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A Relational Dialectics Approach to the Identity Development of Millennial Mothers

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A RELATIONAL DIALECTICS APPROACH TO THE IDENTITY

DEVELOPMENT OF MILLENNIAL MOTHERS

A Masters Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of

Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, Communication

By

Shawna Merrill

May 2018

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Communication

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ABSTRACT

This thesis uses relational dialectics theory (RDT) to make sense of the experiences of millennial mothers. RDT is a heuristic theory of relational meaning making and asserts that relationships and identities are negotiated in states of competing and contradictory discourses. This thesis can be conceptualized as two projects: autoethnography and qualitative inquiry using semi-structured interviews. Autoethnography explores the researcher's own experience with the topic. Interview participants were asked a series of questions about their lives as millennial mothers to identify competing discourses, management strategies, and implications for identity. Three primary tensions were identified of millennial vs. mother, authenticity vs. persona, and connectedness vs. autonomy. The management strategies and identity implications fall in line with each dialectical tension. This research indicates that motherhood is a contradiction with millennial, so conclusions reveal a variety of balancing and sense-making acts to discern experiences as a millennial mother.

KEYWORDS: relational dialectics theory, identity, motherhood, millennial, interpersonal communication, autoethnography

This abstract is approved as to form and content

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INTRODUCTION

Be sure to exercise and drink plenty of kale smoothies while you're pregnant. But don't ever lie on your back and definitely don't overdo it. Don't gain too much weight; you've got to be swimsuit ready as soon as the baby is born. If you had an epidural, you didn't *really* experience childbirth, and your caesarian was obviously the easiest way out. Remember, breast is best, but it had better not interfere with the job that you'll return to immediately. Don't hover. No one likes a helicopter mom, but your children must be perfectly behaved in all situations. Maintain a social life. Stay connected. But never let your kids see you on your phone; God forbid they know you have a name besides "mom." Your kids should be your entire world, but don't annoy your social media friends. But also don't let your friends know that your life isn't perfect. Every. Single. Day is an absolute joy as a mother and to say otherwise is blasphemous. If you only have one kid, they're clearly being deprived of socialization, and if you have multiple children, well… you know what causes that, right? Every decision is under fire, and mothers are constantly torn between, "It takes a village," and "Mind your own motherhood."

This is a small glimpse into what life is like as a millennial mother. Motherhood has never been easy. Creating humans, caring for them, and teaching them how to become decent citizens has always been an exhausting, exhilarating, thankless, and rewarding job. Some themes of motherhood endure throughout time, but other challenges are unique to their spatiotemporal location. One's culture, community influences, and age can impact what it means to be a mother. The experience of being an American millennial mother is undoubtedly different from the experience of being a Generation X

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mother or Baby Boomer mother. One must only look so far as the economic and educational climate to observe this. "With a median household income of $40,581, millennials earn 20 percent less than boomers did at the same stage of life, despite being better educated" (Boak & Antlfinger, 2017, p. A13). While these generational changes might not seem like they impact motherhood directly, they do. Education and economic status impact the amount of time mothers spend with their children, whether they have access to child care, the quality of mothers' mental health, family nutritional choices, etc.

A 2015 Pew Research Center report found that in 46% of households, both parents work full time jobs. In those households, more than half (54%) say that the majority of childrearing responsibilities still fall on mom, 4 in 10 mothers report facing challenges in their careers as a result of having children, and 4 in 10 full time working mothers report not having enough time with their children (Patten, 2015). In addition, in many states, child care costs more than a 4-year university. Many millennial women are aware of these factors and are delaying the choice to have children. Between 2007 and 2012, birth rates for women in their 20s fell more than 15%, making millennials the slowest generation in US history to have children (Astone, Martin, & Peters, 2015). A more recent report from Pew Research Center indicated that 82% of US births in 2015 were from millennial women, but those women were older than previous generations' mothers (Livingston, 2017). This delay is not for a lack of wanting children and families. In fact, most millennial women express similar sentiments about the desire to become a mother as previous generations but cite financial reasons for delaying having a family. Instead, women are opting to pursue higher education and embark on careers *before*

having children. The median age to first become a mom for women with Master's degrees or beyond is 30+ (Livingston, 2015).

These economic and educational shifts are not the only factors that have changed about the experience of motherhood in the last few decades. Millennial mothers are also the first technology veterans to raise children (Bolton, et al, 2012). Navigating the social media landscape is a new challenge that previous generations of mothers have never had to face. Social media and the prevalence of the internet in general are both helpful resources and giant challenges. Millennial moms turn to social media, blogs, and online shopping sites to seek advice, product recommendations, daycare reviews, and dozens of other topics. Gone are the days of having only a handful of resources, such as family members and *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Instead, parents can scour the internet for the best and most recent information available. However, because of this abundance of information, the internet can also be a source of information overload and decision paralysis.

Social media, in particular, is quite the double-edged sword for millennial mothers. On one hand, social media can be a great source of useful information and connection. A 2015 Pew Research Center study indicates that millennial mothers use social media to respond to good news, get useful information, and receive support. This study also indicates that mothers use social media as a parenting resource slightly more often than fathers (Duggan, Lenhart, Lampe, & Ellison, 2015, n.p.). Social media platforms like Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram, YouTube, and others provide more resources than ever for validation, advice, encouragement, and information. On the other hand, it is also a place for bickering, judgment, and fake personas. Millennial mothers

report feeling that pressure from social media creates a more difficult environment in which to raise children. "BabyCenter reported that nearly 80% of millennial moms claim it's important to be "the perfect mom," a higher percentage than both gen X and boomer mothers, and 64% believe that parenting is more competitive today than it used to be" (Fromm, 2016, n.p.). Research indicates that the pressure to be perfect in every aspect of motherhood is not necessarily new (Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979; Marshall, 1991), but the millennial generation's constant access to and connection with social media makes those messages more prevalent than ever.

Even without the unique generational differences, scholarly research indicates that motherhood itself impacts identity formation in women (Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Laney, et al., 2015). In fact, even pregnancy can cause huge changes in the way women view themselves and form identities in their various roles (Ladge et al., 2012). However, as the world progresses, motherhood arrives with new sets of challenges and new opportunities. These new variables to motherhood that millennials face can make identity formation more complex. Women have more roles outside of the home with thriving careers and social lives, but they also feel just as much pressure as ever to be the perfect mother and housewife. Reynolds (2001) and Buzzanell et al. (2005) found that when mothers are faced with additional role expectations, such as providing financially, those roles become intertwined with their identities as mothers. The roles do not remain compartmentalized; instead, they are incorporated into the process of identity formation, and what it means to be a mother changes for those women.

Where does one role end and another begin? How do mothers navigate their various roles and which ones take priority in any given situation? What interactions or

relationships impact their identity development? *How* do those interactions and relationships impact their identities? These are the questions this thesis seeks to explore. Identity development within mothers and the development of a mothering identity have been explored by other authors (Heisler & Ellis, 2008; Laney, et al., 2015). However, a gap exists in the research regarding a communication theoretical perspective on millennial mothers. In their 2015 article, Laney et al stated that what is lacking in communication research on motherhood "is a theory on how becoming a mother is identity forming based on women's own accounts of their identity changes" (p. 127). To that end, this thesis will examine the identity formation of millennial mothers through the theoretical lens of Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery's relational dialectics theory. This will complement Laney et al's call for more literature regarding identity formation and motherhood, as well as contribute to the gap regarding Millennial experiences and motherhood. Unlike some research about motherhood and identity (Heisler & Ellis, 2008), this project is not specifically about a mothering identity, though that will be a component. This thesis is more encompassing of whole identity and how becoming a mother is integrated into millennial women's complete view of themselves.

Identity formation is not a process that takes place in a vacuum. One cannot truly have a sense of self without the aid of others; only a small component of the self is accessible in the absence of interaction with others. Therefore, this thesis will examine identity formation that takes place via communication and interaction with the world and those in it. Women will be asked to reflect upon, share, and evaluate their own experiences and discuss the ways those experiences serve to shape their identities as

millennial mothers. Identity formation does not reach a permanent destination; rather, it is always in flux.

RDT is a descriptive theory that helps make sense of human experiences and communicative interactions. For that reason, this theory works well within a qualitative study of sense making and identity formation. This thesis will utilize a series of qualitative methods, including autoethnography and in-depth interviews. Autoethnography is conducted in a variety of ways, and the structure and format can vary greatly. "The defining feature of autoethnography is that it entails the scientist or practitioner performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon" (McIlveen, 2008, p. 3). Because autoethnography is such a diverse research method, there is not one standard set of criteria by which to judge autoethnography. However, this thesis attempts to adhere to Richardson's (2000) five criteria to evaluate autoethnography: substantive contribution, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, the impact the narrative causes the reader, and how much the narrative expresses a reality. Some of the advantages of autoethnography include inside access to the learner's mind and private world, the ability to tell and interpret one's own story rather than having it recounted and interpreted by another, the potential for readers to connect with and reflect upon the narratives presented, among others (Méndez, 2013).

This thesis can be conceptualized as two research projects: autoethnography and in-depth interviews. In the following sections, the autoethnography stands alone to set the stage. Next, relevant literature is discussed to provide a basis for understanding and analyzing interview data. Next, results and implications are drawn, and finally, both methods are tied together in the conclusion.

"The Ones with the Words"

"Although relationship identities are always in flux to some extent in everyday interaction, turning points are potentially occasions of major identity shift in which the inherited relationship identity is upended in some significant way" (Baxter, 2011, p. 94).

I intended to follow the trend of my generation. My husband and I planned to date for a few years, get married, spend a few years building our lives together and accomplishing goals like finishing college and starting a career, and then, eventually, down the road, someday, *think* about having children. I had only been 21 for four months when I decided to buy a pregnancy test on my way home from work. I didn't entirely expect it to be positive; I mean, I had just gone to my first legal pub crawl three nights prior. I couldn't be pregnant, right? Since I didn't expect a positive result, I got the cheaper test, the one that shows one line when it's negative and two when it's positive. After the two minutes passed, I brought the test to my (then) boyfriend, Dakota, and asked him if he saw one or two lines. He took a deep breath, laughed hysterically because that's what he does when he's nervous, and so eloquently said "Let's go to Walmart – we're getting the ones with the words!" Off we went, nervously laughing the entire way and joking "What *IF* we're pregnant?!?" The idea was completely ridiculous to us because we were practically still children ourselves. We shared a two-bedroom apartment with a roommate in a sketchy area of town, we regularly had to step over tweakers in the stairwell, we still went to parties or drank almost every night, and in almost every possible way, we were not ready to become parents. Our only saving grace was the

stability of our relationship. While we were utterly unprepared as individuals, we felt far more prepared as a couple. We had discussed hypothetical parenting situations like curfew violations and conversations about religion, asked one another's opinions of topics like spanking and positive parenting, and shared stories of our own upbringing and how those experiences shaped us.

When we got to the store, we walked down the aisles holding hands, giggling nervously. It felt surreal, like an impending emergency that had been put on hold for just a moment. I think in my heart, I knew what was about to happen, but I hadn't quite accepted it. I'd begun thinking about what pregnancy and motherhood might mean – no more parties, we'd have to find a new apartment, would the past few weeks' worth of drinking harm the baby, what will people think, is my small frame capable of growing a human, do we make enough money, I've never been around babies… will I know what to do? But it wasn't for real yet, so we were still kids in that moment, wandering around Walmart, nervous, anxious, excited, and terrified. Dakota becomes electric when he's nervous – full of energy, laughs hysterically at everything, talks excitedly. His energy was weirdly calming. It was the one thing keeping me from absolutely losing my shit in a fit of anxiety. We bought two pregnancy tests – the ones with the words, and Dakota grabbed a bottle of apple pie moonshine. He said if it was negative, we'd both take a shot with our sigh of relief, and if was positive, only he'd drink of course. Either way, someone was going to need alcohol that night.

When we got home, I took the test, set a timer, and walked away; I couldn't stand the waiting. Two minutes later, I walked back into the bathroom, not really prepared for the result. One ominous word stared back at me – "Pregnant." I felt like all the air had

suddenly been stolen from my body and time stood still. I let out a gasp-scream combo, and I'm certain my face looked as pale as it does when a needle comes within 10 feet of me. Dakota ran into the bathroom and he looked at the test, looked back at me with this big goofy grin, and got down on his knees so that when he hugged me, his head was against my stomach. He got back up, looked at me with tears in his eyes and the biggest smile and said with disbelief, "Well. We're having a baby!" Dakota and I hugged, cried, laughed, and took turns reminding one another to take deep breaths. He drank quite a bit of the moonshine that night. Meanwhile, I looked up the impacts of alcohol on a fetus before finding out you're pregnant. My mind immediately went to the pub crawl three nights prior and the bits and pieces of memory I lost by the time we made it to the last bar and called our roommate to pick us up. Luckily, that's a really common concern and doesn't have an impact on a developing baby; it's only prolonged alcohol use that causes problems. So I breathed a momentary sigh of relief, and then resumed internally freaking out about the situation as a whole.

By the time our roommate and his friends got home at some ungodly time like 3 or 4 am, we were still up, of course. The instant the door cracked opened, Dakota shouted "WE'RE PREGNANT!!" Everyone stopped in their tracks. As the guys made their way into the apartment, they struggled to discern whether this was a joke or not. When I confirmed that he wasn't kidding and I had the test to prove it, they then struggled with the appropriate response. They stumbled over the beginnings of, "Oh shit…um… I'm sor – uh – congratula – er – I don't know how to respond!" We clarified that we were excited and that it was a good thing, and they were excited with us. That was the first time we

were confronted with how strange it was being in such an in-between period of what having a child means.

