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Motherhood, homeschooling, and mental health

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Abstract

Homeschooling fits neatly under the umbrella of intensive mothering, a prominent parenting style in the United States. Intensive mothering has been shown to increase the emotional distress of mothers, which may be exacerbated when mothers take on the additional burden of being responsible for the formal education of their children. Given that intensive mothering ideologies negatively impact maternal mental health, it makes sense to examine how homeschooling may exacerbate this outcome. In this paper, I examine the literature on intensive mothering, homeschooling, and mental health to demonstrate a need for further exploration to show how homeschooling mothers, encouraged by intensive mothering ideologies, may be putting their mental health, and more, at risk in their endeavors to be both "good mothers" as well as "good teachers."

1 | INTRODUCTION

Since the 1980s, the number of families choosing to educate their children at home has increased exponentially. As of 2012, the nationally representative data on the homeschooling population in the United States showed that it had almost doubled in prevalence since 1999 to 1.77 million (Murphy, 2012; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999, 2012). Though it bears noting, the number seems to have slightly dropped to 1.69 million in 2016 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Traditionally, the homeschooling population was mainly comprised of Christian households and "hippie alternative" families, representing mostly White, middle-class, heterosexual parents. Today, the demographics of homeschooling are expanding to include families who do not fit into those categories (Lois, 2013; Murphy, 2012).

Though the demographics of homeschooling may be changing, who does the labor is not. When a family decides to homeschool, it is almost always the mother who takes on the additional labor of providing education to their children (Lois, 2013; Mazama, 2015; Murphy, 2012; Stevens, 2001). Given that women remain responsible for the bulk of household domestic and emotional labor (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Bianchi, Sayer, Milkie, & Robinson, 2012; Hochschild, 2003; Kroska, 2003; Roxburgh, 2004), the extra duty of teaching children is piled on top of

teacher–mothers' existing household responsibilities (Lois, 2013). Moreover, for the teacher–mother, there is less respite from their duties as a mother because their children are not in school during the day (Lois, 2013). This additional labor can cause added stress for the teacher–mother causing "homeschool burnout" (Lois, 2013, p. 93) when their emotional resources are spent.

Homeschooling can be considered an extension of hegemonic ideologies of motherhood as it fits many of the values shared by these ideologies. Hegemonic mothering ideologies (Dow, 2016) such as "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996), "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2011), "the cult of domesticity" (Williams, 2000), "helicopter parenting" (Cline & Fay, 1990), "identity parenting" (Paltineau, 2012), and others acknowledge that there are high cultural expectations of mothers (Dow, 2016). These ideologies demand that mothers selflessly expend a large number of resources such as time, energy, emotional labor, and money for the benefit of their children. Hegemonic mothering ideologies often insist that mothers are the natural and best caretakers of their children. Additionally, hegemonic motherhood dictates that children's needs, including the expectation for a happy childhood, are put mainly upon the mother, and this added work can cause an increase in the stress levels of mothers (Gunderson & Barrett, 2015; Hays, 1996; Lois, 2013). Intensive mothering, in particular, has been linked with homeschooling practices and choices. (Lois, 2013).

As the literature clearly shows a link between parenting and negative mental health outcomes (Evenson & Simon, 2005; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Simon, 1998, 2008), a risk that may be even higher among those who practice intensive mothering (Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013) as well as stay-at-home mothers (Frech & Damaske, 2012; Goldsteen & Ross, 1989), it follows that teacher–mothers would not only be affected but possibly experience even more negative mental health outcomes. Due to the gendered nature of homeschooling and the unequal division of labor at home, it is crucial to explore how this constant, extra, potentially intense, mental, and emotional labor may affect homeschooling mothers' mental health.

A teacher–mother's mental health could be impacted by a multitude of factors, including their reasons for choosing to educate their child at home and the number of resources and support they have. Homeschooling mothers face unique stressors that may increase a mother's already high level of stress such as increased workload, role insecurity, curricula choices and related strain, lack of support from spouses, and lack of community support. As such, the purpose of this essay is to review the literature that brings together homeschooling, intensive mothering, and mental health focusing on some of these unique facets of homeschooling that can cause stress: the labor of choosing to homeschool, emotional management, stigma management, and community and spousal support.

2 | THE LABOR OF CHOOSING TO HOMESCHOOL

It is possible that the feelings that drive the choice to homeschool could have a long-term effect on a teacher–mother's mental health. Lois (2013) points out that while much research exists on why families decide to homeschool, less research has been done on the thought and emotional labor that goes into the choice. She argues that mothers' feelings influence their identity as mothers and therefore inform their choice to homeschool. Additionally, she showed that the reasoning for choosing to homeschool did affect how the teacher–mother's felt about the work of homeschooling (2013).

