“Mommy Wars” in the media

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ABSTRACT

We compare computer searches of the phrase “mommy wars” against more conventional content analyses of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Pos*t that code stories for themes of conflict between employed mothers and stay-at-home mothers. Comparing trends since 1980, we find that both computer searches and traditional content analyses record a rapid rise in mommy war themes beginning in the 1990s and accelerating rapidly in the first decade of this century. However, the content analyses date the rise of “Mommy Wars” themes noticeably earlier than do the computer searches for the phrase itself. That timing difference is theoretically important because the computer searches date the rise in the “Mommy Wars” theme well after the stall in the gender revolution while traditional content analyses show the rise to be coincident with or perhaps even prior to the stall in the gender revolution.

The arrival of “big data” promises to re-invigorate a long tradition of content analysis research. From instant online analyses of Google’s 5 million-book database to word searches of tweets by time of day, the possibilities of uncovering meaningful relationships with a click of the “enter” key has drawn new researchers to a long-established field, one that traces its origins to well before computers were even imagined. Not unlike the history of more qualitative content analysis research, computerized searches have attracted a broad spectrum of researchers not all of whom bring a meaningful background in the social science questions that can be addressed with the new techniques. Some of the enthusiasm for big data is even scornful of theory or past research. But the success of big data methods depends on moving beyond the interesting curiosities that can be revealed with clever searches to answering enduring social science questions.

In this paper, we compare computer searches of the phrase “mommy wars” against more conventional content analyses of the New York Times and the Washington Post that code stories for themes of conflict between employed mothers and stay-at-home mothers. We find that both computer searches and traditional content analyses record a rapid rise in mommy war themes beginning in the 1990s and accelerating rapidly in the first decade of this century. However, the content analyses date the rise of “Mommy Wars” noticeably earlier than do the computer searches. That timing difference is important because the computer searches date the rise in the “Mommy Wars” theme well after the stall in the gender revolution while traditional content analyses show the rise to be coincident with or perhaps even prior to the stall in the gender revolution.

Introduction

The new schema about mothers’ labor force participation

The mommy wars theme is one element in a larger schema of related themes (Bachrach 2013) that together have raised new doubts about mothers’ increased labor force participation. These new critiques of working mothers differ from earlier reservations that mothers’ employment outside the home would damage their children and disrupt the family. Instead, the focus has shifted to the mothers themselves: that the urge “to have it all” has only made women more unhappy. This shift in the popular culture about working mothers may have contributed to the stalled gender revolution of the 1990s that otherwise remains largely unexplained. Other elements of this new working mothers schema include:

- the “distressed working mother” theme asserts that “trying to have it all” has only made women more stressed and guilty;
- “opting out”, describing how new mothers abandon successful careers because of the draw of family life;
- intensive mothering that has raised standards for what is required to be considered a good parent to levels that crowd out the possibilities of self enjoyment.

These themes are consistent with a broader gender ideology of what Charles and Grusky call egalitarian essentialism – a mix of feminist insistence on gender equality while accepting the more traditionalist assumption that men and women will always differ in important ways.

The "Mommy Wars" theme has reinforced this new anti-working mother schema by identifying the main antagonists of working mothers as other women who have chosen to stay home to devote themselves to their children, what the media have labeled "stay-at-home" mothers. No longer do conflicts about working mothers focus on aggrieved husbands who resent the loss of attention and services that an at-home wife provided. Nor is the conflict any longer a generational split between grandmothers (or mothers-in-law) who often never had the opportunities that women of the Baby Boom had seized so confidently and proudly. Instead the conflict discussed now in the popular culture has been between working mothers and other women with whom they shared the same generation and the same gender.

Among these themes within the new, broader, schema, the "Mommy Wars" theme is especially interesting because it lends itself well to big data methodology. While "opting out" now has a widely accepted gendered meaning in popular culture, media searches will identify far more stories about professional athletes opting out of their contracts than middle-class mothers opting out of their careers. "Intensive mothering" remains a largely academic expression, and popular alternatives (the "new momism" or "helicopter parents") have not captured the theme to nearly the same extent that "Mommy Wars" has become the universal tag for conflict between employed and stay-at-home mothers. And while "egalitarian essentialism" nicely encapsulates how the new schema blends earlier feminist and traditional ideologies, it too remains a purely academic phrase.

"Mommy Wars", in contrast, can be found throughout the media. Our search of 32 U.S. and Canadian newspapers finds 572 instances of the use of "Mommy Wars" since 1990, most of which have occurred since the turn of the century (see Appendix Table 1 for a breakdown by sources). Similarly, Google nGrams retrieves xx books using the phrase since 1990.

