High Involvement Mothers of High Achieving Children: Potential Theoretical Explanations
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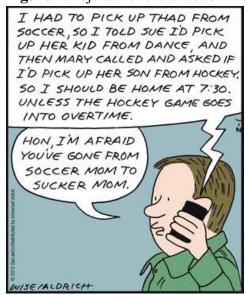
Abstract

In American society, parents who have high aspirations for the achievements of their children are often viewed by others in a negative light. Various pejoratives such as *pushy parent*, *helicopter parent*, *stage mother*, and *soccer mom* are used in the common vernacular to describe these parents. Multiple explanations for the behaviors of these parents, especially mothers, can provided through concepts such as *enmeshment*, *mattering*, and *moral intuitions*. This paper explores the results of interviews with several mothers who take great interest in their children's attainments and who play an active role in affording their children the opportunity to achieve. Qualitative analysis of these interviews, as well as of family archival materials, was conducted using each of the conceptual lens listed above to determine which provides the best fit for explaining the mothers' activities related to their aspirations for their children's achievements in academics, aesthetics, and athletics. These analyses indicate that enmeshment theory seems to provide the best fit.

INTRODUCTION

In American society, parents who have high aspirations for the achievements of their children are often viewed by others in a negative light. Various pejoratives such as *pushy parent* (Gibbs 2005), *helicopter parent* (Gibbs 2009), *stage mother* (Belkin 2010), and *soccer mom* (Smith 2003) are used in the common vernacular to describe these parents. The extent of this negative stereotyping is well illustrated by a comic that recently appeared in newspapers across the United States, which employed a term that many consider vulgar (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Pejorative reference to involved mothers (Wise & Aldrich, 2012).

One purpose of this research is to ascertain the way high involvement mothers describe themselves. In addition, the degree to and the ways in which each of three theoretical perspectives—enmeshment, mattering, and moral intuitions—are present in the aspirations and activities of these mothers as related to their children's academic, aesthetic, and athletic achievements is a focus of this research.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In any qualitative study, it is important to establish parameters or boundaries for the inquiry. In this case the focus is on mothers and their aspirations and activities relative to their children's achievements in academics, aesthetics, and athletics. This literature review discusses why the focus should specifically be on mothers and their activities and aspirations, how their involvement has been judged in the popular press and scholarly literature, and how their involvement might be explained through theories of enmeshment, mattering, and moral intuition.

Why Mothers

In a seminal article from fifteen years ago, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997) claimed that most empirical literature on parental involvement has focused on mothers because mothers are the parent most closely involved with their children's education. The date of this article, of course, begs the question of whether this is still so. Certainly the articles from the mass media publications already cited (Belkin 2010; Gibbs 2005, 2009; Smith 2003) mention mothers' behaviors more than fathers' behaviors, but does this follow in the academic literature? Hopefully, a whole new literature has arisen on father involvement (see, for example, Pleck 2007), and more recent research uses the broader term *parent* or *parental involvement* (see, for example, Jeynes 2007; Lee and Bowen, 2006—both meta-analyses that investigate variables such as parent ethnicity, socioeconomic status, level of education, parenting style, and types of involvement, but not parental sex differences). This might suggest greater father involvement in children's education and a move toward co-parenting (Buckley and Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010). However, according to Buckley and Schoppe-Sullivan, "Although father involvement has shown modest increases over the several decades, fathers continue to spend significantly less time than mothers caring for children" (2010, 414; see also Jolly and Matthews 2012; Tan and Goldberg 2009). Further, even recent research reports that use the term *parent* or *parental involvement* continues to be based primarily upon reports from or about mothers. For example, in an Anderson and Minke (2007) study purporting to extend Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1997) work, mothers comprised 89% of the sample, and a study by El Nokali, Bachman, and Votruba-Drzal (2010) involved a comparison between mothers' and teachers' reports of parental involvement.

In a classic retrospective study on talent development reported in 1985 by Benjamin Bloom (1985) and his colleague, twelve individuals who had attained the pinnacle of their respective fields at an early age were identified, and the paths they took to their outstanding achievements were investigated. While Bloom's text reports on the activities of *parents per se*, it

is apparent from an inspection of the material quoted from interviews with parents that the majority of activities that supported these individuals' accomplishments through their school-age years were carried out by their mothers. Fathers served primarily as role models, values communicators, and resource providers. Mothers communicated values, too, but also were also responsible for locating learning opportunities and instructors, providing transportation, monitoring homework and practice, and advocating for the child when needed (Gustin, 1985; Sloan, 1985; Sosniak, 1985). More recent studies have shown that, despite more active involvement from fathers and greater recognition of the impact fathers can have on children's achievements, mothers continue to be more involved with their children through means such as direct school involvement (e.g., talking to the teacher), monitoring and helping with homework, supporting extracurricular activities, and interpersonal communication (Tan and Goldberg, 2009). Thus, while fathers are becoming more involved in their children's education and have a unique contribution to make apart from mothers, mothers remain the primary source of involvement for school and non-school activities and achievements for their children.

What Mothers Do

Some years ago, Katz (1984) distinguished between the behaviors of teachers and mothers along several dimensions (see Figure 2).

Polar Description	Role Dimension and Example Optimal Tendencies for Mothers (M) and Teachers (T)	Polar Description
Diffuse and Limitless	Scope of Function ⟵ .———M————————————T———.⟶	Specific and Limited
High	Intensity of Affect ⟵.———M——————————T———.⟶	Low
Attachment	Attachment ⟵ .———M——————————T———.⟶	Detachment
Irrationality	Rationality ⟵.————M————————————————T—⟶.	Rationality
Spontaneity	Spontaneity ⟵.——M———————————T——————⟶	Intentionality
Partiality	Partiality ⟵.———M——————————T———.⟶	Impartial
Individual	Scope of Responsibility ⟵ .———M———————————T——⟶	Whole Group

Figure 2. Distinctions between mothering and teaching (Adapted from Katz, 1984).

The positions along the various scales of mothers' and teachers' tendencies is arbitrary, simply to illustrate that the optimal positions vary from scale to scale, but that the mothers' role expressions always tend to the left of the teachers'. The first dimension, *scope of function*, indicates that mothers have tacit permission to be involved in all aspects of their children's lives. However, the word *optimal* is important here because it makes the point that for neither mothers nor teachers is it appropriate to operate at the extremes and that there is definitely overlap between what is optimal for mothers and teachers. For example, along the spontaneity dimension, teachers must generally act with planned intentionality, whereas mothers may

generally act with spontaneity. Teachers may act with spontaneity on occasion, but not to the extent the mothers may. In general what this figure illustrates is that mothers and teachers rightly come from different positions with regard to their relationships to any individual child in a classroom. Mothers do not have to be, and in most case, according to Katz, should not be, as objective as teachers about their children's needs. They may act, as indicated by the teacher quoted earlier, from the status bestowed on them by evolution.

Based on the Bloom (1985) study, mothers' aspirations and activities related to their children's achievements usually occur in three general domains; academics, aesthetics, and athletics. Each of these appears singly or in combination in descriptions of mothers' activities in the popular press. For example, Gibbs states that, on many ways mother involvement is seen as a "godsend to [economically] strapped schools" (2006, ¶ 11). She lists varied activities cut across the academic and athletic domain. "[Parents] volunteer as library aides and reading coaches and Mentor Moms, supplement the physical-education offerings with yoga and kickboxing, sponsor faculty-appreciation lunches and fund-raising barbecues, supervise field trips and road games and father-daughter service projects" (2006, ¶ 11).

A college administrator describes parent involvement in all three domains:

This generation of parents has had a hands-on approach to their children's education from preschool through high school. Most middle-class parents have spent countless hours arranging schedules and taking their children to sports practices and music lessons, to tutoring sessions and enrichment classes. (Coburn 2006, 10)

Mothers themselves have described their own behaviors as well. For example, one mother, in a book-length resource, relates the various experiences she had as a child being raised by her own mother, as well as experiences she has had raising five gifted children. These experiences run the gamut of the three domains—academic, aesthetic, and athletic. As a summary of the impetus for her activities, this mother stated, "My biggest, most important role as the mom of junior brains in progress is to let each one of them know that it is okay with me for him or her to be just exactly who he or she is meant to be. Even if it means becoming a rock star" (Isaacson 2002, 183).

