few mothers described fulfillment of ideals by themselves and others. Finally, emergent racial differences will be analyzed, given previous research that culture is one of the most robust predictors of beliefs. Due to the length and complexity of the results, some references between individual codes and extant quantitative literature were incorporated into the current section and the discussion focuses on more global comparisons between themes and existing research.

As a summary of the results of the thematic analysis, values for mothers and children emerged via mothers’ evaluations of their own strengths and weaknesses, and hypothetical advice they would give to other parents. Thus, emergent themes included ideas about parenting ideals and descriptions of realistic parenting behaviors. Additionally, most expressed values for the child emerged because mothers were describing the ways they should be helping their children. It was less common for mothers to talk about goals for their children without describing the role they should play in the process. Thus, values for the mother and child were heavily interrelated.

Another key feature of maternal beliefs was the high degree of variability. The only agreement among all mothers was that their primary goal was to support their child’s development. Even within teaching and supporting descriptions, mothers used different language, described different methods, and hoped for different outcomes for their teaching and supporting behaviors. Other than agreement in overarching themes of teaching and supporting, the most common individual codes were only reported by 53.4% of the sample and, within those, mothers varied in the content, frequency, and intensity that they spoke about each subject. Thus, while a frequency count was used to summarize emergent themes in the whole sample, the variability within each theme is also represented via qualitative summary and direct quotes.
Global evaluations of the parenting role

Primary patterns that emerged regarding global evaluations of the parenting role focused on whether it was enjoyable or hard to be a parent. These reflections were made by about a third of the sample. Most mothers who viewed parenting as hard also expressed enjoyment of parenting or positive self-evaluations of their ability to overcome challenges. Thus, the common theme was that, despite challenges, most mothers had an overall positive view of parenting or their parenting ability. For example, participant 26 [P26] said,

Okay. I’m a parent and I think parenting is very hard sometimes because you go through some hard stuff with your child. You go through some hard times, you go through good times, you go through bad times but most of all I like being a parent, you know I have learned so much from being a parent. And um, I like having Mark around, he makes me smile, he keeps me going.

Like participant 26, the primary reasons that mothers said they enjoyed parenting was because they enjoyed their children and they were proud of the strengths they had developed. The primary challenges that arose involved balancing multiple demands:

Alright, parenting has been both the hardest job I’ve ever had but also the most rewarding job I’ve ever had. Um, it takes so much of you to go into being a parent but sometimes it just seems it is taxing, it pulls from you both physically and emotionally at all times (P70).

The other main reason that parenting was generally perceived as hard was if mothers had to do it independently, which will be described later. Mothers who made global evaluations often mentioned enjoyment or strengths immediately before or after they mentioned challenges, which
alludes to two possible functions of global evaluations. Reminders of benefits may give mothers perspective and patience to help them cope with challenges. Alternatively, mothers may juxtapose challenges and benefits to help them maintain realistic expectations. The pattern of co-occurring negative and positive evaluations of parenting introduced one of many parental cognitive conflicts that mothers mediated.

**Valued behaviors and characteristics for the mother**

The emphasis of the responses within this theme was on the behaviors and characteristics mothers should possess and demonstrate to achieve success for themselves and their children. Again, there was large variability among mothers in the behaviors and characteristics they valued, their intended outcomes, and their ability to enact their values, but there were commonalities, too. For example, while mothers valued different combinations of behaviors and characteristics, they agreed that the synergistic and interdependent relations among their valued parenting behaviors meant that constellations of parenting characteristics were more important than individual ones. Some characteristics and behaviors were explicitly described as interdependent. The most commonly referenced grouping was maternal flexibility, patience, and consistency, all of which were considered important for a mother’s ability in all domains. Characteristics also emerged as important within constellations, rather than individually, because they were almost always mentioned in conjunction with other valued behaviors. For example, love was never mentioned on its own but always with other characteristics, such as support, care, safety/security, understanding, respect, discipline, attention/time, patience, devotion, and spoiling. These characteristics seemed to be important because they related to other positive parenting factors and because they were best demonstrated through other behaviors. Finally, some characteristics and behaviors were best understood based on the other parenting behaviors.
they correlated with. For example, time and attention had different meanings so contextual clues about related behaviors and characteristics defined the individual values in these domains. The correlations, interdependence, and contextual clues of characteristics and behaviors are consistent with a recent research effort to study groupings of maternal characteristics and styles as stronger predictors of maternal and child outcomes than individual behaviors or characteristics (Steinberg, 2001).

Very few mothers reported beliefs that they should prioritize their own needs and very few described parent-centered activities. Even when mothers did prioritize their needs at the expense of time with their child, they stated that they did so to improve their parenting. For example, participant 29 said,

I often um, you know I don’t take the time I need to take care of my own needs and sometimes that can leave me worn a little bit thin and I have to step back from the situation or call in daddy to come and help me because I just don’t have the emotional resources I need sometimes to power through the situation.

Almost twice as many mothers said they should sacrifice their needs to provide for their children compared to those who prioritized their own needs, but both of these themes only applied to a small portion of the sample. Participant 86 described values of putting her child first:

Um, put your child first. I know it sound cliché, but very true. Um, a lot of times we try to satisfy our own wants and needs and desires and not really think about our kids because we feel like if we do what’s best for us, then it will be predominantly what’s best for your children, but that’s not always the case. Even when it comes down to dating or relationships or jobs, whatever the case may be, although we need to do what’s best for them as far as overall, but sometimes what we think is best for them may not be, so.
While a minority of mothers expressed similarly extreme beliefs of self-sacrifice, most mothers in the sample struck more of a balance between satisfying their needs and their child’s needs. Management of priorities and needs seemed to be an ongoing, adaptive process and another dimension of maternal conflict.

The low rates of self-sacrificial beliefs did not support early theories that mothers hold “intensive mothering beliefs” that they should be selfless and self-sacrificial. Also not supported were hypotheses that perceived failure to uphold “intensive mother believes” resulted in high levels of guilt, blame, and anxiety (Hays, 1996). The current study supported more recent research that “intensive mothering beliefs” were not the norm but were more common among mothers who were African American (Crowley, 2015). Additionally, the way mothers described prioritization of the child seemed developmentally appropriate for the current preschool-age sample. These findings may need to be replicated in older samples but the current study, like others, did not support “intensive mothering beliefs” theories that mothers often have guilt related to beliefs about complete selflessness.

**Teaching and supporting behaviors.** The only theme that had complete consensus was the belief that mothers should encourage their children’s development by teaching, supporting, helping, encouraging, being involved with, guiding, and/or modeling for them. Of the few mothers who mentioned control or pressure to foster child development, only two reported that those methods were beneficial. A few mothers also stated beliefs that children’s subjective experience of support would have an added benefit of improving the parent-child relationship, but otherwise the emphasis was on benefits for the child.

Most mothers were not specific in methods they used to encourage, support, or teach their children, but stated that patience, perspective taking/understanding, cognitive and behavioral
flexibility, and feelings of responsibility were instrumental. Patience and perspective-taking were expected to have a particularly strong transactional relation with support and teaching:

Read, a lot, um, and not get too frustrated, which is easier said than done. Um, to really nurture their spirit just because they’re taking in so much, they’re little sponges and they’re sort of crossing these lines between preschool and school age. And I just feel like, yea there’s a lot of frustration at this level but there’s so much fun at this level too. And to sort of take as much as you can in stride, and you do have to be firm at this point, I think now is the time to set boundaries, for sure. And it does work (P10).

As participant 10 explained, many mothers reported beliefs that they would be better able to teach their children if they were patient and understanding of their child’s developmental level. Patience and understanding were also believed to lead to flexibility in expectations (e.g., “Letting them kind of learn at their own, their own pace, because I know that children are very different and very unique” P22), and support for autonomy and uniqueness (e.g., “I think you have to practice self-control and you need to understand that it’s not about making your child be who you want them to be… helping them be who they want to be” P84). Behavioral and cognitive flexibility were believed to be important so parents could scaffold their lessons and style to match their child’s ability and interests and provide their children with a safe, secure method of exploration.

Maternally reported goals of understanding the child’s abilities and/or interests to foster development demonstrated an understanding of scaffolding models and attachment theory. According to scaffolding models, experts can raise their child’s level through developmentally appropriate teaching (Vygotsky, 1978). Attachment theory stated that parental accurate perception and reliable responses to children’s needs give children a secure parent-child
relationship from which they can safely explore the world around them (Bowlby, 1969). Mothers did not reference these theories directly and values of flexibility, patience, and understanding were not explicitly stated by all, but similar stated beliefs and parallels with developmental literature were described in some manner by most mothers. Thus, as researchers suggested, scaffolding and secure relationships were perceived to be the norm and standard by most mothers.

Another valued characteristic that helped mothers support and teach their children were feelings of responsibility. For example, participant 18 said,

Uh, I feel responsible to my children, not necessarily responsible for them, I feel I need to create for them an environment in which they can learn and develop into people, the little people, because they, they are individuals in their own right and they like things and dislike things and want to do things and don’t want to do things and where I can I like to let their individual uh… needs, individuality come through with what I allow them to do.

This mother, like the others, stated beliefs that they were responsible for teaching and supporting their children. They also said that parental responsibility as a motivation and enhancer for supportive behaviors was considered unique from other responsibilities.

One of the more commonly endorsed beliefs about methods for teaching was through communication. Different methods of communication were believed to teach children about the intended subject, the value of inquisitiveness, appropriate behavior, and emotion regulation. One valued method was open and honest communication, or talking and answering questions as truthfully and transparently as possible. These mothers expressed beliefs that children would learn more, desire to learn more, and feel more self-worth if they knew their parents were listening openly and consistently responsive with honest information. Some of these mothers
also said their children’s perceptions of openness and honesty would improve the parent-child relationship:

Um…I just…I kinda like to let him do his own thing and develop his own idea of what he’s into and an idea of what he’s interested in…um there’s a lot of explanation of things, a lot of encouraging, of asking questions, of asking why, why do we have to do this…um…I don’t like the idea of making up stories to kids to explain things like the Boogey man or something like that. I like explaining what’s actually happening realistically in a way that he can understand it um…so we’re pretty um…he’s free to ask me about anything or come to me with whatever he feels like talking about even if it may…I may not have the answer at the moment, I try to answer it as best I can (P12).

As participant 12 and others explained, the objective was not to have all the answers, but to demonstrate honesty and assistance in finding the answers. By being open to and with their child, mothers also reportedly expected to be open to learning opportunities their child evoked. Thus, open and honest communication was described as both a teaching tool and a demonstration of support and respect that had relational and intrapersonal goals.

Other valued methods of communication for teaching were communication about emotional and/or social behaviors. These mothers said they shaped their children’s behavior by communicating about emotion modification and expression, social rules, “right and wrong” methods by which children could achieve their goals, and expectations for work. More mothers explained the rationale behind their expectations of emotional expression than did mothers who said they communicated about social mores. For example, participant 5 said,

Um, and we always try to ask Mary how things make her feel so that she can learn how to connect her feelings with experiences that she’s having, instead of telling her that, you
know, you shouldn’t hit your sister that’s wrong, we ask her how do you think that makes your sister feel, or how would you feel if somebody did that to you. So that she can learn how to be empathetic and how to connect feelings. And we try to validate her feelings as much as we can so if she, if she cries for example we don’t tell her that-

In contrast, when communicating socially appropriate behaviors that were not emotionally charged, participant 81 said:

But at the same time they should be taught to respect behavioral expectations such as not running around in the middle of the grocery store or something like that – something that could hurt them. Or behavior that wouldn’t be, for example, okay at school – hitting, or cussing at your teacher or something like that – they need to learn and those kinds of expectations should be reinforced

Participant 81, like others, described communication with her child about specific behavioral expectations without justification or rationale for the behaviors or for why the child should obey. It is likely that mothers have more reciprocal discussions with children about emotional behaviors because those require coping skills, whereas many social rules should just be memorized and followed. Additionally, within communication about emotions mothers were more likely to talk about communication of negative emotions. Increased emphasis on negative emotions is consistent with research findings that parents spend more time communicating about negative emotions than about positive ones (e.g., Hudson, 1991). Again, negative emotions may receive more time and explanation because those are harder for children to modulate.

