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Author(s): Jessica L. Collett

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# What Kind of Mother Am I? Impression Management and the Social Construction of Motherhood

Jessica L. Collett

*University of Arizona*

*Previous research has examined the use of others as props for impression management (e.g., presidents' use of first ladies), but has left many areas underexplored, including the role of nonadults as important associates. This article focuses on the unacknowledged role of children's appearances in the maintenance of identities and management of impressions for their mothers. Using both participant observation of a playgroup and interviews with mothers of young children, the research described here investigates what these mothers think about children's clothing, mothers' concerns about when—and with whom—to manage impressions, and the impressions these women hope they portray through the physical appearance of their children. In addition to providing insight about these phenomena, the article also discusses responses surrounding the importance of first impressions, differences in meanings attached to children's spoiled appearances, and the sacrifices made in motherhood. Results show that women do use well-dressed and groomed children to enact and confirm identities as "good mothers" and to protect and enhance their own self-concepts during the course of everyday social interaction.*

A running joke among parents is that, although one needs to take lessons and pass a test to demonstrate driving ability and earn a driver's license, anyone can walk into a hospital, give birth, and walk out with a baby. There are no mandatory tests and no licenses required to parent. It may not be much like becoming a driver, but taking on the role of mother is much like adopting other roles. Individuals are not told in full detail how to play the part or what conduct is required; rather, they are given a "few cues, hints, and stage directions" (Goffman 1959:72) and it is assumed that they have been involved in enough interactions and accumulated sufficient previous information that they can effectively adopt and sustain the new status. An important part of implementing this social identity and maintaining it is looking and acting the part.

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Direct all correspondence to Jessica L. Collett, Department of Sociology, University of Arizona, P.O. Box 210027, Tucson, AZ 85721-0027; e-mail: jcollett@u.arizona.edu.

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The research described here is a preliminary study of how mothers say they confirm their own identities as well as shape the impressions others have of them through the management of their children's appearances. Two literatures are of particular interest. The first emphasizes appearance as a way to signify membership in a particular social group (Cahill 1989; Goffman 1959; Hunt and Miller 1997; Tseëlon 1992). The second examines the use of others as props or associates for impression management (Andrews and Kacmar 2001; Cialdini, Finch and De Nicholas 1990; Gillespie 1980; Sarmicanic 2003; Tardy 2000).

Through interviews with sixteen mothers of preschool-age children and participant observation of a playgroup they belong to, I explore what these mothers think about—and how they talk about—their children's appearances. Before delving into my methods and results, I address motherhood and its unique nature as both a personal and social identity and outline recent research on the changing conceptions of motherhood (e.g., Douglas and Michaels 2004; Hays 1996). In addition, I conceptualize a definition of impression management and differentiate between direct and indirect self-presentation tactics (Brown, Collins, and Schmidt 1988). Finally, I discuss the role of children and why, as incomplete and open persons (Goffman 1963), they are particularly suitable for use as impression management props.

## MOTHERHOOD

Parenthood begins with a biographical incident, whether conceiving, giving birth to, or adopting, a child. However, as Snow and Anderson suggest, these experiences “influence, but do not fully determine the construction or assertion of . . . personal identities” (1987:1347). Personal identities are self-designations that arise in the course of interaction, not material things one possesses and displays. In other words, a woman may become a mother by giving birth, but she truly takes on a mother identity by playing a socially defined, publicly visible role.

This article focuses on mothers and, as a result, on women. Although fathers increasingly shoulder responsibility for some household labor, in most cultures mothers are held accountable for the care and emotional development of their children (Hays 1996). I assert that today's fathers are able to focus on their career first and their role as father second, for the first is directly supporting the latter—sometimes financially, but undoubtedly ideologically (Eyer 1996). Although fathers are quite important for the success or failure of their children, mothers are seen as ultimately responsible for the way their children turn out (McMahon 1995; Phoenix and Woollett 1991).

The view of mothers as “little more than architects of the perfect child” (Eyer 1996:6) has important implications for mothers' self-concepts. Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) assert that central to self-concept development are issues of autonomy and efficacy. Autonomy refers to the ability to choose one's own course of action, and efficacy to the belief in self-as-cause (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983:81). All mothers, the media would like us to believe, are autonomous and efficacious in the sense that

they make choices regarding how to parent and that their children are the product of such choices. It is important to realize, however, that autonomy and efficacy, particularly in motherhood, are disproportionately luxuries of the middle and upper classes. In her research on intensive mothering—giving unselfishly one's time, money, and love to one's children—Hays (1996) finds that social class is key. While mothers of all statuses and occupations believe that child-rearing is intensive and should be child-centered, adequate financial resources offer women time and opportunity to provide children with what they think children desire or what experts tell them children might need.

In *The Mommy Myth*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels (2004) describe “The New Momism” that insists that “to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children” and enjoy every minute of it (Douglas and Michaels 2004:4). This myth is perpetuated by parenting books, magazines, value-based marketing, and the media coverage of celebrity mothers. The authors assert that “The New Momism” is an equal opportunity oppressor, affecting both stay-at-home and working mothers (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Working mothers, portrayed by the media and experts as neglectful and a threat to their children's emotional development, are desperate to show that they can be supermoms, managing to work as well as raise happy, healthy children and maintaining a blissful marriage (Eyer 1996; Hays 1996). Mothers who stay home with their children face challenges too. The intensive mothering idealized today further strengthens the centrality of the mother role and identity (Hays 1996). As women lose their personal identities and motherhood monopolizes their time, they predominantly derive their sense of meaning and purpose from their children and their role as mothers (Boulton 1983).