Another mother talks about the positive outcomes of the decision she made to persuade her shy daughter to perform at a piano recital, despite the daughter's fear. Shiue explains that she "had specifically chosen a [piano] teacher whose reputation was excellence and who was known for being encouraging rather than fostering competitiveness" (2010, ¶ 12). Consider this conversation between the mother and her child following the piano recital:

At bedtime, I congratulated her again on overcoming her fear and for her wonderful first recital. She said, "Mama, do you know, I was so afraid, I felt like someone was going to kill me?"

"Kill you? Why …"

"No, I knew nobody was going to hurt me, but that's how afraid I was, and my heart was going boom-boom-boom."

"I'm sorry, sweetie. I didn't want to force you, but I knew you could do it, and you would be disappointed after all of your hard work if you left without playing."

"Yes, Mama, and that is why you are the best Mama in the world. You are always looking out for me." (2010, ¶¶ 6-10)

This mother further elucidated, "Sometimes, as adults, we have to do things because we need to, even if we really don't want to. If we don't teach our kids that lesson, can they learn it on their own, when the decisions are more significant" (2010, ¶ 12)?

Children now live in a media-rich world that gives them access to information beyond that which their parents had. Parents today are faced with children who have more information about troubles in the world and the local community, generating fears and anxieties not known by previous generations. One mother related her experience with her five-year-old daughter's realization that all living things eventually die. When a sibling explained that she probably wouldn't have to worry about death until she was old like her grandparents, the child shifted her concern about her own death to that of her grandparents. Such concerns become real to bright children much earlier than they do for others. Mothers have to deal with this (Isaacson 2002; Ruf 2005). However, in an interesting survey of over 5,000 children, Rimm (2011) discovered that both gifted and regular program middle school students were concerned fairly equally about the same things. Global terrorism was top concern, tied with popularity.

Still another mother describes what she does on the sidelines during soccer season, "I make sure shin guards are properly covered by socks, that water bottles are full, that cleats are tied and shirts are tucked, at least at the start of the game" (Smith 2003, ¶ 2), and then exults, "It's one of the joys of parenting" (2003, ¶ 2). She continues, "I carry canvas chairs in my trunk, along with a blanket in case it's cold and umbrellas in case it rains" (2003, ¶ 17). She avers, "I have a kid who enjoys the sport. He's exercising, having fun, and building confidence, and I get to watch" (2003, ¶ 2).

Judgments about Mothers
Deeper reading of Coburn's (2006) article indicates that the high level of involvement by parents concerns her and is rooted in the frequency with which students contact their parents, through modern technological means, for advice and the frequency with which parents advocate for their children with school official, even through college age. Some stories of extremes, such as a mother phoning about burned-out light bulbs, lend an air of "guilt-by-association" to all mothers who advocate for their children. Gibbs criticizes parents for "obsessing about kids' safety" (2009, ¶ 6) and uses evidence such as the statistical decline in crime and death by injury as reasons to end the "insanity" (2009, ¶ 1), without considering the possibility that the reason for these declines may be parental vigilance.

More recently, Hirsch and Goldberger described today's parent involvement, "This phenomenon…typically involves parents—most often, mothers—who "hover" over their children to shelter them from stress, resolve their problems, and offer unwavering, on-the-spot

support and affirmation" (2010, 30). Even more recently an on-line news article describes the stereotype this way:

> The American stereotype is pervasive: the hovering helicopter parents who rush to prevent a toddler from falling on the playground; worry that their child isn't zooming through Piaget's stages of development; are hawkishly on the lookout for any signs of giftedness; stay up late perfecting that popsicle-stick diorama of Fort Ticonderoga for their second-grader; ferry the middle-schooler to travel soccer, violin, ballet and fencing lessons; demand online grade books to check up on a high-schooler; call and harangue college professors; and now, according to a recent report on NPR, submit grown children's resumes, sit in on job interviews and demand a "Take Your Parent to Work" day. (Schulte 2012, ¶4)

Given such descriptions, mothers who believe they fit the stereotype are hard-pressed to describe themselves in a way that can be perceived as positive. Issacsen begins her story by worrying:

> We live in a society built on peer pressure—sometimes good, sometimes not so good. But the pressure to fit in and to belong and to be normal can be as overwhelming as a big city is to a small-town hick like me. Sometimes, when people try too hard to fit into a mold, they get lost in a world that doesn't belong to them. (2002, v)

In fact, mothers may react with some defensiveness. Ruf, for example, described the frustration she felt with her first child's penchant, as an infant, for going from a state of total alertness to sleep. She learned later that this pattern is typical of highly gifted children and regretted that she "didn't know it at the time. I wish I had. It would have made it easier for me to relax about my parenting" (2005, 6).

The self-admitted soccer mom recognized that, according to the stereotype perpetuated by society, she "can't possibly be stylish, sexy and desirable" (Smith 2003, ¶ 7); that she is "the scourge of society" (¶ 9), and that what she is "is something of which to be ashamed" (2003, ¶ 12). The piano recital mother questions herself, "But did I push too hard? Have I turned into a stage mother? Was this overparenting, or old-fashioned encouragement to excel" (Shuie 2010, ¶ 12). Another mother explained that she always felt "out of place in this world" (Isaacson 2002, v) and has tried to help her children learn that "the trick is to … fit in *because* they're different, not in spite of it" (2002, 173). She continues, "Somehow they have to find and accept the beauty of their weirdness and then remain confident in what they have to offer, whether or not the rest of society recognizes that same beauty" (2002, 173; emphasis in the original).

Mothers in Bloom's talent development study reported that their children had chores to do at home. The children were not permitted to idle away free time, but their time was organized with constructive activities, with parents setting priorities and standards (Sloane, 1985), so that everyone in the family is contributing.

However, these parents question themselves because the general cultural expectation in American culture for parent role involvement in their children's achievements is a passive one—the school personnel, the coach, the music teacher know best (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1997) and the wisest parents let the experts do their work unencumbered by parental demands.

Indeed, apparently a "new revolution is underway, one aimed at rolling back the almost comical overprotectiveness and overinvestment of moms and dads" (Gibbs 2009, ¶ 4) in favor of "simplistic parenting" (2009, ¶ 4).

Parents who go beyond this are faced with negative labeling (see especially Gibbs—in which "a taxonomy of parents behaving badly" [2005, ¶ 8] is presented); stereotyping (Shiue 2010; Smith 2003), condescension (Isaacson 2002); doubt, disbelief, or dismissal (Ruf 2005), and criticism (Gibbs 2005; 2009). Consider, for example, the sarcasm and self-admitted hyperbole of this statement from an on-line news article:

> High schools … find themselves fending off parents who expect instant responses to every e-mail; who request a change of teacher because of "poor chemistry" when the real issue is that the child is getting a poor grade; who seek out a doctor who will proclaim their child "exceptionally bright but with a learning difference" that requires extra time for testing; who insist that their child take five Advanced Placement classes, play three varsity sports, perform in the school orchestra and be in student government—and then complain that kids are stressed out because the school doesn't do enough to prevent scheduling conflicts. Teachers just shake their heads as they see parents so obsessed with getting their child into a good college that they don't ask whether it's the right one for the child's particular interests and needs. … Parents seeking to stay on top of what's happening in class don't have to wait for the report card to arrive. "Now it's so easy for the parents through the Internet to get ahold of us, and they expect an immediate response," notes Michael Schaffer, a classroom veteran who teaches AP courses at Central Academy in Des Moines, Iowa. "This e-mail—'How's my kid doing?'—could fill my day. That's hyperbole. But it's a two-edged sword here, and unfortunately it's cutting to the other side, and parents are making demands on us that are unreasonable. Yeah, they're concerned about their kids. But I'm concerned about 150 kids. I don't have time during the day to let the parent know when the kid got the first B." (Gibbs 2005, ¶¶ 14, 20)

Perhaps the most recently famous case of public reaction to high mother involvement is that engendered by Amy Chua's book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. Chua characterized herself as a "Chinese mother" (2011, 4) quite different from "Western parents" (2011, 4). While admitting that there was much more diversity in Western parenting styles, in general, than arose from her reported cultural background, she, nonetheless, made the follow contrast:

> Some might think that the American sports parent is an analog to the Chinese mother. This is so wrong. Unlike your typical Western over-scheduling soccer mom, the Chinese mother believes that (1) schoolwork always comes first; (2) an A-minus is a bad grade; (3) your children must be two years ahead of their classmates in math; (4) you must never compliment your children in public; (5) if your child ever disagrees with a teacher or coach, you must always take the side of the teacher or coach; (6) the only activities your children should be permitted to do are those in which they can eventually win a medal; and (7) that medal must be gold. (2011, 5)

Reaction to Chua's writing was immediate and mostly negative. Commentators on her writing accused her of extreme parenting, if not abuse, but saw no contradiction, apparently, with taking the extreme response of death threats (Paul 2011; Zernike 2011). Academics primarily criticized her for furthering a belief in Chinese Americans as the model minority (Gym 2011; Lum 2011). Despite all this vitriol, Chua's daughter wrote a public response to her mother, which her mother reportedly wished she had not made public (Lum 2011), thanking her for the opportunity to live "life at 110%" (Chua-Rubenfeld 2011, ¶ 13).

