Experiences and Meanings of Maternal Ambivalence with First-Born, Early Adolescents

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EXPERIENCES AND MEANINGS OF MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE
WITH FIRST-BORN, EARLY ADOLESCENTS

by

Teresa M. DiStefano

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EXPERIENCES AND MEANINGS OF MATERNAL AMBIVALENCE
WITH FIRST-BORN, EARLY ADOLESCENTS

Teresa M. DiStefano, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2003

A phenomenological method of qualitative inquiry is used to capture the experiences of maternal ambivalence while mothering first-born, early adolescents. From the naïve descriptions of seven participants a description of and response to maternal ambivalence are examined. Major findings include three overarching domains: (1) maternal context, (2) shared essence of maternal ambivalence, and (3) participants’ responses to maternal ambivalence.

Findings relevant to contextual variables identified as influencing mothers’ daily lives with their adolescents include: (a) perceptions of their adolescent, (b) perceptions of their adolescents changing context, and (c) participants’ marital status.

Data comprising the shared essence of maternal ambivalence include: (a) maternal role; (b) perceptions of self, other, and relationship shifts; and (c) establishment of limits and boundaries in participants’ relationships with their adolescents. Perceptions of the maternal role included descriptions of a loss of omniscience and omnipotence in their relationships with their adolescents, internalized notions of the ideal mother, evaluations of their maternal effectiveness, and the centrality of the maternal role.
Participants also described their perceptions of self, other, and relationship shifts that helped delineate the shared essence of maternal ambivalence. Participants described shifts in all components in the object-relation’s triad and the tension between old and new meaning constructions during this transitional time with the adolescent. The final grouping of data pertinent to the shared essence of maternal ambivalence is the mothers’ struggle with the negotiation and imposition of limits and freedom in the adolescents’ expanding context.

The final domain describes findings related to the participants’ responses to maternal ambivalence. Mothers remained subject to old meaning constructions, were beginning to imagine new meaning constructions, and were uncertain of how to navigate between.

Transitions might be times when psychological meanings no longer fit one’s current lived experiences. Developmental movement is often about dynamic relational shifts and renegotiating meanings about self, other, and relationship. With the adolescent’s development the mother is also engaged with her adolescent in an ongoing interplay between redefining the self, other, and relationship. The clinical implications of the function of maternal ambivalence and participants’ attempts to negotiate a new meaning balance are presented.
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Teresa M. DiStefano
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This research is dedicated to understanding women, their relationships, and their development as they mother early adolescent children. A phenomenological method of qualitative inquiry was used to capture the lived experiences of women who are mothering adolescent children with specific attention paid to understanding how a mother's ambivalence toward herself as a mother, toward her child, and toward their relationship might influence her development, not only as a mother, but also as a woman. Self in relationship theory posits that women know themselves through relationships. Inherent in mothering an adolescent are issues of loss and discovery. The child's psychological self is formed through ongoing dynamic relationship with significant others. Transitional times between attachment and differentiation, for the child, represent the loss of old self, other, and relationship with the discovery of new expanding constructions of self, other, and relationship. As is true for the child, each loss, each discovery, and each balance between will mean something about how the mother knows herself as well (Kegan, 1982). In dynamic relationship, the mother and child represent object and subject and are in continuous movement together. As the infant needs to differentiate from the mother, for example, the mother will likely need to find her ambivalence to support the baby and herself. Developmentally, this dance will continue across the life span through the child's adolescence and beyond, in the
sense that both mother and child will find, lose, and then discover new ways of relating.

Moustakas (1994) in outlining the methods for conducting “an organized, disciplined, and systematic [phenomenological] study” stated that the first step is for the researcher to discover a question that has “autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meanings and significance” (p. 103). Qualitative methods of study do not call for the researcher to be free from bias and values, but to “bracket” them. There is value in having one’s own journey lead the researcher to a personally meaningful topic of investigation. Chapter I brackets my experiences with mothering that led me to the present research on maternal ambivalence. Chapter II reviews the literature that focuses and contextualizes this study and addresses the social significance of the question. The third chapter outlines the methodology to be used to investigate the mother’s lived experiences of maternal ambivalence while mothering an adolescent. Chapter IV presents the major findings of this study, and Chapter V presents a discussion and implications of the findings.

Terms and Definitions

Before turning attention to the researcher’s bracketed experiences the following terms and their definitions are provided:

*Maternal ambivalence*—an “experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side” (Parker, 1995, p. 1).
Experience—lived events in a participant’s life.

Meanings—psychological sense participants make of experiences about self, other, and relationships.

Subjectivity—participants’ experience with and meaning of a phenomena.

Early-adolescent—for the purposes of the present study an early adolescent is defined as a person currently enrolled in the ninth grade.

Bracketed Experiences

The inspiration for this study flows, in part, from my experiences with ambivalence during mothering and the influence this tension has brought to bear on my sense of self, others, and relating. Some suggest that ambivalence during motherhood is “the only thing that seems eternal and natural” about mothering (Chodorow, 1978). Hating what one loves, the intermingling of such paradoxical and basic emotion, can be an alarming and confusing phenomena and is what is meant here by having maternal ambivalence. Experiences with mothering have been full of poignancy and meaningfulness to me. As the researcher in this phenomenological study, I am the instrument and it is important that the reader be informed of the experiences I have with maternal ambivalence and the meanings I have made of those experiences. To that end, I will share some of these experiences and the developmental relevance they have in my life.

My experiences of being mothered and of mothering have had a profound influence on me. I was not mothered by my biological mother, but by her mother, my
grandmother. In some ways, my mother was lost to me and I was lost to her. That we were lost to each other in the one relationship where selves are supposed to be found had significant meaning to me. There is an old gospel I sing in church to this day with the line “And even if a mother leaves her child, I will not abandon you.” The comparison of the mother’s love being next to Godly love adds poignancy to the loss of my mother. The cultural and personal prescriptions about mothering and being mothered have reverberated throughout my making meaning of life and my place in it. I did not have normal daily experiences of being in relationship with my mother. I idealized mothering and knew very little about the actual ordinary experiences of being mothered.

My grandmother was both my mother’s mother and my replacement mother. I think she never quite found me because acknowledging her ambivalence towards her daughter for leaving me threatened the relationship with her daughter. She suffered from depression, which was one of many reasons I did not find a mother in her. But I was searching for a mother throughout childhood and I turned to a neighbor in my hope of finding a surrogate mother. I loved the neighbor woman and found many maternal provisions flowing from her. Though she loved me, I could never quite feel like I represented the finding of a daughter for her. I would actually introduce her to others as the “the closest woman to a mother” that I had ever known. I had found a close approximation, but still never found the mother that I longed for. This meant something to me about mothers and my ability to “recruit the attention” of a mother.
(Kegan, 1982). These experiences were formative about what mothering represented to me.

I think the dilemma of finding and losing mothering-others has resonated throughout my life. These dilemmas influenced my beliefs about becoming a mother and why it was necessary. From earliest recollections, I included in my nighttime prayer that I would promise to understand why I had not been given a mother if I could have my own children to love and nourish when I grew up. The search for a mother also influenced my ideas about being a “good enough” mother myself (Winnicott, 1971). In some ways, the stakes have always felt high about providing good mothering to my two children. I think I viewed mothering them well as redemptive in some ways—redemptive of something that was never quite found or entirely lost in my own search for a mother.

The theme of losing and finding has continued to be a thread woven through the tapestry of my mothering experiences. What was lost? At the birth of my son, a false hope of the redemptive power of being a mother was lost. Having my own child did not erase the losses of my past. In fact, in some ways it magnified them, as I sat and pondered how I was going to care for this helpless and precious other when I felt that I did not have the greatest experiences of being mothered to rely on. What did I know? I was just his mother! My daughter was born 19 months later and still I didn’t feel like I knew what I was doing. I lost some of my felt sense of competency that I had gained in other aspects of my life, particularly my work life. I was trying to manage a work, a marriage, and mothering. I was terribly worried about leaving my
children and going off to work and yet I felt it was important to keep this as an aspect of my life. The ambivalence I felt at this time of my life was heart wrenching. I felt like I had lost false hopes, known ways of being, and myself, in the process of giving birth to two beautiful children. To feel the sadness of being a mother and all it represented while aware that I held in my arms the most glorious gift imaginable was incredibly confusing and disorienting. How could I be sad at a time when I was supposed to be the most fulfilled by all cultural, familial, and personal accounts?

What about the finding? I experienced incredible mornings when I would hear the early stirrings of a baby waking up. I remember times when I could hardly wait for my son or daughter to wake so that I could hold and provide for them. They were absolutely the most precious beings I ever hope to be engaged with. I found them and I found aspects of myself in mothering them. I found my deepest fears and greatest joys in mothering them. I found that my body could nourish and that my heart could love. But always the tension of finding and losing was present. The ambivalence of mothering began upon their entry into the world.

As my children grew, I came back to school to pursue a degree in counseling psychology. Although I had always worked outside the home, my children were school aged and I felt like I had breathing room again to pursue other life endeavors. To work when they were very young had been a painful process and the relief that came from them being occupied with school was freeing. As part of my graduate training, I completed a field placement in a community mental health agency. It was at this agency that I worked with two court-appointed clients who were referred to
counseling to address personal issues associated with petitioning the court to relinquish their custodial rights of their adolescent children.

As I listened to these women’s narratives and the meanings they seemed to make about self, others, and their relationships it became clearer to me that I was not alone with my maternal ambivalence and that my children’s adolescence might be yet another time when the tension between holding and differentiating would seem untenable. Unfortunately, the theme of my clients’ lives seemed to be more about losing than finding. Their children were incorrigible and one was physically abusive to his mother. The women seemed overwhelmed with their own sense of failure and despite their apparent love for their children, both decided to give up the right to be the child’s mother rather than face this ultimate failure.

The ultimate choice had presented itself to these women inherent in the tension of mothering: lose the self or lose the child. I think they decided to cut their losses and bow out of the relationship. To remain in the relationship with their adolescent meant that they might be provided with the final evidence to condemn themselves and this was unbearable. The condemnation of self related to maternal failures and perhaps their own aggression towards their adolescent children. They seemed to have an idealized notion of the good mother and to them; their children’s behavior proved that they had failed as mothers. For love of their children, they seemed to feel that they should relinquish custodial rights before irreparable harm be done. They settled the anguish inherent in the ambivalence by surrendering their self...
as mother, their child, and their relationship with the child. They could not tolerate the
distress of mothering.

As children reach adolescence, both the mother and the adolescent must be able to establish limits and the mother is served by using hate in the context of love. The “good enough mother” has both love and hate for her child and the mother having her hate serves both the child and herself developmentally (First, 1994; Winnicott, 1987). The developmental task during times of transition, such as the child’s entry into adolescence, is for the mother to hold the ambivalence. For a while, the tension cannot be settled; it must simply be endured with hope of finding a new balance. These women’s histories with developmental moments like this had not left them with much hope that a new balance was possible and so they retreated to what was known even if this meant losing someone they loved.

I became especially intrigued with maternal ambivalence because it seemed that much harder to manage the ambivalence as the child matured from a helpless infant to an acting out adolescent. The tension of maternal ambivalence is between the mother’s focus on self and on her child. During her child’s adolescence, she is likely to be called on to abandon old ways of knowing herself as a mother, old ways of knowing her child, and old ways of knowing how to be in relationship with her child. All of this at a time when the adolescent child is busy engaging in their own developmental yearnings to differentiate from the mother. The two women I worked with clinically seemed only to represent extreme expressions of what mothers face in normal everyday lived experiences with their adolescent children. The mother is called
upon to help the child with their differentiation. She may be called on to support her adolescent’s autonomous yearnings. She may also be involved in helping herself accept and find a new idea of herself as mother. What if her child makes a mistake and she feels discouraged about whether she has provided the necessary support and structure? What if she becomes frustrated with her adolescent and turns her attention to herself with others reminding her, “You’re still the mother”? These questions have personal relevance because they come from my own experiences with my children. As I pursued my studies in counseling psychology, my children entered adolescence and I have experienced anew tensions of mothering. All of these doubts and tensions are happening to women whose sense of self likely comes from their perceived sense of goodness of the relationship, especially the relationship with their child. All of this finding and losing and hanging in the balance will be the tender of this research. I hope to listen to both sides of the confusion and invite the participants of this study to allow themselves to have a conversation between the two sides of the tension.

It is my belief that most mothers will at times feel torn between self-investment on the one hand and care and concern for their children on the other. Mothering often has to do with the risk of losing the child, the self, the relationship and the promise of finding the new child, the new self, and the expanded relationship. Imagine the mother of an adolescent who has the responsibility of encouraging the adolescent’s differentiation and the subsequent loss of her child while pursuing her own developmental course of losing the self who has been a mother to an adolescent and also remaining invested in the ongoing vitality of the relationship between herself
and her child, all without any roadmap. Inherent tensions between the losing and finding will undoubtedly result in mothers feeling confused, torn, and uncertain. The exquisite pain of maternal ambivalence is that one must live it and endure it long enough to find a new balance. Certainly my experiences of mothering have been wrought with times of tension between knowing and not knowing, trusting and not trusting, loving and hating the self, other, or the entire mothering endeavor.

Motherhood is not required for a woman's growth and development. Some women choose not to mother, just as some women do, and being a biological mother is not always a matter of choice. It is hard for this researcher to imagine a mother who never experiences maternal ambivalence. While some women may not experience the tension between self and other because they are invested in one side of the ambivalence or the other, the tension exists. For example, some women may not feel a need to differentiate from the child and will remain invested solely in the child forever without any concern for personal needs beyond those fulfilled by being a mother. Other women may feel that having a child does not affect their self-development and represents little change in their lives. Further, my focus on women's experiences with maternal ambivalence is not meant to imply that men and fathers do not struggle with parenting and how to provide care to their children. In fact, one could argue that men also provide "maternal" provisions to their children. This research will illuminate but one phenomenon, that of women who mother and who have experiences living in the pause between the finding and the losing inherent for many in mothering an adolescent.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Very little is known about the subjective experiences of mothering. Only three empirical studies were found investigating maternal subjectivity relative to any maternal issue (Francis-Connolly, 2000; Small, Eastman, & Cornelius, 1988; Smith, 1999). Briefly, Smith (1999), in a qualitative study, found that entry into motherhood could be transformative to a woman's sense of identity. Francis-Connolly (2000) in another qualitative study investigated the developmental course of motherhood and found that mothers' care and concern for their children continued throughout their children entering young adulthood but that the nature of care changed. Finally, Small, et al. (1988) found that an adolescent's autonomy seeking behaviors impacted the mother's level of stress. Mothers experienced more stress as their adolescent sought greater autonomy. These three studies will be reviewed more fully in the body of this literature review, but are introduced here to demonstrate that experiences of mothering are very understudied. The findings of these three studies could almost be taken for granted.

Of course, entry into motherhood can be transformative to a woman's sense of identity. Likewise, it is no surprise to find that a mother's care and concern for her children continues but changes to meet the growing needs of her young adult children. In addition, most mothers of an adolescent would find themselves frustrated at the
autonomy seeking behavior of the normal adolescent. In fact, it is likely that the mother's frustration is normal and developmental. Missing in the literature is any psychological understanding of the internal meanings the mother makes of these mothering experiences. The current study begins to address the void in the literature by investigating maternal ambivalence, its essence, and the meanings mothers make of it.

Because the current state of the psychological literature regarding mothering is so limited, this review draws on broader psychological theories with literature specific to mothering integrated throughout the discussion. The value of theory when little research has been conducted concerning a phenomenon is that it brings to light a possible frame from which to view the phenomena. In this study, selected developmental and object relations theories will be used to develop a frame from which to consider the phenomenon of maternal ambivalence while mothering an early adolescent.

Psychological Development

Conceptually, the broadest frame from which to view the phenomenon of maternal ambivalence is through the lens of adult development. Ideas from Kegan's (1982) constructive developmental model and the Stone Center's self-in-relationship developmental model (Jordan, 1997; Miller, 1991; Surrey, 1991) will be used as models of adult development from which to understand maternal ambivalence.
Literature specific to mothering will be included in this discussion to integrate current thinking on mothering with these broader psychological theories of development.

**Transitions**

According to the constructive developmental and the self-in-relationship theories, human development involves transitional times when the life course seems altered (Kegan, 1982; Miller, 1991). Kegan (1982) describes this movement as shifting between times when our developmental orientation (sense of self, other, and relating) is tilted towards inclusive activities to times when our orientation is tilted towards more autonomous activities. Miller (1991) notes that it is developmental movement between “differentiation and integration in the evolving context” that characterize the person’s life course (p. 20). Although there are times, of course, in all our lives when we experience developmental equilibrium, the focus of this study is on times of transition because they can be a time of confusion and distress when the person may be aware that their old meanings no longer fit their lived experiences but have not quite discovered the new meanings associated with their developmental growth. Transitional times often require a loosening of the hold on one’s current reality (meanings made of self, other, and relating) while the next evolutionary reality is being created. As the self moves from balance to balance, there can be a considerable state of disequilibrium and the self risks the loss of who they have known themselves to be, who they have known the other to be, and how they have known the relationship to be, before they really discover again who the self, other, and
relationship are. "The process of differentiation, creating the possibility of integration, brings into being the lifelong theme of finding and losing, which before now could not have existed" (Kegan, 1982, p. 81).

Writers from the Stone Center underscore the sense of instability women may feel through developmental movement because they recognize that there is something unique about the process of differentiation and integration for women. They argue that women have a "felt sense of self" but it is a "self inseparable from a dynamic interaction" with others (Jordan, 1997, p. 16). Inherent in women's development is the growth of empathy in relationship or an "ethic of care" that is culturally encouraged in girls (Jordan, 1997). Empathy in relationship "alters the traditional boundaries between subject and object and experientially alters the sense of separate self in a profound way. In a mutually empathic relationship, each individual allows and assists the other in coming more fully into clarity, reality, and relatedness; each shapes the other" (Jordan, 1997, p. 15).

This transitional theme is evident in the theoretical literature on mothering, as well, and endorses the idea that the mother, as she enters motherhood, experiences a time when she loses her old sense of self before she is able to find and integrate a new self (Bassin et al., 1994; George & Soloman, 1999; Oberman & Josselson, 1996; Suleiman, 1988). Drawing from her own maternal experiences, Suleiman (1988) wrote about the inner conflicts of the writing mother "who feels herself torn between two seemingly irreconcilable allegiances: on the one hand her commitment to and love for her child ... on the other her commitment to her own creative self" (p. 25). As
she moves from being a woman without a child with her own life course and needs, to being ultimately responsible for the welfare of her child there is a loss of the old self and a search for a new balance. In a qualitative study, Smith (1999) found that the transition into motherhood could be both “disorganizing and developmental” and was significant enough to “transform” the women’s sense of identity (p. 422). In his study he asked women about changes they noticed about themselves and their relationships with significant others. The new mothers reported relationship changes, which affected their sense of self. Both Suleiman’s personal description and Smith’s finding fit well with the theoretical idea that mothering might be generative for a women’s development (Bassin et al., 1994; George & Soloman, 1999; Josselson, 1987). Yet, both are limited by an exclusive focus on transition to mothering infants. Although the literature on general adult development suggests that development occurs over the life span, nothing could be found in the literature that addressed the potential developmental consequences of the transition to mothering an adolescent.

While we attempt to understand the mother’s needs it is important to recognize that her needs are all the more “poignant because they are inextricably linked to her child’s well being” (Parker, 1995, p. 31). Unfortunately, the current focus of much of the literature continues to be on maternal failure and the impact on the child (George & Soloman, 1999, p. 620). Very little is written empirically about the normative experiences of transitioning into motherhood and even less on transitioning with one’s child during adolescence. Questions such as the following are left unanswered in the literature: If women tend to define their worth by tending to
relationships (Miller, 1991), what happens when the relationship with the adolescent child changes due to either the mother’s or the child’s developmental evolution? What is it like for the mother who “wanting to understand the other’s feelings; wanting to contribute to the other; wanting the nature of the relationship to be one in which the other person is engaged” (Miller, 1991, p. 22), can’t attend to her adolescent in known ways? How is she to renegotiate her developmental balance while maintaining the self-in-relationship?

In addition to suggesting that mothering is a developmental opportunity for women, the theoretical literature also suggests that motherhood itself has a developmental course (George & Soloman, 1999). However, most of the available literature focuses on an exploration of mothers of small children. At best, research on mothering is focused on two ends of the continuum: the transition to parenthood and providing of elder care (Arendell, 2000). Missing from most of the literature is “an exploration of motherhood stages and parenting over the life course” (Francis-Connolly, 2000, p. 282). Francis-Connolly (2000) began to address this void by investigating mothering at two stages of a child’s development to explore how mothering might change over the life span. She conducted a qualitative study of two groups of mothers: one group with young children and the other group with early adult aged children. She found that the work evolves and changes as children mature, but mothering remains a central role and mothers remain actively invested in the role for both groups. Although activities change for a mother at different stages, mothers at both stages were found to be involved in caring and nurturing work. Francis-
Connolly found that mothers felt connected to their children and described an emerging interdependent relationship with their children through the children’s entrance into young adulthood. She found that mothers tried to remain available to their children but how they were available changed with the changing needs of their children. Still, Francis-Connolly did not explore what it was like for the mother to adapt to her children’s needs, while on her own life course. Her findings that mothers of young adults continue to be invested and to provide a home base for their children was presented without any exploration of what this maternal provision meant to the mother.

**Meaning Construction**

In Kegan’s model of general adult development, it is also recognized that developmental transitions require a person to make meaning of the experiences within and between inclusive and autonomous phases of life so as to make their life coherent. According to this model, the self is constituted of meanings made of relational experiences. Writers from the Stone Center also conceptualize the self as a “relational self” or a “being-in-relationship” (Jordan, 1997; Miller, 1991). Both developmental theories acknowledge that the person must compose and re-compose meanings about relational experiences during times of psychological balances and times between those balances. George and Soloman (1999) argued that the mother would need to accommodate and integrate new experiences and meanings about her self, others, and relating as she faces mothering. It is argued in the present study that this same need to
accommodate and integrate new experiences and meanings about her relationship with her child continues for the mother as her child becomes an adolescent. The adolescent’s movement into more autonomous developmental activity will obviously influence the mother’s own sense of self. What does it mean to the mother’s sense of self when her own maternal ambivalence leads her to questions about herself and her relationship with her adolescent?

Both Kegan’s (1982) and Miller’s (1991) developmental theories reviewed here emphasize a social constructive model of development. Mothering, too, is beginning to be understood as a “fluid constellation of active maternal relations” with subjective meanings constructed by both participants in the relationship (Schwartz, 1993). A mother makes meanings about this dynamic, evolving, and emerging relationship with her child, just as the child does (Arendell, 2000; Francis-Connolly, 2000; George & Soloman, 1999; Schwartz, 1993). Just as it is with any relationship, the meanings arising out of relationship with her child come to represent internalized aspects of the mother’s sense of self, other, and relating (Kegan, 1982; Miller, 1991; Trembley, 1996). Mothering can be understood then as “an active identity” where the mother and child are in dynamic relationship with each other (Arendell, 2000; Francis-Connolly, 2000; Oberman & Josselson, 1996; Schwartz, 1993; Smith, 1999).

Although theory is evolving to include questions about the mother’s experience instead of approaching mothering “almost exclusively in terms of the psychological experiences of the child” (Arendell, 2000), no empirical studies were found that
address the mother's meaning construction. The present study will specifically attend to the meanings mothers make of their maternal ambivalence.

**Relational**

All psychological development and meanings made about the self occur within interpersonal relationships. From infancy, social activity is a matter of survival because the infant must be able to "recruit" the attention of another to be nourished (Kegan, 1982). Kegan believes that being able to recruit others to "see" the "meaning" of the self is a matter that continues throughout one's life in ever-expanding relational contexts. All self-development requires one to be in dynamic relationship with others, for better or worse (Kegan, 1982).

The writers from the Stone Center discuss the centrality of relationships in a woman's life as well. "Women often feel a sense of effectiveness as arising out of emotional connections" (Miller, 1991, p. 22). Recall that Kegan (1982) describes times of transition as times when the old self or old meanings are lost and new meanings about the self, other, and relating have yet to be found. This notion takes on richer meaning when one considers that the mother of an adolescent during developmental movement may not only fear the loss of herself, but the loss of her child, and the loss of her relationship with that child. The Stone Center theory also posits that "the deepest sense of one's being is continuously formed in connection with others and is inextricably tied to relational movement" (Jordan, 1997, p. 15).
Theory specific to mothering further holds that the mother and her child form a qualitatively unique relationship, a relationship that is set apart from other relationships (Arendell, 2000; Chodorow, 1978; George & Soloman, 1999; Oberman & Josselson, 1996; Rich, 1977; Suleiman, 1988). This literature suggests that the maternal relationship is one of profound significance for both the mother and her child. Oberman and Josselson (1996) state that “through dynamic interaction with their children, mothers foster and shape a profound affectional relationship, a deeply meaningful connection” (p. 343). Mothering has been characterized “as the ultimate in relational devotion” (Arendell, 2000, p. 1192), “ultimate maternal responsibility” (Suleiman, 1988, p. 31), and of “ultimate importance” (George & Soloman, 1999, p. 619). The quality of mothering is viewed as “crucial” to the healthy development of the child (George & Soloman, 1999; Suleiman, 1988). This emphasis on the ultimate and crucial nature of mothering underscores the risk associated for the mother who provides maternal care. In her qualitative study, Francis-Connolly (2000) found that mothers worried about dire consequences for their children if mothering was not done appropriately.

The focus of the current research is how the mother comes to manage her maternal ambivalence? Does she tire of it? Does she worry about whether she can mother well enough? Does she feel guilty for not wanting to be ultimately responsible? Or for wanting to pursue other life endeavors? And what are the counterpoints to these tensions? These questions beg being asked but they remain unanswered in the current psychological literature on mothering.
Finally, for a person to flourish developmentally, they must have a culture that supports their evolution. Here the term culture represents Kegan’s (1982) notions of a culture of embeddedness, which includes the greater sociopolitical culture and the person’s immediate lived in context. The value of a culture that can provide continuity during times of transition cannot be underestimated. People who populate the relevant culture will have much to do with the meanings made about transitional times in the person’s life (Kegan, 1982). For a mother of an adolescent, the culture may include the adolescent, other children, the adolescent’s father, the mother’s spouse or significant other, extended family, work relationships, friends and the larger culture of her life (Bassin et al., 1994; Chodorow, 1978; Chodorow & Contratto, 1992; Francis-Connolly, 2000; George & Soloman, 1999; Suleiman, 1988).

Kegan (1982) postulated that functions of the culture are confirmation, contradiction, and continuity. The culture must first be able to confirm or recognize who the person is becoming as they enter a new developmental era. Secondly, the culture must be able to provide a way for a person to know they are changing amidst their own confusion. The people who populate the person’s culture do this by siding with whom he/she is becoming, as well as holding who he/she has been, and provide a bridge for these two states of meaning. The culture also provides the function of continuity. Old and new meanings can be integrated when the culture stays in place and is able to recognize the new, remember the old, and encourage the person’s developmental achievements.
The literature on mothering suggests that neither the broader culture nor the personal lived-in context necessarily provides a mother with much support for her mothering. Mothering seems to be a loaded proposition from a social cultural perspective. “Personal fantasy, fictional representation, and social and cultural reality are so interconnected where motherhood is concerned that it is impossible to talk about one with out the other” (Suleiman, 1988). Cultural images, myths, and ideologies about mothering are replete in the literature (Bassin et al., 1994; Chodorow & Contratto, 1992; Francis-Connolly, 2000; Suleiman, 1988). Most of the cultural prescriptions are dualistic in nature. Cultural depictions of mothers discussed in the literature include dialectical tensions such as omnipotent mother/powerless mother, ultimate responsibility/blame, desexed/fully embodied, and all giving/self-sacrificing (Bassin et al., 1994; Chodorow & Contratto, 1992; Suleiman, 1988). In a theoretical article, Oberman and Josselson (1996) identified a number of developmental issues the mother must negotiate that are strikingly similar to these cultural tensions. Oberman and Josselson discuss “loss of self/expansion of self; omnipotence/liability; life-destroying/life promoting behavior; maternal isolation/maternal community; cognitive strategies/intuitive responses; maternal desexualization/maternal sexualization” and go on to suggest that an investigation and understanding of how the mother copes with these tensions would be informative regarding mothering.

Suleiman (1988) believes that mothers cling to the notion of the “fantasy” that they are “ultimately responsible” because the culture does not endorse their “desire
for self-creation and their desire to mother” (p. 38). Bassin et al. (1994) suggested, “the ideological pull of the all-giving mother remains a powerful force in the lives of all women” (p. 5). Society may deny the mother’s subjective experiences of maternal ambivalence and create cultural myths that tend to silence her. How is the mother to reconcile her true experiences of mothering when they fall short of these cultural myths? Might she be left to secretly worry that her shortcomings represent personal failure?

There is little attempt in the literature to synthesize cultural images of mothering with the women’s actual lived experiences. In fact, Chodorow and Contratto (1992) suggest “there is little attempt to investigate [maternal] reality in its complex subjective and objective breadth” at all (p. 199). Suleiman seems to agree and writes that maternal omnipotence and ultimate responsibility are both cultural distortions and that a more “reality-oriented [cultural] attitude” is necessary. Suleiman (1988) offers one example of how the culture and the mother’s reactions and meanings merge and reflect each other. She suggests that the mother may feel powerless while the culture holds her responsible and omnipotent. The culture reactively blames the mother and the mother has her own sense of guilt for her maternal failure to live up to the cultural distortions.

The assumption that women have the right to mother, as well as not to mother, and the recognition that mothering, though it may be conflictual and oppressive, is also emotionally central and gratifying in some women’s lives, has created a level of tension and ambivalence in recent writings that was missing in the earlier [feminist] discussion (Chodorow & Contratto, 1992, p. 192)
Several writers theorize that women may be isolated in their roles as mothers even in their personal contexts (Chodorow & Contratto, 1992; Rich, 1977). Some feminists argue that cultural prescriptions of the good mother make it difficult for a woman to feel validated in feelings of maternal ambivalence and may have a silencing effect on mothers (Chodorow, 1978). In one of the few studies found investigating mothering from the maternal perspective, Francis-Connolly (2000) found that there were taboos around discussing mothering negatives. So even where the mother may have a sense of community, she may be reticent to discuss the ambivalence she experiences being a mother. The mother needs to be recognized and affirmed for her mothering effort, positive and negative, particularly when she may have a fair share of ambivalence about the endeavor. For the mother’s reality to be honored she must be allowed to depict her context and the meanings she makes of that context in her own unique voice (Chodorow & Contratto, 1992; Francis-Connolly, 2000; Kegan, 1982).

Summary

Arendell (2000) in a review of the past decade of literature on mothering stated explicitly “there are disjunctures between the ideologies of mothering and the experiences of real women” (p. 1196). Feminists argue that mothering has been idealized and devalued and have actively sought to reconsider mothering from the subjective maternal experience. “We deny mothers the complexity of their lives, their selfhood, their agency in creating from institutional context and experienced feelings. We deny them their place in a two way relationship with their children, we deny
ourselves as mothers” (Chodorow and Contratto, 1992, p. 206). This discussion goes to the heart of the present research, which invites women to share their experiences of mothering and the meanings they make of these experiences specifically as it relates to the dialectical tensions that seem inherent in the mothering endeavor.

The literature does not address what the mother of an adolescent might be facing as she loses the child and her relationship with the child before finding a new qualitatively different balance with her adolescent. This movement seems normative and dynamic from a developmental perspective and both the mother and the adolescent will struggle to make meaning of the changes underway. The researcher in the present study wishes to know what the developmental process might be like for the mother, especially as it relates to her maternal ambivalence about self, other, and relationship.

Object Relations and Ambivalence

The developmental movement between a mother and her child discussed in the preceding section is fueled by maternal ambivalence. Maternal ambivalence has been recognized in the object relations literature for years beginning with Winnicott (1947). However, as will be seen by the following discussion, most of the theory concerns the mother–infant dyad. Nothing could be found that addresses a woman’s maternal ambivalence towards her adolescent. Nonetheless, it will be proposed that the same functions necessary for differentiation and integration during the mother’s and infant’s development are necessary for the mother and adolescent’s development.
Object relations theory provides a psychological theory that brings into focus our understanding of ambivalence, both its normalcy and purposefulness. More than any existing theory of psychology, object relations has concerned itself with understanding the mother–child relationship and the consequences for the development of the self, mostly the child's self. The child's psychology is formed through interactive relationship with a primary caregiver; in Western culture, this is typically viewed as the mother. In object relations theory, ambivalence provides an understanding of the intrapsychic processes of differentiation and integration which are fundamental processes in the formation of the self. The infant needs his/her ambivalence to differentiate from the mother and become his/her own subject (First, 1994; Winnicott, 1971). From the developmental perspective of the mother, she needs her ambivalence to differentiate from the baby (First, 1994; Parker, 1997).

It is argued that part of the mother's provision is to recognize and hold the emerging self of the baby. The baby has "the feeling of oneness between two persons who are in fact two and not one" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 7). By recognizing and nurturing the baby, the mother increases the infant's capacity to feel real and separate (Schwartz, 1993; Winnicott, 1971). The mother's "good enough" provisions of holding and contrasting help the baby develop his/her own sense of separateness. Eventually the baby will need to be frustrated by the mother in order to come to know that he/she is indeed a separate self. Winnicott (1971) wrote, "In time the baby begins to need the mother to fail to adapt" (p. 8). He goes on to discuss the infant's frustration with the mother for her "relative environmental failures" (p. 8). He
suggested, from the infant’s perspective that “there is much satisfaction to be got from anger that does not go over into despair” (p. 8). It is a consistent theme in the theoretical literature that the infant's capacity to experience and tolerate ambivalence towards the mother is a developmental achievement for the baby (First, 1994; Parker, 1995; Winnicott, 1971).

Winnicott noted that the “ordinary devoted mother” because of her own ambivalence about self, her baby, and the maternal relationship will frustrate her baby and that this is a developmental necessity for the baby. The mother’s ambivalence serves the baby’s development. This idea is in sharp contrast to the notion that the mother should be absolutely devoted, without any ambivalence, to her baby. Just as the baby needs his/her ambivalence toward the mother to be able to “use” the mother and begin to experience him or herself as a separate being, the mother’s ambivalence enables her to set appropriate limits with her baby and her self (Winnicott, 1971). Winnicott does not explicitly discuss how the mother experiences her ambivalence, or how it may serve her own development. He does, however, expand object relations theory to include the existence and purposefulness of maternal ambivalence in aiding infant development (First, 1994). His acknowledgement that the “ordinary devoted mother” could hate her baby and that the “mother has to be able to tolerate hating her baby without doing anything about it” (1947, p. 202), is an incredibly important perspective if we hope to understand mothering in all its complexity.

Winnicott (1947) offered the following list of “reasons why an ordinary mother hates her baby”:
The baby is not her own (mental) conception. The baby is not the one of childhood play, father's child, brother's. The baby is not magically produced. The baby is a danger to her body in pregnancy and at birth. The baby is an interference with her private life, a challenge to preoccupation. To a greater or lesser extent, a mother feels that her own mother demands a baby, so the baby is produced to placate her mother. The baby hurts her nipples even by suckling, which is at first a chewing activity. He is ruthless, treats her as scum, an unpaid servant, a slave. She has to love him, excretions and all, at any rate at the beginning, till he has doubts himself. He tries to hurt her, periodically bites her, all in love. He shows disillusionment about her. His excited love is cupboard love, so that having got what he wants he throws her away like an orange peel. The baby must at first dominate; he must be protected from coincidences, life must unfold at the baby's rate, and all this needs his mother's continuous and detailed study. For instance, she must not be anxious when holding him. At first, he does not know at all what she does or what she sacrifices for him. Especially he cannot allow for hate. He is suspicious, refuses her good food, and makes her doubt herself, but eats well with his aunt. After an awful morning with him she goes out, and he smiles at a stranger, who says, "Isn't he sweet?" If she fails him at the start, she knows he will pay her out forever. He excites her but frustrates—she mustn't eat him or trade in sex with him.