Additionally, current measures employed in nationwide surveys are not nuanced enough to explore these decisions. A deeper understanding of how this decision is made is important, as reasons for choosing to homeschool could impact a teacher–mother's mental health outcome. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2012), the top three reasons why families homeschool are to provide higher quality education than a traditional school, to provide "moral instruction" (p. 11), and out of concern about the overall school environment. However, the literature shows that the reasons for choosing to homeschool tend to be somewhat more nuanced than these broad categorizations suggest. In fact, there are several other reasons that families choose to homeschool:

distrust of public schools (Stevens, 2001), disappointment in school safety (Lois, 2013), "racial protectionism" (Mazama & Lundy, 2012), and protection from peer influence (Stevens, 2001; Vigilant, Trefethren, & Anderson, 2013). Further, many parents cite more than one reason for their choice to homeschool (Lois, 2013; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2014; Murphy, 2012).

It is important to note that the decision to homeschool is not always driven by emphatic choice but is sometimes the last resort or a seeming lack of choice. Lois (2013) found that there are two different types of homeschooling families: "first-choice" and "second-choice" (p. 47). First-choice homeschoolers are those who choose to homeschool, usually for reasons such as to provide religious instruction (Mazama & Lundy, 2014; Kunzman, 2009; Stevens, 2001; Vigilant et al., 2013), to protect their children from social influences (Stevens, 2001; Mazama & Lundry, 2014; Vigilant et al., 2013), to protect their children from racism in the schools (Fields-Smith & Kisura, 2013; Fields-Smith & Williams, 2009; Mazama & Lundy, 2012, 2014), or out of a distrust in the public schools to give their child a proper education (Stevens, 2001; Vigilant et al., 2013). Contrarily, second-choice homeschoolers are those who homeschool not because they desire to but because they are circumstantially forced to because their child has special needs or they have run out of school options for other reasons such as disciplinary, behavioral, or social problems (Lois, 2013; Murphy, 2012).

These patterns illustrate how the current quantitative measures used by NCES to measure reasons for homeschooling make it challenging to understand why people are making these choices. For example, the NCES 2012 data question about the school environment is listed as "...concern about the environment of other schools, such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure" (NCES, 2012, p. 12). This broad category could include a multitude of things such as racism, bullying, fear of the surrounding neighborhood, and protecting their children from the influence of peers. It would be beneficial to attempt to tease out the multifaceted reasons that families choose this non-traditional approach as their reasons for homeschooling could influence a teacher–mother's mental health by adding additional layers of stress.

Specifically, even though it appears that some reasons, such as religion, are popular across race and class, some homeschoolers of color cite reasons not explicitly listed in the surveys. Fields-Smith and Williams (2009) have named these reasons "ethnological" and explain that these reasons for homeschooling stem from parents' worries that racial stereotypes affect their children's education. Fields-Smith and Kisura (2013) and Mazama and Lundy (2012, 2014) noted that homeschooling Black families, whose numbers seem to be increasing, tend to include religion, school safety, low expectations for Black children in schools, lack of unbiased education, and racism in their reasons for homeschooling. Some of the Black homeschooling mothers in Fields-Smith and Kisura's (2013) study expressed feeling as though they needed to choose homeschooling to ensure that their children were pushed to reach their full potential citing a "culture of low expectations" (p. 272) in school. These mothers also discuss belief in the idea that Black children needed to be "twice as good" (p. 273) than White children. This belief could potentially increase stress on these mothers if they strive to ensure that the rigor of their homeschooling is enough to guarantee their children's success.

Lois (2013) explains that the motivation behind choosing to homeschool can affect a mother's feelings and vice versa. This pattern became especially apparent in another group of mothers who may face added stress due to their reasons for homeschooling are second-choice homeschoolers who homeschool because their child has special needs such as autism, attention hyperactivity deficit disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, and other neurodivergent diagnoses, chronic ailments, and disabilities (Lois, 2013). Moreover, those who have special needs children may experience added work and emotional labor. These mothers, in general, carry a larger load of emotional labor and stress due to combating stigma due to their children's needs (Gray, 2002), managing doctor appointments and other forms of treatment (Brewer, 2018; Rogers, 2011), and managing mother-blame for their children's condition (Blum, 2007; Rogers, 2011). These mothers must become fierce advocates for their children through the educational and medical systems, ensuring that their children get the care they need, and they often sacrifice their social ties and struggle to find social support (Blum, 2007).