Reflecting on her own childhood and youth, in an interview for *Time*, the controversial Amy Chua avows, "I see my upbringing as a great success story. … By disciplining me, my parents inculcated self-discipline. And by restricting my choices as a child, they gave me so many choices in my life as an adult. Because of what they did then, I get to do the work I love now" (Paul 2011, ¶ 17). Chua claims that her own parents didn't focus on her happiness, but on preparing her for the future. She believes she is doing the same for her children now, something with which her children apparently agree (Paul 2011; Chua-Rubenfeld 2011).

Why Mothers Do What They Do
There are, of course, multiple explanations for why mothers take such an active role in their children's lives. One possible explanation is that such parenting is merely an artifact of the times. The generation now coming into adulthood, labeled the millennial generation, has had extraordinary access to the panoply of communications and entertainment media now available since childhood (Tyler 2007) and, as a result, are accustomed to twenty-four hour access to their parents, and vice versa (Coburn 2006; Hirsch and Goldberger 2010). From the political point-of-view, the accountability movement has created a consumer orientation in which parents and their children expect to see a significant return on investment and service on demand from educational, recreational, and social providers in an economic market in which parents and their children are well informed of their choices and seek more choices through policy initiatives such as school vouchers, charter schools, or tax credits. This is particularly so for the parents of gifted children in schools which have curtailed gifted program services in the face of benchmark testing that emphasizes grade level attainment only (Jolly and Matthews 2012). Interestingly, as the recent financial downturns have stressed family finances, families are cutting back on children's extracurricular activities (Gibbs 2009). Further, mothers continue to have more discretionary time than fathers during the school day and at other times when children need support for their activities (Tan and Goldberg 2009).

The outcomes of high parental involvement are debatable. For example, a study of involvement by parents of gifted children found that parents perceived their involvement much more positively than their children did, but that the children were appreciative of their parents' involvement nonetheless (White 2009). Another study of affective dimensions of parent involvement found that mothers' interpersonal contacts at home with a child, but related to school, positively influenced the child's enjoyment of school (Tan and Goldberg, 2009). A further study indicated that parent involvement, as reported by teachers and mothers, has a

positive effect on behavior problems and social skills (and this was especially so for children of highly-involved parents), while not influencing academic outcomes (El Nokali et al. 2010). However, the latest meta-analysis indicates that parental involvement, particularly parent expectations, positively affects academic outcomes such as grades, but not achievement test performance (Jeynes 2012). Similarly, Lee and Bowen (2006) found that parent expectations were associated with academic achievement, again measured by grades, but they also found that parental involvement at school affected academic achievement.

While no one doubts that highly involved mothers have their children's best interests at heart, many question whether other motivations or issues are not at play. Beyond the socioeconomic explanation given above, there are at least three explanations from the psychological literature that can possibly shed light on why highly involved mothers do the things they do. These include theories concerning (1) enmeshment, (2) mattering, and (3) moral intuitions. Each will be discussed in turn.

Enmeshment

The following examples come from the professional literature. A gifted program coordinator has suggested that "exploitation … by … proud, well-meaning parents can lead [high ability children] to rebel, to hide their talents" (Cooper 2011, 295). A counselor has cautioned, "Parents who are emotionally needy themselves may have difficulty focusing on their children's needs" (Peterson 2011, 535). A parent relations program administrator at a university has confessed that she and her colleagues "bristle at the unconscious use of the word *we* by a growing number of parents" (Coburn 2006, 10) when parents communicate concerns about their child at the university, charging that the parents intervene "out of their own anxiety" (2006, 10). Finally, a group of advocates for parents of gifted children queried, "To what degree am I [the parent] living my own fantasies through my child, rather than helping my child develop her own potential" (Webb et al. 2007, 242).

Writers in the mass media are much less tolerant. Gibbs (2005), for example, wrote about a mother who argues about a grade on a student's paper when it's obvious the mother wrote the paper herself; about a group of mothers who show up to watch their senior class children's final days at school who say that their children are their life; and a teacher who insists that mothers need to cut the umbilical cord.

Scholars today refer to this parenting condition as *enmeshment*. Enmeshment, sometimes also called *pseudocloseness* (Petrican et al. 2010), is an apparently undesirable state (Barrera, Blumer, and Soenksen 2011) in a close relationship (e.g., romantic partners, parent-child, teacher-student). An individual is unable to distinguish his or her own thoughts from those of the other person in the relationship. Webb et al. provided this description of the phenomenon in the family context, "[Parents'] activities and life satisfaction are so related to the child's behaviors that it is difficult to see where the child ends and the parent begins" (2007, 242). Family loyalty is considered the primary family value. Characteristics of such hyperinvolvement in a family include "excessive togetherness, lack of privacy, tendency of family members to speak for one

another" (Aragona et al. 2011, 10), and the use of the pronoun *we* in conversations rather than a more appropriate singular pronoun (Friedlander and Walters 2010; Petrican et al. 2010). Enmeshment is considered a contributing factor to a whole host of psychological disorders including delayed individuation (Barrera et al. 2011), self-injuring behavior (Wood and Craigen 2011), eating disorders, stress, depression, marital problems, panic disorder, identity crisis, and even suicide (Tomiyama and Mann, 2008).

However, recent studies have suggested that the pathological outcomes of enmeshment are likely mediated through cultural values systems. For example, when cultural and family values favor interdependence over independence, enmeshment does not show a relationship with eating disorders (Tomiyama and Mann 2008). Indeed, the authors of another study (Aragona et al. 2011) claimed that enmeshment is quite a diffuse condition, even in *normal* families and that in cultures where individuation or autonomy are not as highly valued as in American white culture, enmeshment isn't viewed as pathological or as a good predictor of the psychological disorders listed earlier. Further, Barrera et al. found in their study of 188 American undergraduates, mostly women, that the predicted difficulties in individuation did not occur. Their explanation again referenced cultures that are more "collectivist" (2011, 71), and the introduced the concept of "allocentrism" (2011, 71) as a "self-construal [that] tends to embrace the values of collectivism, interdependence, emotional connectedness, and group cohesiveness" (2011, 71). Where such an orientation is valued, individual family members experience "better communication between parents and children, greater marital consensus, and better behavioral outcomes for adolescents/young adults" (2011, 75). This has apparently been noted in the culture at large, as Tyler quotes from a corporate leader as saying, "This generation is closer to their parents that any other generation. They see their parents as friends. It's a good thing" (2007, ¶ 24).

Mattering
A related construct is the idea of *mattering*, which is defined as "one's perceived significance to others" (Lewis and Taylor 2009, 273). Other scholars have extended this definition by stating that mattering is "feeling that one has social significance and makes a contribution in the lives of others" (Flett et al. 2012, 828) or "to a larger social entity" (France and Finney 2010, 49). While a number of components in mattering have been explored, but four are generally accepted as core to the concept. Translated into a mother-child relationship, from the mother's perspective, these components are (1) awareness—the mother's perception that she is the object of her child's attention, that her child notices and acknowledges her actions; (2) importance—the mother's opinion that she is of interest and concern to her child and that her child cares about her well-being; (3) reliance—the mother's belief that the child is dependent upon her, that she has obligations imposed by her social bond with her child and that her actions in meeting those obligations will affect the child; and (4) ego-extension—the mother's view that the child sees the mother's life as an extension of its own, that its successes and failures bring delight or disappointment to the mother's life. A mother desires to feel like she matters to her child (Flett et

al. 2012; France and Finney 2009, 2010; Lewis and Taylor 2009). Each of these perceptions could, of course, be restated from the child's point of view.