Purity

"Rarely is language use an equal playing field; some utterances pack more authority than others, based on cultural norms or social stratifications along lines of gender, race, and class, among others" (Baxter, 2011, p. 29).

Upon learning of my pregnancy, along with a host of other emotions, one that set in immediately was fear. To fully understand the context and extent of that fear, it's necessary to go back a little further in my story. I was raised in a very strict, evangelical Christian home. I was taught that my body is to be protected, covered, and preserved for my husband. Puberty was a miserable time for me, as every single day brought a new fight over my wardrobe. I made a concerted effort to dress very modestly and had certain rules and guidelines that I self-imposed. For example, if I was wearing a blouse with a neckline lower than a t-shirt's, I'd put my hand sideways across the top of my chest with my thumb in the crook of my collarbone, and if my shirt was lower than the bottom of my hand, it was too low. For shorts, skirts, and dresses, if the hemline was more than a couple of inches above my knees, it was too short. I preferred long, flowy shirts that drew attention away from my widening hips and developing figure. A bikini was absolutely out of the question; my swim suit was a tankini. The top covered my whole stomach, and the bottoms had a skirt-like wrap around it so as not to draw attention to my lower body. I looked like I was wearing a patterned cardboard box. I *self*-regulated my own body, but it was never enough for my stepdad, Ron. Every day, I was met with some variation of,

"Do you think that's appropriate for a Christian young woman to wear?" And this wasn't the sitcom classic "You're not leaving the house wearing that!" sort of thing; this was psychological warfare where my motives for dressing a certain way were questioned. I was made to doubt every choice I made because of what other people might think. I was told that my body had power to cause my Brothers in Christ to sin, and it was my responsibility to prevent that sin. As if revealing my shoulders would cause teenagers and grown men alike to suddenly lose all self-control and fling themselves at me. My body was sacred and should be reserved for one man whom I marry. I had certain standards to uphold for the good of God and for my community of fellow believers. I was but a small piece of the Body of Christ, and must do my part to protect myself and others from… myself, I guess? Fast forward to the 21-year-old living with her boyfriend and finding out she's pregnant; I was terrified not only to raise a child when I was barely out of childhood myself, but also terrified of the reactions to my pregnant, unwed body.

I'd planned to save myself for marriage and had even heard of couples who saved their first kiss for their wedding day. I knew that was idealistic, but that was my goal. Ron was thrilled. I still remember the day he gave me the parameters of his love and acceptance of me, though. He told me he wanted to talk to me about something serious, so I went into my parents' room and sat on their bed with he and my mom. My mom was there, but not an active part of the conversation; she was mostly there to witness, I think. I don't remember all the details, but I know the general topic was purity. The part that has stayed with me all these years is when he told me there are two things that I could do that would change our relationship forever. Either of these decisions would make it difficult for our father-daughter relationship to recover, as he explained it. Those two things were

1) if I ever had sex before I was married and 2) if I ever married someone outside our race. Now, I'm not even going to go into that second one, as racism in my household could be a whole other topic of discussion. But that first one impacted me in a way that I didn't entirely understand at the time. Looking back on it as an adult, I'm beyond weirded out that my relationship with my father was contingent on my sex life. But at its core, that conversation communicated that my worth was determined by my choice to remain "pure" and any deviation from that meant that I'd let people down. In that conversation, it became clear that my body and my sexuality determined the success of my future marriage, future children, father-daughter relationship, and even my parents' marriage.

Can't Stop; Won't Stop

"Giving priority to the individual's self-interests is an act legitimated within a discourse of individualism, whereas an other-orientation that gives priority to the needs and interests of the other is intelligible from a discourse of community" (Baxter, 2011, p. 68).

I spent my first year of college following the tradition in which I'd been raised. I went to a private Baptist university, remained close with my family, devoted to my religion, and stayed the course. I remained comfortably situated in a discourse of community. During the second semester of my freshman year, I met a friend of one of my coworkers and we became close. He lived basically next door to my dorm building, and we began dating pretty quickly. My stepdad was "turning over a new leaf," one of the phrases that marked my relationship with him. We had this cycle where he would be

consistently angry with erratic outbursts at the slightest provocation, manipulative, and hateful, and then a big fight would happen, and he'd realize how unreasonable he was being, and he'd "turn over a new leaf." For several weeks, he'd be much calmer, easier to talk to, and slower to jump to accusations.

To illustrate, when I was 16, Ron and I were at a doctor's appointment where I had driven him. He found out I was texting a boy in one of my classes and demanded to see my phone in the waiting room. I begged him to wait until we got home to handle this because I knew all too well the spectacle that was about to take place. Speaking to a boy was a cardinal sin in our house; what business did a good, Christian girl have talking to a teenage boy? I had all the men in my life I needed – daddy and Jesus. He would not accept my offer and became increasingly agitated, so I handed over my phone. He proceeded to read through my text messages and when he saw that we'd told one another "I love you," he began accusing me of forsaking my convictions, making a fool of him, being unchaste, being a terrible and untrustworthy daughter, and host of other insults I've blocked out at this point. Normally, 16-year-olds saying "I love you" might cause a good eye-roll and maybe a discussion about the weight of those words. Not in our family, though. No, this had to be an event I'd discuss in a counseling appointment years later. When Ron went back into the exam room for his appointment, I texted my mom while she was at work to let her know what was happening. While she was also strict, she was at least reasonable. She often worked on my behalf and plead my case to the dictator of our household. On the drive home, Ron continued to hurl insults at me, demanded I explain myself and then yelled over me when I attempted to speak. Even though I was driving, at one point, he grabbed my ponytail, jerking my head to the side, and then let go

with force, pushing my head into my driver's side window, saying through gritted teeth, "Ooh I'd love to kick your ass!"

When we neared our house, he demanded I stop at a gas station and wait in the car. He came out of the store holding a case of Bud Light and a pack of Marlboro Reds. He had quit smoking months ago and I could count on one hand the number of times I recalled him drinking alcohol, none of which ended well. He said that since I'm going to throw all my beliefs and convictions out the window, he might as well, also. I was bawling by now, because I didn't understand why simply talking to a boy was such a big deal. I'd never even seen this kid outside of school or work. I couldn't grasp how it warranted this response. I knew my family was different and that my dad was over-protective, but this couldn't be normal. And now I'm apparently responsible for *his* relationship with God? When we got home, he went to the garage, downed several beers and cigarettes, made me hand over my keys to him – that's right, the sober teenager had to relinquish her car keys to the drunk man. He sat on a red cooler in the garage, made me sit across from him on a toolbox and told me I was a slut. By this point I'd let my mom know the situation was progressing and that I was afraid for my safety, so both my best friend and Ron's mom just *happened* to drop by shortly after the conversation in the garage. I left with my friend and we stayed gone until my mom came home from work. I didn't see Ron again until the next day. While this situation was one of the more extreme ones, it was by no means out of the norm. In the days that followed, we had several, more reasonable conversations and I ultimately broke off contact with the boy.

So, the beginning of this college relationship took place on the face of a new leaf with Ron. He tried a groundbreaking and foreign technique of fully embracing and

supporting this relationship rather than trying to undermine it, shame me, and threaten my boyfriend. It was a great couple of months; my dad and my boyfriend hung out together, played and talked sports, found common interests, and for a minute, it felt normal. I was ecstatic when my parents told my boyfriend and me they wanted us both to go on a cruise with them at the start of the summer. The four of us planned it all out, we decided on excursions, and we had an amazing vacation. One morning, Ron and my boyfriend, Brady, woke my mom and me up with our favorite drinks from Starbucks. I found out that it was my dad's idea and he told Brady my favorite drink. He was really being supportive, and I couldn't believe my luck. And then the last night of the cruise happened.

Ron had ordered an expensive case of wine, in what was supposed to be a sweet gesture for my mom. I think he had this idea of sitting on the deck of the cruise ship, looking out over the ocean sunset, drinking wine, and recreating a scene from a romance movie. He gave no mind to the fact that my mom hates wine and doesn't care for grandiose romantic gestures. Regardless, he began drinking this wine midway through the evening. The four of us met up to attend a show a little later that evening. It was a fun, interactive show highlighting music and dance trends throughout the past few decades and I thought we were all having a good time. The seating was mostly in typical rows like you'd expect in a theater, but instead of individual seats, there were rows of small couches. On our row was Brady, myself, my mom, and Ron, in that order. The smiling women with stage makeup and overly enthusiastic men jumping around waving jazz hands made their way through the audience, masking the eruption gradually building from our row.

During the show, Ron had his arm around my mom and they were sitting close to one another. I was sitting with my hands in my lap, and Brady had his hand on my leg near my knee, and all was well. To the unsuspecting eye, we looked like a perfectly happy, conservative family. I noticed during the show, however, that Ron became more rigid and visibly upset, though I wasn't sure why. During the intermission, we went out on the deck nearby and he and my mom spoke in hushed tones. Animal handlers know better than to try to reason with the creature growling or snarling its teeth at them, just like I'd learned to keep my distance when I saw agitation and serious faces. So, Brady and I stayed a few feet away, admiring the endlessness of the night ocean. Meanwhile, my mom was clearly trying to calm Ron down. She came over and asked us where Brady's hand had been on my leg. My face wrinkled with confusion as I said, "On my knee?? Why, what's going on?" In Ron's mind, apparently hand-on-knee translated to inappropriate touching and heavy petting. He swore that Brady's hand was way far up my thigh and insisted we were "making a fool of him" – a concept he was oddly fixated on. My mom managed to keep him calm throughout the remainder of the show, Brady and I left room for Jesus in between us, and my mom told us to go back to our room and don't talk to Ron immediately after the show. Brady and I shared a room, but our twin beds were separated, and my parents had a key to our room. It didn't take long for Ron to storm in drunk, screaming at me, threatening Brady, and demanding I move out of their house as soon as we got back. Again, I was told all about how my faith and my convictions are a joke, I'm nothing but a manipulative slut, I deserve any mistreatment that comes my way from Brady, the list goes on. By the end of the night, I was a shaking, crying ball in the corner of the room filled with equal parts rage and sorrow.

I knew Ron would sober up, calm down, and apologize profusely in the following days – or maybe weeks, this was a big one. But I also knew that I'd had enough. The cycle of accusations – humiliation – insults – apology was old. So, at 18-years-old, I followed his orders one last time. I moved out within two weeks of returning from that vacation. Shortly after settling in to my own place, I recognized that familiar pattern of abuse with Brady and called off our very short engagement. We broke up over the phone on a Tuesday, and I went downtown to the college clubs that Thursday.

I stepped out of my apartment feeling unstoppable, like a goddamn queen 'Yoncé would be proud of. It was my time. Then I immediately became a walking stereotype of the sheltered, religious girl who goes to college and goes buck wild. As a 19-year-old who had never experienced party culture, I had lots of catching up to do, or at least that's what I told myself shortly before throwing up copious amounts UV Blue vodka. I didn't even like UV Blue, but I also didn't know what options were available. Beer was gross, wine isn't convenient for house parties, and I had no idea what liquor tasted like. Being underage, I couldn't exactly go into the liquor store and browse my options, so I asked a friend what she was getting, and that became my drink for the next 6 months because I was too embarrassed to ask for anything else. To this day, UV Blue tastes like poor decisions. Then again, at $12 a bottle, that's probably just how it tastes to everyone.

The rest of that summer and the semester following was one giant party for me. I rarely slept at my own apartment because I was usually too drunk to drive home. I failed most of my classes that semester, with the foresight to drop one class required for my major and managed to get a C in another required class. For those few months, I drank when I wanted, smoked when I wanted, and slept with who I wanted. My anthem of that

summer was Miley Cyrus' "We Can't Stop." The lines proclaiming autonomy and personal freedom felt like they were written specifically for me: "It's our party we can do what we want to/It's our house we can love who we want to/It's our song we can sing if we want to/It's my mouth I can say what I want to." Being on the dance floor of Zan and Martha's Vineyard, shouting those lines with and to my friends, I felt truly free for the first time in my life. I'm certain we looked ridiculous – underage drunk white girls with no idea how to handle ourselves, but god, I felt alive for the very first time. After years of having each action, word, wardrobe choice, and everything in between scrutinized, that period of my choices, my life, and my body belonging to *me* was such an important journey. I began to embrace a discourse of individualism, not as a character flaw, but as a necessary part of my early adult life. After one semester of a 1.6 GPA and an academic probation notification, I knew I had to get myself together. I continued to party, but I kept it to the weekends, rather than every night. Those good times continued until the word "Pregnant" on a Clearblue stick changed everything.

Knocked Up

"Relationships are not isolated, dyadic phenomena driven by the psychological states of two parties. Rather, they are social processes that speak culture whenever the parties open their mouths in conversation" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 66).

I like to think my generation has moved past some of the archaic definitions of a family and the proper order of operations in terms of starting a family. In fact, the idea of a grown man asking a father's *permission* to marry a grown, consenting woman makes my skin crawl. No longer is a family only defined as one man, one woman, and their

children who are born after marriage. Families look differently, come about differently, and evolve differently. But my pregnancy proved to me that the ideals from my upbringing were not as far removed from my generation as I would have liked.