The origins of "Mommy Wars"

A 1990 *Newsweek* story is sometimes cited as the first to popularize the phrase, but a 1989 *Washington Post* column attributes its first use to a 1989 *Texas Monthly* feature by Jan Jarboe, entitled "The Mommy War [singular]". Jarboe captured the interpersonal hostility that the phrase highlighted:

> "Working moms view stay-at-home moms as idle and silly, traitors in the battle to encourage men to assume more responsibility at home. Stay-at-home moms view working moms as selfish and greedy, cheating their own children out of a strong maternal bond."

The hostility had a particular edge to it because of the self-doubts of either side. Jarboe described how stay-at-home mothers feared the "What do you do?" dinner-party question; employed mothers worried that they were seen as selfish and inferior parents in comparison with the maternal dedication of stay-at-home mothers. Guilt easily crossed the Mommy Wars battle lines and encouraged mutual avoidance rather than engagement and resolution.

The 1990 *Newsweek* feature repeated these themes to a much broader national audience, although it would be ten years before the magazine again used the phrase. Books

including Mommy Wars in the title by Mirian Peskowitz (2005) and Leslie Morgan Steiner (2006) greatly increased the visibility of the phrase in the first decade of the century.

The Stalled Gender Revolution in the 1990s.

The rise of this new anti-working mother schema in the popular culture may hold a key for understanding the otherwise puzzling 1990s stall in the gender revolution. A broad range of gender indicators including mothers' labor force participation, occupational and educational integration (England and Li 2006; Cohen, Huffman, and Knauer 2009; Cohen 2012), the gender wage gap (Hegewisch et al. 2010; IWPR 2012), female elected officials (Rutgers Center for American Women and Politics 2012), and even time spent on household chores (Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006) have documented a mid-1990s stall in earlier progress towards gender equality (see also Cotter, Hermsen and Vanneman 2004; England 2010). Attitudes on gender also ceased becoming more egalitarian in the mid-1990s (Thornton and Young-DeMarco 2001) and have shown minor change since then (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011).

While the stall is now a generally accepted fact, explanations for it have not been so readily developed. Many of the structural trends associated with the spread of gender equality in the 1970s did not change significantly backwards in the 1990s. For example, neither contraceptive availability nor fertility rates changed much as they had earlier (Goldin and Katz 2002). Nor was there a shift in the occupational or industrial structure away from the "female jobs" that had expanded earlier to pull women into the labor force (Oppenheimer 1973). There was no economic recession in the 1990s pushing women out of the labor force. And gender differences in education (Smith and Ward 1984) were one of the few trends that failed to stall in the 1990s (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006) so human capital explanations are unlikely to offer an explanation for stalls in other gender trends.

Because there are no easily identified structural causes for the stalled gender revolution, a shift in popular culture might provide an alternative an important explanation. The fact that individual attitudes also shifted in the 1990s strengthens the case that a cultural explanation might be especially promising. Susan Faludi's *Backlash* (1991) had made precisely this argument although Faludi dated the shift in the media and popular entertainment to the 1980s, well before any slowing in the pace of feminist progress. However, our analyses of the "distressed working mother theme" in the *New York Times* (Kling and Vanneman 2013) suggest that the prevalence if not the origin of these themes is better located in the 1990s. The theoretical interest in Mommy Wars, therefore, is not merely because of its interest as a theme in the popular culture, but because it may be one component in a larger schema of ideas that may have played a role in the unexpected 1990s stall of rising gender equality.

Research Questions

We seek to track the rise of the Mommy Wars theme in the popular culture paying particular attention to the timing of the rise as a clue to the possibility that a shift in how popular culture portrayed working mothers might help explain the mid-1990s stall in the gender revolution. Big data methods can assist in this effort because the availability of sufficiently large annual text bases might provide a more reliable dating of the rise of anti-working mother themes.

This research is part of a larger effort that uses more conventional content analysis methods to analyze trends in themes about working mothers since 1980. Among the themes being tracked in that media research are examples of conflicts between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. In contrast to big data methods, the conventional content analysis methods do not depend on an exact quotation of “Mommy Wars”. Comparison of the two methods may, therefore, provide some insights into the advantages and disadvantages of each as a strategy for detecting trends in popular culture. Specifically, we ask:

- Does the rise of the “Mommy Wars” phrase in popular culture coincide, precede, or follow the 1990s stall in the gender revolution?
- Do the trends in the usage of “Mommy Wars” match the trends revealed in more subjective coding of newspaper articles about conflicts between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers?
- Do time trends in the prevalence of the “Mommy Wars” theme coincide with trends in other themes related to the new anti-working mother schema?