One of the potential side effects for a mother's desire to matter could be pressure to appear to be perfect. Though, according to Flett et al. (2012), the relationship between mattering and *perfectionism* could certainly flow the other way (i.e., the need to appear to be perfect leads to greater desire to matter). Perfectionism, in and of itself, need not produce negative outcomes but may provide the psychic energy to pursue excellence. However, *neurotic* perfectionism is characterized by a compulsive desire to attain unrealistic goals (Hébert 2011). A mother who believes she does not matter to her child would be quite prone to this negative form of perfectionism. The idea of not mattering could, indeed, be one of the "most frightening perceptions we could ever have" (Rayle 2006, 483; see also Elliott, Kao, and Grant 2004). Further, Flett et al. found that perceptions of low levels of mattering could predict depression. A mother who believes she doesn't matter to her child would have to "find or create ways in which to cope with the realization that [she does] not matter" (Rayle 2006, 483).

Yet, mattering holds a fundamental role within rewarding social relationships. France and Finney (2012) indicated that mattering is closely related to similar concepts such as a sense of security, feelings of belonging, and self-esteem. This clearly relates to humanistic psychological concepts such as the hierarchy of needs. Thus we might find highly involved mothers doing things such as making sure their soccer playing children have their water bottles (i.e. satisfying basic needs), making sure that children playing outdoors will have access to umbrellas and blankets (i.e., providing safety and security), locating a music teacher who focuses on cooperation rather than competition (i.e., ensuring social connections), and convincing a reluctant child to perform during a recital (i.e., experiencing success). Each incident listed here was reported in a previous section of this article (Shuie 2010; Smith 2003). Ultimately, according for France and Finney (2009), a sense of mattering is positively related to a purpose in life (i.e., self-actualization).

Moral Intuition

Haidt and Joseph (2004) propose that humans first use an evolutionarily-developed intuitive system for moral action. A teacher cited in Gibbs also posits this alternative route for explaining highly involved mothers' behaviors:

> The parents are not the bad guys. … They're mama grizzly bears. They're going to defend that cub no matter what, and they don't always think rationally. If I can remember that, it defuses the situation. It's not about me. It's not about attacking our system. It's about a parent trying to do the best for their child. (2005, ¶ 12)

According to Haidt and Joseph, "People have quick gut feelings that come into consciousness as soon as a situation is presented to them" (2004, 57). Only after these initial intuitions are moral reasoning systems engaged as "people search for supporting arguments and justification" (2004, 57) for their action. From time to time, in this schema of action, moral reasoning can be used to influence moral intuition "as people gossip, argue, and … reason with each other" (2004, 283; see also, Haidt 2007).

Haidt and his colleagues have proposed five foundations for moral intuition: (a) Care/harm, (b) fairness/reciprocity; (c) in-group/loyalty; (d) authority/respect; and (e) purity/sanctity. Each of these has an evolutionary basis, characteristic emotions, and relevant virtues and vices that will be explained in turn. Unless otherwise stated, these explanations are drawn from Haidt and Graham (2007), Haidt and Joseph (2004), and Haidt (2004).

Care/harm. The moral intuition foundation of care/harm finds its evolutionary basis in the initial response of sympathy we developed as a species in view of the suffering and vulnerability of children. We recognized that if we were to survive as a species, we had to guarantee the survival of children. This led to characteristic emotions such as sensitivity and compassion and is seen in the virtue of kindness, but can also be expressed in vices such as aggression as we seek to protect our children from harm. As humans, our child-care obligations are unusually long among species. Interestingly, women have been found to be higher than men on this moral intuition, in particular among those who identify themselves as practicing Christians (McAdams et al. 2008).

Fairness/reciprocity. The foundation of fairness/reciprocity in our moral intuition comes from the cooperation needed in hunting and gathering societies in order to secure enough food. Great gains can be made by those who cooperate. This lead to the characteristic emotion of altruism in which we were willing to put group needs ahead of individual needs. From this, grew the emotion of gratitude for those who behaved in altruistic ways, as well as guilt within those who failed to do so. Attendant virtues included a sense of fairness and justice—that each was receiving his or her due. However, vices of bias and privilege also emerged as some individuals felt their position merited more than a fair share of the results of a group's labor.

In-group/loyalty. As groups attempted to secure sufficient resources to ensure their own survival, inevitably conflict with other groups arose. This triggered the moral intuition foundation of in-group/loyalty. Characteristic emotions included a sense of belonging or identity with a specific group, built perhaps on a feeling of trust that the group would, indeed, secure one's survival, and an attendant feeling of distrust for individuals outside the group, who would be seen as threats to securing the resources needed for survival. Characteristic virtues include cooperation, sacrifice, and heroism—all actions in which the group is served because it is believed to be more important than the individual. Attendant vices include dissent and betrayal.

Authority/respect. Authority and respect grew from the recognition that some group members, because of physical strength and size, were more efficient and effective at securing resources for survival and protecting the group from harm. Sometime these physical characteristics could lead to domination of the group by the stronger members. We live in groups in which access to resources, power, and protections are structured hierarchically. Characteristic emotions included respect and awe on the part of weaker members of a group, and magnanimity on the part of the stronger members. However, weaker members could also develop feelings of resentment and fear, depending on the degree to which stronger members dominated the group without the magnanimity. Relevant virtues include obedience, deference to group leaders and a sense of duty from leaders to followers and vice versa. These same virtues have as their flip-side

the vices of ineptitude, through which leaders fail to accomplish what is expected of them, and exploitation, through which leaders take undue advantage of vulnerable individuals both from within and outside the group.

Purity/sanctity. The evolutionary trigger for purity/sanctity is the avoidance of disease and death. A primal emotion that helped us avoid these things was disgust—an aversive reaction to whatever might be polluting or contaminating, perhaps in such a way as to promote disease. Over time taboos are developed, especially around activities related to food and sex, beyond those objects directly related to disease. This also sometimes leads to a sense of piety in which things to be avoided actually become objects of worship—hence the development of certain funerary practices. Relevant virtues are cleanliness and chastity, with vices including lust, gluttony, and greed.

There is some debate (see, for example, Pizarro and Bloom 2003; Saltzstein and Kasachkoff, 2004) about whether a social intuitionist theory such as Haidt's (2003, 2004) provides a better explanation than moral reasoning theories for human moral action. However, given the character of the accusations against highly involved mothers, which are almost reactionary, cast their activities in a highly emotional frame, and employ pejoratives that suggest an instinctual nature, especially, for example, the label of "tiger mother" (Chua 2011), it seems more apropos to use a theory of moral intuition rather than a theory of moral reasoning to analyze mothers' behaviors.

As stated before, the degree to and ways in which each of these three explanations— enmeshment, mattering, and moral intuitions—are present, both positively and negatively, in the aspirations and activities of mothers as related to their children's academic, aesthetic, and athletic achievements is the focus of this research.

METHOD

This research is intended primarily to describe the phenomenon of parental aspirations for their children's achievements through the theoretical lenses of enmeshment, mattering and moral intuition. Qualitative methods for sampling, data gathering, and data analysis were employed. In addition standard methods for ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative data were established.

Sampling

A purposeful sampling was used to gather data for this research. A total of nine informants were selected as data sources. Each of the nine was mothers of elementary-aged children who are actively involved in advanced academic, athletic, or aesthetic pursuits. Mothers were used for two reasons: (1) mothers tend to be the focus of the pejorative labels described earlier, and (2) mothers tend to exhibit different patterns relative to their aspirations for their children than do fathers (Cornell & Grossberg 1986). Using only mothers in the interviews simplified the data analysis by avoiding any possible confounds with gender differences. Further, mothers of elementary-aged children were used because these children are still young enough for their

mothers to be operating from an early aspirational mode more likely to have an impact on their children's achievements.