I worked as a custodian during my pregnancy, and I was at a crew meeting with all the custodians in the district. For the most part, we only associated with the people who worked in the same building, but during the monthly crew meetings, the entire district's custodians were together. I was in the bathroom with several women, and I was washing my hands. One young woman near my age who worked in a different building commented on my pregnant belly, observing that I was getting bigger. We only saw one another during these meetings, so it didn't seem odd or unusual that she was curious about how things were going. She asked how far along I was, and I told her about 7 months. Then she asked me if my husband was excited about the pregnancy. I told her that I'm not actually married. She immediately and obviously looked at my left hand, and when it confirmed that there was not a ring, she looked back up to my face, and recoiled as she said, "Oh…" Immediately feeling self-conscious, I said, "Well, my boyfriend and I have been together for over 2 years, so, ya know..." She said hesitantly, but politely, "oh okay." Her verbal and nonverbal message that marriage is a prerequisite for pregnancy made me self-conscious, though I hated to admit it. I felt like I had to prove that my pregnancy was legitimate; I hadn't just gotten knocked up by some random guy. We had might as well be married. It bothered me that her comment bothered me. I simultaneously wanted to tell her to screw off and that my boyfriend and I are in a loving relationship and excited to become parents. I would have liked to think in that moment that her

comment was hers and hers alone, but it wasn't. It was part of a shared reality that was created in the exchange, and it reinforced a centripetal discourse of "traditional" families.

During pregnancy, the feeling of walking across my university campus was very strange. I kept a close watch on the people I passed, to see when my pregnant belly was being scrutinized. Not that there was anything I could, or even wanted, to do about it; I just wanted to know what people's faces said about my pregnant body. Oftentimes, I felt an emotion that was not quite shame, but very close. It was akin to what I imagine being a teenage mother must feel like. In the 4 years I've attended this university, I've only ever seen two other pregnant women on campus. With a majority of students between the ages of 18-21, and the aforementioned statistics about 20-somethings not having children, I was quite the outlier. It doesn't help that most days, I barely look like I'm 18. I couldn't pass for a slightly older, married, working woman. I looked like I was fresh out of high school and knocked up. Even though I had a full-time job, was in a stable relationship with the father, and was excited about becoming a mother, I still felt strange as a pregnant college student.

As my belly got bigger, and I felt like more of a spectacle, I felt more and more removed from my peers. Most of my classmates had no idea how to react to a pregnant woman in their midst. One day, I walked into a philosophy class where I was one of two women in the class. I was nearing the end of the second trimester, and on this day, I was wearing a form-fitting maternity t-shirt. One of the men in the class turned toward me as I walked in, did a double take, and said, "Holy smokes! You're really pregnant!!" I laughed as I said, "Wow, good job. I've been pregnant this whole time, actually." He seemed a little embarrassed, and said, "Yea, but I've just never really noticed before."

During the last week of classes before finals, my university doesn't hold classes on Friday. It's labeled on the academic calendar as "Study Day," but it's known to the students as Dead Day, and Thursday night is known as Dead Day Eve. Coupled with the fact that Thursday is already college night at all the downtown bars and clubs, Dead Day Eve is a well-known drinking holiday for our college town. I sat in my Thursday afternoon class and I had just begun the third trimester of my pregnancy. All my classmates discussed their plans for the evening and one person said something along the lines of, "I'm getting so drunk tonight!" and many other students nodded or voiced their agreement. I smiled and opened my arms a little to acknowledge my belly and said, "I… am *not.*" My classmates chuckled with a tinge of discomfort and agreed that was probably a good plan. I felt very awkward during the conversation and searched for some way to include myself. I related with them and with their desire to celebrate the end of the semester and blow off some steam before our exams. As a 21-year-old woman, I also wanted to go out that night and take part in Dead Day Eve, but of course that wasn't possible. I knew I would go home that evening, sit against a heating pad, and watch Gilmore Girls on Netflix. I envied their freedom.

Silenced

"Whenever we speak, argues Bakhtin, we use words that are already populated with others' prior utterances or with our own utterances from the past…In addition, utterances in the here and now "speak culture" and are riddled throughout with any number of social/cultural ideologies" (Baxter, 2007, p. 122).

Pregnancy was a strange time where I tried to make sense of the messages from my childhood and adolescence in conjunction with my experiences of freedom. I was somewhere in the middle. I was on my own, still making decisions for myself doing the whole adult thing, but I wasn't exactly free, either. This new life had taken over my body and I had to take care of myself and the baby I was carrying. While I still thought of myself as just Shawna, I was visibly and obviously not just Shawna; I was Pregnant Shawna. My identity was changing along with my body. As I tried to make sense of that, I realized there are so many topics mothers and expectant mothers aren't supposed to talk about. But no one tells you what those things are! It would be super helpful if the doctor would have given me a neat handout of topics I should avoid in conversation along with the foods I should avoid in my diet at that first appointment. It would have included subjects like the pain and discomfort of pregnancy, your general opinions on kids, infanticide, you know – the basics.

My first trimester of pregnancy was unbelievably easy. I didn't get sick a single time; my energy level was a little lower than normal, but nothing I couldn't work with; I was always hungry, but who doesn't love food? I actually remember thinking to myself, "Man, I don't know what women complain about so much! This is easy. I can totally do this! Maybe I should look into surrogacy. I could make a bunch of money just by being pregnant!" And then the universe laughed and laughed. Shortly after that, the problems and complications began piling on – kidney infection, pelvic floor pain, swollen legs and ankles, hemorrhoids, pinched sciatic nerve, gestational diabetes, urinary tract infections, pre-eclampsia, diastasis recti. My body began hurting in places I didn't even know existed. One day in my second trimester, I was feeling sluggish, sore, and just generally

not great. I jokingly posted to Facebook, "Is "I feel really pregnant" a good enough excuse to call in to work?" One of the comments came from a woman about 3 years older who was currently pregnant with her second child and it said, "Oh girl, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but if you feel really pregnant now……… Just imagine weeks 35-40. But at least you look super cute preggo!" That comment induced an eye-roll so hard I'm certain I saw the inside of my skull. Yes, thank you, that is so helpful. Exactly what I need right now while feeling gross and huge and in pain is to look forward to even more pain with an even more stretched out body. Because apparently my week 23 pain is small potatoes and someday I'll know what it's like to give birth while changing a diaper and washing dishes all at the same time, but until that day, I should really just count my blessings that I'm cute. Cool. Thanks.

One of the most awkward classes I've ever experienced was a result of not knowing what I can and can't discuss as a pregnant woman. It was an intercultural communication class, and we were discussing moral absolutism. The instructor asked the class whether we thought there is an absolute moral guideline on which we should all agree – regardless of culture. A portion of the class agreed that there should be some basic ground rules, but another portion of the class allowed for more cultural freedom and interpretation. I was a part of the class who thought there should be some type of moral agreement so that basic human rights are not violated in the name of culture. The instructor explained that we were going to conduct a class debate on whether there should be an absolute guideline, but the trick was that we were going to have to affirm the opposite position from what we believed. Now, I have a debate background and understand how to fully commit to the argumentation of a position that I do not hold, so

while everyone else gasped and groaned, I chuckled and began formulating arguments for my new side.

When we got into our groups, one of my classmates attended my high school and was aware of my debate experience. I was immediately nominated the position of speaker, to which I accepted. During the other team's speech, they gave the proposition that it should never be acceptable to kill defenseless humans, such as babies and small children. Of course, this is a general premise that all rational, decent humans could agree on. However, I wanted to add some complexity to the situation and countered that in some circumstances, infanticide might be in the best interest of the greater good. For example, in nations where population control is an extreme issue, it might be more humane to kill an infant than to let a child starve or freeze to death. As I spoke, I could see the look of horror on some of my classmates' faces, and the sheer amusement in others'. Everyone, especially I, became incredibly aware of the pregnant woman advocating for infanticide, and the irony literally being carried in and on my body. I didn't begin that refutation with the idea of horrifying my classmates. I formulated an argument as an academic and debater, but I quickly learned that some matters are not okay for a mother to discuss. Evidently infanticide is one of them; who knew?

"We're the Parents, Not You"

"Others will always be different from us, bringing to an interaction "horizons of seeing" (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 22) *that are to some extent different from our own. To the extent that we speak in ways that recognize potential differences in worldviews, our*

utterances will invariably be multivocal, even if other discourses are given only a token verbal nod" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 69).

One of the benefits of working as a custodian during my pregnancy was the hours upon hours that I had to seek out information. One of my most influential resources was a podcast that emphasized natural birth and natural parenting options. I learned about drug-free labor and delivery, breastfeeding, cloth diapering, positive parenting, elimination communication, updated dietary guidelines, placenta encapsulation, and so much more. Over the course of a few months, I got to know superheroes expecting twins with the goal of drug-free, intervention-free births, moms who breastfed their babies into toddlerhood, and the warriors who fought through horrifying complications in their pregnancies. I consumed the information as if it gave life, and I developed my own thoughts and opinions regarding the baby I was growing and the child he would become. By the time I had my son, Oliver, I felt as prepared as a new mother can. Obviously, experience would be the greatest teacher, but I'd come to class prepared. So, when my mother-in-law told me about how she'd done things 25 years ago, or that my son absolutely needed baby food at four months, or that I was crazy for using cloth diapers, I took her opinion with a grain of salt. It wasn't that I thought she was a bad mother or that I had any malicious feelings toward her; I am just a very different person. We'd all long since accepted that I was the hippy who wore tie-dye and went around the family cook-outs collecting plastic water bottles and soda cans to recycle rather than see them fill a garbage can. So, when my plans and thoughts as a parent were met with some condescension, I tried not to take it personally.

For example, when I let it be known that I was planning for a natural, drug-free birth, my in-laws called me crazy. Beth, my mother-in-law, had wanted an epidural during my husband's birth, but asked too late, and never let my husband live it down. Why would I willingly choose to go through that?? When I told them I was having my placenta encapsulated, Beth thought it was the most disgusting thing she'd ever heard of. "That would be like me putting my period blood in a pill and taking it!" she said. It's nothing at all like that, but okay. When I cloth diapered, they refused to use them and bought disposable diapers for their house. When we went to visit family an hour away from home or went out to eat together, she'd always ask, "Did you bring disposable diapers?" The answer was always no. I explained over and over that I have to wash the diapers just the same, whether they're used at my home or someone else's home. It's the same process. It felt like she was really just checking to see whether I'd given up yet and realized the diapers weren't worth the hassle. We've used them for two and half years and counting, so I guess they're not that bad.

When I realized Oliver would be four months old at Thanksgiving, I explained in no uncertain terms that he was not to be given food of *any* kind at the family dinner. I don't care if you're the grandparents and if you've always snuck mashed potatoes to the babies – not with my baby. We were exclusively breastfeeding and following the updated guidelines from the World Health Organization, UNICEF, American Academy of Pediatrics, and American Academy of Family Physicians that babies should not be given any solid food until 6 months of age. My in-laws insisted I was starving my child. When Dakota was just a few months old, they gave him baby cereal in his bottle and it helped him sleep better. They insisted Oliver – at four months old – would know what food was

and would be upset that he was missing out. And besides, can we really trust those organizations? After all, the guidelines for safe sleep have changed drastically every few years. This is probably just another one of those things. Plus, the Gerber bottles say "4 months;" that means babies need food!

Eventually, when they saw that I wasn't backing down, they agreed to keep their food to themselves. We survived one family dinner without incident, and I was feeling optimistic. We just had one more gathering for the other side of the family and then we were in the clear for our first Thanksgiving holiday as parents. Unfortunately, that one did not go as well. When we arrived at Dakota's grandparents' house, most of the family was already there. Lunch was cooking, people were mingling, the house was too warm, and it was a lot to take in, especially for a 4-month-old. Beth approached me almost immediately in the living room and told me not to breastfeed Oliver in front of anyone. She said, "I know you're in to all of that, but Grandpa Jim is from a different time. You can use one of the bedrooms, just not out here." Excuse me? First of all, I will feed my baby whenever, wherever, and however I choose. That's frankly no one else's business. Second, how about you ask me politely if I mind using a bedroom where it might be more comfortable instead of telling me what I am and am not allowed to do? And third, hi, it's nice to see you too. Happy Thanksgiving. Those were all the comments that immediately rushed to my mind, but instead, I said, "Okay, that's fine." After all, it's a holiday, we're at a family event, and Beth always gets a little high-strung and frazzled at these sorts of things. Fine, whatever.

There's always a certain amount of time you're expected to stay at family gatherings like this. It's never really specified, but people notice when you drop in to eat

and then leave immediately. So, we're trying to prove that we can hang, staying to chat and having an extra piece of grandma's pie. Unfortunately, nap time had always been a bit of a hassle with Oliver. And by "bit of a hassle," I mean the stars had to be in perfect alignment, the ratio of full belly to sleepiness must be *just* right, and Hypnos, the god of sleep, needs to have personally kissed Oliver's head. So it was no surprise that we were having some trouble getting him to fall asleep in the crowded, hot, noisy house. Beth was trying to rock him in the rocking chair, but nothing was stopping the tears. Finally, tired of having my baby passed to everyone in the house to try to calm him down, I took him back and felt that he was sweltering hot. The fleece outfit and thick sweater with a turkey on it was adorable and seemed perfect for Thanksgiving when we left our house that morning. But after hours in the house full of moving bodies and a 400-degree oven, it was no longer a good fit. I took his sweater off and his little body was red and sweaty. By Beth's reaction, you would have thought I'd dunked him in an ice bath. "What are you doing?! He needs a shirt! Where are his sleeves?" "He is too hot," I said, "he's burning up right now. That's why he won't sleep. He's warm-natured, just like Dakota."