There was variability in the way mothers who talked about communication related to emotions said they responded to their children. While each strategy was only mentioned by a minority of mothers, the tactics that emerged included assisting their children’s identification of
the source of their emotions (e.g., “A lot of times I’ll ask my children how they’re feeling, if they feel sad I’ll ask them what has made them feel sad or how can we help keep them happy” P25), validating their children’s emotions (e.g., “I do my best to let them know that it’s okay to be sad, it’s okay to be angry and those type of things” P20), problem-solving with them (e.g., “If she’s crying we hug her and say you know it’s okay, I understand how you feel but what’s the best way to handle this instead of crying and acting out in frustration” P9), and encouraging their emotional expression (e.g., “Tell them it’s okay to be emotional, to show emotions as long as it’s demonstrated in a positive way” P68). These emotion socialization strategies were classified as “supportive” by researchers (e.g., Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998), and the few mothers who mentioned them seemed to agree. It was rare that mothers said they responded to their children’s emotions by telling them to “be calmer,” but there was insufficient context to determine if these responses were minimizing or appropriate.

While less common than communication related to emotion, some mothers seemed to value modeling appropriate emotion regulation, too (e.g., “If I lose my temper and say something that might hurt her feelings, I go and apologize and try to explain why I said what I said and why I shouldn’t say that or things like that” P15). Mothers’ beliefs in using coaching and modeling to teach their children emotion regulation was consistent with emotion socialization theory, though mothers place a stronger emphasis on the influence of communication than they do on modeling or observation (e.g., Eisenberg, et al., 1998).

Involvement in children’s activities was also described as a way for mothers to support and teach their children. Involvement included engaging in family play, spending time with children, paying attention to them (i.e., demonstrating engagement or monitoring their progress), and helping them on homework and other tasks. Play was expected to enhance children’s
imagination, individuality, talents, and understanding of the world around them while improving the parent-child relationship:

Um, just the importance of teaching them things that they’re responsive to, I can’t stress that enough. Because you know so many parents they want their kids to read, they want their kids to multiply and do all these amazing, brilliant things, but if you sit there and push them and push them and do that then it becomes very not fun for them, so it’s more important to put those things in a fun context and just let them lead the way with regard to learning how to read or how to do addition, or different things in their environment that they’re curious about, just respond with information whenever possible when they lead you to a question (P29).

The theme of “letting them lead the way” was common among almost all mothers who talked about family play but these mothers also described personal enjoyment from the activities. Child-led play was described as playing age-appropriate games, joining the child’s pre-selected activity, or showing support in the child’s school activities. These activities that were reportedly appropriate for the child and enjoyed by the mother included “going out” to places such as the park or restaurants, exploring nature, engaging in physical activities such as biking, swimming, or hiking, travelling, doing artistic projects, watching television or movies together, playing games, or reading together. Of the few mothers who mentioned electronics, most reported that television and other electronics should be limited in favor of more educational experiences. Because so few mothers mentioned electronics and because electronics are so integrated into daily life now, it is expected that electronics were only salient to mothers who opposed them and that most mothers use electronics with their children, though follow up is needed. Additionally, only two participants talked about the prohibitive cost of activities, which they said they adapted
to by finding affordable activities and/or sacrificing leisure activities for educational ones. Thus, activities that mothers described as particularly potent teaching and relational behaviors seemed attainable to mothers of all socioeconomic statuses.

While some mothers reported beliefs that they were uniquely important teachers for their children, some also said that they should provide their children with extra support and resources by encouraging other family relationships. Some mothers described encouragement of close nuclear family ties to teach their children the importance of family and shared family values and goals. These mothers endorsed beliefs that family values and relationships would increase a child’s sense of support. For example, participant 25 said,

Guide them into the principles that are important to your family and values that are important to your family. And we try to teach those, I think our girls have a good understanding of what is correct and what is not correct in terms of manners and those types of things. And the best thing to do is to show them love. If your child knows you love them, and I hope, and I’m pretty sure my children know they love us, the other night we carved pumpkins and afterwards my 4-year-old was like, you’re the best mom ever! Doing things as a family really helps give them the strength and confidence they need, courage and confidence I guess to face the world.

Nuclear family relationships were described as providing direct lessons and indirect encouragement of development through feelings of support. Similar benefits were also reportedly obtained through relationships with extended family, but these resources were mentioned more rarely. One added benefit of extended family was that the child had more perspectives to learn from and the mother had more caregiving help. For example:
I think that I allow them to have enough resources that if they don’t want to come and talk to me about stuff that they can go and look up thing on their own, I take them to the library a bunch. They’re very close with other family members in case they ever don’t feel comfortable about telling me anything...my sister and my mom are always there to kind of give them a fresh perspective on why things are the way they are in case they get tired of hearing the same things from me (P7).

In addition to providing the child with more teachers, it was implied, but rarely explicitly said, that extended family also made the mother a better teacher by giving her support and stress relief. While the family unit relationship was not the emphasis of most mother’s responses, the nuclear and extended family emerged as beneficial for teaching the child because of the benefits that were conferred to the child, mother, and their relationship.

Mothers also described their less direct methods for teaching and supporting their children, including guidance, modeling, and supported autonomy. These mothers mentioned beliefs that they should adhere to the standards they held for their children, they should model the behaviors they hoped to see, and they should guide their children’s autonomous exploration so children could learn through experience. Mothers reported modeling and guiding empathetic behaviors such as apologizing, taking responsibility for mistakes, and showing love, respect, and patience. For example, participant 3 said,

I model the behaviors that I want my children to show, to learn. I take responsibility for my mistakes, I say I’m sorry, if I do something that I shouldn’t have done, or could have done better or could have said better, um.. what else.. I provide clear guidelines as to what is safe and not safe, or what the limits are and boundaries, in other words my
children are just not, they not allowed to just do whatever just because it’s “gentle parenting,” so to speak.

This mother, like others, recognized how her behaviors affected her children’s behaviors, so she tried to teach socially and emotionally appropriate behaviors by doing them. Other mothers said they recognized their children’s agency but were still responsible for putting their children on the “right track” through guidance:

It’s just, it’s all about providing stability for your kids and nurturing them and showing them the how to make good decisions on their own and not making them for them, just like providing them the ability to know what the difference between what, what, is right and wrong in our particular family and um allow them the ability to come to the conclusions on what is right or wrong for them, like, later in life. Um, and how to make good decisions for themselves that are going to help them achieve their own stability and consistency in life later on…Um, like if I, if I have one child that is a little bit more insecure, than another child, then I might try to do things to work on building the strengths up of, of my, you know, my oldest daughter. Um, or play, like more on the, uh, the stronger points of my son. I don’t try to push the same things on all of my children. Um, I try to help build their confidence in themselves by playing on what their strengths are (P101).

The overarching themes were that modeling and guidance were ways to capitalize on natural learning opportunities, such as their children’s observation and respect their children’s autonomy as mothers helped their children achieve success. Guidance and modeling were complex skills because mothers had to have high levels of self-control and awareness of their own behaviors, their children’s activities, and the implications of their actions. The ability to engage in these
forms of teaching and support were also expected to have high rewards; children learned the requisite skills, developed the understanding and confidence to engage in the skills independently, and perceived their mothers as dependable and supportive. Guidance and modeling were relatively commonly reported, so these behaviors were perceived as normative. But, due to the complexity of the behaviors, follow up on the accuracy of mothers’ perceptions of themselves and their children is needed.

**Disciplinary behaviors.** Most the sample (67.0%) described beliefs about discipline and/or limit setting. Even though many mothers espoused rule setting and specific disciplinary strategies, they rarely articulated why they engaged in those behaviors (e.g., “I’m not a strict disciplinarian but I feel like rules are important and we need to follow them” P10). These mothers primarily explained their rationale if they were referencing strategies they opposed. For example, a few mothers said they did not use time-out or punishment because they thought those strategies were ineffective or harsh. The most commonly rejected discipline strategy was spanking. Mothers who eschewed spanking stated that they did not want to teach their children violence, and they thought other disciplinary strategies were more effective. For example, participant 29 said,

I think it’s important to be consistent in your parenting style, especially in regard to discipline. No violence, violence doesn’t teach anything except to solve your problem with violence, so no hitting, no slapping, no screaming to try to get your child to behave, it’s more effective to do things in a calm, even manner and not to show that they’ve gotten a rise out of you even if they have.

Mothers who did spank were in the minority of the overall sample and of the group of mothers who talked about spanking. The mothers who reported spanking described time-out or
punishment as ineffective with one or all their children and/or used the strategy when they were unable to maintain patience or consistency. For example, participant 6 said,

I um, it’s hard to punish a child, and say no, and even when you do it’s like I am strict with my kids, and you know I discipline them, tell them what’s right what’s wrong, and yet they get spanked on the butt and then I feel guilty for it and I reward them right after, you know? So It doesn’t.. in my household like if my kids get in trouble, they’ll get upset and they’ll cry and then literally a minute after they cry they come up to me and cuddle up to me and tell me what’s wrong and everything and everything’s back to normal. And um, it’s just, It’s just really hard.

Mothers who did not spank similarly identified consistency, patience, and a balance between leniency and strictness as the most salient characteristics for discipline.

The importance of patience and consistency in discipline were consistent with Stolz’s (1967) sample but the relative value of disciplinary strategies have somewhat changed over the past fifty years. While both samples endorsed removal of privileges and items most often and physical punishment the least, the percentage of mothers who seemed to value communication in discipline increased between the studies. The mothers in Stolz’s (1967) study endorsed mixed reactions to verbal disciplinary strategies, but communication to prevent (“Umm, and also as far as discipline is concerned, that parents should explain that rules are for everybody, that adults have to also follow rules” P92), supplement (“I try to be more of a gentle parent, talking more with um, um more talking it out than just making a time out” P55), and complement (e.g., “So just a lot of time-out and talking about the situation after, are the types of things I use personally. And talking about choices” P78) discipline was more consistently endorsed in the current study. It is possible that probing the mothers who did not mention communication related to discipline
would yield more mixed reactions. But, given the high rates of valued communication in the current sample, it still seems that this strategy is relatively more highly valued than it was fifty years ago.

Most mothers seemed confident and comfortable in their implementation of disciplinary and rule-setting strategies, with only about a third of the mothers reporting difficulty with restriction and/or implementation. Mothers were more likely to talk about weaknesses in discipline than they were to talk about weaknesses in other behaviors. This was likely because errors produced more noticeably negative outcomes for their children and themselves than errors in other domains would. It did seem that other mothers were not proficient in their use of discipline, despite expressed confidence, which suggested that weaknesses in discipline were more common than were reported. For example, three mothers seemed unaware of their incorrect implementation of time out (e.g., “I do time out when it comes to my discipline. I have a pillow that I sit in the living room…The T.V. is still on but I have a pillow that I sit in the living room” P36). Thus, some mothers seemed more aware than others of the challenges of discipline, but it was evident that discipline was one of the harder domains for mothers to implement.