The sample of nine mothers was split into to three groups of three each, representing a primary focus on academic, athletic, and artistic achievements of the children respectively. Because of my expertise in gifted education, over the years numerous parents have contacted me for advice on how to optimize their children's academic experiences. Thus, initial contacts were made with these parents to determine their interest in participating in this research project. In addition a general call for volunteer participants through the newsletter of the Utah Association for Gifted Children was made. As it turned out, all participating mothers in the academic category were drawn from those who had initially contacted me for advice. Mothers representing children of athletic achievement were contacts through competitive programs in gymnastics, soccer, or basketball. These three sports have been selected because of the likelihood of participation by both boys and girls, as opposed to football and baseball. However, ultimately, all participating mothers were drawn from the gymnastics group because of the enthusiastic support for the research project of a gymnastics coach. Purposeful sampling of mothers of children focused on aesthetic achievement was done through two community theatre companies in Cache County, UT: Music Theatre West and Four Seasons Theatre Company. I have been active myself in productions of these companies and, therefore, already had access to individuals who would be willing to serve as informants. I contacted mothers of child actors who had appeared in leading roles in recent productions of these companies. When a mother agreed to participate as an informant, I reviewed an Informed Consent Form with her, giving her another opportunity at that point to withdraw from the research, if she so chose. All nine mothers originally contacted agreed to participate in the research. Once the Informed Consent Form was signed, the data gathering with that mother began. Table 1 provides demographic information on each child.

Table 1

Child Demographic Information

Code	Sex	Age	Siblings	Family Position
A1	M	12	9	Youngest
A2	F	7	1	Oldest
A3	M	12	3	Oldest
T1	M	10	3	Second
T2	F	12	2	Youngest
T3	F	7	3	Third
E1	M	7	1	Youngest
E2	F	10	1	Youngest
E3	F	10	2	Youngest

Data Gathering
Two methods of data gathering were employed in this research: (1) interview, and (2) archival document inspection. Standard qualitative research procedures were used for each of these both in obtaining the data and in guaranteeing its trustworthiness.

Interviews
Each informant selected the location of her interview according to what would be most convenient and comfortable for her. All three academic interviews, as well as one interview each for athletics and aesthetics, occurred in my office at the university. Two athletic interviews

took place at the gym where the children received gymnastics coaching. Two aesthetic interviews were conducted in the mothers' home. Upon agreement by each informant, all interviews were recorded using the voice notes function of a mobile telephone. Once an informant approved a transcript of her interview, the recording was deleted from the mobile device.

Interviews followed a standardized protocol with questions eliciting both positive and negative explanations of parental activities and aspirations. While each interview focused on a specific aspirational area (i.e., academics, athletics, or aesthetics), mothers did hold some overlapping aspirations, and thus were permitted to discuss their activities and aspirations in areas other than the predetermined focus. Follow-up probing questions not listed in the interview protocol were also asked to gain greater detail or clarity from the mothers' responses. The mothers were given the right to refuse to answer any specific question for whatever reason they may have had and to terminate the interview at any time for any reason. None chose to exercise either right, and, indeed, were quite forthright in responding to all questions, including those in which their actions and aspirations might not be cast in the most positive light.

Interview data were prepared for analysis in the form of verbatim transcripts. These transcripts were identified by letter code indicating the area of focus (i.e., C = Academic, T = Athletic, E = Aesthetic) and a numeric code (i.e., 1, 2, 3) to indicate the informant. Once data gathering and analysis were completed and trustworthiness criteria were fulfilled, all recordings and coded lists connecting specific informants to specific interview records were destroyed.

Archival Documents
During each interview, the mothers were asked for an example from family archival documents of the children's achievements. All mothers responded in the affirmative to this request. Documents included work samples, completed projects, photographs, and programs. Electronic copies of each document were made and the originals returned to the mothers as requested. Identifying information was obscured or purged from each document, according to the mother's desire. Each document was then be coded and secured in the same manner indicated for the interviews.

Data Analysis
The general data analysis method used for the data collected in the research was the constant comparative method. Data analysis began soon after the first interview was conducted. This is done to permit the researcher to adjust and focus subsequent interviews and document analyses, though this was turned out not to be necessary in this study.

Category System
The category system for the analysis of interview transcripts and archival documents was predetermined according to the theories of enmeshment, mattering, and moral intuition previously presented. Specific expressions, negative or positive, of the different aspects of each

theory were segmented from the original interview transcript, coded with the appropriate focus and interview number, and then stored in an electronic file that was hyperlinked back to the original transcript.

Analysis Unit

Each interview transcript was analyzed three separate times; once for each theory (i.e., enmeshment, mattering, moral intuitions). As the interview transcripts were read, segments of the mothers' responses that related to any of the aspects of the theory were identified. A segment could be as brief as a clause or as long as several paragraphs. A segment began when, in my judgment, an aspect of the theory was referred to by the mother and ended when the mother shifted to a different aspect. Each segment was classified into a specific category representing an aspect of theory to which it related, as well as into a subcategory of a positive or negative manifestation.

Each archival document was inspected as evidence that the child was achieving in the predetermined focus area at a high level. Thus, each document was placed as a whole into broad achievement area rather than as an illustration of any specific theory or aspect of a theory.

Constant Comparison

Typically the constant comparative method affords the opportunity for categories to emerge from the data. However, in this case, each segment was sorted into predetermined categories based on the competing theories. Each segment was used to clarify the definition of the aspect of the theory into which it was placed. As the sorting of segments was done, it became evident that some categories are more prevalent or salient than other categories. Prevalent categories include sample segments from multiple informants. Salient categories may include sample segments from only one informant, though sample segments from multiple informants are also possible. The distinguishing feature of a salient category is the degree to which it exemplifies the theoretical aspect. The segment may be an illustrative example or a non-example. When all nine interviews had been coded for all three theories, a matrix was created to determine category prevalence and salience. This matrix permitted a visual judgment of the theory that seemed, from the mothers' responses, to best explain their aspirations and activities related to their children's achievements. The best fit could be garnered for an over-all explanation, as well as an explanation within each achievement focus. In addition, given prevalence and salience across theories and cases, specific categories within theories and cases within an achievement focus could be identified.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research studies, trustworthiness refers to the extent to which the data presented and the interpretations of that data can be trusted. Do they reflect the reality of the informants accurately and sufficiently to be meaningful to the informants themselves, to the researcher, and to the research community? In this research, trustworthiness has been established in five ways:

triangulation, journaling, member-checking, peer debriefing, and thick description.

Triangulation
The research project is triangulated among theory, methods, and sources. Three competing theories for explaining mothers' aspirations and actions related to their children's achievements were used in the analysis of data. In addition, two general methods of data gathering will be employed, interview and archival document inspection. Finally, while mothers served as the principal source, they were divided into three groups representing different arenas of aspiration—academics, athletics, and aesthetics.

Journaling
A three part journal was maintained as a record of the research effort. The first part detailed the day-to-day operation of the research, including a record of appointments and expenses. The second part consisted of the field notes, which were divided into two section; one section describing data gathering activities and content, with a parallel section in which researcher reactions were noted. This method of separation provides a means to separate the data for analysis from any emotional experiences the investigator may be having—providing possible clues to any biases the investigator may hold. The third section consist of the notes from the data analysis, describing the specific methods used, tasks done, and decisions made.

Member Checking
When verbatim transcriptions from interviews were completed, copies of the transcriptions were provided to each mother. She then had the opportunity to verify that the transcriptions were accurate, to provide clarification or additional information where she felt it necessary, or to correct anything she believed was in error. In this study, each mother attested the accuracy of the transcript. Some mothers pointed out potential typographical errors. Only one added further explanation, but this did not alter the categorization of any segment. Despite a caution not to be concerned, most commented negatively about the articulateness of their comments in a verbatim transcript.

Peer Debriefing
A peer debriefer was selected with whom I met at critical points in the inquiry—when data analysis began following the first interview and as data analysis continued following the completion of all interviews. The person selected for peer debriefing was an individual who has published qualitative research in peer-reviewed journals. To prepare for peer debriefing sessions, she reviewed the transcripts, documents, journal entries, and category data-bases to determine the degree to which the content and process of the investigation proceeded in a reasonable manner. The peer debriefer looked for instances of bias, failure to pursue opportunities, and premature closure in the data gather and analysis. She found the interviews thorough and the analyses to be reasonable, except for the failure, within the data-base to indicate when segments

where examples or non-examples of the aspect of the theory into which they were placed.

Thick Description

Finally, as the final consumer is the ultimate authority as to the trustworthiness of any research endeavor, this research report relies heavily upon quoted material from the interviews to illustrate the findings. This permits the reader to determine the extent to which what is reported is trustworthy and useful in contexts other than that in which it was produced.

Findings

An inspection of the matrices shown in Figure 3 quickly reveals the prevalence and salience of the competing theoretical explanations. In most cases where the aspect of a theory was represented in a mother's comments, the comments provided exemplars of the aspect. However, in some cases, non-examples emerged.