The temperature was probably in the 50s that day. I was wearing a light fleece jacket and Dakota was wearing a sweater with no extra coat or jacket. So, when Dakota saw how upset and overheated Oliver was, he picked Oliver up – still shirtless, wrapped him in an oversized receiving blanket, and walked outside. I took the extra shirt from the diaper bag out with us, and we stood in the driveway, keeping Oliver safe from the wind but giving him a chance to breathe. Beth ran out to the porch, hysterically saying, "It is too cold for that baby to be out here!!" I started to say, "He is too hot," again when Dakota's voice drowned out mine, saying, "Mom, go back inside. He is too hot. We've

got this." She retorted back in tears, "Fine! But don't ask me to keep him when he gets sick because you guys don't care about him!" Dakota said with more control than I ever could have, "Mom. Go inside. **Now**." We put the shirt on Oliver and walked around the block. Midway through the walk, Beth's words dawned on me with the force of a cartoon anvil. "Hold up. Did she just say we don't care about our son?? Are yo—are you kidding me? I just now realized that…" Dakota chuckled and said, "Yeah, I was wondering how long it was gonna take you to catch that. I'm just trying to keep the volcano of rage from erupting for another few hours. This will be a conversation, but not today. There's no way I'm talking about this calmly anytime soon."

In the days that followed, we arranged to meet with Dakota's parents and we had a long discussion about respect. While our pregnancy might not have been planned, that doesn't mean we're just a couple of kids floundering out here in the unknown world of parenthood. I am a scholar and a researcher at heart; obviously I've read all the information I can get my hands on about each decision we make. Dakota had years of childcare experience and grew up around nieces and nephews. It's not like a baby was just dumped in our laps and we were making it all up as we go along. We are real adults who have autonomy in our parenting choices. When we make a decision, it's not an invitation to negotiate. We addressed the Thanksgiving episode and explained we will not tolerate being spoken to in that way. Asserting that we don't care about our son was untrue, insulting, and downright unacceptable. We acknowledged that they did a great job raising their kids. They made their decisions, and undoubtedly some were good, some were bad. That's part of the process. But right now, it's our turn to make decisions. We're responsible for this life; we're the parents; not them.

We had to take extra steps to legitimize our roles as parents because it wasn't accepted as a given. Every decision needed an explanation or a conversation; it was exhausting. It was especially frustrating that we were receiving so much push-back from our family – the people who are supposed to support us. I expect to be told that I'm doing it all wrong from random moms on the internet, but not from my in-laws. In this period of parenthood, we had to bring our family in line with our own horizons of seeing, even if we never landed on the exact same location.

Our Kid, Our Rules

"Relational dialectics does not conceptualize relating as an equilibrium-driven enterprise. Equilibrium presupposes a center. Instead, relational dialectics…displaces the notion of a center with an ongoing centripetal-centrifugal flux. There is no center, only flux" (Baxter, 2004, p. 186).

As time has gone by, I care less about what people think. I've gone from a timid 22-year-old with a newborn worrying about each milestone, to a 24-year-old mother of a vivacious toddler and our life is what it is. Dakota and I are committed to raising our son in an environment of consciousness, and we make no apologies for that. In southwest Missouri with farming family, our decisions aren't always popular. For example, when Oliver puts on my high heels and walks around the house, Dakota and I tell him how pretty and impressive he is rather than telling him those are for girls. When he plays with my makeup brushes, we tell him he's got great blending skills. Instead of buying a children's Bible, we bought a Norse mythology storybook. In just two and half years, he's been to at least three political protests/rallies. Dakota bought him a Black Panther

action figure because representation is important. Even at two years old, it's important to us that Oliver is raised in environments that value and foster inclusivity.

Therefore, when Oliver's daycare hired a new employee who had a confederate flag on display in her vehicle, I flipped. I saw visions of this new employee dressing up the preschoolers in blackface, leading them in singing Dixie Land, and chants of "The South Will Rise Again!" I could hear the history lessons, convincing children that the Civil War wasn't really about race at all; it was about economics – the same history lessons I learned in rural Mississippi. I could see the artwork, using construction paper and Magic Markers to depict lynchings and book burnings. And then I calmed down… a little. I still held by the idea that displaying a confederate flag makes me question this woman's judgment, critical thinking skills, and compassion for humans. None of these things lend themselves to me trusting her with my child. Then I began thinking about the 2 or 3 black and bi-racial kids who also attend that daycare. I began thinking about more realistic possibilities. What if she treats them differently? What if this woman is the very first step in a school-to-prison pipeline where children of color are scrutinized more and given harsher punishments than their white classmates? What if my two-year-old son sees this type of behavior normalized by an authority figure? And we can't even talk about it. He's too young to come home and tell us what happened at school and ask questions. I can't mitigate any damage.

As soon as I told Dakota about the new employee and the flag, he said it might be time for us to find a new daycare. While I knew that was definitely a possibility, I didn't just want to up and leave without a conversation. Oliver loves all his teachers and they absolutely adore him. I'm good friends with some of the people who work there, and we

really feel like family. I hated the idea of leaving. We tossed around a few ideas for how to broach the subject with the daycare director. Again, being in southwest Missouri, Dakota didn't expect we'd get very far in a conversation about our concerns. So, he went out to check on some other daycares in town and I spoke to one of my friends at our current daycare. I asked how she thought Jill, the director, felt about the Confederate flag and asked if she thought Jill would be receptive to a conversation about our concerns. She said she really wasn't sure, but she would mention something for me. "Thank you," I said, "because I am truly not okay with someone who openly displays a symbol of hatred and oppression caring for my child. And if she continues to work here, we *will* find another daycare."

That very same day, Jill met us outside as we came to pick up Oliver and told us about her conversation with the new employee. As it turns out, that vehicle belonged to her dad and she was only driving it while hers was in the shop. She apologized profusely about the flag and understood why it was concerning. She explained that was her dad's flag and not hers or indicative of her views. As I breathed a huge sigh of relief, I was so proud of all of us – myself, my husband, my friend, and our daycare director. Dakota and I were not asking for permission; we didn't need our opinions to be validated; we made a decision and stuck to our guns. We're flexible on lots of issues, but bigotry is not one of them. That was a very clear moment for us where we took ownership of our parenthood and acted on the offensive rather than defensive. My friend was absolutely ready to put up a fight for Oliver, and our daycare director affirmed the environment that is so important to us. This situation had a great ending all around, but what it symbolized for

me as a parent was even bigger. We might not have it all figured out, but I'm proud of our choices, and I'm proud to be Oliver's mother.

Being a mother is hard. Being a millennial is hard. It's always a fight. I'm constantly fighting to be taken seriously as an adult and as a woman. I fight for my authority to be taken seriously as a parent. I fight against stereotypes and opinions that seem inescapable; I fight my own upbringing and self-doubt. My identity as a mother and as a millennial is not always clear to me; it's constantly in flux. But I'm becoming more okay with that and learning to just enjoy the ride. I'm learning not to ask for permission and to just do the damn thing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework used in this study comes from Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics theory. The theory is grounded in Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, is formally developed by Baxter and Montgomery in 1996, and then further elaborated upon by Baxter in 2011. The latest articulation of RDT by Baxter is sometimes referred to as RDT 2.0. RDT 1.0 and 2.0 are largely similar, but Baxter outlines five key differences between the two versions of the theory (2011). First, focus is placed on the struggle between *discourses* rather than individuals. Second, an individual's utterance is not viewed as a psychological phenomenon, but a link in an utterance chain. Therefore, emphasis is placed on the utterance and the corresponding discourses again, rather than the individual. Third, the intersection of discourses is where research takes place. Fourth, competing discourses are rarely on an equal playing field; some discourses are privileged over others. Finally, RDT 2.0 elaborates on the method of contrapuntal analysis, whereby the interplay of competing discourses is analyzed.

Mikhail Bakhtin and Dialogism

In order to understand relational dialectics theory, one must trace its origins back to Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. One of Bakhtin's most well-known contributions to philosophy is the concept of dialogism, or the belief that dialogue is the key to consciousness. For Bakhtin, relationships, identity formation, and meaning-making all happen in a social space through relationships and interactions with others. "The essence of Bakhtin's dialogic view hold that dialogue – both as an actual, real time,

interpersonal process and as a conceptual metaphor for understanding more abstract

cultural, historical, and relational phenomena – is the glue that holds social existence

together" (Montgomery & Baxter, 1998, p. 157). This idea of dialogism and co-authoring

of one another's lives persisted throughout Bakhtin's career, but the specific focus shifted

around 1924. In his early works as a philosopher, dialogue is a key concept only in a

metaphorical sense; human existence and consciousness can be understood as the unity of

different voices and the relation of difference between one embodied person and another

(Arneson, 2007). However, around 1924, during what's known as the "linguistic turn,"

the dialogue became more literal as Bakhtin turned his focus to language, specifically.

While other scholars were also turning their attention to language during this

time, Bakhtin took issue with what he identified as abstract objectivism and

individualistic subjectivism (Voloshinov, 1986). On one extreme end of the spectrum,

abstract objectivism focuses solely on the stylistic and grammatical structure of a

language, conceptualizing it as a closed system incapable of rendering objects or

experiences meaningful. "[S]tylistics has been deprived of an authentic philosophical and

sociological approach to its problems; it has become bogged down in stylistic trivia…"

(Bakhtin, 1981, p. 269). For Bakhtin, the study of language was so much more than

grammar, style, and symbols. Instead, he was interested in language as "ideologically

saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion…" (1981, p. 271).

On the other extreme end of the spectrum was individualistic subjectivism, which

Bakhtin said ignores and fails to understand the social nature of language (Voloshinov,

1986). In this view, language comes from the sovereign self, meaning that any

communicative act is simply reflective of the inner self's desires, attitudes, beliefs, and

goals. By conceptualizing language as something so personal that it only reflects the speaker's inner world, scholars ignore the shared meaning making that takes place in language. In contrast, language itself was a relational entity according to Bakhtin, writing as Voloshinov: "In point of fact, word is a two-sided act. It is determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant" (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 86).

Rather than viewing language as extremes of either a closed system or a mere reflection of individual thought, Bakhtin conceptualized language as an open, constantly evolving, social process that creates the world in which people live. Experience does not form expression; rather, expression forms experience (Voloshinov, 1986). Therefore, in order to make sense of an embodied life experience, the study of language is crucial. Meaning making, identity, and reality itself is created and shaped by dialogue, in both the literal and metaphorical sense.

Utterances. The central unit of analysis in dialogism is the utterance, and Bakhtin's "utterance" is far more complex than contemporary understanding of the word. Utterance in the sense that Bakhtin described is not just an individual exchange of words from one person to another. Words and meanings are bound by space, time, and culture. Every utterance carries links from the past and future, and those links create meaning. "Utterance" includes the context in which words are spoken. Previously, the context and situation surrounding language was studied, but it was seen as something external to the meaning. While not unimportant, it was not viewed as integral to the meaning.

In no instance is the extraverbal situation only an external cause of the utterance; it does not work from the outside like a mechanical force. On the contrary, the situation

enters into the utterance as a necessary constitutive element of its semantic structure. (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 251).

An utterance does not come solely from the speaker, such as with individualistic subjectivism. Utterances also include the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, the spatiotemporal circumstances, and the anticipated reaction from the hearer. The relationship between the interlocutors, shared knowledge, and culture are all integrated into the utterance. Since the utterance carries the weight of meaning and associations that come before it and after it, one cannot analyze the utterance itself as something that stands alone. Analyzing an utterance means stepping back to look at the bigger picture, or the utterance chain. An utterance is only one part of a bigger system, so in order to tease apart meaning, one cannot narrow the focus too much.

Identity Formation. When it comes to identity, Bakhtin goes so far as to say that one's realization of self is impossible without the other. "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287). In dialogism, the self is only partially accessible without the presence of the other. "Self and other do not exist as two separate entities but as a relation of similarity and difference. Consciousness is the ongoing, situated action of relating" (Baxter, 2011, p. 25).

Dialogue is the back and forth exchange between interlocutors that creates meaning. Dialectic is when that back and forth exchange is a tension between two competing viewpoints. The opposing forces are not necessarily negative; rather, they serve to balance the meaning that is created.

Relational Dialectics Theory

From Bakhtin's dialogue comes Baxter and Montgomery's relational dialectics. While Bakhtin provided the framework for relational dialectics, Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery distinguish RDT from Bakhtin's dialogism in that Bakhtin focused on the novel or the carnival, whereas RDT focuses more on the basic, everyday interactions that take place in common acquaintanceships and relationships. They also intentionally moved from dialogism to dialectics because it emphasizes the struggle of competing discourses (Baxter, 2011). In RDT, the voices and discourses are not simply different, as with dialogism. Rather, they are opposing forces constantly at odds with one another. "RDT narrows the domain…from a more benign focus on differing discourses to the more combative focus on competing discourses" (Baxter, 2011, p. 45). Discourses are more than just a particular word, phrase, or conversation. They are bigger than just one situation; instead, they provide meaning to a bigger picture. "Discourses are those systems of meaning at the level of the broader culture or localized in a given relationship or family, by which interaction and relational life is made intelligible to those inside and outside of the relationship" (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014, p. 102). For example, younger mothers may feel pressure to maintain an active social life when their friends express dissatisfaction at their absence, but they might also feel guilty about asking for a babysitter and explaining that they're going out with friends. The oppositional discourses play out in a variety of ways, and the way opposing discourses are handled or resolved is a large focus of RDT research. The management of competing discourses is what shapes relationships and identities.

"RDT is a theory of relational meaning making—that is, how the meanings surrounding individual and relationship identities are constructed through language use" (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). This language use and meaning making goes beyond particular denotative definitions. Rather, RDT is more concerned with the way language shapes discourses and systems of meaning that evolve. Meanings are ascribed and understood in the larger context of relationships. "Unlike many relational theories, RDT focuses on discourse rather than the individual as the unit of analysis; we ask how our personal talk interacts with, reflects, and contests cultural ideas about relationships" (Faulkner & Ruby, 2015, p. 210). These ideas about relationships form individual identities and provide a way to understand oneself. Much like relationships, identities are ever changing. RDT asserts that competing discourses create tension within our relationships and personal identities, and thus provides a way to analyze and make sense of those discourses. "RDT advances from the assumption that tensions (or relational contradictions) are inherent in all relationships and that these should not be viewed as problems" (O' Boyle, 2014, p.170). Tensions are a vital and healthy part of relationships, and as individuals balance those tensions, they create solutions and personal priorities, all of which converge to form an individual concept of identity.