Methods

Big Data.

Two searchable text data bases are used to count occurrences of the phrase “Mommy Wars” across time. Google Books Ngram Viewer, available at http://books.google.com/ngrams, has a database of over 5 million books published from 1500 to 2008. The Ngram Viewer reports annual counts of books with a selected phrase as a proportion of all books digitized for that year. We begin a “Mommy Wars” search in 1980 although the first recorded instance occurs only in 1990. We search all books published in the United States in English that include the “Mommy Wars” phrase. Because the Ngram Viewer is case sensitive, we search for a combination of the capitalized “Mommy Wars” and the lower-case, and slightly less common, “mommy wars” version. We have also experimented with calculating occurrences as a proportion of books that include the word “mother”, but “mother” appears at a quite consistent if slightly rising rate over time so the shape of the “Mommy Wars” trend does not change much by dividing only by books with the word “mother”. Therefore we report the proportion of all books with “Mommy Wars”.

Our second text data base is the LexisNexis digitized collection of U.S. newspapers. This database has completely digitized newspaper sources for a variety of U.S. and Canadian newspapers, but with varying initial years. We can search 10 newspapers from 1990 onwards and 32 newspapers from 1995 onwards. Because most of the usage of the “Mommy Wars” phrase occurs after 1995, we report the 32-newspaper monthly totals since 1995. However this truncation comes at some cost of the loss of the theoretically interesting early 1990s which immediately precede the stall in the gender revolution. Nevertheless, as we will see, the use of this phrase is still quite rare in the early 1990s so we lose little information by narrowing the range of years and broadening the sample of newspapers.

Newspaper content.

Our conventional content analyses are based on samples of articles in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* beginning in 1981 and 1978 respectively. The sampling criteria described below yielded 944 *Times* and 568 *Post* articles. Although this sample of 1504 articles might seem adequate for many purposes, annual sample sizes average less than 50 even after combining the two newspaper samples. Because theoretical interest focuses on precisely when the rise in the new anti-working mother schema occurred, annual samples of 50 cases are too small to yield reliable estimates, as we shall show. Additional coding of Associated Press articles from 1978 to 2012 is currently underway and promises to double the population of coded articles.

Although our analysis of the *Times* and *Post* articles follows largely conventional content analysis coding protocols, the selection of the articles itself depended on “big data” resources provided by Lexis Nexis. Rather than trying to select relevant articles through a manual search or the use of published indexes, we used Lexis/Nexis to search for articles with any mention of either working mothers or stay-at-home mothers. This search identified over 8000 articles in the *Times* and over 5000 in the *Post*. [The exact search string we used was: (work! OR employ! OR career OR housewi! OR homemaker OR stay at home) w/2 (mom OR mother!)]. In most of these articles, the mention of working mothers or stay-at-home mothers was only incidental. For example, a biographical article might say, “his mother worked as a baker.” To focus on articles that would be most likely to reveal the qualitative descriptions we sought, we limited the sample to articles where the search terms appeared at least three times. That restriction identified a sufficiently limited number of articles that could be downloaded and coded.

These articles were coded for each of the themes described above as elements of the new anti-working mother schema. (In addition several contrasting themes were also coded to trace alternative media trends such as a more feminist recognition of the personal and economic benefits of work for working mothers.) The mommy-wars theme combined two somewhat distinct subcodes. The first described actual interpersonal antagonism between working and stay-at-home mothers. Typical were stories of snubs of stay-at-home mothers at dinner parties or complaints about the working mothers’ non-involvement in their children’s schools. For example, a 1998 New York Times story reported:

> Ms. Factor said that during one of her maternity leaves: "I used to get glares in the supermarket after 6 o'clock. It was like, 'What are you doing here now clogging up the line when you have all day to shop?' "

And a 2002 Times book review describes the fictional working-mother protagonist of “I Don’t Know How She Does It” as

> “cowed by the stay-at-home mothers she thinks of as "The Muffia," the ones who bake for school parties, while she "distresses" store-bought pies so they can be passed off as homemade.”

A second code under the “Mommy Wars” theme included any recognition of conflict between working and stay-at-home mothers as a common topic in the popular culture even

if no explicit examples of interpersonal conflict occurred. For example, a 2004 Times article about the resignation of Pepsi-Cola's chief exectuive:

> "Her move rekindled debate about whether motherhood and a career are mutually exclusive."