This list underscores the myriad ordinary ways a baby may provoke maternal hatred. Implicit in this list is the mother's profound wishes to nurture and develop her baby while dealing with the sometimes-maddening frustrations of mothering. On a personal note, I remember countless mornings when I did not have time to brush my teeth in between the demands of my baby. Or the wish to sleep just a little longer while my baby screamed for attention at 4 a.m. Or the abject fear of being responsible for this completely dependent tiny being. Or nursing my infant every two hours while
others suggested that his insatiable hunger meant that I was not producing enough milk to satisfy him. This maternal ambivalence has not gone away as my children have grown. Recently, while trying to read a book on the subject of maternal ambivalence, my 16-year-old son arrived home. As he milled around demanding my attention, my frustration mounted. The story ended with my son growing frustrated with my inattentiveness and leaving. I put the book down, that only a few moments earlier had engaged me and wished I had taken the time to have the conversation. The irony was not lost on me. That this and countless other interactions might be normal and even necessary for developmental purposes did not occur to me. Instead, I was left feeling guilty and torn between two meaningful aspects of my life.

Feminist Revisions

Elsa First (1994) convincingly argues from a feminist perspective that Winnicott added maternal ambivalence as a “new dimension to our consideration of maternal subjectivity” (p. 147). Winnicott was ultimately interested in the development of selfhood. He was interested in understanding how the child in relationship with his/her mother comes to have a psychological self. Through “good enough” care the “ordinary devoted mother” allows for relational provisions of holding, contrasting, and consistency so that the baby can develop a separate, functional self (First, 1994; Trembley, 1996; Winnicott, 1971). Elsa First argues that Winnicott was the initial theorist to suggest that hatred for her child is a natural and inevitable part of mothering. Likewise, the recent literature regarding mothering
continues to support the notion that it is an endeavor full of tensions (Arendell, 2000; Bassin et al., 1994; First, 1994; Francis-Connolly, 2000; George & Soloman, 1999; Hopkins, 1996; Suleiman, 1988). In fact, Chodorow and Contratto (1992) suggested that maternal ambivalence is “the only eternal and natural feature of motherhood” (p. 201).

Although maternal ambivalence has been recognized in the psychoanalytic literature for years, the idea that a mother can both love and hate her baby, her maternal responsibilities, and herself as a mother, is not often given much legitimacy in the popular culture, in our families, and perhaps with the mother herself (Chodorow, 1978; First, 1994; Parker, 1995). To understand mothering in general, the mother’s subjective experience with maternal ambivalence must be integrated into our theories about mothering (Arendell, 2000; Chodorow & Contratto, 1992; First, 1994; Parker, 1995, 1997; Suleiman, 1988). We need to understand the existence of and the meanings “the ordinary devoted” mother makes of maternal ambivalence during moments of anger and love, frustration and hope, loss and discovery. Most of the writers in this area of study are psychoanalytic and they argue that “psychoanalysis is necessary for any deep understanding of ambivalence but—and it is an important but—we have to reframe, realign and rewrite theory to illuminate this theme from a maternal perspective” (Parker, 1997, p. 18).

Winnicott’s acknowledgement of the necessity of having and managing ambivalence as a maternal provision for the developing baby, opens the door for us to consider the mothers experiences and uses of this ambivalence (Parker, 1995). He
suggested that, at times, the baby needs to know that they can stir hate in the other. He wrote:

Sentimentality is useless for parents, as it contains a denial of hate, and sentimentality in a mother is no good at all from the infant’s point of view. It seems to me doubtful whether a human child as he develops is capable of tolerating the full extent of his own hate in a sentimental environment. He needs hate to hate. (1947, p. 202)

Winnicott suggested that hate helps a mother have limits and set them with the child; he opened the door to consider that maternal hate within the context of love, made the mother emotionally available rather than “incapacitated by guilt, envy, rivalry and hurt” (First, 1994, p. 154).

First (1994) noted that Winnicott “alerts us to the risk of a masochistic solution to the task of being hurt by the baby without retaliating: this is the martyr mother who lives ‘for’ or ‘through’ the child” (p. 154). Therefore analyzing Winnicott from the maternal perspective, First states:

A mother would need to be on good terms with her own aggression, to feel where it has been constructive to her, to be able to identify with the child’s aggressions and play with it resiliently. This is an argument for helping mothers appreciate the reality and validity of their hate as well as of their love. The mother who feels she has rights is better able to defend them without retaliation. (p. 159)

Using Winnicottian ideas, Parker (1995) postulated that there is a beneficial aggression in maternal ambivalence. Parker suggested that there is a “creative aggression” inherent in maternal ambivalence that serves the mother and the baby. She argues that maternal ambivalence is a creative and constructive force in maternal subjectivity. Feminists theorize that maternal ambivalence helps the mother differentiate self from baby so that the ongoing relationship involves “a mother big
enough, with enough agency to be a real participant in the relationship” (Bassin et al., 1994, p. 3). Maternal hatred as a part of maternal practice is understood as natural and empowering (Bassin et al., 1994; Chodorow & Contratto, 1992).

Winnicott suggested that there is a moment of concern where the infant’s aggression is transformed and appears as guilt or grief and he found the capacity by an infant to sustain and manage his/her grief a major developmental milestone. Parker (1995, 1997) takes this idea and expands upon it by viewing it from the maternal perspective. Instead of dividing hatred into conscious hate which is available to be used by the mother and unconscious hate which is not available and leads to reaction formations which are not helpful to the infant or the mother, Parker thinks about maternal ambivalence as manageable and unmanageable. If the mother cannot accept her ambivalence for the child, she will defensively destroy the true affect, which leaves her susceptible to anxiety, depression, or further confusion. Unmanageable ambivalence can paralyze the mother. Manageable ambivalence, “the coexistence of love and hate for the child,” can mobilize the mother’s concern for the child and her capacity to be creative in her response (Parker, 1997, p. 28).

Parker (1995, 1997) also theorizes that maternal ambivalence can be constructive for the mother by using another Winnicottian idea of the “use of the object.” The baby uses his anger to psychologically destroy his/her mother. Psychologically, the destruction of the mother or the object places the object outside the baby, that is, outside the control of the self. The baby’s sense of differentiation is thus enhanced. The “good enough” maternal provision is to survive the destruction,
to not retaliate, and to demonstrate that loving differentiation is possible. Parker (1997) suggests that there is a parallel, albeit different process, that the mother must experience for her development of a separate evolving self, unique from the baby. The mother, Parker (1997) argues, must find her distinct sense of self from the baby and subjectively experience the “maternal use of the infant” (p. 30). The mother will use the anger side of maternal ambivalence to give energy to this differentiation process.

It is only through the psychological destruction of the infant that the baby is placed out of the omnipotent control of the mother. She has to find the baby as an object in and of itself. The baby is not simply an extension of the mother. Parker states, “Only via ‘destroying’ her baby can she be said to have achieved the full use of an infant” (p. 30), meaning the achievement of a relationship to the baby as a person separate from herself. She goes on to explain how ambivalence is the creative force in this process. She wrote:

For this process to remain benign and for the baby to survive, the mother’s hate-inspired process to “infant usage” needs to be accompanied by recognition of her ambivalence—hate being vital for destruction and love for keeping this on a psychic and not a physical level. (Parker, 1997, p. 30)

Love is the counterbalance for the modulation of the hate.

Parker looks at such developmental conflicts as being a part of the mother’s development as well as the baby’s. “The recognition of both her needs and her child’s desires is a constant and necessary struggle in her development” (Parker, 1997, p. 31). The mother will likely want some assurance that she is a good enough mother of a well baby. Parker (1997) notes “ambivalence saves her from over submission on the one hand and excessive domination on the other” (p. 31). The baby, of course, has
no such responsibility for the mother’s well being, but nonetheless the baby’s
developmental movement will have a dynamic impact on the mother’s development.

Parker (1997) argued that it is exactly the recognition of love and hate for her
baby that

promotes a sense of concern and responsibility towards, and differentiation of
self from the baby. Acknowledging that she hates where she loves is acutely
painful for a mother and feels terribly dangerous, for her baby is dependent
upon her. Hence the sense of loss and sorrow that accompanies maternal
ambivalence cannot be avoided. (p. 20)

With the acknowledgement of maternal ambivalence, the mother must become aware
of loss, sorrow, and differentiation inherent in the process (in the context of
counterbalancing love, concern, and ongoing relationship).

**Mother/Adolescent Dyad**

Reflecting the current state of theory regarding maternal ambivalence, this
discussion has focused on the mother–infant dyad. It is argued, here, that maternal
ambivalence is a normal and useful aspect of the mother/adolescent dyad as well.
Developmentally, adolescence is thought to be a second phase of differentiation
(Steinberg, 1990). The adolescent is viewed as striving for greater autonomy and
competency (Flannery, Montemayor, Eberly, & Torquati, 1993; Gegas & Schwalbe,
1986; Smetana, 1989, Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986; Thompson & Zuroff, 1998,
1999). The impact of this differentiation process might be thought of as a catalyst for
the mother’s development as well as for her adolescent’s development. However,
much of the literature on mothering adolescents not only neglects the mother’s
subjectivity but also reductionistically treats the mother as a variable with negative implications for her adolescent’s well being. In a review of the literature in clinical psychology journals published in 1970, 1976, and 1982, Caplan and Hall-McCorquodale (1985) found that mothers were held responsible for “72 different kinds of psychopathology” in children. Consistent with Caplan and her colleagues review, this review of literature regarding mothers and their adolescents found that maternal variables such as dependency, maternal efficacy, ability of the mother to take the perspective of the child, emotional distress, and depression were all negatively related to the well being of her adolescent. (Dix, 1991; Flannery et al., 1988; Gegas & Schwalbe, 1986; Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997; Thompson & Zuroff, 1998, 1999).

Very little theoretical and only one empirical article could be found in the literature regarding the adolescent’s impact on the mother.

This one empirical study examined the effect of adolescent autonomy seeking on parental stress (Small et al., 1988). A four-factor analysis of variance including the sex of the parent, sex of the child, child’s age range, and whether the child was a first-born adolescent or not was performed with parental stress as the dependent variable. No significant interactions were found in this analysis. Mothers and fathers reported equal levels of stress and no differences were found between parenting a girl versus parenting a boy. Parents of first-born adolescents showed statistically significant more stress than did parents of second and third order adolescents. A second analysis examined adolescent autonomy variables as predictors of parental stress. A number of regression analyses were run on each of four separate measures of an adolescent
questionnaire. The authors found that mothers’ stress was significantly related to their adolescents’ pursuit of greater autonomy. This study was the only research found that investigated what impact the adolescent’s behavior might have on the mother. The specific findings seem less important than the authors’ acknowledgement that the mother is not simply an object but a subject in her own right. The other empirical literature reviewed for this proposal concerned maternal variables that impact the adolescent; this study was groundbreaking in highlighting that the adolescent influences the mother as well.

Just as the mother and infant are thought to need their ambivalence to differentiate from the other, the developmental literature endorses the idea that the early adolescent will become more argumentative and conflictual (i.e., ambivalent) during this second phase of differentiation and the adolescent’s ambivalence serves their differentiation (Steinberg, 1990). Although the nature of the conflict is debated, it is nonetheless widely acknowledged that normal early adolescence will be a time of increased family conflict even if over rather mundane and ordinary aspects of life (Steinberg, 1990). As was argued by Parker (1995, 1997) and First (1994), maternal ambivalence was normal and useful to the mother and her infant. Proposed in the current study, is the idea that the mother and her adolescent continue to need their ambivalence to sustain the life-long developmental journey of differentiating out from old notions of the self and embracing a new and more complex self. Yet, nothing could be found in the literature about the mother’s side of this dynamic with her adolescent.
Maternal ambivalence as it is lived, experienced, and made meaning of must be understood if we are to foster healthy mother–adolescent relationships. Writers from the Stone Center argue, “Western culture has devalued women’s skills in empathy and our capacity and motivation to foster growth in others” (Jordan, 1997, p. 3). Mothers may be faced with a “relational paradox” as they strive for self-development and changing connection with their adolescent child, but this does not necessarily call for turbulent relationships and separation from her child (Coll et al., 1998). Cultural prescriptions about the mother’s role in her adolescent’s life seem to encourage the mother “to take more and more of their authentic experiences out of relationship, thus distorting and disempowering themselves and their relationships” (Coll et al., 1998, p. 2). If the mother’s ambivalence is found to be a normal and useful aspect of mothering for her and her adolescent’s development, might the mother be able to manage the ambivalence in creative and productive ways instead of turning a normal and healthy developmental response inwards to guilt and self-recrimination?

Parker (1997) theorized that maternal ambivalence induces guilt and anxiety in the mother and suggested that it is the management or inability to manage guilt associated with ambivalence that is of concern. Manageable ambivalence is a “source of creative insight” while unmanageable ambivalence is a source of internal conflict and anxiety (p. 21). The adolescent may behave in ways as part of his/her normal development that make the mother doubt herself. The mother/child relationship is changing with the old ways of mothering likely being contested by the adolescent yearning to be dealt with on different, more mature, terms. The mother’s responses to
this is likely to be some attempt to encourage the child’s autonomy and move to meet the adolescent on new ground. Transitions such as this can be hard won and neither the mother nor the adolescent have a road map to help them. The mother must actually encourage the loss of the child and her old relationship with the child before she or the adolescent can know what the new relationship will be. She and the adolescent need their ambivalence to move them through the developmental unknowns. She actively participates in the adolescent’s leaving and the adolescent’s departure constitutes a loss. Her maternal ambivalence, if not understood, acknowledged, and affirmed, could lead to “unmanageable ambivalence” that cannot serve the adolescent or the mother. Only by talking to women about their experiences with maternal ambivalence in relationships with their adolescent children can we begin to understand the complicated and meaningful relationships of mothers and adolescents. The mother’s voice of relational experience needs to find articulation. We need research that addresses mothering from the perspective of the mother and allows us to begin “to construct a full vision of the mother herself” (Bassin et al., 1994, p. 8).

Conclusion

The integration of developmental ideas and object relations perspectives on maternal ambivalence yield a broad theoretical framework that informs this research in several ways. Development is a life long process that naturally has times of transition. All developmental movement takes place in relationships and the individual
subjectively constructs meanings about this. For women, the relational characteristic may be even more poignant to a sense of self since women are thought to be influenced by an "ethic of care" toward significant others. The mother–child relationship is thought to be a unique and meaningful relationship to both the mother and her child. Maternal ambivalence is a normal and ordinary aspect of the mothering enterprise and, in fact, is necessary for both the child and the mother's development throughout life. Because loss is an inevitable aspect of the process, mothers can be torn. Mothers who are aware and accepting of their ambivalence can use it as a constructive and creative force in their ongoing relationship with their child. Mothers who know developmental transitions are normal and purposeful, no matter how confusing and conflicting their emotions may be, have a chance to remain in authentic relationship with their adolescents. We need research that listens to mother's describe and make meaning of moments of maternal ambivalence during the ordinary course of mothering their adolescent. The current study proposes to do this in an effort to normalize experiences of maternal ambivalence and to encourage mothers to be in authentic relationship with themselves and their children.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Phenomenological research methods are utilized in an attempt to understand human phenomena as they are experienced and made meaning of. Phenomenology is a method of inquiry that requires close attention to relationships with the participants, their personal stories as the data studied, and with those to whom those data and their analysis are reported. These three relationships will be explored more fully in the following description of the methodology used in the present study. Information regarding the research design, participant selection, data collection, interview protocol, and data analysis is also provided. A pilot study was conducted prior to this research and will be discussed in the interview protocol section of the chapter.

Research Design

A phenomenological study was conducted investigating the experiences of and meanings made about maternal ambivalence while mothering a first-born, early adolescent. Moustakas (1994) noted that phenomenological research is an attempt to uncover the essence of a particular lived experience or phenomena and to understand the meanings made of the experience by those who live it. The results of any one phenomenological study “are but a pause in arriving at knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 65). The “pause” at which this researcher arrived was a better understanding
of the essence of maternal ambivalence and the meanings mothers make of it during their everyday, ordinary lives as mothers of first-born, early adolescents.

As was discussed in the previous review of the literature, little focused attention has been paid to the mother's experiences of mothering. Using phenomenological research methods allowed the researcher to invite participants to describe and make meaning of phenomena as they experienced it. Phenomenological research methods as employed here are an attempt to understand the mother's subjectivity and to hear her voice. Although the theoretical literature concerning mothering often cites maternal ambivalence and its impact as meaningful in mother's lives, women's experiences with and meanings made of maternal ambivalence have not been researched. Only three empirical studies could be found concerning mothering adolescents from the perspective of the mother.

The Phenomenological Approach

In phenomenological research, the researcher must accept the theoretical assumptions of phenomenology, i.e., that all psychological phenomena are socially constructed and the meanings participants make of their experiences provide valuable psychological understandings of living the phenomena. The major premise of phenomenological inquiry is that the experience and meaning people make of living the phenomenon should be the focus of study (see Creswell, 1998, p. 86). Four variables make phenomenology a particularly good fit for this study and lend credence to using this approach to investigate maternal ambivalence: (1) the researcher's
scholarly values and goals, (2) the researcher’s experiences with the phenomena under study, (3) the current state of the psychological literature regarding mothering, and (4) the focus of this study.

The present researcher enters this research with an a priori theoretical orientation that lends itself to seek knowledge phenomenologically. The researcher values relationships and honors as the best source of truth the stories people tell of their personal experiences and the meanings they make of these experiences. In distinguishing among the five traditions of qualitative inquiry, Creswell (1998) noted that methodological theory plays a more significant role in phenomenological inquiry than in most of the other qualitative traditions. The researcher decides upfront he or she is interested in examining the meanings individuals make of experiences.

Phenomenological research methods further call for the inquiry to have autobiographical relevance to the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenologist’s approach, which includes her experience with the phenomenon, “informs what will be studied and how it will be studied” (p. 106). Phenomenological research methods are not about being a disinvested, objective, observer of a phenomenon, but instead require the researcher to autobiographically search for a personally relevant research question and to subjectively make meaning of the data (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher’s experiences with maternal ambivalence have been “bracketed” and are included in the introductory chapter of this manuscript.

The current state of the psychological literature further supports the use of phenomenological research methods. While the theoretical literature suggested that
mothers experience maternal ambivalence, we do not know what maternal ambivalence might represent for the mother on a psychological level. The mother's voice has not been articulated. Qualitative methods of inquiry are thought to be especially appropriate when the psychological phenomena in question are not well researched or understood.

Further support for using a phenomenological approach to understand mother's experiences with maternal ambivalence is the phenomenological researcher's attention to capturing the mother's voice, which fits well with the existing theoretical literature on mothering. Theorists who believe that value resides in the subjective nature of the women's experience write much of the theoretical literature. Phenomenological methods hold as a tenet that knowledge is subjectively determined. The relevant domain of phenomenological inquiry is the subjective meaning made of the objective event. Holstein and Gubrium (1998) believe that phenomenological study is "an uncompromising interpretive enterprise focused on everyday subjective meaning and experience, the goal of which is to explicate how objects and experience are meaningfully constituted and communicated in the world of everyday life" (p. 140).

The focus in a phenomenological study is to understand the essence of an experience and the meaning made of the phenomenon in a person's life. In this case, the focus is on the lived experiences of maternal ambivalence and the meanings women make when they find themselves with conflicting experiences of mothering an early adolescent. Phenomenological research methods assume that there is "an
essence or essences to shared experience” that can be uncovered using a phenomenological approach (Patton, 2002, p. 106). These “essences” are the core meanings discovered by the researcher as she interviews participants who share the experience. Chodorow (1978) noted that maternal ambivalence may be the only “eternal truth” about mothering and so our understanding of these experiences will add to the psychological literature regarding mothering. The purpose of this study is to describe maternal ambivalence and the meanings participants make of the phenomenon as they mother their first-born, early adolescent.

The present study followed methods and procedures proposed by Moustakas (1994) that satisfy the requirements of “an organized, disciplined and systematic study” (p. 103).

1. The researcher identified the question or focus of the study. The focus had autobiographical meaning to the researcher as well as social relevance. The researcher “bracketed” her personal narrative concerning the question via full description of her own experiences with the phenomena.

2. The researcher next conducted a comprehensive review of the literature.

3. The researcher determined the appropriate criteria and source for selection of participants.

4. The researcher invited participants to be involved with the study and provided them with an informed consent that included the general nature and purpose of the study, insured confidentiality, and maintained other ethical practices and considerations.
5. The researcher developed the interview protocol. A pilot study was conducted prior to the current study to facilitate the development of a meaningful interview protocol.

6. The researcher conducted and recorded two interviews with 7 participants that focused on the topic of concern.

7. The last step of a phenomenological study as proposed by Moustakas is the organizing and analyzing of the data. Data analysis is discussed in full under a later section of this chapter.

The Researcher as Instrument

Qualitative methods, in general, require the use of the researcher as instrument. However, Creswell (1998) notes that there is a continuum of researcher involvement in qualitative analysis that is noteworthy here. The researcher’s investment occurs in at least two ways with phenomenological inquiry. First, phenomenological inquiry requires close attention to relationships with the participants and their personal stories as the data studied. One of the distinguishing features of phenomenological methods as Marshall and Rossman (1999) argue is that successful qualitative studies depend in large part on the interpersonal skills of the researcher. They suggest that the researcher must be an “active, patient, and thoughtful listener and have an empathetic understanding of and a profound respect for the perspectives of others” (p. 85).
This researcher knows no other meaningful way to understand a complicated psychological phenomenon than to ask others to share their experiences with living the phenomena and then respectfully receive and understand what is offered by making psychological meaning of it. Because the researcher is the instrument for this study, the qualitative methods employed should resonate with her own personal, clinical, and scholarly approaches to discovering knowledge. Creswell (1998) argued that the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenological investigation include the need for the researcher to “emphasize empathy, openness, life as a mystery (rather than a problem to be solved), and being present for others” (p. 31).

Phenomenological research requires a participant to describe as fully as possible an experience and their meanings made about this experience. In the current study, there are societal proscriptions and prescriptions about the good mother that the participant was asked to set aside to tell her truth. Unless an interview experience is created between the researcher and the participant in which the participant feels a level of trust, she is unlikely to divulge her reality especially as her stories clash with cultural norms.

In phenomenological discourse as in therapy, this space is dynamically and interpersonally created. In clinical settings, Trembley (1996) referred to the third reality in which he described “an interpersonal reality which neither party owns, but to which both parties can contribute ideas” (p. 14). As is true in psychotherapy, a good enough holding environment for the participant to feel safe to tell her story is necessary. In the current study, the researcher transferred her knowledge of
establishing a trusting therapeutic environment to attempt to create a similar sense of trust and safety necessary for the participants to tell their truths.

Secondly, phenomenology requires greater involvement of researcher subjectivity in data analysis than other qualitative approaches (Creswell, 1998). The researcher was called upon to make meaning of the stories she heard from participants. The researcher acknowledges her role in the process of making meaning rather than considering herself merely a conduit for the meaning of others (Garko, 1999). As a psychologist, this means that we bring our psychological understanding into our research. As the researcher, we have “interpretive authority” (Rogers, 2000, p. 80). We are to try to imagine the real or the truth of our investigation. Imagining the real is considering “what the other is wishing, feeling, perceiving, and thinking” (Buber, 1965, p. 70).

Participant Selection

Participants were sampled using purposive sampling methods. Criterion sampling proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was employed to select participants who met the necessary criterion. Creswell (1998) noted that criterion sampling is essential with phenomenological studies because it is necessary that all participants have experienced the phenomenon. In this study, mothers were chosen based on the criteria of currently mothering first-born, early adolescents and a willingness to share experiences of maternal ambivalence.
Although qualitative methodologists do not provide a definitive answer to how many participants are required for a phenomenological study, it is generally agreed that fewer participants are necessary in this method than other qualitative methods (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Patton, 2002). Fewer participants are required because the data sought are focused on particular phenomena where participants have been purposely sampled to provide information-rich examples of the experience (Creswell, 1998). Creswell notes that phenomenological studies represented in the literature vary from 1 to 325 participants. Dukes (1984) recommended 3 to 10 participants, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) recommended 6, and Creswell (1998) recommended 10 as a “reasonable” number of subjects. The current study had 7 participants who were interviewed twice. Returning to the each participant twice allowed the researcher to improve her understanding of the phenomena by allowing the participant to further explain certain experiences or personal meanings. Allowing for a second interview also gave the researcher time to reflect on and to wonder about participants’ stories following the first interview. Since the phenomenological investigation focused on the essence of describing a particular experience rather than developing a broader theory, two interviews with 7 participants allowed the researcher to enhance her understandings of the mothers’ experiences with maternal ambivalence. Variations in the participants’ stories were noted during the initial analysis and further investigated during the second interview.

Following doctoral committee and Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (HSIRB) approval of the proposed study, participants were located using
criterion and snowballing methods of sampling (see Appendix A for HSIRB approval). A middle school principal was contacted regarding mothers who might meet the criterion for the current study. The elementary school only goes through the 8th grade and the principal was asked for a list of mothers (and their addresses) whose first-born child recently passed eighth grade and moved to the ninth grade.

The first criterion for inclusion in the present study was that the participant be the mother of a first-born, early adolescent. Developmental literature described the early adolescent to be between the ages of 10 and 14 and be in grades 4 through 9 (Flannery et al., 1993; Steinberg, 1981; Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Researchers in this area also tended to include only first-born adolescents in their samples to control for the influence of parental experience (Small et al., 1988; Steinberg, 1981). The first criterion in the present study is that the participants have a child currently enrolled in the ninth grade.

The second criterion for the present study is that the mothers have experiences with maternal ambivalence and have a willingness to share those experiences. It is assumed that the time when an adolescent moves from middle school to high school is a time of transition for both the mother and her adolescent and might represent a time in their relationship when the mother’s ambivalence toward her child (and vice versa) is heightened.

The middle school principal was given a brief description of this research and the potential benefits and risks to the participants. Mothers of first-born early adolescents currently enrolled in ninth grade who have had no personal relationship
with the researcher were considered potential participants for this study and were
mailed a letter briefly describing the research, inherent risks and benefits, and inviting
their participation in the current study (see Appendix B). Initially, 7 potential
participants were mailed the letter. The letter included the researcher’s phone number
and email address. If interested in participating in the study, the potential participant
was asked to call or email the researcher. A copy of the informed consent, as
approved by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, was also included with
the letter of invitation for the potential participant’s review.

Creswell (1998) noted “the most important” aspect for choosing participants
for a phenomenological study is that the individuals “have experienced the
phenomenon being explored and can articulate their conscious experiences” (p. 111).
During the initial phone contact, the research was explained in enough detail so that
the potential participant understood her involvement with the research and the
interview process (the script is attached as Appendix C). The researcher also briefly
inquired whether the potential participant had experienced conflicted emotions and/or
thoughts towards her adolescent and whether she would be willing to share these
personal experiences with the researcher during a later interview (script attached).
Confidentiality of information shared by the participant was assured. Four participants
were identified for inclusion in the present study from this initial sample of 7 women.

A snowball sampling method, which is a “form of purposeful sampling that
typically proceeds after a study begins and occurs when the researcher asks
participants to recommend other individuals to study,” was also employed (Creswell,
2002, p. 196). During the first interview, the 4 participants were asked if they knew one or two additional women who met the criteria and who might be interested in participating in the present study. Three additional women were identified by the snowball sampling method and were sent the same letter of invitation and copy of the informed consent as the other women. Follow-up phone calls were made to these three women to inquire about their interest, and if appropriate, to enlist them in the current study. All three of these women met the criteria for inclusion and had interviews scheduled.

Dates, times, and location for the first interview were determined when prospective participants indicated their interest in participating in this research. Interviews were either conducted at the participant’s home or at the researcher’s office to assure the participant’s privacy. At the beginning of the first interview, the informed consent process, as proposed and accepted by HSIRB, was conducted (see approved consent document, Appendix D). Once informed consent had been garnered, the interviews were conducted. All interviews were audio-recorded.

Participant Demographics

The 7 participants ranged in age from 34 to 46, with 6 of the mothers in their early and mid 40s. The participants were all Caucasian women. One participant had a high school education only, and 6 of them had some education beyond high school. Five of the mothers worked outside the home, 1 ran a daycare from her home, and 1 participant was a stay at home mother. Four were mothers of first-born daughters.
Three were mothers of first-born sons. Of the 6 women who were currently married, all had more than one child.

Six of the participants were currently married. One participant was divorced and remarried to someone other than her adolescent’s father. One participant divorced when her adolescent was under a year old and never remarried. Six of the women were born and raised in the Midwestern United States. One was born in the Eastern United States and moved to the Midwest when she was 18 years old.

Participants all identified themselves as Christians and 3 of the mothers had sent their child to a Catholic parochial elementary school. Currently, 2 of the participants’ children attend a Catholic high school and 5 attend a public high school.

Data Collection/Interviews

Phenomenological interviews require the researcher to invite the participants’ stories, to keep them focused in the area of concern, and to encourage as much trust in the telling of their story as possible. An interview protocol developed for the current study was used to guide the interview (see Appendix E). Two participants were initially interviewed. Data gathered from these first interviews were preliminarily analyzed to determine the usefulness of the interview guide before continuing to interview the other 5 participants. After the first 2 participants were interviewed, a question about birth experiences was eliminated from the interview guide as it did not generate useful data regarding maternal ambivalence. The protocol for the second
interview was developed after the data were partially analyzed and topics needing further attention were identified for each participant.

Phenomenological research as employed here recognized that neither the researcher nor the participant "knew" the truth; therefore, the researcher relied on using the semistructured interview protocol as a guide to inquiry in an unfolding process. In fact, strength of this methodology lies in its appreciation for allowing the participant’s story to evolve in the interaction with the researcher. In-depth interviewing is the preferred data collection method for researchers using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Moustakas (1994) wrote about the "long interview" and the process for conducting the interview. The long interview is an interview conducted over an hour or two where the participant is invited to give a full description of her experiences with a bracketed phenomenon. Although he acknowledged that the researcher may develop an interview guide to elicit a full account of the person’s experiences with the phenomenon, he believed the interview guide should be "varied, altered, or not used at all when the participant shares the full story of his or her experience of the bracketed question" (p. 114). He noted that the researcher is "responsible for creating a climate in which the participant will feel comfortable and will respond honestly and comprehensively" (p. 114). This is no small matter when one considers the grace it takes to create a space where the participant might feel willing and able to tell her personal story.
A semistructured interview guide served to keep the participant’s attention focused on the bracketed question. However, the phenomenological interview requires a subtle relational dance where one is guiding the inquiry for content but also paying attention to the process. Moustakas (1994) suggested that the “phenomenological interview involves an informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (p. 114). He goes on to note that the researcher must use the questionnaire artfully with the aim being to hear the “full story of the [participant’s] experience of the bracketed question.” The researcher used the interview guide to facilitate the interview process in a flexible manner, keeping attention focused on the bracketed question while allowing each participant to tell her story in her way.

The semistructured interview guide was developed and tested in a pilot study before the onset of the current research. The guide, the data obtained, and the process were analyzed to determine the usefulness of the original interview protocol. The interview protocol and the data gathered in the pilot study were used to ascertain whether the researcher was able to hear the experiences and meanings the participant has had with maternal ambivalence. According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992), a pilot study “if conducted in the right frame of mind—the deep commitment to revise—should suffice for pilot testing purposes” (p. 68). The protocol was further refined to enhance the data gathering potential in the current study. Glesne and Peshkin suggested that the pilot study could provide valuable information to the researcher regarding “practical aspects” of the interview process, as well. The participant of the
pilot study was asked to comment on her comfort with the interview process, on her perceptions of the focus of attention, and on her satisfaction with the researcher's thematic analysis of her story. The participant felt comfortable with the interview process. She seemed to find the interview gratifying because it allowed her to think and talk about her experiences with her children. The mother did seem more willing to discuss mothering positives, such as love for her children than to discuss issues that frustrated or angered her. As the interview proceeded, she began to share feelings of sometimes tiring of the ultimate responsibility associated with mothering and worrying about whether she had adequately prepared her child for the world. These and other broad themes were shared with the mother and she felt they adequately reflected her thoughts. The interview guide was further refined by integrating feedback from the researcher's doctoral committee members following the proposal of this research.

The pilot study helped the researcher see the usefulness of a second interview. A second interview allowed the researcher the opportunity to further investigate issues that were not fully explored during the first conversation due to a lack of time or the researcher's inability to recognize the possible significance of a statement in the moment. For example, when the participant was asked to describe the range of emotions she experienced as a mother, she answered by stating, "I never get angry." She went on to talk about emotions such as care, love, and worry. After listening to the transcripts, the researcher noticed the participant's unsolicited denial of anger.
The researcher would have liked to have addressed this during a second interview for a better understanding of what she was thinking.

During the pilot study all the questions in the interview guide were asked but not in the same order as they appeared. Questions were asked in an order that more matched the flow of our conversation. The participant sometimes began talking about an issue that the researcher had questions about. Rather than waiting to get to that question on the interview guide, the researcher followed her lead, gathered information about the issue, and then returned to earlier questions listed on the protocol. The interview guide helped the researcher to quickly assess whether she had covered the topics of interest and kept the interview within the bracketed focus of concern. The interview guide facilitated the interview process in the current study in the very same manner.

There are at least two other reasons why each participant was interviewed twice. First, it was hoped that through the experience of the first interview the participants would gain some trust in the process and with the researcher and be more willing to give voice to their experiences with maternal ambivalence in the second interview. Participants talked qualitatively different during the second interview than the first, offering richer accounts of their lives with their adolescents. During the second interview participants began to spontaneously offer information that they deemed relevant to the questions put before them. For example, participants, without solicitation, brought up issues about their personal histories that enhanced the researcher’s understanding of their meaning making. The first interview primed them
to think about their maternal experiences and they had more to share during the second interview. Some had thought about issues they shared during the first interview and elaborated on them during the second interview. A subsequent interview also provided the researcher an opportunity to validate findings of the initial data analysis. Each participant was given a copy of a summary of findings after the first interview. They were asked to read the summary and give feedback to the researcher. The participants’ responses to the summary offered meaningful direction for the second interview. Each of the two interviews lasted between 1½ hours and 2 hours.

Data Analysis

According to tenets of phenomenology, human experience is composed of the noema and the noesis. The noema is “what” is experienced. In this study, the noema is maternal ambivalence. Participants were asked to describe experiences they have had with maternal ambivalence. In other words, they were asked to describe maternal ambivalence. The noesis is the “way” in which a phenomenon is experienced. In this case, the noesis is about the meanings made about personal experiences with maternal ambivalence. For example, in Chapter I the researcher described actual experiences of mothering an adolescent son when he was trying to share his day with her and the researcher was trying to conduct her work. The researcher could describe the context, what was said, behaviors, feelings, etc., of that experience. Upon reflecting upon this experience and other similar experiences, the researcher began to arrive at the
"essence" of the experience and what the experience of maternal ambivalence meant to her. “The shift from a phenomenon and our perception of it, to reflective examination of our conscious experience of it occurs throughout a phenomenological study” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 71).

Analysis of the data obtained during interviews with the participants in the present study focused on the noema and noesis in order to arrive at the essence and phenomenological meaning of maternal ambivalence. The present study sought to understand experiences and meanings made about maternal ambivalence as it occurred for mothers in concrete lived situations.