Mattering:	Academic			Athletic			Aesthetic		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Awareness	▨		▨				▨		▨
Importance	▨			▨			▨	▨	
Reliance	▨	▨	▓	▨	▨	▨	▓	▨	▨
Ego-Extension	▓	▨	▨			▨		▨	

Enmeshment:	Academic			Athletic			Aesthetic		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Speaking for Other	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨			▓	
Use of We	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨
Family Loyalty	▨	▨	▨		▨			▨	
Excessive Togetherness	▨	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨		
Lack of Privacy	▨	▓	▨	▨				▨	

Moral Intuition:	Academic			Athletic			Aesthetic		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
Authority/Respect	▨		▓	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨
Care/Harm	▨	▨		▨	▨	▨	▨	▨	▨
Fairness/Reciprocity	▨							▨	
In-Group/Loyalty	▨		▨	▨		▨		▨	
Purity/Sanctity	▨			▨	▨	▨		▨	▨

Key:						
Prevalence	Space filled with diagonals any or both directions					
Salience	Example		Non-example	▨	Both	▓

Figure 3. Prevalence and salience of theoretical aspects for high mother involvement.

Clearly, the theory into which mothers' remarks from interviews were most prevalently categorized is *enmeshment*. Enmeshment theory was represented by five categories; 1) the tendency of the mother to speak for the child, 2) the use of the pronoun *we* when referring to the child, 3) demand for family loyalty, 4) excessive togetherness between the mother and the child, and 5) a lack of privacy for the child.

Academic Achievers' Mothers
The enmeshment explanation of high involvement holds in particular for mothers of academic achievers. The enmeshment matrix in Figure 3 shows that, with one exception, every aspect of

the theory was illustrated by some comment by every academic mother. As an example of how a mother might speak for her child, C2 reported:

> I went in and talked to one of the third grade teachers because she was there in the hall, and she had said that, 'cause I had mentioned that, you know, how do they account for kids who are reading above level or something, and she said, "Oh, well, you know, it doesn't really matter anyway because they all level out … by third grade anyway." And that was kind of a little red flag for me, and I said [to myself], "Well, maybe it's just that particular teacher." … I had, as you know, the experience with the first grade teacher that it was clear that it was more than just one teacher. The first grade teacher had told me, "No, you know, I have student teachers that this is how I have to train them, and these are the books that we use. … I don't want her reading fifth grade novels, and, [mother laughs], you know, it has to be appropriate content." And I said, "Well, you know, of course, I want her reading age-appropriate materials, … but there is a great deal of age-appropriate material that still challenges her."

The use of the pronoun *we* in speaking of the child is illustrated by this example from C1 in reference to an arthropod collection her son was to gather for a science class, "And I think we're—that's what I'm worried about. We're getting to the point that we're not reading instructions." Note that in this quotation the mother attempts to avoid using the first person plural in discussing her son's efforts but ultimately gives in to the tendency. In an example from C2, the mother flips between the use of the pronouns *we* and *she* in reference to working with her daughter:

> Now, I don't have a lot of concerns, except that I, I worry about that mentality of everybody levels out, and other people, you know, within the system not allowing her to continue to grow. We can't do everything at home. We don't have the time when she's in school all day, and then there's homework, and then there's activities. When is there time if the school system isn't able to challenge her.

It could be argued that this mother was using *we* to refer to both her daughter and herself. However, this mother also frequently used *we* to discuss the parental support she was giving her daughter. For example, in response to a question about her actions that support her daughter's achievements, C2 explains, "We recognized very early on that we had to be very creative in our approach with her … in order to maximize her gifts. … She's a very different kid, so, I mean, we understood that it wasn't simply our approach. It was she really learns differently." The possibility such a statement raises of spousal enmeshment may indicate potential for parent-child enmeshment.

In enmeshed parent-child relationships, the demand for family loyalty is an attribute that is often seen in excess. C1 explained how this demand operates in with her son:

> And then, and then, "I need you to do it now." And he justifies, you know, "Ohhh, I'm going to go do this, and I'm going—" And I, I'm, "Look, you know, intelligence is one thing, but being cooperative and a part of the family and not getting angry when you're asked to do something is totally different." So as far as this goes, it's all positive, but that's where we have our clashes.

Excessive togetherness is also a typical characteristic of enmeshment. This might be expressed in an extraordinary need for undivided attention between parent and child. For example, C1 described this attribute in her son:

> He needs, he wants me to be, to see everything he's doing, and I can't see everything he's doing. … There is one little quirk that he has in his personality that I worry about, and that is, and I think it comes from the sibling rivalry. He wants to get me to himself, … to focus only on him, and he will come up with something that he says is wonderful, fabulous, important, desperate, you know, whatever, and it's never that. He knows it. He screams about it for about three seconds, and I figured out that he just wants, when everybody is watching, me. He has got my complete and undivided attention. So we've had to work on that, because, you know, … it's kind of like crying wolf.

What constitutes *excessive* in togetherness is likely a matter of opinion. For example, is it inappropriate that an older elementary-aged child still approaches his mother as indicated in this interchange from the interview with C3:

> C3: [I am] very involved with any paperwork that he does bring home and talking to him about how he could better express himself, or just, you know, little grammatical or punctuation things that we correct and explain to him things like that, what works better. … He'll bring [his writing] to us and let us read it, and he, he actually will say, at this point, he'll say, "So, did I do that right?" You know. "What, did I spell everything right? Is that the way that it should be?" So that's kind of cool, to have him—
>
> SH: So he approaches—
>
> C3: —doing that.
>
> SH: —you?
>
> C3: Yes, at this point, ya.

The final feature of enmeshment is lack of privacy in the family. One glaring example of this was reported by C1 in talking about her son. Note the difficulty the mother has in beginning her explanation.

> He, you know, he doesn't have a …, he has, he, you know, uh, a lot of people don't like him. And girls like him, which I, I was worried. I actually sent my daughter, who's an educator, uh, was an education major, uh, to sit in his classes because I felt like he wasn't telling me everything that was going on, and I was afraid he was being, he was mentioning he was being picked on, and he was being shoved into something, and "I'm hurting and I'm—," and I thought, "Oh", and he's telling me it's no big deal.

Perhaps less dramatic than sending a sibling to observe a child's social experience in the school setting, but still potentially an invasion of a child's privacy, is the act of deciding for a child what may best be decided by him- or herself. This interchange with C3 provides one example:

SH: Describe any actions you've taken over the years that might have been a barrier to this achievement in language arts.

C3: Mmm. Um, I, I don't, I can't think of anything right now, but maybe, maybe saying, you know, "You might, you might need to do something else besides read a book [mother laughs]," because that is kind of the opposite. Usually you have to encourage your children, but for [my son] it's like, "'Kay, you, you might need to walk outside and bounce a basketball a few [mother laughs] times, you know." And so that, you know, he's like, "But I'm doing this, and I, and I want to do this." "Well, that's fine, but you might need to do some other things, too." So, I, that's the only thing I can think of?

Athletic Achievers' Mothers

Enmeshment also appears to offer the best fit for explaining mothers' actions and aspirations for the athletically achieving children. While examples of enmeshment were not as prevalent among the athletic mothers, such examples appeared more frequently than for other theories, and T1 provided an example for each characteristic of enmeshment.

As an example of the mother speaking for the child, T2 described an encounter she had with her daughter's coach:

After we, we'd gone the rounds three or four times, I finally decided it was time for Mama Bear to come out, so, while my daughter was working out in one area, so that she could not hear nor see [mother laughs] my conversation, I walked over and asked this gentleman if I could talk to him, and I just said, "'Kay. I'm not going to try to pretend to be a coach, because I never have been. I've never competed. I haven't done gymnastics and I don't know anything about it, and I won't pretend to. So I'm not walking in here trying to tell you how to do your job, but what I am telling you is that you're taking a young lady who has grown so much in this sport, both athletically, both mentally. Um, I have, I've seen so much love and passion and growth with this young lady, and you're tearing all of that down, and you're taking it away. … All she's telling me [about when I ask what she did this session] is fighting with you. All I'm hearing are all the negative, frustrating 'I don't want to be here anymore. I'm not learning anything. I'm not growing.' And I'm here to tell you that if my daughter quits, because I'm not going to have her quit unless she chooses to, but if she quits, I will hold you 110% responsible, and I will see that every person in this place knows that you are the reason that she quit and why. I've given you the opportunities. I've given you the information that you need to work this kid. You can work this kid. You can get her to do the things that you want her to do that she doesn't want to, but you're going about it all wrong, and you just blow me off every time I talk to you.