Considering the emphasis placed on success in motherhood, it is not surprising that being perceived as a good mother is a central identity issue for many women. While social identities are inherently defined by roles and relationships, the identity of mother is distinctive. Being someone's mother is not enough. A mother's success is measured by her child's life and achievement. As the tangible results of her endeavors, a woman's children are on stage and their goodness and success are “the results of her maternal instincts, her worth as a human being” (Tardy 2000:444). One way of “dealing with this evaluation apprehension and generating the self-confidence needed to face stressful situations” is a conscious attention to appearance (Tseëlon 1992:510). Impression management helps women convey competence to both self and audience in a situation where they want nothing more than to be successful.

## IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Selective self-presentation, or impression management, means “accentuating certain facts and concealing others” (Goffman 1959:65). While Goffman (1959:255) asserts that the main goal of self-presentation is to help maintain a single definition of

the situation and ensure smooth interaction, his own research and that of others shows that impression management serves other purposes as well. Impression management is related to self-concept (Gecas 1982), self-esteem (Brown, Collins, and Schmidt 1988), efficacy, mood, and self-beliefs (McKillop, Berzonsky, and Schlenker 1992). Research suggests that individuals manage impressions in an attempt to “construct more beneficial, less threatening, surroundings” (Schlenker and Weigold 1992:134) and to highlight facts about themselves that might otherwise not become apparent in the short interactions in which they normally engage (Goffman 1959:30).

Although Goffman (1959) states that self-presentation is important for gaining approval and achieving positive outcomes in life, he does not consider impression management manipulative in a negative sense. Quoting Park (1950:249), Goffman suggests that our mask, or our “given” impression, represents the way that we conceive of ourselves and the role we are striving to enact (Goffman 1959:19). Self-presentation offers women with children the opportunity to appear as the mothers they would like to be, the ideal toward which they aspire. Impression management also gives mothers an opportunity to demonstrate role embracement—to declare attachment to the role, to demonstrate the qualities and capacity they have for performing it, and to be actively engaged or involved in appropriate role activities (Goffman 1961b:106; McKillop, Berzonsky, and Schlenker 1992).

When an individual views an identity as central, he or she is likely to engage in behavior that reinforces that identity to self and others (Snow and Anderson 1987). Types of identity work include: “Procurement or arrangement of physical settings and props” (mothers may convert their formal dining rooms into playrooms for the children); “cosmetic face work or the arrangement of personal appearances” (mothers may purchase clothes befitting the role, whether the concern is comfort or modesty); “selective association with other individuals and groups” (mothers may belong to playgroups or ‘Mommy and Me’ clubs); and “verbal construction and assertion of personal identities” (mothers will often speak of themselves as a mother and accept opportunities to relay that information) (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348).

Mothers use countless other self-presentation tactics to claim their identities. A woman who has yet to regain her prepregnancy figure may disclose to a stranger that she just had a baby, or a woman might explain that the bags under her eyes are from staying up all night caring for her infant (Balswick and Balkwell 1977). As a form of ingratiation, a woman may conform to the opinions of other mothers in a playgroup. She also may use self-enhancement to advertise her strengths and admirable qualities, emphasizing her calm demeanor or discussing how she labored without the use of an epidural (e.g., Jones 1964). When someone uses tactics to place others in a role, it is commonly referred to as altercasting (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963). Mothers are constantly casting the roles of their children (Cahill 1989). Throughout the toddler years, children are reminded that they are big boys and girls, not babies, because this is how the children’s mothers want them to behave. Finally, mothers also manage their and their children’s appearances (Goffman

1959). Appearances can be anything an onlooker can observe—clothing, grooming, habits, surroundings, props, and verbal or nonverbal actions. Managing the motherly appearance might dictate carrying a diaper bag rather than a purse or trading in a sedan for a minivan.

Most impression management literature, like that cited above, focuses on the way actors manage the impressions others have of them by directly altering their own behavior. However, “indirect” self-presentation involves individuals’ use of associates for their own benefit (Brown, Collins, and Schmidt 1988; Cialdini, Finch, and De Nicholas 1990). In an interesting application of Goffman’s ideas, Gillespie (1980) examines the role of first ladies in their husbands’ political self-presentation and suggests that the politician surrounds himself with symbols to suggest certain “necessary, yet intangible traits” (111). Individuals’ use of associates as tools for impression management is an understudied phenomenon, but it has surfaced in the literature before (Andrews and Kacmar 2001; Cialdini, Finch, and De Nicholas 1990; Sarmicanic 2003; Tardy 2000).

## THE ROLE OF CHILDREN

At times a child is a prop, only there for display, just one part of a mother’s appearance. Young children are particularly well suited as props for two reasons. The first is that they are not complete persons and therefore not complete distractions (Goffman 1963:74). Goffman argues that even while involved in another conversation, an individual can engage a child without any negative sanctions. For instance, a woman may tend to her child while she is talking with a friend, without taking away from the intimacy of the conversation between the two adults. Second, young children are “open persons” (Goffman 1963:126). These exposed individuals can be approached or engaged at any time. Adults, normally bound by rules of public behavior, including only glancing at strangers, are permitted to openly stare at a young child (Goffman 1963). This treatment makes young children more comparable to objects than to other individuals.

However, at other times, the child is an associate. Although the child is an individual in his or her own right, the mother can bask in the child’s behavior as it is considered a reflection of the mother herself and subsequently a part of the mother’s own self-presentation.<sup>1</sup> As children grow older, they become more individual in their actions and accomplish feats all their own. Because there is a tendency to “judge the individual socially by the company he is seen in,” these children’s actions and accomplishments influence outsiders’ perceptions of the adults associated with them (Goffman 1963:104). Showing how this can be taken to an extreme, McMahon (1995) asserts that, over time, the moral worth of mothers has been replaced by the social worth of children, and motherhood retains its worth only through its connection to treasured children (McMahon 1995:190). The child is all that is left to value of a mother.