Process of Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded through a series of analytical steps based on the researcher’s synthesis of ideas presented by Moustakas (1994) and Colaizzi (1978).

1. The researcher read transcripts of each participant’s interview to get an intuitive understanding of each. (Colaizzi, 1978). As she read the transcripts the researcher highlighted passages that seemed generally relevant to the understanding of maternal ambivalence.

2. The data were listed and preliminarily grouped into two categories. The highlighted data were entered into QSR NUDIST software (a qualitative data analysis software program). The extracted phrases or sentences that directly pertained to the experiences of mothering a first-born, early adolescent were placed in two buckets of data: demographic and maternal experiences.
3. *Eliminating data* refers to eliminating phrases or sentences when the phrase does not “contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding” maternal ambivalence. A phrase may also be eliminated at this stage of analysis if the researcher is unable to “abstract it and label it” or make psychological meaning of it. Portions of the transcript that were not highlighted when the researcher initially read the transcript were eliminated. The eliminated data were not relevant to understanding maternal ambivalence and were not used to develop themes.

4. *Reducing the data* in phenomenological analysis refers to reducing the many expressions of the experience to some common categories. The researcher read the data in the category entitled “experiences of mothering.” For each participant the data in this broad ‘bucket’ or category were entered into subcategories. Two initial categories emerged: adolescent changes and maternal responses. Buckets were created in the software entitled “adolescent changes” and “maternal responses” where data relevant to these two categories were placed.

5. *Invariant constituents of the phenomenon were identified* and are a result of eliminating “overlapping, repetitive, and vague descriptions” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). Each participant’s data from the first interview were coded for the invariant constituents of her story. At this point of data analysis there were two buckets of data, “adolescent changes” and “maternal responses,” and each were read to determine further categories. Invariant constituents began to emerge and further subcategories of data were created.
6. Abstracting and labeling data is an essential step explicit in Colaizzi’s (1978) method of analysis and refers to the researcher “transforming” the extracted data into the words of the researcher. The researcher was called to use her interpretive authority and transform the data into psychological terms. The “naïve descriptions” of the participants were transformed into “more exact descriptive terms” (p. 69).

7. Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents is the next step of analysis. In the present study, the researcher began to cluster related invariant constituents into themes. These became the core themes or the “horizons” of the experience. Each participant’s transcript was examined to identify the core themes of maternal ambivalence as she described it.

Initially only 2 women were interviewed. The data collected from these two interviews were analyzed through step 7 to help ensure the adequacy of the interview format before the other 5 women were interviewed. As the remaining participants were interviewed, the analysis continued.

8. Validating the themes (horizons) by applying them to the original transcripts is the next phase of analysis. This is a validation check where the researcher returned to the actual words of the participants to determine that the identified invariant constituents and their accompanying themes are either directly expressed or at least compatible with the original transcript. Times when the analysis did not seem compatible with the original transcript were noted, reviewed, and further investigated by starting again from the beginning of analysis. Remaining issues,
questions, and ideas were entered in analytical memos and were attended to in the second interview with the participant.

9. The researcher developed individual textural descriptions for each participant by combining and synthesizing the themes in each mother's story. The textural description had to do with the "appearance of the phenomenon." The textural description is the "what" or the "noema" of the experience of maternal ambivalence and contained examples of descriptions of the mother's experiences which had to do with maternal ambivalence.

10. The researcher next developed individual structural descriptions of the phenomenon. During this phase of analysis, the researcher began to make meaning of the mother's personal stories. During this phase of analysis, the researcher was attempting to identify the experiences participants had with maternal ambivalence and the meanings they made of it. It required the researcher to employ an intuitive and subjective technique of imaginative variation to begin to identify the meaning made of an experience. Just as we are called to make meaning of a client's story in a therapeutic setting, we are called to understand what it means to the mother to have ambivalence toward her adolescent child. "Variation is targeted toward meanings and depends on intuition as a way of integrating structures into essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The process of imaginative variation "includes a reflective phase in which many possibilities are examined" and ultimately the researcher was called upon to develop structural themes that go beyond the content of the participant's story to the psychological processes underlying it (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99).
11. *The researcher constructed textural-structural descriptions* of data from each participant’s first interview. The meanings and essences of the experience were constructed for each participant and are presented as analytical summaries in Appendix F. Textural-structural synthesis “requires an integration of the composite textural and composite structural descriptions, providing a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” for each mother (Moustakas, 1994, p. 144). It requires a “back and forth” process between the noema and noesis. In phenomenology, an experience is comprised of the noema or the object-correlate and the noesis or the subject-correlate. Together the object, the thing we wish to understand (in this case maternal ambivalence) is subjectively experienced and made meaning of. By going back and forth between the naming and describing of maternal ambivalence and the subjective experience of it, the essence of maternal ambivalence unfolded. The synthesis of textural descriptions with structural themes is an attempt to move back and forth and eventually integrate perceptual meaning with concealed meanings uncovered by reflection. Think of a mother who might tell a rather ordinary story about a situation she experienced with her adolescent child. But the “facts” of this story are only a part of the experience. The rest of the story is the subjective meanings she made of the experience. The task of the researcher in this phenomenological study was to understand the objective and subjective experiences of maternal ambivalence. An auditor read all of the interview transcripts and the textural-structural descriptions as a verification of the researcher’s analysis and findings.
Steps 1 through 11 were done for each transcript of each interview. After the data were analyzed from the first interview, the researcher moved to step 12 in the analysis. Second interviews began after data analysis of five of the first interviews had been completed.

12. The researcher presented the preliminary findings to the participants as the next step of analysis. Data from the first interview were analyzed through step 11 and each participant received a copy of the preliminary textural-structural description of their experiences of maternal ambivalence before the second interview. These summaries were discussed with the women during the second interview. Themes in the summaries were clarified, expanded, and made further meaning of during the second interview.

13. The researcher analyzed data from the second interview by repeating the first 11 steps of data analysis, which resulted in the final textural-structural description for each participant. A final analytical summary was prepared for each participant that included themes from both interviews. The auditor read the transcripts from the second interviews and the analytical summaries to verify analysis and findings.

14. The researcher developed a composite description of the essence and meaning of maternal ambivalence that applied to the entire group of participants and is presented in the findings as “Everymother’s Story” (Moustakas, 1994). Colaizzi (1978) refers to this as creating an “essential structural definition” of the phenomenon (p. 60). Everymother’s Story was developed by coding the analytical summaries prepared in step 13 of data analysis. This coding identified themes consistent across
participants' stories by coding the abstracted data in the individual textural-structural summaries, and resulted in a higher level of abstraction and meaning making.

The goal of phenomenology is to "bring to life the universal character and dynamics" of a phenomena. Or put another way, the "composite structural description is a way of understanding how the co-researchers as a group experience what they experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 142). Participants were mailed the composite description of Everymother's Story. The participants gave no further additions or corrections.

The Rigor of the Data Analysis

One of the major discourses in qualitative research literature is the establishment of "standards" and "verification" criteria for evaluating projects. It is argued that qualitative researchers should not use quantitative concepts of reliability and validity because these constructs do not apply to the goals of qualitative research (Creswell, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Janesick, 1998). Establishing rigor in qualitative inquiry does not mean that we have to use analogous language and be "co-opted by the dominant frames of discourse especially when the goals of qualitative inquiry are so different than the goals of quantitative inquiry" (Miller & Crabtree, 1998, p. 307).

Miller and Crabtree (1998) suggested that the goals of a sound qualitative study are that it tells a "convincing story," methodologically, rhetorically, and clinically. Kahn (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) suggested that a "language of
relationship be used to judge the methodological adequacy of qualitative research” (p. 308). A methodologically convincing story will address at least three different relationships: the researcher’s relationship with the participants in the study, with the data, and with the reader.

For the present study, rigor was established by attending to these relationships. Regarding the relationship with the participants, attention was paid to the influence of the researcher and the participant on each other. How well the researcher bracketed her experience at the onset of the study was a matter to be evaluated as it relates to the bias the researcher brings to the findings of the study. Analytic memos were made that captured major impressions of an interview or participant. Analytic memos were also made to keep track of the researchers thinking as the analysis continued. The semistructured interview guide was used as a tool to keep the inquiry focused generally on the topic of concern.

The researcher’s relationship to the data is also important to evaluate in a methodologically convincing story. This study employed several techniques to establish rigor of data analysis. Triangulation methods requiring the researcher to check her findings with the participants is a technique used in qualitative inquiry to assess the validity of the findings. Moustakas (1994) specifically includes returning preliminary findings to the participants to seek their feedback on the accuracy. The participants’ feedback is yet another aid in making meaning of the data. Several validation checks were imbedded in the data analysis. The first validation check was during step 7 of analysis whereby the researcher returned to the data to check for
accuracy of her codes. Another validation check occurred after initial analysis of the
data following the first interview. The chairperson of the researcher’s doctoral
committee provided another validation check by reading interview transcripts and the
researcher’s analytic summary of each participant’s first interview to confirm findings
in the summary. Participants were also given a copy of the researcher’s analytic
summary of the first interview and asked to validate the accuracy during the second
interview. Finally, participants were mailed the composite textural-structural
description of maternal ambivalence as portrayed by the group for validation.
Participants were asked to call the researcher if they had thoughts they would like to
share and none did so. Another method for ensuring that the data were robust was
that “thick description” of the phenomena was gathered (Creswell, 1998). In the
current study, participants were interviewed two times, which allowed the researcher
to hear subtleties and nuances of experiences that would have otherwise been missed.

Finally, a methodologically convincing story involves a relationship with the
reader where the researcher’s “authorial intent” is made clear. In the current study,
the researcher bracketed her experience and meanings made about maternal
ambivalence at the onset of the study so the reader could have some understanding of
the researcher’s potential biases. Post modernists and feminists argue that the process
of all discovery emerges from the “researcher’s prejudgments and predilections”
(Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Nielsen (1990) argues that such “predispositions should
be used as building blocks for acquiring new knowledge” (p. 28). The biases of the
researcher “are essential data and a crucial part of the knowledge generated by
qualitative research” (Janesick, 1998, p. 307). However, to be methodologically convincing, the reader should be able to judge whether the researcher’s assumptions were made explicit. The reader must be able to judge whether the findings presented by the researcher are reasonable given her “prejudgments and predilections.”

A second test of a sound qualitative study, according to Miller and Crabtree (1998), is that the researcher should tell a “rhetorically convincing story” where the conclusions are reasonable given the data. Important for evaluating the rigor of the findings in this study is the notion of using the participants’ words to illustrate the meanings made by the researcher during data analysis. The quotations and observations selected to illustrate interpretations need to be consistent with the actual story told (Miller & Crabtree, 1998). Asking the participants to verify the researcher’s interpretations and meanings made of their stories helps ensure that findings reflect the participants’ voices. Analytic memos made throughout the process that tracked her reflection and thinking as she analyzed the data also ensured that a rhetorically convincing story was told.

Finally, Miller and Crabtree (1998) argue that a rigorous qualitative study tells a “clinically convincing story.” Linda Hogan (1995) wrote, “We have arrived despairingly at a time when compassion and care are qualities that do not lend themselves to the world of intellectual thought” (p. 55). She shared a poem written by Jimmie Durham, a Cherokee writer to illustrate her point:

In a magazine too expensive to buy, I read about
How, with scientific devices of great complexity,
U.S. scientists have discovered that if a rat
Is placed in a cage in which it has previously

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Been given an electrical shock, it starts crying.

I told my grandmother about that and she said, “We probably knew that would be true.”

(Hogan, 1995, p. 55)

This study is designed to understand the essence of what it means in a woman’s life to be ambivalent towards her adolescent child. This is a psychologically complicated phenomenon and should be treated as such. Qualitative research is judged by the clinical difference it makes (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Creswell (2002) suggested that a study be judged by whether it adds meaningful value in informing and improving our practice of psychology. In this study, understanding the normal, ordinary, and everyday lives of women who experience maternal ambivalence towards their early adolescent children will improve our clinical practice when working with women who experience this ambivalence as distressing.
CHAPTER IV

MAJOR FINDINGS

The goal of phenomenological data analysis is to describe the essence of a phenomenon and the meaning people make of living the experience. Participants of this study were asked to describe their lived experiences of mothering a first-born early adolescent. Mothers were encouraged to share the meanings they made of experiences when they felt confused, sad, frustrated, or otherwise ambivalent about their maternal experiences. For the purposes of this study, early adolescence was defined as children who entered the ninth grade in the year the study was conducted.

The process of data analysis was outlined in Chapter III. From naïve descriptions of participants’ experiences mothering first-born, early-adolescents, the researcher compiled three distinct and overarching domains which examine the context, describe the phenomenon of maternal ambivalence, and examine the participants’ responses to maternal ambivalence. These domains and relevant themes in each domain are presented. Figure 1 is a diagram of the outline of the present chapter. Analytical summaries of each participant’s story are presented in Appendix F.

Domain I contains findings relevant to the mother’s context and includes data categorized into three themes: (1) maternal perceptions of her adolescent, (2) maternal perceptions of the adolescent’s changing context, and (3) the participant’s marital status and quality of relationship.
Figure 1. Outline of Chapter IV. MA = Maternal Ambivalence. Domain II, Theme 1 has five subsections: (1) loss of omniscience, (2) loss of omnipotence, (3) internalized "good mother," (4) maternal evaluation of role functioning, and (5) other roles. Domain II, Theme 2 has 3 subsections: (1) self, (2) other, and (3) relationship.
Domain II consists of data concerning the participant’s lived experiences of maternal ambivalence while mothering a first-born, early-adolescent. Under Domain II data are categorized into three themes: (1) maternal role; (2) maternal perceptions of self, other, and relationship shifts; and (3) limits or freedom. There are five subsections of data under maternal role: (1) loss of omniscience, (2) loss of omnipotence, (3) the internalized “good mother,” (4) other roles, and (5) maternal evaluation of her role functioning. Theme two—maternal perceptions of self, other, and relationship shifts—has three subsections of data: (1) self, (2) other, and (3) relationship. Theme three, limits or freedom, has no further dimensions of data.

Domain III is data relevant to the participants’ responses to their maternal ambivalence. Domain III has the following six themes: (1) reparation and healing, (2) love or hate, (3) holding on or letting go, (4) self and other confusion, (5) self-sacrifice or self-preservation, and (6) awareness and acceptance.

Domain I: Contextual Variables

Data about the mother’s context include her perceptions of her adolescent, her perceptions of the adolescent’s changing context, and her marital status. The first theme under Domain I is the mother’s characterizations of her adolescent, which included adolescent personality variables, which mothers saw as having been consistent across their children’s lives. Mothers also described perceived changes in their adolescents’ behavior that they attributed more to the adolescents’ current development. A second theme under Domain I represents changes mothers noticed
with regard to their adolescents’ expanding world due to their children’s broadening contexts. The third theme regarding the participant’s context is her marital status and the impact she perceived this to have on mothering.

**Perceptions of Her Adolescent**

Some of the mothers believed that their adolescents’ personality characteristics had not changed since childhood. Fran described her son as “caring, kind, and nonaggressive” and expressed the same concerns for him now as she did when he entered kindergarten. In kindergarten, she feared that her son’s personality traits would lead him to be taken advantage of, and in high school she worried about whether he would be able to make friends. Vivian’s characterization of her adolescent being “disorganized and naïve” has also been a consistent concern about the daughter since she was a child.

Mothers sometimes made conflicting statements about their adolescents. For example, Vivian believed her daughter was “pure love,” which conflicted with her notion that the daughter was also “self-centered.” Mary also held a contradictory perception of her daughter. She believed that her daughter would live a life of “passion,” which conflicted with her perception of her daughter having diverse and more superficial interests in many things and moving at what Mary viewed as a rather slow pace. Mary noted the inconsistencies between these two descriptions, but nevertheless, insisted that the daughter would pursue life passionately. Both mothers
seemed to need to see their daughter in a certain way regardless of behavioral indications to the contrary.

By and large, all of the mothers in this study believed that their adolescents were good people. Fran believed that her adolescent was a blessing and a payment for the struggles she had encountered earlier in life. Vivian believed her daughter was "pure love." Mary felt that her daughter was not the typical adolescent because of how easy she was for this mother to raise. Helen said her daughter wasn't "all bad," while Ann said she had a "good kid" and Fran felt that she had raised a "decent" human being.

The mothers talked more extensively about behavioral changes they noticed since their children's entrance into adolescence. The most common theme regarding adolescent behavioral change reported by 6 of the 7 mothers was that their adolescents were more secretive about their lives and the adolescents refused to share life events with the mothers now that they were older. Vivian stated, "A lot of it is secret. She has lots of secrets, little secrets." Four of these 6 mothers complained that their adolescents told lies. Vivian, for example, said, "I get little white lies" when she asks her daughter questions. Mary, Vivian, and Helen noted that their adolescents did not ask for their help like they once had.

Four of the 7 mothers noted that their adolescents seemed to have their own opinions that did not always coincide with the mothers' opinions. The mothers acknowledged that their adolescents seemed to want to work out problems they encountered on their own and keep their mothers at bay. Two of these 4 mothers,
Ann and Helen, explicitly commented that their adolescents were more argumentative. Helen and Mary believed that their children exercised good judgment but still seemed to worry that the adolescents may not have the maturity to always make the best decisions.

Three of the mothers, Vivian, Ann, and Beth, felt that their adolescents were more manipulative than when they were younger. Vivian and Ann seemed to feel that their children had began exaggerating complaints about their lives to get the mother’s attention or “push her buttons.” Beth believed that her adolescent’s manipulation was due to his knowing right from wrong, but choosing to do wrong while wanting to please her.

The mothers also reported that their adolescents currently spent more time alone or with friends than they had in the past. However, 3 of the mothers, Vivian, Fran, and Carol, felt that their adolescents continued to be content to stay at home. Vivian worried about this and encouraged her daughter to reach out more to friends. Three of the mothers, Mary, Ann, and Helen, described their adolescents as being busier and active in social events. Ann and Mary noted that their adolescents markedly changed their style and manner of dress during their early adolescence. Their daughters had pierced body parts, dyed their hair, and changed their clothing styles.

Beth and Carol noted that their adolescents’ behavior was different in public than at home. These 2 mothers described their adolescents as not wanting the mother to show any physical signs of affection. Fran seemed to expect this behavior from her
son, but seemed surprised to find that he did not seem to be bothered by her presence in public and in fact had on occasion shown his affection for her. These 3 participants were mothers of sons.

Four of the mothers felt that their adolescents’ maturity level had changed. Increases in maturity were noted with regard to being able to have more mature conversations with their adolescents now. At least 2 of the mothers, Helen and Mary, felt that their children had their life foundation established and were who they were going to be. Mary said:

Part of it is just because our conversations are more fun. Being able to not change your vocabulary when you’re having a conversation is more fun. Understanding things at the same level is neat. It’s more relaxed now. I feel like for the most part what I can offer my children in formation, values, foundation, is pretty much over. [My daughter] definitely is who she’s going to be.

While Mary seemed to believe that her daughter was mature for her age, Mary described her need to change her way of relating to her daughter as moving from relating to a child versus relating to a woman. Three other mothers described their adolescents as being between a child and an adult. Beth and Carol believed that their adolescents struggled between being a boy and a man. Both of these mothers worried about their son’s immaturity. Beth said:

As they mature and get older you have to respect that they have opinions and that is a challenge especially at 14 years old because, like I said, he’s fighting between a man and a boy so do you need to mother him at this point or do you let him fly and be a man?

Beth and Carol believed that their sons’ behavior was contingent upon whether they were behaving as boys or men. As boys, they sought closeness with
their mothers. As men, they were more distant. Beth said when her son was behaving as a man he was “headstrong” and turned a “deaf ear” to her. When responding to her as a boy he wants her to enter a “mothering mode.” Carol described her son as wanting her to “tuck him in to bed at night” as a sign of his remaining a boy. When he was acting more like an adolescent he shunned her, especially in public.

The mothers’ characterizations of their adolescents fit with larger meaning constructions the mothers made about self, other, and relationship. One is left to wonder if the adolescents are actually the way the mothers perceived them or whether the participants needed to see the adolescent as they characterized them to make old meaning constructions more coherent. For example, maternal characterizations of their adolescents sometimes fit with psychological defenses the mothers seemed to employ to deal with maternal ambivalence. For example, Vivian seemed to defensively deny negative thoughts and feelings regarding mothering. Insisting that her daughter was “pure love” even though the daughter’s behavior suggested that she was “self-centered,” might help the mother adhere to old meaning structures about who her child is, about how best to mother, and about the relationship with the adolescent. Likewise, Mary had a tendency to defensively merge her identity with that of her daughter’s. Mary highly valued being able to live life passionately. Fitting with this dynamic, she insisted that her daughter would also live a passionate life. Carol needed to see her son as a boy because this defended against the eventual loss she believed would occur as he matures.
Perceptions of Her Adolescent’s Changing Context

The adolescents’ entrance into high school was often cited as a turning point in the adolescents’ and the mothers’ lives. Mary noted that at the beginning of her daughter’s ninth grade year, the daughter’s “world opened up like a ripened melon.” Mothers talked about believing that this ushered in a time of a much expanded world full of new pressures, influences, and dangers. The mothers also believed that they were no longer able to know all their children’s friends. Mothers noted that their adolescents had an increased interest in the opposite sex and worried that they would probably be exposed to sex and drugs. Their adolescents were also described as having more mobility because they had friends who could drive and they themselves would soon be driving.

All in all, adolescents were described as being both interpersonally and physically more distant from their mothers. The adolescents had an internal world that the mothers could no longer access except by invitation of the adolescent. The adolescents also had an external world that the mothers could not completely know.

Marital Status

Five of the mothers were married to their adolescents’ fathers, 1 mother was married, but not to her adolescent’s father, and 1 mother was a single parent to her adolescent. Participants talked about how this contextual variable influenced their mothering and quality of the relationship with their adolescent.
Six of the women were married but they had different experiences with how supportive they perceived their husbands to be regarding parenting issues. Moreover, they held different views about wanting or needing support from their husbands. Mary and Helen depicted their husbands as helpful and supportive in parenting their children. Mary stated that she and her husband negotiated parenting decisions. Helen said her husband offered his opinion when asked. However, each of these husbands deferred final authority to the mothers. Both of these mothers believed that this was due in part to their knowing their adolescent better. Helen explicitly said she liked this arrangement because it gave her “freedom” to parent as she saw fit. She said:

When it comes to kind of discipline and raising, he lets me have—sometimes I’d like to say you deal with this or something like that. But I appreciate actually the freedom that he has given me to be a mother and not criticize me.

Vivian, on the other hand, deferred final parenting authority to her husband even though she felt she knew her adolescent better. This mother felt that her husband was much more rational and pragmatic about their daughter than she was. She described her husband as being less emotionally involved and stricter with their children. Even though she believed that her husband is not as close to his daughters and does not understand them as she does, his parenting authority and decision-making seemed to alleviate her anxiety when faced with a worrisome situation. Even though the husband has the final say regarding major parenting decisions, the daughter still comes to the mother with her complaints. During the first interview Vivian said:

Oh no, I get to worry about it until [my husband] makes me feel better. And he said, then she (the daughter) sits on the couch and she tells you all the bad
stuff. She stretches the truth. And I said to her, it won't matter what you say to me. Your father has made this decision and he's very strong. You have to talk to him as well about how you feel. So I want her to quit always bringing to my—but then she knows she can talk to me and she can tell me her feelings.

Fran seemed to be ambivalent about whether she really wanted her husband’s support in parenting their son. She felt she had to carry out discipline on her own and she said she wished her husband would support her in this regard. Fran suggested that she remained married to her husband because it was a sacrifice she was willing to make to give her children a two-parent family. She perceived herself as more able to handle unexpected parenting issues than her husband due to her greater ability to be responsible and organized; she said she would rather handle parenting issues herself. Speaking about her husband’s role in parenting she said:

I mean when things, when curve balls get thrown instead of—you just deal with them instead of freaking out, falling apart, oh my God. I mean, that’s like how [my husband] handles things. He falls apart, everything, loses it all.

Even though she expressed a desire to be helped out, she said delegating some of the household and parenting responsibilities to her husband was her “biggest stepping stone.” She seemed to feel that delegating threatened the importance of her role in the family. Talking about giving some of the parenting responsibilities to her husband, she said, “I don’t know what that relinquishing is about, you know, if it’s just about control, or if it feels like we don’t have the important job that we had.”

Carol did not talk much about the quality of the father’s relationship with their son except to say that he shared her focus on parenting. He seemed to be an active and involved father. He coached his son’s athletic teams and worked at their school
when their children were younger. The mother noted that during a time of distance between her and her son, the son continued to talk to his father.

Ann, a single mother, seemed to wish that she had a “partner” that would allow her to present “a unified front” to her adolescent and someone she could check with about parenting decisions. Another single mother who had remarried, Beth, noted that her husband helped her to see that she needed to “cut the apron strings” with her son and hold him more accountable for himself.

Participants also discussed the priority of the marital relationship in their current lives. Three of the mothers, Carol, Vivian, and Beth, talked about needing to put the marital relationship on hold in the sense that they did not have time or energy to give to the marriage. They felt that their focus had to be on their children for the time being and that they would rekindle the relationships with their husbands when the children left. Carol stated:

> When you have kids and you’re involved, you lose track of your friends, you know, because you’re totally wrapped up in your kids, which is okay, cuz they’ll come back too or you’ll make new one, but it’s hard, you know, you can’t have it all . . . between a husband and wife too, I mean that gets very uhm, stressed, because you know you’re doing for your kids, and you’re losing out on who you each are . . . I just told him I said you know in a few more years they’re gonna be going their ways, I said we’ll get ourselves back together then. We’ll find each other again or whatever.

Beth had been a single mother for several years while raising her son and had been engaged to other men several times. But now in her current marriage, she too finds it difficult to make time for her husband. A fourth mother, Ann, also a single mother, did not seem to date much while her daughter was younger, at least in part due to a feeling that she needed to be home with her daughter.
At least one mother, Helen, seemed to actively develop other relationships. This mother vacationed with her husband, without the children. She also vacationed with her sister yearly and took regular excursions with girlfriends. These breaks made her feel better able to be a mother. She believed that while she was gone her husband and children appreciated her more as well.

The single mother and the woman who had been single, Ann and Beth, both felt that not having a father in the home had an impact on the quality of the relationship they had with their adolescent. Both mothers noted that their relationships with their adolescents had a more friendship quality to them than solely parental quality. Ann said, “You feel like you’re two, like people sharing an apartment, instead of like the mother and the daughter.”

They both noted that they had had to rely on their children because there was no one else to depend on. Ann seemed to worry that this had eroded her adolescent’s respect for her authority. Ann went on to say that “the respect level isn’t there like it should be, which is not a good thing and I think that comes from growing up you know in that single parent home.” In contrast, Beth believed that she was particularly close to her adolescent because of their time together without other’s influence. Beth stated, “I’m not only his mom, I’m his best friend.”

Helen, a married participant, attributed another mother’s apparent closer relationship with her adolescent to the woman being a single mother. Helen seemed to feel that that the mother was more apt to be a friend than a mother because she was single and had more time. While Helen complained about not having the closeness
with her adolescent that the other woman seemed to have with her daughter, she also
criticized the other mother for being more a friend than mother to her child.

While mothers acknowledged receiving varying levels of support from their
husbands, all but one mother seemed to feel that parenting responsibilities fell
primarily to them. Even this one mother, Vivian, who said she deferred child-rearing
decisions to her husband, felt more called on by the daughter to provide emotional
support. Some mothers enjoyed the freedom to make parenting decisions, even when
they might complain about the lack of support. They seemed to be pleased with their
efforts and the idea that they were an integral part of their children’s lives. All the
married mothers, except for Carol, believed they knew their children best so were
better able to know what the child needed than their husbands were. Several mothers
seemed to prioritize their relationship with the adolescent over the marital
relationship. Mothers thought being married or single had an impact on the quality of
the relationship with their adolescents for good or bad.

Domain II: Participants’ Descriptions of Experiences of Maternal Ambivalence

Domain II is the researcher’s interpretations of the participants’ naïve
descriptions of their ordinary experiences with mothering that shed light on the shared
essence of maternal ambivalence. This domain includes the following themes:
maternal role; maternal perceptions of self, other, and relationship shifts; and limits or
freedom.
The first theme under Domain II, maternal role, has five dimensions of data: loss of omniscience, loss of omnipotence, the internalized good mother, cultivating other roles, and maternal evaluation of her role functioning. Theme two—maternal perceptions of self, other, and relationship shifts—has three dimensions: self, other, and relationship. Theme three, limits or freedom, has no further dimensions.

As the analysis of Domain II unfolded, it became apparent that the essence of maternal ambivalence as described by the participants in this study is comprised of meaning constructions of self, other, and the relationship. At this transitional time in these mothers’ lives, they described changes in all three of these object relationship arenas.

Maternal Role

Theme one, maternal role, has to do with descriptions of, and changes in, the participants’ sense of their maternal self. Loss of old ways of being in their children’s lives, fear of how they would be remembered for doing their job, fear of how they might come to evaluate their maternal efforts, and worry whether they had mothered in a way that approximated the internalized maternal ideal they had held throughout their children’s lives, were all described by the mothers of this study.

Maternal Omniscience

The first dimension of the maternal role theme, maternal omniscience, included mothers’ ideas and struggles with a perceived loss of being able to “know”
their adolescent in ways they were used to. Six of the 7 mothers talked about how the experience of “knowing” their adolescents had shifted. Five of these 6 mothers felt that they were less able to know about their adolescent children. The sixth mother, Beth, seemed to fancifully believe that she would always be able to know about her adolescent and his life because of their uniquely close relationship.

The 5 mothers who felt that they were not as able to be omniscient in their adolescents’ lives cited several reasons for the diminished knowing. Four felt that their adolescents weren’t as likely to tell them about events and experiences in their lives. These mothers wished that they could always be “privy” to their children’s lives. Even though Mary continued to maintain that she intuitively knew her daughter, she commented:

The biggest sense of loss, I guess, would be I am looking straight in the eye in the fact that I am not going to be, have not been, privy to everything in her life the way I have been for 14 years.

These mothers felt a need or a wish to know about their children. They experienced the inability to know everything about their child as a loss.

Four of the mothers who felt that they were not able to know as much about their adolescents’ internal life also talked about the adolescents’ expanding world. A common complaint of these mothers was the impossibility of knowing everyone in their adolescents’ lives. This seemed to be a new experience for them, one that they described as a loss and invoking fear or worry. For example, Mary said she wished to know about her daughter’s life because she would miss not being included in the way she had been.
When Helen was faced with not knowing, she read her adolescent's correspondence to discover what was going on with her daughter. Another mother, Fran said she had spies and would not hesitate to call a perfect stranger if she felt a need to know. Fran was bothered by not knowing about decisions her son might make while at a doctor's visit. These mothers seemed to believe that the trend of knowing less would continue to worsen as the adolescent continued to mature.

Ann was the only mother of the 7 participants that did not talk about knowing her daughter in a special way. She said that her daughter had others to go to with her problems and the mother believed this was a good thing.

Loss of Omnipotence

A second dimension of data regarding the maternal role is loss of omnipotence. With a loss of omniscience, mothers also noted changes in their ability to influence or control their adolescents' behavior, and worried that they could no longer be as able to protect their adolescents from all they might encounter in their world. Three mothers stated explicitly that not knowing was experienced as a loss of control over their adolescents' lives and other mothers in the study seemed to experience this loss as well. For example, Helen said she continued to need to know about her daughter's life because she was still responsible for the decisions her daughter made.

Mothers in the study described their mothering role as central to their family's lifestyle. Four of the mothers seemed to suggest that they had much of the control in
the life of their children, including the maintenance of family schedules. Their ability
to have this kind of control seemed threatened by their children's entrance into
adolescence. Mary described herself as the "hub" of the wheel and experienced the
loss of control in her daughter's life as her biggest loss. Beth felt that having her son
was one of the few things she had control over. Fran said loss of control over
childcare responsibilities was her "biggest stepping stone." Finally, Helen said that she
enjoyed the "freedom" to run her household without interference from her husband.
Several of the mothers seemed proud that they were the keepers of the calendars and
that family life scheduling was in their control.

The loss of control for these mothers was experienced around the issue of
their adolescents making decisions and life choices for themselves. Six of the7
mothers talked about the wish for control and loss of it in their adolescents' lives and
decision-making. Four of the 5 mothers who felt a decline in their omnipotence said
this threatened their ability to continue to influence decisions in their adolescents'
lives. Helen noted, "I'm responsible . . . hoping that they're going to make the right
decisions." Mary had raised her daughter to think for herself and trust her judgment,
yet she worried that her daughter would make choices based on the daughter's
judgment not hers. Nonetheless, she stated that she would rather have her daughter
make a bad choice than to "crip[le]" her by taking her choices away. In a very earnest
way, Mary said:

    I taught her to trust herself and if I need to step in and say you can't do that
any more because you are making a very, very wrong choice, then that upsets
a trust in there and this sounds strange, especially for a mother of a young girl
whom I do not want having sex, but I'll tell you strangely enough, I think it
would almost be for her long run as a woman, almost be better for her to have early protected sex than to make her no longer trust her inner voice . . . I think the decision would be between something that's important but life goes on versus being crippled somehow. I wouldn't want her to be crippled in that way.

On the other hand, Beth thinks her son chooses to date the wrong type of girl and would like to influence his romantic involvements. She said she likes to "dictate" what he will and won't do, but finds it difficult to do now. Vivian wishes she could "teach" her daughter better life skills or "fix" her daughter's academic and social problems. She acknowledges that she wishes she could pick her daughter's friends and fight her battles and has been accused of trying to do this by teachers. Helen worries whether her daughter will be "prepared" to make good choices as she faces more options. She has lost control because her daughter does not disclose everything to her, nor does she know how to make her daughter "hear" her. Like Mary, she believes her daughter should be able to make mistakes, but wants to protect her from making a serious mistake. Fran had to struggle with being asked to wait in the waiting room of the doctor's office while her son was examined. She felt a need to be involved with the decisions they might make. She gets frustrated with her son because she cannot make him do his schoolwork.

Some of the wish for control seemed to be about the adolescent's behavior, good or bad, that was perceived as a direct reflection on the mother. Beth and Fran discussed explicitly that their adolescents' decisions were a direct "reflection on the parent." This idea was implicit in several of the other mothers' stories as well. Contrary to these mothers, Ann said she did not wish to be the "epicenter" of her
daughter’s world. She seemed to feel that her daughter did not have to come to her with all of her problems. This mother was willing to hear her daughter’s problems but also believed that the daughter had others she could turn to. Ann seemed to feel that it was her daughter’s job to figure out what she wanted in life and pursue it. She said:

I think she’s gonna be great and she’s very creative and I just—that would be the best thing that could happen for me, is if she was able to take those different parts of her personality and become what she really wanted to be. You know if she could just determine it, figure it out.

Likewise, if her daughter made a life altering choice such as getting pregnant, Ann said, “You (the daughter) make those choices, you lay in that bed, then you take care of it. You take responsibility for it. I will not. Cuz I raised her alone.”

Two of the mothers seemed to have unrealistic expectations of what they could have control over. Beth believed that she still had influence over her son’s decisions even though he is making decisions contrary to her wishes. According to her, he is currently dating “trailer park trash,” but in the end she insisted that they will choose a wife for him together that will care for her in her older age.

He has told me since he was this knee high and he has told me—he has already promised me that his wife will take care of me when I’m old and grey. And oh, it’s easy for you to make that promise, but that says a lot for you that my son at 14 still loves me enough that we, that’s what he says we, we’ll find me a good wife that will take care of you when you are old Mom.

