Is Maternal Guilt a Cross-National Experience?

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Abstract

Many working mothers in the US say that they feel guilty about their inability to live up to cultural ideals of the "good mother" embedded in intensive mothering discourse. Intensive mothering is reflected in and exacerbated by the country's work-family policies. The United States is an outlier among Western welfare states for its lack of policy supports for families, assuming that childrearing is a private responsibility even though most mothers work outside the home today. So how do working mothers outside of the US experience maternal guilt? Does a more family-friendly policy environment mitigate these feelings of guilt? Using detailed accounts of four women drawn from a larger interview study of 109 working mothers in Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States, I demonstrate how policy context does—and does not—make a difference in the experience of maternal guilt. A feeling of guilt helped to define "good mothers" across all four contexts. However, I found that public policy has a role to play in reducing maternal guilt in three specific ways: (1) by giving mothers more time outside of work, (2) encouraging fathers to complete more unpaid care work, and (3) distributing the responsibility and costs of childrearing more broadly.

Keywords Gender · Motherhood · Work-family policy · Guilt · Cross-national

"The guilt, the guilt, the guilt." Adrienne Rich summarized motherhood this way in her landmark book, *Of Woman Born* (1976, 217). The lament resonates widely today: Mothers in the United States consistently report feeling unable to live up to cultural ideals of the "good mother" (Sutherland 2010a, 2010b). Good mothers are child-centered and self-sacrificing, and intensive mothering requires that women devote all their energy and attention to their children (Arendell 1999; Hays 1996). Thus, "the requirements of intensive mothering set women up for failure" (Henderson, Harmon, and Newman 2016, 514), especially when they must juggle the responsibilities associated with paid work. This dilemma is part of why mothers' sense of guilt is one of the most robust research findings on motherhood (Sutherland 2010b).

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Feelings of maternal guilt may be particularly powerful in the US because American society does not value or reward care work like other types of labor (Folbre 2008). Instead, this labor is conflated with women and motherhood. Women still complete most domestic tasks and caregiving is devalued compared to breadwinning. Moreover, the US offers few policies to help women combine unpaid caregiving with paid employment: it is the only industrialized country with no paid maternity leave and no minimum standard for sick or vacation days. It is one of few wealthy countries with a national educational system that largely excludes childcare and preschool (Collins 2019). The lack of institutional support for caregiving combined with unrealistic mothering expectations leads US mothers to feel "competing devotions" to home and work (Blair-Loy 2003).

Yet the absence of policy supports and the underlying assumptions about gender, caregiving, and work, are not universal. Some countries do not devalue motherhood or conflate caregiving with mothering (Gornick and Meyers 2003). Some welfare states consider care work a public good and allocate public resources to support care (England 2005). These include paid parental leave, universal childcare, work flexibility, options for reduced working hours surrounding childbirth, child allowances, and paid vacation and illness leave, among others. How do these sorts of policy offerings influence women's sense of maternal guilt?

In this article, I offer a cross-national assessment of maternal guilt through interviews with middle-class, primarily white, heterosexual working mothers in the capital cities of Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the United States. These countries exemplify the four welfare regimes of the industrialized West. Each offers different policy supports to working mothers (Bonoli 1997; Esping-Andersen 1990; Siaroff 1994). I want to understand how these different policy contexts shape women's intimate feelings about motherhood (Kremer 2007; Pfau-Effinger 2004). I present detailed accounts of four women (one in each country) drawn from a larger study of 109 working mothers. Delving deeply into their narratives allows me to explore how maternal guilt is contextually derived from social support in different welfare regimes.

Guilt, Motherhood, and Social Policy

Although competing models of motherhood exist in the US and differ by race, ethnicity, and class, cultural consensus remains that intensive motherhood is ideal (Blair-Loy 2003; Damaske 2013; Dow 2016; Hays 1996). As a discourse, intensive mothering reflects and reproduces gendered power dynamics (Butler 1993; Hays 1996). Women are acutely aware of what makes a mother "good" or "bad" (Blair-Loy 2003; Damaske 2011; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Stone 2007). Good mothers focus exclusively on childrearing. They are white, married to men, monogamous, and unemployed (Arendell 1999; Hays 1996). Good mothers and bad mothers are hierarchically opposed but interdependent—they "derive their meaning from the contrast" (Glenn 2016, 13).

The United States' work-family policies are structured to reflect the ideal of intensive mothering. The tasks involved in social reproduction have long been considered families' private responsibility and women's natural purview: "the activities, attitudes, behaviors, emotions, responsibilities, and relationships involved in maintaining daily life" typically fall to mothers (Brenner and Laslett 1991, 311). If caring labor is assumed to be women's sole, all-absorbing commitment, policy supports for families are redundant. This belief is reflected in US law. Unlike most wealthy countries, the United States has no mention of the word family in its Constitution, no explicit national family policy, and no federal body dedicated specifically

to family issues (Collins 2019). Intensive mothering discourse suggests that women are naturally gifted at and inclined to raising children and maintaining a home. If they do need help, families are meant to rely on the market to meet their needs in a liberal welfare state (Gornick and Meyers 2003).

Like all Western capitalist countries, the US is facing the collision between new social and economic realities and traditional conceptions of gender relations in work and family life. The conventional breadwinner/homemaker model is now largely outdated: 71.5% of US mothers with children under age 18 work outside the home, most of them full-time (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019). Without other institutions to share in social reproduction or policies that afford them more time at home, mothers' employment makes it categorically impossible to fulfill the dictates of intensive mothering. The result, I will argue, is maternal guilt.

I define guilt as *a socially induced feeling of negative self-judgment*. Guilt matters: when people do something they perceive as wrong, "the guilt feeling of 'I *did* a bad thing' can get magnified and generalized to self, as '*I* am a bad person'" (Turner and Stets 2005, 176; original emphasis)—a related emotion scholars call shame. Guilt is a moral emotion. It shapes "who we are in our own eyes" and exerts "a profound and continued influence on our behavior in interpersonal contexts" (Tangney and Dearing 2002, 2). It can motivate people to self-regulate and behave in line with cultural standards of right and wrong. Guilt may discourage people from hurtful or unethical behavior (Cohen et al. 2011).

As a result, some scholars argue that maternal guilt can be productive. Some suggest it may have an evolutionary basis, ensuring that mothers promote their children's survival (Rotkirch and Janhunen 2009; Turner and Stets 2005). Maternal guilt surfaces in women's health and pediatric research and medical sociology about breastfeeding and formula feeding (Dennis and McQueen 2009; Taylor and Wallace 2012). References to guilt as a natural part of motherhood appear often in pop culture (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Seagram and Daniluk 2002; Sutherland 2010b). But most sociologists agree that mothering is socially constructed, not inscribed by biology (Glenn 2016).

Another body of research suggests maternal guilt is disadvantageous. Like any emotion, the experience of guilt is not gender-neutral (Glavin et al. 2011; Simon and Nath 2004). The guilt mothers feel today is part of a long cultural history of gendered discourses that frame children as mothers' responsibility. Mothers who attend to their own needs are considered uncaring and unfeminine (Blair-Loy 2003; Edin and Kefalas 2005). Guilt tends to be more prevalent for mothers than for fathers because cultural standards of good parenting are far more intensive for women (Borelli et al. 2017; Simon 1995). Even when mothers and fathers divide caregiving equally, a "guilt gap" remains: mothers still feel much more guilt than fathers (Hays 1996). American mothers expend a great deal of energy contending with intensive mothering discourses and employing various tactics to paint themselves as good mothers (Christopher 2012; Damaske 2011; Johnston and Swanson 2006). And even when women feel good about their jobs and childcare options, they still see guilt as an expected byproduct of mothering (McDonald et al. 2005).

What does it mean for mothers to feel guilty? Maternal guilt involves women's sense that they can never do enough for their children—a perpetual fear that they are bad mothers. Adrienne Rich (1977, 223) described it as overwhelming worry: "the full weight and burden of maternal guilt, that daily, nightly, hourly, Am I doing what is right? Am I doing enough? Am I doing too much? The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children." Seagram and Daniluk (2002, 66) explain maternal guilt as "an unrelenting and total sense of responsibility for the health, welfare, and development of their children."

