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“It’s not all a Hollywood film is it?” Discourses of
stay-at-home mothers over thirty

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Abstract

Research has remained limited on the lives of women over thirty who decide to stay-at-home upon having children. The present research sought to examine the discourses and subject positions available to partnered stay-at-home mothers over thirty, and the opportunities and constraints these positions offer. Following ethical approval, ten partnered stay-at-home mothers over thirty took part in a semi-structured, in-depth interview. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed and analysed using a Foucauldian discourse analytic approach. In particular, the discourses, subject positions and discursive resources these mothers use to construct their experiences were identified. This study found a strong adherence to a 'good mother' discourse, which was comprised of four underlying discourses. The first discourse, the 'relational mother', emphasises the relational aspect of mothering and this discourse was co-articulated with the intensive mother discourse, requiring mothers to spend large amounts of time with their children. A third discourse, the 'selfless mother', requires women to sacrifice career, time and energy to provide for their children. Finally, mothers drew on a 'best caregiver' discourse, which positioned them as solely responsible for the expert care for their child. At times, some participants resisted the good mother discourse, and instead drew on a 'good enough mother' discourse, which constructed mothering as a complex and unique learning process. Stay-at-home mothers and their partners also negotiated multiple and contradictory constructions of the working mother, which positioned them in various ways. The primary working mother discourse constructed working mothers as financially contributing to the family unit and providing women with a fulfilling career. This positioned stay-at-home mothers as financially dependent, and outsiders from the paid workforce. In their talk about being older mothers', participants discussed preparing for being a 'good mother'. Their time prior to children was constructed in positive ways, making the discursive transition to being a 'good mother' challenging. Future research into the way in which mothers over the age of thirty discursively negotiate the transition to motherhood, and how families with young children make sense of both financial and domestic responsibilities would benefit both working and stay-at-home mothers.

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