Carol too believes that her son will not likely move very far from home and will come back to care for her in her old age. She said, “That’s my holding onto part of who he is. I mean, I’m sure—I know I’ll let go but, hopefully, I don’t think he’s going to go far anyways.” Carol even seemed to believe that she could control how quickly her son grew up. She wished to keep him a boy for as long as possible and she
said, "You can kinda control how quick they grow up. Just by being there." Both Beth and Carol felt that they had been overprotective. Beth believed that she had begun to "cut the apron strings." Carol believed that it was her job to let the boy remain a child for as long as possible.

Four of the mothers wish for control seemed to be about wanting to protect their children. Mary found it very difficult to witness her daughter’s pain when her daughter experienced interpersonal difficulties with her peers as she entered early adolescence. Talking about this time, Mary said:

She was very, very quiet. The only time I’ve ever known her to be quiet like that and it was very, very hard for me to give her room and space and basically all I could do was about two or three times a week say, so anything you want to talk about? And she was never ready. She never, ever told me about that until the next year when it was all done and over with, and she was just so deeply hurt and I’m sure there was a lot of other stuff.

Mary desperately wanted to intervene and magically fix what was hurting her daughter. She went on to say:

Even though she wasn’t talking, she was still good about listening to me so I would say to her out loud, I know something is hurt or broken or damaged somewhere deep and it is killing me not be able to fix that for you.

Mary and Helen wanted to protect their adolescents from making potentially life-altering choices that could result in pregnancy or alcohol or other drug abuse. Vivian and Carol seemed to feel a need to protect their adolescents from more irrational threats. Vivian seemed to believe without her protection her daughter would fail or be victimized. She talked about her daughter’s naïveté and inability to be attentive to potential danger. She imagined her daughter being abducted or being the victim of a violent crime. Instead of worrying about what one might consider more
rational fears, Carol also worried about her son being kidnapped or beaten up. She said:

He’s got a pretty good head on his shoulders. We talk about drugs and drinking and stuff like that, so I think he’s going to be okay. I worry about just somebody getting in a fight with him or picking a fight with him or something like that because nowadays they don’t punch anymore. They pull out guns and knives or that he’s ever abducted or anything.

The Internalized “Good Mother”

The third dimension of data pertaining to the maternal role theme examines data about the participants’ perceptions of the “good mother.” Included in this dimension are mothers’ ideas about the role of the mother. Although not identified by the mothers as such, this often seemed to be an idealized role that was internalized by the participants in the study.

All the mothers in the study had idealized their maternal role and expectations to some extent. One example of this was noted in the omnipotence dimension and had to do with participants’ perceptions that they were central to family functioning and responsible for the day to day mechanizations of family life. It is mentioned here again because of its relevance to internalized notions of the good mother. Not only did mothers believe that they were crucial to the functioning of their families as talked about in the previous dimension, they valued themselves for having this function. Moreover, mothers feared losing this important function as their adolescents’ matured because they wondered if their mothering would still be needed and important without this purpose. Six of the mothers talked about being the center of family life.
Mary described it as being the “hub” and her family members and activities were the “spokes” with her holding it all together as they spun around her with “centrifugal force.” Carol said that she wants to be totally involved in her children’s lives. She said, “I just live for them” and “nothing is more important right now.” Helen noted that her husband helps with childrearing, but when it comes to “the serious stuff, the nitty gritty,” it is her job alone. Fran talked about her struggle with leaving some of the family rearing responsibilities to her husband, but found this made her worry and feel guilty about not being as important to her family as she once was. She seemed to be reassured by the notion that they would not be able to do these tasks as well as she could. She stated, “Go ahead and let them start dinner cuz nobody’ll make it as good as [I] can.” Beth said she found it difficult to be a “100% superwoman” all the time making sure the “household runs smooth, making dinners and running her children to events,” and she too felt guilty when she tried to take time for herself. Vivian said when she had competing demands she gave them all up for the children and never was this done for any reason but love.

Every mother in this study had internalized ideal images of the “good mother” and used words and ideas such as the following to capture this idealized maternal self: always “findable” and “available,” “self-sacrificing,” all loving, without complaint, “absolutely no burden,” and “devotion.” The idealized “good mother” seemed to find her children to be: “blessings,” “greatest gifts from God,” “God-sent,” and “payment” for past suffering. The “good mother” strived for family harmony, “white picket fence, white bread, mother “[who doesn’t] work,” and “100 % superwoman.”
The mothers also seemed to have an implicit idea that they should talk in a positive way about their mothering and their adolescent. Vivian said she did not think she should complain about her adolescent. She talked about another mother who did complain about her adolescent and said:

I don’t feel like that ever, like hatred or resentment, but now they’re gone and now she’s lonely, severely lonely, so I think she really loved what she used to do, just complained a lot about it. So I kind of learned from her. I’m not going to complain because they’ll soon be gone.

Helen said that she wished she had portrayed her daughter and their relationship in a more positive light during the first interview, even though the researcher had found her account to be an honest and balanced portrayal of her lived experiences. Helen tearfully said during the second interview that she felt bad that she had “talked all about the down sides and I didn’t talk enough about the wonderful things that I feel.”

Although Ann seemed to have an internalized and idealized notion of the good mother, she was the only mother who seemed able to make object of the internalized good mother and note that she found it unattainable. She still questioned her mothering because she knew she couldn’t deliver her notion of the good mother. Ann stated:

I grew up, you know, my family was the typical white picket fence, you know white bread, uhhh, mother didn’t work, of course that was a real norm at that time frame, you know the dads sent off to work and the moms just stayed and you know basically cookies after school and the whole thing, and I could never do that ever for her cuz when she started kindergarten, I went back to, I started working here full time.

A little later in the interview, Ann goes on to say:
Well, I think what I grew up with is what I thought I should be like and I think that's almost impossible . . . the way I grew up is what I wanted to be able to give her, and then I didn't.

The other mothers seemed to unquestioningly accept their version of the "good mother" and found it "vital" to mother accordingly. For example, Vivian said:

Our kids are like with love and attention, they have the cream of the crop. We don’t do it to be look at us or none of that. We do it because we love our kids totally and it’s weird. Everyone on the street is like that. They’re always pouring out their love.

These mothers seemed completely subject to the internalized representation of the good mother, whether it was idealized, attainable or not.

Other Roles

Other roles is the fourth dimension of data subsumed under the theme of maternal role. Some of the mothers felt that the maternal role was all-encompassing of their sense of self. Three of the 7 mothers believed that mothering was the only role that was important to their sense of identity. During the second interview, Carol noted how pleased she was that I understood how important mothering was to her sense of self. She said, "I liked reading . . . the statement mothering is the most important aspect of who I am and that’s nothing other important right now, honestly." When asked about how she would feel if she had not had children, she simply responded "empty." When Vivian was asked about how she deals with competing demands in her life she began to cry and said, "You give them all up for your children. You do it."
While Fran does not talk explicitly about identity she did talk about self-sacrifice and guilt for attending to her own needs. In a rather remarkable passage of the second interview she began talking about taking 20 minutes of time at a tanner for herself and she moved directly into talking about children being neglected and abandoned in cars to die terrible deaths. She said:

There’s nobody can get to me. I’m not answering my phone because you’re not going to get out to answer your phone. You can lay there, you can not think of anything, you can think of everything in the world, but nobody’s knocking on the door. Nobody’s mom, mom. And I started, it was almost like an addiction then that I started going, but this is my time . . . It’s my 20 minutes! And there have been times—last year there was kids abducted and stuff. Shortly after those there was two kids in Chicago who got left in the car, the mom went into the salon for three hours.

When asked how often she takes the opportunity to go to the tanner, she responded, “Well, I haven’t done it this year.”

On the other hand, 3 mothers believed that it was incumbent upon women to develop roles and interests other than mothering. Mary is one of the mothers who believed that a woman needs to have her own life distinct from mothering. Ironically, Mary believed it is important to develop one’s own life in part so that one’s children will return home to them. She stated, “If your life is wrapped up with your child and they leave, you have a major empty spot and empty spots aren’t very enjoyable to come home to.” Ann also talked about the importance for a mother to have her own life. She talked about her adolescent’s maturity to be another chapter in her life. She said, “I feel like that’s just a new chapter and I mean, I feel very strongly that you’ve got to have—your identity can’t be wrapped up, isn’t wrapped up in your children.”

Helen was one mother who actively seemed to cultivate friendships and kinships with
others. This seemed to be her way of taking care of herself; she annually vacationed without her children and felt like this was important to how she effectively mothers and did not seem to suffer guilt for doing so.

Every woman in the study commented on working outside the home and mothering. Five of the 7 mothers worked outside the home, 1 ran a daycare from her home, and 1 mother did not work outside the home. Only Mary seemed to feel that work actually enhanced her life and her mothering. She felt she was a better mother because she worked outside the home. Vivian and Carol cried when they talked about the conflict between working and the wish to be more available to their children. These two mothers wished they did not have to work. Carol stated, “I have to work full-time and I wish I didn’t”; she felt “guilty” that she does.

Ann and Fran acknowledged the struggle inherent in balancing work and home life but seemed to be more accepting of the conflict as just another reality of their lives. The mother that provided daycare in her home, Beth, remarked that it added one more ingredient to an already hectic life but she too did not seem to find it an emotional drain. Nonetheless, the 4 mothers that acknowledged a struggle between work, family, and self all expressed guilt for attending to roles other than mothering. The one mother in the study that did not work outside the home, Helen, had made a conscious decision to quit working when she had her first child. She seemed to feel that she was “fortunate” to be able to make the decision to be a stay at home mother because it fits with her notions of the “good mother.”
Maternal Evaluation of Her Role Functioning

The final dimension of data under the theme maternal role is maternal evaluation of her role functioning. Participants talked about not knowing if their mothering efforts were good enough. Mothers commented that there is no “rule book,” “training manual,” or “guide book” to help them know how to mother in difficult situations.

Mothers expressed fear about their adolescents leaving and repeatedly said that this time in their lives was scary. For some of the mothers the fear was about whether they had, when it was all said and done, been good mothers. Two mothers, Mary and Helen, said watching their adolescents mature was scary because the “foundation” was laid of who their children would be and there was no going back. The fear was about whether the mothers had done a good enough job preparing their child for his/her entrance into adulthood. Four mothers voiced the fear that they couldn’t go back and start over.

Three of the mothers explicitly noted that in some way who their adolescents became was an “extension” or “reflection” of how they had been mothered. Ann seemed to have a lingering doubt about whether her daughter would carry “emotional baggage” from growing up in a single home. Even though mothers tried to encourage themselves that they had done the best mothering job they could and move on, they all seemed to be left with some measure of self doubt. The mothers seemed to look outside themselves and to others for affirmation of their mothering. For example, Helen said:
Well see, I even think that I do that with my friends, like if I question something I've done or I go to my friends. I think that's typical of women. I mean, it's me and my friends, but I kind of think that's typical of women. It's like because it is an important job and we as women need verification and a lot of times I think it's verification or—maybe not verification but it's the word that I'm—affirmation to our life situation. Women need that more than I think men.

They often looked to the adolescents' behavior as evidence of whether they were doing a good enough job mothering. If the adolescent seemed to be making the "right" decisions and choices than the mother used this as "evidence" that she must be doing something right. If the mother deemed the adolescent behavior to be questionable or wrong, she seemed to worry that she might have failed to provide the appropriate maternal provisions. The participants repeatedly looked to the adolescents' behaviors as a way to stop their "second guessing" of their maternal value. Fran and Helen were 2 of the mothers that used this approach to settling the dilemma and continued to monitor their adolescents' behavior for other signs that they were mothering good enough. The mothers seemed to believe that they could not "measure" the affect of their mothering until they could look back after the difficult time had passed. For example, Fran said that after every difficult decision she second-guessed herself because there is no "training manual." Not until after the decision was made and she could see how it turned out (reflected in her adolescent's behavior) could she know whether she had made the right decision.

Another means of calming their fears regarding maternal evaluation was to look to other mothers to form a benchmark. Five of the participants commented that they would not allow their adolescents to do some of the things they saw other
mothers allowing their children to do. Participants used this as evidence that they loved and protected their children better than those other mothers who would allow such behavior. An interesting dynamic emerged when examining this particular dimension of data. Vivian, Carol, and Beth seemed to believe that they were better than some mothers they compared themselves to. These 3 mothers believed they were better than other mothers because they, respectively, did not complain about mothering or their child, protected their adolescent better, and they were a best friend and good listener to their adolescent. All three of these meaning constructions about their mothering seemed to be defensively employed by these mothers to deal with maternal ambivalence. All of these strategies will be discussed more fully under Domain III, but a brief discussion is included here.

Vivian idealized her mothering, her adolescent, and their relationship and felt it was wrong to ever complain about being a mother. Carol desperately wanted to keep her son a little boy and believed that over protecting him would keep him from prematurely growing up. Beth seemed to have a difficult time differentiating herself from her son and would superficially refer to their relationship as more akin to a best friendship even though she had evidence to the contrary. These participants seemed to defensively argue that this made them better mothers than other mothers.

In contrast, Helen and Ann compared themselves negatively to other mothers of adolescents. These 2 participants had specific mothers in mind that made them question their mothering and the quality of their relationships with their children. These 2 participants seemed to believe that other mothers were doing a better job.
Both of these participants tried to encourage themselves that although they couldn’t be like these other mothers they used as benchmarks, they could still offer good mothering. For example, Helen said, “I’ve said to other people instead of blaming myself that [my daughter] couldn’t come to me and beating myself up thinking okay, well they have a different relationship.”

The participants also questioned the researcher as to her evaluation of their mothering. Even though all of the mothers in the study reported that they believed they were doing a good enough job at mothering, they wondered about the researcher’s judgment. Five of the mothers seemed to be pleased with the content in the first interview summary that the researcher shared with them. It seemed important that the researcher had heard their stories. The mothers seemed pleased with what had been noticed and found noteworthy about their mothering. Sometimes they seemed to be relieved that the researcher did not have harsh judgments regarding their efforts to mother well.

Two of the mothers, Helen and Fran, worried about how the researcher perceived their mothering. Even though Helen repeatedly noted that she felt she had done a good job mothering and that once she makes a mothering decision she doesn’t “obsess” about it, she tearfully worried about how she had portrayed her mothering and her daughter during the first interview. She ended the second interview with wondering if I thought she had done a “shitty job” mothering or whether I thought she was in the “normal range.” This mother had talked about how she looked to other mothers for “verification” and “affirmation” of her mothering. Even though she
argued that she felt she had done an overall good job of mothering, the researcher’s opinion still seemed to matter. Fran worried that she sounded “flighty” but after discussing this felt pleased that she was able to talk to someone about her mothering because it is not something she has found much opportunity to do.

With regard to the mothering role, mothers seemed to wish for a rule book to follow during these transitional times. Mothers experienced a loss of old ways of mothering with regard to being more omniscient and omnipotent in their children’s lives. They had internalizations of an ideal mother that they, for the most part, seemed subject to. With no firm guidelines to follow and their own internal doubt they turned to others for evidence and affirmation that they were good mothers. They turned to other mothers for affirmation and they turned to their adolescents’ behavior as evidence of the job they were doing. Some mothers found others who seemed to be mothering more effectively than what they felt they were doing and they felt bad and guilty. Other mothers seemed to take a superior stance to those mothers who mothered differently than they did as an attempt to protect their own defensive maneuvers to manage their maternal ambivalence.

**Maternal Perceptions of Self, Other, and Relationship Shifts**

Maternal perceptions of self, other, and relationship shifts is the second theme under Domain II, participants’ descriptions of experiences with maternal ambivalence. This second theme has three dimensions: self, other, and relationship. Participants talked about shifts in their meaning constructions of the maternal self and were
uncertain about the line between mother and friend. They had varying opinions about whether their adolescent was becoming an adult, remaining a child, or fluctuating between these two constructions. All the mothers in the study believed that their adolescents’ developmental movement was shifting and they all described this as resulting in more relational distance between the mothers and their adolescent. Mothers described this movement as the adolescent “moving out from my center,” “moving away,” “drifting away,” “out of my reach,” “find[ing] her wings,” “pull[ing] further and further away,” and “go[ing] on.” This relational shift resulted in loss for all the mothers and resulted in fear and/or confusion for some of the mothers. The relational shift ushered in the possibility of new meaning constructions for some of the mothers. Perceptions of changes in self, other, and the relationship are dynamically interrelated. Although changes in one component of the object relation triad reverberate in other parts, they are discussed separately here for the sake of clarity.

Self

Old ways of knowing themselves as mothers to a child were giving way to new ways of imagining themselves as friends to a maturing adolescent. The mothers seemed to know what maternal provisions they could offer the child their adolescent had been, but most of them had only vague imaginings of what they could offer the adult their child was becoming. Mothers complained about not knowing where the line was between mother to their adolescent and friend to their adolescent. Three participants felt that the relationship would evolve into more of a friendship between
two adults. While they seemed to look forward to this, they were concerned about where the “line” was between mother and friend.

Helen exemplifies the confusion some mothers faced as they imagined becoming a friend to their adolescent. Helen said that having an adult relationship with her daughter was her “retirement benefit.” She seemed ready to start reaping some of the “benefits” but was afraid that this would not be the responsible thing to do. She talked to other women about this difficult boundary and she was cautioned that a mother needed to be a mother not the daughter’s friend. Helen stated:

I wonder about so many—different people have said you have to be careful that you’re a mother and not like trying to be pals with your—where is that line? How do you know? I mean, we’re getting along now. Am I being too much of a friend to her, but I feel like I struggle, like if someone is going—if I say that [my daughter] and I did something fun, are they going to say oh, you’re being her friend. I think you can be both.

A repeated theme of both interviews with Helen was her struggle with knowing how to integrate being a mother and a friend to her daughter. At least 2 other participants, Ann and Fran, also seemed to be troubled with where they should draw the relational lines and worried about the loss of respect and authority in the relationship.

Some mothers did not seem able to imagine a new, meaningful self in relationship with a maturing adolescent. Three mothers feared a loss of self as their adolescents continued to mature. With the adolescent’s departure into the world and a perceived shift in proximity to the mother, these 3 mothers feared they would no longer be needed by their adolescent. They were afraid that with their adolescents’ maturity the adolescent would not come home to them or need them. This seemed to represent a loss of the other and a loss of self for these mothers. They seemed very
fearful about how they imagined the future. Carol said, “You’ve got to let them have their own life, but it’s scary.” She went on to exclaim, “Yikes, my baby,” which seemed to underscore the intensity of what she feared she would lose. With her son’s maturation she could imagine him “not lik[ing] or “hat[ing]” her. Carol also felt like mothering was who she was and she had nothing to say about how she imagined herself changing. Likewise, Vivian also feared a loss of an old self that is the teacher and “fixer” in her daughter’s life. Beth talked about the son leaving and marrying only to take his mother with him. She seemed unable to imagine her son living a separate life from her. For these 3 mothers their children’s development seemed to mark the end of being able to be a mother; an important role to their sense of self.

Other

The adolescent’s growing maturity was confusing for mothers as they tried to figure out who their child had been and who their child was becoming. As was discussed in Domain I, some mothers believed that their children were basically the same as they had always been. However, the mothers also noted that their adolescents had shown changes in levels of maturity. Four felt that their adolescents were more mature. For example, Mary felt that she was more a mother to a “woman” than to a “child” now. As such she believed the “foundation was in place” and her daughter was who she would be. Helen felt similarly, that she had given her daughter her foundation and decisions were more up to the daughter to make. Three of these 4 mothers commented that they could have more “mature” conversations with their
adolescents now. These 4 participants all struggled with whether the adolescent was more like a child or more like an adult, even from moment to moment.

Carol, Beth, and Vivian characterized their adolescents as less mature than others their age. Beth felt her son was “fighting between a boy and becoming a man.” She said her husband told her that she needed to “let go of the apron strings. I’m creating a monster for someone else.” Carol also thought her son was between a boy and a man and felt that he was entitled to be a boy for as long as possible. She seemed to feel that it was part of her mothering responsibility to protect him from having to grow up too soon. Vivian worried that her daughter inherently lacked mature characterizations of responsibility. She believed that her daughter was naive and impressionable and that these qualities hindered her daughter’s maturity. These 3 mothers were the same mothers who feared that their children’s maturation threatened a loss of self. They did not have new constructions of the other or the self to help them bridge the change.

**Relationship**

Five mothers described a loss of relating to their child in old and known ways. For 3 of these mothers, Mary, Ann, and Helen, there was a loss of knowing or sharing in their child’s life in the ways that they were accustomed to, but they did not seem to view this as the finale of their relationship. Although, Mary identified this as her greatest loss and felt saddened that she would not “be privy” to all the experiences her daughter would have in the future, she believed they would have a close adult
relationship. Ann felt that her daughter’s leaving was a “close of one chapter” in her life. She likened it to when her daughter started kindergarten when she had cried so hard another mother had to help her off the playground. At the time of the study, Ann did not seem to notice as abrupt a shift in her relationship with her daughter as other participants reported. Ann attributed this to needing to depend on her daughter as a partner in keeping their family life going. She felt this had shifted the balance of the relationship long ago.

I had migraines all the time, so she would be like, she saw all that and I mean there was a lot of times I just couldn’t function, you know and she grew up with that . . . Sometimes she would have to be like get me some tea, you know, and so, I mean I think we had a different dynamic in our house than the little child and the adult. It was more here, cuz a lot of times, even when she was small I had to rely on her in that way. For help, cuz there wasn’t anybody else there.

Helen identified this time in her relationship with her adolescent to be about losing and gaining as her daughter matures. Although she mentioned that there will be things to “gain” in a more mature relationship with her daughter, the loss of things in her old relationship with her daughter seemed to resonate more, causing her to cry. She said:

You lose—it’s losing and gaining because I should look at it there’s things to gain. Her maturity, her different phases of her life, there’s good things that you can’t foresee in the future and the change in the relationship, the exciting things that happen to her that I can share in and that kind of thing, so there’s that to look forward—I should look forward to that, I should focus more on that, the exciting instead of looking at the negative side. Oh, she’s not going to be around as much and my baby is growing up and that kind of thing, but that’s part of it too. It is that feeling sometimes that’s like, oh my gosh.

The other 2 mothers who talked about the loss of relating to their child in old and known ways, Carol and Beth, felt a loss of closeness with their adolescent. They
seemed to feel that they would lose their relationship (as has been noted in previous sections, lose themselves as mothers and their child) with the adolescents’ maturity. Carol exemplified this idea and seemed terrified at the prospect that her adolescent would mature and become an adult. Although she acknowledged that this would happen, she seemed to equate his maturity with him not needing her and thus the loss of the relationship and her role as mother. During the first interview she said, “I don’t want him to ever, like emotionally leave me. I hope he always can, you know, come to me and I can always be his mom.” She echoed this sentiment during the second interview when she talked about the time she experienced him as pulling away from her. She said:

It was scary because he’s my son and I want to be—I don’t want him to hate me. I don’t want him to not like me or I want him—and I want him to come to me if he needs me.

When he “kisses [her] goodnight” and asks her to “tuck him in” at night she says, “It just makes me feel real good. That he still—that he still wants that, the mothering.”

Naively she seems to think:

He’s still my little boy. I still got a few more years with him or I still—at least now I still have this where he wants my affection. In a few more years, I don’t know what he’ll be like. He’s only 15. A couple more years, he probably won’t want me tucking him in. Hopefully he’ll still give me a kiss good night.

Participants all noticed shifts in their relationships with their adolescents. They could identify losses for themselves associated with these shifts, including: a loss of the maternal self, a loss of being needed, a loss of the child, and/or a loss of the relationship. Old ways of relating to their adolescents were being called into question and the mothers seemed only to have vague constructions of a new, still meaningful
and ongoing, relationship with their maturing child. They imagined that the relationship might evolve into something like a friendship between two adults. For the most part the mothers remained caught between the two paradoxical constructions of the self in relationship.

The mothers that could imagine a different meaning construction about the self, other, and their relationship had more hope for the future. For example, Mary, Ann, and Helen seemed to be able to better imagine an ongoing and meaningful relationship with their children even if they were unsure of what it would be like; they seemed more hopeful about their future relationships with their adolescents than Vivian, Beth, and Carol. These mothers who had a more difficult time imagining a new self, other, and relationship seemed to be quite distressed about the changes they were noticing.

Loss associated with these relational shifts elicited the most sadness for all the mothers during the interviews. Whether they had hope for ongoing close relationships or were despairing that they would lose the child, they often cried as they considered the poignant losses they faced.

Limits or Freedom

The last theme under Domain II is limits or freedom. All the mothers had something to say about the negotiation and imposition of limits and freedom in their adolescents' changing context. The mothers seemed aware that "natural boundaries" were lessened because their adolescents were more autonomous. The issue was about
the line between trusting their adolescent to be able to make the right choices and fearing that their adolescent would make a mistake and thus suffer the consequences or be a bad reflection on the mother.

When faced with a difficult choice about limits, it seemed that Mary and Ann would rather err on the side of their adolescent’s growing autonomy. Mary clearly resided on the side of letting her adolescent make mistakes. She believed that she “would rather have the daughter make a wrong decision than be incompetent to make decisions.” Mary felt that “squelch[ing] her daughter’s fire” by telling the daughter that she could not trust herself would be a far more harmful event than having the daughter make a bad decision, even a life altering one such as becoming pregnant. In similar fashion, Ann felt that it was incumbent on the daughter to figure out her “bliss.” Ann hoped that the daughter would consider her choices and not make them impulsively; nonetheless, Ann seemed to feel that they were her daughter’s choices to make. Both of these mothers felt that their adolescents were doing a good job with making good decisions.

In contrast, Carol and Vivian talked about their belief that they erred on the side of overprotecting their adolescents. Carol seemed to believe that by watching and setting limits she could protect her son and control how quickly he grows. Although her son does not spend much time away from home, when he is away she said she wants to know where he is, whom he is with, and what he is doing at all times. She forbids him from going to some places where other adolescents frequently go. Vivian talked about wanting to let her daughter make mistakes but felt that the consequences
were just too great for the daughter. The mother expressed a desire to let her
daughter "stand on her own" but not if that meant her daughter's "failure." This
mother seemed to think that her daughter would fail without her intervention so she
erred on the side of intervening. A teacher told Vivian that

[My daughter] has to stay on her own and do this on her own, and I listened
to that and I so badly wanted to let that happen, but I also said to myself my
daughter is not ready for that. You have to step in before she gets in trouble
with maybe it's her grades, maybe with something she has done or something.

Two other mothers, Helen and Fran, seemed to have a harder time deciding
how they would like to establish limits with their adolescents. They seemed to waver
between continuing to have influence and power over their adolescents' lives and
allowing their adolescents to make their own mistakes. Helen seemed to wish she
could let the daughter make her own decisions, but seemed afraid that her daughter
will make a mistake. She believed that her daughter would learn from her mistakes
but would like to be assured that they are manageable lessons. She also believed that
her daughter's decisions were a direct reflection on the mother. Helen was the only
mother to identify an event in her daughter's life whereupon learning about it the
mother felt ashamed of the daughter's behavior. Establishing limits with her
adolescent was identified as the biggest "struggle" for this mother. She said:

All of a sudden, she's getting to the point where you have to let her make
some—some decisions on her own and hope that she got something that you
tried to put out there for her in these growing up times and . . . I thought
potty training and sleeping through the night was the end-all and if I could get
through this I could get through anything, and now it's like that was so
cinchy. This is so scary.
She worried about the tension between pushing too hard and allowing her daughter to make mistakes. She felt that ultimately she was responsible for the daughter and that she would need to continue to be an authority because she had more maturity and wisdom than her daughter.

Fran talked about this issue in terms of discipline. She said she felt like “discipline is a fine line, what’s not gonna kill you and what’s gonna make a point to them.” She feels that she suffers more when she disciplines her son than he does. She stated, “Every time there’s discipline, I sacrifice.” She wishes others could support her in drawing this difficult line, because she feels that she is “terrible” at sticking to discipline and limits.

Mothers were presented with a tension between freedom and limits. They all struggled with knowing where the “line” was between the two, but had very different ideas about the inherent risks to the adolescent in misjudging the “line.” Some mothers attempted to solve the paradox by giving the adolescent freedom. Other mothers determined that they should continue to adhere to protective limits. And other mothers really seemed to flip back and forth, never being quite sure in a given situation which side of the proverbial coin to settle on. On the one hand, mothers feared that too much freedom might risk their adolescent making a harmful mistake. On the other hand, too much restriction of the adolescent might rob him/her of the ability to trust his/her own judgment.
Domain III: Responses to Maternal Ambivalence

Participants in this study can be described as subject to their maternal ambivalence as they mothered first-born, early-adolescents. They seemed to cling to old meaning constructions about self, other, and relationships as tenable even while acknowledging changes in their lives. Domain III, responses to maternal ambivalence, examines how mothers in this study responded to maternal ambivalence and the inherent unsettling of old self, other, and relationship meaning constructions. There are six themes under Domain III: reparation and healing, love or hate, holding on or letting go, self and other confusion, self-sacrifice or self-preservation, and awareness and acceptance.

In Chapter II it was argued that maternal ambivalence serves the function of facilitating further differentiation between the mother and her child (First, 1994). Maternal ambivalence can then be understood as a renegotiation of who is self and who is other. Mothers are faced with figuring out where new space and boundaries reside within themselves and between themselves and their adolescents. One could make a straightforward argument that it is the job of the adolescent to grow up and the job of the mother to facilitate the adolescents’ development. But this statement belies the complicated task that stands before the mother.

All the mothers in this study seemed subject to old meaning constructions and were confused, saddened, and frustrated with self, and/or other, and/or their relationship with the other. They did not have new meaning constructions available. Maternal ambivalence, if not prematurely settled, may provide the awareness and
psychic energy to move to a new evolutionary and developmental balance (First, 1994; Kegan, 1982). When one considers what the mother is faced with as she tries to mother her first-born adolescent, it becomes clear that she is navigating heretofore new waters with multiple currents.

Based on their own developmental histories and significant relationships, women in this study responded to the dilemma of maternal ambivalence in a number of ways. The following depictions portray the complexity of this movement and how the mothers' own meaning structures influence this complicated relational and dynamic setup between each mother and her adolescent.

Reparation and Healing

During the second interview, some participants began to spontaneously talk more about their families of origin and how their developmental history affected their mothering. These mothers talked earnestly about their convictions that came from this source. Four mothers believed that they should mother in ways that would prevent their children from ever experiencing the pain they had experienced. These ideas are especially clear in data from 2 mothers, Mary and Fran, who talked about loss during their own adolescent development. Another mother, Ann, had hoped that she would be able to mother her daughter as she had been mothered, but because of a different life context she felt unable to do so.

During the second interview Mary talked about her history and the abandonment she had felt after her parents divorced. Mary's parents divorced as she
entered early adolescence. She felt that her father had been her “center” and after the divorce he walked away from the family. Mary’s father gave her freedom to pursue a passionate life but let go of her too soon. She believed that her mother was also psychologically unavailable to her during this time; this left her feeling without a home base.

These experiences led Mary to believe that it is “vital” to remain her daughter’s center. She believes it is essential that she always be findable so that her daughter will never be lost without a “touchstone.” Now, in her immediate family, Mary described herself as the “hub of the family.” She said:

[I am] the hub, the hub of the family and all these spokes were going out that was whirling around like centrifugal force that [I] was just hanging on hoping that all that whirling had meaning and importance to [my] family and I really—that would be my visual of what I try to be. That hub and my husband’s a spoke, and my son is and my daughter is and all of our activities and sometimes I’m one of those spokes, too, whirling around.

Mary’s depiction of her developmental struggle as an adolescent fit remarkably well with her struggles as a mother. Her father was both a good and a bad object in her life. She seems to attribute her sense of passion to him as well as her sense of being without support. Following this theme from her own childhood development, Mary now believes it is “vital” to allow her daughter “freedom” but to remain “always findable” as a “touchstone” when her daughter gets “lost.” She said:

That’s because I don’t feel like I should move. I think I should stay where somebody can find me if they need me and yet at the same time, I need to allow both of my children to move out as they need to but I stay right where I am so if they need to turn around I’m there.
Fran mentioned feeling that she was alone in the world by the time she was 12 years old. She said her parents were too busy hating each other to pay her any attention. Her older sisters were busy with their lives and moving away; this left Fran feeling abandoned. Without a base, Fran began to hang out with a troubled crowd of teenagers and made life choices she regrets. As a mother, she expressed a conviction that she should create a family for her son regardless of the cost to her. Fran stated:

There have been times when I would have loved to have taken my children and walked, because you know every marriage, with every relationship, there’s always straining, and um, and I guess, I always thought for my parents, I would never stay together for the kids’ cuz I think it’s a bullshit excuse. I just do, but, but, if you can make it work, so that your kids have a family unit, to grow up in, because so many kids don’t, and, and you know and so I guess I’ve tried really hard to keep a family unit together.

It is extremely important to Fran that her son not feel abandoned or without a family to care for him and that he always know how important he is to her. She said she desperately wanted to spare her son from going down the same path she had gone down. Fran said her children were the “payment” for what she went through as a child. This seemed to up the ante of mothering them well because if she fails to do a good mothering job there is no redemption of the loss in her youth.

Although she talks about not wanting to repeat her past with her own children, Fran told a story that was remarkably similar to a story from her childhood. When vulnerable about her mothering she may resort to old ways that are familiar to her. As a form of punishment for her misbehavior Fran’s father transferred her to three different schools. Likewise, when her son was not performing well academically she threatened to send him to military school. In her depiction of this time Fran found
her son's behavior to be very alarming and she seemed to react to his behavior in a drastic manner. It was clear that this time in her relationship with her adolescent was very distressing and she did not disclose the event until her second interview. She seemed to suggest during the first interview that she had not experienced any significant discord with her son, that he in fact was making his growing up "easy on her." While Fran wanted to mother differently than she was parented, it seemed that when she felt overwhelmed in her attempts to help her son, she fell back on internalized working models that seemed to be repetitive of old meaning themes.

Two other mothers also talked briefly about wanting to give their children something that they had felt they missed while growing up. Carol felt that she had no one to depend on when she was growing up and she asserts that she wants her son to know, without a doubt, that she will always be there for him. Helen remembers times when she felt her mother misunderstood her when she was growing up. She seems to worry that her daughter will feel the same way.

While these 4 mothers, especially Helen and Fran, seemed adamant that what they lost growing up should not be repeated, Ann feared that she would not live up to the standard her mother had established. Ann said her mother was a traditional stay-at-home mother, which for Ann meant that her mother was always home when she returned from school, always prepared the meals, kept the house clean, and played tea party with Ann in the afternoons. Ann felt that she could not fulfill this standard given her single parent status. This internalized standard of the good mother left Ann doubting her maternal provisions at times.
Love or Hate

Some of the mothers in this study managed maternal ambivalence with its confusing emotions by psychologically splitting off from conscious awareness one side of the ambivalence or the other. Vivian was a good example of a mother who was reticent to acknowledge the negative side of mothering. She expressed an idealized version of mothering. Her stories of home life are about making memories and living a perfect sort of existence. She believes that her daughters will always be close to her because their home life has been so positive. Her daughter was described as "pure love" and she described herself as doing everything for her daughter for "no other reason but love." When Vivian faces competing demands she gives them all up for her children, without complaint. In fact, she believed that she should never complain or view her children as burden.