Often, the conflict was recognized but regretted. As early as 1986, the *Times* quoted one stay-at-home mother as saying:

> "This whole conflict now between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers saddens me and upsets me."

An article was coded for the presence of a Mommy Wars theme if either of these two codes were noted anywhere in the article.

Preliminary Results

Big Data

The trend in counts of "Mommy Wars" in U.S. books is reported in Figure 1. The first instance does not occur until 1990, after which there is a slow but steady rise in usage that jumps abruptly upwards in 1999. Usage declines steadily from that peak until a new and even steeper rise in 2005 and remains quite high for the remaining three years of the data bank. These results suggest that the main popularity of Mommy Wars was primarily a phenomenon of the first decade of this century – well after the stall in the gender revolution or the rise of the "distressed working mother" theme in the Times.

Usage of "Mommy Wars" in 32 U.S. and Canadian newspapers follows a superficially similar trend but the timing is quite different (Figure 2). Usage rises in the late 1990s to a peak in mid-1998 then falls until another even more dramatic rise that peaks in late 2006. While usage never again reaches those levels, there are also marked resurgences in 2008 and again toward the end of 2012.

The monthly newspaper data permit a finer analysis over time than was possible with Google Books, but both are characterized by short peaks of usage followed by periods of lower frequency. The episodic nature of interest in Mommy Wars is obvious in both figures but especially clear with the monthly newspaper counts. But there is little consistency in the peaks and valleys of the two sources. It would be difficult to draw conclusions about any general rise in the popular media of concern about conflicts between working and stay-at-home mothers. And both trends are quite different from the steady rise beginning in the mid-1990s of the "distressed working mother" theme that Kling and Vanneman found in their content analysis of the New York Times.

Conventional Content Analyses.

Content analyses of the *Times* and *Post* show only a few articles each year during the 1980s that mentioned conflicts between stay-at-home and working mothers. The trend lines are five-year moving averages (plotted for the previous five years). The Times had more such stories, two to three per year on average, while the Post had only one. But such stories did occur. Even though the phrase "Mommy Wars" did not appear in print until 1989, the idea of this conflict was present in the media throughout the 1980s.

The number of Mommy Wars stories grew steadily in the 1990s. The increase started by the beginning of the decade in the *Times* and not until mid-decade in the *Post*. But by the early years of this century, the rise was quite dramatic. The average number of Mommy Wars stories per year in the *Times* had increased from two to three in the 1980s to seven in the middle 2000s; and had grown in the *Post* from one to four during this same period. These trends are quite consistent with the similar rise in “distressed working mother” stories found in the Times during this same period.

Towards the end of the decade, however, interest in the Mommy Wars declined as rapidly as it had first risen. Both the *Times* and the *Post* show very similar trends that have returned levels of interest almost to the low levels of the 1980s. It would appear that the bubble of interest in Mommy Wars has now broken.

Discussion

It would appear that phrase counts and conventional content analyses are measuring quite different trends in cultural interest in tensions between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. Most importantly, the phrase “Mommy Wars” did not come into widespread usage until the first decade of the century. Stories that discussed those tensions, however, began to increase in the 1990s, well before the phrase itself came into popular usage.

That difference in timing is important because if interest in the Mommy Wars occurred mostly in this century, that change in popular culture could not be a candidate to explain the stall in the gender revolution of the 1990s. The content of newspaper stories, however, particularly in the *Times*, could help document a cultural change that pre-dated the stall in the gender revolution. And because the trend in Mommy Wars stories resembles the trends in other themes related to the new anti-working mother schema, the cultural changes in the 1990s appear to be an internally consistent set of themes, all of which plausibly would discourage mothers labor force participation.

The difference between the phrase counts and the theme codes cannot be attributed to the different sources of the texts. If we look only at the phrase counts in the Times and Post (Figure 4), the trends appear more similar to the phrase counts in Google Books and the larger set of 32 newspapers than they do to the theme codes in the two newspapers. Interestingly, the Times is more reluctant to use the phrase “Mommy Wars” than the Post despite having many more stories mentioning the tensions between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. But trends in usage of the phrase again are concentrated mostly in this century, well after each newspaper had begun to notice the conflict itself. The popularity of the phrase may have boosted the awareness of the underlying conflict, but analyses of the phrase alone would leave a misleading impression that the working mother – stay-at-home mother tension was widely noticed only in the twentieth century.

Figure 1. Google Books Ngram: "Mommy Wars".