As props or associates, children are a vital tool for parents’ self-presentation and

identity work. The present article investigates how women say they use their children to exert control over social situations and subsequently confirm salient identities and enhance self-concepts (Gecas 1982). Specifically, I address how mothers say they manage the appearances of their children and how they use these appearances to establish identities as mothers and to verify their identities as “good mothers.”

## METHODS AND DATA

For the purpose of this research, I collected data through both participant observation of an online playgroup and interviews with a subset of the playgroup’s members.<sup>2</sup> Before proceeding, and particularly because it is such an unusual forum, it is important to explain what an online playgroup is, why an individual would join one, and how the discussion and interaction take place there.

According to ParentsPlace.com, an online playgroup is a message board and chat room where “parents can share their ups and downs, feelings, and ideas. ParentsPlace is about community, support, friendship, and encouragement” (<http://www.parentsplace.com/>). In these types of message boards, most of the posts are followed up with a response, and followed by a response to that response, and then another, so that the thread goes on and on (Moore 1995). This type of exchange facilitates the sharing of information while also blurring the distinctions between past, present, and future (Barnes 2001). The posts feel less like asynchronous communication and more like an ongoing dialogue.

For some mothers, these playgroups are ideal in many ways. Participants can log on from anywhere, provided they have computer access. Some log on from work, others from home, and some even post once a week from the library. Parents who live in rural areas with no local playgroups nearby are able to communicate with other parents. City-dwellers lacking ties to neighbors or a traditional type of community are able to connect in virtual space and time. Because the dialogue is ongoing, with posts and responses constantly available, individuals can easily join the conversation at any time. Although mothers have busy lives that make it difficult to nail down an hour or two each week to meet with a “real” playgroup, this forum enables them to exchange stories, advice, or recipes with other mothers.

### “Real Moms”

“Real Moms,” the virtual community that I chose to examine in this project, is an online playgroup for parents with children born in the same month of 1999, a group I have been a member of for five years.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the women have been involved in the group since their pregnancies and, over time, have come to know each other intimately.<sup>4</sup> Because of this history and intimacy, I feel quite confident that most women are accurately representing themselves. This is not to say that there is not self-presentation and impression management occurring online, but I assert that these would occur, to a similar degree, in a playgroup that meets in person.



The women in the online playgroup are well aware that they will be judged as the persons they appear to be and actively choose what to post. Mothers face numerous dilemmas in child-rearing, including the guilt and blame associated with raising a “bad” child. As a result, it is often difficult for mothers to open up to other women about their problems with motherhood because their “confessions” might suggest they lack a maternal instinct or that they are somehow failing as mothers (Hays 1996; Tardy 2000). Nevertheless, as in a “real” playgroup, the online playgroup is a support system (Tardy 2000). These women also share stories about the follies and foibles of their lives as mothers and convey their self-perceived shortcomings in their other roles. They vent frustration, ask for advice, and share embarrassing stories.

In addition to my familiarity with the group, I also chose this forum for its diversity. In contrast to the local playgroups I have observed or participated in, this online group is less homogeneous with regard to marital and work status and social class. While many “real” playgroups comprise women who live in the same neighborhoods and have similar work hours or stay-at-home arrangements, the internet group provides much more variety. Women in this group come from very different socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, of the thirty-five active members, two women live in trailers, eight rent apartments or small houses, and twenty-five own single-family homes. These dwellings range in size and are located in both rural and urban areas. Twelve of the active members have college degrees, two more members are a few courses short of their bachelor’s degrees, and two hold vocational degrees—one in nursing, the other from a secretarial school. Ten of the remaining members have high school diplomas and the nine other women started college but never finished. Eighteen of the women are employed full-time, five hold part-time jobs, two work at home earning money by offering home day care, and the remaining ten are stay-at-home mothers. Twenty-eight of the members are married, one is separated, and five are divorced. Two of the divorced women are currently cohabiting with new partners. The remaining member is a lesbian who lives with her partner of eight years. The household incomes range from just under \$20,000 a year to more than \$125,000.

In December 2002, I posted a message recruiting volunteers to participate in a research interview. Seventeen women expressed interest and I posted a series of questions for members to answer one of two ways.<sup>5</sup> To enable mothers to broach taboo topics in this research, I gave them the option of either responding to the survey at the playgroup’s site, where anyone could see their survey replies and respond to them, or responding using e-mail, where the survey took the form of a private conversation between me and the respondent.<sup>6</sup> Seven women chose e-mail and ten chose to post on the site message board. While there were no distinct differences in the answers these women gave, the women who chose to e-mail tended to post less often in general and therefore may have been more uncomfortable with that communication style. The women who participated in the interviews were representative of the group members as a whole.<sup>7</sup> The common characteristic that the women



share is having a child, born in the fall of 1999, living at home. At the time of the interviews, these children had just turned three.<sup>8</sup> The women's other children ranged in age from newborn to eighteen years old. The interviews are supplemented with information gleaned through participant observation on the board.

Although I originally intended to research designer labels and the branding of children, other categories and their properties became evident as I critically read and coded the data I had collected (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Impression management and identity emerged as the core conceptual categories. I reviewed the data bearing in mind Goffman's research, impression management, and identity work; as I did, the relation between a child's appearance and a mother's self-presentation became clear, as did their connection to the mother's identity and attributions made about other mothers. I found the idea of children as props or associates for their mother's self-presentation and the importance of children's appearances for women's identities as "good" mothers clearly evident in the interviews, validating the theoretical approach to the data.