Fewer mothers talked about positive reinforcement in the form of praise or rewards, compared to mothers who talked about punishment or rule-setting. No mothers talked about praise and rewards, and two mothers were aberrant: one said she did not use rewards, and the other said she rewarded her children after spanking them to appease her own guilt. Mothers who positively reinforced their children were vague in their descriptions of target behaviors (e.g., “when he or she does something well” (P75); “they’re asked to do certain things” P44). Thus, it was unclear if mothers reinforced behaviors, effort, and/or completion of tasks. It was clear that
positive reinforcement strategies were expected to modify the child’s behavior, and two mothers noted other interpersonal and intrapersonal benefits:

When there are simple things going on at school, doesn’t have to be something major, I try to let them know that whatever they do, I’m proud of them and that I just only want them to be happy. I want the best for them (P96).

Mothers seemed more concerned with or aware of the behavioral implications of reinforcement than the emotional ones, as evidenced by the fact that few mothers mentioned intrapersonal benefits for the child resulting from positive reinforcement. It is likely that more mothers praise their children than reported it. But, the lack of demonstrated awareness of the value and function of praise or rewards suggested that relatively few mothers understood the effectiveness of these strategies for shaping child development. Limited understanding means mothers may not be using praise or rewards as often or as effectively as they could be.

**Providing behaviors.** Mothers expressed beliefs that their ability to provide necessities, luxuries, routines, and boundaries would fulfill material needs and wants and enhance a sense of safety and security for their children. Mothers who mentioned their ability to provide did so because they were proud that they could give their children material objects, consistency, or security, even if they experienced barriers in the process. Almost all the mothers who mentioned difficulties providing also expressed self-compassion about their effort or success, suggesting that this is an area in which caregivers can feel self-efficacy. The importance of the ability to provide was especially salient among mothers of low socioeconomic status, which coincided with Stolz’s (1967) findings. Thus, concerns about the ability to provide may be more salient for mothers who have historically or currently are facing barriers in doing so.
Mothers who had more difficulty providing due to low socioeconomic status were also more likely to describe values or self-compassion about “spoiling their children”. Few mothers explicitly said they spoiled their children and mothers were vague in their definitions of spoiling (“I think I’m a pretty good parent, um.. we all have faults, um, but I do love my child, maybe spoil her a little too much. Um, I may, I may give in when I shouldn’t give in to her” P27). It was unclear with this participant and others whether they spoiled with attention, material objects, or if spoiling referred to insufficient discipline. Only mothers who said they “spoiled a little” expressed remorse and the mothers who said they wished they could spoil their children more were of a higher socioeconomic status (yearly income of greater than $60,000). Thus, mothers who seemed to value indulgence described it as a privilege and way to demonstrate love and security. Despite reported benefits to spoiling, indulgence was likely accompanied by behaviors that other mothers and researchers said were negative. For example, the mothers who mentioned spoiling were inconsistent in their self-evaluations and values, so they were likely inconsistent in parenting (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, Henry, & Schoeny, 2009). It was unclear if inconsistency caused spoiling or if spoiling was a marker of other negative behaviors, but there were likely consequences for the child from the spoiling and/or from the accompanying behaviors.

A mother’s ability to provide security and safety, in part through protection from unsafe behaviors and people, were also reportedly valued. Protection occurred through communication of boundaries, punishment, and monitoring relationships. As boundaries and punishment were previously discussed, only protection and monitoring in relationships will be described here. Beliefs in protection from others were mentioned rarely and were aimed at keeping children safe from environmental dangers and negative outcomes. Seven mothers espoused concerns about their children’s relationships with peers and eight reported monitoring their children’s
interactions with others in general. The primary concern with peers was that children would be negatively influenced by others:

Well as far as just staying and make sure they’re focused on their schoolwork basically and not running out with the wrong crowd so with other teenagers who are not trying to go the right direction they’re trying to have something... you know have something for themselves, have something going. Instead of the ones that are just hanging out and not trying to learn and be focused on their education because that’s the top priority right now (P34).

Other mothers restricted their children’s activities and interactions with others:

Don’t trust too many around your kid no matter who they are because in this world we live in now, don’t nobody care who you are, they gonna do what they gotta do. And I mean, talk to your child more often to see how their feelings are going (P93).

Identified causes of protection from others were feelings of over-protectiveness, views of children as helpless, and/or negative childhood experiences. It may also be that current contextual effects led to and justified concern about relationships with others because most mothers who endorsed these beliefs were low income and racial minorities in the south.

Another way that mothers reported providing, or at least attempting to provide, stability and security for themselves and their children was through routine. It was believed that routines fostered obedience, structure, and stability, and, thus, were also opportune times for children to practice independence and flexibility. Some mothers reported values of consistency in routine and some advocated for flexibility to help children feel supported, safe, and secure. Participant 37 described both the value of consistency and routines in general:

You should also be consistent uh… so routine, go to bed at the same time every day, eat dinner at the same time, take a bath, establishing that routine gives them something to
follow and it shouldn’t change. If you told her no don’t do this but then you let her do it the next day, it’s not teaching them what’s right and wrong….mean what you say and the routines are just…establishes them a sense of order early... We have a very good routine at home. We stick to things in that order…um and she knows when Mommy says it’s time to go to bed, it’s time to go to bed. We don’t fight, we don’t cry, it’s just time to go to bed and I think establishing that at an early age is… not created the problems that we have.

In addition to finding balance between flexibility and rigidity, mothers also had to balance tasks and balance people, as participant 37 described. These conflicting dimensions seemed most challenging in the nighttime routine, as evidenced by the tendency of mothers who mentioned routine to talk about bedtime due to pride or challenges in maintenance. Nighttime was reportedly the most difficult part of the routine because mothers had to coordinate more children and tasks. They were then subject to more people’s wants, needs, and influence, which left mothers with less control. When being flexible in their routine was not enough, some mothers said they had to be flexible in their definitions of success, too.

**Relational behaviors.** It was rare that mothers explicitly stated the benefits of fostering a good parent/child relationship, but almost a third of the sample described their relationship positively (32.04%). The few who talked about advantages to good relationships said they ensured continued connection as their children grow, led to improved outcomes for their children, gave mothers a deeper understanding of their children, reduced maternal stress, and improved the mothers’ mood. Mothers seemed to view positive relationships as having a unidirectional impact on intra- and interpersonal outcomes and it was apparently less salient to them that good relationships also resulted from the same outcomes.
Mothers were more specific in their beliefs about parent-child boundaries than they were about the benefits of a good relationship. The boundaries mothers described were a balance between friendship and parenting, which were supposedly important for security and obedience. These mothers’ descriptions paralleled research on parenting styles. Baumrind (1967) proposed that mothers balance control and warmth. Mothers also seemed to believe they balance those dimensions, but they called them parenting and friendship.

Most mothers who mentioned boundaries fit the authoritative style in that they tried to be both a parent and a friend (e.g., I’m their friend but I’m also their mom so you have to set very, not boundaries, but rules down…P71). Baumrind (1967) also found this style to be the norm and most beneficial for Western mothers. Only one mother in the current sample erred on the side of friendship (e.g., “Um, well as far as parenting my kids, at the moment I’m more of their friend” P73) and two on the side of parenting (e.g., “We’re not friends. I don’t consider…um…a parent should never be friends with your children” P40). Interestingly, even though participant 40 said she did not want to be her child’s friend, she also reported dependence on her child, which suggested that boundaries may not apply to all domains of the relationship. Additionally, she and the other mother who did not want to be friends with her child reported disruptions in her relationship with her own mother. These patterns suggested that mothers who preferred to be at either extreme of parenting or friendship were atypical and may have been examples of relational disruptions, which was consistent with Baumrind’s (1967) model.

Regarding ways to establish and maintain the parent-child relationship, communication about context, each other’s lives, and the child’s interests and questions were said to be particularly important. Communication offered opportunities for the mother to demonstrate
respect and understanding. Participant 11 described the value of communication in a partnership with her child when she said,

I’m very fortunate that my husband is indeed my husband is a very good parent as well but also a partnership with your child that is leading her and guiding her through her day, that she understands that she does have say so, that she does have an opinion in what goes on in our…in our household and in her daily routine, in her daily life, and that’s something that I’ve really kinda had to refocus on lately as she’s getting to a point where she’s more verbal and does definitely have an opinion. It’s letting her voice, her opinion and not talking about her like she’s not even in the room.

The previously described supportive and teaching behaviors clearly promoted positive relationships and relied on similar characteristics and behaviors.

**Valued outcomes for the child**

Mothers rarely mentioned goals for their children without describing the maternal role in those outcomes. Children’s outcomes were described as heavily intertwined with mothers’ behaviors but mothers acknowledged that the relationship was transactional. Children were influenced by their mothers but mothers also adapted to fit their child’s unique needs, interests, and behaviors. The individuality of children and influence of the larger context were also mentioned by mothers who recognized that their behavior was not determinant of the child’s outcomes. The style of mothers’ comments hinted at behavioral genetics findings, that maternal behaviors were relatively less influential than factors internal to the child. But, most mothers’ emphasis on her role and ability to shape her child’s behavior suggested that most of these mothers perceived a stronger environmental effect than has been found in the literature (Dunn & Plomin, 1991; Maccoby, 2000).
There were differences in the relative weight mothers gave to internal and external influences on their child depending on the context. Mothers were more likely to attribute behaviors as internal to the child when they evaluated their children negatively, than when they evaluated them positively. For example, participant 43 said, “He’s just spoiled and it’s hard to now as he’s getting older, I’m trying to pull him away from being so spoiled. It’s hard”. The mothers who described their children negatively were also more likely to talk about externalizing behaviors (e.g., tantrums, not listening, testing boundaries, high energy), than internalizing ones. In contrast, positive child evaluations were more likely to be described as externally influenced by maternal behaviors or transactional interactions (e.g., “I mean it’s good for them to experiment by themselves because that’s how they learn but if you can help them, help them because my son is very independent” P13). Positive evaluations were made about interpersonal and intrapersonal strengths (e.g., “easy-going,” sociable, intelligent). The patterns of internal attributions for negative behaviors and external ones for positive behaviors were consistent with attributional research (Dix & Reinhold, 1991). Additionally, the tendency for mothers to focus on externalizing behaviors when describing difficulties was consistent with Stolz’s (1967) research that externalizing problems seemed to be more noticeable problems for mothers. One finding that was inconsistent with empirical research on the negativity bias was that more mothers in the current sample evaluated their children positively than negatively (see review in Vaish, Grossmann, & Woodward, 2008). It may be that mothers remind themselves of their child’s positive characteristics for similar reasons that they mentioned parenting as enjoyable more often than they mentioned parenting as hard. The higher rates of positive evaluations may also be the result of demand characteristics, so follow up is needed to determine if mothers more often think about their children positively than negatively.
Regarding domains of goals for the child, the ones that emerged were general success, intrapersonal strengths, and interpersonal skill development. Mothers varied in the extent to which they defined child success based on their own values or their child’s goals. There was more consensus in the view that child outcomes work in a feedback loop. Mothers alleged that child development of interpersonal skills would lead to success in relationships and other domains, which would support the child’s confidence and self-efficacy. Child confidence and self-efficacy were also hypothesized to improve children’s behavior and expectations in relationships. Some mothers mentioned the interplay of these domains whereas some mothers only described values in a few of these domains.