Given these meanings, guilt has important consequences for maternal employment, parenting, and wellbeing (Aarntzen et al. 2019; Glavin et al. 2011; Hochschild 1979; Simon 1995). Guilt may lead mothers to prioritize "family time" over paid work, which has long-term repercussions for mothers' earnings and occupational trajectories (Hochschild 1997; Stone 2007). It can "limit a mother's propensity to meet her needs and affect her abilities to provide care for her children" (Sutherland 2010a, 475). Guilt can also spur mothers to engage in more permissive parenting behaviors and limit their own personal leisure time, resulting in lower wellbeing (Aarntzen et al. 2019). Mothers who feel guilty for failing to meet parenting expectations report lower self-efficacy and more stress, anxiety, and depression (Dunford and Granger 2017; Henderson et al. 2016).

In fact, previous studies show that maternal guilt is entangled with a host of feelings of psychological distress. It "co-occurs with and is exacerbated by feelings of inferiority, exhaustion, confusion, fearfulness, and anger" (Sutherland 2010a, 472; see also Douglas and Michaels 2004). Guilt and shame in particular are deeply intertwined (Cohen et al. 2011; Dunford and Granger 2017; Sutherland 2010b; Tangney and Dearing 2002). Guilt involves negative self-judgment for a specific behavior, whereas shame is a more expansive negative self-perception, attended by a fear of social sanctioning. These two emotions are difficult to separate: "The average person rarely speaks of his or her 'shame.' Instead, people refer to guilt when they mean shame, guilt, or some combination of the two" (Tangney and Dearing 2003, 11).[1]

Regardless, by any definition, mothers' guilt is fundamentally social in origin (Tangney and Dearing 2002). I will argue that it is also political and cultural in origin. Maternal guilt may be intensified in the contemporary US by the ascendant neoliberal logic that divests communities and the state from responsibility in children's care (Gornick and Meyers 2003). Since guilt falls more heavily on mothers than fathers and given its association with lower maternal wellbeing (Aarntzen et al. 2019; Borelli et al. 2017; Glavin et al. 2011; Simon 1995), guilt is relevant to public policy. Guilt takes on particular policy relevance as governments seek to address concerns about declining rates of fertility and maternal labor force participation.

Other countries have implemented various policies to distribute the social reproduction of childrearing differently between women and men, and between families, communities, the market, and the state (Gornick and Meyers 2003). Each arrangement creates a very different picture for mothers who work for pay while raising children. Given these different policy contexts, do mothers in other countries also feel a sense of guilt? Societies contain different emotion cultures (Hochschild 1975, 1979; Thoits 1989), and references to guilt appear briefly in studies of motherhood in Australia (Goc 2009), Chile (Murray 2015), Finland (May 2008), Spain (Martínez et al. 2011), Turkey (Aycan and Eskin 2005), and the United Kingdom (Sullivan 2015), but maternal guilt is not the empirical focus of inquiry. The few qualitative studies that directly examine maternal guilt do not discuss the role of policy in shaping the context that informs the experience of guilt (Aarntzen et al. 2019; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Guendouzi 2006; Korabik 2015; Seagram and Daniluk 2002; Williams et al. 2013). This article seeks to fill this empirical gap. I investigate whether and how the work-family policies available in different Western welfare states inform mothers' feelings of guilt and why they matter.

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[1] For debates on definitional distinctions, see Glavin et al. (2011), Liss, Schiffrin, and Rizzo (2012), Sutherland (2010b), Tangney and Dearing (2002), and Taylor and Wallace (2012).

Cases of Study

A study of intense emotions in complex contexts warrants a focus on individual women. Delving deeply into mothers' accounts helps us understand "how social structures and culture influence the arousal and flow of emotions in individuals" (Turner and Stets 2005, 2)—not only what women feel, but also what they think and do about what they feel (Hochschild 1979, 1983). Because guilt is socially situated (Bericat 2016), we need to evaluate guilt as more than an isolated variable. This study provides an opportunity to do so. I discuss results from a carefully selected subset of respondents who were participants in a larger cross-national interview study on women's work-family conflict.

This presentation of findings helps preserve the nuance and contextual integrity of narratives obtained uniquely through interviews.[2] Leveraging the richness of interview data from select respondents allows sociologists to assess the intersections of biography, history, and social structure in women's lives (Mills 1959). For example, Christine Williams (2017) examined the trauma of job loss for three women drawn from a larger interview study of geoscientists in the oil and gas industry. She explains:

> My aim is to honor the unique tapestries of the lives of these three women, while remaining faithful to the dicta of Mills' (1959) sociological imagination to understand people in context.... I treat these women's responses as "narratives," that is, as constructed accounts crafted to make sense out of their experiences (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Pugh 2013). I did not attempt to probe the veracity of their stories, but I do consider them truthful and meaningful in their context, and real in their consequences. (Williams 2017, 220)

The same reasoning motivates my approach here. I showcase four women's experiences of maternal guilt: Josefin in Stockholm, Silke in Berlin, Elena in Rome, and Samantha in Washington, DC. These women approximate one another with regard to occupation, career stage, and family status (Schulz 2012). They are white, native-born citizens of their respective countries, between the ages of 33 and 40, and hold advanced degrees. Their time pressures are similar: they all work full-time in professional or white-collar occupations and are partnered to men in white-collar jobs. Each has one or two children under age five. Table 1 gives a demographic snapshot of the full sample and the respondent serving as the case study in each city. I discuss the larger study, data analyses, and biographical matching procedures used to select the women in the methods section.

These four women built careers and families in the capital cities of four very different societies. Their perceptions of guilt need to be understood in context. Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the US are ideal-typical of the four Western welfare state regimes (Bonoli 1997; Esping-Andersen 1990; Siaroff 1994). Their work-family policies reflect distinct welfare strategies of

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[2] For other studies using this approach, see: Auyero (2003) on the intimate experience of popular protest; Bobrow-Strain (2019) on gendered immigration at the US-Mexico border; Cooper (2014) on US families and financial insecurity; Crompton (2001) on work-family dilemmas for bankers and doctors in Britain, Norway, and France; Gay (2005) on drug gang life in Rio de Janeiro; Gerson (2010) on young people's perceptions of marriage, employment, and family; González-López (2006) on the sex lives of Mexican day laborers in Los Angeles; Hochschild (1979, 1983, 1997) on work-life balance for US men and women; Lareau (2003) on US parenting behaviors across social classes; Pérez (2018) on Argentine activists in the unemployed worker's movement; Schulz (2012, 2015) on working hours in France, Norway, and the US; and Williams (2017) on layoffs in the US oil and gas industry.

Table 1 Sample and subsample demographics

	Age	Education	Hrs worked/wk	Race	Ethnicity	Marital status	# of children
Stockholm							
Full sample (n = 25)	Median = 36	Median = adv. degree	Median = 40–44 hrs	White = 24 Nonwhite = 1	Swedish = 22 Other = 3	Partnered = 19 Single = 6	1 child = 10 2 children = 13 ≥ 3 children = 2
Josefin	35	MBA	40 (marketing mgmt.)	White	Swedish	Cohabiting	2 children (2 mo, 3 yrs)
Berlin							
Full sample (n = 25)	Median = 38	Median = adv. degree	Median = 30–34 hrs	White = 24 Nonwhite = 1	German = 18 Other = 7	Partnered = 19 Single = 6	1 child = 12 2 children = 9 ≥ 3 children = 4
Silke	34	Master's	40+(film producer)	White	German	Cohabiting	1 child = 12 2 children = 9 ≥ 3 children = 4
Rome							
Full sample (n = 27)	Median = 41	Median = adv. degree	Median = 40–44 hrs	White = 25 Nonwhite = 2	Italian = 23 Other = 4	Partnered = 24 Single = 3	1 child = 16 2 children = 8 ≥ 3 children = 3
Elena	40	Master's	~50 (marketing mgmt.)	White	Italian	Married	1 child (3 yrs)
DC							
Full sample (n = 32)	Median = 38	Median = adv. degree	Median = ≥ 45 hrs	White = 19 Nonwhite = 12	American = 30 Other = 2	Partnered = 25 Single = 7	1 child = 11 2 children = 18 ≥ 3 children = 3
Samantha	37	JD	~45 (lawyer)	White	American	Married	2 children (10 mo, 5 yrs)

care and employment (Misra et al. 2007). Table 2 summarizes the prevailing cultural models of work and family life and public policies in each place. The findings section describes the specific work-family models and policies in more detail.