I also drew from critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2000) in analyzing the interviews. I considered how social structure (the respondents' roles as mothers and class positions) and culture (rules and norms of socially acceptable behavior for mothers) shaped and constrained the discourse they used and how discourse outside of the interviews (images, advertisements, parenting books, interactions, and so forth) shape and constrain these women's identities, relationships, and systems of knowledge and beliefs (Fairclough 2000).

In the interviews with the women, I asked specific questions about children's clothing, the management of appearances in public and private spheres, and the impressions women believe they portray through the physical appearance of their children.<sup>9</sup> The questions elicited, in addition to insights about these ideas, responses about cleanliness, sacrifices made in motherhood, and the importance of first impressions. I will address each of these subjects in turn.

## CHILDREN AS PROPS: STRATEGIES OF IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

### Name-Brand Babies

Designer clothing for youth is a booming industry (Mintel International Group Limited 2003). The last decade has seen, in addition to specialty boutiques for children, traditionally adult clothing lines such as The Gap®, Guess?®, and Tommy Hilfiger® branch out and create markets specifically targeting youth, particularly infants and toddlers. A marketing research group reports:

An increase in wealth fueled by a decade of economic growth from 1990 to mid-2000 together with a near record number of kids born during the Echo Boom has enabled brand-aware, affluent parents to create expensively dressed "mini-me's." This has been a boon for high-end retailers, and specialty stores which introduced new or expanded children's clothing lines. (Mintel International Group Limited 2003)

According to Zukin (2004), branding an item is a way to get consumers to accept new products. Mothers' brand awareness and loyalty are evident in my interviews. For instance, Ginger<sup>10</sup> admits it makes her feel better about life in general to buy the name-brand clothing for her children that once made her think she "had it going on." Perhaps as a result of the pressures they faced as young adults and their knowledge of the importance of fashion in peer cultures, today's mothers are well versed in designer fashion and cognizant of what brands their children are wearing.

The overwhelming majority of the women I interviewed had at least some name-brand clothing hanging in their children's closets. Many of the mothers cite quality of the clothing as the impetus behind purchasing the more expensive labels.<sup>11</sup> Tess, a stay-at-home mother of one who says that she typically wears Gap® clothes herself, said "[Designer labels] have durability and will stay like new through several wash-wears. They fit fairly true to size, and they seem to be very comfortable." Like many others, she believes that the association with the brand name is an indication of quality and the price is a reflection of the value of the product (Zukin 2004). Julia, an engineer with three children, one a teenage boy, said, "I will always choose clothing that I have found to be high quality made . . . Generally I go for a traditional classic look, so styles that carry those colors and fits are what I buy." The classic look Julia mentions is a byproduct of branding. According to Zukin (2004:209), the strategy of branding children's clothing has made shopping more predictable for shoppers and has enhanced brand identity.

Despite the popularity of many of these designer chains, women continue to shop at specialty boutiques for high-priced children's wear. In describing a dress that she bought for her daughter's two-year portraits, Julia said, "What could be cuter? It costs ten times more than a Wal-Mart dress but hey, it's priceless, she can wear it for months, and her children can wear it!" Despite the fact that there are few other functions where her daughter's dress would be practical and two-year-olds outgrow clothing quickly, Julia draws on language one might hear in an adult boutique as reasoning for the expensive purchase—the dress is priceless in that it has longevity; it is beautiful, classic, and well made.

The media garners significant influence in "The New Momism," and women are continuously exposed not only to the brands but to the status and identities affiliated with them (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Zukin 2004). Because they realize the value of these labels, the mothers ensure that the designer and name-brand clothes are available for certain occasions, even if this means picking them up at a second-hand store, buying them on eBay, or stocking up at an annual sale. Similar to Goffman's (1959:37) account of the Scottish landowner who normally lived quite frugally but would rise to the occasion when entertaining important visitors, individuals with money concerns limit buying designer brands to special occasions such as for holidays and when photographs are to be taken, occasions when they are certain the children will be on display for an important audience. Janice, who worked part-time in advertising and with her husband was in the process of buying their first home, saved her daughter's "designer and brand name clothes for 'nicer' occasions"

including “parties, social functions, and so forth.” Sabrina is a licensed nurse practitioner who has struggled financially since marrying her high school sweetheart. Although she was “not really concerned with what name is on the tag . . . only what [she] can afford,” Sabrina dressed her son in three-piece suits for church every week.

### Public and Private Images

The idea of the special occasion ties into the second theme of the interviews. When are women most concerned about the appearances of their children? Previous research (Cahill 1989, 1998) asserts that parents are concerned about children’s appearances because they want to instill the youngsters with personhood, with social identities. I assert that if this were the only goal, parents would manage children’s appearances in both the public and private spheres to foster such identities. This was not typical among the women I interviewed. All but three mothers dressed their children differently for interaction in the public sphere—that is, school, play dates, and errands. The three women who did not dress their children differently were not unaware of the importance of appearance; they simply ensured that their children always dressed well.

One such mother who always dressed her child well was Caroline, a stay-at-home mother of one. When asked if her children are “dressed differently when you know they’ll be leaving the house than when you are ‘hanging out at home’ all day,” Caroline responded, “Not really because she normally does not look like white trash around the house.” For Caroline, who grew up in rural Louisiana, an unkempt appearance is an indicator of “white trash.” Associating certain appearance and grooming standards with a reference group—nonwhite trash—circumscribes even Caroline’s private actions. Most likely, Caroline envisions a “nonpresent audience” that guides her private activities in accordance with established moral standards (Goffman 1959:81).