As was the case with the academic mothers, the athletic mothers tend to use the pronoun *we* in a shifting pattern that gives the *we* an ambiguous meaning, as in this statement from T1, "He did better when he was younger … and … wasn't as happy with his results this last week. Uh-huh. Um, I, I feel like that is in part due to the fact that we haven't put him in for more than three days a week. We feel like that's already enough."

In exploring enmeshment's characteristic of family loyalty, T3 explained how her children became inspired to excel in gymnastics:

> T3: But I think, too, it probably comes from family support. When we saw her, like, starting to achieve, I think we were all so surprised 'cause she was six, … and just took it and went so far that I think she sees, feels our excitement and how proud of her we were, … that she was doing these things that we never thought she could, and then, I don't know, then the whole family, you know, like her brothers started, so it just ended up being this, I don't know, love that—

> SH: So she's [their] inspirational source [Interviewer laughs].

> T3: Ya, she is. She started and the boys wanted to come because they saw the gym, they saw her, ya, and now it's three of the four … are gymnasts.

Family loyalty can potentially be translated into what others might consider excessive togetherness, a typical trait of enmeshment. Consider, for example, this example of a family tradition describe in the interview with T1:

> T1: Um, something that we do at our house is every night we sit down, and one person is the spotlight, and everybody has to say something that they're good at, that, that we like about them. … And something that is repeated over and over by me and his dad is that "You are a hard worker, and you're so driven, and you're good at what you do."

> SH: That's great. You do that … every night?

> T1: Every night.

> SH: Seriously?

> T1: Ya.

> SH: How many kids?

> T1: Four kids.

> SH: Four kids.

> T1: So, Mom and Dad get a turn, too. … That is, it's not like, we do it with family prayer, so it's almost every single night, just when we don't get around to family prayer, but it's usually probably five out of seven nights, that we get to it.

T1 also provided an example for lack of privacy as far as making decisions for the child is concerned. She stated, "I'm going to sound like a tiger mother. … I'm just a time, I'm the time, I'm his, I'm his time manager, so I do have to, like, help him to figure out when's the best use of all of his time, and … kind of remind him, 'You need to be doing this so that you can do this.'"

Aesthetic Achievers' Mothers

While enmeshment examples were certainly present among the mothers of high aesthetic achievers, the theory of moral intuition showed greater prevalence. Further, E2 provided examples of each aspect of moral intuition. The five moral intuition categories are; 1) the provision of care and the avoidance of harm, 2) the need for fairness and reciprocity, 3) the claim

on in-group loyalty, 4) the demand for authority and respect, and 5) the need for purity and sanctity.

One aspect of moral intuition theory mentioned by every mother of aesthetically high achieving children is that of providing care and avoiding harm. Every mother mentioned in some way issues related to scheduling. For example, E2 stated, "Scheduling can be dodgy because we're all going in different directions. … I try to schedule things so that, to maximize where we are at any given time, so if I can have both girls in one place doing lessons in different rooms, I do that. The teachers have been pretty good about trying to accommodate that. This year, um, we have dropped a few activities this year because I felt it was just too much. I felt that they needed more play time, more time with their friends, and I, … they, you need to have down time."

The mothers also had specific concerns about the harm that could potential come their children by participating at such an early age in aesthetic endeavors. For example, E1 worried, "Wow, what if he freezes [on stage]?" E2 expressed concern that "there might be some time in the future where there might be that environment [referring to drug use among theater people], so I would worry about it." E3 defended her decision to have her daughter take voice lessons, "I didn't want her to do any damage before she got real training, and so I just wanted her to kind of know how to use her instrument."

Within the theory of moral intuition, there is also the issue of engendering fairness and reciprocity. This is exemplified by an explanation from E2, herself a talented violinist, on how she manages potential competition and jealousy between her two talented daughters.

> There is a concession I made when she got into *Seussical*. What happened is when, um, they were in the *Sound of Music*, I went to all the shows, and I saw her sister in all those shows, and then when she got into *Annie*, or *Music Man* and then *Annie*, I was going to be in the pit and I wasn't going to get to see them, so I requested that I could sit out one dress rehearsal … and not be paid and see them. And for *Seussical*, I was asked to play in the pit, which, to try to make things even, I turned down that offer, so that I could watch her and … let her feel that I supported her as much as her sister, because all summer, I had gone to all of her sister's shows, and that was in July and August, and then, and then these shows were in October, November, and I would have felt really badly if I had seen all of her sister's shows and then I just went down in the pit and never saw her shows, so just to be fair, I turned down that offer to be in the pit.

An exemplar of in-group/loyalty also comes from E2. This mother explained how her daughter's loyalty to the family tradition of musical performance started:

> Well, she heard Mommy practice her whole life [Mother laughs] and listened, saw the violin students, the girls and boys coming to and fro, and so it was around all the time, … and when her big sister started cello, she said, "Well, I want to play the violin." So I got her a little violin and started her. … I'm pretty aware that musical ability runs in families, and she's getting it from both sides, so we weren't terribly surprised that she did really well on both violin and piano.

An example of the demand for authority and respect comes from E1. This mother explained the circumstances in their home while her son was taking a leading role in a high school production.

> Well, we were teasing…My husband calls [my son] "my little *prima donna*" [mother laughs] 'cause …we have to keep things real, you know. He was especially, in this last one, was really … waited on at the practices. "Oh, … I'll do this for you or that." And he just, like, asked the [high school] kids to do things for him, and they would, just, because, you know. And he'd come home and thinks that's going to happen here.… We have to do a reality check with that, "You know, this is fun, but, uh. … It's okay to be the star, but then you need to, can't let it go to your head. … You still have to do things for yourself and get your own shoes on and get your own drink of water."

Interestingly, moral intuition's issue of sanctity/purity, which involves avoidance of things associated with disgust, disease, or death, was raised by mothers only in regard to aesthetic achievement. Translated into comments by these mothers, this meant avoiding people who might be seen as potential threats to the purity of the child, as illustrated by E3:

> Probably my biggest concern is that she, if she continues being really involved in theater, … she'll have a much broader world view maybe as a teenager. She'll be, just meet people, and I don't have much control over that. It's harder to control who she meets and what she hears and, um, what she's influenced by, and while I'm certainly okay with that in theory [Mother laughs], it's a little scary, because it can, you know, when they're a teenager, they start to think they're cool, that they don't understand fully, and so, that's been a little bit of a concern for me, that she would end up meeting people that would exert undue influence on her.

Mothers' Aspirations

Given the mothers' activities and attitudes relative to their children's achievements, especially because enmeshment theory proved to the most prevalent category into the mothers' comments could be categorized, it would be interesting to note what these mothers hope their children will ultimately do with their abilities. As might be expected, mothers did make statements expressing an aspiration specifically related to the current achievements of their children. For example, C1 stated, "I don't know where his interests will take him. I think he would be a good geologist (I haven't said to him, 'You would be a good geologist.'), … but, because of things he's interested in and how he thinks, and what he, the rocks he's given me, you know. He's fascinated by little things, like on the inside, and I think he would be fascinated by the rules, the rock … cycle." T1 also articulated a current-achievement-related aspiration for her son, "My aspiration for that is I'd rather him go with jump rope and be done with gym. … but I'm leaving that up to him." T2 expressed a similar goal:

> My number one hope really and truly with gymnastics is for her to build confidence, just see that she can do anything that she sets her mind to, … to have the desire and the heart and the will and the work ethic to do something, whether

it continues to be in gymnastics or whether it be something else. That really is my primary goal with her, and I see more of that,… that so much of that has come out in gymnastics, that, if that's where her dream lies, great!

Comparable hopes were shared by E2:

Well, my whole life I personally have … had great enjoyment coming from music, and it's so much fun in terms of meeting people and having a social activity, and it's beautiful, and I want her to have that enjoyment, and if (I've always felt that she has that gift as a youngster.) … she can … attain a high proficiency, she'll have that for life, and she'll always have that to enjoy whether or not she wants to go into music. I … wouldn't push her into a musical career if that wasn't what she wanted.