**General outcomes of success.** The most commonly reported goals for children were ambiguous hopes of success or generally positive outcomes. While most mothers did not define “success” or the “best,” a few included in their hopes for success that their children would also excel in their self-selected interests, feel confident, and be independent, all of which were said by participant 2:

Um I believe that parenting should be based on love and patience because parenting should be preparing a child to be successful in the future, to be an accomplished adult, to feel good about themselves, so I believe you have to have a lot of patience to help your child learn how to know himself or herself, and I think that you should take them and have them live as many experiences as possible to prepare them for the future because you’re not always going to be with them...So if I give them that self-confidence then they won’t be afraid to try different things, they won’t, um, because the worst person that can put you down is yourself so I want my children to be, to have a high self-esteem and believe in themselves, because I believe in them...they’re going to have to try to learn
different things, and be independent and successful. And um, hopefully, parents when they grow up or whatever they want to be when they grow up, I’ll be there to keep helping them.

This mother was the most concrete and specific in her definition of success and seemed to balance prioritizing her values with the interests of her child. About half of the mothers who valued general success wanted their children to find their own definition of success (e.g., “Umm, and make them feel safe and secure and confident in whatever they choose but also teach them to go beyond what they may initially feel or think and to expand on that I think” P84) and the other half wanted their children to fit the definition of success and values the parents established (e.g., “Um to go ahead and teach that to her that early is important for shaping her into the person I hope that she will be when she grows up” P109). Mothers seemed to maintain ambiguity in their definitions of success because they were hoping for globally positive outcomes and because the definition of success depended on the parent, child, and the child’s developmental level.

Another domain in which children were reportedly expected to achieve general success was in pursuit of their interests. Mothers described beliefs that participation and success in fun activities that were just for the child would offer exposure to new situations and people, opportunities for exploration, and development of skills. Some mothers emphasized the role of independent exploration for children’s discovery and mastery of talents:

And so I want to find their strength and encourage their interests, um, and let them try different things then other siblings try, and not have everyone play soccer, but ya know, have one run cross country or have one play baseball and be able to find what they’re good at so they can develop to the best of their ability (P1).

Activities were also relatively safe opportunities for children to learn from mistakes:
I think it’s important to expose them to a lot of different um, situations, so that they know how to deal with a variety of things, with or without me. And…um, and it’s important for them to be able to make their own mistakes and be able to correct that if they, you know, if they need to. Like, playing on the playground if I climb up and fall down, it’s okay to fall down. Kind of figuring that out on their own, obviously with a little bit of help (P21).

Finally, agency during play was believed to help children prepare to adapt to new and diverse situations while interacting with peers, as participant 59 expressed:

We put him in different activities. He plays basketball. He does gymnastics so and since he’s been to—a lot of things we try to expose him to a lot of stuff at a young age, so he’ll be able to adapt to situations as he gets older, so that’s just my parenting philosophy I guess… and that’s it…

These activities were classified as values of general of success because mothers seemed less concerned with the type of activity and more interested in the broad benefits the activities brought. Even though these activities were relatively independent times for the child, rather than the previously mentioned family play, mothers still said they should be involved. Mothers espoused involvement through observation, encouragement (e.g., attending and cheering at events), guidance (e.g., offering ideas for activities), help, and openness but not pressure.

**Outcomes with intrapersonal and interpersonal benefits.** While many mothers reported valuing their own ability to love and show love, most of these mothers also said they wanted their children to feel loved. Feelings of love were supposedly believed to improve the parent-child relationship, the child’s self-evaluations, and future relationships. For example, participant 2 said:
And uh, and love and patience, I want my child to know that I love them as much as, I want them to know that if I love them, everybody else that is around them should love them as much as I did. They are valuable human beings and nobody should ever treat them badly. So if they know what it is to be loved from me, from a parent, they will expect that respect and love from everybody else.

Loved children were expected to be able to enter into loving relationships that would further foster their development. It was also common for these mothers to mention unconditional love, which they supposedly believed would lead to positive outcomes in the most domains.

Emotion regulation was also valued by many mothers for children’s personal and social development. Mothers who identified this value said their child’s ability to understand, express, and cope with his or her emotions would alleviate the child’s distress, improve his or her empathy, and lead to appropriate social behavior. These skills were mainly said to be taught through communication, as was previously explained.

Very few mothers defined success in terms of education, though a few referenced the importance of intelligence and education. For example, participant 6 said:

I study with her every night, and I don’t want her to be like, I don’t want to go to school, I don’t want an education, I want them to go to college. So that’s my main focus right now is keep studying interesting, make them like school, which so far is working, they like school they want to be you know.. One wants to be a doctor, the other one wants to work at Walmart but I’m sure that will change but you know, it’s just keeping that focus on, you know, but at the same time having fun with them.

Education and intelligence were explained to be important for the opportunities they provided for general success and for learning about effort (e.g., “We try to tell Emma all the time that she has
to practice to achieve goals, and, even though she may be smart she has to work hard, which is very important to us” P15). For the most part, most mothers who talked about education seemed to view it as relatively less important than socioemotional development and it was endorsed as a priority less often than socioemotional outcomes were. The relative prioritization of socioemotional development over academic success were found in Stolz’s (1967) study, too.

**Intrapersonal outcomes.** Most intrapersonal outcomes for the child were previously mentioned as they were viewed as closely tied to the mother’s actions. As noted, the primary intrapersonal values for the child were confidence, feelings of security, independence, and individuality. Some other rare, but notable characteristics were values of creativity, flexibility, and effort.

**Interpersonal outcomes.** Many mothers hoped their children would be “good people,” engage in socially appropriate behavior, and enter into positive relationships. In order to be “good people” and good citizens, mothers reported that their children should understand morality and their place in the world. Morality was described as differentiation between “right and wrong” that could be taught through maternal guidance, instruction, and/or discipline. In rare cases, religion was mentioned as one way to enhance teachings of morality, but it was nonessential. Morality was also valued for its relation to manners. For example, participant 47 said,

Teach them right from wrong from day one. From like one, maybe two. Yes ma’am, no ma’am. You don’t go around hitting no people. Don’t be a bully. Don’t spit. Don’t hit. Dress appropriately. And just to be a good parent, just trying….just trying that’s all it takes, trying to be a good person. And your kid will follow right behind you footsteps.
Mothers who talked about manners were very specific in their expectations and teaching. It is likely that these mothers were specific because they expended so much time and effort explaining them to their children so their expectations were easy to retrieve and articulate. Manners were defined by these mothers as showing respect, kindness, and empathy to others through respectful, appropriate words (i.e., “yes ma’am,” apologizing, refraining from curse words and harsh language) and/or appropriate behaviors (i.e., not hitting others, showing table manners, sitting quietly in public, sharing). Manners were not often described as obedience, though that pattern emerged in Stolz’s (1967) sample. Only one mother in the current sample specified that she expected obedience as a sign of respect (P44). Otherwise, manners were described as appropriate ways for children to negotiate and interact with others, rather than the quiet obsequiousness that was common in Stolz’s (1967) sample.

Morality, manners, and being a “good person” were said to be improved by a child’s understanding of the world and their place in it. Mothers seemed to believe their child could develop perspective through exposure to diversity, communication, and a sense of self. Participant 108 provided an example of all these values:

And what can he learn about and how does that affect our environment? How does it affect him as a person? How does it make him feel? Um so to be able to provide them, and I say that them for my boys, to provide them with the confidence so they can go forward and be able to function um in a world with a bunch of different people um is certainly what I want them um to be able to do.

Mothers who mentioned these values described themselves as a foundation for prosocial development and related skills but also recognized their limited influence as the child developed agency and independence.
Finally, some mothers reported that their children should have relationships with peers and family members as ways to refine their social skills and develop other avenues of support. In addition to the peer and family relationships that were previously mentioned, some mothers talked about rivalry and competition among siblings, most who talked about their children’s relationships with each other seemed to value the camaraderie and mutual support among their children. For example, participant 103 said:

My weakness is, I would say my biggest weakness is that I am an only child and having two children who are close enough in age to have lots of interactions and rivalries at times can be a challenge and knowing how to deal with it. But usually what I try to revert back to is teaching them to love each other, um, we try to show love to everyone but especially our family, and um revert everything back to that, so um are they being kind to each other if something happens and they hurt each other or they’re mad at each other, um, we talk about it, we try to work it out they don’t just get an immediate consequence we try to work through and get to the heart of the issue and not just make it stop and then move on.

These mothers seemed unconcerned about sibling rivalry, which suggested that mothers perceived it as normal and a teaching experience. These mothers described sibling relationships both as an opportunity to practice social skills and as another source of support for children.

**Influences on the mother**

Mothers identified a range of actors, relationships, and circumstances that impacted their parenting. Familial influences on the mother included adapting to fit the children’s unique interests and needs (child effects) the effect of having or not having a partner (coparenting effects), and the influence of the extended family in childhood and currently (extended family
effects). Contextual effects on the mother included perspective on social norms, the mother’s occupation, and identification with religion.

One of the most common beliefs that was referenced explicitly and implicitly was that parenting was a dynamic process. Mothers’ descriptions of learning and developing as they adapted to interacting changes at multiple levels of their environment was consistent with the dynamic systems perspective (Smith & Thelen, 2003). Most mothers described their development as parents as they adapted to changes at multiple levels of their environment. A few mothers reflected on previously held beliefs and practices that had been altered through experience and some reported on continued learning from observations of and interactions with others. Of mothers who said they learned from others, the emphasis was on judging or not judging other mothers. Very few referenced the role of professionals or books. The mothers who did reference professional advice typically thought the skills did not apply to them because they found parenting in practice to be different than parenting in theory.

**Child effects.** The most commonly and heavily emphasized influences on parenting were factors about the child and interactions with the child. Many mothers’ past experiences with their children led them to the conclusion that their children are unique from their mothers, siblings, and other children. The patterns that emerged within this theme were that some mothers believed their children’s unique personalities, interests, and learning style impacted their general parenting approach, discipline tactics, encouragement style, and/or relationship with their child. Participant one provided an example of almost all of these parental changes:

My second child was so different from my first one, that um, I had to kind of change my strategy again with how I interacted and, uh, with my second daughter and how I disciplined her, and how I encouraged her, um, to do things and to excel. Um, I have two
girls and then two boys, and so by the time my sons were born I think that I have developed uh, just an awareness that each one is so different that you have to look at their personality and their characteristics and be consistent, but each one, each one you have to discipline a little bit different because they respond differently to whether you get angry at them, or whether you punish them or whether you just give them a warning, and that’s enough for one, where other of my children, you know, you have to throw the kitchen and sink and their punishment in order for them to be, um, okay I won’t do that bad behavior again. So, um, but each one is so different, uh, that, and also in encouraging, um, their development and what they’re good at and their talents and, and hope – trying to have them be individual, um, where they see older siblings or younger siblings, and they see things that they’re good at or that they’re interested in, and they want to copy, but I want them to be their individual also. And so I want to find their strength and encourage their interests, um, and let them try different things then other siblings try, and not have everyone play soccer, but ya know, have one run cross country or have one play baseball and be able to find what they’re good at so they can develop to the best of their ability. Um also I think in parenting when it comes to their education um, they all learn differently as well, and to again encourage and allow them to excel in all of their areas...

Few mothers commented on the cause of their child’s uniqueness (i.e., heredity, environment, or both), though two expressed beliefs that “children are born knowing exactly who they are and what they want but they need help expressing it and that’s where you come in as a parent” (P84). Other mothers similarly implied that factors internal to the child accounted for variation among them, though they seemed to take less of a deterministic view of child development. Again, there seemed to be variation in the extent to which mothers’ views were presented as consistent with
behavioral genetic findings of the relative influence of genes and environment (Maccoby, 2000). But, mothers seemed less concerned with the cause of individual differences and more concerned with the effect of those differences.