Tess, another mother whose child is always well-dressed, said, “We usually have one day a week where we stay comfy. Even then, I’ve got sweats from The Gap that he wears, so he could still go out like that.” Note that Tess brings up the brand name of the sweats as though there is something distinctive about them. They seem to be more than just sweats simply because they are a designer label. This supports Zukin’s (2004) assertion that these name-brand stores have transformed “the standardization of mass production into individualized images of status and style” (101). It is as if Tess is saying that sweats from The Gap® are not sweats at all.

More typical responses—implying that the less familiar one is with the audience, the more one manages impressions—are “Yes, I am more likely to let them wear ‘worn,’ comfy clothes around the house” (Sarah) and “I like to dress them nicely whenever we go anywhere besides general shopping. If we’re home, some days they’re in their jammies all day!” (Katie).

The most frequently cited places where children are dressed up and appearances are managed were church and school. These two arenas are particularly important

because of both the opportunity to express, and the significance of, demeanor (Goffman [1956] 1967). The character of the clothing—reverent, careful, neat, and so forth—represents, in a way, the character of the person wearing it (1952:5). It also may be seen as a reflection of the mother who presumably clothed the child.

Although most replies emphasized that the comfort of the children and the type of activity are important to keep in mind, most respondents also said that their children are always dressed “cute” or “nicely” when in the presence of others. Like Tseñlon (1992), I find that these others are not necessarily unfamiliar others. Marie, a mother of two who taught high school, managed impressions for a specific family member, her mother-in-law: “For me, I dress them in whatever is clean . . . When we go to [my mother-in-law’s] house, I . . . try to put them in clothes she buys for them . . . She has always dressed in designer labels and so she thinks the kids should too.” Celeste, who ran a day care center in her home, said, “When my daycare parents are here in the evening I try to make sure Claire is clean, even if it means changing her outfit five minutes before they are supposed to come because I think it can potentially reflect on me and the care I give their kids.”

In each instance, the child’s appearance somehow reflects on the mother. By dressing her children in the same designer labels that her mother-in-law wears and in particular items the mother-in-law has purchased, Marie is demonstrating acceptance of her mother-in-law’s taste. Arguably, this is in an effort by Marie to enhance the view her mother-in-law has of her. Of all the women I interviewed, Celeste may have the most at stake in her daughter’s appearance because she feels that her livelihood depends on her clients’ perceptions of her care-taking abilities and that her daughter’s appearance is a reflection of her competence.

### Perceived Impressions

These examples prompt the question: when a mother manages the appearance of her child or children, who is intended to benefit? Previous research (Turner-Bowker 2001) suggests that the way an individual dresses influences others’ perceptions of her personality, credibility, attractiveness, sociability, compliance, charitable/giving behavior, and power or status (Thorndike 1920). Just as Cahill (1987) believes children’s behaviors are indicators of their caretakers’ moral character, women believe that the way their children dress is a reflection of them. This belief is evident in discussions, both in the interviews and among the playgroup, about children who want to choose their own outfits. In her interview, Gillian said, “I am much more likely to let Hannah choose her outfits head to toes when we’re hanging out [at home].” In a recent post about the trials of raising girls, Janice told a story about her four-year-old daughter. “Two days ago, her ensemble consisted of a bright blue wrap skirt she outgrew a year ago, and a pale peach t-shirt with glittery writing on it. (Luckily, we weren’t going anywhere that day, so I let her keep it on.)”

To explore who is to benefit from or to be blamed for appearances, I asked the women, “Do you think the way that your kids look is a better reflection of what

kind of child they are or what kind of parent you are?" All but one of the mothers who answered this question (Sheila abstained) believe that the way a child looks is a better reflection of who the parent is than who the child is. Katie said, "If a child looks neat and clean, it shows that you care about them and yourself." Julia expressed similar views: "Whether my children's clothing fits, has no stains or rips, and is clean is WAY more of a statement on what kind of parent I am." Caroline asserted that the way her daughter looks says more about Caroline because her daughter "is really too young to make all of the grooming and dressing decisions on her own." She went on to say, "If I see some kid out in public and they have a dirty face, ratted out hair, and stained clothes, I automatically think the parents are at fault for their [child's] appearance." While Sabrina "won't run herself into the poor house" to give an illusion that she has the money to buy her child a forty-dollar t-shirt, she assumes "that the parent is irresponsible or dirty themselves" if she sees a messy or dirty two-year-old in Wal-Mart. Denise told a story of a four-year-old girl in the preschool class she works in who wears nothing but the best clothing: "Labels, labels, labels of THE BEST. But the clothes are dirty, shoes are dirty, and this little girl is never bathed, she smells and her hair is matted!!! So what do those expensive clothes mean if the child is completely neglected like that?"

It is interesting that the question about whether appearances are a better reflection of parent or child generated little discussion in either the e-mail or on the message board's posted replies. The most common answer was simply, "What kind of parent I am." Penny, a lesbian cohabiting with her partner of eight years, wrote, "(Our children) are a reflection of us as a family." Perhaps as a result of intensive mothering (Hays 1996) and "The New Momism" (Douglas and Michaels 2004), women have come to accept full accountability for the way their children are dressed and groomed. Based on my interviews, it seems that most mothers are more than willing to embrace this responsibility and actually take pleasure in it.

Mothers commented on the outfits that were too cute to pass up, how much they enjoy shopping, and where to find the cutest clothes for kids. Gillian enjoys finding bargains and will never pay retail for the "better labels" she insists her children wear; Penny likens managing her daughter's appearance to childhood play, saying, "Kids are cute and should look cute! . . . It's like an extension of dressing our dolls when we were little girls." However, Penny's analogy leaves out an important difference between children and dolls. Dolls can be dressed up in adorable outfits and perched up on shelves, perfectly coiffed, for all to admire. Children, on the other hand, one day outgrow their perch and begin to crawl, walk, and get into things, with the potential of spoiling the images their caretakers so carefully created.