At the same time, Vivian seemed to have an implicit quid pro quo attitude where she wished the daughter would make her "a cup of tea." She believed that if the daughter served her a cup of tea to her liking it would demonstrate that the daughter knew her needs and wanted to attend to them. However, she complained that her mother-in-law always expected to get something in return for being a mother and said:

[My mother-in-law] only does stuff expecting something in return and it makes it tough on us. I didn’t realize it a long time ago but I don’t ask of her anymore and I think how could she do that for her granddaughters or for her daughter-in-law without love, just pure love, just do it because it made her happy.
She vehemently expressed that a mother should do for her children out of love and devotion with no expectation of return. She denied expecting anything from her daughter, when she in fact, seemed resentful at times. She brought the "cup of tea" example up in both interviews, but fitting with her denial of negative affect she denied ever resenting her daughter's "self-centered[ness]." During the first interview she said, "I want them to show their love for their parents but I never expect return for what I do for them and stuff like that. It sure would be nice to have a hot tea every so often." During the second interview she talked about how pleased she was that her daughter had made her a cup of tea. The researcher was struck by how demanding Vivian seemed to be about the preparation of her tea and that she was disappointed that the daughter found making tea "work." Vivian said:

I'm like an extreme person. I want it hot. I don't want it warm. I want it hot. And they know that about me. And them my drinks, my cold drinks, I love them cold. I don't want them warm. Anyway, so she's making me tea now. We did talk about—it was a talk that had to come anyway—about her trying to show people she cares about them and she can start with me, you know, and not always—she considers making me tea work, yes.

Vivian had a tremendous amount of worry for her daughter. She frequently, obsessively, and irrationally worried about her daughter being abducted or otherwise a victim of an aggressive act. She believed that her daughter's innate characteristics of being naïve increased the danger her daughter faced in the world. This mother seemed to split off and defend against any indications of frustration with the daughter. One way to understand her irrational worries about harm to the daughter is that the natural negative emotions associated with mothering were turned inward and manifested as obsessive worry for the daughter. Although the obsessive quality of the worry
bothered the mother, it seemed that this was a more tolerable reaction to the daughter than maternal anger would have been.

Helen was a mother who seemed to reside on the hate end of the love/hate split. The researcher was puzzled by a comment she made during the first interview that her daughter “wasn’t all bad” because the researcher did not think that Helen portrayed her daughter in a particularly bad light. Helen cried after reading the first interview summary and commented that she was disappointed that she hadn’t been more positive about her daughter and their relationship. She said the first interview summary read like “a story of my life with all the good things missing.”

After thinking about the interviews with Helen, the researcher was struck by the essence of Helen’s interviews being about her need to be the “authority” even if this threatened the “friendship” she seemed to hope for with her daughter. Helen said her biggest struggle was knowing where the line was between pushing too hard and letting her daughter make her own mistakes. Her daughter’s secretiveness seemed to be evidence that her daughter was already turning away from her.

For Helen, the psychological splitting dynamic seemed to be between authority figure and friend; hate and love. As an authority figure Helen saw all the areas in need of her supervision. As an authority figure she had responsibility to know what her daughter was up to even if she had to invade her daughter’s privacy. As the authority figure she was the “good mother” who protected her daughter. But the daughter seemed to be rebelling against the authority and was becoming less and less
disclosing about events in her life. The daughter’s dynamic reaction seemed to escalate Helen’s commitment to being the authority.

Helen was also the only mother that told stories about feeling ashamed of her daughter. While she talked about being worried that her “push[ing] too hard” might result in the daughter not liking her, it seemed dynamically that she also worried that she would not like the woman her daughter would become. This is on an implicit and psychological level, of course, because the researcher had no indication that Helen did not love her daughter. In fact, Helen also had a wish to be her daughter’s friend, which she saw as her “retirement benefits.” Helen could not seem to integrate these two parts of her mothering self at the time of the interviews.

Object relation theory suggests that mothers need to be on good terms with the hate side of their ambivalence to establish limits with their children (First, 1994; Parker, 1995; Winnicott, 1987). Yet not all of the mothers in this study were. Fran found the setting of limits and discipline to be an excruciating ordeal where she felt it hurt her far more than her son. Fran became most emotional during her interviews when she talked about two things. One was making the right decision about where her son would go to school and about how gut wrenching it was for her to discipline him. Making the right decision about where he should go to school was “torture” for Fran and disciplining him “kills her.” Fran seemed to have perfectionistic tendencies and to feel that she has no way of knowing whether her mothering decisions are good until it is all said and done. She believes that a mother “always second guesses” herself. In the past, when she had come to a decision point, she felt she often made
the wrong decision. This seemed to cause her distress as she felt that she must mother her son well. Interestingly, when the tape recorders were turned off after the second interview, Fran earnestly asked the researcher if she thought that anger might help mothers separate from the adolescent.

Holding On or Letting Go

For the mothers in the present study, maternal disengagement from their adolescents was a relational and dynamic interplay between the mother and her child. Mothers seemed to have to decide psychologically whether they would remain, whether they would leave, whether the child would remain, whether the child would leave, and/or whether the child would return. In this study mothers seemed to work this dynamic out in different ways. Some mothers clearly talked about the eventual leaving of their children. Fran hoped that her son would be a responsible and decent human being, Helen hoped her daughter was prepared, Mary hoped her daughter would pursue her passion, and Ann wished her daughter would find her bliss.

All the mothers felt called upon one way or another to remain available to their children. The researcher was repeatedly struck by the mother’s earnest efforts and struggles to gradually disengage from their adolescent and prepare and sometimes encourage the adolescents to leave even when this represented unprecedented loss for the mother. Mary talked most poignantly about remaining a “touchstone,” “a center,” and “always findable” to her daughter. Talking about her conviction that she should prepare her daughter to live her own life she said, “Even if it goes against my biology,
I will send her out into the world" and I will remain available. She said, "If you (her daughter) get lost, then here I am." Mary's most heartfelt concern seemed to be that her daughter trust herself to make life choices. Mary intently discussed her conviction that she should let her daughter go. She is a good example of how complicated this space is to provide, however. While Mary wanted her daughter to pursue her passion, she seemed to merge her own identity with that of her daughters. She determined what the daughter's leaving would represent for the daughter. The following passage in the first interview is indicative of Mary's wish to determine what her daughter will do in life; interspersed throughout the passage is a nagging doubt that the daughter has the right character:

I would love it if she was passionately interested in a life's work, a life cause. I would love it if she was passionate about people in the life, a partner, friend, family that she surrounds herself with. I would love it if she felt passionately about the future, not just for herself but for everybody and everything around her. She's not nearly as cause driven as I would have thought. I mean, it's fine but I would have thought that she'd be more of an environmentalist or more of this or more of that, but what happened I think is she has so many interests that it has to become diluted. But I would very much want that because I firmly believe I would rather be loved or hated for being passionate about something than to be tepid, to just be lukewarm. That frightens me actually. That apathy frightens me so I would not want that for her.

While Ann was another mother who seemed invested in launching her daughter, there was a distinct difference between her story and Mary's. Mary seemed to believe that her daughter would go out into the world and would find fulfillment in the way she herself had. Ann seemed much clearer that her daughter would go out into the world and live according to the daughter's wisdom, not the mother's. Ann had little idea what her daughter would do with her life, she thought it was up to her
daughter to figure out. She simply wished that her daughter would have the patience and the fortitude to pursue her bliss. For Ann it seemed two whole people, a mother and a daughter, both with distinct interests, hopes, fears, i.e. identities, would enter the larger world. Ann and Mary positioned themselves as letting go of their adolescents, but did so in very different ways with very different meanings about the self and other.

Three mothers, Carol, Beth, and Vivian, seemed to find it more difficult to imagine the adolescent’s psychological separation, increased autonomy, and gradual leaving. These mothers positioned themselves as holding on to their adolescents. There was a distinct difference between these mother’s stories and the stories of mothers who were letting go. Mothers who were holding on seemed to be afraid of losing the adolescent and so there was desperation in their stories. Carol had no way of imagining a relationship with a grown man so seems to want to hold on to the boy forever. When she noticed him moving away from her she seemed to be at a loss and passively said she could only “wait” for his return.

Vivian perceived her daughter as unable to succeed without her. Vivian seemed afraid to let go of her daughter because the daughter would fail; this construction served to legitimize the mother’s holding on. She said she had tried to let go, but had to step back in and save her daughter. Vivian had been very active with helping her daughter with school work until the daughter left for high school. When her daughter started high school, she said:

Yes, I tried [to back off]. Well, I felt I needed to see if she can grow. Now come to [high school], I cut her off. Like I said, you know, she needs to grow
up... Now it’s like she’s just kind of—I can see her just kind of rolling off, like rolling off soap. I said, you know what? I can’t let her go. I can’t let her go.

Beth believed that she and her son would find a wife that would care for the mother. She reported what the researcher believed was an unrealistic belief that when she tells her son to talk to her as his best friend, he does. She told many stories in both interviews about their unusual and superior openness about sexuality. Yet, her stories of their life are filled with incongruencies and fantastical thinking. For example, she believed that he wanted to find a wife that they would both agree to and who would take care of the mother in her old age. However, she described his current girlfriends as “trailer park trash.” She does not seem to hear the incongruencies in her stories. He lied to her about his involvement in these relationships. When asked about the incongruency in this, she seemed to rationalize her perception of her son’s poor behavior and deceit to mean that he really wants her approval. Beth seemed unwilling to psychologically let go of this son. She seemed to be holding on tight to a fantasy relationship.

These 3 women, in their own unique ways, seemed to deny the eventuality of their adolescents’ leaving. Two of the mothers worried that they overprotected their sons which resulted in their sons not being as mature as they should be. Carol believed her son would never leave. Beth figured that even if her son left he would take her with him. Vivian believed her daughter would fail without her. Paradoxically, 2 of these mothers, Carol and Beth, seemed to be more distressed about their adolescents’ maturity into adulthood than the other mothers. Carol worried when her
son was distant from her that he would never “like her” or would “hate” her. Beth thought that as a man her son turned a “deaf ear” to her and did not want her closeness.

Mothers in this study could be characterized in two ways relevant to staying and leaving. Some mothers could be characterized as staying in place for the child to return to. These mothers seemed to accept and in some ways look forward to their adolescents pursuing adult endeavors. They could talk about looking forward to adult relationships with their children. And at the same time they could not yet imagine growing and changing themselves. For these mothers their children’s leaving was a movement towards the adolescents’ life fulfillment as well as an eventual return to the mother. Other mothers refused to let the child leave and actively tried to hold on to the child side of the adolescent. They were requiring the child to remain. They could not endorse the adolescent leaving. For these mothers their children’s leaving was a movement away from them with the fear that the adolescent would never return.

Self/Other Confusion

Several of the mothers seemed to experience self–other boundary and differentiation issues. They did not seem to know where they left off and where their adolescent began. Their identities seemed blurred or in some cases merged. Beth misused pronouns when referring to herself or her son throughout both interviews. She would be talking about her son and then switch to using “I” in the middle of the story. At times it was confusing to the researcher and left her unsure about whom the
mother was referring to. The researcher had asked her a follow up question about second guessing a mothering decision she said,

*I don’t know with him right now because of it being—I’m fighting between being a man and being a boy or is it I’m trying to fight for my independence. You know, if I knew—if I just had a crystal ball.*

The researcher followed this with “What would be wrong with you fighting for your independence?” to which Beth responded, “There’s nothing wrong with it if I could—I guess if I could understand where he was coming from like with the grades.” It is still unclear to the researcher whether Beth was talking about her son’s fight for independence or her own. She also used “we” often in the first interview when referring to either an experience she had or one that her son had.

Beth believed that she had an extraordinarily close relationship with her son, which was more akin to a best friendship than a mother son relationship. Beth also had a superior air about her when it came to mothering. It seemed that she felt she mothered better than most women. She used words like fantasy, reality, and reality check, during the second interview. This was notable to the researcher because she felt like Beth was living in a fantasy world and sharing a glorified reality in the interviews.

Mary felt as though she had a strong intuitive knowing of her daughter. She felt that she was connected to her daughter by a “thick weaving” between them. She described looking in on her daughter as she slept at night and compared it to how she feels with her son:

*When I go and stand over [my daughter] I don’t know if it’s a gender thing or it’s an age thing because she’s older, if it’s a mother–daughter versus mother–*
son, but when I go stand over [my daughter’s] bed, I feel like this thick weaving thing her (she pointed to her heart center) and when I stand over [my son’s] bed it feel more like a fiber optic. So I still don’t know the answer, but at the time I feel intensely connected. For example when we’re going shopping for Christmas stuff, I know immediately what is just yank her crank what she will just be like oh, thanks. I just feel that way . . . [The connection] feels thick and supportive and knowledgeable and clear. I feel like we know each other, almost an intuitive thing.

She would often talk about experiences her daughter was having and then in the same paragraph begin talking about her experiences with the same situation as though her experience and her daughter’s experience were the same. Mary’s stories about her daughter merged with thoughts about her own life. She might be describing a particular experience of her daughters, and then report, “I felt like . . . when I had the same experience.” For example, she said she didn’t like restricting her daughter’s activities because “that really sucks. I don’t like doing that because I remember my teenage years really, really well. Those were really just stamped themselves on me somehow. I just remember that . . .” At another point in the interview she was talking about her worries about her daughter becoming sexually active and she said:

I don’t think a lot of girls would share that particular inside information and she did and I was able to share back with her that a similar thing had happened to me when I was 17. I chose not to have sex with a boyfriend . . .

The researcher had the sense that Mary did not always know that her daughter might have a different reaction to an event than Mary would. She talked repeatedly about knowing what her daughter was experiencing because she remembered experiencing the same things in her own life.

Another example of blurred identities was that Mary had a strong value that people should follow their passion. She seemed to “know” that her daughter would
share this value and would indeed pursue her passion. Even though Mary seemed to “know” that this would be important to her daughter, she also described her daughter as having a lot of characteristics that might make others question this idea. She firmly insisted, even after the researcher questioned the incongruency, that her daughter would live a life of passion. The researcher asked Mary, “What will that be like for you if [your daughter] remains a diversified woman and sort of takes a slower pace?” She responded:

She does and that’s interesting. She has a much slower pace physically. My husband and I, we move fast. We just move fast through life and [my daughter’s] pace is very much slower, interestingly enough... she just ambles around. She loafes, you know?... so she just has her own pace... She has all sorts of fantasies. So she’s got lots of different ideas, but it will not surprise me if she ends up doing—I even hesitate to use the word less, but it’ll make—less than she imagines because I was very passionate and I expected I would be living in Europe and jet-setting here and there and then I lost interest in all of that. Who knows, but I think she’s going to absolutely vibrate with the importance of what she’s doing, I do.

It seemed difficult for Mary to imagine her daughter choosing to live in a different way than the way she had lived her life.

**Self-Sacrifice or Self-Preservation**

Some mothers seemed to deal with maternal ambivalence in two distinctly different ways with regard to self differentiation: forfeiture of the self for the other’s needs or maintaining one’s own self interests. Some mothers seemed to function in a dependent way and apparently could not reconcile their needs with the other’s needs. When push came to shove, they settled the dilemma of maternal ambivalence by
forfeiting their own needs, wishes, and desires. Following is what Fran said about
sacrificing for others:

I always call it the broken egg syndrome, you know the mom always gets the
broken egg when there’s, when you’re frying eggs, and the broken one’s
there, you get it, and you get the burnt, you get the last, you get the cold,
that’s how it is, but, um, it doesn’t, it’s just what we do to ourselves. Because
we want our kids to have and everybody else to have first to have the best,
and even, you know even my husband, I’m like, okay, yeah, you take this, and
I’ll eat the shit at the end, you know.

Fran seemed to have a bargain philosophy to life and mothering. She was
willing to sacrifice for the sake of her children because they were her blessing. She
had a meaning construction that allowed her to understand suffering she endured as a
child as “payment” for her children. Hard work, responsibility, and sacrifice are worth
the effort if this allows her to raise a good and decent son. Throughout her interviews
Fran said things like, “I would go down the same stupid dumb, do all the crap [to
have my children],” “I go through all the hell [for their happiness],” and “they are the
payment for the shit that I went through.” Speaking of the sacrifices she said, “it’s self
gratification.” She felt guilty for going to a tanner for 20 minutes to attend to her
wishes. It was through self-sacrifice that she felt she had worth as a mother. In talking
about trying to delegate some authority to her husband, Fran said:

I think its about not feeling as important, like, well if I don’t do all this, I
won’t, everybody won’t need me as much and then, they, you know, then you
kinds feel like they don’t, you know, they don’t need you.

Other mothers more definitively attended to their own needs and did not
forfeit them automatically for their children. For example, Helen told many stories of
taking care of her needs and feeling that this made her a better mother. She was able
to go on vacations without her children; as a result she felt revitalized as a mother and more appreciated by the others in her life. She stated several times that she came to wonder if her mother might have had similar “needs” but was never able to attend to them. However, it does not seem that this is as easily negotiated as Helen might make it sound. Given that relationships are complexly dynamic, it might be that ultimately Helen’s worry is about whether she loved her daughter well enough.

Mary and Ann both explicitly talked about the mother needing to have a sense of identity beyond being a mother. Mary felt driven to pursue a passionate life and did so it seemed, with gusto. It seemed that Ann had put her life on hold when her daughter was younger, but as her daughter matured she seemed to invest more and more in a life separate from her daughter. Ann seemed to look forward to the daughter seeking her “bliss” so that Ann would be free to pursue other life interests. Ann seemed to integrate the self/other especially well. She seemed to truly be able to attend to both her needs and her daughters, because their needs were distinct.

**Awareness and Acceptance**

Ann seemed more aware and accepting of the struggles inherent in living a life in general, and mothering in particular. She felt overwhelmed and confused about how to mother in good enough fashion. Ann said “confusion is my mode of operandi.” She also said that she “starts from a guilt position” and it doesn’t take much to cause her to “second guess” herself and her mothering. She lived with the uncertainty of whether she had done an adequate job. It seemed that rather than
settling her maternal ambivalence on either side of the self other continuum, she lived in the middle of it. She seems to use normative creativity to find her way in the confusion.

Feeling guilty that she could not meet her internalized expectations of the good mother seemed to have led Ann to create her own norms about how to mother. She had lingering doubt, confusion, and guilt about whether she had done her mothering adequately, but she seemed able to accept that her relationship with her daughter marched to the beat of a different drum. From her own experience Ann seemed to know it is hard to find and pursue one’s “bliss.” Ann was notably different from the other mothers in the study. She did not seem to wrestle as much with issues of control and influence over her daughter. Ann did not talk about struggling to disengage with her adolescent like the other mothers did. While she acknowledged that she would be sad when her daughter left home, she did not struggle with loss of the other or self as others did.

Perhaps Ann began differentiation work early on in her relationship with her daughter. For example, she sent her daughter to camp during summers because she had to work. Did this help her begin the differentiation process years before the other mothers in this study? How did being a single mother influence her maternal ambivalence? When confronted with the impossibility of mothering according to her internalizations about the good mother, was she forced to figure out a different way? Her story is included here as a mother who seemed to have found a different way than the other 6 participants in the present study.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter is organized under four broad sections. Following the introduction, the first section presents a summary of the major findings in this study. The next relates these findings to developmental and relational models of psychology, with particular attention to mothers' meaning constructions and their origin and current function. Maternal ambivalence as a dynamic process is also discussed in this second section. The third section of this chapter presents a discussion of psychotherapy issues relevant to working with mothers of first-born early adolescents. The last section of this chapter suggest future research implications and limitations of the present study.

The participants' stories support cultural feminists' theoretical propositions about the existence of maternal ambivalence in women's lives (Chodorow, 1978; Chodorow & Contratto, 1992; Josselson, 1987). These theorists have argued that maternal ambivalence is a natural and inevitable part of mothering with certain features that are culturally prescribed. While findings in this study support theoretical constructs regarding an idealized maternal role and dialectic tensions inherent in mothering in a patriarchal culture, the following discussion moves away from the cultural determinants of maternal ambivalence and takes the discussion to a psychological level.
However, before turning attention to a psychological discussion of maternal ambivalence as articulated by the mothers in this study, it must be stated that in the judgment of the researcher, the participants' depiction of their lives and their meanings are ordinary experiences of mothers with first-born, early-adolescents. The participants' descriptions of maternal ambivalence and their dynamic responses to it are not viewed as pathological but illustrative of what most mothers, if not all mothers, will experience in their ordinary, everyday lives. Maternal ambivalence is considered a transitional phenomenon, and as was argued in chapter two, maternal ambivalence, i.e., hating where one loves, promotes a sense of concern towards and differentiation from the adolescent (First, 1994; Parker, 1995; Winnicott, 1947). The mother's ambivalence helps sustain the difficult task of differentiation and the gradual discovery of new meanings about herself, her adolescent, and their relationship. Given that these findings represent the experiences of normal, everyday mothers of apparently healthy adolescent children, the universality of maternal ambivalence and subsequent dynamics under study is highlighted. For many mothers, her distress about hating the loved one—or loving the hated one, naturally becomes a recognized, metabolized aspect of who she knows herself to be without psychotherapeutic intervention. Her maternal ambivalence loses its relevance over time and growth.

However, maternal ambivalence in general, and perhaps especially maternal ambivalence with an early adolescent, is a common client issue. In the following discussion then, it is the researcher's responsibility to try to highlight common psychological dynamics of maternal ambivalence to foster greater psychotherapeutic
understanding of issues surrounding mothers during this phase of their lives. Psychotherapy can then be offered based on an enhanced knowledge of maternal ambivalence as it is lived, experienced, and made meaning of by women.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and present the essential quality and dynamics of maternal ambivalence as it is experienced in the lives of mothers of first-born, early-adolescents. The following discussion describes the fundamental nature of the phenomenon as depicted by the participants in this study. Although each mother had a unique story there were invariant constituents in every mother's lived experiences. The summary statement is written as "Everymother's Story" because it captures the poignancy of the participants' lived experiences with first-born, early adolescents. The summary is a depiction of the shared essence of the participants' experiences that seem crucial to understanding maternal ambivalence and its therapeutic management. Everymother's Story follows:

Everymother's Story

A mother notices that her child's world expands as he/she enters adolescence. The adolescent's world is populated with more people. The adolescent is faced with more choices to negotiate, some that cause the mother concern. One of the most poignant changes the mother notices is that the adolescent has a private internal self that cannot be known to the mother, unless the adolescent chooses to share it. The
mother might complain of secrets, lies, and an inability to know about her adolescent’s relationships and world.

Everymother has a loss of omniscience and omnipotence in her adolescent’s life. She believes, retrospectively, that she once knew the child and all the activities the child engaged in. She often felt she knew her child from the inside out. Moreover, she was an active and integral part of the child’s relationships and activities. With the child’s growing autonomy the mother has the experience of losing her ability to know, and to be as comforting, influencing, and protecting in the way she has grown accustomed to. These perceived losses sometimes worry the mother as she wonders if she is still needed or wanted in her adolescent’s life and if so, she wonders about how to respond. The mother may want to support the child’s growth, but is uncertain how to support the child’s clumsy efforts to differentiate. She faces the unsettling dilemma of how to remain connected, without impinging or being too controlling. She is also able to see that new opportunities exist for her relationship with her adolescent and she looks forward to an adult relationship with her child. In early adolescence, this future relationship seems elusive, uncertain, and not resonant with the mother’s history with her child. The mother seems more focused on the distance and space between herself and her child, less so on the yet-to-be found adult connection this maternal ambivalence suggests.

Everymother is saddened by the relational shift she has noticed in her relationship with her adolescent. She loses the younger child she once had and old ways of being with the child, and she is saddened. She may be unsure of how she can
be within the relational shift. She becomes fearful when she imagines that the growing
distance with her adolescent will result in harm to the adolescent or a loss of the
relationship altogether. She seems confused about how to mother the changing
adolescent. She may wonder who the “new” other will be and will she love her or him
in old and known ways.

She has carried an internalized vision of the good mother and she is left to
wonder if she has done a good enough job at mothering. She has been the center of
her family’s life and she has tried to provide what the child has needed as the child
approaches adolescence. She believes that ultimately it was her job to provide the
adolescent with the needed care to become a decent human being. With less control
over the adolescent and with the adolescent’s burgeoning autonomy, she worries
about whether she has provided a strong enough foundation for the adolescent to
launch from. She might worry that her attempts to prepare the child for the
complexities of the adolescent’s world ultimately weren’t good enough and that the
adolescent may be harmed. She might wonder if she will like the person her child will
gradually become now that she is finished with the foundation.

Every mother looks to the adolescent’s behavior for evidence that she has done
a good job mothering. She judges her success based on her view of the “good
adolescent.” Despite the acknowledgement of her child’s growth, she still struggles
with feeling responsible to guide her adolescent and his/her life choices. She may not
be sure if she is relating to a child or a young adult. She also worries whether her
adolescent knows he/she is loved and hopes he/she may want to return home.
Everymother experiences ambivalence about the relational shift implicit in her child becoming an adolescent. This brings with it a wide array of maternal positions regarding self and the adolescent. Mothers may seek to resolve the ambivalence by attempting to keep the adolescent a child who needs and relies on the mother. Some mothers may try to force the inevitable growth in autonomy of the adolescent by over encouraging differentiation activity in the adolescent and pursuing her own separate life. Of course, most mothers likely avoid these extremes of ambivalent resolution and are caught up in the undulating dynamics between self and adolescent, expressed in their unique language of uncertainty, fears, regrets, and hopes.

The ambivalent mother’s boundaries between self and other are sometimes quite confused. It is difficult for her to see the adolescent as separate and distinct from herself, and to understand the adolescent’s dynamics separately from her own. Everymother is called upon to make her way in this changing and dynamic psychological landscape. All the more poignant is that the mother feels responsible to encourage her child to grow even if it feels like she is “sending her heart out into the world unprotected.” She might refuse to do the sending off, but she feels the call. Should she be psychologically prepared to send her adolescent off, she has a hand in her own loss by encouraging the other to leave. Even though she cannot know with any certainty how their lives will turn out, she psychologically sends the child away with only hope that a new self, a new other, and a new relationship will emerge between her child and her self. How she negotiates this dynamic movement has to do with meanings she holds about self, other, and relating.
It is not uncommon for a mother to try to dynamically repair old wounds she has carried since her own efforts at differentiation from being a child to becoming an adolescent; if she had a painful transition herself, she desperately wants to spare her child the same pain. Everymother thinks about her own development and what she wished for and she does her best to provide these to her children. This interplay of the mother's history with her current attempts to mother her changing child often reawakens old struggles with roles and boundaries between mother and emerging adolescent.

A natural aspect of experiencing transitional ambivalence is to become frustrated with oneself and/or other, because the established ways of mothering are not, in fact, as useful as they once were. Everymother has a difficult task of managing both love and hate for her adolescent. Sometimes having anger frightens her, and she will deny it or defend against it. A mother might struggle with how to integrate her frustration and anger with the love she has for her adolescent, which leaves her subject to worry and guilt and prone to second guessing herself. Everymother is usually much more able to claim the love side of this dynamic. She may set up an implicit bargain with the adolescent that involves the mother forfeiting aspects of the self for the maintenance of the relationship. Rather than acknowledging the hate side of her ambivalence, she defends against its expression by sacrificing her own needs to preserve the relationship. She may think about self sacrifice as coming from love when it may be psychologically born of unmanageable guilt for having frustration.
Every mother of an early-adolescent seems to be in the natural position of noticing that change is upon them and not knowing quite what to make of the change. The change impacts who they have known themselves to be, who they have known their child to be, and how they have known to be in relationship with their child.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Developmental Models and Relational Psychology

Times of developmental transition are characterized as periods when established psychological meanings no longer fit one’s current lived experiences, and new meanings have not been securely constructed and organized. Developmental movement is often about relational shifts and renegotiating meanings about self, other, and relationship. What the mother emphasizes in this object relational triad has much to do with her mothering and trying to find a new meaning balance that will make her life more settled (Kegan, 1982). As the adolescent develops and begins making new meanings about self, other, and relationship, mothers also engage in an ongoing dynamic interplay between redefining the self, the other, and the relationship. In the following discussion, mothers’ attempts to negotiate a new balance in relationship with her early adolescent are considered.

Adolescents’ changing meaning constructions did not allow participants to mother in old and known ways and are unsettling to the mother’s old meaning constructions. Generally adolescent’s changes are experienced by the mother as creating greater distance between herself and her emerging adolescent. The changes in her adolescent’s psychology call forth new meanings for the mother which are
dissonant with old meanings about herself, her child, and their relationship and her current experiences. Mothers in this study noted change in their adolescent and their adolescents' world but could not address changes noticed in themselves. At first glance, this might lead one to believe that only the adolescent was embarking on developmental movement.

However, with a closer look, it becomes clear that the mothers were also dynamically engaged in a developmental process in concert with their adolescent. As old meanings and developmental balances were being contested by the adolescent, the mother was called to respond with her own redefinitions of self, her adolescent, and the balances in their relationship.

Old Ways of Knowing the Self, Other, and Relationship

Ultimately the mother of a first born early-adolescent and the adolescent are faced with negotiating a complex relational setup with no roadmap. Inherent to the developmental process is the loss of old meaning constructions of the self, other, and relationships. Below is a discussion of findings related to the mother's old meaning constructions that no longer fit with her current experiences with her adolescent.

Participants' stories can be used to illuminate a number of theoretical constructs relevant to maternal ambivalence. Some mothers experience a threatened loss of the adolescent (with his/her maturity) which threatens a loss of the maternal self. As a self-in-relation, mothers also struggled with conflicts inherent in the mother/adolescent dyad. Another construct illuminated in this discussion is a sense of
merged identities where mothers were not able to experience a maternal self as fully
differentiated from that of the adolescent. Other mothers’ attempts to differentiate as
they prepare to launch their adolescents are also discussed.

The dynamic psychological impact of carrying an internalized and idealized
role of the good mother is also illuminated in this discussion with particular attention
paid to effects of not claiming true affective responses to mothering an early-
adolescent. Mothers’ ambivalence between closeness and distance in relationship with
their adolescents is discussed. Finally, a discussion of the function of maternal
ambivalence in alerting mothers to the normal developmental evolution of her and her
adolescent is presented.

**Loss of Other, Loss of Self**

Some mothers seem to cling to old meaning constructions about their
adolescent even in the face of evidence that these constructions no longer work
effectively in the current realities of the mother/adolescent dyad. For example, Carol
doggedly overprotects her son in an attempt to keep him the baby. She is willing to
sacrifice her needs in an attempt to keep him close. The distance she experienced
between herself and her son when he withdrew affection from her deeply hurt her.
Her old meanings about self and historical others informs her that her son would
eventually leave and turn against her.

Carol’s sense of identity seems to be about being the mother of a child, not an
evolving adolescent. Her son’s maturation would lead, according to her meaning
constructions, to a loss of her son. She believes that if and when her son matures he will “hate” her, even though he once loved her. Carol used the word “hate” to describe what she feared her son might feel towards her with his eventual maturation. His hate, she feels, could destroy her psychologically, since her identity is so closely linked to being the mother according to old and known ways. His psychological departure not only represented a loss of her child, but of a loss of a known self she has been. Without her son, she no longer knows what her existence would be, except “empty.” She does not have a working model of a new and different way. She is unquestioningly subject to her old meaning constructions about self, other, and their relationship.

Influenced by her meaning constructions, Carol inflexibly sees her son in one of two ways. Either he will remain the boy and need her old ways of mothering or he will mature, turning against and away from her. But, even given this, she is not able to imagine a different way to be the mother. She can continue to mother in old ways that deny her son’s continuing maturation or her mothering will be of no value. Finally, she cannot imagine having a relationship with a more mature son. Her hope is that she can continue to mother in the old way, not lose the child to adult status, and hence maintain the relationship she knows and values. The old way is more known and might feel safer. Imagining new ways of relating to a more mature son seems to threaten her. Her own growth awaits a redefinition of self, other, and relating.

Should Carol settle her maternal ambivalence prematurely by holding on to her old meaning constructions about herself, her adolescent, and their relationship she
threatens the very things she hopes to avoid. Ambivalent dynamics often carry such powerful paradox. It could be argued that Carol is attempting to prematurely settle her ambivalence in favor of over-inclusion. Over-inclusion as used here refers to the mother’s tendency to avoid the distress of loss of the adolescent due to their growing autonomy by a refusal to recognize and manage that very autonomy; in addition to continuing to relate to the adolescent by keeping loose boundaries with and infantilizing the adolescent. She herself suspected that she overprotects her son. As one reads her words, it is difficult to imagine this serving her long-term relationship with her adolescent. The paradox is that the event she most fears, the loss of her son and subsequently the loss of a known and viable self, is more likely to happen if she settles this ambivalence too soon. If she continues on the same course of clinging to old meaning structures, her son will most likely have to fuel his developmental task of differentiation with a fair amount of anger towards the mother.

Old Relational Ways

Some mothers struggle with integrating the existence of both maternal love and hate for their children; Helen’s story exemplifies this. Helen wants desperately to be a friend to her daughter someday, but cannot give up being the good mother who is an authority in her daughter’s life. She is caught between the good authoritarian mother and the fantasy of being her daughter’s friend. Her emphasis is on the relationship and she has no idea how to bridge these two different relationships. A repeated theme in interviews with Helen was that she did not feel that she described
her daughter or their relationship in a positive light. Upon reading the first interview, she tearfully wished she would have described both more positively. She worries about remaining the authoritarian mother and pushing her daughter too hard, but seems to have a difficult time redefining the relationship in any other way. This seems complicated for Helen because as she redefines the relationship as a friendship, she seems to wonder if her daughter will like her. For Helen, there is no way she can modulate the split she has constructed between mother and friend. Dynamically, she might also have to consider whether she will like her daughter.

If Helen’s relationship with her daughter does not endure across their lives, she may well conclude that she did not love the child enough. For Helen, one fear seems to be that she must not mix being mother and friend and she continually seeks verification from others that she is not crossing the imaginary line between friend and authority figure. Remaining the invested authority in her daughter’s life might be a retreat to a time when her love for her child was not questioned by either herself or her daughter. There was no doubt for Helen that she loved her baby. On the other hand, she has no way of knowing her daughter’s meaning constructions now that she believes her mothering work is done. She has no way of knowing if her daughter will live life according to the foundation Helen has provided her. If the daughter doesn’t live according to this foundation constructed by her mother, will Helen value the person she is becoming? Helen seems to have unspoken and private worries about this.
If she cannot “love” her daughter, Helen will likely see herself as having failed at the mothering process; she will also be faced with loss of a relationship that she considers her “retirement benefits.” Old meaning constructions lock Helen into worry about giving up being the authority figure in her daughter’s life because this old way of being in relationship with her daughter does not require Helen to decide whether she likes the woman her daughter is becoming.

Beth represents another example of how old ways of a mother relating to her child seems to create immense ambivalence. Beth believes that she has a uniquely close and intimate relationship with her son. She clings to this old notion even in the face of evidence to the contrary with regard to her son’s behavior. Beth defines herself in terms of her son’s ongoing affection and attention. Her relationship with her son seemed superficial and manipulative to the researcher, but Beth actively pursues her son’s attention by clinging to a meaning construction that she is his best-friend and better than other mothers. Beth’s effort to resolve her maternal ambivalence could very easily lead to deep disappointment if the son ultimately rejects his mother’s old ways.

**Merged Identities**

Another way of preventing loss of self, other, and the relationship is by psychologically merging one’s identity with that of the adolescent. In effect, this dynamic negates the gap between mother and emerging adolescent. While Carol’s sense of identity seemed to be defined by the adolescent, Mary was a mother who
adhered to old meaning constructions by defining the adolescent’s self. Mary often merged discussions of her daughter’s experiences with experiences of her own. Her daughter’s experiences were heavily associated with her own experiences. Rather than “knowing” her daughter, it seemed that Mary sought to define her daughter. Such a gross failure to recognize the differentiation between mother and daughter is likely to be problematic for both. Mary’s relational stance gave her the perceived ability to know her daughter’s private, internal world because she believed that it was similar to her own private, internal world. Even when Mary’s daughter behaved differently than how Mary described her, Mary insisted that her description was accurate. For example, she acknowledged that her daughter moved at a “rather slow pace” and had many superficial diverse interests, yet insisted that her daughter would indeed find and follow a passionate interest. Mary’s meaning constructions do not allow for the daughter to have a distinct self separate from the mother. In a somewhat narcissistic way, Mary rationalizes her daughter’s observable behavior away and makes it fit with her old meaning construction.