Makeup of Discourses. The driving forces of discourses are centripetal (i.e., unifying) and centrifugal (i.e., decentering) dynamics that contribute to the establishment, maintenance and dissolution of personal relationships. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) propose that these dynamics create at least three major families of opposing voices in social interactions: (a) integration (i.e., autonomy/independence versus connectedness/ integration), (b) certainty (i.e., stability/continuity/predictability versus

change/novelty/surprise), and (c) expression (i.e., openness/disclosure versus discretion/ privacy) (Amati & Hannawa, 2014).

Discourses in RDT are formations of utterances as Bakhtin described them. Utterance in the sense that Bakhtin described is not just an individual exchange of words from one person to another. Words and meanings are bound by space, time, and culture. Every utterance carries links from the past and future, and those links create meaning. "The single utterance, with all its individuality and creativity, can in no way be regarded as a completely free combination of forms of language…" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 81). Utterances are simply the merging of what has already been uttered and the anticipation of future utterances. Elaborating on Bakhtin's discussion, Baxter and Montgomery formulated four distinct utterance links that are implicated in a given utterance: distal already-spoken, distal not-yet-spoken, proximal already-spoken, and proximal not-yet-spoken (2011). Distal and proximal indicate the temporal closeness of previous and anticipated utterances to the current utterance. Distal already-spoken refers to the larger, cultural messages. These are utterances that inform cultural norms and determine the typical way of doing things. Distal already-spoken utterances have been long since established and can have an enormous impact on utterances at hand. Distal not-yet-spoken refers to the anticipated response of the culture at large. It moves away from the immediate individuals and deals more with the generalized other, or "they," so to speak. Distal not-yet-spoken asks, "What will people think?" Proximal already-spoken accounts for the individuals involved in the utterance and their history. This site on the utterance chain deals with the established relationship norms and individual norms. This is where the relationship's past butts heads with the relationship's present and future. Every

utterance is informed by previous utterances. Finally, proximal not-yet-spoken the anticipated reaction from the hearer on the part of the speaker. Using the relationship's past, the speaker might anticipate that the hearer will or will not like what will be said, and might adapt accordingly.

Discursive struggles take place at every link in the utterance chain, and in the middle of all four sites is the utterance at hand. While it may be impacted more by one link or another, it is not unaffected by any of them. For example, one utterance might be more impacted by a cultural norm (distal already-spoken) than by a specific relationship's history (proximal already-spoken), but it is nonetheless still impacted by and acts upon proximal already-spoken. Analyzing the forces at odds by locating an utterance on the utterance chain allows individuals to make sense of utterances by giving them more context and background. Meaning can be determined and interrogated more fully.

Aesthetic Moments. While much focus is placed on the way competing discourses collide with one another, one experience that is sometimes overlooked is what Baxter (2011) calls an *aesthetic moment*. This occurs when two competing discourses interact in such a way that one does not subsume the other, rather they join together to create a new meaning. The discourses are no longer viewed as oppositional, but they join to transform the meaning in question as it relates to the relationship or identity.

An aesthetic moment occurs when discourses interpenetrate in a way that significantly and profoundly reconstructs each meaning system (Baxter, 2011). Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) likened aesthetic moments to chemical reactions, such as the mixing of hydrogen and oxygen to create an entirely new and different entity—water. (Wenzel & Poynter, 2014, 153).

Aesthetic moments are not incredibly common, as discourses are relatively enduring. It's difficult to reconstruct a discourse's impact on meaning and identity. However, when they do occur, aesthetic moments can be powerful experiences. Aesthetic moments transcend the normally oppositional nature of dialectics to create a temporary wholeness, which is what Baxter considers idealized dialogue (Halliwell, 2016).

RDT's Distinctiveness. RDT is unlike post-positivist theories used for causal prediction of future behavior. Rather, it is a descriptive theory of relational meaning making (Baxter, 2011). In other words, the theory doesn't predict future events; it explains past events and interactions. The criterion for a descriptive theory is "its capacity for heurism – its ability to be useful in assisting us in seeing things in ways different from what otherwise would be the case" (Baxter, 2011, p. 7). RDT analyzes language and discourse to assess meanings that are socially constructed and to assess how those meanings impact individual and relationship identities. "The core premise of dialogically grounded RDT is that meanings are wrought from the struggle of competing, often contradictory, discourses" (Baxter, 2011, p. 2). Given the nature of RDT, this thesis does not seek to make generalizations about the way one *should* handle motherhood and identity. However, it does seek to explain the way women grapple with their identities and reveal the various influences on identity formation. This paper seeks to provide a direction to which women can look to navigate their own identities. Examining the experiences of others can help reveal and make sense of one's own experiences. The primary questions this thesis seeks to explore are as follows:

RQ1: Which dialectical tensions are present in the lives of Millennial mothers?

RQ2: How are the respective dialectal tensions communicatively managed by Millennial mothers?

RQ3: How do the dialectical tensions serve to shape Millennial mothers' identity of self?

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews. Interviews were used to investigate millennial mothers' own thoughts and recollections of their interpersonal experiences relating to their identities.

Participants

After obtaining IRB approval, a total of ten interviews were conducted with participants ages 22-28 (IRB-FY2018-343, 11/19/17). The call for participants gave an age range of 18-28, but the youngest participant age was 22. Each participant was within the age range of a millennial, and in various stages of motherhood. Participants had children ranging in ages from 6 weeks to 10 years. While all ten participants were married, they had a variety of family statuses in terms of biological and step-children. Between the ten participants, three had one or more step-children. Of the fourteen biological children of mothers interviewed, participants reported nine pregnancies were planned, and five were a surprise. All participants were straight, white (or white passing) women.

The researcher recruited participants through a convenience sampling on social media accounts, as well as snowball sampling. Posts were made on two local Facebook groups for women and/or mothers. In addition, a post was created on the researcher's personal profile. Women who expressed an interest in the study were contacted to arrange a time and date for interviews. The researcher asked for current participants to refer other

potential participants. Nine participants were recruited using the convenience sampling, and one was referred via snowball sampling.

Procedure

During interviews, participants took part in a semi-structured interview with 5 main questions or prompts. These can be found in the Appendix. The researcher asked follow-up questions and for clarification or more information as needed to achieve data saturation. By utilizing the semi-structured approach, interviewer and interviewee are equal participants in the conversation. The interviewer has a basic idea of the topics the conversation must cover, but the participant has the freedom to explore those topics in a variety of ways depending on personal experience. "The interviewee is able to tell her own story, to be the expert, to choose what to tell and how to tell it, to share significant experiences, and to teach the interviewer how to interpret them" (Sporer & Toller, 2017). Interviews lasted for an average of 21 minutes and all were conducted in face-to-face settings. Interviews were conducted in a variety of locations, depending on the availability of the participants. After women expressed interest and willingness to participate in an interview, the researcher allowed participants to choose the location. Some were conducted in the participants' homes, and some were conducted in public locations. Likewise, some participants had their child/children present and others did not. Interviews were audio recorded with the informed consent of participants and transcribed for a total of 72 single-spaced pages of data.

Data Analysis

The researcher used a contrapuntal analysis as outlined by Baxter (2011) to examine the competing discourses present in data gained from participant interviews. "The general analytic question that guides contrapuntal analysis is, "What are the competing discourses in the text and how is meaning constructed through their interplay?"" (Baxter, 2011, p. 152). This form of analysis examines the interplay of competing discourses as they appear explicitly or implicitly in talk (Baxter, 2010). Baxter discusses the importance of identifying both manifest and latent themes (2011). Manifest themes are fairly straightforward to identify, as they are discussed explicitly, but latent themes are more difficult to discover. To identify latent themes, the researcher analyzed the data itself, while also considering other relational and cultural influence that might make a discourse intelligible (Baxter, 2011). "It requires an analytic sensibility to ''the word with a sideward glance'' (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 208); that is, the ways in which speakers' utterances mark discursive struggle and negotiate centripetal and centrifugal positioning of discourses" (Baxter, 2007, p. 123).

Contrapuntal analysis does not include a clear step-by-step process to follow, as each use of contrapuntal analysis is highly contextual to the data and goals of the study. Therefore, to identify themes and discourses in a contrapuntal analysis, the researcher utilized thematic open and axial coding in close readings and re-readings of the data. Open coding began during transcription and preliminary readings of completed transcripts as the researcher noted themes in each interview. Next, the interviews were compared to one another in axial coding as themes were placed in broader categories. Some themes were expanded, while others were collapsed. In this process of open and axial coding, the researcher followed guidelines for thematic analysis. "Thematic analysis

is a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon. The process involves the identification of themes through careful reading and re-reading of the data" (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 3-4). Thematic analysis complements contrapuntal analysis well in that contrapuntal ultimately searches for themes; it simply keeps discourses and tensions at the forefront of thought.

The thematic analysis used in this thesis follows the 6-step guidelines laid out by Braun & Clark (2006). The first step is for the researcher to become familiar with the data set(s). This step involved reading and re-reading transcribed material from interviews and focus groups. The researcher began making preliminary notes regarding themes and discourses during this first step. In the second step, initial codes were generated. "Codes identify a feature of the data (semantic content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst, and refer to the most basic segment…that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon" (Braun & Clark, 2006, p. 18). Once initial codes were created, step three involved searching for themes. Themes are broader categories in which the previously discovered codes are placed. Step four involved reviewing themes to decide if data saturation was met. Some themes did not have enough data to actually become themes, others needed to be split into more than one theme, and others simply needed refined. This step involved two levels of review: the first level looked at individual data codes to determine whether they form a coherent pattern. The researcher determined whether the coded data extracts belonged in their respective themes. Level two of this step was similar, but involved looking at the entire data set as a whole. At this level, the researcher considered the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set, but also whether the thematic map accurately reflected the

meanings evident in the data set as a whole (Braun & Clark, 2006). Step five was to

define and refine themes. This included naming themes and discourses to determine the

essence of that theme. This step was to ensure themes do not attempt to cover too much

or too little ground. Finally, step six involved the final write up of the themes. These are

identified in the following Results section.

RESULTS

By interrogating the data, all three research questions were answered. The results of each question are explained in this section, and further discussion and connections between the two studies are established in the conclusion.

Dialectical Tensions

Research question 1 asked which dialectical tensions are present in the lives of millennial mothers. Through analyzing interview data, three main tensions appeared: mother – millennial, authenticity – persona, and connectedness – autonomy. Each tension is discussed below.

Millennial – Mother. The first dialectical tension that must be explored is that of millennial versus mother. Throughout this study, both "millennial" and "mother" emerged as discourses and not just roles in life or demographic identifiers. They each have their own sets of expectations and utterances associated with them, which proved important. The researcher personally felt this tension to be prevalent in her own life, so much that it inspired further examination through this thesis. It also clearly emerged from interviews with participants. When asked to describe their lives as millennials, many participants gave responses such as, "I guess I've never classified myself as a millennial," or "I don't think of myself of a millennial really," or "to be honest, being a Millennial just means nothing to me." This was interesting because the generation in which one grows up can have huge, lasting impacts on identity. Therefore, this blanket rejection of the term was cause for more conversation. The researcher asked follow-up questions as to

why participants did not identify with the term. Many of them described the public perception of millennials as being entitled, whiny, crybabies, partiers, self-obsessed, and political. These are the centripetal discourses participants have incorporated into their own definitions of what it means to be a millennial. "In its broadest sense, a discourse is a cultural system of meaning that circulates among a group's members and which makes our talk sensical" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 349). The negative descriptors of "millennial" have circulated to the extent that they not only make the group's talk sensical, but they constitute the dominant discourse. It is practically a given that millennial equals bad, so that becomes the centripetal, or primary, discourse. Savannah, a 24-year-old mother of a 7-year-old and a 3-year-old said, "I kind of look at what social media describes as a millennial, and I don't think I fall under that category for the most part." Participants' definitions of "millennial" have been shaped by social media and internet headlines, which are largely negative. This can be seen in the following response from Kendra, a 28-year-old mother of a 6-week-old:

> I mean, the older generation is, "You millennials, you think you're entitled (laughing)." Like, "Tell me about how I'm entitled or if you think I'm entitled to things." … I guess it's just kind of knowing that I'm going to work hard for what I want regardless, because in my mind, whenever I say millennial-- whenever I hear the term millennial, I think negative.

Even if they haven't been personally targeted, just knowing the public perception of millennials is so negative, participants feel the need to overcome that stigma and work against the stereotypes associated with their generation. Each choice they make comes with the weight of distal already-spoken utterances that tells them being a millennial makes them lazy, entitled, etcetera, in addition to the distal not-yet-spoken where they attempt to determine whether their choice will disrupt or reinforce those stereotypes. The

discourse of millennials-as-lazy or any other negative characteristic has power as the dominant, or centripetal, discourse. "In other words, power resides in the systems of meaning – the discourses – through which social reality as we know it is constructed" (Baxter, 2011, p. 124). For many participants, being a millennial doesn't mean being educated, confident, or risk-takers; it means being entitled and self-obsessed. This definition is imperative when understanding the way "millennial" is a dialectical tension opposed to "mother." The negative descriptors of millennials that participants seem to have internalized are direct contradictions to being a good mother. It is not possible to adequately attend to a baby's needs or to raise a well-adjusted member of society if one is entitled, selfish, partying and shirking responsibilities.