### Spoiled Identities

According to Manning (1992), impression management is driven by a fear of unpleasant scenes in which the presented self may differ from the projected self. This fear is particularly important when one relies on children to provide favorable

impressions since they often unintentionally spoil their appearances. An interesting conversation arose between playgroup members about how to determine the congruency between appearance and reality. After Sabrina's post about "dirty kids in Wal-Mart," Denise responded with "as long as your child is happy, clean, and neat—that is what warrants being a good mother in my eyes."

These two comments touched a nerve in Rebecca. The stay-at-home mother of two replied:

I am not usually a dirty, messy individual [and] could never understand judging someone by a dirty face! I was in Wal-Mart today and the girls were eating a candy cane. I forgot my wipes. Why does that make me a bad parent . . . I never realized people were looking at me and thinking I was a slob because my kids have sticky faces.

To help put Rebecca at ease and assure her that they would never be as quick to judge by appearances as their answers originally suggested, the women introduced a new typology—new dirt and old dirt. Sarah assured Rebecca that "there's a difference between 'old dirt' and 'new dirt' on a child. You can tell a child that is cared for and bathed regularly but has gotten dirty in the course of a day." Other women (Denise and Sabrina) chimed in with experiences of children they encountered through work, at a preschool and an Urgent Care Center respectively, who are clearly "neglected" because they are only bathed once a week and have dirt on their faces. Sabrina added, "Hell, Evan came home from the movies as I [made the comment about kids at Wal-Mart] with chocolate ice cream all over his face . . . but his clothes were clean and you can tell he's well taken care of."

Despite earlier comments about children's appearances directly reflecting their mothers, this dirt typology highlights the boundary between what mothers believe they can control and what they cannot. When the mothers realize that there are times when their own children are dirty, they draw a distinction between differing levels of cleanliness, delineating between a neglectful and a normal mother. If the child plays hard at school or has yet to master the use of a spoon and, as a result, is messy or dirty, that is excusable. That is "new dirt." On the other hand, if the blame can be attributed to the parent, this "old dirt" is a sure sign of neglect.

According to Mary Douglas (1966), we believe that sacred things should be protected from dirt or defilement. It follows from intensive mothering (Hays 1996), then, and from the sacredness of children (Zelizer 1981) that babies and children should be clean. When an individual encounters an anomaly, what Douglas (1966:38) refers to as an "element that does not fit a given set or series," he or she must decide how to classify it. Placing labels on the categories exaggerates the difference between them, creating the semblance of order. It is important to realize that these classification schemes arise out of interaction and that culture mediates what we believe. It is also significant to note that the dirt the mothers describe, whether new or old, is not toxic for a child. When judging cleanliness, instead of focusing on the material circumstances of an act, individuals today assign importance

to motives and disposition (Douglas 1966:11). Accordingly, although dirt is not itself harmful to a child, the women consider it a sign of parental neglect.

This exchange about differences in dirt is important for two other reasons as well. First, it demonstrates the malleability of the self-presentation of these women. Because they did not want to be as quick to judge as their original statements implied, they actively sought to realign the images portrayed in the playgroup with their "real selves." Most important, though, is that the discussion demonstrates the understanding among women with children that women need support from one another. Women feel inadequate if they do not fulfill expectations of intensive mothering (Hays 1996). Not wanting a member of their playgroup to feel inadequate, the women quickly rallied to save Rebecca from feeling this sense of failure as a mother. The deep bonds and shared moral careers (Goffman 1961a) that these women developed influenced how they went about redefining dirt. Emphasizing that all children get dirty and delineating one type of dirt from another was a way of helping Rebecca and every other mother whose child has unintentionally spoiled his or her appearance save face (Goffman [1956] 1967).

### Sacrifices in Motherhood

It is a basic tenet of child-centered mothering that good mothers are selfless and sacrifice their own wants and desires for those of their children (Hays 1996). Although spending a lot of money is increasingly how we express love at home (Hochschild 2003:144), money is not enough. Mothers, it seems, selflessly invest time and talent, in addition to money, in the appearance of their children and often at the expense of their own appearance. Perhaps not surprisingly, the women I interviewed reported that their appearance and the appearance of their children are not typically congruent. When I asked the mothers if their children dress better than they do, the overwhelming answer was a resounding yes.

Sheila, the mother of a three-year-old boy who is typically well-dressed, responded "YES!!! As I type in my Wal-Mart jeans." Another mother said, "If I'm working, I'm dressed pretty well. If we're shopping or running errands, [my daughter] is probably dressed better than me" (Janice). Although mothers try to balance their own desires against the requirements of motherhood, it is socially unacceptable in the world of motherhood for them to put their own needs above those of their children (Tardy 2000). In addition, when they put their children's needs above their own, the mothers are engaging in behavior that appears to be freely chosen. When asked if her child is better dressed than she is, Denise responded, "Absolutely. My clothes are nice . . . but I would rather buy Dina new clothes than myself." In situations like these, where there is latitude in deciding how to play the role and women choose to make sacrifices for their children, self-presentation is more likely to affect self-beliefs (McKillop, Berzonsky, and Schlenker 1992).

A number of mothers mentioned the amount of money they spent on their children's clothes. Jodi, who homeschooled her children by day and worked at night,



said, “That’s where my money goes . . . and Grandma’s . . . and Gigi’s . . .” Julia also claimed to spend “way more” on her childrens’ clothing than on her own. Most group members shopped for designer clothes on sale, but Janice noted that she would also pay full price “if they’re so cute I can’t stand passing them up.” Katie “splurged” on a Tommy Hilfiger outfit for her daughter’s one-year portrait, spending \$80 for a jumper, and Charlotte bought one infant outfit from Baby Gap for \$60, even though she thought the price was “insane.” While there is no way to measure the actual amounts these women spent on clothing, it is interesting to note that these replies echo the expectations of the selfless mother. In interviews these women are conveying impressions that are “appropriate” personal qualities for mothers (Goffman 1961b).