Furthermore, teacher–mothers who express this second-choice reasoning typically did not desire to home-school in the first place, therefore increasing their ambivalent and even resentful feelings towards educating their child at home (Lois, 2013). These feelings of resentfulness and ambivalence in addition to added workload could increase the chances that teacher–mothers have negative mental health outcomes. One of Lois' participants who was categorized as second-choice even expressed feeling as if she should be prescribed antidepressants after leaving the workforce to homeschool her child (2013, pg. 64). Lois (2013) found that many of her second-choice homeschooling participants tried, and failed, to place their children in traditional schools by the time of their follow-up interviews, demonstrating their struggle between giving their needs and the needs of their children.

3 | STIGMA MANAGEMENT, EMOTIONAL MANAGEMENT, AND FEAR OF FAILURE

For the homeschooling mother, there seems to be an added layer of fear of failure, managing stigma, and emotional management due to their added role as teacher that could also affect their mental health. Themes of sacrifice, devoting all to their children and putting their lives on hold, are expressed by mothers attempting to achieve "good mother" status (Donath, 2015; Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Lois, 2013). Arnold (2014) found that mothers describe themselves as "going crazy" and "losing their minds" (Arnold, 2014, p. 53) or mention experiencing mental and physical illnesses, depression, and relationship strain due to parenting expectation and experiences (Arnold, 2014). So it seems that even though these mothers love and care for their children, rather than experiencing the positive emotions generally associated with parenthood, they are instead experiencing anxiety, stress, and depression that stem from highly demanding role expectations regarding mothering. For the homeschooling mother, taking responsibility for the education of the child makes the mother role that much more demanding.

Despite fitting into the ideology of hegemonic mothering, homeschooling remains a socially deviant choice (Lois, 2009, 2013); thus, mothers often feel insecure about the decision to homeschool (Lois, 2009) and participate in stigma management. Teacher–mothers are often accused of being irresponsible parents (Lois, 2013). Lois (2009) found that some of the most common ways these mothers are labeled are as "academically arrogant" (p. 210), "socially over protective" (p. 214), "morally self-righteous and extreme" (p. 216), and "relationally hyper engaged" (p. 220). And while homeschooling is becoming more widely accepted and practiced, it is still seen as a deviation from the norm and is often contradictory to what is generally considered "good mothering." Teacher–mothers cope with this stigma by developing justifications for their choice (Lois, 2009, 2013). New teacher–mothers attempt to assuage their insecurity by immersing themselves in research and buying expensive curricula (Lois, 2006). Not only do mothers spend energy defending, explaining, and justifying their deviance, but also the stigma may cause homeschooling mothers to receive less support from family members and friends (Lois, 2009).

One of the ways teacher–mothers attempt to dismiss being labeled as deviant and possibly even negligent is by emphasizing their children's successes. While it has been shown that non-homeschooling mothers express feeling a strong sense of responsibility not only for their children's education (Hutchison, 2012), intelligence, and brain development (Wall, 2010), this is especially true for teacher–mothers (Lois, 2013). For these women, their children's education is not only proof of their homeschooling success but also an affirmation of their choice to educate their child at home (Lois, 2013). Additionally, the mothers in Liss, Schiffrin, and Rizzo's (2013) study reported feeling more shame when they feared being evaluated negatively, and it is possible that this would be similar in homeschooling mothers. Their fear may be compounded by the deviance of their choice to homeschool, adding even more pressure on teacher–mothers. This additional pressure could be considered chronic strain (Pearlin, 1989) and cause negative mental health outcomes for these mothers.

Moreover, hegemonic mothering ideology demands a large number of resources, including time, money, and energy, and these resources are expected to be spent without question for the good of the child (Hays, 1996). These expectations can cause an ongoing struggle between maternal needs and the needs of the child, which can foster ambivalent feelings towards motherhood. Mothers who feel as though they have failed at these expectations often express feelings of guilt, shame, and failure (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2015; Sutherland, 2010). Henderson et al. (2015) found that mothers who experienced this guilt, whether they practiced hegemonic mothering or not, reported experiencing more stress and anxiety.

Again, like hegemonic mothering, homeschooling is a practice that requires a tremendous number of resources, freely given without question, for the good of the child. One such resource is time, as the ideologies typically encompass the expectation that mothers are constantly available to their children (Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Lois, 2013) while asserting that bad mothers are those who are not always accessible such as those who work or who take time for themselves (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). However, mothers express that the expectation of constant availability causes them distress (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). This expectation includes emotionally supporting children.