In addition to adjusting to variable needs among offspring, many mothers also believed they should adjust to the changing needs that accompany aging. As participant 12 said,

Um…it’s still….it’s honestly still sort of developing as he gets older and we have new um…I don’t know challenges is the right word but just different things that come up in his development um….yeah it’s still kind of a developing process. I’m still learning how to be a parent as he gets older so um…

Most mothers who focused on their child’s development stated beliefs that they should be flexible and adaptive to their child’s changes in interest, behavior, and needs. These mothers reportedly tried to adjust their perspective and behaviors to match their child’s developmental level and abilities in all domains of parenting, which, again, was consistent with dynamic systems perspectives. Maintaining perspective on the influence of child development also helped some mothers enjoy their role more and they described improved patience and flexibility from their experience and adjustments as parents.

Siblings were mentioned as influences by some mothers because the comparison among siblings led some to conclude their children were unique and because the sibling relationship occasionally impacted the family dynamic. For example, participant 30 said, “Treating them all equally. Which is kind of hard to do when you have a younger one, the other two you know they get jealous of each other because you’re spending more time with one than the other”. Siblings reportedly competed for maternal attention, though this was rarely mentioned. Because of competition, these mothers believed they had to manage their attention and time to accommodate
all their children. Some mothers also reported needing to mediate fights. Comments about mediation among siblings were mentioned by mothers with a range of children (two to six offspring), suggesting that the number of children did not necessarily determine the presence or salience of sibling competition.

**Coparenting effects.** Both married and single mothers believed coparents offered valuable support for her and the child. Coparents were reportedly viewed by these mothers as cooperative partners with shared beliefs (e.g., “It’s also a huge amount of cooperation and a partnership” P11), who also offered complementary sets of skills and stress relief (e.g., “They have special activities that they get to do with their dad like play the Wii, and they only get to do that when their dad is home” P25). Stress relief had a more nuanced pattern than the other forms of cooperation: parents shared responsibilities and time with the child (e.g., “My husband does a whole lot. I’m really proud of him. He helps when I’m working in the afternoons, he picks the kids up, well he picks up Molly and spends a lot of time with her” P66) or provided emotional relief during times of frustration (e.g., “It’s interesting how we both seem to complement each other in that if I can tell that my husband is getting frustrated, 9 times out of 10 I’m able to step in and vice-versa” P28). Stolz’s (1967) findings reported a similar role of support and cooperation for coparents. The difference between the two studies was that Stolz (1967) found that parents often described the influence of the other parent. The current sample focused more on agreement and joint understanding. Because Stolz’s (1967) sample also described more differentiated roles for mothers and fathers, it may be that marriage and child-rearing are currently expected to be more of a cooperative partnership.

The single mothers who said they experienced difficulties because of their marital and childrearing status provided similar reasons as were just mentioned for needing a coparent. Some
of these single mothers said they wished they had someone to share the responsibility with them (e.g., “um I’m a single parent so I tend to um play both roles in the family where I think sometimes it’s two parent homes have more of a play figure and a disciplinary” P109). Some acknowledged that the skills they could provide individually were limited (e.g., “And by being a single parent I’m trying to teach two boys how to be men and I don’t know anything about being a man” P83). And some of these single mothers expressed needs for stress relief (e.g., “The little tantrums and stuff like that, it kind of frustrates me, I guess because I’m a single parent” P65).

But, some single mothers in the sample also described personal benefits from a coparent, which suggested that coparent support was not exclusive to intact couples. Additionally, while clearly some mothers were specific about challenges that came from being a single mother, most of these single parents just said they experienced global “challenges.” Thus, the challenges of being a single mother seemed to cross many domains and likely occurred for many reasons.

Despite the identified challenges, all single mothers who mentioned their marital status as an influence included self-compassionate statements that hinted at resilience. Some of these mothers mentioned pride in their effort (e.g., “I try my best” P63), some appreciated their continued involvement (e.g., “Caring, providing, and being concerned. That’s my biggest strength ‘cause it’s hard being a single mom and all. I just care and being there” P57), and some said they still enjoyed parenting (e.g., “Okay well I’m a single parent and I um enjoy parenting” P13). The pattern of mentioning strengths when challenges were raised mirrored the way mothers talked about global evaluations of parenting and of their children. So, again, it may be that being a single mother helped women see their resilience and/or that self-affirmations helped these women be resilient.
Another notable pattern within stated beliefs about the influence of coparents was that most of these mothers talked about how coparents influenced the child, instead of how the child influenced the relationship between coparents. Only three mothers described the impact of child rearing on the quality of their marital relationship. One mother reported divorce due to extreme child-rearing stress (i.e., child disability) and the other two said child-rearing strengthened her relationship with her husband (e.g., “Umm parenting is a good thing. Having children is a great thing. Helps improve your marriage as well, because you learn to work with each other” P25). Given participant 99’s extreme circumstances and the rarity of comments about the child’s impact on overall marital quality, it seemed that these mothers did not attribute major marital or relational problems to their children. Child-rearing stress likely affected day-to-day coparent interactions, but these mothers focused more on how child-rearing stress affected coparental roles, rather than their relationship. It may be that when mothers were thinking about parenting more globally, the benefits outweighed and were more salient than the stressors, which is why they did not mention the impact of stress on their romantic relationship. Additionally, it seemed rare that child-rearing would be a determining factor in romantic strife, even if it did contribute to it.

**Extended family effects.** Many mothers believed their parenting was shaped by observations of their parents and/or other childhood experiences. The ways in which these parents wished to deviate from or replicate their childhood experiences varied but generally focused on the amount of love, discipline, and involvement they felt as children. It was more common for these mothers to express desires and attempts to do the opposite of their parents or to give their child a better childhood environment than they experienced, rather than to try to replicate their childhood, though both types of statements were made (e.g., “My parent
weaknesses with me, they wasn’t supportive, you know for me. Seeing how my parents did it make me want to strive and do better with my kids and be a better mama” P65). Two mothers did, however, recognize that it was difficult to deviate from their parents because they had developed negative characteristics similar to their mothers (e.g., “I don’t have patience um…I could just say my mama was the same way so I guess I get it from her” P45).

Some mothers did say that their childhood enhanced their parenting because they learned valued behaviors and/or they had experiences they could now use to relate to their child. A minority of mothers hoped to enact qualities their mothers had (e.g., “There are rules and you have to follow them. I mean you know what I’m saying. I don’t know about you but when I was a kid my Mom said jump and I said how high” P44). Also, a few tried to recall their childhood to be more understanding of their children (e.g., “So basically go back to childhood. Use it, use your ways that you used as a child with them” P13). Thus, some mothers mentioned childhood as a positive influence, though follow up would be needed to determine if these mothers successfully achieved intergenerational continuity or discontinuity.

As was previously described, some mothers also mentioned current experiences with extended family. As a quick refresher, these mothers said other family members influenced their role and their child’s development by offering caretaking and teaching help. A smaller number of mothers reported increased challenges without extended familial help. Because so few mothers mentioned the benefits or disadvantages of extended family, it seemed that extended family is a nonessential form of additional support, which other mothers seemed to find through other relationships and/or communities.

**Contextual effects.** The most commonly reported contextual influence was occupation. Most of the mothers who mentioned the influence of occupation stated that work made them feel
guilty or stressed. These mothers regretted expending time, energy, and/or patience that they could use with their child. The occupation that was most often lamented for exhausting emotional, time, and cognitive resources were occupations that involved working with children. For example, participant 60 said,

I mean I’m a preschool teacher, so I’m around two year olds—tiny two year olds all day, so I have to have good patience with them. Sometimes it’s hard going home to my own children after with being them, so I think I have really good patience. Um I uh… and I have to um never be tired when I come home because I start a second job when I come home.

Difficulties from jobs in education and social work were mentioned more often than benefits were. Even when mothers said they learned parenting tips from working with children, they often found those skills were not as applicable or harder to implement than they expected (e.g., “and um then being a special ed teacher, I had all this training and adaptive behaviors, and behavior modifications and all of this stuff, which none worked for my second child” P99). Again, though, this applied to a minority of the sample.

Only a few mothers said they could make sacrifices in their occupation to benefit their child. None of these mothers explained how they eliminated work responsibilities to care for their children, so that advice likely depends on one’s occupation. Even though occupation was said to come in conflict with parenting, the fact that most mothers were employed, even those who had been stay at home mothers previously, indicated some necessity to work. Other research on the balance of parenting and worker ideological conflicts similarly found that many, though not all, mothers said parenting and occupation were in constant conflict. A study by Johnson and Swanson (2007) found, however, that many full-time employed mothers managed the dialectic
by keeping mothering and worker ideologies while changing their approaches to both. The current sample was more negative in their evaluations of occupation and did not talk about strong worker ideologies. Follow up would be needed to see how mothers who did not mention the work-life conflict balance those roles. Regardless of how mothers manage the dialectic, evidently work and parenting are another dimension that mothers must learn to balance.

Religion was one of the only influences that was exclusively considered to be positive by mothers who talked about it. Religion offered spiritual and emotional support and values for morality through a connection to god and to religious communities. Most mothers who talked about the influence of religion called themselves “blessed,” “chosen,” or supported by God in their parenting role. For example, participant 82 said,

And I show them the same love that Christ showed me. I feel that, I mean, I have not always been of Christ, but since I have found Him, I’ve become a great parent – a better parent – because I’ve not always been a good parent. Without Him, I was lost, I meant that. But now since I came into them, I try to show them the same love that Christ shows me and basically, so they can raise their children up into Christ so they can be genuine and loving and caring and sharing.

Some mothers also found supportive communities through their churches (e.g., “but um definitely you definitely need that support, whether it comes from within the family, within the church, within the community” P99). Religion stood out because it was one of the few influences that mothers seemed to have complete control over.

**Self and other evaluations**

While all mothers identified strengths as part of the task, only 39.81% of the sample reviewed themselves positively overall. Even though less than half the mothers rated themselves
positively, this was one of the more common codes within the sample. Additionally, all of the mothers in the sample were able to identify strengths, suggesting that most mothers viewed their performance and fulfillment of values to be generally positive, even though they did not mention global evaluations of themselves.

It was more common for mothers to say they thought they were “good” or average than it was for them to say they thought they were “great” or ideal (e.g., “I mean I think I’m as loving a parent as somebody can be” P66). Most of these mothers seemed to be describing self-perceptions, because only three mothers said they were great because their children told them so.

While mothers likely evaluated themselves positively for many reasons, the immediate evidence they cited was their ability to provide their valued characteristics of love (“I think I’m a pretty good parent, um.. we all have faults, um, but I do love my child” P27), understanding (e.g., “I do think I’m a pretty good mom. Um, I think I am very sensitive and responsive to my children’s needs” P102), effort (e.g., “I do my best to keep them safe and keep them happy” P20), attention (e.g., “but overall I think I’m doing a good job. Another strength that I have um in regards to parenting is…easy to talk to” P63), or necessities (e.g., “I make sure I’m a good parent because I make sure my kids have food, I make sure they’re clean” P46). While reasons provided for being a good and great mother were similar, the primary difference among those codes was that some mothers who called themselves good or average immediately began talking about weaknesses (e.g., “Um, as a parent I feel that I feel that I’m a good parent obviously every parent has weaknesses” P74). This pattern did not emerge for mothers who thought they were great. It may be that mothers who thought they were average immediately cited weaknesses to justify their ratings. Alternatively, these mothers may be more realistic and/or negative in their
thinking overall, and average ratings were an example of those styles of thinking. The realism of these mothers' ratings could not be determined from their speeches.