Before continuing, it is important to introduce Kristin, the one mother who said that her child typically was not dressed better than she. There are a number of attributes that make Kristin distinctive. She was one of two message board participants who served in the military, was the only playgroup mother who was separated from her child’s father before the child was born, and had two nearly adult children. More important, Kristin was unique in that one of her older children is seriously developmentally disabled. Research suggests that parents of disabled children are more likely to think of occurrences that would “embarrass, distress, anger or otherwise disorient other parents” as routine (Voysey 1972:88). Parents like these describe themselves as more mature in their parenting, and their experiences may help neutralize threats to their identity as “good parents.” While Kristin was concerned about keeping her youngest son clean and neat and hated the fact that his father “derives some perverse pleasure” from his son being filthy when he returns from visits, she did not view her son’s appearance as a reflection of her own mothering abilities.

## DISCUSSION

In an article about the professionalization of medical students, Haas and Shaffir (1977) described how medical students act and subsequently adopt the role of medical professionals. There are striking similarities among the mothers I interviewed and those students. The researchers found that medical students work to reduce the unpredictability of their precarious situations by manipulating impressions of themselves as medical professionals and seizing opportunities that allow them to impress others. Mothers appear to use the same strategies—buying clothes when they are on sale, dressing their children up when they leave the house, and saving the most elaborate or expensive outfits for interactions that really count. Like the medical students, these mothers “are acutely aware of the relationship between impression management and successful evaluation and while the evaluation ought to consist of an objective evaluation of the students’ abilities . . . the outcome is, in fact, shaped by the students’ abilities to behave as if they are able to accomplish these tasks” (Haas and Shaffir 1977:84).

A crucial factor in identity management is the ability of actors to perform in a way that convinces others of their identity (Mullaney 1999:269). These interviews suggest that women are working to enact and confirm an extremely salient status—mother—through the presentation and behavior of their children. In order to enhance their self-esteem, these women are motivated to create and maintain a positive view of self as mother for both themselves and outsiders. Confirming the positive identity reinforces their self-concept as they imagine the responses and appraisal of others regarding their success as mothers (Gecas 1982). Indirect self-presentation techniques allow mothers to make mild assertions—rather than explicit claims—about themselves, and these mild assertions are much less likely to be challenged (Schlenker and Weigold 1992:143).

The medical students masked their uncertainty and anxiety with an air of self-confidence and observe each other, looking for a base of comparison. In their discussions, playgroup members often highlighted the differences among themselves—who they perceived as “typical mothers”—and other social categories such as “bad mothers” or “celebrity mothers.” They often chatted about mothers in news stories and distinguished themselves as either “good mothers” against the mothers cited in stories about child abuse or neglect or as “real mothers” as opposed to the celebrities who, the women believed, hire full-time nannies and buy outrageous products for their children with the millions of dollars at their disposal. Despite the growing number of glossy images of celebrities and their children and the articles devoted to balancing the celebrity life with home life, most of the mothers I interviewed seem to choose as reference groups other women they encounter in social settings such as church and preschools rather than celebrities.

### Managing Impressions, Enacting Identities

These women use impression management not to manipulate others but to help develop their own identities (Goffman 1959). Indirect self-presentation techniques give mothers a chance to demonstrate the autonomy and efficacy that are vital to the development of their self-concept (Gecas and Schwalbe 1987). There is evidence that publicly self-conscious people tend to manage impressions more than those who are less self-conscious because they are particularly concerned with others' approval of their social identities (Doherty and Schlenker 1991). However, the possibility that new mothers or mothers of only one child might manage impressions more than others because they are anxious about their parenting abilities and have less experience (Porter and Hsu 2003) is not evident in my interviews. The women with two or more children whom I interviewed were as likely to manage the appearances of their children and to make inferences about other mothers based on the appearances of those other mothers' children.

Although it is possible that women are attempting to teach their children to manage their own identities with these impression-management tactics (Cahill 1987,

1989), this preliminary research shows promise for future research about mothers' use of children as props for their own impression management strategies. It is important to consider that these women are generating impressions of multiple identities (e.g., their capacities as mothers, their class positions, and other salient identities). With more demographic data, employment status and class could be carefully analyzed. Perhaps the increasing number of women in the workplace who lack the time to affirm their motherhood identity but have the resources to purchase it fuels the rise in designer labels and specialized products for infants and children (Hochschild 2003; Mintel International Group Limited 2003; Zukin 2004).

This process of managing the appearances of our associates, particularly our children, serves a dual purpose. My research is not intended to deny Spencer Cahill's view that parents are teaching their children to manage impressions or give them social identities (1989, 1998), but to point at another important element. The parents get something in return. Through their children's dress, grooming, and behaviors (Cahill 1987), the women are able to show themselves and others that they are good, capable mothers who care about their children.