Methods

The Larger Study

The women discussed here were respondents in a larger cross-national interview study of middle-class mothers' work and family experiences. I conducted interviews in Stockholm May–July, 2013 ($n = 25$); in Rome June–August, 2014 ($n = 27$); in Washington, DC in March, 2015 ($n = 32$); and in Berlin May–July, 2015 ($n = 25$). Given Germany's particular history, I also conducted 26 interviews in three western Germany cities, bringing the total sample size of the larger project to 135 (Collins 2019).

In-depth interviews are an ideal method to study mothers' work-family conflict and maternal guilt. Interviews allow researchers crucial access to four different levels of information about people's beliefs, motivations, meanings, and feelings. Allison Pugh (2013) calls these the honorable, schematic, visceral, and meta-feelings. This information cannot be gleaned via other methods of data collection (Pugh 2013). These four levels of data were evident in this study. First, mothers conscientiously provided "honorable" information that presented them in the most favorable light, signaling what they considered admirable behavior for mothers. Second, I gleaned "schematic" information when women used jokes, turns of phrase, and metaphors to convey the frameworks they used to view their social world. Third, "visceral" information such as verbal missteps, facial expressions, sighs, pauses, laughter, and halting syntax allowed me to understand the emotional frameworks of desire, morality, and expectations that shaped mothers' actions and reactions. Fourth, "meta feelings" are people's feelings about how they feel. This information captured the distance between how mothers felt and what they thought they *should* feel—an emotional expression of a woman's relative ease with dominant discourses.

Following the recruitment methods well established in qualitative research on women, families, and work, I used my social networks and referrals to generate a snowball sample of respondents. I began with between 7 and 12 initial points of contact in each field site, developing more as fieldwork continued. I restricted my sample to middle-class mothers using a multidimensional evaluation to filter and classify respondents according to education, occupation, personal income, household income, lifestyle, and self-reported social class. Middle-class respondents provide a conservative test of how working mothers perceive guilt because they are more likely to have the networks and means to help assuage feelings of guilt, such as paying for quality childcare. Women's stories here are framed by class privilege, as well as racial/ethnic advantage. They have access to stable employment and other resources that are less often available to working-class women and many women of color who most need policy supports (Blair-Loy 2003; Williams 2010).

I conducted all interviews in English. Because English is taught broadly in schools and many middle-class jobs require the use of English at work (Education First 2016), it was not a stretch to find women able and willing to speak English (see Collins 2019 for details on the study design). All but four of my interviewees in Europe were white and ethnically European. The women I spoke to in Washington, DC were more racially and economically diverse than

Table 2 Prevailing cultural models of parenting and employment and work-family policies

Profile	Country	Parenting Culture	Work Culture	Work-Family Policies								
				Paid Leave			Publicly Subsidized Services		Legally Mandated Paid Time Off from Work			
				Maternity leave (# weeks)	Paternity leave (# weeks)	Total leave [a] (# weeks)	Childcare	Healthcare	Sick days	Vacation days	Holidays	
Josefin, Stockholm	Sweden	Dual carer	Dual earner	15.5	10	60	Yes	Yes	Yes	25	0	
Silke, Berlin	Germany	Female carer	Male earner/ Female PT earner	14	8.7	58	Yes	Yes	Yes	20	10	
Elena, Rome	Italy	Female carer	Male earner	22.7	.2	47.7	Yes	Yes	Yes	20	10	
Samantha, DC	USA	Female carer	Dual earner	0	0	0	No	No	No	0	0	

[a] after childbirth

participants in Europe because language and sampling were smaller barriers to my recruitment efforts. Of the 32 women I interviewed in DC, 19 identified as white and 13 as women of color. This study primarily reflects the experiences of middle-class, white women partnered to men.

My full sample includes women with an array of occupations, working hours, and family structures. Interviewees were working or on maternity leave when we met, with one or more children residing with them. Semi-structured interviews were one hour long on average and conducted in places the women chose. The interview schedule covered the following topics: navigating motherhood with a career; workplace interactions with supervisors and colleagues; employment history and plans for the future; dividing family care with a partner; opinions about parenting; use and perceptions of various work-family policies; interpretations and understandings of their careers, families, successes, and regrets; and general views on working mothers in each country. I digitally recorded all interviews with respondents' verbal consent. They were then transcribed, totaling 3,454 single-spaced pages.

Data Analyses in the Larger Study

I used the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti to analyze the transcripts using Emerson et al.'s (2011) analytic open and focused coding strategies. For the larger study, I began data analyses using broad codes that reflected my interview questions and extant theoretical concepts (Deterding and Waters 2018). I wrote analytic memos as I coded, noting conceptual themes that appeared across cases. I then conducted more fine-grained, focused coding of the full dataset. Maternal guilt was one of several prominent topics. Others included women's attributions for and resolutions of their work-family conflict (Collins forthcoming), women's experiences disclosing their pregnancies to employers, women's perceptions of the gender division of household labor, and beliefs about outsourcing carework to housekeepers and nannies (Collins 2019).

I anticipated that mothers would talk about guilt during interviews, and they did. But I did not ask respondents specifically about guilt or impose the term on their responses. For example, I did not ask, "Do you ever feel guilty?" or "How often do you feel guilty?" or "What are your experiences feeling guilty as a mom?" Instead, I phrased questions in open-ended ways so as not to prime or lead respondents (Weiss 1994). Mothers brought up guilt often, most frequently in response to the question: "Everyone has their own ideas about what it means to be a good parent. Can you tell me what being a good father and mother mean to you?" (see Collins 2019, Appendix B for full interview schedule). Data analyses with ATLAS.ti's co-occurrence function confirmed this finding. The top co-occurrence with the "emotions – guilt" code was "'good' mothering" (131 co-occurrences), followed by "emotions – stress" (108 co-occurrences). This analysis confirmed my experience conducting the interviews, where I had a strong sense from spending time with respondents that guilt was central to their experiences, though in different ways and for different reasons. This indicated maternal guilt was a topic sufficiently salient to warrant further focused coding and analyses for an empirical article.

Data Analyses on Maternal Guilt

I used ATLAS.ti for subsequent analyses to understand the nature and sources of maternal guilt. The software allows coding in multiple rounds with many analytical layers that one can screen and sort to investigate subtopics. In the larger study, I had already applied "emotions – guilt" as a textual index code in the full dataset but did not conduct subsequent rounds of fine-grained analytic coding on guilt. I returned to the textual index code report as my starting point. As with large topics, the textual index code for "emotions – guilt" often included multiple pages of text from a given interview that included several questions at different points in the interview. The goal here was to "locate and link together answers to broad content areas wherever these topics appeared during the interview" (Deterding and Waters 2018, 20).

I began the formal analytic procedure by indexing and memoing this report, which is a subset of the larger interview dataset, to identify the "'main stories' in the data" (Deterding and Waters 2018, 18) about guilt. Through additional rounds of reading and coding, I compiled a list of explanations mothers offered for their guilt and noted relationships, or the lack thereof, that seemed to describe multiple cases, gaining a sense of the general contours of guilt across the full sample. I also referred back to respondent-level memos I had written in the field after each interview. I conducted cross-case analysis of these memos to supplement this list. I then created subcodes from this list, collapsing and refining the categories during analytic coding to understand mothers' primary explanations for guilt.[3]

The next two stages of analyses served to validate my theoretical understanding of maternal guilt in the four field sites. I returned to the full dataset and re-read all 109 interview transcripts with an analytic focus on guilt. This stage was distinct from preliminary analyses for the larger study in which my attention centered on the broad topic of work-family conflict (Collins 2019). Evaluating transcripts again in full gave me another chance to compare and contextualize cases from the indexed coding report on guilt to the full interviews to ensure I adequately captured mothers' perceptions of guilt in each place.