Additionally, motherhood is often made sensible through the discourse of intensive motherhood. According to Hays (as cited in Johnston & Swanson, 2007), intensive motherhood is a set of taken-for-granted meanings that constitute mothering expectations as "an expert-guided and child-centered…emotionally absorbing, labor intensive and financially expensive" child-rearing philosophy (p. 448). Through this discourse, independence, participation in the work force, or any other type of self-service is inherently at odds with "good" motherhood. Other researchers posit that intensive mothering is the dominant ideology surrounding motherhood (Elliot, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012), so it makes sense why the discourse of individualism that surrounds millennials is something to be rejected.

Even the characteristics of millennials that are not inherently negative become either more difficult or impossible as a mother. For example, being independent and career-driven are not at all bad traits, but when an individual has to pack a diaper bag, a

breast pump, a car seat, snacks, and whatever else a baby might need before they ever leave their homes, independence is no longer a real thing. Jennifer, a 28-year-old mother to a 3-month-old discussed the challenges of always having to think about the last time the baby ate, the last diaper change, if they have everything in the diaper bag, carrying around the car seat and how that can interfere with making plans or going places. "So, you know, there will be no date night… everywhere we go, he has to go."

Having a career is more challenging as a parent, but specifically as a mother. Numerous researchers have documented gender inequity in the workplace (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011; Cohen, 2013; Gaucher, 2011; Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Winslow, 2010), so once motherhood is added to gender inequity, working mothers' challenges multiply rather than add. To illustrate, breastfeeding can be a huge hurdle in the workplace. Employers often don't understand the time it takes or the importance of adhering to a schedule when trying to maintain an adequate milk supply. Katheryn, a 26-year-old step mother to a 10-year-old and biological mother of a 2-year-old and 6-month-old, discussed the factors that led to her quitting her job and staying home full time with her children, and one was the difficulty of breastfeeding while working outside the home:

> And my boss being like, "That only takes 10 minutes, right?" And I'm like, "Ha, ha. You're funny." I've got to hook everything up. I've got to clean everything back off. Maybe 10 minutes without any actual pumping…And constantly being like, "You can go in 10 more minutes," or "You can go in 30 more minutes, right?" And it going further and further and me drying up becau – you know.

Mothers do not always have the option to pursue careers and opportunities, as they are limited in various ways. The proximal and sometimes distal already-spoken understanding that women need to check their motherhood at the door of the workplace makes it far more difficult to balance a work-life identity. In Katheryn's case, her boss's

dismissal of her needs became a discourse that had real-life implications – she could no longer work there and breastfeed her baby. The discursive becomes material in contexts such as these.

Millennial mothers' very existence is rife with contradictions. Madison, a 24-year-old step-mother to a 5-year-old and biological mother to an 8-month-old, explained that she is both the youngest person and the only female in her workplace, and occasionally gets unsolicited comments about motherhood:

> I have pictures of my daughter sitting in my office at work and I absolutely hate when people are like, "Well, you're just a baby yourself. How could you have had a baby?" And I'm like, "Well, same way you had a baby. I don't know what to tell you."

Comments like these represent a confusing contradiction in the cultural discourse. Women are still expected to have and raise children, but they're also expected to…not? Julia, a 22-year-old mother of a 5-month-old brought up the point that millennials are "kind of the first generation to say, "Maybe I don't need to have kids."" She went on to say, "I think that um, older generations have a problem with that too, because they were kind of raised to think that um, you get married, you have kids, that's just how it is…" When women receive these simultaneous messages about how they should follow a traditional life path and have kids, but are also told they are too young to have a baby, it can be difficult to make sense of them. This contradiction is located at the intersection of the proximal already-spoken where mothers are criticized for having children at a young age, and the distal already-spoken where women are criticized for not having children soon enough. There is a societal expectation that women should have children, and they should do it while they're young and able to enjoy it, but on an interpersonal level,

millennial women are often treated like children. Julia also had personal experience with these conflicting messages within her own family:

> But it was the comments that my grandparents would make like, "Oh, you're still my baby and now you had a baby." And it's like - I need you to see me as an adult now because becoming a mom, especially when you're young and a mom it's hard to even see yourself as an adult and so it's – I really need *you* to see me as that (laughing). Because it's just like this is the time when you have to grow up. You have to. Because like when you have a kid that's basically your only option and so having someone still look down on you and still question your decisions as though you were a child makes that 10 times harder.

In addition to contradictory societal expectations, mothers also expressed being alienated from their peers and friends. Eight of the ten participants expressed some degree of loneliness and disconnect from peers as a result of becoming a mother. Participants explained they simply have different priorities than their non-parent counterparts. When millennial mothers do get a chance to hire a babysitter and go out for a few hours, many of them want to spend time with their significant others, rather than going out with friends. Kaylee, a 28-year-old mother of a 7-year-old and 5-year-old explained that her college cohort typically went out on Friday evenings for happy hour, but she was usually unable to join. She said, "So I'm left at home with the kids and I want to reserve my babysitter time for hanging out with my husband, not necessarily going out with my friends, which is also important, but I couldn't do that every Friday." Julia also felt her friend group shifting as she became a mother and their priorities changed:

> … with my friends, being a mom has probably taken me away from them, just because, like I said, we have different priorities now. Um and they're still going to bars, they're still like having fun on the weekends, whereas, my fun on the weekend is just watching a movie at home with my daughter and husband.

Millennial mothers do not often have the luxury of a Friday night out on the town or a lazy Sunday brunch because bottomless mimosas and breastfeeding do not mix, nor do toddlers and restaurants. This struggle is an example of competing discourses of community within motherhood and family life and discourses of individualism in millennial life.

Missing out on opportunities to go out with friends and to eat at restaurants may not sound like a unique experience; after all, people have been juggling family and social lives for years. However, societal trends have changed, and one of those trends is the amount of time and money millennials spend dining out. Analysis of historical data on spending habits reveal "eating out has increased from 25.9% of consumers in 1970 to a current record of 43.5%" (Patel, 2017, n.p.). This is just one example of the way millennial mothers differ from the larger trends millennials are shaping. Millennial mothers do not feel like they have the "typical" experiences of other 20-somethings.

Authenticity – Persona. One struggle that emerged from interview data was that of authenticity versus persona, particularly on social media. Authenticity refers to the ability to represent one's life as it is – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Whereas persona refers to the need to portray a more idealized image. As the first generation to document parenthood on social media, it can be a treacherous terrain. Parents grapple with whether they are posting too much about their kids, not enough, what information is appropriate to share, privacy concerns, among others. Millennial parents are raising children in an era where social media presence is the norm. When asked to describe her life as a millennial, social media was the first topic Kaylee discussed:

> Social media all the time, right, uhh my kids are like wanna take selfies or,
> like I take a picture of them and they're like 'don't put that on Facebook'
> and I'm like, "You're 7, shut up (laughing) you're ridiculous right now."

Even at the age of seven, children are learning to regulate and control their image on social media platforms, and the task is not any easier as an adult. In choosing what to post, parents are conscious of the opinions and responses of their friends and followers. Julia explained her concerns with social media as a mother:

> I mean as far as millennial challenges go in motherhood, I don't know. It's probably just being expected to really document her life on social media, whereas I'm kind of being a little cautious with that. I don't want to really broadcast her whole life on social media, but I know a lot of moms do. And that's totally fine. But one thing I wanted to make sure is I knew that I've heard people complain about millennials, like every post is about their baby. So instead of making multiple posts a week, I try to compile all the pictures to one big post just maybe once every two weeks. So I think that's personally making me a little more comfortable with it, so I know that that's not the only thing going on my Facebook…

This quotation revealed a couple of concerns – privacy of the child and overall social media image. As the first technology veterans, millennials are making up the rules as they go about what is appropriate to post about their children on social media. It can run the gambit of posting every gritty detail to nothing at all. The mothers interviewed feel a pressure to be everything and to represent their lives in a well-rounded, glamorous way that may or may not be accurate. It is not enough that a new baby is a parent's whole world and the only thing important at the time – they cannot *only* post about that for fear of annoying followers. These concerns of knowing when to reveal authenticity versus when to enact a certain persona illustrate the intersection of proximal not-yet-spoken utterances when mothers acknowledge their specific friends may not want to see their baby posts, and distal not-yet-spoken utterances when they evaluate what their posts

mean within a larger culture of being a millennial (Baxter, 2011). Katheryn talked about

the pressure to maintain a certain image on social media:

> I just love social media. If you really stop and look at every single thing
> that people say you shouldn't talk about on there. "I don't want to hear
> your problems." "I don't want to hear you brag." "I don't want to see your
> children." "I don't want to hear about your husband." It's like, "What are
> you? What am I allowed to talk about exactly on there?"

Participants also reported feeling a pressure to portray everything as perfect

without acknowledging the struggles inherent in raising children. People post the happy

photos of fun activities and exciting milestones, but not the tantrums and meltdowns and

ugliness. This gives other parents a false idea of what motherhood is actually like. In true

millennial fashion, this tension is even noted on social media memes. One image

juxtaposes "Me on Instagram: "Making cupcakes with the kids, love them so much!"; Me

in real life: "YOU'RE GETTING EGGSHELLS IN THE BATTER JESUS CHRIST

LET ME DO IT!"" (Me on Instagram, 2016). While it may seem miniscule or common

sense that social media does not necessarily portray real life, it can be challenging,

especially for new mothers.

> And I do feel like being a millennial with social media and everything you
> do kind of have to have-- well you don't have to have but a lot of people
> do kind of have this like face everything's perfect in my life, I'm so
> grateful and blessed and all that. – Kaylee

> And I also think that just being on social media you see um everybody's
> like achievements and things like that and then you start to think about
> yourself like, "When am I--?" And you start to get depressed … honestly,
> I want to go back to Facebook. I think it's that. I think you see these moms
> that go out and their kids look like GQ pretty much and my kids
> have spaghetti going down their stomachs, and I'm like, "What am I doing
> wrong?" – Sierra, 25-year-old mother of a 4-year-old and 1-year-old

These quotations illustrate the tension of authenticity versus persona as mothers struggle

with balancing a level of honesty without giving away too much information that might

incur judgement. Mothers feel pressure to exude the distal already-spoken of intensive motherhood ideals.

Even outside of social media, mothers tend to police their language when talking about their kids or their families. For example, in the interview, Kaylee was discussing some of the challenges of motherhood and said "…being a mom and having to deal with that (laughing). It's a blessing; it's a blessing." The interviewer drew attention to that choice of words "to deal with that" and the immediate backing off from the original tone by saying, "It's a blessing, it's a blessing." Kaylee acknowledged one reason she really appreciates her friends in particular is because they are honest about motherhood. She said, "Yeah, that's one reason I really like my group of friends because they're all just like, "My God this is awful today." And it's okay. It's okay for it to be bad every once in a while." She explained that as a millennial, a lot of people feel pressured to portray a perfect life: "I'm so grateful and blessed and all that. And every once in a while it's just real talk. Like this is batshit crazy [laughter]." Kaylee has a group of friends with whom she can connect and be honest, but that authenticity is not nearly as accessible on social media and many mothers don't have those real-life connections.

Connectedness – Autonomy. The tension of connectedness versus autonomy addresses the extent to which one is an independent, autonomous agent as opposed to someone who is physically or otherwise dependent on others (Baxter, 2011). Millennial mothers face a unique form of the connectedness versus autonomy tension from the millions of opinions available online. Mothers must make a host of decisions about their children and family, and sometimes they have to rely on outside information to make good decisions – placing them in both a position of authority and vulnerability. Mothers

can struggle with knowing when to draw the line between what is helpful advice and what is information overload or mommy-shaming. The internet and social media can provide fantastic resources to parents as they make decisions, such as whether to breastfeed, which pediatrician to visit, which daycare facility to use, and the endless other decisions one must make as a parent. However, many participants reported having to find their own balance of knowing when to connect, ask for help, or take advice, versus knowing when to just make their own decisions and not worry about everyone else's opinions. Katheryn explained that seeking information begins with good intentions, but can quickly get out of hand:

> I mean, it starts with you obviously wanting to be a good mom and you starting the reading process and stuff. And then there's so many--
> …Everything is so pushed and so much of a uh 18 billion things that you should be doing with your kids all the way through the day… Especially Pinterest and all of that. There's two-year-old curriculums that you should be on these schedules and it's so much.

The internet can be a treasure trove of quality information where parents sort out their parenting styles and philosophies, but it can also be too much to sort through. Opinions are hurled at mothers from every direction, and they are not all equally valid or helpful.

Kendra had a similar experience of being overwhelmed by too much information with her newborn. So much about motherhood is unknown and that can be unsettling when trying to care for a baby who depends on their caregivers for every possible need. When asked about what challenges she faces as a mother, she responded, "Not knowing if I'm doing something wrong… That's my biggest challenge right now." The interviewer then asked how she handles that uncertainty.

> At first, I was looking online. I would Google a lot. But then I'm like, "Oh my goodness, I'm going to fill my head with so many what-ifs (laughing). I mean, it could be this. It could be that." So I stopped doing that.

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Instead, she began asking close family members or a pediatrician about her specific concerns. In these cases, the amount of options and information available reaches a tipping point where it is no longer helpful and actually begets more questions and confusion. These mothers had to find their own balance of what works for their families. This struggle with information overload can be analyzed in the utterance chain location of proximal already-spoken. This is the "discursive site in which the relationship's past meaning bumps up against the meaning of the relationship in the present" (Baxter, 2011, p. 51). While the internet is not a person with whom participants have a relationship, millennials may have an online community with whom they have a relationship, and they have also learned an internet etiquette which shapes the way they interact online. They learn what information they can find online and what information to seek from other sources. However, mothers have to continually re-negotiate what is appropriate in an online and connected context, and what is better suited for individual and autonomous decisions.