In all likelihood, most of the people these mothers encounter throughout the day are not paying as close attention to the way these children look as the mothers assume they are (Savitsky, Epley, and Gilovich 2001). However, these public self-presentations are still important. They may influence mothers' self-beliefs at either the benefit or detriment of women (McKillop, Berzonsky, and Schlenker 1992). Regardless of how others might view her, the woman who believes that she successfully manages her children's appearances gains confidence in her abilities and affirms her most salient identity (Stryker 1980). However, the woman who lacks the resources to sustain such an image of her own children, yet who compares herself with the mother of the perfectly dressed child, feels that she lacks something as a mother. This negative evaluation of role and identity performance subsequently affects her self-esteem and self-concept (Burke and Reitzes 1981). Goffman said, "To be a given kind of person, then, is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standards of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto" (1959:75). My research shows that impression management is more than just performance. Appearances play an important part in constructing and maintaining who we are and who we want to be. Although preliminary, this research indicates children's appearances are an integral part of their mother's own self-presentation, and this phenomenon is worthy of further study.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix A. Interview Questions

1. I am wondering what percentage of your kids' clothes comes from an originally adult, or designer, clothing line. Why do you buy these clothes (fit, quality, comfort, style, etc.)? Were they gifts? Are these clothes for special occasions—pictures, parties, etc.? What are special occasions?

2. Do you dress your kids differently when they're around certain groups (like dress them up for church, down for school, up for playgroups, etc.?)
3. Are they dressed differently when you know you'll be leaving the house than when you're "hanging out at home" all day?
4. Do your kids dress better than you do?
5. Do you think that the way your kids look is a better reflection of what kind of child they are or what kind of parent you are?
6. Will you continue to buy name-brand clothes when your kids get older?

### Appendix B. Demographic Characteristics of Playgroup Members and Interview Response Type

Name	Residence	Occupation	Children	Marital Status	Educational Attainment	Interview
Caroline	Virginia	Stay-at-home-mom	1	Married	Some college	Board
Celeste	California	Child care provider	2	Married	Some college	E-mail
Charlotte	Ohio	Stay-at-home-mom	1	Married	College (BA)	E-mail
Denise	New York	Preschool teacher (p/t)	1	Divorced	Secretarial school	Board
Gillian	Iowa	Stay-at-home-mom	2	Married	College (BA)	Board
Ginger	Ohio	Stay-at-home-mom	3	Separated	High school diploma	Board
Janice	Texas	Advertising (p/t)	1	Married	College (BA)	Board
Jodi	No. Carolina	Transcriptionist	3	Married	High school diploma	Board
Julia	Tennessee	Engineer	3	Married	College (BS), pursuing MA	Board
Katie	Ohio	Stay-at-home-mom	2	Married	College (BA)	E-mail
Kristin	Ohio	Accounting secretary	3	Divorced	Some college	E-mail
Marie	Texas	High school teacher	2	Married	College (BA), pursuing MA	E-mail
Penny	Illinois	Full-time student	1	Cohabiting	College (BS), pursuing MA	E-mail
Rebecca	Virginia	Stay-at-home-mom	2	Married	High school diploma	No*
Sabrina	Ohio	Licensed practical nurse	1	Married	Nursing school	Board
Sarah	California	Office manager	2	Married	Some college	Board
Sheila	Illinois	Legal secretary	1	Divorced	Associates degree	E-mail
Tess	Ohio	Stay-at-home-mom	1	Married	Some college	Board

\*While Rebecca responded in the discussion thread about appearances, she did not volunteer for a more extensive interview.

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### NOTES

1. I believe that both conceptions here—child as prop, child as associate—differ from Goffman's (1959) notion of "team" in which a projection "is fostered and sustained by the intimate cooperation of more than one participant" (77). Certainly as children get older, they become a part of the presentation teams, but young children are not capable of this cooperative effort.

2. Although the playgroup met in “virtual space” and what took place online was dialogue between the mothers (which is an important part of “real life” playgroups as well), there was also some face-to-face interaction and playtime among the children and among their mothers. Women who lived close to each other regularly met for lunch or playdates, three families had recently shared a house while visiting Disneyworld together, and on a recent road trip, three of my own family’s five stops were at the homes of other playgroup members.
3. In her own study of a playgroup, Tardy (2000) gained admission into the group by sharing her own stories, joining in the conversations about taking care of children, and engaging in group activities (449). I feel confident that my presence, both as playgroup contributor and researcher, did not significantly alter respondents’ accounts or behavior on the message board. On the contrary because over time I have let my own guard down, the women did the same in the interviews. Also, because I have been involved with the group continuously, I have experiences from both before and after the interview period that support what I found in the interviews.
4. The average amount of time that the women had belonged to this playgroup at the time of this research (December 2002) was thirty-nine months, or just over three years, indicating that the typical member had joined the group before the birth of her child, while the forum was still an expecting mothers club.
5. See Appendix A for the interview questions.
6. The online responses worked in two ways: as an interview, with the respondents directly responding to my questions; and as a focus group or group interview, in that there was room for women to respond to the statements of others. Hunt and Miller (1997) believe that group interviews like this, in which “accounts are affirmed, contradicted, and rearticulated” (71), are particularly useful when studying identity talk because they simulate natural settings where such talk is common.
7. Information on the seventeen respondents who were interviewed is listed in Appendix B.
8. Three of the interviews were conducted in February 2004, when the children were older (Celeste, Kristin, and Penny).
9. Two reviewers expressed particular concern over the leading nature of my interview questions. I believe that the questions are leading in the sense that the respondent is led to think about something in a certain way, but not led to answer in a certain way (Johnson 1983:360). Although I gave examples in the questions and in that sense offered the respondents a schema to draw from, I did not expect my questions to influence their answers, and considering the variety of answers, it appears they did not. However, this is certainly a concern, and it is the reason that this research should be considered preliminary and should be followed up with more rigorous, empirical work.
10. Names of both children and mothers have been changed to protect the identities of those women who participated in this research.
11. Women are bombarded with media images of how to be a “good” mother, and this is often tied to how a woman cares for her child, including what she buys for her child. Therefore, these women could be responding in what they believe to be a socially desirable way. The nature of online participant observation and the interview process makes it impossible to authenticate whether what the women say they do is, in fact, what they do (Schuman and Johnson 1976).

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