It may also be that fewer mothers gave themselves global, positive ratings because being a parent had taught them to reserve judgment on themselves and others. For example, some mothers said they were now less likely to pass judgement on others after seeing that all parents make mistakes (e.g., “And I don’t think there’s such thing as a perfect parent, I think every parent makes mistakes. I mean they learn, as your child, your child could be 20 years old and they’re still learning” P6). Some mothers said they had learned that parenting depends on a context that observers are not privy to. For example, participant 9 said,

I think each parent has to in your own mind, you have to be a good parent and you have to think in your mind that you are doing what you think is best for your child. And each parent is different, even with our education. My beliefs are different than anyone else’s and as long as I believe that I am successful as a mom, is the only thing that matters.

That’s it.

Despite some mothers’ admissions that parents should be forgiving when judging each other, a number of mothers did evaluate other mothers’ discipline styles, involvement, patience, family structure, or overall ability to parent. Mothers evaluated their friends (e.g., “Um my friend, her child is like real bad… I try to tell them you shouldn’t let your child say shut up, or you shouldn’t let your child hit you back” P65), strangers (e.g., “But, I feel like a lot of parents that I see consistently tell their children no, no, no, no, no matter what it is” P5), or parents in general (e.g., “Everybody cannot be fit for a parent, I don’t think everybody could have kids because when you have kids you also have to take care of them” P26). Thus, while the minority of parents had developed beliefs about forgiveness from their own mistakes and changing
expectations, evaluations of other parents provided more mothers with information and rules. Of course, it cannot be determined whether these mothers’ tendencies to pass or reserve judgements preceded the parenting role, but mothers reportedly believed their evaluations were shaped by parenting experiences.

The relatively larger number of mothers who compared themselves to others was consistent with research that increases in the types and content of media has affected mothers’ evaluations of themselves and the ideal parenting role (Crowley, 2015). Media offers more opportunities for mothers to compare themselves to realistic and idealized portrayals of mothers. Researchers have found mixed effects of the new forms of media, including increased information, affirmations of preconceptions, increased stress and loneliness, and increased support (see review in McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2011). While the current study cannot confirm that mothers’ judgements of others were related to media usage, per se, it was similarly found here that mothers’ evaluations of and interactions with other mothers affected mothers’ evaluations of themselves and parenting in positive and negative ways. It seems that maternal self and other evaluations can have positive or negative effects depending largely on the mother’s style of thinking and on the context.

Racial differences

Chi square analyses were conducted to assess racial differences in beliefs. Due to the low sample size for mothers who classified themselves as Asian, Hispanic, or other, these three races were grouped together to meet the assumption that less than 20% of the cells would have expected values (counts) less than 5. Thus, the groups compared were European American, African Americans, and other. Chi-square analyses tested whether the groups significantly differed in the frequencies with which they endorsed the codes that emerged in the qualitative
analyses. Significant differences are summarized in Table 2 and were found in the codes for spoiling, consistency, communication related to emotions, putting the child before the parent, routine, encouragement of independence, encouragement of relationships with non-family members, the effects of being a single parent, interplay between parents, perspective on social norms, and flexibility.

European American mothers were less likely to talk about spoiling, putting the child before the parent, and the effects of being a single parent; African American mothers were more likely to talk about those subjects. The statistically significant differences may have emerged due to descriptive differences in sample characteristics. While not tested using statistical analyses, mothers who talked about spoiling and putting their child first were descriptively found to have a yearly income of less than $20,000 and were not married. In the overall sample, the majority of European American mothers were married and the majority of African American mothers had never been married, which likely explained the different rates of talking about the effects of single parent status and the interplay between parents. Additionally, the majority of African American mothers were of low socioeconomic status (SES; 78.72% had an average yearly income less than $30,000). The majority of mothers who were high SES (average yearly income greater than $70,000) were European American (83.3%). Thus, prioritization of and giving to the child seemed to be related to race, SES, and marital status, but likely because those three demographic factors co-occurred.

European American mothers were more likely than expected to talk about consistency, routine, encouragement of independence, flexibility, encouragement of relationship with nonfamily members, interplay between parents, and communication related to emotions and African American mothers were less likely to discuss those values. Regarding consistency and
routine, European American mothers of all SES were more likely to endorse successful consistency and flexibility in discipline and establishment of a routine, so racial differences in those codes might not be entirely accounted for by SES. Within encouragement of independence and flexibility, European American mothers seemed more likely to talk about these behaviors and characteristics with regard to children’s activities. European American mothers also made more of the comments about letting their children explore the world on their own and/or with some guidance. Mothers of all minorities made more of the comments about encouraging independence of life skills. Within encouragement of relationships with non-family members, the value of teaching children empathy and perspective taking skills of preparing children for relationships with others was talked about almost exclusively by European American mothers. The more common values for African American mothers in the category of encouragement of relationships with non-family members were that children should have socially appropriate behavior and be “good citizens."

Most of the mothers who valued communication related to emotions were European Americans, but the African American mothers who described that value said they used similar strategies as European American mothers did. These strategies included teaching about empathy and encouraging expression of emotions through validation and communication. The strategies that only European American mothers described were communication about the mother’s emotions, communication to resolve tantrums, and problem-solving in response to children’s negative emotions.

European American mothers were significantly less likely than expected to talk about perspectives on social norms and mothers classified as Hispanic, Asian or other were significantly more likely to talk about their perspective on social norms. Most of the comments
in this code of perspective on social norms about reserving judgement on other parents and about judging other parents were said by African Americans, showing a split in opinion. Mothers who were ethnic minorities made most of the comments about perspectives on family structure, such as a need to have a complete family and they spoke the most about experiences learning from books, media, and/or professionals.
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The current study inductively identified parenting beliefs on many aspects of child-rearing (i.e., the parenting role, child, relationship with the child, and influential environmental factors) for mothers of preschoolers. The study filled a gap in the literature on parenting beliefs, which was previously dominated by deductive quantitative research and outdated qualitative research. The current qualitative analysis found five overarching themes to mother’s beliefs about parenting: global evaluations of the parenting role, valued behaviors and characteristics for the mother, valued outcomes for the child, influences on the mother, and self and other evaluations. Global evaluations of the parenting role focused on whether parenting was “hard” and/or enjoyable. Valued behaviors and characteristics for the mother were interrelated but could be divided into teaching and supporting behaviors, disciplinary behaviors, providing behaviors, and relational behaviors. When describing these ideals, participants described underlying characteristics that were needed to achieve these attributes. Most mothers connected these values to the intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes they valued for their child currently and in the future. Mothers also described perceived influences on themselves and their children, which included child effects, coparenting effects, extended family effects, and contextual effects. Finally, some mothers evaluated themselves and others as “good,” “great,” or at least putting forth valuable effort. Racial differences in each theme were also analyzed because culture has been found to influence parenting beliefs. In the following sections, the themes of the qualitative
analyses are discussed relative to points of intersection with and divergence from the extant quantitative literature.

**Global evaluations of the parenting role**

The co-occurrence of evaluations of parenting as hard and enjoyable were consistent with findings that having children leads to both increased stressors and higher overall satisfaction. More specifically, parenting lowers moment-to-moment happiness but increases retrospective evaluations of overall satisfaction. In everyday life, children lead to fluctuations of extreme emotions for parents, which can be hard to manage. As others have suggested and the current study found, mothers were more likely to report satisfaction and enjoyment when they had time to reflect on parenting globally (Senior, 2015). It is possible that mothers said they enjoyed parenting due to social desirability bias, so these findings require replication. But, if retrospective reflections on parenting in general lead to more beliefs that their role is enjoyable, then reflections on the global benefits of parenting may be a coping strategy to increase day-to-day satisfaction.

**Valued behaviors and characteristics for the mother**

As mothers mentioned, parenting is a dynamic process in which intra- and interindividual changes occur often and together (Smith & Thelen, 2003). For those reasons, it can be difficult for researchers to establish the levels and time points they need to include in studies to capture relations of interest. The current study suggested that researchers could use maternal beliefs to guide hypotheses about the direction of effects. First, it seems likely that mothers have some good insight into the intra and interindividual changes of parenting because many of their reported beliefs were consistent with empirical research. Second, even if there is a gap between maternal beliefs and empirical findings, that inconsistency may important on its own.
One particularly important area that mothers identified was in the interrelation among many of their valued characteristics. For example, mothers described consistency, flexibility, and patience as so interrelated that it may be impossible and irrelevant to establish the direction of effects. It seemed that improvements to one or multiple characteristics would result in global parenting improvements. These mothers suggested that it may be less important to isolate some characteristics or to identify the direction of effects because what matters is how they group together and with valued behaviors. Additionally, mothers’ beliefs that these characteristics were essential for execution of almost all valued behaviors suggested that interventions to improve mothers’ disciplinary, relational, and supportive behaviors should target these foundational skills. Even if these characteristics are not as integral to parenting as mothers perceived them to be, improvements in one may indirectly improve parenting through increased self-efficacy.

Mothers’ reported use of different strategies to promote development in multiple domains suggested that support in one area is likely a marker of generally supportive parenting. Researchers typically attempt to isolate styles and domains of teaching, but, again, it seems more realistic and descriptive to study multiple domains and types of supportive practices because they naturally co-occur and influence each other (Aunola & Nurmi, 2005). Additionally, because mothers believed they taught and supported their children in multiple domains it may be that the subjective experience of general support is more influential on child outcomes than the specific lessons or domains of support. Relatedly, it should be investigated whether teaching parents to be supportive in one domain generalizes to others.

Discipline is one of the most heavily researched domains in parenting and seems to be one of the most salient domains to mothers, as well. Most mothers seemed aware of the characteristics and behaviors that have been identified as adaptive disciplinary strategies in
empirical research (e.g., consistency, rule setting, punishment), but there were two primary gaps between research and practice. First, few mothers believed in the importance of positive reinforcement, which has been shown to be a potent behavioral modification strategy. Of the few mothers who did mention praise or rewards, they seemed to reinforce behaviors, though praise for effort has been empirically shown to have a stronger positive effect on children’s outcomes (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Also, the infrequent mentions and vague descriptions of the ways and reasons mothers use positive reinforcement suggested a gap between discipline research and parent understanding of the function and value of positive reinforcement (Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 1998). Even if parents were intuitively using some of these skills, education about praise and rewards may help mothers use the strategies more effectively.

Another gap between research and parenting practice was with spanking. Researchers continue to find that mothers use corporal punishment even though it has also been found that spanking is the least effective strategy for reducing problem behaviors (Martin & Pear, 2015; Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, 1998). While corporal punishment does not always have negative consequences, especially in minority communities, such discipline has been shown to be a risk factor when accompanied by other negative parenting practices. The current study found spanking in mothers of all races and common co-occurrence with other negative parenting practices, such as inconsistency and impatience. It is logical that mothers who spank regularly are also inconsistent and impatient because those characteristics would undermine their ability to implement more effective disciplinary strategies (Gordon Simons, Simons, & Su, 2013). Therefore, preventions and interventions may aim to improve mothers’ consistency and patience so they can implement more effective disciplinary strategies.
If mothers achieve the desired effect with other discipline strategies, they may not feel a need to resort to spanking, which most of the current mothers did say was their solution when other tactics failed.