Furthermore, Gunderson and Barrett (2015) found that depressive symptoms were more likely to be reported by mothers who spent more time supporting their children emotionally. This tension can cause conflicting feelings of joy and love for their children but also depression, frustration, and a loss of self and freedom (Arendell, 2000; Donath, 2015). Some mothers have even expressed an outright desire for more separateness and to have their "bodies back" (Arnold, 2014, p. 57). The choice offered to mothers seems to be either shoulder the burden and stress caused by hegemonic mothering expectations or accept the shame and guilt associated with not adhering to the social script.

As it is, women experience more time pressure than men (Roxburgh, 2004). This tendency is no different for teacher–mothers who often have a unique lack of personal time. Typically, these mothers are accompanied by their children throughout the day, leaving few chances to get things done or pursue their own interests. A lack of time to spend on themselves can increase mothers' feelings of ambivalence towards motherhood and homeschooling. Additionally, this lack of discretionary time increases stress, feelings of resentment, and frustration (Lois, 2010, 2013). Consequently, the three roles of teacher, homemaker, and mother leave teacher–mothers depleted, exhausted, and burnt out (Lois, 2006, 2013).

Many teacher–mothers rework how they speak about time to rationalize their choice to put themselves second, which Lois (2006, 2013) calls temporal emotional work (Lois, 2010). These women use nostalgia and regret to justify putting their desires and needs on hold to homeschool their child. These teacher–mothers argue that their time with their child is finite, and they can always address their needs later after the child has grown up. Lois found this thought process to be strongly encouraged in the culture of homeschooling (Lois, 2010, 2013).

Nevertheless, mothers, in general, express experiencing high levels of anxiety due to their fear of failure (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2015). This anxiety and fear may be even more so for teacher–mothers who have taken on the socialization and academic responsibilities that are usually given to the schools. These women express a concern that their inadequacies will result in ruining their student–children, both socially and academically (Lois, 2013). This anxiety is accompanied by feelings of burnout, stress, exhaustion, and a decrease in feelings of accomplishment when their schooling does not go as planned, such as when their children push back against their curricula or when their student–children were not progressing as they should (Lois, 2006, 2013).

Lois (2013) also found that homeschooler's emotional management paralleled many beliefs also found in intensive mothering ideologies. These ideologies expect that a mother's emotional labor is constant, and mothers' emotions must be carefully checked and curated (Arendell, 2000; Shelton & Johnson, 2006). Once the decision is made to homeschool, teacher–mothers then must learn how to balance their new role as the teacher role is a new one for most mothers (Lois, 2006, 2013). As a result, teacher–mothers can experience emotional distress due to role strain

and conflict (Lois, 2006). Some of Lois' (2013) participants disclosed that they felt insecure in their ability to provide an education for their child and that they had trouble separating their feelings as a mother from their job as a teacher. Moreover, these teacher–mothers expressed needing to do large amounts of emotional labor to encourage their children to cooperate with them (Lois, 2013).

4 | STRUGGLES TO FIND SPOUSAL AND COMMUNITY SUPPORT

When exploring teacher–mothers' mental health outcomes, it is essential to consider what kind of support they are receiving from those around them. As mentioned earlier, teacher–mothers are often stay-at-home mothers in heterosexual two-parent households with a male wage earner (Lois, 2010 and 2013; Murphy, 2012; NCES 2012), and typically, it is the mother who takes on the educational duties (Lois, 2013; Mazama, 2015; Murphy, 2012; Stevens, 2001). This gendered pattern is reflected both in homeschooling media and materials as well as in other more mainstream media that often portray the mother as the more involved parent in the educational arena (Stambach & David, 2005). Of course, this maternal educational burden is not exclusive to homeschooling mothers (Hutchison, 2012). Research shows that even in households where children are traditionally schooled, homework requires emotional management that is usually a burden shouldered by the mother (Hutchison, 2012). However, teacher–mothers cannot rely on teachers, learning aids, and school counselors to assist them as other mothers do because they take on those roles themselves.

Of course, some teacher–mothers rely on their spouses to become part of the educational team. For many couples, the decision to homeschool is one that is made together, though Lois (2013) found that some women homeschooled because they felt pressured by their husbands and families. There is very little research on homeschooling fathers and how they support teacher–mothers and even less on those who choose to homeschool secularly. Though, as with other areas of homeschooling, religiosity may also be a factor in how fathers give support.