I then tested the cross-case reliability of my thematic coding using ATLAS.ti (Deterding and Waters 2018). I queried the intersection of "emotions – guilt" with my analytic subcodes to ensure the nature and sources of maternal guilt I identified were exhaustive and representative. Reducing the data to these grouped analytic codes allowed me to increase reliability or construct validity by confirming I had consistently applied qualitative criteria to the full sample (Deterding and Waters 2018). For example, the query yielded lots of instances of the intersection between guilt and "time spent with children" and "children's wellbeing" in all four field sites, which confirmed these as primary sources of guilt. The query yielded many instances of the intersection between guilt and breastfeeding for US respondents, and only one

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[3] Echoing previous studies, my respondents did not identify guilt and shame as separate feelings. In fact, none of the mothers used the word shame during interviews. They used the words "guilt" and "guilty" to describe the emotional experience of failing to live up to socially prescribed ideals, which social psychologists would label shame (Liss et al. 2013; Sutherland 2010b; Turner and Stets 2005). Delineating mothers' experiences of guilt versus shame is beyond this article's scope (but see Liss et al. 2013; Sutherland 2010b; Taylor and Wallace 2012). Because analytic distinctions between guilt and shame did not surface in respondents' explanations, I defer to their use of the term guilt to describe both specific and broader occurrences of negative self-evaluation. Future work may wish to differentiate these in interviews and subsequent analyses (Dunford and Granger 2017).

instance in Europe, a mother in Berlin. This suggested a possible misclassification. So I returned to the full transcript, noting that this mother mentioned guilt in explaining why she and her partner decided to share parental leave equally and formula feed their baby. They wanted to evenly divide the labor and bonding experience of feeding. This mother said she would feel guilty keeping these experiences to herself. Re-reading the transcript made clear this mention was about the *absence* of guilt. Double-checking the excerpt gave me a chance to reclassify it, which helped assure the construct validity of the typology of sources of guilt across field sites.

Biographical Matching for Cases of Study

The final analytic stage involved case selection. To select the four respondents, I filtered the full sample in an Excel spreadsheet according to field site by age, education level, occupation, career stage, marital status, race/ethnicity, migration status, and number and ages of children. I held demographic characteristics constant within categories given my goal of understanding how variations in policy and culture influence maternal guilt.

I chose four comparable women with young children who were partnered and employed full-time because I wanted to understand the experiences of women with similar time pressures. This was important because the perception of an unrelenting "time squeeze" pervades modern life across OECD countries (Clawson and Gerstel 2014; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Moreno-Colom 2017; Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik 2015; Wajcman 2014). In particular, people report they are increasingly short on quality "family time" (Daly 2001; Kremer-Sadlik and Paugh 2007; Nockolds 2016). With rising maternal employment in recent decades, intensive mothering ideologies that presume childrearing is all-consuming for women may lead to particularly intense guilt for mothers employed full-time, since they are by definition unavailable for this child-centered, day in, day out sort of parenting (Hochschild 1997). Full-time work is the modal experience for employed mothers in the US, Sweden, and Italy, whereas part-time work is most common in Germany. Eighty-one percent of employed mothers work full-time in the US in 2014, compared to 76% in Sweden, 63% in Italy, and 43% in Germany (OECD 2016). Silke in Berlin is therefore a slight outlier, but as you will see, her working hours are highly relevant to her sense of guilt.

It's worth considering whether a sample of only four women would be sufficient for a cross-national study of maternal guilt. My sense is that it would not. I think interviews with several dozen employed mothers in each city were necessary to understand the structural underpinnings of guilt and to meet the threshold of theoretical validity (Deterding and Waters 2018). This required far more than one interview in each place. The four women's accounts are not statistically generalizable, but their views exemplified those I heard from the larger group of interviewees in their respective field sites (Collins 2019). These systematic biographical comparisons illustrate how particular features of national contexts impact individual women at the middle of the class structure, highlighting the utility of a qualitative, comparative case study in furthering sociological knowledge about the relationship between intensive mothering ideology and social policy (Crompton 2001). This article examines the influence of "social structure, culture, and socialization experiences" (Turner and Stets 2006, 46) shaping middle-class mothers' experiences of guilt across the four Western welfare states.

Findings: Maternal Guilt in Cross-National Perspective.

Table 3 summarizes my findings across the four field sites.

Stockholm, Sweden: Josefin

Josefin lived in Stockholm. Sweden is a social democratic welfare state where entitlements are linked to social rights. The state demonstrates a strong commitment to gender equality by supporting a dual-earner/carer family model with generous policy provisions for women and men. Sweden's welfare state strategy treats women as being equally involved in breadwinning and caregiving. The same applies to men. Sweden was the first welfare democracy to introduce paid leave to both parents in 1974. Today, parents receive a total of 480 days' paid leave. Three non-transferable "use-it-or-lose it" months are reserved solely for each parent, referred to colloquially as "mommy months" and "daddy months." Although nearly all Swedish fathers now take parental leave, it is still women who use most of the leave days. In 2012, men took about one-quarter of their families' parental leave (Swedish Institute 2013). Workers with children under age eight have the right to reduce their normal working hours to 75%. Childcare is a universal entitlement. Municipalities provide childcare services with a strong pedagogical focus for all children ages one to twelve. Workers are also entitled to 25 days' minimum paid vacation. All Swedes have access to health insurance through their employer or the government. Taken together, these policies are considered the explanation for Sweden's relatively high fertility rate and women's labor force participation rates nearly equal to men's (Duvander et al. 2005; Oláh and Bernhardt 2008).

I met Josefin at a bustling café in a middle-class neighborhood teeming with young families in central Stockholm. While her three-year-old attended childcare, Josefin brought her infant son to our meeting. He slept most of the time in his stroller, waking occasionally to wave his arms, smile, and babble softly. Josefin (age 35) was home on ten months' parental leave from

Table 3 Mothers' sources of guilt across field sites

	Salient in Field Site			
Source of Guilt	Stockholm	Berlin	Rome	DC
Insufficient time with children	✓	✓	✓	✓
Children's wellbeing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Childcare				
Age children start	✓		✓	✓
Time spent in	✓		✓	✓
Quality	✓	✓	✓	✓
Safety				✓
Paid work				
Working hours	✓	✓	✓	✓
High expectations			✓	✓
Maternity leave				✓
Breastfeeding				✓

her job as a marketing manager, just as she had done with her daughter. Her partner, Markus, took eight months off with their first child, and was planning to do the same again after Josefin's leave ended.

Josefin described her boss as supportive when she announced both her pregnancies at 15 weeks. I asked whether she had any concerns about managing her family and job. Josefin frowned, shaking her head slowly. She shrugged, "No. I mean, not really, because I always knew that I wanted to have a family. I felt like a lot of people around me in the office had kids. So, I think in general there is some understanding for that." "How did your boss react?" I asked. "They were very positive, just very positive. … Then they just worked with me to find a solution for a replacement." Josefin's lack of stress and colleagues' support reflects a norm for full-time working motherhood in Sweden. It has among the highest maternal employment rates of any OECD country at 83%, with 63% of mothers working full-time and 20% working part-time (OECD 2016; Statistics Sweden 2014).

Josefin felt comfortable returning to work full-time: she knew that Markus was home with their child. When they learned she was pregnant, Josefin said that Markus stated plainly: "Well, we'll split it [the parental leave] even." I began to ask whether they ever discussed him foregoing leave time and she interrupted, saying, "No, I haven't had to push him to take it. He's very eager to take his part of it." Josefin's use of the phrase "his part" is significant. Fathers are entitled, and even obligated, to take leave time (thus the "use-it-or-lose it" months set aside for each parent). While Markus was perhaps more egalitarian than the average Swedish dad, it is clear that it is not solely a mother's job to raise children.

Josefin expected to combine paid work with childrearing because every woman she knew did: "Our whole system and all of our policies are based on the thought that you're supposed to be able to work as a woman, if you have a family. Then I think I see, you know, a lot of people who have been able to manage a family and a career." She indicated that it is not only normal but *expected* for mothers to work. Josefin laughed when I asked if she had ever considered being a stay-at-home mother: "No. No," she replied. But if she lived in the US and lacked parental leave, she said she would likely quit her job to be home with her child, even if it hurt her career. In Sweden, though, she generally felt content as a working mother.

However, Josefin expressed guilt about not spending enough time with her children. She and her colleagues often discussed the question: "How do you manage working full-time and still get time with your kid?" She explained, "You don't want to have your kids stay too long at daycare. I think that's something that people are talking a lot about. How do you minimize the time at daycare, but still work full-time, or, you know, handle your job, at least?" Knowing that Sweden's childcare is world-renowned for its quality, I asked: "Why are people worried about that?" She looked puzzled. "That's kind of the culture. If you could pick them up earlier that's something that's good for them, or for you, I don't know really. I have that kind of instinct as well." As "good parents," she and Markus alternated using their flexible work schedules to leave work early and pick up their daughter. Josefin said that everyone in her office used this flexibility, too, including colleagues without children. Overall, she felt that the work-family policies and Swedish culture afforded her a good work and family life: "I really think we have really a great system." She described time to parent as a "right"— "it's very much accepted… it's in the culture… And that's in the policies as well, that you have the right to do that."