Another tricky aspect of this tension comes from social media. The sheer amount of connectedness can be a struggle that mothers must learn to balance. Millennials often feel pressure to remain connected all the time. Fear of missing out, or FOMO, is a new phenomenon scholars have observed (Alt, 2015; Fulton & Kibby, 2017). FOMO is the feeling of apprehension that others are having rewarding experiences an individual is missing out on, leading to a desire to remain connected all the time. Millennials are changing the way connectivity and privacy are viewed and enacted. A degree of privacy is willingly given up in order to observe the events and goings on of an individuals' online network. "[T]he perpetual contact capability of cell phones potentially strains

relationships, creating too much connection at the expense of autonomy" (Duran, Kelly, & Rotaru, 2011, p. 21). Kaylee described her own struggle with connection and how it is challenging specifically as a millennial:

> So there's like the judgement of others but also like being respectful to yourself because like I *can* be connected all the time, but that's *not* good for my mental state. So, knowing, having boundaries and putting those up and knowing when to do that.

Being connected all the time on social media has had negative consequences that several participants noted, mostly with regard to what people feel comfortable saying to one another. Sierra described the impact social media has had on the type and amount of information people share nowadays: "I think that social media has really impacted people sharing their feelings and what they – just everything, like your political beliefs, your feelings, just what you're feeling that day, your kids, just everything in your life…" She went on to note the effect this can have: "I think that people say things to people that they would never say in person. And I think that is extremely sad…" The proximal already-spoken utterances of millennials' online communities give individuals permission to share any and everything, including hurtful comments. Therefore, in negotiating what they share and the personas they want to uphold, mothers must anticipate the proximal not-yet spoken utterances. Madison also talked about social media and how that connectivity can get ugly. When asked whether she thought moms being mean to one another was something that has happened throughout time or whether it is a uniquely millennial experience, she responded, "I think that they've probably always been somewhat catty but I think it was probably not *to* each other because I think that sitting behind a computer screen empowers people to say things that they normally wouldn't say to people." Being a mother in this social media age is incredibly difficult because the

extreme level of connectedness tends to backfire on mothers, even in spaces where it is intended to be a source of help and encouragement. Mothers must negotiate and re-negotiate their level of connectedness as the proximal already-spoken informs the proximal not-yet-spoken. In other words, as mothers see the ugliness play out on social media and they discern new norms for speaking to and about mothers, they have to make decisions on what information is worth sharing in anticipation of negative responses.

Support groups on Facebook and other platforms can be a great way to receive support and validation. Savannah explained she uses Facebook support groups to vent and release frustration when she does not think she can talk openly to friends and family since there is some degree of anonymity on Facebook groups. Madison found Facebook groups to be especially helpful in the beginning stages of breastfeeding: "I had no idea what I was doing until I joined a Facebook support group right before having my daughter where they told me what to do pretty much." Jennifer explained she and her family moved from out of state and do not have a support system here. The interviewer asked what she does or who she asks when she has questions or needs help, and the internet was a huge part of her response. With general questions, she uses the internet to just look up answers, but that typically does not satisfy relational needs. That is where social media can fill some gaps:

> You can get so much information, but then there's also-- I do a lot of things with support groups and whatever. So first of all, that's anonymous or to strangers that you don't know. But at least that's real people and not just some, you know, blog mom who's looking to getting paid to promote something, or wishing she would (laughing), or whatever.

Jennifer also utilized social media to connect to local groups that meet in person. Connection from the internet and from social media can be extremely comforting and can

lead to genuine friendships. These examples are illustrative of the positive side of

connectedness and the discourse of intensive mothering – it takes a village and everyone

is here to help.

However, that is not always the case. Sometimes, the groups can devolve into

bickering and judgement. Julia observed this in her own life:

> …It's the mom's groups on Facebook that I have found *the* most pushback
> with anything and so I feel like it's probably a fairly new thing too. These
> mom's groups. People join them to come to come together and it just does
> *not* do that.

These Facebook groups are a new challenge for millennial mothers to negotiate and to

find their balance. Julia had a direct experience with Facebook and her decisions as a

mother, and it highlighted the unique challenge young moms face on a regular basis. She

explained that she made the difficult decision to switch from breastfeeding to formula,

and it was an incredibly challenging decision for her – she did hours of research, she

weighed her child's needs, her body's capabilities, and made the decision that was best

for her and her family, but she still received a lot of pushback from people on social

media. She explained:

> …Definitely the best support system were the people who just were like,
> "Okay, this is what we're doing now," and rolled with it instead of the
> people who were like, "Are you sure?" like I hadn't already thought about
> it…Especially being a first-time mom, like, you're already really unsure of
> your stance in life. You're young…And there was a definitely a big
> difference, I saw, in a mom who posted on Facebook that she was starting
> formula and she's in her 30s compared to how people reacted when I said
> that I was doing it.

As a millennial, Julia faced a double challenge of dealing with everyone's opinions in the

first place through this unprecedented level of connectedness, but also from being young

and having everyone try to change her mind as if she hadn't carefully and painstakingly

come to an important decision. Her autonomy and authority as a parent was called into question by people who may not even be close enough or informed enough to comment at all. But that comes with the territory as a millennial mother – everyone has an opinion and the use of social media gives people permission to share their thoughts even when they're not called upon. Katheryn discussed this experience:

> …We have such a – with Facebook and everything, we can see into each other's lives so much, and we get to have sly ways of telling you my opinion or how I think you should do things. That we just feel that pressure so much.

Given these challenges and new ways of communicating, mothers have to decide what works for them, and that looks differently for each person. For example, Madison explained that while she is part of several Facebook groups for moms, she does not follow them or engage with them unless she has a specific question. Julia tries to empathize and understand where people are coming from, even through the nastiness:

> Being a parent is really hard (laughing). Not just taking care of your kid but making all the decisions for them and doing what you think is right um not only with your own family but I've found with other moms, holy cow. Because – and I get it – because moms make a decision for their kid thinking that that is the right decision, so it's almost like when someone makes a different decision they're saying that you made the wrong one, and I get why people would feel like that.

Eventually, everyone must make their own choices, but the degree of connectedness and how mothers navigate that tension may make those choices easier or more challenging. There is no clear consensus on whether it takes a village or whether everyone should mind their own motherhood, so each person just figures out the balance that works for them through trial and error.

Management Strategies

RDT posits that tensions are a necessary part of relational life, and as such, they do not have a neat resolution. Instead, "different adaptations and transformations are viewed as appropriate for different times and places" (Montgomery, 1993, p. 210). While all-encompassing, tidy resolutions of tensions do not exist, Baxter and Montgomery have identified several strategies individuals use to make sense of and to transform their experiences. Baxter provides a total of six responses that have been grouped into four basic types of strategies to managing dialectical tensions: selection, separation, neutralization, and reframing (Baxter, 1990). The data revealed prominent management strategies used by participants in this study; however, it is necessary to note that these are not all-encompassing of every woman's experience. The strategies discussed in the following sections reflect the trends, but managing tensions is still a nuanced and complex process.

Mother – Millennial Tension. The primary way participants manage the millennial – mother tension is to disavow the term "millennial." Baxter refers to this strategy as selection; when individuals sense a contradiction, they make one pole or condition dominant to the exclusion of the other (Baxter, 1990). Since motherhood is not typically negotiable, participants latch onto motherhood to the degree of excluding millennial. Seven of the ten participants communicatively distanced themselves from the descriptor of millennial, saying they don't identify as such. When asked to describe her life as a millennial, Jenna, a 25-year-old mother of an 11-month-old explained that she has a negative connotation with the word, and said, "I don't feel like I fit as much with that generation." Even in her explanation, she said "that generation," rather than "this

generation." Even though she does fit the age range of a millennial, she describes it as something far removed from herself. Another participant, Savannah, did something similar – when asked about her perception of millennials, she brought up the way millennials are portrayed on social media: "Well, like how they say they're entitled, and like they want stuff handed to them." She used "they" rather than "we" to describe millennials as if she is not part of the group. Rather than trying to reframe what it means to be both a millennial *and* a mother, these participants select mother to the point of excluding millennial.

Some instances of selection were evident in specific language choices, such as the ones above, while others were represented in more roundabout ways. Since participants expressed they feel the need to fight back against stereotypes of millennials; they often distance themselves from the discourse entirely and work to avoid any association with the group at all. Jennifer explained, "So as somebody who's technically millennial, but doesn't exactly fit the stereotype, there's still the stigma that you are… If you are this one little piece that you have the entire plethora of all the possible characteristics." Participants recognize they can't entirely escape the discourses and negative connotations of millennials, but they do work to negate them. "[T]he ability to act does not mean that individuals are completely unrestrained, nor does the constitutive force of discourse mean that individuals are completely passive and determined by it" (Moore, 2017, p. 271). Some participants said they feel a disconnect between their age and their stage of life, and when that happens, they identify more with their stage of life. They select the discourse of mother and all its trappings and reject the discourse of millennial. Jenna explained:

> Well, I meet with a Bible study once a week and they're other mothers,
> they're about my age up to like mid-30s. And I guess I consider them my

peers just because we're in kind of the same life stage. Maybe not the same age, but just other mothers that are kind of experiencing babyhood and all of that going on.

The role and discourse of motherhood becomes more salient than the discourse of millennial. Millennial mothers' selection of the intensive mothering discourse to the exclusion of discourses of individualism answers the distal already-spoken utterance site in which millennials are vilified and mothers are celebrated. "Womanhood is equated with motherhood, and the desire for motherhood is essentialized as in-born" (Moore, 2017). A potential explanation for this management strategy builds on the research of McBride and Bergen (2014), where they explain, "discourses of individuality are often written about as dominant/centripetal in U.S. culture; however…in the context of marriage and family, the discourse of individuality, especially for women, is the marginalized discourse" (p. 570).

Authenticity – Persona Tension. The dialectical tension of authenticity versus persona is managed a little differently. Rather than selecting one discourse and completely excluding the other, this tension is primarily managed by separation. In this strategy, the two poles still co-exist, but they are enacted at different times (Baxter, 1990). An individual may recognize that complete authenticity is opposed to an acceptable persona, so they decide when each is the appropriate choice. For example, in Kaylee's interview referenced above in the RQ1 results, she acknowledged she can be authentic with her close friends and they can talk about the struggles of motherhood, but there is also a pressure, particularly on social media, to maintain a happy and blessed persona. This is what Baxter calls a topical segmentation, "through the separation of content domain into those for which one contrasting pole is appropriate and those for

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which the other contrasting pole is appropriate" (1990, p. 73). In other words, talking

with close friends is an appropriate domain to allow a discourse of authenticity, but

posting on social media is the domain for a more deliberate persona. In another example,

Katheryn discussed going to see a movie in theaters and feeling an electric sense of

comradery and shared experiences. In that particular setting, the trials and tribulations of

being a mother was the subject of comedic relief and in that moment, it was empowering

and appropriate.

> I went and saw the first Bad Moms movie in theaters and you could just
> tell that it was all of our one night out, watch the kids, the whole movie
> theater was just groups of moms that were like, "This is our girls' night
> out. We're going to have a drink. We're going to have some fun. Da, da,
> da, da." And I have-- the movie was great, but I don't think I would have
> liked it nearly as much watching at home by myself. But just like the
> knowing laughs-- and even you could tell that some people got pulled out
> that weren't moms and that scared, like, "Is that really how this happens?
> (laughing)"

In this conversation, Katheryn acknowledged that talking about the hard parts of

motherhood is not always acceptable, but in that theater with "knowing laughs" and a

sense of community, it was okay to acknowledge it and to laugh about it. There is a time

and a place to fully enact each pole of the tension.

      Connectedness – Autonomy Tension. The final dialectical tension of

connectedness versus autonomy is managed with yet another strategy: neutralization.

Neutralization is similar to separation in that both poles of a tension are still

acknowledged and enacted to some degree. However, it is distinct from separation

because rather than each contrasting element being enacted fully some of the time,

neutralization is characterized by a "compromise in which a portion of each contrasting

position is perceived to be sacrificed" (Baxter, 1990, p. 73). Montgomery describes

neutralization as a happy medium (1993). So, through the use of social media and other online resources, mothers give up some degree of both connectedness and autonomy. Madison explained she does use Facebook groups for certain pieces of information, such as breastfeeding, but she only connects when she has a specific question. Kendra opted to seek information from closer, personal sources rather than connecting online as often. Kaylee works to remain mindful of when she is being drained by connection so as not to overdo it. Julia compiles her baby photos and updates into one larger post so she does not inundate her friends' newsfeeds with continual baby posts. In another example, Savannah was discussing the role social media has in her life and the benefit of Facebook groups:

> Nobody knows you, so you can put whatever you want out there. I do sometimes worry if I'm venting about my husband, he doesn't check my phone, but I get that paranoia like, oh my God, he's going to open up Facebook and see the notification and then click on it and see that I'm ranting about it. So I try to keep it PG somewhat on there.

In this example, Savannah had to balance the connection and support she receives from Facebook groups with the autonomy of her own family and not sharing too much information that could be uncomfortable. For each participant, neutralization looked differently, but each one still engaged with an online community while simultaneously retaining the right to make their own decisions.

Identity Implications

Identity construction is a complex process that involves emotional connectedness, interdependence of relational others, and a context of historical, social, and economic factors (Johnston & Swanson, 2007). This definition pairs well with Bakhtin's notion that the Self cannot be realized without an Other. Identities are constituted in discourse

(Johnston & Swanson, 2007), so it makes sense to examine impacts on identity along with discourses, tensions, and management strategies. The following section will discuss implications for identity along each dialectical tension noted previously.