Maternal beliefs in the importance of providing their children with safety and security were consistent with Bowlby’s attachment theory that mothers should provide a secure base from which to explore (Waters, 2000). Mothers stated beliefs they could provide a secure base and opportunities for exploration by giving their children an environment in which they can make mistakes without severe consequence, they can have open communication to ask questions and test theories, and they can develop confidence to learn, explore, and act independently. Another way that some mothers tried to give themselves safety and security was through routine, which has been supported in the literature (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). While many mothers valued routine, some found it difficult to achieve for two primary reasons. First, some parts were out of the mothers’ control. Additionally, routine required a constant balance between flexibility and rigidity. For example, eating and bedtime were said to need more structure, whereas time after school could be more flexible. Some mothers even reported flexibility within the structured parts of the routine, as they gave their children options to choose from as long as the task was accomplished. Routines were described as a constant balancing act among people and time and relied on similar skills as discipline, though there was more room for flexibility. Programs that help mothers develop the skills they need to effectively discipline their children could also include components about the value of routine. These programs should also focus on the most challenging parts of the routine: meals and bedtime.

Parent-child boundaries have been proposed to be more important for child outcomes in European American middle-class families in Western societies than in other cultures, but most of
the mothers who described boundary maintenance were minorities (Kerig, 2005). The norm for appropriate boundaries that emerged in the current nonclinical sample were that mothers should balance parenting and friendship. These parent-identified dimensions paralleled psychological terminology of control and warmth and were consistent with research that the norm for parent behavior is to be high on warmth and control (Baumrind, 1967). Interestingly, though Stolz’s (1967) study was written the same year that Baumrind (1967) defined the parenting dimensions and Stolz (1967) found that mothers prioritized control and obedience. In contrast, while the current study found that the norm among mothers who talked about boundaries was to be high on warmth and parenting, overall more mothers talked about warmth. For example, the most common themes were socioemotional goals such as love, play, and quality time. The few mothers who mentioned control or obedience in the current sample did not believe those characteristics benefited the child. Obviously mothers still said they engaged in limit-setting behaviors, as evidenced by their descriptions of discipline, but even those strategies often included warmer behaviors, such as communication, a disciplinary strategy that received mixed reactions in Stolz’s (1967) study. Thus, while parents continued to balance control and warmth, mothers’ relative values have shifted. Additionally, because qualitative analyses of beliefs have found prioritization of warmth or control but empirical research has found a balance between the two, there may be a discrepancy among mothers’ values and perceptions and their parenting style.

**Valued outcomes for the child**

Researchers have hypothesized that the flexibility of parents’ definitions of goals and success for their children may be particularly important for parent and child feelings of accomplishment, satisfaction, self-efficacy, and child. These theories expected that variation in
degree of flexibility exists among mothers and among types of goals. For example, researchers proposed that parents would be less flexible and less open to negotiation on goals they expected their children to meet in the parent’s presence and absence (e.g., religion, morality, or safety). In contrast, parents were expected to be less concerned about their children’s relationship maintenance and manners, which would lead to more flexibility (Grusec, Goodnow, & Kuczynski, 2000; Hastings & Coplan, 1999). The current study did find high degrees of flexibility in valued outcomes for the child, as parents adapted their expectations and goals based on their child’s interests and abilities. There did seem to be a difference between flexibility due to contextual effects and flexibility due to child negotiation, however. About half the parents defined overall success in terms of the parents values and about half focused on the child’s values. Thus, goal flexibility seemed to be normative in nonclinical samples but flexibility occurred for different reasons and likely had different implications.

In contrast to the theories on goal flexibility, there seemed to be more variation in degree of flexibility among parents than among domains of goals. For example, some parents were more rigid than others in goals for manners, and those parents seemed more rigid overall. Further research is needed to determine the parent and child outcomes that result from flexibility or rigidity. Further, there may be a difference in outcome depending on whether the mother changed goals for personal reasons or because of negotiation with the child. The former does not necessarily indicate adaptation to the child, but rather may result from inaccurate perceptions of the child’s abilities and desires. In contrast, changes to goals and measures of success due to negotiation with the child may be one method to encourage the child’s independence and may lead to better socioemotional and relational outcomes for the parent and child. Thus, the style and reasons for flexibility are likely important and should be clarified. The impact of goal
flexibility and rigidity on the parent, child, and their relationship also requires further investigation.

As previously mentioned, goals for children have become more focused on child enjoyment, success, and socioemotional development than they were fifty years ago. For example, Stolz (1967) reported that mothers rarely mentioned child play, exposure to diversity, and creativity. She found those goals were less important than morality, education, and family values and mothers were less detailed about ways that play and fun were achieved. In contrast, play and fun were common and highly valued in the current study. There seemed to be a generational shift from focusing on family order to child development in self-selected interests and talents. Similarly, researchers found increased family participation in children’s sports in the past three decades, which they proposed was because families now have more time and money to allocate to activities (Wheeler & Green, 2014). While the recent recession likely limited extra financial resources, mothers still probably have more disposable income to spend on activities than families did fifty years ago. Additionally, mothers identified many cheap activities that their children could continue even during financial hardships. It is promising that so many mothers said they valued play and recognized the many benefits for the child and the parent-child relationship because play has been found to be important for both (Ginsburg, 2007). This was one area where many mothers’ stated beliefs were consistent with the literature, but follow up is needed to determine how often and well these mothers engage with their children in developmentally appropriate and enjoyable ways.

Mothers who described goals for their children’s emotional understanding, expression, and coping mentioned socialization methods that were consistent with emotion socialization theories. As has been suggested by empirical research, some mothers believed they should help
their children develop emotional competence and regulation to help them cope with negative emotions and to foster appropriate social behavior. These Mothers did so through coaching and modeling and reported using the supportive responses that are often emphasized in emotion socialization literature: validation, problem solving, and expressive encouragement (Eisenberg, Cumberland, & Spinrad, 1998). The mothers who had emotion-related goals for their children conceptually understood how to achieve those goals, but the mothers who described these methods and goals were in the minority (26.2%). Future research could investigate differences in emotion socialization among mothers with emotion-related goals for their children and those without. Research could also aim to identify the implications of parents who were aware of themselves as models for their children and those who were not. It may be that increased awareness of the various ways in which parents impact their children’s emotion regulation improves a parents’ ability to teach and model for their children, or it may be that those parental behaviors are more automatic. It is important to know if parental awareness and beliefs impact their emotion socialization strategies to understand intervention possibilities.

As with emotion regulation, mothers who valued social outcomes described perspectives on and methods of developmentally appropriate instrumental goals and children’s cognitive and social abilities that were consistent with research on child development. For example, these mothers focused on the importance of morals, manners, and understanding of one’s place in the larger world to foster relationships and integration into society. All these domains require cognitive and social understanding, such as theory of mind and perspective taking, skills that develop around the age of the current sample (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2003). It may be that the mothers who developed their goals were particularly attune to their children’s cognitive development and/or it may be that mothers fostered their children’s social and cognitive
development by setting social goals. In addition to an unclear direction of effects, it is also not clear if mothers without social goals have the same understanding of child development. It is important to assess maternal understanding of developmentally appropriate expectations and abilities because those skills may help parental scaffolding.

Manners was one of the main social goals that appeared to have changed in definition and relative importance over the past fifty years. One of the more common etiquette expectations in Stolz’s (1967) study was that children should be obedient, obsequious and “seen but not heard.” Those values were absent from this study, in line with the observed shift from an emphasis on control to an emphasis on warmth. Most mothers in the current sample described beliefs of communication and negotiation with their children, instead of control. They said they taught their children to interact with others and contribute to social settings, instead of just showing deference to elders.

The other primary change that was demonstrated through values of manners was that the relative importance of social goals seemed to have shifted, likely because of a change in the reason and way mothers established goals for their children. Stolz (1967) reported that manners, obedience, independence, a close family, and religion were more important than morality or a desire for children to be good citizens. Those mothers valued child outcomes that supported their overall goals for “homemaking” (i.e., unity, orderliness, family harmony) and social prestige (i.e., getting along with others, value of property, good manners). In contrast, the current sample mostly emphasized goals that their children would be “good citizens” and secure individuals. Goals of manners and morality were often valued because they promoted those outcomes. The current focus that emerged was more on the child’s personal development. Because mothers described their own goals as interrelated with those for their child, it can still be implied that
mothers expect personal benefits from their children’s successes. But, the emphasis was still largely on the child’s current and future successes.

While the current sample described more goals than Stolz (1967) found that were aimed at benefiting the child, rather than the family, these conclusions should not be confused with an increase in “child-centered goals.” Some researchers have proposed that parental goals can be separated into “child-centered” and “parent-centered,” but the current study found those categories were too simplistic (Hastings & Grusec, 1998). Some mothers were “child-centered” in that they emphasized goals for their child, but they were also parent-centered by defining success based on the mothers’ values. Additionally, the current mothers could be both “child-centered” and “parent-centered” because of the interrelatedness of maternal and offspring goals. Thus, the “child-centered” and “parent-centered” categories failed to capture the complex dynamic of parents’ stated beliefs. It may be possible to use those dimensions if researchers separated different aspects of parents’ goals, such as distinguishing the intended beneficiary from the person who defines success. It is more likely, however, that goals are the product of some negotiation and that these dimensions are not naturalistic.

**Influences on the mother**

Empirical research has identified many variables that influence parenting, but less attention has been paid to parental beliefs about the existence and salience of these influences (Holden, 1997). Consistent with the empirical research, the current study found that influences on the mother included personality, child and familial effects, and contextual effects. Empirical research has also identified genetics, socioeconomic status, and culture as influential on parenting beliefs and behaviors, but they did not emerge as salient in the current sample (see review in Bornstein & Cheah, 2006).
The current findings that most mothers focused on the influence of child effects and learning from experience were directly in contrast to research on the imperviousness of parenting beliefs to parenting experience (see review in Grusec, Hastings, & Mammone, 1994). It has been argued by researchers that culture and childhood experiences shape parents’ general theories about age-related expectations for children, expectations for effective parenting and goals for parenting (Bornstein & Cheah, 2006). While the racial differences that emerged in this study indicated that culture and socioeconomic status likely play a role and some mothers described the influence of childhood experiences, those were not said to be as salient as parenting experiences. Follow up is of course needed to determine whether the influences mothers described affected their behavior or just their perceived behavior. It will be difficult to determine the strongest influence on parenting beliefs because many of the empirically proposed influences likely function unconsciously, but future research could investigate behavioral or cognitive implications to mothers misattributing the causes of their beliefs and behaviors.

In regard to generational changes, the current sample accounted for the effects of being a single parent, whereas Stolz (1967) did not when she only interviewed intact families. Single parenting has become more relevant in the past few decades because the divorce rate has more than doubled and the number of single parents who never married has increased. The current study addressed ways in which divorce and single parenthood affected parenting because almost half of the current sample were never married (42%) and another 7.5% were separated or divorced. Some single mothers perceived increased challenges as a result of their single parent status. While it cannot be confirmed from the current study that single mothers’ challenges were unique, married mothers and single mothers agreed on the ways that coparents can offer support, which suggests that the absence of a coparent should have a unique impact. As described by
single and married mothers, coparents relieved workload, added social support, and decreased child caretaking hassles, all of which are robust predictors of parenting stress and self-efficacy (Ostberg & Hagekull, 2000). Parenting stress and low self-efficacy negatively impact parent’s (Abidin, 1995) and children’s outcomes (Gutermuth Anthony, et al., 2005). Thus, even if single parents’ stressors are not unique, the perception that they are uniquely disadvantaged may be a risk factor for parents and children.