Yet Josefin said she still felt pressure to parent well. She and Markus easily found a daycare space for their daughter in their top-choice center once parental leave ended. But still, she explained, "It's hard to choose where you put your child in the days… It's a very tough

decision, actually." Choosing the "right" childcare weighed on her. The reality is that all daycare options in Sweden are quality ones, but worrying about these details helped mark Josefin as a good parent. She continued to worry about whether she lived up to this ideal.

Josefin's definition of a good parent required constant presence: "It's about being there. About being—what do you call it? Something like a pillar in their life that they can lean back on, just be there for them whatever happens. And it's a huge responsibility. … I'm here to teach them about everything. Values. It's really important to get it right." Being present with her children, being "there for them whatever happens," was paramount for Josefin. She valued her role in shaping her children as people. She felt the same about fathers. The discourse seemed to be more about intensive *parenting* than mothering. Both parents needed to be steadfast foundations for their children. This finding echoes previous interview research in Sweden showing that cultural ideals of "good parenting" are still involved and intensive: "good parents make time for, and spend time with, their children" (Lindgren 2016, 17).

Josefin also defined good parenting as founded on gender equality. She emphasized that she and Markus worked to maintain equal roles at home because this gender equality defined good parenting to them: "That's something that we actually talk about. […] It's kind of fun to see, because if [our daughter] hurts herself or something happens, one day she can cry for mommy and the other day she can cry for daddy." This egalitarian approach may help explain why the pressure of intensive parenting discourses felt less overwhelming and gendered. Josefin didn't feel that she alone bore the responsibility for childrearing.

Yet Josefin described foregoing commitments outside of her family and job in order to be the parent and employee she wanted to be. Josefin suggested to new mothers:

> Lower the ambition. You can't have a full-time job, a perfect home, do your workout three days a week. These years of my life, it's going to be work and family. So, I won't have time for a lot of friends, for me. … But that's fine. I can pick that up later on. And, you know, my home is not perfectly clean, but that's OK too.

Foregoing these interests were markers of selfless caregiving for Josefin, suggesting women who maintain these "extras" are less committed to their children. She reflected on the advice she would one day give her children: "I hope they will first of all choose to get a family because it's great. And then… maybe not think too much about, 'How will this affect my career?' Or, 'What will they say at work?' Because I think a family is more important anyway." Josefin felt strongly that women could be good parents and successful workers even at the top of their field in Sweden. Nevertheless, she said she placed a priority on family.

Swedish work-family policies do not alleviate women's feelings of guilt entirely. That guilt remains salient for mothers in the face of gender-egalitarian public policies suggests the weighty role of culture in shaping maternal guilt. But their social democratic policies distribute the work of childrearing more broadly and encourage gender equality in childrearing at home. This means that the responsibility for raising kids does not fall solely to women. As a result, Swedish policy seems to minimize the gender-specific presence of intensive mothering as the "right" way to be a mother. These policies de-gender maternal guilt: moms still feel a sense of guilt, but it is not tied to their ideas of being a good *mother* per se, but a good *parent* who makes the right choices for their children. Intensive parenting ideals rather than intensive mothering seemed to shape Swedish women's experiences of childrearing.

Berlin, Germany: Silke

Silke lived in Berlin. As a historically conservative welfare state, German social policy is connected to occupation and earnings. Public provisioning mirrors market-generated distributional outcomes and is rooted in conservative beliefs about gender and families. Typically, women are responsible for raising children and perhaps working part-time while men maintain the role of breadwinner. This "primary caregiver/secondary earner" welfare strategy tries to compensate women for their caring labor. Historically, laws disincentivized full-time working motherhood with up to three years' maternity leave, marginal income taxation, short school days, and few public childcare spaces for children under age three. In essence, these policies encouraged and enabled women to stay home with young children. Part-time work is also widely available and is not associated with lower wages (Gangl and Ziefle 2009).

From 1949 to 1990, East Germany separated as its own socialist welfare state. Work-family policy and norms about maternal employment departed sharply from those in western Germany. Maternal employment was more or less mandatory, supported by dual-earner policies and a cultural expectation that all women work for pay and maintain the home (Rosenfeld et al. 2004). Socialist policies were pro-natalist. The state provided universal daycare, generous maternity benefits, and a gender-egalitarian labor ideology. Official reunification in 1990 meant the collision of two distinct welfare regimes. Former East Germany was forced to adopt West German laws, which continued to value a traditional gender division of labor. Despite this convergence, the socialist legacy persists. Former East Germany still offers more public childcare centers; women's labor force participation remains higher than in the west, especially for mothers with young kids; and gender norms are more egalitarian (Lee et al. 2007; Rosenfeld et al. 2004). Since the mid-2000s, Germany has reconsidered the traditional family model, given its low fertility rate, labor shortage, and gender equality mandates from the European Union. German policy shifted dramatically to a new "sustainable family policy" model that supports dual-earner/carer couples much like social democratic frameworks (Gangl and Ziefle 2015). Paid parental leave is now one year, with use-it-or-lose-it "daddy months." The government is investing heavily in early childhood education services rather than cash services to families.

I met Silke at her flat on a sunny Monday morning in Berlin. We walked to a neighboring park with her 14-month-old son Gabriel in a stroller and entered an expansive playground. Gabriel played in the sand near our feet as we settled onto a bench. Dozens of children, mothers, and fathers played around us as Silke (age 34) described her job as a film producer. Silke clearly loved this work. She took 11 months' leave after Gabriel was born. Her partner Arthur took three months because he would be "worried about his career" if he took more time away. "I was never worried about that, really," Silke said with a laugh. Like Josefin, she enjoyed a family-friendly office, supportive boss and colleagues, lots of flexibility at work, and substantial vacation and sick days.

Silke's employers explicitly endorsed a family-friendly work environment. Before her pregnancy, Silke's boss told her, "You should know that we are a really family-friendly company, and that would be totally cool" if she had a baby. Many colleagues had children and this mattered to Silke: "It's really important for me… I mean that's a big part of my life now, and I can't do a job where that's taboo because then I could never come back." Her colleagues enjoyed flexibility: "People do a lot of home office. I can basically always work from home. I can leave when I have to when there's an appointment." She felt that her family responsibilities were supported at work.

Silke once worked as an au pair in the US and said she couldn't fathom being pregnant there: "People work until they basically pop." She also couldn't imagine going without parental leave time to breastfeed and recover from childbirth: "I can take this time, and it's my choice whether I want to breastfeed or not without having to worry about how I'm going to do that when I go back to work." She paused, her gaze unfocused as she looked out over the playground, and continued: "The sheer physical stress of doing breastfeeding and not sleeping at night, I have no idea how people handle that when they're working. It seems so—I mean, it's just so hard for me to get my head around that." Silke felt mothers needed to be home after giving birth. Her halting speech patterns signaled the inconceivability of returning to work quickly. Parental leave time was central to good mothering. I asked, "How many sick days are you allowed?" Silke guffawed, "Just the word 'sick days' alone just is *crazy* to me!" she laughed. "Because there's no limit on sick days here. If you're sick, you're *sick*!" Policies such as parental and sick leave enabled her to provide what she considered proper care for her son.

Returning to work after parental leave wasn't a source of guilt, but Silke felt tremendous guilt about working full-time. In Germany, 70% of employed mothers worked part-time in 2010, compared to 5.6% of employed fathers (Dribbusch 2013). Silke explained: "I have a feeling that most people think full-time work isn't something you want to achieve. […] I don't know anyone else where both parents are working full-time." Although Silke embraced how Berlin seemed to celebrate diverse work-family models (she knew several stay-at-home moms and many moms and dads who worked various part-time schedules), she felt that full-time work wasn't a preferred option for mothers. Silke's and Arthur's full-time employment was unusual—especially Silke's. The share of employed mothers working full time in Germany has increased in recent years from 30% in 2010 to 43% in 2014 (OECD 2016), but Silke still felt full-time work was frowned upon for mothers. But she couldn't work part-time as a producer. She planned to continue full-time but felt skeptical that this would work out:

> It's kind of my only option at the moment. They have agreed to let me leave at 4:00 twice a week. […] I'm going to do it for a year and if it turns out to be impossible to balance it, then I will have to reconsider and talk to them about whether I can go part-time. But then that would probably mean that I couldn't do the same kind of things. […] It would be a different job. The career opportunities would be very limited.