According to Vigilant, Anderson, and Trefethren (2014) and Lois (2013), in conservative Christian households, families tend to subscribe to the traditional family where the husband is head of the house, and, as for most homeschooling families, the mother is almost always the teacher–parent. The husbands in this study considered their most important role as the "spiritual leader" (p. 300) for their family. The men interviewed by Vigilant et al. (2014) expressed supporting their wives by taking the position of the "principal" or "superintendent" (p. 300) while their wife takes on the role of teacher.

These religious homeschooling fathers considered their contributions to the homeschooling process to include developing "the vision" (p. 300) for their home school, justifying the process to their children, being the disciplinarian, and assisting with decision making. These men also supported their wives by praying for them, making decisions, giving them emotional and financial support, and occasionally giving their wives some time to themselves (Vigilant et al., 2014). Furthermore, these conservative Christian homeschooling fathers saw the stress experienced by their wives as "spiritual warfare" (Vigilant et al., 2014, p. 299) meant to discourage the family from homeschooling, which could be seen as invalidating the feelings of the teacher–mother. However, these husbands view this labor as belonging to their wives, in addition to her duties of taking care of her husband and the home (Vigilant et al., 2014).

Similarly, Lois (2013) found that it was not very common for fathers to participate in the homeschooling of their children or even for them to support the teacher–mothers by giving them time away from their responsibilities. Her participants reported that fathers often expressed intent to participate in the schooling of their children but that this often ended in failure as fathers did not always follow through. Requests for help from the teacher–mothers to the fathers were often met with resistance or they were accepted but then forgotten about (Lois, 2013). If these women perceive themselves as not being supported, this can affect a teacher–mother's mental health as Roxburgh (1997) found that the mere perception of "low partner support" is enough to decrease mental health.

Along with lower partner support, some of these homeschooling women may also lack community support, particularly those who are not religious (Murphy, 2012; Stevens, 2001). This lack of support is important to note because, in 1999, the second most cited reason for schooling a child at home was for religious instruction, but in 2012, religious instruction had fallen to fourth (NCES, 1999, 2012). This change could indicate a rise in secular homeschooling. Secular homeschoolers have fewer options when looking for ready-made curricula and often face exclusion from religious-based homeschooling support groups (Stevens, 2001).

This lack of community support could affect the mental health of mothers who chose to homeschool their children secularly. Prior research has shown that an increase in community support can help mothers buffer the effects of stress (Goldsteen & Ross, 1989; Parks, Lenz, & Jenkins, 1991) and secular mothers may struggle to find this support. Additionally, having to spend more time creating curricula or sifting through the religious ones to find something that suits them or finding groups to support them can take a toll on mothers' time and energy.

5 | CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are still many missing pieces in the literature on homeschooling, including studies on fathers' involvement, reasons for homeschooling, secular homeschooling, and the impact on the teacher–mother. Homeschooling fathers are very understudied, but it would be essential to explore how they impact the homeschooling process and how the process affects their lives. Also, as mentioned, prior, reasons for homeschooling seem more nuanced than the national surveys suggest; it could be a valuable addition to the literature to explore more deeply why families make this decision.

Additionally, much research has been done on the outcome of homeschool for the student–children, but much less on the effects on the teacher–mothers (Lois, 2013, 2010, 2009; Murphy, 2012). Teacher–mothers take on a tremendous responsibility and a large amount of unpaid labor, which can have substantial effects on their mental health (Henderson, Harmon, & Newman, 2015; Lois, 2013). The added pressure of their added work could exacerbate the anxiety, depression, and life dissatisfaction already proven to be related to mothering (Gunderson & Barrett, 2015; Hays, 1996; Lois, 2013). Of course, there has been research conducted that suggests that depression is not experienced at higher rates for nonparents than their child-free peers (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Simon & Caputo, 2018) indicating that the nature of parenting and mental health is complex and warrants more exploration.

The impact that the additional role of teacher may have on teacher–mothers is worthy of academic attention, particularly as the prevalence of homeschooling continues to increase. Prior literature leaves space for further exploration of homeschooling mothers and mental health. For instance, it may be beneficial to see how different types of homeschooling mothers cope with the additional labor. Lois (2013) found that the Christian homeschooling mothers she studied, who comprised the majority of her participants, used their faith to overcome some of the emotional hurdles of homeschooling. Additionally, Stevens (2001) dipped his toes into the secular homeschooling world, but his goal was not to flesh out an understanding of how teacher–mothers coped or assess their mental health. Furthermore, both studies had mostly first-choice participants, which leaves room for the exploration of second-choice and secular homeschooling teacher–mothers' mental health and coping strategies. Understanding how both groups of teacher mothers cope would add to our current knowledge of homeschooling families and possibly inform practices to assist these mothers in the future.

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