Mother – Millennial Identity. When faced with a tension of mother versus millennial, most participants in this study selected the discourse of motherhood while excluding the discourse of millennial. "Selection involves ignoring or denying the forsaken identity" (Johnston & Swanson, 2007, p. 451). Most participants did just that – they actively rejected the title of millennial or at least expressed degrees in which it negatively impacts them. In terms of identity development, this selection indicates a value of being a "good" mother according to the ideologies of intensive motherhood, or at least being perceived as such. When being a good mother is positioned as oppositional to being a member of one's generation, participants identify stronger with motherhood. That is the discourse that shapes identity; participants demonstrated being a mother is not just a role – it is who they are. While this finding may appear straightforward, it is necessary to note that not all mothers can be concerned with being perceived as a "good" mother, especially according to intensive mothering discourses. One area of interest specific to this finding is the sample of participants. Each participant was white, married at the time of their pregnancies, and most of the pregnancies were planned. While educational data was not collected on each participant, it was revealed through conversation in interviews that the sample was largely educated. Each of these factors contribute to an element of privilege that allows mothers to connect with a dominant mothering ideology in ways that women of different races, lower socioeconomic statuses, or more varied family statuses might not identify. For example, Reynolds (2001) found

that black or single mothers often view paid work as an integral part of caring for their children's physical and emotional needs, even though paid work is typically seen as a masculine domain.

The fact that mothers feel the need to select discourses of motherhood while rejecting discourses of millennial reveal this to be a true tension that is not effectively resolved or reframed, at least in this sample of participants. Most participants outright rejected the classifier of millennial, some acknowledged its benefits in certain areas of life such as career or social groups, but none of them fully embraced both discourses to say, "I am both. This is who I am." Certainly, none of them said they are millennials through and through to the exclusion of motherhood.

Authenticity – Persona Identity. Mothers felt a tension between the way real life happens and the perceptions they must uphold. This was revealed in a number of ways, both directly and indirectly. Participants gave specific examples where they felt torn between images of others' perfect lives and their own messy compilation, and they also mediated their own talk with the interviewer. Bakhtin's notion of a super-addressee becomes relevant in this tension. A super-addressee is part of the distal not-yet-spoken location in the utterance chain and is viewed as a generalized other (Baxter, 2011). This is not a specific individual taking part in the conversation, but rather a cultural or societal prescription for what is normal or ideal (Baxter, 2011). Even in talk with the interviewer, participants were very attentive to the super-addressee in their choices of language.

For example, when describing challenges in motherhood, Jennifer continually used the phrase, "an adjustment." That word choice of "adjustment" appeared very deliberate so as not to upend the perception that motherhood is an absolute joy. When

asked to describe her life as a mother, Madison immediately said, "Wonderful. I love being a mom. It's like the best thing that's ever happened to me. But stressful. It's very stressful." The combination of a positive quality along with a qualifier "but" and elaboration on the more negative qualities is a discursive marker. Savanah said, "Well, it's - I like being a mom. Um, there's a lot of temper tantrums, and obviously, you're taking care of a person. Getting up early. Not sleeping." Sierra said, "Basically, with kids, everything is ten times harder, but we're super thankful to have them for some reason (laughing)." These are examples of what Baxter and Braithwaite (2010) describe as "particularly rich insights into the discursive struggles of the "ideal" and the "real" in informants' relational experiences" (p. 70).

In managing this tension and revealing what it means for identities, the balance of authenticity and persona reveals an acute social awareness. Millennial mothers are constantly mindful of the addressee and the super-addressee, especially given the impact of internet accessibility and social media presence. Kaylee talked about having to compartmentalize her different life roles and said, "I feel like my entire life is just putting on different masks in front of different people." Mothers are performing roles and identities in deliberate ways, and even if they don't use the language of "performativity," they know what they are doing. They recognize that performing roles is a necessary part of maintain the images they want to uphold.

Connectedness – Autonomy Identity. Raising children while maintaining a social media presence is a terrain being pioneered by millennials. While generation X (currently ages 34-49), may have children and social media, they remember a time before technology explosion and they likely did most of their childrearing absent social media.

Millennials are navigating new parenthood and internet identities in tandem. Therefore, this places them in a tension of connectedness – autonomy, which is largely managed through neutralization. Millennials give up a little bit of autonomy to be connected online, seek opinions and information, share photos, etc. But they also give up a little bit of connection when they decide not to post certain photos or pose questions online. They recognize each end of the spectrum and simultaneously enact and negate both to varying degrees.

An identity implication of this tension is understanding the need for ownership in millennial mothers' lives. There is no set standard for how much connection is appropriate or where mothers should go for advice; everyone must make their own decisions. In previous generations, there simply were not as many resources available to parents. New mothers relied largely on family members or maybe a few popular press books. Kendra acknowledged this dynamic when explaining why she and her husband do not typically seek advice from her mother-in-law, "She's kind of set in that older mindset of how things were and are…like, this is how we used to do it when I was younger." Julia had similar challenges: "Um, really the hardest part has been parents and grandparents thinking that you have to do the same things that they did."

Millennials understand the options available and have incorporated them into most aspects of their lives, including parenting. However, as the tension revealed, the abundance of resources can quickly become more of a hindrance than a help. Therefore, millennial mothers further embrace individual choice in deciding what is best for their family. Sierra explained, "There's only so much you can do to blame, you know, Facebook or society until you just have to figure out what works for you." She

acknowledged that mothers can seek advice on Facebook or other sources, but eventually everyone has to make their own decisions, and that is something that may be difficult to accept. Julia discussed the differences in the ways she and her sister are approaching family life and she said, "…like one person's life plan isn't technically right for everybody…and I think that goes, again, with everybody's plate is different." These examples of ownership are intelligible through a discourse of individualism in which the responsibility for choices falls on each individual and not a collective decision about what is "right" for families. Millennial mothers are taking ownership of both their resources and their decisions.

DISCUSSION

This thesis explored the dialectical tensions present in the lives of millennial mothers. Millennial mothers are impacted by competing and often contradictory discourses, which were located on the utterance chain. Parsing out the utterances which comprise discourses of motherhood and millennials lends insight into the confusing identity formation that occurs in participants and the researcher alike. This thesis contributes to furthering relational dialectics theory by honoring Baxter's (2011) call that for researchers to push beyond the cookie-cutter classifications and management strategies of observed dialectical tensions. By exploring identity implications and the greater impact of discourses, this project moves beyond RDT 1.0 to 2.0. The following sections conclude the findings of study two and discuss directions for future research.

Millennial – Mother

Motherhood is intelligible through a discourse of intensive mothering, which goes hand-in-hand with a cultural discourse of community. Mothers are expected to forsake themselves in the service of their roles as mothers. Whereas millennials are firmly situated in a discourse of individualism, and millennial women, in particular, are reclaiming the discourse for themselves. So, when millennial women become mothers, it places them in a challenging place to figure out the "right" or appropriate discourse. Most participants in this study chose to select a discourse of motherhood to the exclusion of millennial, indicating a shared value of being a good mother according to that discourse.

When faced with the contradiction, these millennial women have made a choice: "mother" is who I am as a person (Johnston & Swanson, 2007).

Authenticity – Persona

Unique to the experience of millennial mothers are the identities created online. Mothers feel like they must represent their lives as being absolutely perfect, even when it is not. They also have to balance appealing to their mom-friends and their non-mom-friends. This revealed a tension of authenticity versus persona. Mothers grapple with the distal already-spoken discourses of what it means to be a millennial and a mother, the proximal already-spoken discourses of what their friends have expressed, the proximal not-yet-spoken discourses of what their friends might think, and the distal not-yet-spoken discourses of the norms they are creating. To manage this tension, mothers find the appropriate settings to fully enact each end of the continuum. This reveals an acute social awareness that millennial mothers are incorporating into their identity. They understand the necessity of performativity (Moore, 2017) and the nuance that comes with online personas.

Connectedness – Autonomy

The hyper-connectivity that has come to shape millennials poses another challenge for mothers (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Finding a balance between support and connection versus individuality and autonomy can be difficult. To manage, mothers are learning to compromise a little of each end of the continuum in order to accomplish their goals. As a result, millennial mothers fall into a learning curve, and

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ultimately take ownership of both their connection and autonomy. While not a seamless

journey, they come to understand the resources available, they decide when to use them,

and they figure out what works best for their family. This ownership of choices serves to

reify a discourse of individualism; what works for one family may not work for another

family and that is okay. A collective decision is not sought after, nor desired in most

cases.

Future Research

This study was not without its limitations. First and foremost was the

homogeneity of the participants – all participants were white, straight, married, and fairly

educated. This creates a largely unified experience of motherhood, which limits the

analysis. Future research should seek millennial mothers from different races and

ethnicities, different sexualities, family structures, and social locations. A critical lens

should be turned to this study to analyze the impacts these factors might have. "The use

of multiple critical theories to study a particular communication phenomena will

strengthen the understanding of how power operates in multiple and simultaneous ways"

(Moore, 2017, p. 272).

In addition to demographic limitations, this study is uniquely time-bound. While

millennials will always be millennials, the results uncovered in this study may not

necessarily hold true as participants progress into their 30s and 40s. Being a millennial

does have its own discourses, but some of those are contextualized by the fact that in

2018, millennials are still largely young adults with limited life experience. It will be

interesting to see if the distal already-spoken discourses remain throughout time.

Another limitation of this study is the sole researcher. Both thematic and contrapuntal analysis would benefit from researcher triangulation. Given the connection between this data and the researcher's own life experience, this study could benefit from other researchers with fresh eyes to analyze themes. It is possible that new themes could emerge and new perspectives on existing themes would enrich the results and discussion.

CONCLUSION

Through the use of both autoethnography and semi-structured interviews, we gain insight into the tensions, management strategies, and identity implications present for millennial mothers. The following section discusses the overlap and deviation of experiences present in the two studies.

Several themes that emerged in the qualitative interview data rang true to my experiences as a participant researcher. I feel the distal already-spoken cultural message that as a woman, I am expected to become a mother, while simultaneously feeling the judgement of proximal already-spoken encounters where I'm deemed too young to be a mother. I felt the need to justify my pregnancy, my relationship, and my choice to carry out my pregnancy, even though I knew this is what I'm eventually "supposed" to do. I feel the condescension of family members who think they know best and doubt the research I've done or the hours I've spent deliberating. Some of my participants expressed a similar fear of judgement to their young, pregnant bodies to what I felt.

Much like my participants, I also feel severe disconnect from my non-parent millennial peers. As a graduate student in a program with a cohort model, I am in the same age group as my colleagues, but I am bound by familial commitments they are not. Like Kaylee, I am usually not able to take part in the impromptu social events and happy hours. My life requires more planning and maneuvering. During orientation, there were several incoming graduate students who were my age but not parents, and there were two women in their 30s and parents. I felt incredibly torn about who I identified with more. On one hand, I feel disconnect from my traditional peers, but on the other hand, I felt

disconnect from the other mothers because their children were older. Being in my early 20s with a toddler is a life experience that I have not found much connection through. This seemed to be consistent throughout my participants' talk, as well.

Another theme I have in common with my participants is the ownership we're taking for our resources and our decisions. I utilize my options; I research online, pose questions on social media, talk to trusted friends, or whatever else the situation calls for. Or sometimes, I don't. Sometimes the situation calls for discussing options with my husband and that's it. Either way, I am becoming more and more comfortable in the decisions we make as a family using what we have where we are. This has been a problem with my in-laws, much like Kendra, because they sometimes wish I would ask their opinion rather than my friends', but at the end of the day, they are mine and my husband's decisions to make. As we negotiate our proximal already- and proximal not-yet spoken familial discourses, there is only so much we can do to attend to their feelings.

One area in which I deviate strongly from my participants is our responses to the mother – millennial tension. I simultaneously love my son and my family, *and* I do not reject the discourse of individualism and millennials to the extent my participants do. Being a millennial mother is much more of an aesthetic moment for me, in which I reframe what it means to be both. I am fully both – I am a champion for my generation and for my motherhood. Being a millennial is just as much part of my identity as being a mother.

An additional way that I deviate from most of my participants is the awareness of privacy concerns for my son in the social media age. Only one participant, Julia, expressed any misgivings about posting photos, videos, or other information regarding

her child online. I do not know what the distal not-yet-spoken discourses will be for generation Z as they grow up with their lives being broadcast on social media without their consent. I have a lot of concerns for the implications of privacy, connectedness, safety, and identity in a world where people have access to intimate details of one's childhood. I am being much more cautious about those choices, and I feel like an outlier in that regard. Casual acquaintances have noticed my son's absence in my online interactions and inquire about him in face-to-face settings, which indicates a deviation from not just my participants, but also a distal already-spoken of millennial norms.

In closing, analyzing millennial mothers' experiences through the lens of relational dialectics theory has provided insight into individuals' sense-making processes. Locating discourses, identifying management strategies, and interrogating identity implications for millennial mothers contributes to the existing literature on identities relating to motherhood and works to fill a theoretical gap in explorations of millennial women's experiences of motherhood. Research must continue to include marginalized voices and those with atypical parenthood experiences.

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APPENDIX

Interview Questions

1. Describe your life as a mother. What challenges, if any, do you face?

2. Describe your life as a millennial. What challenges, if any, do you face?

3. Tell me about a time when you felt particularly close to/distant from your peers.

4. Tell me about a time when you felt like your roles (mother/student/wife/employee/etc) conflicted with one another. How did you handle it?

5. Who, if anyone, would you consider to be a support system for your family?