Sharon Hays “The Mommy Wars: Ambivalence, Ideological Work, and the Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood”

Main Point: There is currently a “mommy war” occurring in today’s society. While mothers themselves may not have instigated the fight, society has brought upon a clash between stay-at-home moms and paid, working moms by valuing both work and mothering. Both sets of mothers use “ideological work” to explain why they have chosen their respective mothering role; they use cultural ideologies to rationalize what they do with what they believe. However, when breaking down the arguments of each side, both groups claim they use the ideology of intensive mothering to motivate their decision to either stay at home or work.

Central Issues and Concepts:

- Employed mothers see the negative consequences of being a stay-at-home mom. They feel that as if stay-at-home moms are confined to their homes and have little interaction with other adults. Thus, they may not feel fully engaged and recognized by the larger social world. Furthermore, working moms argue that when mothers do not get a break from spending time with children all day, they do not have the opportunity to use their adult minds, which can lead to lack of productiveness and motivation. Working moms do not want to get lost in the confined world of children.

- Stay-at-home moms argue that working moms do not get the opportunity to adequately raise their children themselves. In their opinions, caregivers cannot give the same long-lasting love that mothers give because they are not as committed to the children. Working mothers, it is asserted, are putting their own self-interests ahead of their children and not spending enough quality time with them. This lack of guidance, love, and support can lead to behavioral and emotional issues.

- Stay-at-home moms believe they are using the ideology of intensive mothering because they are doing the majority of the raising of their children. They are teaching them new things and are present for their children’s accomplishments during their growing years. Their intensive mothering stems from the mere fact that they are present in their children’s lives.

- Employed mothers also believe they are using the ideology of intensive mothering. They argue that just because they work, does not mean they are not looking out for the best interest of their children. By working, they are assuring their children are financially secure so that they can have access to quality material goods and high levels of education. They also insist that good day cares allow their children to play with other children, gain independence, and experience new things outside the home. Furthermore, they claim that they can spend better quality time with their children when they get from work because both mother and children are excited to see one another. They emphasize quality of time over quantity of time. Lastly, employed mothers believe that when they are happy from working, it will have the same effect on their children. Employed mothers are using
intensive mothering because ultimately, all that they do outside the home is in the best interest of their children.

Two Key Quotes:

“What this creates is a no-win situation… If she is a mother who works too hard at her job or career, some will accuse her of neglecting the kids… And if she stays at home with her children, some will call her unproductive and useless. A woman, in other words, can never fully do it right” (SS 58).

“The ways mothers explain their decisions to stay at home or work in the paid labor force, like the pushes and pulls they feel, run in opposite directions. Yet the ways they attempt to resolve the ambivalence they experience as a result of those decisions run in the same direction. Stay-at-home mothers, as I have shown, reaffirm their commitment to good mothering, and employed mothers maintain that they are good mothers even though they work” (SS 72).

Two Questions:

--Why does Hays devote a whole section (The Curious Coincidence of Paid Work and the Ideology of Intensive Mothering, SS 69-72) to explaining how working mothers are using the ideology of intensive mothering but only explains how stay-at-home moms are carrying out this ideology in brief, more indirect sentences in other sections of the reading? Does this imply that Hays thinks more people relate to the fact that stay-at-home moms use the ideology of intensive mothering than working moms use this ideology?

--Why does Hays introduce the idea that “if a woman voluntarily remains childless, some will say that she is cold, heartless, and unfulfilled as a woman,” (SS 58) alongside the criticisms working and stay-at-home moms face but fail to carry out this assertion and break down childless women’s struggles, as done with the other two groups?