Her voice was apprehensive. She would have to leave the job she loved if she requested a part-time schedule. But she seemed resigned that full-time work would prove untenable:

> I'm going to feel guilty towards Gabriel because I know it's going to be really stressful when I work full-time and I don't have my boyfriend at home [on paternity leave]. … I'll probably feel guilty that Gabriel has to stay in the daycare place and that I don't have as much time as he would like and I would like. I'm also going to feel guilty at work because I don't have 300 percent. I have 100 percent. I have to split them up. So I can't perform in all the departments equally and I'm never going to perform in any department to my full satisfaction.

To Silke, a full-time schedule was incompatible with being a good mother. And she felt she could never fully succeed at work because she didn't "have 300 percent" to give. She described a lose-lose scenario.

Silke also felt anxious about finding good childcare even though Berlin is famous for its abundance of quality daycare facilities, a remnant of its socialist past (Schober and Spiess 2015). Gabriel loved the center they found. This was a big relief: "For me the daycare thing

was the biggest concern. […] Where I feel comfortable leaving him. Because I feel half as guilty dropping [him] off if I feel he's okay. … I can't imagine he's being traumatized there. […] That's really the biggest relief. And so I'm really happy." Knowing Gabriel was in capable hands made returning to work easier, yet a sense of guilt lingered for Silke no matter how exceptional the facility.

Silke's friends and relatives also questioned her full-time job: "Most people are skeptical of our set up. […] They don't judge me but they make me feel like that definitely is not something that they would do." A friend once said she would miss her son's development if she worked full-time. Silke's sister said outright it was unhealthy for young children to spend a full day in childcare. In response, Silke tried to lower her expectations:

> A successful mother is, I think if you feel like you failed less than you feel like you're succeeding, then you've succeeded [*laughs*]. And it doesn't mean that you always do everything that you want to do and you're always going to be able to achieve all the goals you set. I do think I have high expectations in regards to what I want to be as a mom. But I already know that I am not going to be perfect and I'm not—I try to still be as good as I can and hope that's good enough [*laughs*].

By dropping the bar, Silke tried to free herself from feeling like a failure as a mother for working full-time. But her desire to do right by her child outweighed her desire to maintain her career.

Unlike Sweden, Germany's work-family policies do not de-gender maternal guilt. Germany's historically conservative social policy (e.g., three years' maternity leave coupled with few childcare facilities for children under age three) encourages a particular kind of working motherhood: maternity leave followed by a part-time work schedule. My sample echoed this model: of the 25 mothers I interviewed in Berlin, four were on parental leave when we spoke and 14 worked between 20 and 34 hours weekly. Full-time working moms like Silke and the six other women who worked 35 or more hours weekly felt guilty that their lengthy work days detracted from their children's wellbeing. Working itself is not a source of guilt, but working full-time is.

Rome, Italy: Elena

Elena lived in Rome. Italy centers on a familialist welfare model that relies heavily on the informal market to ensure citizens' wellbeing. Its social protection system is fragmented and varies widely by region. Cultural beliefs informed by Catholicism center on traditional ideals about gender and work: men work for pay while women care for the home. Strong intergenerational solidarity means that women are expected to provide the care families need if and when the government fails. Mothers who work for pay outside the home are required to take five months of maternity leave at 80% pay. A new 2013 law mandated one day of paid paternity leave at 100% pay. In 2019, four days became mandatory. Parents are each entitled to six months of parental leave (this for women after their maternity leave) at 30% pay. Mothers working full-time after leave may shorten their workdays to six hours daily to accommodate breastfeeding for the first year. Workers are guaranteed a minimum of 20 days' vacation. Public childcare is highly regulated and high quality. It is widely available for children ages three to five, but rare for children ages zero to two. Parents generally turn to informal or private care for young children. Grandparents, especially grandmothers, remain a crucial resource for

caregiving (Del Boca 2015), as do informal low-wage care workers. Public healthcare is available to everyone in Italy regardless of citizenship, employment, or immigration status.

Elena welcomed me into her flat in an upscale neighborhood bordering Vatican City in Rome. It was 8:45 p.m. She had just returned from work. Her husband Francesco was out of town. Elena (age 40) stirred boiling pasta while her three-year-old, Anna, sat in a bucket of soapy water in the bathroom's shower. Elena asked distractedly if I wouldn't mind washing Anna's hair so she could get out and dressed. I agreed. Later, Elena joined us, lifting Anna with a kiss into a hooded towel. We perched on Anna's bed to chat while she ate and watched television.

Elena said she usually worked 50 hours a week as a marketing manager, describing her job as a "golden prison." She had a good salary and felt respected at work, but the firm required extreme commitment: "They really push you to have the best from you." She believed she was denied a promotion after announcing her pregnancy. Her boss "advised [her] to go out of the company after a while." Despite formal legal protections for women and mothers, Elena's experience is not unusual in Italy: ideal worker norms continue to marginalize women (ILO 2014). Elena indicated that only women without children could reach the top levels in her firm:

> It is a good company for this, and we have a very high percentage of women in very top management positions. … For example, our country manager, she's a woman. She's brilliant. She's so good. But the first thing that she told us when she came here to Italy was, "I love this job, and I have decided to not be a mother."

The assumption was that any good mother's primary allegiance was to her children, not her job.

Elena said she did not feel like a good mother because she worked so much. "Of course we have a lot of crises due to the fact that I cannot be here all the hours that I should stay with Anna. All her friends at the childcare—all the other mothers have a lot more time to stay together, to organize all the stuff, so I am, let's say, very excluded." Elena's schedule meant she couldn't be the involved mother she thought her daughter deserved and that her classmates had (Nockolds 2016). In this sense, she felt she was failing. Her phrasing suggests that she thought it fell on her shoulders (not Francesco's) to resolve these "crises." She said, "I cannot be here," "I should stay with Anna, and "all the other mothers have… more time."

Elena took the government-mandated five months' maternity leave, and said it was unheard of for fathers to take official leave. Elena felt comfortable returning to work while Anna's grandfather cared for her. But after he passed away, she reported feeling acute guilt for enrolling Anna in full-time childcare. Elena worried about not being involved enough and recounted a story that exemplified her fears. One weekday, Elena received a call from daycare requesting she pick up Anna. Neither Elena nor Francesco could leave work. In desperation, Elena called their housekeeper, Oksana, a single mother from the Ukraine who she had never met in person:

> I never met her! And then I called her and I said, "Please, can you go to the childcare to take my baby [home]? I will call them… And then I thought, "I am crazy. Oh my God, I am *crazy*! … I don't know anything about this woman. I really don't know anything. And I just asked her to go to the childcare to pick up my baby [because of] this fucking work."

Oksana kindly agreed. Shortly after, they hired Oksana as their full-time nanny and house-keeper. Although it ended well, Elena felt she had endangered Anna. She blamed her

inflexible, all-consuming job. Elena used her financial resources to assuage her guilt, though she displaced these "crises" onto Oksana, who had difficulty securing care for her own daughter. This dilemma is common. The dynamic between Elena and Oksana highlights what Glenn (1992) calls the racial division of mothering labor, an arrangement that upholds gender, race, and class inequalities.

Elena had few colleagues to confide in: "The truth is that there are not so many other women in my situation." On her fingers, she counted three other mothers in her office; one recently quit to be with her child. Several colleagues who were fathers told her, "My wife is a doctor, my wife is a lawyer, but we decided at the end she can stay with the baby." "So it's quite a rare case, mine," Elena said regretfully. She felt surrounded by women who had either given up their jobs for their children or foregone children to build careers. Motherhood and work seemed incompatible, but she said her family couldn't afford for her to quit. She out-earned Francesco. So Elena continued to work, but felt wracked with guilt. They didn't plan to have a second child and this brought Elena great sadness.

Although public childcare in Italy has a reputation for high quality much like northern European countries and 98% of children ages 3–5 attend (Boca et al. 2005), daycare continued to cause Elena guilt. She panicked at a recent parent-teacher meeting when the teacher's description of Anna seemed unfamiliar: "Oh my God, she's talking about another baby. Maybe she just mismatched the mother with the baby." But the teacher was indeed talking about Anna. So after that day, Elena vowed:

> I will never, never, never miss any kind of meetings. When they have a meeting with all the parents, all the mothers, I want to be there. […] All the other mothers… they know everything that they do during the day. They have a lot of networking… They already know, for example, the name and the kind of teacher in the public school… All this kind of stuff I don't know.

Elena felt her work schedule made it difficult to be the involved mother that she believed other children had. Her phrasing suggests that Anna suffered from her lack of time and attention, and that only mothers completed these caregiving tasks.