Mary seems to be attempting to repair old psychic wounds from her own past by mothering her daughter differently than she had been parented. This very likely increases the need for Mary to see her daughter’s needs as her own. This allows Mary to know how to mother her daughter. Mary shared some of her history in her family of origin and the apparent meanings she made about self, other, and relating seem relevant to this discussion. She disclosed that she lost her connection to a family after her parents divorced when she was an early adolescent. Her father had been her
center, just as she finds it "vital" to be her family's center. He left and she felt abandoned without a home. Meanings about trust and safety and the risk of losing one's center are a part of her story and certainly influence her current inability to endorse her daughter's differentiation process.

Having a gut-wrenching experience of separation before she was ready and without good enough support, Mary's worry is that she wants to spare her daughter from ever feeling cut off and adrift from the core of the family, i.e., her mother. If the unconscious hope is that she can repeat her old history but discover a new outcome, her own psychological wounds of childhood might be healed and she will be the good mother for having spared her daughter such pain.

Her daughter's unwillingness to share struggles with her caused Mary grave distress. She does not know what her daughter is trying to deal with and this seems to make old meanings less tenable. Mary is faced with a separate and distinct adolescent who threatens old meanings that Mary is all-knowing and ultimately the good mother.

Mary's daughter apparently has a different, distinct life course from the mother (much of it likely due to Mary's adequate mothering) and will likely continue to differentiate from the mother. What if the daughter demonstrates that she doesn't need her mother to be "findable"? What then becomes of the mother who has devoted her mothering to knowing, centering, and remaining findable to her daughter? There is safety for Mary in being able to define the other as herself. In Mary's meaning structure, neither will be able to be lost to the other. When this old meaning structure was threatened by her adolescent's distancing, Mary regained balance by defensively
assuring herself that she knows her daughter best and that she would remain useful to her daughter. However, Mary does not seem to see her daughter’s true self. If Mary responds to her daughter by clinging to old meaning constructions she has of her daughter, she is likely to provide the kind of care she had wished for as an adolescent instead of providing the kind of care her daughter actually needs or desires.

Beth also seems to struggle with seeing her son as distinct and separate from her. Thus, she represents yet another example of what is here called identity merger between mother and son. She often confuses pronouns when talking about her son and uses “we” when referring to either her son or herself. She also confused the researcher as to whom she was referring at times. This merging seemed to protect Beth from fears of losing her son and her specialness in his life.

Launching the Daughter, Launching the Self

In rather sharp dynamic contrast to Mary and Beth, Ann seemed to fully acknowledge her daughter’s emerging distinctness from herself. Ann talked much more than other mothers about her own life goals and meanings. There was no confusion for Ann that her life was quite distinct from her daughter’s. She acknowledged changes she noticed with her daughter but felt like the relationship between them remained fairly consistent, despite their differences. She wants her daughter to be able to go out in the world and pursue her “bliss.” She has a much more hands-off approach to mothering her daughter than other mothers. She does not seem to be threatened by the daughter’s maturation and in fact seemed to look
forward to her daughter leading her own life. As she prepares to launch her daughter into adolescence, she seems to be preparing to launch herself into her own life design. Yet, it is noted that Ann sees in her daughter, the pursuit of her own (Ann’s) valued goals. There is a hint that she is launching the daughter to be the person she wishes she had had the opportunity to be. When interviewing Ann, the researcher had the impression that Ann and her daughter were embarking on the same sort of enterprise of pursuing their “bliss.” Ann seems to have a separate sense of self distinct from her daughter, yet even with this acknowledgment, Ann’s shadow is over the daughter.

Unclaimed Aspects of Maternal Ambivalence

Vivian’s constructions of the good mother seem to prevent her from acknowledging and psychologically claiming the hate side of her ambivalence. She has an idealized and unrealistically purified perception of her daughter and their life. She insists that she is the mother of a daughter who is “pure love.” In her meaning construction, complaints about her daughter are viewed as destructive. She seems to psychologically split off negative affect and insists that she never experiences her children as burdens. She defensively destroys the true affect of disappointment, frustration, or hate and sacrifices her own needs for the daughter. Not being able to acknowledge or claim her negative affect, Vivian turns the affect inward and experiences persistent worry and guilt about mothering her daughter. If she could acknowledge the negative affect as normal and could therefore express it in
appropriate ways, the denied affect would not cause the psychological internal confusion she feels.

For example, Vivian wishes her daughter would make her a cup of tea to show her love for the mother. Vivian has some demanding expectations about how this tea would be prepared and served, although she explicitly denies that she has any expectations of her daughter. Even when the daughter prepares the cup of tea it does not satisfy Vivian’s need. Vivian feels that she has been devoted to her daughter and wishes that the daughter would return in kind, even though she denies having this expectation. Without stretching the point too far, one can see that the unclaimed negative affect dynamic could rather easily lead to mother/daughter relational discord in a relatively short period of time.

The adolescent daughter is embarked on her own developmental trajectory and perhaps a way for the daughter to differentiate is to not serve the mother’s wishes. Vivian’s response is to privately feel injured while denying any expectation about other’s attending to her needs. Vivian turns this true and normal affect inward and is anxious about her daughter’s welfare.

Caught Between Self and Other

Fran is a mother who seems to have trouble negotiating a balance between closeness and distance in her relationship with her adolescent. In order to be close, Fran has constructed relational meanings whereby she seems to believe that she must sacrifice her need for those of her adolescent. She resents this at times, but seems
driven to be the responsible, self-controlled mother. She eats the broken egg yolk because feeding it to others might mean that she has not been the good mother. There is a sacrifice inherent in the metaphor of always needing to eat the broken egg yolk and Fran resents the costs she believes she must always pay for closeness. On the other hand, should she attend to her own needs and take time for herself she feels anxious and guilty. One can sense Fran's actively ambivalent feelings being played out in her oscillation between self-sacrifice and self-attention.

Fran has a difficult time claiming her anger when she tries to discipline. Fran has a meaning construction that seems to keep her caught between wishing for a close relationship with her son which is at a cost of her own self fulfillment. However, to act more autonomously, which may be a truer articulation of self at one moment, she risks the loss of the other and she feels anxious and guilty. Fran's story about going to the tanner illuminates this idea when one considers the horrible things she imagined happening to her adolescent waiting in the car. Fran went to the tanner for 20 minutes and as she tried to take care of her needs and enjoy a fraction of an hour to herself, she imagined children who were left in parked cars to die. She abruptly left the tanner and took her adolescent home.

**Cracks in the Armor**

Mothers are faced with developmental movement that is about differentiating out from the old meanings they hold about themselves, their others, and relationships, and constructing and integrating new meanings about self, other, and relating. The
mothers in this study were all faced with changes that challenged some of their old meaning constructions. Old meanings are clung to because they seem to provide protection against the inherent loss, frustration, and confusion common during developmental transitions (Kegan, 1982). One's old meanings are difficult to give up because they have been, for better or worse, the relational guide and were functional. The cracks in the old meanings and functionality became undeniable evidence that adaptations and new constructions of meanings were developmentally required but elusive to locate. Before the mothers can integrate new ways of being, they have to differentiate out from their old meaning constructions. Some of the mothers in this study are beginning to imagine and hope for a new meaning construction of self, other, and relating. However, for the most part, the mothers in this study seem to remain subject to their old meanings, which might be expected of mothers of first time emerging adolescents. Later on developmentally, accommodation may become routine. Currently, the mothers in this study hold their old constructions as true and threats to these constructions psychologically threatened their sense of themselves, their adolescent, and their relationship with the adolescent.

Relational theories of mothering suggest that mothers need their maternal ambivalence to propel out and away from old meaning constructions towards a gradual shift to new meanings that are more congruent with her lived experiences. Maternal ambivalence will help the mother loosen her grip on old relational meaning constructions and engage new more psychologically healthy constructions (First, 1994; Kegan, 1982; Parker, 1995). Manageable ambivalence helps the mother accept
both her love for and frustration with her adolescent. If she is not able to be frustrated
and angry at her adolescent for psychologically leaving her, destroying her, and
threatening her meaning constructions about self, other, and relationships, she is left
to defensively destroy the true affect and is vulnerable to anxiety, depression, or
further confusion (First, 1994; Parker, 1995). Some of the mothers in this study
attempted to destroy the true affect they experienced by overprotecting or idealizing
their adolescent or by being consumed with worry, guilt or hurt feelings. In the midst
of this transition, some mothers will benefit from psychological attention that
acknowledges the old meaning constructions she has about herself, others, and
relationships, while encouraging her to articulate her maternal ambivalence. Maternal
ambivalence will be more available for use if the mother can give voice to the
experiences of having it. Articulation of ambivalent affects then is understood to
empower the mother to find a relational position with her adolescent that transcends
the pain inherent in an unarticulated affective position. Otherwise she is subject to the
defenses she employs to keep old meaning constructions in place.

Clinical Implications: Living the Questions Inherent in Maternal Ambivalence

The mother’s developmental task, when experiencing the evolving
development of her child, is to hold her own ambivalence and not settle it prematurely
(Kegan, 1982; Parker, 1995; Winnicott, 1987). Premature settlement means
foreclosure of possibilities and a loss of hope for a shared evolutionary movement. In
effect, there is a foreclosure on healthy growth of both mother and child. Mothers can
attempt to deny current realities, set up bargain relationships, withdraw continued
responsibility for their still maturing adolescent, or otherwise avoid inherent loss and
confusion in mothering an early-adolescent. Or mothers can live in the uncertainty and
their ambivalence until a new self is recognizable and available to be integrated into
the mothers’ ongoing development, which would ultimately be supportive of the
adolescents’ growth. It is understandable that mothers will attempt to resolve or settle
the ambivalence. Maternal ambivalence while a natural feature of mothering an early-
adolescent is composed of conflicted and paradoxical affects. The ambivalence itself is
a source of anxiety, depression, and confusion.

In this study, mothers were attempting to resolve or settle their ambivalence in
favor of old meaning constructions and non-differentiation from their adolescents in
several ways. The only way for a growth-enhancing relationship to be established is
that the mother can come to see and know herself, her adolescent, and their
relationship in distinct ways (Miller, 1991). Settling ambivalence too soon does not
give the mother or the adolescent a chance to gradually evolve into two distinct and
whole people. Likewise, the changing relationship has little chance of becoming an
authentic and meaningful one, if modes of interaction are restricted to fit an
inauthentic relationship. As might be expected given that the mothers in this study
were mothers of first-born, early adolescents, they were still subject to their old
meaning constructions. Being subject to old meanings they continue to adhere to their
old selves, others, and ways of relating. While the mothers in this study notice change
in their adolescents, which conflicts with old meaning constructions, they do not perceive change in themselves.

Struggling to find new meaning constructions about mothering an adolescent despite the inherent risks, fears, and loss, holds the promise that a new self will be found that will fit with the changing reality the mother faces. Clinging to an old way or disengaging from the relationship means that the mother may never emerge in an authentic manner to have a full relationship with the adolescent. Living in the confusion gives the mother and the adolescent time to figure out new meaning constructions.

Living in the question means acknowledging the maternal ambivalence inherent in the developmental endeavor. The mother will have to acknowledge that she psychologically hates where she also loves. She will need to be able to face the sadness along with the joy, the loss along with the discovery, the anger along with the love that she has for herself, her other, and her relationship. It would be so much easier, albeit unrealistic, to have only one side of the ambivalence or the other. While living in the confusion, might be painful at times, it is listening to the very confusion that helps the mother know that new meaning constructions must be created. It is the hate side of ambivalence that causes enough discomfort to move her to a new developmental balance.
Therapeutic Functions

Three psychotherapeutic functions, holding, contrasting, and integrating, must be provided when working with the client struggling with maternal ambivalence in her relationship with her early-adolescent. While these three functions are understood to be important in the provision of all psychotherapy which see the therapeutic relationship as basic to change, they seem particularly relevant to working with women who experience maternal ambivalence. The provision of these relational functions is qualitatively unique to this population because of the powerfully poignant relationship a mother fashions with her child. The mother/child relationship is like no other and represents significant meaning to the mother. As we further consider that women's development of a "self-in-relationship" means that mothers will come to experience differentiation and integration processes in a qualitatively different way than men, the therapeutic functions of holding, contrasting, and integration are likewise of a different psychological shading (Miller, 1991). A discussion of each function provided by the psychotherapist follows.

Holding

What might help the mother to live in the confusion long enough to find new meaning constructions that better represent the developmental reality she and her adolescent are living? The one most important therapeutic principle for helping a client with maternal ambivalence is to hold it. Holding the client's confusion and distress is specifically designed to help the client feel accepted, even though the client...
feels that one side of the ambivalence (usually the hate) is inappropriate and a sign of bad mothering.

In this study mothers responded favorably to reading the summary of their mothering story after the first interview. Those summaries are available to read in the Appendix F. The researcher tried to give an honest account of what she thought she had heard from the mothers. At times, she worried that the participant might be offended because their stories seemed unreasonable. Six of the 7 mothers, however, were delighted with the summaries. They seemed relieved that the researcher heard their stories and knew what was important to them. Even though the researcher believed that some of the mother's stories set them up for the possibility of difficulty in their relationship with their adolescent, 6 of the 7 mothers found the summary of her experiences to be affirming of who she knew herself, her adolescent, and her relationship to be. Helen was the only mother to be upset by the summary of her first interview; it seemed to represent a piece of external evidence that she might not love her daughter enough.

By hearing each mother's story and writing her summary, the researcher was holding the mother's old self, while also acknowledging the mother's ambivalence. The mothers were able to put words to the ambivalence they were experiencing in the holding presence of the researcher. Before she can hope to find a new way and a bridge between, the mother first needs to be recognized and affirmed for who she has been (Kegan, 1982). Should a therapist call into question old meanings a mother has
about her self, other, and relationships before really holding the mother’s experience, they jeopardize providing a good enough hold for the mother.

Cultural messages of mothers needing to “cut the apron strings” or “get her own life” cannot be integrated without the culture or an important other first recognizing who the mother has been in her child’s life. To “cut the apron strings” would mean that the mother would need to be on good terms with her hate in the context of loving her adolescent (First, 1994; Winnicott, 1987).

The hate side of the ambivalence is often defended against and the mother believes it is not to be articulated, lest she be seen as a bad mother. By hearing the mother’s stories of her old ways of creating the loving context, the mother will be encouraged to tell the unclaimed aspects of her maternal ambivalence.

Once the mother begins to articulate the ambivalence and trust that she will be accepted for who she has been in her child’s life, she can begin to articulate what is often defended against because it is “bad.” The mother has the ambivalence but may only articulate one side of it. The other side is turned against, i.e., a part of self (the hate feeling) becomes hated. When crucial and authentic affective responses are under articulated they often lead to symptoms and become more acutely experienced, but still not expressed. As we hear this in therapy, we are able to show holding/acceptance. We contain the negative affect and look at and relate to that which the client cannot. We show loving containment, which helps the client contain/accept aspects of self which she has “known” to be unlovable. As this process unfolds, articulation of client affective life becomes deeper. The therapist continues the
holding, containing, and helping the client to understand. Usually the client will gradually become less distressed.

Contrasting

Once the mother has been recognized for her old meaning constructions, a therapist can begin to side with the less articulated side of who the mother is becoming, i.e., offer contrasts for consideration. The mother may need help in articulating the changing reality she is faced with. She will need to name the change, be frustrated with it, be afraid and sad about her real and imagined losses, look forward to real and imagined changes, and otherwise give voice to her experiences. Mothers are dealing with changes in the actual relationship with their adolescent. They are also dealing with changes in their affect and meanings about themselves, their adolescent, and their relationship with their child. Some of the mothers in this study seem to be heavily defended or psychologically naive about how they are trying to settle the ambivalence; in instances such as these defensiveness would require therapeutic attention before therapeutic contrasting.

For Carol, the therapist might have to patiently wonder what the mother makes of being overprotective and what she imagines to be the outcome of this. She might have to help Carol imagine a new and different relationship with a growing adolescent. For Vivian, the therapist might have to wonder what it is like in the “rare” circumstances when Vivian becomes frustrated with her adolescent. The therapist might wonder with her client about what is feared or imagined when she has her
frustration. The therapist might begin to wonder with her how anger might enhance an authentic relationship with her daughter. For Helen, the therapist might side with the mother who wants to become a friend to her daughter and help her imagine what this might be like. The therapist might have to help Helen come to terms with the possibility that there might be aspects of her adolescent’s character that she does not like.

For Fran, the therapist might help her claim her anger when she disciplines her son or side with the mother who wants 20 minutes alone away from her children. Fran might come to be able to hold her hate in the context of her loving presence. For Mary, the therapist might have to gently call on the mother to see how her daughter is different from her. She might be encouraged to see how their pasts have not been the same and what her daughter faces when she leaves the family home is not what Mary faced. Ann might be helped to find greater articulation that she did a good enough job mothering her daughter despite it looking very different than what she had imagined when younger.

The question of what is contrasted is obviously unique to each mother’s story and is a more complicated question than it sounds. The client’s anger (its existence, which has already been argued to be natural) is not contrasted per se. But the client’s fears about, lack of skill with, not understanding repair motifs may all be contrasted. Even the “simple” idea that to hate doesn’t mean you don’t love the object is a matter for contrasting. As we help the client accept her anger, diffuse her guilt for having the anger, and become more realistic about the vicissitudes of the mother/adolescent...
relationship, we are contrasting. We are endorsing the integration of the anger into the articulated (healthier) self.

**Integrating**

The therapist, after contrasting, begins to help the client to “renegotiate her developmental balance” while remaining in relationship with her adolescent. Claiming who she has been, articulating who she will become, and figuring out how to do this dynamic dance allows the mother to remain in the confusion she is experiencing as she hangs in the balance. Voicing the under articulated makes object of new meanings which the mother can psychologically play with and integrate into her evolving meaning constructions about self, other, and relating. The mother can be encouraged to begin to actually express new ways of being in relationship with her adolescent, while in the safety of the therapeutic relationship. For her to be able to implement the once under articulated side of self in relationship with her adolescent will be a gradual process. It shouldn’t be expected to be a necessarily smooth, linear process. As she begins to relate differently to her adolescent the adolescent will have dynamic responses to the mother that might initially confuse or distress the mother. During integration, the client will continue to benefit from the therapist’s holding/containing, but now a new therapeutic function of remembering who the old mother was in contrast to who the new mother seems to be becoming will help the mother with the bridge between.
It is important to note that mothers will struggle with developing new meanings, in a relationship that is very significant to them. However, it is premature to know whether the mothers in this study will not be able to do so. It is likely that participants in this study seemed to remain subject to old meaning constructions because they were mothering first-born, early adolescents. With time, these mothers have to be able to separate out from old meanings about the self they have been and differentiate from their adolescent. But before they can do so the old meanings must be known and honored and new meanings must be discovered and integrated.

Using "Everymother's Story"

Everymother's Story could be used in a number of creative ways when working with women struggling with maternal ambivalence. Everymother's Story could be used as a stand alone piece offered to mother's as a way to normalize their experiences. The story could offer women a way to therapeutically play with ideas in the story. Women could be encouraged in the safety of the therapeutic "third reality" to create their story (Trembley, 1996). No one owns the outcome of this therapeutic play so Everymother's Story could become the unique story of the client which she might now feel safe to have.

Another way the story could be used would be to develop a journaling exercise for women to use to help them articulate old, evolving, and new meanings they have regarding this time in their life. In effect, the story could serve as stimulus material to assist women with articulating aspects of their meaning systems that they
are called upon to challenge as they transition from child-mothering to early adolescent-mothering. Everymother’s Story could be sectioned into any number of reflections that stimulate the mother to think and write about her lived internal experiences and the meanings she has come to make of them as she mothers her developing child. Journaling would provide women the opportunity to give voice to both sides of their ambivalence, and the psychological pain inherent in living in the ambivalence, while mothering their adolescents. Mothers would be served by articulating the pain inherent in the transitional process; growing into it, learning how to be in it, and then getting out of it. Letting mothers know that the task at hand is not to prematurely settle their ambivalence but to live the questions inherent in it would be a powerful way for mothers to write their own “Everymother’s” Story.

Using ideas in Everymother’s Story to develop a 10- or 12-week support group for mothers would also be an empowering exercise for women at this developmental juncture. Such a group might be offered to mothers with children in the eighth and ninth grades. Given the cultural prescriptive, idealized, and dichotomist aspects of the internalized “good mother” a group experience for mothers of adolescents is thought to be especially useful for helping mothers normalize their experiences by understanding the universality of Everymother’s Story shared in the group context.

Findings in this study support theorists’ claims that neither the mother’s personal context nor the broader culture hold and honor her experiences with ambivalence, particularly the unclaimed aspects of her ambivalence, which tend to be
the negative side/confused part of the ambivalence. People experiencing normal
developmental transitions require a holding environment (Kegan, 1994; Trembley,
1996). Sharing her experiences relevant to Everymother's Story in a facilitated group
setting would provide the mother an environment where she and her ambivalence
could be held and normalized. In such an environment mothers could be encouraged
to live their ambivalence; claiming the loss inherent in the transition while embracing
new and authentic meaning constructions of the self, other, and relationship.

Theoretical and Research Implications

This study expands theoretical and empirical considerations of the function of
maternal ambivalence to include mothers of early adolescents. Most of the theoretical
literature has been written about the mother and her baby. Acknowledging that
development is life-long and that a child's entrance into adolescence will once again
stir a mother's ambivalence about herself, her child, and their relationship honors the
ongoing process a mother participates in and expands our theoretical understanding
to include the mother of an early adolescent.

The current study enhances the theoretical understanding of maternal
ambivalence in several other ways. First, our understanding of maternal ambivalence
is enhanced by exploring the nature of the experience with first-born early
adolescents. We also have a better understanding of the mother's struggles as she
notices change in her early adolescent and the inherent upending of old meaning
constructions of self, other, and relationship. Finally, the current study enhances our
understanding of the psychologically dynamic and relational function of maternal ambivalence as it facilitates differentiation activity for the mother and her adolescent. By giving voice to mothers’ experiences we better understand the struggles inherent in this process.

The present study also suggests the value of future research aimed at extending our understanding of maternal ambivalence. It appears that the mothers in this study were still subject to their old meaning constructions at least in part because the sampling criteria restricted the sample to mothers of early adolescents; these mothers were not yet fully wrestling with their maternal ambivalence. They had just begun to heed the developmental call in their relationships with their adolescents. Research with mothers of children in middle and late adolescents would further inform our understanding of maternal ambivalence and subsequent development. The current research discovered the shared essence and meanings made at the beginning of a developmental transition. The experience and meaning of maternal ambivalence is postulated to change with the continued development of the mother and her adolescent. Conducting research with mothers further along the process would inform us about the normal and natural conclusions of maternal ambivalence. For example, mothers of 16-year-old adolescents might have more to say about the expression of their ambivalence and their attempts to settle it. Mothers of older adolescents could inform us about the outcome of this transitional time in their lives. Do they still have the conflicting and confusing feelings or has the experience of maternal ambivalence lost its usefulness as natural development occurs?
The mothers in the current study talked about actual changes in their relationship with their adolescents and perceived changes in themselves, their adolescent, and their relationship. With this in mind, there are at least two additional research directions that could also enhance our understanding of maternal ambivalence. One is to conduct action research whereby an ongoing weekly focus group with mothers could be established for 8 to 12 weeks. Mothers would be invited to share events/interaction with their adolescents from the previous week and the meanings they made of these events with the group. This might add to our understanding of maternal ambivalence by giving more account of behaviors, in addition to thoughts and feelings, and more fully illuminate the experience of maternal ambivalence and the psychological meaning it has in mothers' lives.

A second research direction would be to include the mothers' adolescents in a study similar to the present one. Adolescents could be interviewed separately from their mothers to hear stories regarding experiences with their own ambivalence during differentiation. They could share their perceptions of their mothers' responses to their efforts at differentiation and their attempts to settle the confusion in their own lives. Research such as this would allow us to see some of the dynamic intricacies of the mother/adolescent dyad during normal developmental transition.

**Building on a limitation of the present study, future research conducted with mothers who represent a more diversified population would further enhance our understandings of maternal ambivalence.** The inclusion of women of color, of varied
social economic status, and of different sexual orientations would allow us to capture
the complexities of maternal ambivalence as it is lived in all mother's lives.
Appendix A

Human Subjects Institutional Review Board Approval
Date: November 11, 2002

To: Mary Anderson, Principal Investigator
    Teresa DiStefano, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Mary Lagerwey, Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 02-10-11

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “Experiences and Meanings of Maternal Ambivalence with First-born Adolescents” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: November 11, 2003
Appendix B

Letter of Invitation
January 6, 2003

Dear:

I am a doctoral student in Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University, in Kalamazoo, Michigan. I am writing this letter to invite you to participate in a research project for my dissertation titled *Experiences and Meanings of Maternal Ambivalence with First-born Early Adolescents*. I would like to interview mothers on two occasions about their experiences of mothering their adolescent.

I am interested in talking to women whose first-born son or daughter recently graduated from St. Basil School. Lois Brigham shared your name with me because you meet this criterion. I’m interested in exploring what it means to mother an adolescent child. Reviewing the psychological literature, I found that we don’t know much about mothers’ experiences, especially about their relationships with their adolescent children.

A child’s adolescence is a time of change and I’d like to know what this time is like for the mother. I want to hear your stories of daily, ordinary experiences of mothering your first-born adolescent. I will audiotape interviews with each person on two occasions. Each interview will last between one and two hours. Before the second interview, I’d like to mail you some of my thoughts about our first conversation and have you respond to those during the second interview. I am writing to you because you are a mother whose child is entering adolescence and I believe what you have to say about this transitional time could make a real contribution to the increased understanding of what it is like to mother an adolescent.

I also want to let you know that your, and your child’s, confidentiality will be strictly protected, should you decide to participate in this study. I will use pseudonyms to identify you and your child when I discuss the findings of the research. Enclosed is a copy of the consent document that details confidentiality and other information. Should you join the study, you will be asked to sign this document before the start of the first interview. If you are interested in knowing more about this research, I will call you in a week or feel free to call me at (269) 344-4413 (work) or (269) 427-7018 (home) or email me at teresa.distefano@wmich.edu, and we can discuss this research and your involvement in more detail.

Warm Regards,

Teresa M. DiStefano
Appendix C

Initial Phone Contact Script
Participant Phone Contact Script

Thanks for calling me. I gather that you received my letter about participating in research about the experiences of mothering a first-born adolescent. [If I am placing the call as a follow-up to mailing the letter I will begin with the following: Hello, this is Teresa DiStefano and I am calling to follow up on the recent letter I mailed you about participating in a study about experiences of mothering a first-born adolescent]. This research is for my dissertation and will satisfy partial requirements for my Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University and is titled: Mothers’ experiences of maternal ambivalence with adolescent children. I’d like to give you more details about the project, answer questions you might have, and then talk to you about whether you are still interested in participating. This may seem rather long winded, but I want you to know what your participation is about. Do you have 15-20 minutes to spare right now? (If yes, proceed. If no, ask for a time to call back and proceed with the rest of the script.)

As was stated in the letter I mailed to you, I’m interested in exploring what it means to mother an adolescent child. Reviewing the psychological literature, I found that we don’t know much about mothers’ experiences, especially about their relationships with their adolescent children. A child’s adolescence is a time of change and I’d like to know what this time is like for the mother. I want to hear your stories of daily, ordinary experiences of mothering your first-born adolescent. I will audiotape interviews with each person on two occasions. Each interview will last between one and two hours. Before the second interview, I’d like to mail you some of my thoughts about our first conversation and have you respond to those during the second interview.

I also want to let you know that your, and your child’s, confidentiality will be strictly protected. I will use pseudonyms to identify you and your child when I discuss the findings of the research. Should you decide to participate, you will be read a consent document at the start of the first interview where this will be detailed in writing. You will be asked to sign the consent statement to document your willingness to participate. Should you decide to participate but change your mind at any time, you can withdraw from this research without penalty by simply contacting me and letting me know that you are no longer interested in participating.

Do you have questions about any of this? (Allow time for questions.) If you don’t have questions (or any more questions), I’d like to know if you understood my description of this research and if you are interested in participating. (If not interested, I would thank the caller for her time. If interested, I would proceed with the following.) What, if anything interests you about this study? (allow time for answer). Have there been times when you have felt torn in your relationship with your adolescent? (allow time for answer). How about times when you have been unsure of the best way to handle a difficult situation arising in your relationship with your
adolescent? (allow time for answer). If you agree to participate in this study at a later date, would you be willing to talk to me about your experiences of mothering – the good and the difficult? (If not interested or unwilling, I would thank the caller for her time. If interested and willing, I would proceed with the following: Before we can proceed, I would like to meet with you to discuss the consent document enclosed with your letter of invitation to participate in this study, address any other questions you might have, and then if you are willing, have you sign the form. If you agree to participate in the study, we will begin the interview process at that time. That’s great. I am really looking forward to hearing women’s stories about their experiences of mothering and contributing to our understanding of this important role in women’s lives.

I need to see if we can find a date and time to meet. We can meet at your home or at my office in Bangor, Michigan. We can decide which would be more convenient when we set a date. What would be the most convenient time and place for you? (make meeting arrangements). Thank you again for your time today and I look forward to meeting you on (date arranged).
Appendix D

HSIRB Approved Consent Document
Western Michigan University  
Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology  
Principal Investigator: Mary Anderson, PhD.  
Student Investigator: Teresa DiStefano, MA.  

I have been invited to participate in a research project titled Experiences and Meanings of Maternal Ambivalence with First-born Early Adolescents. This research is intended to study the experiences and meanings of mothering a first-born adolescent child. This research is conducted to fulfill the partial requirements for the student investigator’s doctoral degree in Counseling Psychology.  

I will be asked to attend two private interviews with Teresa DiStefano, both lasting from 1–2 hours. I will meet Teresa DiStefano for this interview in a private professional office, at an office provided by my child’s grade school or in my home. The interviews will be spent talking about my experiences and the meanings I have made of those experiences of mothering my first-born adolescent child. One of the conditions of my participation in this study is that I am willing to share these experiences with Teresa. I will also provide demographic information at the beginning of the first interview. The interviews will be audio taped. All of the information collected from me will be kept confidential. An exception to this confidentiality is that Teresa DiStefano is required to report all incidences of child abuse to the State of Michigan Family Independence Agency.  

My real name and that of my adolescent will not be used in any written document associated with the data. I will be mailed a summary of the first interview to review before the second interview. All audiotapes, transcripts of interviews and analyzed data, be it in printed form or in the form of a diskettes, will be secured in a locked file cabinet in the office of the student investigator during data collection and analysis. After that, it will be retained for at least 3 years at the department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology at Western Michigan University in a secure, locked file. If publication of all or portions of the dissertation occurs, data will remain stored in a secure, locked file at the Department of Counselor Education and Counseling Psychology for a period of 7 years after publication, in accordance with American Psychological Association practices. At the conclusion of this time, all data will be destroyed.  

Although not anticipated, one potential risk of my participation in this project is that I may be upset by the content of the interview; however, Teresa DiStefano will provide me with a list of referrals and contact numbers in case I wish to pursue counseling for myself or for my adolescent. I will be responsible for the cost of therapy if I choose to pursue it.
One way in which I may benefit from this activity is having the chance to talk about being a mother, which research suggests is beneficial for individuals who are not often given the opportunity to give voice to their experiences of mothering. Others who share these experiences may benefit from the knowledge that is gained from this research.

I may refuse to participate or discontinue participation at any time during the study without prejudice or penalty, by contacting Teresa DiStefano and letting her know that I no longer wish to continue. If I have any questions or concerns about this study, I may contact either Dr. Mary Anderson at (269) 387-5113 or Teresa DiStefano at (269) 344-4413. I may also contact the chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at (269) 387-8293 or the WMU Vice President for Research at (269) 387-8298 with any concerns that I have.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Participants should not sign or verbally consent to this document if the corner does not have a stamped date and signature.

By signing this consent at the conclusion of the reading of this document, I am indicating that the purpose and conditions of participation in this study have been explained to me and that I agree to participate in said study.
Appendix E

Interview Guide
1. Age
2. Education
3. Occupation
4. Marital/Relationship Status
5. Currently married to adolescent’s father
6. Number of children
7. Age of children
8. Gender of children
9. Where did you grow up?
10. Who parented you? Did you have siblings? How many?
11. Race/Ethnicity
12. Religion
13. How old were you when you had your first child?
14. Is your child adopted, biological? If adopted, how old was your child when you brought him/her home? If biological, what was your delivery like?
15. What made you call? What interests you about this study?
16. Have there been times when you have felt torn in your relationship with your adolescent? How about times when you have been unsure of the best way to handle a difficult situation arising in your relationship with your adolescent?
17. Would you be willing to talk to me about your experiences of mothering – the good and the difficult?
Semistructured Interview Guide

Maternal ambivalence

1. I'd like to know more about why you decided to participate in this study. What made you call when you received my letter?

2. Tell me about being a mother of an adolescent?

3. Is being a mother an important part of who you are? How has that changed with your child's growth into adolescence? What do you make of these changes?

4. What are other important aspects of who you are? Do these complement or conflict with your identity as a mother? What's that like? How do you manage?

5. What is your day-to-day life like as a mother? Has that changed with your child's growth? What's that like for you?

6. Do you ever tire of being a mother? What do you make of that?

7. How has your relationship with your child remained consistent, changed, shifted now that your child is an adolescent?

8. As your relationship changes with your adolescent, are there times you feel out of step or out of balance or confused?

9. Are you discovering new things about yourself or your child? What changes do you see in your son or daughter? What changes are you experiencing about yourself?
10. Do you ever feel you are losing something because of the changes your son or daughter is going through? Do you ever feel as though you have to let go of an old way of relating with your child? What is all this like for you?

11. Tell me about the range of feelings and thoughts you have about mothering your adolescent. What are some of the negative feelings you have about being a mother or towards your adolescent? What's it like to feel this way sometimes?

12. Do these feelings and thoughts ever seem to be in conflict with each other? Do you ever feel torn about how to be a good enough mother?

13. Does it seem that some feelings and thoughts are more culturally/socially acceptable to have than others are? What do you think it means to be a good mother in our society? Does this always match with how you know yourself to be? What do you make of that?

14. Do you think others in your life might not understand some of your feelings or thoughts about mothering? Who in your life do you think would or does judge how you're doing as a mom?

15. Do you ever doubt yourself as a mother? What is that like?

16. As we wrap up, I'd like to know what your hopes and aspirations are for your child? For yourself?
Appendix F

Analytical Summaries
A Summary of Each Mother’s Story

Touchstone and Passionate Freedom

Demographics

Mary is a 41-year-old mother of two children. She has a 14-year-old daughter and a 10-year-old son. She has a master’s degree in organizational psychology and is a middle school teacher. She is married to the adolescent’s father. They have been married for 19 years and it is her only marriage. Mary’s parents divorced when she was an early adolescent. She has lived in the Midwest all her life. Her religious affiliation is protestant and she is currently attending two different churches after recently leaving the church she had been attending.

Adolescent Characterizations

This mother has a sense that her daughter has been easier than most children to raise. She feels she has had to do very little by way of disciplining her daughter and that in some ways her daughter has “raised herself.” The mother says her daughter has a natural tendency to think situations through to their consequences and make good decisions at the front end. This mother feels very lucky it seems and feels as her daughter matures that her role has gone from teaching and instructing, to guiding, to re-direction. Her daughter is now at a phase in her life where the mother thinks re-directing might even seem a “little heavy handed.” This mother believes that not all teenagers would be as easy to mother. She thinks that her daughter is not a typical adolescent. She has made positive life choices and when she has been given limits she has taken them without responding with angry outbursts but instead seems to accept them as legitimate.