An inspection of these quotations indicated that, even where the mother held aspirations specific to the child's current achievements, the ultimate outcome was left to the child and his or her life experience. The tenor of these comments was one of encouragement and support. This was also reflected in the comments the mothers made about the general outcomes in life they would like to see for their children, as illustrated by this statement from E3, "To me, it's about being a whole human being. Her life will be happy if she's a whole well-rounded human being, more than if she puts all of her efforts into one thing." T1 expressed a similar sentiment, "I just want [my children] to find their niche, like something that makes them feel like 'I am successful and happy'—something that makes them feel proud of themselves and something to give them self-confidence. So, that's my aspiration."

Discussion

This discussion is limited by two important considerations. First, it is based on the specific experiences of nine mothers as seen through the lens of one interviewer/researcher. While such an ideographic perspective can inform theory development—particularly, in this case, for enmeshment theory—by providing specific examples of larger principles, high involvement mothers of high achieving children and professionals who work with them should exercise caution in applying the findings to any specific case. Transfer of outcomes for qualitative research depends on an understanding of the similarities and differences among reported and lived situations.

Second, specific theoretical perspectives were imposed on the data rather than using grounded theory, as is usually the case in qualitative research. This was done for two reasons, as explained earlier; (1) to emphasize the potential differences between the pathological explanations typical in American society for these mothers' actions, and (2) to provide an additional level of triangulation to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. Thus, the degree to and the ways in which each of three theoretical perspectives—enmeshment, mattering, and moral intuitions—were present in the aspirations and activities of high involvement mothers as related to their children's academic, aesthetic, and athletic achievements was the major focus of this research. Another purpose was to ascertain the way these mothers describe themselves,

especially given the stereotypical judgments and predictions of pathology the mothers face. Each research focus will be discussed in turn.

Theoretical Perspective

Of the three theories investigated, enmeshment seemed to provide the best explanation of the mothers' activities and aspirations. Enmeshment is characterized by a demand for family loyalty that is expressed in "excessive togetherness, lack of privacy, tendency of family members to speak for one another" (Aragona, Catapono, Loriedo, and Alliani 2011, 10) and the use of the pronoun *we* in conversations rather than a more appropriate singular pronoun (Friedlander and Walters 2010; Petrican et al. 2011). Enmeshment is considered a contributing factor to several psychological disorders including delayed individuation (Barrera et al. 2011), self injuring behavior (Wood and Craigen 2011), eating disorders, stress, depression, marital problems, panic disorder, identity crisis, and even suicide (Tomiyama and Mann, 2008). Examples of every characteristics of enmeshment were provided by at least 5 of the 9 mothers, covering all three interview categories. However, enmeshment explanations were most prevalent among the mothers of academically and athletically achieving children. Given this prevalence, one might expect to find evidence of at least some of the disorders indicated. Indeed, just from the material quoted in the findings sections, cases of stress—especially related to health, time, and finances— were reported. However, one could hardly call any of the families dysfunctional. All families, with the exception of T1, were completely intact. T1 was the only mother with children who had moved out of the home, some children having reached an age of majority. T1 is an interesting case because she was the only mother who reported activities and aspirations that could be categorized into every aspect of each theory. Within enmeshment theory, this mother's comments were also more purely aligned with the aspects indicated. For example, she definitely used the pronoun *we* when the use of *he*, in reference to her son, would have been more appropriate. In addition, she was the most willing to describe actions that an objective observer would be most likely to describe as invasions of her child's privacy. Yet, it would be difficult to attribute this to enmeshment alone, given the number of children (i.e., 10) that she raised or is raising. One might hypothesize that privacy is more difficult to attain in a large family. Further, predictions concerning individuation are problematic because six of her children have already successfully made the transition into adult life.

The findings of the present study tend to support the work of Aragona et al. (2011), who claimed that enmeshment is quite a diffuse condition, even in *normal* families, and that in cultures where individuation or autonomy are not as highly valued as in American white culture, enmeshment isn't viewed as pathological or as a good predictor of the psychological disorders listed earlier. One cultural factor in Cache Valley, UT, that may have an impact on the way enmeshment operated in these families is the presence of a dominant religion that evangelizes family togetherness. While not all informants in this study were practicing members of that dominant religion, the broader cultural influence could, nonetheless, shape family practices in ways that permit characteristics of enmeshment to flourish without the predicted pathology.

While also providing numerous exemplars of enmeshment, the mothers of aesthetically achieving children were more strongly influenced, it appeared, by the theory of moral intuition, which suggests a set of evolutionarily determined responses that would be used in parenting. The two aspects mentioned by all three aesthetic mothers were the demand for authority and respect and the provision of care and avoidance of harm. This fits well with the general finding that enmeshment provides the best over-all explanation of the mothers' activities and aspirations in that enmeshment could be seen as taking the demand for authority and respect and the provision of care and avoidance of harm a few steps too far. However, pathology again seems to be lacking. In fact, the mothers' application of avoidance of harm sometime took the opposite track from what is stereotypically expected of high involvement mothers. Take just one example of an activity, over-scheduling the child, that some are concerned will lead to psychological and physical problems. All the aesthetic mothers reported that their children rely on them to manage and curtail their schedules when needed. Incidentally, the only aspect of any theory that was mentioned by every mother at least once was *reliance* within the mattering theory. So, even though mattering theory, in and of itself, did not have the prevalence of the other theories, this one aspect—reliance—as expressed through the provision of care and avoidance of harm was clearly an important attribute of the mother-child relationship. One of the major differences between moral intuition theory and the other two theories is that moral intuition theory does not suggest that the actions of mothers would necessarily lead to psychological disorders. Rather, Haidt and Joseph (2004) propose that humans use an evolutionarily-developed intuitive system for moral action. Seeing pathology in motherly actions that are likely naturally derived seems patently unfair.

Mothers' Self-Descriptions

The mothers' interviewed in this inquiry, especially the athletic mothers, tended to embrace the pejorative labels society tries to place on them. T1, for example, labels herself a "tiger mother", and T2 calls herself a "mama bear." The mothers also seemed to recognize that they sometimes acted for their own good in company with the good of their children, explaining, for example, their inability to look at everything their children produce, their desire for down time, and their need to receive compliments. Mothers also believe that their involvement is providing their children with important life lessons about things such as ability, opportunities, and effort. Ultimately, every mother saw herself as leaving final choices up to the child and that their current high involvement does not necessarily disable their child from making those decisions. As stated by C1:

> I want him to go into … what he loves … , and that's what I …want him to be involved in. I don't want him doing something his brother did. I don't want him doing something he thinks will make me happy. … I want him doing something that uses a gift that he's been given and that is his own personal thing.

Conclusion

Perhaps the one over-arching message from these data for parents would be that active involvement, even high involvement that others might interpret as overinvolvement, with their children can contribute to high achievement in a variety of areas for their children. Overinvolvement, in and of itself, need not necessarily lead to the predicted pathologies.

The message to educators and other professionals who observe what they would label as overinvolvement is to exercise more caution in labeling parents and their activities with their children. Such labeling often places parents in a double-bind of being charged with being underinvolved or overinvolved. Schools may likely find more success in welcoming any parent involvement, on its face, as worthwhile and working with parents to provide active, rather than passive, channels for parents' aspirations and activities. For example, Hunsaker and Hunsaker (1998) suggest three levels (i.e., child, program, and institution) and four means (i.e., informational, educational, resource, and decision-making/advisory) for parents' participation in their children's talent development—creating a dynamic two-way relationship between parents and educators within a community context.

Having articulated these messages for parents and professionals, this research does not preclude the possibility of pathologies developing from overly close parenting behaviors. Certainly care should be taken in homes and schools to watch for the combinations of indicators that might indicate the presence of predicted pathologies.

However, no one indicator is usually sufficient to make such predictions. This research joins more recent research that demonstrates that enmeshment, for example, is not, by itself, a viable predictor of pathology. This study, in particular, points to cultural milieu, especially a culture dominated by a single religious perspective, as one mollifying variable. The sample used in this study also indicates that special family position (e.g., oldest child, youngest child) may play a role. Future research could definitely explore these possibilities further.

Finally, Jolly and Matthews (2012) have noted a penchant for research on parenting of high achieving children to draw primarily from parent self-report of their beliefs and practices, usually relying on surveys. This study went one step further by utilizing in-depth interviews and documentation of children's achievement. Future studies should likely include documentation of parenting behaviors and, as especially noted by Jolly and Matthews, observations of behaviors in the home and in the academic, athletic, and aesthetic settings in which children achieve.

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