Elena felt Francesco didn't help around the house, but liked that he was an involved father: "That's super, just to play. It's super, to teach her things that he likes. For me it's more the role of mother, 'I need to put on your clean dresses,' 'I need you to have a bath,' 'I need to bring you to the doctor.'" The domestic sphere is considered women's domain in Italy, so the tasks of social reproduction typically fall to women. By assigning routine tasks to moms and playtime to dads, Elena explained how an unequal division of labor recreates itself in parenting. She surrendered some enjoyable aspects of parenting to Francesco and completed more of the onerous behind-the-scenes work than he did, though these tasks mostly fell to Oksana.

Elena experienced this arrangement growing up. Her own mother "paid a lot of attention to our daily needs. […] She was really a present mom. She dedicated all her life to all of us, me and my sisters. And so it's hard for me sometimes because I have this big example. […] I am really not in the position to replicate the model." Elena worried that she was a bad mother: "I don't want to give her the impression that she has a stressed mom. […] I think that 'til now it worked quite well. Everybody who's in contact with her is saying she's a very relaxed baby, she's happy." Elena assuaged her fears, but nevertheless, she felt guilt that her job meant she couldn't "dedicate all her life" to her daughter like her mother had for her.

As a familialist welfare state with policies that encourage the bulk of caregiving to occur within the home, namely by women, it's logical that Elena would feel guilty for working long

hours outside the home. Maternal employment is far lower in Italy (55.2%, with 34.8% of mothers working full-time and 20.4% working part-time; OECD 2016) than in Sweden or Germany, making Elena's case somewhat rare among Italian mothers, but common for women in my study. Only two of the 27 respondents worked part-time. Mothers who do not work more closely align with intensive mothering expectations. This may lead to reduced guilt, but perhaps a greater sense of economic dependence on men. Regardless, maternal guilt seems acute for employed mothers.

Washington, DC, the United States: Samantha

Samantha lived in Washington, DC. The United States is a liberal welfare state. Social benefits reflect and preserve the primacy of the market. Most entitlements are means-tested. Men and women are both expected to participate fully in the market, while women remain responsible for the home. The lack of support for care makes the US an outlier among welfare states (Misra et al. 2007). The US has no national work-family policy to support caregiving, no universal healthcare, no universal social insurance entitlement, no guaranteed income, no paid parental leave, no universal childcare, and no minimum standard for vacation and sick days. Without an explicit national family policy, the US has a set of patchwork policies from employers that are weakly institutionalized, subject to the discretion of managers, and available mostly in white-collar workplaces (Glass 2009). The one federal policy support is the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, which gives eligible employees up to 12 weeks of unpaid, job-protected family leave. Families that turn to the market find vast differences in the quality and cost of care.

Samantha was a lawyer at a Virginia firm located on a street lined with stately office complexes just across the Potomac River from DC. Samantha (age 37) and her husband John had a five-year-old son and ten-month-old daughter. We spoke in a windowless conference room in her office building, a high-security facility with fluorescent lighting and sterile white walls. Employees spoke in hushed voices. She closed the door before we began. Samantha described feeling panicked when she found out she was pregnant:

> My early concerns mostly revolved around my professional trajectory and how the other attorneys were going to perceive my ability to do my job as a new mother... I worked very hard to ensure that nothing was different as a result of being pregnant and that I was taking on the same workload, and sometimes more, trying to prove that I was as available, as accessible, as committed.

Her workplace wasn't family-friendly. Samantha took on even more work to reassure her employers that her pregnancy would not diminish her performance:

> You could have children, but the general expectation was… you needed to have a plan for someone else to care for them. […] And fully committed meant that you were available at all hours whenever anything was needed. There weren't boundaries. And this, ironically, was a firm that I joined because they [said] folks were supposed to be able to coach their kids' t-ball teams.

Samantha worried about giving her son the time she felt he needed. It became clear to her that women could have children only so long as they didn't detract from time at work. I asked, "Where did this message come from?" Samantha chuckled, "From the people who said that

moms were less capable. […] The message was perceived loud and clear." Other associates and partners voiced these opinions.

Samantha had worried about having a second child, "about the realities of how that would work. And looking back at the young go-getter female associates who had been in our office, most had survived having one child, and those who went on to have a second child for one reason or another usually weren't at the firm six months later." Samantha was pessimistic that she could "survive" having a second baby since so many women seemed to leave for this reason. She mentioned her fears to a trusted (childless) mentor, who laughed and said, "I'm not sure that [our boss] would still be supporting me if I chose to get a second dog." This ideal worker model may be exacerbated in law, but it's not isolated to this industry or to male-dominated occupations (Acker 1990; Williams et al. 2012).

Without paid parental leave, Samantha decided to save up leave days. She took roughly four months off with each child. This is more time than most Americans get. The US is the only industrialized country without federal paid parental leave (or vacation or sick leave; see Gornick and Meyers 2003). John took two weeks off. Her company asked her to start working from home nine weeks after her C-section. Recalling this, Samantha grimaced and said she was "still knitting back together." When she returned full-time, "it was a disaster." At this point in our interview, Samantha started to cry. We paused for a few minutes. She closed her eyes and caught her breath, dabbing at her cheeks with a tissue. She felt she never saw her children. Samantha took a deep breath and reflected softly:

> Before I had children, the message that I received was, "I am woman, hear me roar. You can do everything." […] Load of crap. I *am* awesome, and I *can't* do everything. […] If I keep all the balls in the air, I'm broken. […] I've talked to so many friends in a similar position… We love our careers, we love our children, and we can't figure out how to do it all at the same time.

She sobbed. Averting her eyes, with her hand over her mouth and tears streaming down her cheeks, she told me she felt like a terrible mother. She felt her taxing work hours and absence from home were hurting her children. Something had to change.

So Samantha transferred to a different position with fewer hours at a less prestigious law firm, describing her decision as a personal choice: "I went to the trouble to have a child, so I wanted to see my child." Samantha also implied that mothers who don't find a way to spend time with them are bad mothers. Yet only the most advantaged Americans—higher-income, well-educated, often white workers—have the privilege to change jobs or take time off like Samantha, suggesting that it is harder for women who are less well-off to embody good mothers.

Snapping her fingers, Samantha described learning to be hyper-efficient at work: "I needed to be home to help my son grow and develop and be a part of his life." She didn't state the same need for John: "If something needs to get fixed, Mom is the name they know." Samantha developed other coping tactics to achieve her definition of a good mother. To provide breast milk, she bought a hands-free breast pump to use under a poncho in her cubicle. But she and John hadn't found a good childcare solution. The US does not have a federal childcare system. The quality therefore varies widely. She felt guilty that her children moved between daycares, nannies, and emergency care arrangements. Shaking her head, she described it as "a disaster," "a little traumatic." On her family's busy schedule, she remarked: "For us, this is the world that works. This is what we've chosen. This is what we know. Sometimes it's hectic, but I talk to friends who are stay-at-homes, and it doesn't sound like a bed of roses [*laughs*]." Samantha

expressed agency in describing her time-constrained lifestyle: it was a choice. She reassured herself that it was the right one. To make it possible, she used her income to "buy back time" and alleviate her guilt by outsourcing domestic work to lower-paid workers (jobs usually held by racial/ethnic minority women [Hondagneu-Sotelo 2007]). Samantha also bought herself a clearer conscience, enabling her to maintain her definition of a good mother—one with a stocked fridge, a clean home, and most importantly, time to dedicate to her children.

Samantha coped with her situation by aiming to be a "good" instead of "great" mother. She called herself a "juggling mom": "Give yourself grace that you're not great at all of the things at all of the times. […] As long as nobody died and you didn't get fired, it's OK. […] It will pass." Reflecting on her advice for new mothers, she said: "I'm a really good lawyer, and I'm an awesome mom. I'm a pretty darn good wife. But I am never all three at the same time. You have to choose who you are at that moment." Samantha felt she could never be a good employee, mother, and partner simultaneously. She tried to set realistic expectations rather than trying to meet the ideals of intensive mothering. Samantha wanted her children to prioritize family in their future lives: "Work should be personally fulfilling. […] But work is not their identity, not their ultimate job. Their ultimate job is to be a loving individual who supports and loves their family and that's their first responsibility."