The mother believes that with her daughter’s entrance into high school, her daughter’s world expanded greatly. She is now with 9th -12th graders because of some of her activities, her maturity, and her advanced academic placement. Her daughter is also much busier than she used to be and is active in many things. Moreover, as her activity level “skyrocketed” the mother did not know who all the people in her daughter’s life were for the first time in her life.

Although the mother thinks her daughter has good judgment she seems to worry about how strong peer pressure might be for her daughter in this expanded world especially as a 14 year old. The mother seems impressed by how well her daughter seems to know herself. She believes that her daughter has a strong sense of self esteem and that she might make choices based on her own sense of good judgment rather than deferring to her mother’s wishes.
The mother thought that new limits and boundaries needed to be established with her daughter’s entrance into adolescence. She and her husband agreed to the new rules and their daughter seemed to be pretty accepting of these limits. The daughter broke one curfew and had her privilege taken away and the daughter has not broken a curfew since. With the daughter’s maturity the mother has also had to renegotiate censorship. The mother said she had been protective of what music, TV, movies, books, etc. her daughter listened to, watched, and read. At 13 the daughter asked for no more censorship. The mother, after consulting with her husband, agreed and lifted any censorship. The mother believes that this had positive outcomes along with the risks. The positive outcome was that she believes it helped her daughter have more awareness and be an advocate for gay and lesbian people. The risks seemed to be about having her daughter exposed to something that would scare or trouble her.

The adolescent’s appearance changed dramatically when she was in the 7th grade. She went from being more feminine to be more casual and comfortable. She dies her hair, wears unmatched socks, loose fitting comfortable clothes, converse sneakers. This was at a time when the adolescent struggled privately with treatment she was receiving amongst her peers. She did not share this trouble with her mother until the following year. Her mother knew she was troubled but believes that the daughter just couldn’t find the words to articulate the painful experience. The mother believes this experience helped her daughter define the unique person she has become.

**Maternal Reaction**

This mother has a sense of a loss of control over her daughter’s life in large part because her daughter’s world has expanded to include older high school students. Because of her daughter’s activities and precociouslyness she is likely to be hanging out with 16- to 18-year-olds. This mother seems to worry about her 14-year-old daughter being exposed to situations prematurely for her age such as drugs and sexual activity. The daughter’s natural “boundaries were lessened” and “options skyrocketed” which left the mother to figure out new limits to protect her daughter. The mother said that applying limits was hard because she remembered being a teenager and wanting to do all the things her daughter wants to do and that at the same time the mother had a sense that limits needed to be in place or something important would fall apart like family life. The daughter blew one of these limits early on and the mother put in place a year long consequence that prevented her daughter from being in that situation again. A dilemma for this mother seems to be that she has taught her daughter to pay attention to herself and make decisions that are authentic to her. The mother believes that she has done a good job of this and that her daughter makes sound decisions. However, the mother seems to worry that the daughter’s ability to trust herself to make decisions good for her might lead her daughter to make a decision that the mother does not think her ready for. For example, if the daughter believed in her own heart that she was ready for a sexual relationship the mother worries that her daughter would make that decision.
Some of this mother’s worry seems to be related to her own experiences as a teenager. This mother remembers that she too was young for the crowd she hung out with and she remembers things she was exposed to and also remembers that she didn’t always make the best choices. She seems to both know what her daughter is likely to be exposed to and wishes that she could protect her. The mother also seems to be concerned that there are new dangers that she wasn’t exposed to such as more potent illicit drugs. I think this mother also hopes that her daughter is smarter than she was, but the mother seems to acknowledge that her daughter will be tempted.

Another instance when the mother seemed to want to protect the daughter by controlling her exposure was through censorship. This mother censored her daughter’s music, books, etc. When the daughter ordered a CD that was misogynistic, the mother destroyed it. She also worried about her daughter seeing movies with graphic violence because she wanted to protect her from those images. The mother in response to a request from her daughter has decided to end the censorship now that her daughter is an adolescent.

A very different matter of control also had to be managed by this mother and that is organizing and scheduling a very hectic family life. This mother said “control” is a big deal for her and to that end every activity is scheduled, planned, and placed on the family calendar. The participant said she is then able to deal with upcoming events as they occur and she does not worry about those two weeks away.

It seems the hardest thing for this mother to come to terms with is that she “won’t be privy” to everything in her daughter’s life like she once was. It seems that she has enjoyed a strong feeling of knowing her daughter. She described feeling like there was a thickly woven “weaving” between them that was about their knowing of each other. Although the mother has this experience with her daughter, they experienced a time when her daughter was not able or willing to talk to her mother. This mother knew that something was hurting her daughter. It seems like it was very difficult for the mother to witness her daughter’s pain and not be able to know what was going on in her life that had caused the pain. She seemed to wish to be able to do something, say something that would take the daughter’s pain away, but without knowing was at a loss. This mother said it was very difficult to give the daughter “room and space” and she seemed to keep talking to the daughter letting her know that the mother knew something was wrong and remained available. The daughter seemed to acknowledge this but also let her mother know that she had to figure this out on her own. The mother seemed to doubt her mothering at this point too because she figured if she had been a good mother her daughter would come to her with this problem.

Not being privy to everything in her daughter’s life was noted as the biggest loss for this mother. She seems to experience this as a loss of “being included” in the way she has been until now. She has enjoyed being an active and involved mother. She also finds her daughter to be a “really neat” person and likes her daughter’s friends. There

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is some sense of loss of not being able to be a part of all their lives. Although this represents a difficult loss for the mother, she also acknowledged that she will enjoy watching the good choices her daughter makes in life which give the mother a sense of satisfaction that she and her husband have done a good job parenting. This mother seems to feel an incredible sense of pride in some of the decisions her daughter has already made that demonstrated the daughter's sense of integrity. This mother seems to think highly of her daughter as a person and when responding to a question about the range of emotions she feels she commented that the range is not as "wide" as the depth of feeling she has for her daughter. One thing the mother hopes that her daughter will have in her life is "passion" about what she does. I think the mother wonders if her daughter will have this characteristic, which seems very important in the mother's life.

Her daughter's growing maturity has resulted in the mother feeling that her mothering must change. She described it as going from the mother of a child to the mother of a woman. Her role has shifted from being "constant tell, teaching and instructing to doing a little guiding to doing some kind of redirecting things." Even redirecting seems a "little heavy handed" at this point and the mother seems to think her role will be to listen and serve as a guide to her daughter offering clarity to decisions her daughter will ultimately make. The mother's role of offering "information, values, foundation is pretty much over." The mother acknowledges that this feels both "scary" and a "relief" to be at this point in her life as a mother.

This mother feels it is important to use everything you have to the fullest. She has a strong value of following your passion and doing what makes you fulfilled. Mothering is not the only role that is important to her and she feels she is able to pursue multiple activities that she cares about because she has a good support system with extended family. She also thinks she has figured out ways to manage when she feels overwhelmed. The calendar helps her to do one thing and move on to the next. She takes time for herself when she feels she needs it. She is also able to be "content" that she did the very best she knew how to do every day along the way mothering her children and that is what she was "responsible" to do.

This mother used a metaphor of being "the hub" of her family with "spokes" whirling around her. The spokes are her children, husband, work, herself sometimes, and their activities. The wheel turns with centrifugal force and her hope is to hang on and that all the "whirling" has meaning and importance for her family and I think for herself because she credits mothering with making her who she is.

She negotiates with her husband about child rearing issues and believes that he tends to defer to her judgment because she knows her daughter better. She also feels that she has a great support system with family. Work seems to enhance this mother's life. She has competing demands and she says she goes to where the greatest need is. She seems to feel fortunate that she has the support of family so that she can attend to her
career as a teacher. Teaching seems to be an important role for this mother, enhances her life, and makes her feel like she can be a better wife and mother. She feels it is important to follow her priorities and passions and seems to manage her life accordingly.

Second Interview

This mother found the summary of our first interview to be very accurate. She did not disagree with any of the content. Interestingly, she was unsure if I emphasized a topic or if it was more resonant with her. The topic she thought was emphasized was her knowing her daughter and this pleased her. As I reviewed the first summary, I do not believe that I emphasized this idea much at all except to note that the mother felt she had an intuitive knowing of her daughter and that the intuitive knowing had been threatened at one point in time. This might fit somehow with the themes that emerged in the second interview. One theme seemed to be a process note. The mother frequently and repeatedly went from talking about her daughter to telling me how it was for her. The mother feels that they really know each other and this may be about the mother lacking clear differentiation so that she thinks her daughter’s experiences with her own.

Another theme noticed in the second interview had to do with boundaries and freedom in the boundary. During the first interview, I thought the idea of boundaries, limits, and “censorship” was one of the major emphases. During the second interview, the mother seemed to be talking about boundaries and great passionate freedom in between.

She wants her daughter to have the freedom to make life choices. This seems crucial to the mother. She seems to believe that a mother’s responsibility is to not “squelch [their adolescent’s] fire. This mother would rather have her daughter make a bad choice that might have painful consequences than to take the choice away from the daughter. This mother seems to believe that telling the daughter that she can’t choose for herself would harm the daughter’s ability to trust herself and leave her “crippled” irrevocably. A loss of trust in oneself would be far worse than the consequences that might follow a bad decision.

Even if it “goes against [her] biology,” this mother will send her daughter out into the world and will hope to remain available to her. She says, “If you get lost then here I am.” This is not to suggest that the mother does not have things she worries about and wants for her daughter. For example, this mother seems to worry about her daughter becoming sexually active and the mother does not believe the daughter is ready for this. However, she would rather have her daughter make that mistake than for the mother to try to take control of the situation and leave her daughter doubting her own wisdom. She “would rather have [the daughter] make a wrong decision than be incompetent to make decisions.” She wants to provide a “touchstone,” a “center,”
and always be “findable” to her children. This center gets reinvented by the mother and seems to represent change in herself as a mother as well. The mother believes it is absolutely “vital” to remain “findable” to her daughter. She also said this leaves her feeling full rather than emptying as in a sacrifice.

Interestingly, this mother talked about having big dreams when she was growing up that did not pan out. This mother describes herself as loving change and dreading being in a rut, which she seems to find, remarkable given her need to feel “rooted” as well. She seems to want to provide her daughter with this paradoxical condition of pursuing her dreams but never feeling without a “home.”

This mother feels that with her daughter’s maturity it has become more appropriate to share her life experiences with the daughter. She seems to offer these to the daughter in an attempt to show understanding and wisdom. She offers it to the daughter as “this is my experience, but I’m not going to tell you what to do” with your experience. The mother describes this as “stepping back” and she feels she knows when to do this because of how well she knows her daughter.

As she talked about trying to provide this paradoxical context of boundary/structure and freedom, she talked about herself as a girl. She said her father had been her “center” and when her parents divorced when she was an early adolescent, he quit being the center. She noted that her mother was too emotionally fragile to be very available to her. This left her feeling like she had no “family home.” She seems determined to provide this “center” to her children. She feels as though her daughter is “moving out from [her] center.” She also said her father was someone who gave pretty broad boundaries for her to operate within, so much so that he might not have provided much limits at all. She seems to apply this to her mothering where she seems to want to provide enough latitude for her daughter to gain self-confidence and maturity.

Change, in fact, exuberates this mother. She is passionate about her life. It also seems that she feels passionate about her daughter’s life. When her daughter fell in love for the first time, the mother really seemed to experience this as a big moment for her daughter and sort of for her, I think. More than the other mothers she talks about herself and her life. She seems to pursue life’s ambitions without much guilt. She attributes this in part to her children giving her that freedom and the support of her immediate and extended family. It almost seems that change, not being stuck in a rut, passion to pursue life is what she substitutes in place of the loss associated with roots and a family home. This seems related to her ideas about one does not stop something they start something. She believes that a mother needs to have her own life “because if your life is wrapped up in your child and they leave you have a major empty spot and empty spots aren’t very enjoyable to come home to.” As she considered this during the interview, she qualified that she wanted always to be accessible to her children but not necessarily always available.”
This mother describes her mothering work as “hard,” “consistent,” “careful” and “intentional.” She seems to feel like she has done a good job and she finds evidence of this in her daughter’s behavior. She believes that her daughter acts as though she has been “gifted” by her mother. She also feels like it helps to know that she has mothered in ‘good enough’ fashion because she and her daughter have made it through stormy times. Finally, she seems reassured that her relationship will be long lasting because she has this experience in relationship with her own mother.

A Boy Forever

Demographics

Carol is a 44-year-old mother of two sons. Her first-born son is 14 years old. She is a high school graduate and currently works as a bookkeeper. She has been married for 17 years to her sons’ father. This is her only marriage. Her parents are still married and she has two older brothers. She was born in New York, lived there until she was 8 years old, moved to the Midwest until she was 16, moved back to New York and graduated from high school there. She then moved back to the Midwest when she was 20 years old and has lived in the Midwest since. Her religious affiliation is Catholic.

Adolescent Characterizations

Her son has been changing over the past two years. The most significant overt behavioral changes seemed to happen when he was in the 8th grade. Some of the behavioral changes that the participant noticed were that the adolescent seemed to be moving away from her or less close. She felt this way because he ignored her, was more withdrawn, didn’t talk to her as much, and did not want her to touch him. The mother noticed these behaviors especially in public. The adolescent was different at home, but still somewhat aloof. Her son also seemed to communicate a bit more with her husband than her during this time. Sometimes she catches her son in little lies about whether he has done what he has been asked to do. She reported that these behaviors aren’t as marked as they were in 8th grade.

The mother seems to feel that her son is between a boy and a man. Sometimes she worries that he is immature for his age, but mostly seems to think that he is mature enough. The mother does not feel that he should have to grow up quickly and that he should be able to remain a child as long as possible. He still wants to be tucked in at night. And he still needs to be reminded of daily responsibilities such as brushing his teeth, taking his meds, and making his bed.
Maternal Reaction

The changes the mother noticed led to reactions of fear and loss. The mother felt her son “moving away” or “drifting away.” When he ignored her it hurt her and made her feel like she was not important to him. She seemed to worry about a loss of closeness. As the boy matures there seems to be less opportunity to be physically affectionate. As a man, she seems to worry that he may out grow the need for emotional connection or become “out of her reach.” There seems to be some nagging doubt that with time the son might walk away from her. The participant believes that this is a normal fear that mothers have.

The mother hopes that her son can remain a child for as long as possible. She does not want to hurry him through his childhood. As a boy he still wants her to tuck him in and kiss him good night and this brings the mother goodness. She hopes that he will always need her and come to her with problems. She hopes she can “always be his mom.” She hopes for ongoing emotional closeness with her son.

The mother described worrying that her son would be safe. She has less control because she is not with him as much. Her son’s school context has changed and is less familiar to her. She believes the worry is natural and continuous, even though she trusts her son’s judgment. She seems to wonder if she and her husband overprotect her son. She thinks that some others might think so, but she states that she does not care. She feels she can protect him by watching and setting limits. She wants to know where he is at, what he is doing, and whom he is with. She thinks this is a way she can control how quickly he grows up. Her son spends most of his time at home and she thinks she will worry when he is away from home more. She wants to know where he is and forbids him from being some places that she deems risky. She feels she is able to protect him by really watching him and being there.

The participant really felt a need to “back off” when her son was more aloof. She felt that she shouldn’t touch him or speak to him when they were out in public. She felt she needed to give him “space” and “leave him alone.” She was afraid if she “pushed” him he would have just pushed further away. So she “waited.”

The participant expressed some concern that her over protection makes her son less responsible. She sometimes wonders if her son is as mature as he should be for his age. She gets frustrated with him sometimes for needing to be reminded to brush his teeth, shower, etc. She worries that her tendency to do everything for him, prevents him from taking responsibility for these things.

The maternal role involves self-sacrifice and putting on hold other relationships with friends, husband, etc. The maternal role for this mother is prominent. She feels that everyday is about raising her kids; everyday is for them. She explained that the reason she had children was to love them and be totally involved in their lives. Mothering is
the most important aspect of who she is and there are no other important aspects of her self now.

She feels that it is necessary to put the rest of her life on hold right now. Sometimes she tires of this but then reminds herself that her son will be gone in just a few years and she will miss him. She is willing to sacrifice time for herself to be able to be involved with her children. She doesn’t have much time for her during the day and she doesn’t get a lot of sleep. She seems to experience role conflict between work and mothering. She has to work and sometimes she seems to feel guilty that she can’t always be available to her sons. It seems that she has had to let friendships go for now and that she’ll rekindle them or find new ones when her sons are gone. She also thinks her relationship with her husband has to wait too. She figures there will be time for them after the boys leave home. She stated that you can’t have it all and it seems focusing on her son is the most important thing she can do right now. She wants the time she does have to be for her sons. The matter of there not being enough time in the day seems to have worsened since her son has become an adolescent.

Second Interview

This mother seemed especially pleased that I included in the 1st interview summary that mothering is the most important aspect of who she is and that there is “nothing [more] important right now.” She went on to add that this pleased her because “right now I just live for them.” Her work competes with her maternal role because she can’t be at every event in their lives. This bothers her quite a bit and she describes seeing her son’s disappointment at her not attending a basketball game as “[ripping] her heart.” If she had not had children she feels she would be “empty.” She seemed to feel like she did not have someone to depend on when she was growing up and she says she wants her sons to know that she is always there for them.

This mother talked a great deal during the second interview about her wish to keep her adolescent a small boy. She seemed delighted that he once again is asking her to “tuck him into bed” at night. When asked to describe her relationship with her adolescent she said it is “great” now. When asked to explain, she said it is great because he still wants her “mothering.” This pleases her because it means, “he’s still my little boy.”

This mother talked about worries and fears she has about her son maturing. It seems that she believes with his maturing, the world is “scarier.” It seems ironic though that the things this mother worries about seem to have to do with fears a mother would have of a younger child. For example, this mother worries about her son being abducted. She said she didn’t really worry about his future career or his involvement with drugs or sex. She believed these latter things would work out or that he could handle them. The worry and fear almost seem to serve the function of keeping the adolescent a child. She wants to protect and shelter them, even though she says she
over protects and over shelters them. She says her son needs to learn to “stand on his own” and this requires her to let go or back off. She does not seem willing to do the backing off however. She says she “wishes she could keep them little.” This seems to be a very true statement for this mother. Mothering is her identity and she wishes she could continue to mother the little boy forever. This mother seems naïve about how it sounds that she wishes she could keep them little, that she hopes they don’t move too far away, and that she believes they probably won’t go too far from home. It seems like an attempt to deny that her son will eventually grow up. She openly says, “you’ve got to let them have their own life, but it’s scary.” She talks about her mothering as “holding on,” and thinking she “should start backing off a bit.”

The other part of the 1st interview summary that this mother reacted to was the depiction of her son a year ago as more aloof and withdrawn. She thought this was an accurate description, but it seemed remarkable to her to read about it. She said this was a “hard” time for her. She said she worried during this time that her son would not be close to her ever again. She seemed to worry that he would “not like” her or “hate” her. It seemed to represent a threatened loss of the child. She exclaimed at one point “Yikes, my baby.” This seemed to be a literal fear that she would lose the child and all the closeness she felt with the child. Her son’s growing up seems to equate with distance, dislike, and loss for the mother. She does not talk about having a different kind of relationship with a grown son. She talks about wishing he didn’t have to grow up and since he does have to she hopes she won’t lose him. She seems to hope that he will continue to need her. It is interesting that one of the few references to him growing up is that he will return to take care of her when she is old and in need.

Mother or Friend: Retirement Benefits

Demographics

Helen is a 45-year-old mother of four children. She has three daughters ages 15, 14, and 7 and a son age 6. She had two miscarriages between her older and younger children. She has been married to the father of her children for 18 years and this is her only marriage. She has a bachelor’s degree and worked as a recreational therapist before having her first child and is currently a stay at home mother. Her mother and father divorced when she was a year old. Her mother remarried when she was in the third grade and remains married to Helen’s stepfather. Helen has had little contact with her biological father and considers her stepfather to be “dad.” She has a sister and three half-siblings. She was born and raised in the Midwest and her religious affiliation in Christian Reformed.
Adolescent Characterizations

The mother believes that her daughter has matured in the past year or so. She seems to believe that her responsibility to mold her daughter is coming to an end and now the daughter is more on her own to do what is right and wrong. With the daughter's maturity the mother also feels that she can have different kinds of conversations and maybe a different kind of relationship with her daughter, more of a friendship. This concerns the mother though because she wants to maintain her authority in the relationship. On the flip side of this the mother talks about her daughter's movement into adolescence as more conflictual and that they have had times when they couldn't "hear" each other because they both saw a situation in a different way. The mother also feels that her daughter is not very forthcoming about events in her life. The mother seems to wish to be able to know more from the daughter. Her daughter's unwillingness to talk to her about certain matters seems to hurt this mother. The mother, on occasion has read her daughter's personal correspondence because she has had reason to be suspicious or concerned.

Markers of her daughter's maturity are things like her being able to drive and being old enough to be sexually active (not that she is, but that she could be faced with those situations). Because of the many influences in her daughter's life, girlfriends, boyfriend, hormones, mother's availability, maturity level, going to high school, etc., the mother seems to have a hard time knowing what influence might be making her daughter behave in a given way. The mother seems to wish that she could have more of an influence on how her daughter manages these relationships and worries about her daughter's decisions in them.

Maternal Reaction

The mother can identify both things to be gained and things that will be lost as her daughter grows up. The gains seem to be about the change in their relationship and her daughter's living a life and that the mother will be able to share in. She gets excited about these future events. But she also seems to worry that her daughter is heading off into a world where there are unknowns and the mother won't have as much control. This seems to scare the mother. She also seems saddened when she thinks about her daughter growing up and not being around as much. She seems to worry and hope that she has given her daughter what she needs to live a good and decent life and one where she will make good choices so that she won't be hurt too badly in life. This seems to be about the mother moving from the responsibilities of teaching her daughter throughout her life to letting her daughter make her own decisions, even if this means making mistakes. This seems to be an emotional experience for the mother. The mother believes that her daughter will learn from mistakes but just hopes that they are manageable lessons. She also noted that when her daughter suffers because of a life mistake, the mother hurts too. The mother hopes that she will be able to have an adult relationship with her daughter.
This mother seems to doubt and "struggle" most with a tension between pushing too hard and allowing her daughter to make her own mistakes. She doesn't seem to be sure where the difficult line is between telling her daughter what she should do for her own good and giving in to her daughter's will. She seems to wonder if she expects too much of her daughter. The mother notes that "there is no guide book" and sometimes she has to go on her "gut."

She seems to worry about where the line is between being the authority figure and being more like a friend. She feels she needs to continue to be an authority because she has more maturity and wisdom than her daughter. The responsibility for rearing a good daughter is all the more serious because she has a sense that you can't go back for another chance to do it differently. There seems to be a sense of having one chance to mother her good enough and then it's too late. She also seems concerned when the daughter is not forthcoming to the mother about mistakes she has made or about important life situations. The mother wants to be an active and involved part of her daughter's life and is hurt when her daughter is not truthful or disclosing.

Part of the tension seems to be about wanting to be able to continue to influence the daughter's decisions and feeling more and more like that is out of her control. It is more difficult to exert influence in her daughter's life because the daughter doesn't always tell her what is going on. Sometimes the mother feels she has to find out about her daughter's life from reading her daughter's correspondence. She feels guilty about this, but believes she had a responsibility and a right to know what her daughter might be doing. She also seems to feel she is losing influence because it seems harder to know how to get her daughter to "hear" her. They both have their own opinions and the daughter doesn't seem to always appreciate her mother's stance. The mother remembers times like this with her own mother where she didn't think her mother understood her. She seems to wonder about this in her relationship with her adolescent even though she thinks she and her daughter have a more open relationship than she did with her mother. Having an adolescent daughter seems to make this mother more appreciative and understanding of her mother. She has become aware that her mother likely had her own needs too. She also hopes that her daughter and she have a chance to get to the life space that she has with her mother because her relationship with her mother is meaningful to her.

Although she loves her daughter, through the struggles in their relationship the mother has gotten angry with her daughter. This mother honestly acknowledges feeling a range of emotions from finding her to be "the most wonderful person in the world" to "ready to kill her" figuratively speaking. She has also been able to say to the daughter that the daughter's behavior has caused her hurt feelings.

Mothering is an important role for this participant. She said she "always" knew she wanted to have kids. She said she "wanted six kids and a white picket fence." She has always been involved with children from helping to rear her younger siblings to her
professional life to having her own children. She quit working to be a stay at home mother and seems to feel good about this choice. In fact, she describes it as a real choice of what she really wanted to do. Although mothering can “tie” you down and it is a “24/7” job, it is the work she loves to do. This participant may experience some role conflict from having four children with a significant age span between the two sets. She stated that she “can’t be two places at once” and sometimes her schedule can get pretty “wacky.” She seems encouraged that her and her adolescent daughter have some time each day this year for just the two of them. She seems to worry sometimes that her daughter may not always have a chance to talk with her when their family life is hectic.

This participant’s husband helps with child rearing responsibilities but it seems more as a help to her. She seems to be ultimately responsible and feels that she would be ultimately responsible for how her adolescent grows up. She reported a cooperative supporting role by her husband. They seem to negotiate who is going to go to which event and base this on some of their personal interests. This participant feels like her husband is there to support her when she asks and she is glad that he gives her the “freedom” to make most of the family care decisions. She feels very fortunate to have other women to turn to about mothering. She seems to take comfort and support from these women and turns to them when she is unsure of a mothering situation. However, sometimes at least two other mothers seem to have a different relationship with their adolescent children and this seems to make her question her relationship with her daughter.

This participant seems to engage in self-care and apparently values this time very much. She goes on yearly excursions with her sister and her friends. She and her husband vacation without the children. She feels like this is good for her and that she is a better mother when she feels refreshed. She calls her kids while gone but does not seem to feel guilty about spending time away. She also believes that her husband and children have a greater appreciation for her when she returns. She seems to have become aware that her mother likely had similar “needs and desires” but was not able to attend to them the way this participant can. She seems thankful that she has this freedom and is adamant about the value of taking care of her needs as well as her families. This mother feels like she has done a “pretty good job” of mothering. She feels she is an affectionate and fun loving mother. She is active and tries to be involved with each of their lives. She recognizes that she can’t attend everything nor do mothering “perfectly” but feels overall she is doing all right. She seems to have the philosophy of doing the best she can and then going on. She admits not always knowing the best course of action in the moment, but once she handles the situation she tries to move on.
Second Interview

After reading the 1st interview summary this mother felt that her mothering was called into question. It did not make her feel very confident and she said “I wish I felt better, more positive, about this—my mothering skills.” She objected to the word worry because she does not feel she obsesses about mothering. It seems though that the worry might also have made the mother feel like she didn’t know how to be a good mother. She thought the first interview summary made her sound like “not a very good mother.” The participant felt that it read “like a story of her life with her daughter with all the good stuff missing.” This reaction was emotional for the mother and she teared up on several occasions. I asked about the “good stuff” and she seemed to be caught off-guard and after hesitating said she was proud of her daughter. It didn’t seem that she disagreed with the 1st interview summary; she just didn’t like what she read about herself. I think she wished she had been more positive about her daughter and their relationship and that she had been more self-assured in her initial responses.

Even though this mother said that she felt bad that she hadn’t portrayed her daughter more positively, she only said a few positive things about her daughter to counterbalance this. She said that she enjoyed her daughter’s humor, she was proud of her athleticism, and that she teaches her life lessons. This was not the bulk of what she talked about in the second interview but instead she talked about her evaluation of her mothering.

After re-reading the 1st interview and reflecting on the second, I am more surprised by the mother’s reactions to reading the 1st interview. The summary of the first interview does not seem overly harsh or judgmental to me. Nor does the 1st interview summary conflict much with what she continued to talk about in the 2nd interview. During the 2nd interview, this mother continued to talk about the hope that she would have an adult relationship with her daughter one day. However, she was very quick to point out that she still has the “responsibility” for her daughter making right decisions. Even though she believes you “always stress” about your kids, she seems to think the feeling responsible for them will lessen and will allow room for a friendship. In fact, she thinks about her daughter’s maturation and the possibility of an adult friendship with her as “retirement benefits.” Even though this mother says that she loves being a mother, she acknowledges that it is a “tough job.” She may feel as though she has little room to make mistakes. I wonder if the 1st interview summary made her feel that she might not always know the perfect path. She commented quite a lot during the second interview that she knows a mother can’t be perfect and that she is fine with that. She might have protested too much though as she talked at length about maternal self-evaluation.
She also made a comment that she might think her children have expectations of her that she do mothering perfectly. This idea coupled with her feeling worried about her responsibilities might have led this mother to feel judged by the content of the 1st interview summary. She seems to take her responsibilities to mother seriously and those responsibilities include "guiding and leading and directing." She seems to think these activities must come before being friends with your daughter. She also thinks when it comes to the "serious stuff, the nitty gritty" of childrearing it is her job alone. She does acknowledge that there is a "lot of gray area" to do the responsible thing by your children. She believes that her activities mostly, or always, fall in the gray area, which seems to encourage her that no irreparable harm is done. Although she seemed to deny it, I think that this mother does still worry that she is doing her job well. For example, she mentioned that you can’t "measure" the effect on your child of losing your temper. She was the only mother to talk as she did about how helpful it is for her to talk to other mothers. This talk seems to be about seeking "affirmation" of her mothering. She says it makes her feel like she's "not so bad" and others make mistakes too.

Even though this mother said she feels like the overall "big picture" is one where she has done a good job mothering her daughter, she still seemed to worry about what I thought of her mothering. She wondered if I thought she was in the "normal range" or whether I might think she had done a "shitty" job. She seemed to hope that I would "verify" that she has done a good job. The summary of the 1st interview did not seem to represent this verification.

The Broken Egg Syndrome

Demographics

Fran is a 41-year-old mother of a 14-year-old son and a 12-year-old daughter. She is a high school graduate and currently works as a processing manager for a mortgage company. She is married to her children's father and this is her only marriage. She was born and raised in Colorado. Her parents' marriage was apparently conflictual and they divorced after Fran moved out of their home. She has two older sisters. Her religious affiliation is Catholic. Her son attends a Catholic high school.

Adolescent Characterizations

This mother has not noticed much change in her son with his entrance into adolescence. She describes him as becoming a "decent" human being. She seems to believe that he is a very caring, kind, and non-aggressive person. She describes him as being a "mellow" and "lay back" kid. She seems to have anticipated more changes in him than what he has shown. She seems almost surprised that he has not been "stand-offish" with her, doesn't act embarrassed to be with her, and hasn't closed up. In fact, she feels he has made his maturing easy on her by being kind and affectionate when
other kids have behaved differently. She says her son is a homebody and this has helped with the transition too because he is not pushing to go here and there.

In fact, she seems to believe that her son is who he has always been and that she has the same worries now as she did when he entered kindergarten. When asked if he has changed, she talked about when he went into kindergarten and how she worried that he might not fit in and might even get picked on by the other boys. This seems related to the idea that he is so mellow and laid back. She took him to karate so that he could defend himself. She also worried when he began high school that he might not fit in and she worried about his social interactions. She believes he is doing fine socially and she feels good that he comes home happy. However, his academic performance is not consistent and this frustrates the mother. He doesn’t always seem accountable to do work assigned in a timely fashion.

She thinks they are able to have more mature conversations now. She suggested that there are some things that he is not as open about, such as the topic of girls, but all in all she has not experienced a lot of change in their relationship. She has struggled with not being able to know about everything in his life and example of this came up during a discussion about her son visiting the doctor. She was asked to wait in the waiting room. She felt like she had a right to know what they would talk about and had an urge to call the doctor to find out. She also seemed to believe that her son should have a place to be able to ask important questions about drugs and sex without being afraid his mother might find out. She did not call the doctor, but this was a new experience for her that seemed to mark her son’s growing maturity.

Maternal Reactions

I think this mother might struggle with making the “right” decisions in mothering her adolescent. She seems to feel fortunate that her son has been such a “blessing” to her. The positive characteristics the mother assigns to her son seems to help her know she is making good mothering decisions. To help the mother with very difficult decisions, she sometimes defers the ultimate decision to her son, such as the decision to go to high school. He made the decision and the mother has a sense that he will and is making it work. When he comes home happy this helps her know that the right decision was made. Her son is a “good kid” and so she often has evidence that she is making the right decisions on his behalf. When it comes to his becoming an adolescent I think she expected him to behave more antagonistically than he has. She hasn’t had to face many tough interpersonal moments with him because he has been “very gentle” with her by not being the stormier adolescent she might have imagined. On the other hand, he is not consistently a good student and when he fails this seems to make her question herself. She seems to believe that after the decision is made, one can look at “both sides” and know better that the decision was good or bad. Her son’s positive character seems to help the mother know that she is doing her mothering well. In the one area that he doesn’t always do so well, academic
performance, she seems to feel that she must discipline him. She says she is "terrible" at sticking to discipline and this seems to be something she wishes others, including her husband, would help her with. It seems difficult for her because she feels it hurts her worse than it does her son. She wishes to know where the line is between having discipline "kill" the mother and make a point with the child. She seems to feel she has to sacrifice more than her son when she disciplines him.

It seems that she would like to have others try to understand her dilemmas with disciplining her son. She seems to wish that others would endorse her decisions regarding discipline and help her stick to those decisions, but others tend to disappoint her in this regard. This seems to leave the mother with doubting her discipline and on at least one occasion she went against her own better judgment. This mother stated that when there is a fork in the road she will often take the wrong path and this seems to be something she would like to avoid as a mother. She might think the wrong decision will have a long lasting adverse impact on her son. Making the right decision about high school was "torture" for this mother and disciplining her son "kills her." She acknowledges that every difficult decision causes second-guessing because there is no training manual. She noted that a mother always second-guesses herself, everyday. Not until after the decision is made and you see how it turns out can you know that you made the right decision. The importance of making the right decision is that every move you make is "an extension" of you.

One decision that this mother says she would make all over again is the decision to have her two children. Even if she could have escaped some of life's difficulties if she had chosen another path, she says she would do it exactly the same because she adores her children and that they have made it all worth it. In fact she feels like they have been the "payment" for the problems she had while growing up. She seems to have made an effort to provide her children with some things she did not have growing up like close family ties.

This mother very much wants to raise a happy son. She repeatedly mentioned that she wanted to raise a decent human being who was compassionate, kind, and able to achieve his goals. This seems to be above all else. No matter what self-sacrifice it takes, she seems to want to provide him with a life that will make him a happy adult. She seems to believe that she should provide him with a family unit where there are two parents and love between siblings. She readily admitted that providing a good family environment is not always easy, but very much worth the effort if it helps her son have what he needs to be happy. Providing her son with a sense of family gives this mother a sense of self-gratification.

When asked about whether this mother thought she might lose something when her son becomes an adult, she said she doesn't think about that. She seems to try to not think about the future since she doesn't like to think of those things and feels she will probably feel differently then than she does now. She also said she refused to think
about her son not being happy in his life. She says she has never been a planner. She seems to adopt a philosophy in life that life will “just happen” and you have to be “flexible.”

Even though this adolescent seems to remain open with his mother, she seems to worry that she won’t know all that is going on with him. She talked about her son going to see a doctor for a sport’s physical and not liking that she could not know all that was going on in the examining room. This seemed to represent a loss of control over decisions that would affect her son. Likewise, her son’s entrance into high school might have represented a loss of control for this mother too. The decision of where he should go to high school was so difficult in part because she felt like she would no longer know everyone he might associate with. She readily admitted that she has spies and that she would call a stranger if necessary to know something that she felt she needed to know. I think she would like for her son to come to her with questions he has about sex and drugs.