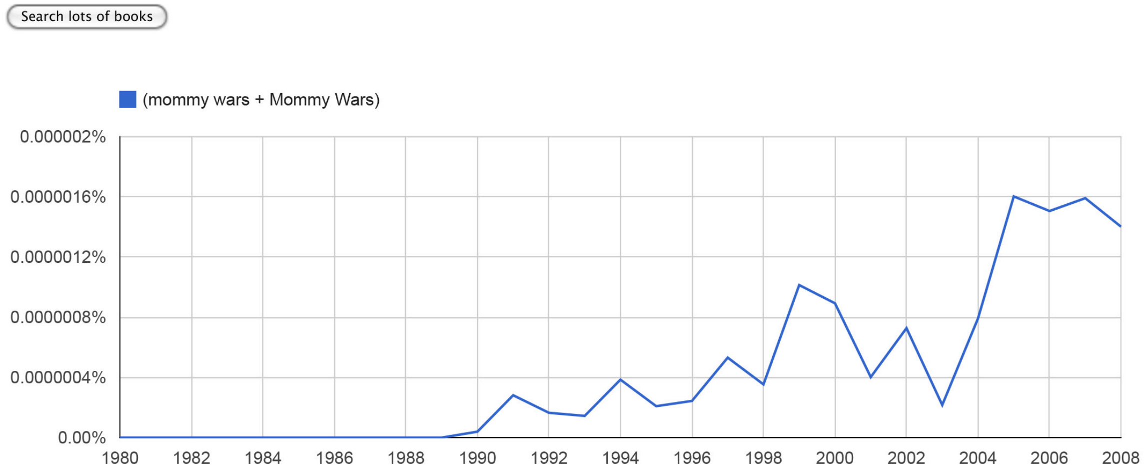

Figure 2. “Mommy Wars” in 32 U.S. and Canadian newspapers, 1995-2012.

Figure 3. Mommy Wars themes in content analyses of New York Times and Washington Post stories, 1980-2012.

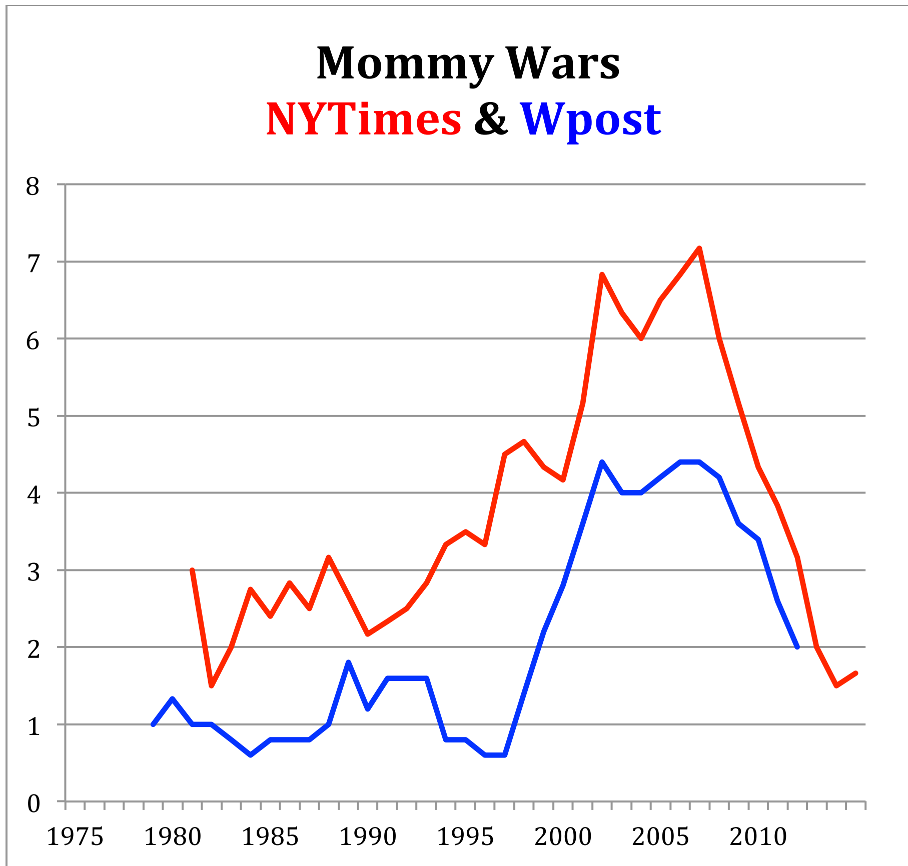

Figure 4. Usage of the phrase “Mommy Wars” in the *Times* and *Post*.