Family, not work, took precedence for Samantha. Employers assume that work is employees' priority. All jobs in the US operate around the assumption that workers are single-mindedly committed to their jobs, unencumbered by family responsibilities (Acker 1990). Social policies reflect this model and assume a privatized, market-based approach to family care. The lack of policy supports to help workers reconcile work and family commitments affects all workers across the board, particularly women, since they remain largely responsible for social reproduction. It seems to breed acute guilt in mothers because they find themselves lacking the time and resources necessary to be the sort of mothers they want to be—even advantaged women like Samantha. Without protective work-family policies, mothers and their families in liberal welfare states like the US are subject to the forces of the market and the whims of individual employers to make matters better.

Conclusion

Is maternal guilt a cross-national experience? I examined whether and how guilt shapes women's lives across Western welfare states with different public policies regarding motherhood and employment. I featured four women in this article who exemplified the trends gleaned from a larger interview study with 109 middle-class working mothers in the capital cities of Sweden, Germany, Italy, and the US. Drawing from their accounts, this article makes two important sociological contributions to the literature on gender, motherhood, and social policy.

First, I find that maternal guilt transcends national cultural and political contexts. Women in all four cities reported a sense of maternal guilt (see Table 3). Some sources of guilt resonated across the board. Mothers in Stockholm, Rome, Berlin, and Washington, DC felt that they didn't get enough time with their children and fretted over their wellbeing. They worried about daycare quality and whether their children were happy. They felt that working full-time meant they didn't spend enough time with their kids. All interviewees had internalized the idea that good mothers sublimated their own needs for their children. In this way, guilt serves as a

regulating force in mothers' lives. Future studies should investigate the relationship between time pressures and maternal guilt.

Second, work-family policy shapes which aspects of motherhood produce these guilty feelings. In Stockholm and Berlin, employment itself did not spur guilt for moms. Social policies and cultural norms there explicitly support working motherhood. Elena (Rome) and Samantha (Washington, DC) felt guilty for working, and for not meeting their employers' expectations. In DC, women including Samantha described feeling guilty about their short maternity leave (if they had any), their limited ability to breastfeed, and their children's safety at daycare.

Despite their very different levels of support for employed mothers, intensive mothering across these four national contexts required an expression of guilt. Counterintuitively, feeling guilty became an enactment of good mothering and acceptable femininity for middle-class women, inducing them to work ever harder on their children's behalf. Good mothers are never good enough because they can always try harder to meet their children's needs. The "threatening specter" (Butler 1993, 3) of the bad mother—and, by extension, of failed gender—is a constant presence inducing women to strive ever harder to live up to intensive mothering ideologies. If "patriarchy depends on the mother" (Rich 1976, 61), then maternal guilt is part of its affective apparatus as a disciplining emotion. As Aarntzen et al. (2019, 14) write: "guilt may limit women in their work and family choices and straitjacket mothers into complying with gender norms in which they prioritize caregiving tasks over work."

Mothers varied in their ability to deploy work-family policies to ameliorate their guilt. Josefin (Stockholm) used a flexible work schedule and federally-protected reduced working hours to pick her daughter up early from public childcare—though her guilt seemed specific to parenthood, not motherhood. We can see the performative acts of "good mothering" evident in Silke (Berlin), who anticipated part-time work after a year of parental leave. Elena (Rome) vowed to attend every event at her daughter's public childcare facility, but without longer leave or flexible hours once she returned to work, she couldn't attend these midday meetings. And with very few policy supports, Samantha's (DC) only recourse to address feeling guilty was to change jobs to what she thought was a more family-friendly workplace, increase her productivity, try to pump breast milk in her cubicle, and to hire the best private caregivers she could afford.

I argue that maternal guilt is a type of *internalized oppression*, one regulatory mechanism by which intensive mothering discourses reproduce mothers' feelings of inadequacy. Mothers' performances of guilt demonstrate their position as "'carriers' or representatives of prevailing relations of domination and subordination" (Dellinger and Williams 1997, 152). These routine practices demonstrate how middle-class women are inculcated in and at times reproduce power hierarchies represented in intensive mothering discourses. The women I interviewed had the resources to adapt their circumstances to lessen the pressures of intensive mothering—tactics largely unavailable to women of lesser means. Many mothers cannot afford to reduce their working hours or hire babysitters and nannies, do not have the privacy at work to pump breast milk, and lack the power or job security to demand time to attend childcare meetings and pick their children up early.

What mothers worry about and lose sleep over is directly tied to the social supports embedded in systems of welfare provisioning. Policies can reduce mothers' guilt in three ways. First, mothers need more time outside of paid work. Labor market regulations can make reduced-hour work available, require employers to accommodate caregiving responsibilities and reduce the penalties for doing so, and offer paid family leave, vacation, and sick days.

Second, mothers cannot do all the work of social reproduction. Policies need to target men's behavioral changes. "Use-it-or-lose-it" family leave days designated for fathers with high wage replacement have been shown to increase men's leave uptake and share of housework and childrearing (Kotsadam and Finseraas 2011; Patnaik 2019). Third, families cannot bear the responsibility and costs of childrearing alone. By understanding children as public goods (Folbre 2008), policies can distribute the labor and expense of raising children well more broadly across society, namely high-quality, affordable, and universal childcare.

Policies are a necessary but insufficient solution to ease mothers' guilt without concurrent cultural shifts in the meaning of motherhood. The mothers I interviewed in Europe had access to national subsidized childcare, rights to paid parental leave, and more opportunities to work flexible schedules. Yet these mothers told me they still experienced guilt—though far less than Samantha and other US mothers reported. But I did see evidence of resistance in all four cities. Women discursively pushed back against the high standards of intensive mothering and found ways to think and talk about their experience that assuaged their guilt (Christopher 2012; Gerson 2010; Miller 2007). They all tried to be "good enough mothers." As Josefin (Stockholm) said, "Lower the ambition." Silke (Berlin) echoed this sentiment: "I already know that I am not going to be perfect and I'm not—I try to still be as good as I can and hope that's good enough." Elena (Rome) reflected, "I don't want to give her the impression that she has a stressed mom." Perhaps most strikingly, Samantha (Washington DC): said, "Give yourself grace that you're not great at all of the things at all of the times. … As long as nobody died and you didn't get fired, it's OK." By acknowledging they could never be perfect, women recognized that intensive mothering was by definition impossible to achieve—no matter how generous the policies. They asserted agency over their emotional wellbeing with this redefinition. This tactic didn't eliminate guilt entirely, but made it less painful. Undermining the gendered dictates embedded in the discourse of intensive mothering may be necessary to open up the possibility of social change (Blair-Loy 2003; Christopher 2012; Miller 2007). Scholars might consider how mothering discourses can be reshaped in specific cultural contexts and reinforced by more progressive, egalitarian work-family policies to lessen their regulatory effects.

Studies with mothers from diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds are important directions for future research. I did not interview non-English speaking mothers or those who were low-income, unemployed, or had little education. Thus this research does not include these women's experiences. More expansive welfare state provisioning matters most to vulnerable groups like these (Misra, Moller, and Budig 2007). Intensive mothering likely operates differently for less advantaged mothers and for those who are unemployed or precariously employed. Future research should examine how emotion work like the performance of maternal guilt may reproduce racial inequalities (Wingfield 2010). Contrasting mothers' experiences across social locations and demographics would also be fruitful—e.g., perceptions of guilt for women of color and white women, single versus partnered women, those with younger and older children, and women working part-time versus full-time. I also did not interview fathers. Whether men also feel a sense of paternal guilt, especially in more gender equal contexts such as Sweden, remains to be explored empirically. These studies could help deepen our understandings of these most intimate, emotional parenting experiences, and more broadly, of other sociological issues shaped by policy context.

In sum, guilt shapes how middle-class mothers feel about themselves. Guilt matters because it influences mothers' career decisions, scheduling negotiations, parenting styles, and personal aspirations. Women are deeply invested in upholding ideals for good mothers. In this article, I

developed a culturally specific understanding of the ways that maternal guilt helps constitute contemporary motherhood and femininity in Western welfare states and how some women use various policy provisions to mitigate feelings of guilt. Overall, maternal guilt perpetuates a gender system in which women remain primarily responsible for their children, fueling an unequal gender division of labor that hinders women at home and at work. It also plays into a culture of blame and diverts attention away from the larger structural inequalities making it difficult for all women to have satisfying jobs and contented family lives. For middle-class mothers, guilt may be a spoke in the wheel stalling the gender revolution, a linchpin of gender inequality (England 2010).

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