In her son’s grade school she was able to be involved and to know everyone that her son would be involved with. She seems to have the same active approach to home life. She invests herself in domestic responsibilities. When she worked when her children were younger, she felt guilty and worried that she wouldn’t be available to them. She said this was not true though because they were her priority. It was difficult for her to give some of the household chores up when she started working full-time because it felt like a loss of control. She seemed to worry that her family wouldn’t need her as much as they had if they could cook their own meals and if her husband took the children to the doctor, etc. She feels that delegating some of this responsibility has been her “biggest stepping stone” because she had to face the fear and guilt that she wouldn’t be as important to her family. Being dedicated to her marriage and willing to work hard and sacrifice are worth it, in part, because she can give her son a family.

This mother says there are times when she needs “down time” but she tends to feel a little guilty about taking it sometimes. She says mothers in general tend to be self-sacrificing and she uses a “broken egg” metaphor to explain this. This mother will generally take the broken egg and give the unbroken egg to her husband and children. This seems to get tiring sometimes but seems to be the way it is.

Second Interview

The mother found the summary of the 1st interview accurate. However, she seemed to worry that it made her sound “flighty.” An interesting note is that I find this mother to be anything but flighty. She seems very practical and serious about her mothering. She has a no nonsense air to her. So I found it remarkable that she thought the summary made her sound flighty or irresponsible. As we discussed this, the mother’s reactions seemed to be about statements in the summary that she doesn’t think about nor plan
for the future. She said this is generally true. This refusal to worry about the future or predict or prepare may serve a function for this mother. She seems to be someone whom others count on to take care of unpredictable problems in life. She says she is called on at home and at work to be organized and keep things running smoothly. She would rather deal with problems when they come up than delegate them to someone else because it seems she believes that she is more able than others she could turn to. She is organized and responsible.

Another reaction she had to reading the summary was reading that she feels guilty for taking time for herself. The mother thought this was accurate and the mother said she still doesn’t take enough time for herself. I think this might be related to sacrifice, which is discussed later. As the mother talked about taking time for herself by going to the tanner, the conversation quickly flowed into children being kidnapped and left in a car to die. These stories seemed linked to the mother’s story of taking time for herself and I think they underscore a fair amount of guilt for doing so.

A final reaction to reading the first summary was that she was thankful that she was able to talk about her mothering. She said it felt good to talk about being a mother and that it helped her know she was doing okay. I got the feeling that having someone witness her mothering without judgment felt good to this mother and maybe to many of the mothers.

This mother seems to have a bargaining philosophy to mothering. Her bargain seems to be some sort of sacrifice equals blessing. This mother talked about self-sacrifice in both interviews and that sometimes small blessings such as your child thanking you for your efforts or sitting down to dinner together, or big blessings such as having your two children make it all worth the sacrifice. When asked about what she has sacrificed this mother talked about material items, but I think her sense of sacrifice runs deeper than this. She even seems to entertain the notion that her childhood pain was necessary to lead her down the path that resulted in her being a mother to her two children. Even past suffering would be endured all over again if this guaranteed the current blessing of her children. She says she does not feel resentful for making the sacrifices. It seems like the essence of what she is saying if she has to eat a hundred broken eggs so be it because being a mother to her two children is worth it.

Much more light was shed on the importance for this mother of making the right decisions for her son. One idea that she shared was that the right decision should be a reflection or an “extension” of the mother’s values. I think she believes that the mother must walk the talk of her mothering to be influential and respected by her kids (and maybe loved). Another idea about the importance of making the right decision is that she desperately wants her son to know that he matters to her, that he is important. Finally, the decision about which school he should attend really seems to be connected to issues of her childhood.
This mother talked more about her earlier childhood experiences with her parents than during the first interview. She felt quite alone, perhaps abandoned by the time she was her "daughter's age" (12 years old). She believes her parents were too busy hating each other to pay her much attention. Her older sisters had their own life and either left her or found her a bother. She began getting into trouble and her father sent her to three different schools as a form of punishment. She seems to desperately want to spare her children from going down the same path she did nor does she want them to feel like she did. If she is a good enough mother, maybe they won't feel like she did growing up. It seems like mothering may be a loaded proposition for this mother.

She found a military school and threatened her son with sending him there because of his poor academic performance. This surprised me because during the first interview she seemed to deny that she and her son had many confrontational times. She repeatedly described him as a mellow, non-confrontational kid. This was so apparent in the transcript that it lead my chair to wonder if this boy had entered adolescence yet. He may not be openly hostile but he apparently has found a way to exert himself by refusing to do his homework in a consistent way. This seems to make the mother quite frustrated, angry, and overwhelmed. She denied that the military school was a "disciplinary school" but she said she felt sorrow at having to "threaten him" with it. She denies that his irregular school performance reflects on her mothering because she asserts that she has given him the tools to be successful. She also denies that his academic performance is one of the things that "hurts" or makes her feel like a "failure" because he has to take some of the "responsibility." These statements seem to not fit with what the student investigator understood the mother to be saying about this issue. She seems to believe that there must be something she is missing that would influence her son to do his work but she cannot figure it out. She seems to feel guilty that she does not have the answers.

An overarching theme in both interviews was about being responsible for your children and teaching them responsibility for themselves. She stated she has "had to be the responsible person" and she wants to be sure they can be too. This mother talked about loving her son in terms of responsibility. She is responsible to him to be a good mother and make sure he knows he is important. There were/are duties such as keeping them clean when little, feeding them, and making them do their homework that a mother does to be responsible and to show the child they are cared for. She also expressed more direct frustration with him than the other mothers did, but almost completely denied this during the first interview. She can get very frustrated and angry when he fails to respond to her influence. I got the idea that he does this with a quiet sort of determination.
Demographics

Ann is a 45-year-old single mother of a 14-year-old daughter. She divorced her daughter’s father when her daughter was just a baby and has not remarried. The father was not involved with her daughter’s life and died when her daughter was nine years old. Ann attended college for two years but did not graduate. She is currently a manager and buyer for a family owned business. She grew up in the Midwest with her parents and one older brother. Her parents remained married until her father passed away in December 2002. She attended the Congregational church when growing up, but does not attend church on a regular basis now. Her daughter is currently attending a public high school.

Adolescent Characterizations

This mother feels that her relationship with her daughter is different because she has been a single parent, which she believes has lead the daughter to be more self-involved and to sometimes take the mother for granted. The daughter seems to feel that she is on more of an equal footing with her mother because the mother has had to rely on the daughter at times. The mother characterizes her adolescent as argumentative, strong willed, and more emotional as an adolescent. The mother has a sense that her daughter might manipulate her sometimes and wonders if the daughter is bluffing, plotting and planning, and otherwise pushing her mother’s buttons. With the adolescent’s maturity the mother feels like they are “two people sharing an apartment” and she seems to worry that the daughter might not have enough respect for the mother’s judgment.

The mother says that her daughter is a good kid and it seems when it comes right down to it the daughter has not “pushed the envelope” too far. The daughter colors her hair and has multiple ear piercings but this does not seem to bother the mother. The mother describes her daughter as very busy and active socially. In fact, they both seem to lead busy lives. The mother seems to feel more freedom now to go out with friends and have her own plans, even though, she thinks her daughter might resent this sometimes. The mother seems to feel that the daughter wants her mother to be at home if the daughter doesn’t have her own plans, whether they would spend this time together or not. Her daughter is likely to be in her own room watching television or talking on the phone. The mother seems to feel that it is more about the daughter not wanting her mother to have her own identity. The daughter seems to have a circle of friends and a few other adults that she can go to with problems and the mother thinks this is good. The daughter is straightforward with friends and the mother seems to feel that this is a strength of her daughters, as well.
Maternal Reactions

It seems that this mother sees her job as providing care and wishing her daughter and her could have a meaningful life pursuing their own interests. This mother seems to look forward to her daughter finding her “bliss” and living her life so that the mother can get on with her life. She loves her daughter and she does not seem to be wishing the time away. She seems to look forward to both of them living their own lives. This mother seems to caution herself to not look too forward to her daughter growing up because the time will pass quickly. She seems to want to enjoy the time they have now but she does not seem to fear her daughter’s pursuit of her own bliss. In fact, I think she might be relieved. It seems that if her daughter is happy living her life, it frees the mother to be happy to live her life. This mother really seems to hope that her daughter is able to find out who she is and then is able to pursue it. This mother seems to believe it is up to the daughter to figure this out. The mother repeatedly mentioned that she hopes her daughter is able to figure it out or find it out and then has the perseverance to stick with it (“it” being her bliss). I think the mother might know how hard it is to be able to first figure “it” out and second pursue it because she has struggled with this issue in her own life. It seems that a hope this mother has for herself is that she be able to live a meaningful life when the daughter goes off to live hers.

This mother has not seemed to struggle with backing off or letting go of her daughter because she has not felt that she has had to adjust her relationship with her daughter. She stated that they are not “relating particularly different” than they always have. This might be because their relationship has remained more consistent in that they have always been more like friends or roommates than mother/daughter. It may be because adolescent behaviors such as dying her hair orange or multiple ear piercings doesn’t bother the mother. This mother seems to be more concerned that her daughter not get trapped or stuck in a situation where she won’t be able to pursue a complete life. She wants her to consider her choices and not make them impulsively. The mother does not seem to try to control or overly influence these choices but rather seems to take a more “straight forward” approach about discussing the consequences her daughter will deal with if she makes a bad choice.

This mother readily acknowledges that her standard mode of operandi is “confusion.” She said she also seems to start from a guilt position so is prone to second-guessing her mothering decisions. She feels her daughter doesn’t help this much because the daughter has a way of playing into her mother’s guilt. Because the mother feels like she is always wondering if she is “doing okay” it is easy for the daughter to make her question her mothering. The mother feels it is harder to defend herself psychologically against the daughter’s arguments or guilt inducement because she doesn’t have a partner that she could stand with as a unified front. It seems that she is left questioning whether the daughter is just trying to get her way at a particular moment or whether the mother has “missed something.” This is complicated for the mother.
because there is no one to check this out with. Part of the worry it seems, is that this mother feels there is no way of knowing if you have done a good job mothering until “it is all said and done.” The mother seems to have in mind times when she could have done more, but she also seems aware that she did the best she knew how to do. She states sometimes you have to “fly by the seat of your pants” because there is no “rule book.” Love, guilt, joy, and anger are all a part of the picture for this mother.

I thought a lot about this mother providing psychological care to her daughter. She loves her daughter and seems to truly wish that she find her “wings.” The mother wonders if her daughter might harbor difficult issues sometimes. But for the most part this mother does not seem to feel that she needs to be the one the daughter comes to with these issues. She seems willing to hear her daughter’s problems but seems equally okay with her daughter trying to work out difficult feelings with friends or other trusted adults. The mother seems to try to provide space for their relationship by taking her daughter out to eat now and then or inviting her daughter to work along side her. But the mother also has conflicts with available time for her daughter and work. The mother has seemed to find solutions to this dilemma by finding interests for her daughter to pursue such as camp, art, and other social activities. It seems that she wishes not to be taken for granted by her daughter and have her daughter feel that she is the “epicenter” of her mother’s existence. She seems to firmly believe that mother’s need to have their own lives. True to form, this balancing act is not done without some self-doubt. The mother commented that she worries that she might be compensating for the lack of time by trying to provide her daughter with multiple activities.

Work and mothering seem to be two roles that can conflict with each other for this mother. She works long hours and her work is seasonal so when she is busiest, her daughter is not in school. This mother seems to worry that she is there enough for her daughter and her daughter can play on this by telling her mother that she feels like she has raised herself. The mother seems to feel guilty about not being able to provide the kind of home she had as a child where her mother was always home, preparing meals, keeping the house clean, and playing tea party after school, etc. She said this was her image of what she wanted to be able to give her daughter. On the other hand, she doesn’t really believe that she was cut out to be this kind of mother even if her circumstances were different. Given her circumstances of being a single mother she has had to work and mother without support from her daughter’s father. She feels she does the best she can and describes this as often having to “fly by the seat of your pants.” She also seems adamant that a woman should have other life interests beyond being a mother and this seems to be a value that she holds in her life. I don’t know if this value has helped the mother see the value in her daughter having other people who she can go to with problems or if the mother was made to realize that she cannot do and be everything for her daughter. Regardless, this mother seems to value that her daughter has her own support system of friends and other mothers.
This mother has felt judged by others. For example, she has not always felt like she fit in with other parents at her daughter’s school because she is a single mother. She knows that she is not able or maybe willing to live the “white picket fence, white bread, mother didn’t work” lifestyle. She wonders if neighbors might approximate this ideal model of family life, she watches advertisements that depict this model and she is very much aware that those cultural discourses do not fit her experience. I think this makes her wonder if she is mothering good enough or whether she might be failing her daughter.

This mother seemed to put aspects of her life on hold while her daughter was young and is interested in cultivating her life now that the daughter is older. She has ideas and dreams of what she wants to do once her daughter is settled in her life.

**Fantasy or Reality Check**

**Demographics**

Beth is a 34-year-old mother of two. Her son is 14 years old and her daughter is two years old. Beth is about six credit hours from receiving her bachelor’s degree. She currently runs a daycare from her home. Beth is divorced from her son’s father and has remarried. She was a single mother for seven years, but lived with another partner and was engaged to be married to three different men during these seven years. She was divorced from her current husband and has since remarried him. Beth’s parents are still married. She disclosed that her father is a recovering alcoholic. She has three older sisters. She has lived in the Midwest her entire life. Her religious affiliation is Catholic, but she is not very active in the church currently. Her son goes to a public high school.

**Adolescent Characterizations**

The adolescent was diagnosed with ADHD and the hyperactivity has waned since he has entered puberty. He is mischievous now as an adolescent, which seems to be about being a “daredevil” and pushing limits. The participant has the perception that the adolescent is fighting between being a boy and becoming a man. His developing maturity seems to be represented in things like getting a summer job and saving money, graduating from the eighth grade and going to high school, setting goals for buying a car and an interest in girls. There are also times when he responds to her in ways which make her feel like he needs her mothering versus other times when he seems to be less receptive to her. The participant mentioned that her son might be less willing to be with her in public—“it’s not cool to be seen with mom.”
Maternal Reaction

The mother felt like she had smothered her son by doing everything for him. This was attributed to feeling like one of the few things she had control over in her life was her son. Her current husband warned her that she needed to “cut the apron strings” because she was “creating a monster” for the next woman in his life. She feels that her son is now “caught up to where he should be” as far as being self-sufficient.

A struggle for this mother seems to have to do with protecting him from making a mistake with girls and letting him take his hard knocks along the way. She says that fears and worries are greater now that he is an adolescent in high school because of drugs but most specifically it seems that she worries about him being hurt by dating relationships. She has been concerned about the girls he has tended to like so far. She feels she needs to let go and in the long run she will gain a daughter-in-law and other relationships. But she acknowledges this “backing off” is hard and seems to be a struggle for her.

This mother has also tried to protect her son from the affects of not being raised in a “normal” family. She has felt the need to be the mother, father, and best friend. She feels she has overcompensated for her son not having a suitable father. She feels she has had to give 200% to make up for this loss in her son’s life. She also seemed to put her son’s father on a pedestal so that the adolescent would believe his father cared for him. This has become a new worry because the father has reentered her son’s life. She is worried that he will be a bad influence and feels responsible for portraying the father as a responsible, caring man. Dating and his wish to be close to his dad seem to be other markers of his maturation. Both relationships seem to represent a threat to the mother’s relationship status with her son.

The participant reported feeling very distraught when her son graduated from eighth grade. This seemed to mark the passage of time and she thought she only had four more years left with him at home. She felt that from here on he would pull further and further away. This is particularly hard for the mother because of the felt closeness between her and her son. For many years it was only she and her son and through their experiences she feels they have developed a uniquely close mother/son relationship more akin to a best friendship.

She seems unwilling to admit that her relationship will change with her son. She has a superior way of talking about her relationship with her adolescent, as though it is special and set apart from most mothers’ experiences. She seems to feel threatened by other relationships in his life, but believes that they will ultimately decide on a wife for him who will take care of the mother.

This mother believes that her son is struggling between being a boy and a man. Sometimes she sees his friends and him get into little “pickles” or he gets into minor
trouble at school and she gets frustrated with him for behaving more like he is in fourth grade than ninth grade, but she seems to think this is part of the developmental process. She also seems to know that sometimes he feels like a boy and needs her to go into a “mothering mode” with him. At other times he has his own opinions and indicates that he is not going to respond positively to her mothering him. She thinks it is a “struggle” and a “challenge” to always know how to respond. Sometimes she has to remind herself that he’s plenty old enough to make certain choices and she has to back off. The struggle seems to be between knowing when to mother him and when to “let him fly” and be his “own man” with his “own identity” and “personality.” She believes it is very important to listen and try to respect his opinions. Yet, she sometimes worries that she might have “crossed the line” when criticizing his choice in girls. She doubts herself and sometimes finds that she should go back and apologize to her son.

Being a mother has “consumed” this participant’s sense of identity. She said if something happened to one of her children it would strip her of her entire identity. This seems to be related to the feeling that her “whole world revolves around her children.” She seems to be a very active mom and has been Cub Scout leader, soccer coach, taxi driver, etc. Some of these activities she felt she needed to do to make up for the absence of her son’s father. She feels she needs to give 200%, which she attributes to needing to be her son’s mom, dad, and best friend. She believes this is why they are so close. Even though she has many life demands, she always put her kids first. She believes that children are our greatest gifts from God and all that is asked of the parent is to be devoted to the child for 18 years. She apparently believes that you have to do your very best with your children because who they are when they leave your home is a direct reflection on you the parent.

The participant talked about feeling overwhelmed as a mother at times. She talked historically about sometimes wishing she could drink herself to death and she says what she did do to cope was to be an emotional eater. This seemed to be related to being a single mother of a young child, going to school, and working. She found it hard to remember what hat she was wearing at times. She also said that being a mother can still be tiring. She said it is a 24/7 deal and there are times she wishes she could “punch out” for a while. It is hard to be the “100% super woman” all the time making sure the household runs smooth, cooking dinners and running the children to their events. When she tries to make time for herself, she seems to feel guilty for relaxing and will often end up doing for her children or worrying about them. Sometimes she finds it difficult to put the stress of being a mother behind her to go out with her husband. They have tried to schedule date nights every three weeks but sometimes it doesn’t seem worth the effort to even try to take a break or do something for herself because she feels too many demands of motherhood and guilty for relaxing. At times like these she feels overwhelmed and like she has too much going on to enjoy herself and cancels the dates. Parts of this interview led the student
investigator to believe that her complaints were over stated and made with a
demonstrative air.

Being a single mom for part of her son’s life led this mom to have what she feels is a
unique and close relationship with her son. She is very open with him about issues
related to sex. She did this partly because she felt she owed him an explanation about
the men she would date. She was engaged a number of times after divorcing her son’s
father and lived with another man for a while. She seemed ambivalent about the
morality of this and wanted to be open with her son about what she thought was
morally right and wrong. But more importantly it seems that her openness with her
son comes from the fact that it was just the two of them for seven or more years. She
feels that their closeness is because it was the two of them and they became best
friends so that they are very open. She believes that his friends seeking her opinion are
evidence of their unique and superior closeness. Moreover, at 14 her son still tells her
that they will find a wife for him together and that he and his wife will take care of her
in her old age.

Second Interview

This mother felt that the summary of the 1st interview was accurate with the exception
that mothering is not the only source of her identity. She said that if one of her kids
died, her life would go on. She added that she has future plans of returning to school
and pursuing a career in the mortuary science.

It is hard to analyze the content of this interview because of a very strong process
issue. I did not believe most of what this mother said during the second interview. I
felt like she was telling me what she thought I would respond favorably to. She has a
sense of superiority about her that I picked up on during the first interview, but
seemed stronger during the second. When the tape recorder was turned off, she talked
to me as though she and I had similar ideas, sort of a false sense of collegiality. She
also seems to say conflicting things about her intent and her behavior. For example,
she seems quite pleased that her son finds his father “a shitty dad.” During the first
interview she said she had kept his father on a pedestal. She later used her son’s father
as a bad example to influence him to do his schoolwork. Actually, she led the student
investigator to wonder if she, in fact, talks derisively to her son about his father. It
seemed that she would like the student investigator to think that she does not do this.
Her career talk seemed rather grandiose and seemed as though it was meant to
impress me. She was only ½ year away from a bachelor’s degree when she quit. She
repeatedly uses words like priorities, reality and reality check, fantasy, fairy tale, etc.
which lead me to believe that she lives a sort of fantasized and rationalized existence.
Her husband has commented that she needs to “practice what she preaches” which
underscores a feeling that I had throughout the interview that her words were
incongruent with other markers.
She talks about laying down the disciplinary law, but she repeatedly tells stories of not following through with discipline. She said she describes herself as sometimes “tender” and sometimes the “raging bull.” This fits with my sense of passive aggressive behaviors. She repeatedly describes her mothering as superior to other mothers who don’t get it like she does. She summed up her impressions of the first interview summary at the end of the second interview stating, “By reading this I’m thinking damn, you accomplished this and you’re not even—it’s not even a term paper that you’re BS-ing to get on the good side of your professor. This is reality.” Her mothering stories seemed more based on fantasy than reality.

The descriptions of her relationship with her son seemed similar to dynamic processes that occurred during the interview. For example, he likes a girl that this mother considers “trailer park trash.” He tells his mother that he hasn’t been talking to the girl. She finds out that he has indeed been passing notes in school to this girl and is infuriated. She ends the story by seeming pleased that he has been listening to her and that is why he hid this relationship from her. This is quite remarkable given how this mother thinks that she and her son have a uniquely close relationship where he is willing to share with her as he would a friend. A parallel process noticed during the interview was that in similar fashion the mother seemed to present a story that she thought would meet with the student investigators approval, but that seemed glorified.

Even though he is dating someone she refers to as “trailer park trash” she still asserts that he wants her approval and input into the right wife for him. She continues to assert that her son will choose a woman to her liking and that they will take care of her in her old age. Even though she seems to have plenty of evidence to the contrary, this mother continues to assert that her son really wants to please her and wants her opinion and approval.

This mother talked a lot about wanting control of her son. She liked being able to “dictate” to him when he was young and it sounds like she can get quite frustrated when he does not heed her now. She seems at times to treat him in demeaning and belittling ways. At one point she said she didn’t like belittling him but then acknowledged that sometimes she liked to “knock him down to size.” She seems to discipline him in anger and then retracts the punishment. She gets angry, she makes idle threats, and then she takes back the discipline. Her need to feel in control seems strong, as does her apparent need to not limit her son and make him angry with her.

She repeated her thoughts about his being between a boy and a man. It seems that as a man he is “head strong” and turns a “deaf ear” to her, which she stated was like his biological father. When he is a “mama’s boy” then she can revert to her mothering mode and tell him how it is going to be. She says that she wants him to “skin his knees” and learn from his mistakes but this did not seem congruent with other stories she reported. It seemed instead that she wished she could continue to have complete
control over him. Although she repeatedly said that his behavior now is a "reality check" to the idea that she has control, she rationalized choices she did not agree with as his really living within her control and trying to please her. For example, she believes he did “listen and learn” about her feelings towards his girlfriend. The proof of this was that he knew what to say and do to keep her off his back so that he could do what he wanted to do. Another example of this is that she feels he has learned her moral and values about sex since he tells her that he would let a girl have oral sex with him but that he wouldn’t respect her afterwards. There is something that seems incongruent in these statements. They sound like grand rationalizations that might fit with her need to be a superior mother, to be in control, and to be her son’s best friend. She really seems to believe that she can turn off being mom and become his best friend and have different more honest conversations with him about sex. She really seems to believe that he can see her as his best friend and as such is very honest with her. In contradiction to this she acknowledges that he has learned to work her to get what he wants.

She confused me a couple of times during both interviews with her use of pronouns. There are times when she is referring to her son that she uses “I.” At least one time in the interview, I thought she was talking about herself and identity issues but she was referring to her son and his wish for independence.

The summary of this second interview is that I had a strong reaction to this mother and her story. I felt like I was being told what the mother thought I would approve of. She did not seem to hear the apparent incongruencies in her stories though. The interview was over an hour and ¼ long and she did not leave for over another hour after the recorder was turned off. She was assumptive about my thoughts and seemed to want to feel as though she and I thought alike. She seems to feel that she is superior to most mothers. She seemed histrionic, active dependent.

A Cup of Tea and Worry

Demographics

Vivian is a 46-year-old mother of two daughters, ages 14 and 10. She has been married to their father for 18 years and this is her only marriage. She has a Bachelor of Science degree and currently helps manage a family owned business. She grew up in the Midwest with her parents, three sisters and a brother. Her parents are still married. She was raised in the Lutheran church but converted to Catholicism when she married her husband. Her daughter currently attends a parochial high school.

Adolescent Characterizations

This participant seems to believe that her daughter has innate characteristics of being disorganized, naïve, loving, and self-centered. She thinks her self-centered tendencies
come from being naive about what the other might want. Some of her daughter’s
tendencies to be disorganized and to not think about others frustrate the mother. The
mother’s perception that the daughter is naive about others’ motives seems to worry
her. She also believes that her daughter has a tendency to be “impressionable” and this
worries the mother that she could be encouraged to take an unsafe risk or trust an
unsafe situation. The mother has a sense that pressures facing her adolescent are
greater than when she was a girl, which further leads to worry. Even though she
believes these characteristics are innate, she believes that she can teach her daughter
to develop skills to counteract some of these tendencies.

Since her daughter has entered adolescence she spends more time alone in her
bedroom. Her mother believes that her daughter needs this time to sort out events in
her life. The mother thinks her daughter has many more “secrets” now. She thinks the
daughter takes time to figure things out in her own mind before she talks to her
mother. The daughter tends to tell more little lies these days, which also bothers the
mother. Again the mother’s response is to want to teach her a more appropriate
response to questions asked of her.
The mother describes her daughter as “pure love” and very sweet. She acknowledges
that her daughter sometimes upsets her and her husband but she believes that it
bothers the daughter when she does so. The daughter can also be demanding of her
little sister but according to her mother, very loving nonetheless.

The daughter is not happy in her current high school setting and complains to the
mother frequently. The mother seems to understand that the daughter is unhappy and
this seems to cause considerable distress to the mother. On the other hand, she
sometimes thinks that the daughter exaggerates how bad things are to convince her
mother to let her go to public school. The mother seems torn in this situation between
wanting to alleviate her daughter’s distress and her husband’s desire that their
daughter continue at a parochial school. The mother has seemed to worry that her
daughter is happy to stay at home and doesn’t make a lot of effort to do things with
friends. This is beginning to change and the mother seems grateful that her daughter is
making friends and going out a bit more. The mother seems very distressed about her
daughter’s difficulty in making good friends at her current school. She is not able to
understand why it is so and she seems to have a hard time knowing how she can help.
She also believes that her daughter may be preoccupied with an interest in boys and
she worries about this distracting from her schoolwork.

While the mother wants the daughter to have a more active social life, she also seems
to believe that scholastics come before dating and playing. The daughter doesn’t ask
for help when she is having difficulty with her schoolwork and there seem to be more
little white lies that surface. The mother wishes her daughter would ask when she
needs help instead of waiting until the mother finds out.
Maternal Reaction

This mother is aware that her daughter will be leaving home in 3 ½ years and this seems to sadden her and scare her. The fear seems to be about the daughter no longer needing her in the way she does now. The mother says she feels she will have to change in response to her daughter’s growing up. The mother tries to think about the changes she foresees positively as more time for she and her husband to travel. However, she seems to fear that she might wish them away by imagining a happy future when they leave home. For example, a friend of hers complained about her daughter all the time and the daughter didn’t leave on the greatest terms with her mother. This mother does not want to complain because she only has three and a half years left with her daughter at home. She feels confident that her daughters love her and that they will always remain close because their time at home has been so positive. It seems that she prepares for their leaving by taking it “one day at a time.” While they are still home she wants to spend all her time with them. When they leave home, then she will be happy for the time she and her husband have. The idea that she and her husband will have time to travel and spend time together seems to be what her husband tells her she should look forward to. She seems more afraid of what she may lose when her daughters leave home.

As the daughter matures she has become more secretive and withdrawn. The mother thinks her daughter has many secrets and sometimes the daughter tells white lies. The daughter also spends much more time alone in her room and her mother believes she needs this time to reflect and figure out problems in her life. The mother’s response to the secrets and lies seems to be to not ask. She also seems to appreciate her daughter’s desire to be left alone. This mother also encourages the daughter to reach out more to friends. She understands that the daughter must “go on” and seems to want to facilitate this process by teaching her daughter.

The mother seems concerned about letting the daughter go too far on her own. She seems to want to try to let her daughter make her own way but wants to be able to step in to get her back on the right path when necessary. One of the contexts that seem to be hard for the mother to navigate is her daughter’s education. She said that she “cut her off” and then decided she couldn’t “let her go.” She told her daughter that she would not be as available to help with schoolwork when the daughter started high school. The mother said she wanted to see if she could grow. The daughter began getting in trouble academically and this mother felt a strong need to get back involved. She said she just couldn’t “let her go.” She has received criticism for this from a teacher, but she seems to try to do what she feels her daughter needs. The teacher told her that she needed to let her daughter “stand on her own” and the mother said she wanted to be able to do that but not if that meant her daughter’s failure. One of her hopes for her daughter is that she be self-sufficient.
Although this mother says that she has to do what she believes to be right, she seems to worry about her daughter and is unsure about how to help her daughter at times. On the one hand she says she believes her daughter is very unhappy at school. The mother worries about her academic performance, her social relationships, and her overall happiness. On the other hand she thinks her daughter might exaggerate her misery at times. This leaves the mother doubting how bad things really are. I think the mother might also wonder about her reactions to her stories. Should she be more pragmatic like her husband or should she trust her heart. She seems to struggle with listening to her own “voice” or that of a dominant other. Her husband can rationally talk about situations bothering their daughter and his ideas seem to have more legitimacy to her. On the other hand, she is aware that he is not as close to the girls as she is and she feels she understands their daughter better. It seems to leave her with a dilemma of not knowing how to help her daughter during a difficult time. She seems to try to do what she has to do, or what she believes she should do, even when her heart might be telling her something different.

The mother wishes she could pick her daughter’s friends but she knows she can’t. She says not being able to pick her daughter’s friends or fight her battles for her leads the mother to worry and feel anxious. She seems to try to take an educational approach to helping her daughter with life dilemmas. She tries to teach her good study habits or organizational skills. Her husband is going to try to teach her how to accept friends during an upcoming trip. She tries to instruct her daughter on being more considerate of others and teach her empathy skills.

This mother became emotional around two issues. One is that she is worried about her daughter’s happiness and seems to feel pulled by her daughter’s stories to help. She attributed a recent late night to being unable to sleep because of the worry. Her daughter comes to her with her complaints because the mother understands. Yet it is the daughter’s father that feels strongly about her staying in her current school. The mother finds his advice helpful in alleviating her anxiety but she seems to wish that the daughter would take some of her complaints to him. She believes that mothers and fathers see things from very different perspectives and that he might not understand his daughter as she does.

Another emotional issue for this mother seems to be the unfulfillment of a wish to have her mothering efforts acknowledged by her daughter. Although she doesn’t believe it is in her daughter’s nature, she would be gratified to have her daughter simply offer her a cup of tea as thanks.

The mother perceives a change in her because of mothering. She cries now as a mother but never experienced herself as a “crier” when younger. She seems perplexed by this. She also mentioned that she would face change in herself when her daughter leaves home.
Mothering has to do with unconditional love for this mother. She sees her daughter as “pure love” and the mother’s actions are a matter of total love. She has a sense that this love will be everlasting. She wants to make memories with them and “never is it for any reason but love.” Vivian identified competing demands between mothering, working, and finding opportunities for her physical fitness. She said that when she faces competing demands she gives them all up for her children.

Second Interview

This mother thought the summary of the first interview was very accurate. She seemed a little bothered that she read that she was a “fixer” but said this depiction is true of her. So even though she wished that some of what was written wasn’t true, she believed it was an accurate depiction.

The daughter making her mother tea was brought up again. This seems to metaphorically be about the mother’s wish to have her daughter know and attend to her needs. It seems that she would like the daughter to make tea for her out of love, but the daughter still seems to experience the making of tea as “work.” Although this mother denied expecting anything from her daughter, her stories depict a different story. It seems very apparent that she wants her daughter to notice her efforts, be thankful, and repay in kind. This does not seem to be in an imbalanced way but seems notable because of the mother’s idealization of doing everything out of pure love and her declaration that she expects nothing in return for her mothering devotion (1st interview).

The mother acknowledged that she’ll always “need” her daughters but thinks she will have to be “careful not to need them too much.” Instead she feels she should wish for “them to be happy.” She acknowledged more complaints about her daughter in this interview. The daughter had “scammed” her about being sick one day and staying home from school. The mother acknowledged that she was upset about this and referred to her daughter as a “little butt person.” Due to her daughter’s recent behavior, she said she could let her daughter go this week but said she would probably grab her back as she walked through the door. Nonetheless, she feels one chooses to have children and that that choice means that there should be no complaints and that her children are “absolutely no burden.”

During the second interview, this mother talked much about worry. Worry was the largest topic of discussion during the interview and it resurfaced throughout the interview. Although she says it is not her daughter’s fault, it seems that she feels she has to worry about her daughter because the daughter is so naïve. She seems to feel that she worries more than most. She feels it is wrong to worry and her husband and her God tell her she shouldn’t worry so much. She attributes physical pain to carrying the worry. She believes if she would not have had children she would not have had to face her worries. She believes that she is a worrier by nature but stated that she
“wouldn’t have to show it if she didn’t have children so it would never come up.” She maintains that one should not complain about having children because it is the mother’s choice to have them, but she did acknowledge that she wished she would have been prepared for how much she would worry. She says the “burden” of worry is “worth every bit because I have her.” She worries everyday and thinks she probably will forever. When asked what it is she worries about she responded that she worries about her daughter’s safety and she seems to scare herself by watching depictions of violence on TV. The worry really does seem to be irrational. She asks herself what it is she worries about. The more rational worries about her daughter making friends etc. she says she believes will be okay.

This mother’s characterizations of her daughter continued to be that her daughter is naïve and disorganized. This characterization intensifies the mother’s worry for her daughter. It also means that the daughter continues to need her whether the daughter acknowledges this or not. It also seems to give the father a more legitimate stance. If the daughter is naïve, disorganized, and exaggerating of her experiences and the mother worries too much, the father is in the position to have his decisions carry the most weight. During the first interview this mother idealized her daughter and family life. During the first interview, she talked about being the fixer. During the second interview she talked more about her daughter having to deal with consequences and some of the harsh realities of life. She feels she needs to teach her daughter to live with this fact and take responsibility for herself. This change seems to have taken place because she got involved with the school and saw that the school was a good place for her daughter. More importantly, it seems that her husband had convinced her that their daughter’s classmates were a great bunch of kids who really wanted to be their daughter’s friends. This seems to endorse the husband’s ideas that the daughter exaggerates and needs to try harder. This seems to settle the mother’s worries and feelings that she needs to fix something. The mother believes that her worries are extreme and that she shouldn’t worry and this too seems to give the husband’s opinion more sway because she finds him so much more rational.

This mother notices a difference between herself and her husband as parents. Consistent with the first interview this mother thinks her husband is less emotionally involved and more rational. She expanded this by saying he is “a lot stricter” and “his feelings don’t get involved with the situation.” She contrasts herself to this and says she takes her daughter’s feelings into account and worries about upsetting her daughter. Her daughter talks to her about her father being “mean.” This mother says she is more able to understand that her daughter has times of disagreement with her parents and this is part of the age where her husband apparently gets angry with their daughter. One question this mother had at the end of second interview was whether other parents were “more firm” with the children than she was.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