What is promising, though, is that the single parents who talked about their marital status as an influence also believed they showed high levels of resilience. There may be a selection bias, because more resilient mothers may be more likely to participate in research. That being said, the pattern of co-occurrence between mentioning stress and strengths for single mothers and in regard to overall enjoyment and difficulties for other mothers may have important research and intervention implications. Research could aim to determine if mothers review themselves positively to cope with stressors, or because they overcame stressors. Intervention research should also analyze the impact of thinking more globally about the parenting role and successes to determine the impact on self-evaluations and daily happiness. It may be that promoting positive self-images and perceptions of resilience buffers parents from stress, whether they are single mothers or just mothers experiencing challenges.

Another major generational change in parenting influences that the current sample captured was concerning occupation. The number of working mothers in the country has more than tripled since Stolz’s (1967) study, which seemed to impact work-life conflict for mothers. Fathers were the primary “breadwinners” in Stolz’s (1967) sample and they rarely mentioned occupation, presumably because the two rarely came into conflict. Additionally, for the few mothers who mentioned occupation in Stolz’s study, they thought that working with other
children in professional settings positively influenced their parenting. The reverse was true in the current sample, however. Occupation was one of the more common codes, mentioned by 31% of the sample, primarily because of the conflicts that were raised. Of the current mothers who mentioned occupation, those who worked with children in professional settings were also more likely to identify their profession as a stressor. It is hypothesized that the increased work-life conflict among mothers who work with children professionally is due to increased risk factors over the past few decades for teaching stress, such as increased time pressures, evaluations, and decreased working conditions in educational settings (Kyriacou, 2001). Fortunately, individual coping abilities have been found to relate to teacher stress, so this may be an area of intervention for teachers who are mothers, given the salience of that occupation on parenting (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). There have also been reports that fathers feel increased work-life conflict, now, too, though follow up is needed to determine if this generational change occurred. The increased perceptions of work-life conflict do signal a need to help parents manage these seemingly conflicting roles. Because mothers most often identified the toll their job takes on their time and patience, interventions could emphasize cognitive restructuring to help parents value the time they have more. If parents focused less on their limited time and more on the benefits of the time they do have, they may have fewer perceived stressors, which could also improve their patience.

Another hypothesized contextual influence on parenting beliefs is culture, though this influence did not emerge as salient to mothers. Mothers described values that researchers said were culturally influenced (e.g., encouragement of independence, level of discipline) and some of those values differed by race, which may indicate cultural difference. Yet, mothers seemed relatively unaware of the role of culture in shaping these beliefs because mothers did not mention their race or culture as an influence (see review in Bornstein & Cheah, 2006). Additionally, some
of the emergent racial differences may be caused by the co-occurring demographic factors, such as socioeconomic status (SES) and marital status, so findings of cultural differences may be more complex than initially stated. Follow up with measures of cultural identification and statistical control of other demographic factors may better explain the influence of culture on parenting beliefs, but, because those demographic factors commonly co-occur, the distinction may be unrealistic.

The primary racial differences that did emerge through quantitative and qualitative analyses in this study were in codes related to discipline and social norms, though, again, the role of other demographics is unclear. African American mothers were more likely to endorse values of prioritizing or over-providing for the child, which suggested difficulties with limit setting. African American mothers were also less likely to report values related to structure, such as consistency, routine, or communication to help children regulate their emotions. It is likely that these difficulties with limit-setting were more related to the mother's socioeconomic and marital status than their race or culture. Mothers with less money and support likely do not have the resources needed to be consistent and structured. Limited resources also seemed to account for indulgence, because, based on the mothers’ descriptions, indulgence was used as compensation for lack of money and time. Unfortunately, limit-setting, routine, and consistency have all been found to significantly improve outcomes for children, parents, and the parent-child relationship, so interventions should help mothers with fewer resources establish and maintain appropriate boundaries (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Improved limit-setting and consistency would improve a mothers’ ability to maintain a routine, so many benefits would be conferred.

Mothers who described themselves as a racial minority were also most likely to say they looked to others for information about the appropriateness of behaviors. African American
mothers who valued their children’s relationships with others spoke more than European American mothers did about social appropriateness. Minority mothers who talked about perspectives on social norms made most of the comments about gathering parenting information from other parents, professionals, or media. Even though some of these mothers said they had learned to reserve judgement on other parents, the fact that they were more likely to mention these experiences still showed higher levels of awareness of the opinions of others. These findings suggested some cultural differences in concern with others’ opinions. The findings that European American mothers were more likely to talk about independence and less likely to be concerned with opinions of others are consistent with cultural research that European Americans are more focused on independence than other ethnicities are (Harwood, Miller, & Irizarry, 1995). This focus on perspectives of others is important for intervention because group and community settings may be most effective for recruitment and establishment of rapport. Negative experiences or attitudes from some mothers could also heavily undermine research or intervention, and, thus, should be monitored closely.

**General contributions and comparisons to the literature**

This study updated the inductive, qualitative literature on parenting beliefs. The current study showed that was considerable overlap in emergent codes in the past fifty years but differences in the descriptions and relative importance of codes. Twenty-nine of the current codes emerged as significant in Stolz’s (1967) study and six of the current codes were described in some manner. Stolz’s (1967) study had more codes and detail, most of which were so rare that they served to indicate individual variation instead of generalizable themes. Some of Stolz’s (1967) codes may not have emerged in these responses because of the shorter format but some may also not be relevant anymore. For example, mothers from Stolz’s (1967) sample reported
consultation with professionals and/or self-help books. The few mothers in the current sample who mentioned professionals or books felt the advice did not apply to them. The rare mentions suggested that professional advice is either less salient or less influential, which is logical given increased accessibility of parenting information in digital media. Interestingly, though, mothers did not cite digital media as an influence, so future qualitative studies may need to ask about digital media specifically. Another reason codes may not have emerged was because Stolz’s (1967) sample included parents of children of all ages. While the current sample included mothers with older children, they all had at least one toddler with whom they were visiting the lab. Parenting beliefs have been shown to vary by age, so some of the codes that Stolz (1967) reported may not be developmentally appropriate for preschoolers. Thus, while follow up on some of the codes that did not emerge may be helpful, it is suggested that the current format at least captured important overarching themes. Future research could ask more specific questions about these themes to all mothers, to better account for individual variation.

The current findings also confirmed proposals to improve extant theories and measures of parenting beliefs. First, this study showed that current measures are limited in scope. Most measures assess one or two beliefs about reflections on parenting practices and a much smaller percentage focus on evaluations of children. Further, most measures ignore beliefs about marriage or other influences. All of these domains emerged as salient to mothers and were believed to be interrelated, so the limited content of extant measures is not naturalistic or representative. Additionally, the focus of measures is inconsistent with the current identified values. Most measures focus on beliefs about domains that were less important to mothers, including control, overinvolvement and/or overprotection. Those were common themes fifty years ago, but were rarely mentioned or endorsed in the current study. Other domains that
require more emphasis in assessments are positive experiences and evaluations, though most measures focus on negative social development and/or behaviors (Holden & Edwards, 1989).

The inconsistencies among extant measures and the current findings were unsurprising given that most measures were not grounded in naturalistic data, such as observations or interviews (Holden & Edwards, 1989). Because researchers have been emphasizing, defining, and measuring beliefs that were more theoretical than natural, it was also not surprising that current measures do not predict parenting behaviors. Mothers may be able to endorse beliefs when given options but that does not ensure that they were pre-existing beliefs or influential ones (Holden & Edwards, 1989). Thus, future measures should capture a broader spectrum of maternally identified strong beliefs in language that mothers use naturally. These refined measures may better show if there is a relation between beliefs and behaviors.

**Limitations**

The primary limitations of the current study were that the responses were not collected for the purposes of qualitative analysis, so it was not structured with prompts to elicit clarification or details. Relatedly, the current narratives were relatively brief compared to other inductive studies on parenting beliefs. The current format seemed to have captured overarching themes, but follow up on details is needed by prompting mothers to talk about the emergent themes.

Another caveat was that the speeches of beliefs only captured conscious thoughts. Automatic thought processes, such as attributions of the causes of behaviors, have also been shown to contribute to parenting behavior and child outcomes and are less subject to social desirability bias (Rudy & Grusec, 2001). Thus, interviews only elucidate a portion of maternal cognitive processes.
The current study did not assess the relation between parents’ beliefs and behaviors, so it remains unclear if and how mothers engage in the behaviors they described. While cognition is an important variable on its own, it will be important to determine the role of those cognitions on parenting behaviors and styles. Additionally, because different mothers reported different values and outcomes as salient, it should be investigated whether increased awareness and prioritization relates to improved implementation.

Finally, the current study analyzed race as a marker of cultural differences. Culture is hypothesized to be a robust influence on parenting beliefs and, while race may indicate differences, it is not a direct measure of culture. Additionally, the current sample primarily provided pairwise comparisons of African Americans compared to European Americans. Finally, the current study was not designed to control for co-occurring demographic factors though a mixed-method approach or quantitative study might be able to do so. Future studies should also include measures of cultural affiliation and should aim to consider cultural differences among other minority groups (Bornstein, 2002).

**Directions for future research**

Future research on the measurement and implications of parental beliefs should focus on parental beliefs as dimensional, interrelated values for the self, child, and family that require constant management, balance, and flexibility. Parents have to resolve their needs with those of their child and they often have to do so under stress. Thus, measures and models should account for parental balance, conflict resolution, and flexibility in different contexts when studying parenting beliefs. Measures should also be validated in samples of different cultural and socioeconomic contexts given the apparent role of context that may limit the generalizability of beliefs.
One currently used method to account for the role of conflicts in parenting beliefs is by having parents report beliefs in response to parenting dilemmas. These questions may be more realistic and predictive of parenting behaviors than simple questions without context are, which the current sample indicated when they described the robust influence of contextual factors and family members (Holden & Edwards, 1989). While some studies have tried to use parenting dilemmas, they often only categorize parents’ thinking as parent or child-centered, but, as previously mentioned, the current study showed those dimensions were too simplistic.

Additionally, a mixed-method approach can be used to study parenting beliefs in a person-centered way to better understand patterns of beliefs and thinking and the relation between beliefs and behaviors. There may be important patterns of co-occurring values and beliefs that were beyond the scope of the current study, which focused on identification of emergent themes. Additionally, by looking more thoroughly at patterns within individual speeches, hypotheses about parents’ style and complexity of thinking may emerge. Understanding cognitive styles and complexity may be important for relating beliefs to behaviors. For example, it should be investigated if parental prioritization and awareness of certain behaviors and goals makes they more likely to implement those behaviors successfully. Some mothers may prioritize the same goals but individual differences in cognitive complexity, understanding, and motivation may moderate their ability to execute their values. Improved definition and measurement of the content of beliefs will hopefully allow for these types of studies on the mechanisms that account for parents’ successes and failures in fulfilling their beliefs.
REFERENCES


Table 1

Summary of the Name and Frequency of Each Code, Grouped by Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Global evaluations of the parenting role</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting as enjoyable</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting as hard</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Valued behaviors and characteristics of mothers</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective taking</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Putting the child first</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Placing importance on the parent’s needs</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching and supporting behaviors</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching/encouraging learning</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family plan/fun</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guide/model</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting or helping</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement</td>
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</tr>
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Table 2

*Statistically Significant Racial Differences*

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*Note. *$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$. Adjusted standardized residuals appear in parentheses below group frequencies.*
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