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MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD IN AMERICAN FILM

by

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MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD IN AMERICAN FILM
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Dedication

To my husband, Joseph: I would have never made it out of this transition in labor if not for your love and support. I love you.

To my children: Thank you for being my motivation. It never fails that when moms have something to finish one of our children gets sick, and you all didn't disappoint.

To my parents: Thank you for instilling in me the value of education and pushing me to always finish what I start.

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ABSTRACT
MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD IN AMERICAN FILM

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The American family has diversified significantly in the past century as women have assumed greater roles outside of the home, and film has been shown to illuminate common societal beliefs and the changing nature of social norms. The purpose of this research study was to examine the ways in which pregnancy and relationship status are portrayed in American film. This study also sought to examine whether common stereotypes about women were also present in film regarding age, race, sexual orientation, employment status, and relationship status as characters transitioned to motherhood. In order to do this, a content analysis was performed that collected both quantitative and qualitative data from a random sampling of 23 films. Results indicated that the majority of films showcased marriage and the nuclear family unit as the ideal and that pregnancies should be carried to term whether characters became pregnant intentionally or not. Ironically, characters who were facing fertility issues and made the decision to adopt were more likely to divorce from their partners by the end of the films. Additionally, qualitative analysis showed that characters in the films were likely to

encounter common stereotypes relating to their age, race, and employment status. In conclusion, the results highlight the pervasive nature of societal norms and expectations as they affect pregnancy and motherhood through media sources such as film.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	x
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW	3
The Changing Family	3
Film History	4
Stereotypes of Mothers	5
CHAPTER III: CURRENT STUDY	9
CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY	12
Age	13
Race/Ethnicity	14
Sexual Orientation	14
Employment Status	14
Pregnancy Intentions.....	15
End Pregnancy Results	15
Relationship Status.....	16
Partner's/Biological Father's Supportiveness.....	17
CHAPTER V: RESULTS.....	18
Quantitative Results	18
Qualitative Results	23
Marriage as a Precursor to Motherhood.....	23
Fertility Issues and Alternatives to Pregnancy.....	25
Age	26
Race.....	27
Sexual Orientation	28
Employment Status	28
CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION	31
CHAPTER VII: LIMITATIONS	33
CHAPTER VIII: CONCLUSION.....	34
REFERENCES	35
APPENDIX A: LIST OF FILMS THAT MET CRITERIA.....	41

APPENDIX B: FILM ANALYSIS WORKSHEET 42

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Relationship Status Changes from Beginning to End of Film..... 19

Table 2. Initial Pregnancy Response compared to Relationship Status from
Beginning to End of Film 20

Table 3. Pregnancy End Result Compared to Relationship Status at End of Film..... 21

Table 4. Relationship Status at Beginning and end of Film compared to Partner
Supportiveness 23

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Whether it is a children's rhyme ("first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes a baby in the baby carriage") or a romantic comedy on the big screen, there is a pervasive message in our society that women should be married before becoming a mother. Furthermore, the messages dictate what a "good" mother looks like and who is viewed as a "bad" mother through various stereotypes regarding a woman's age, race, marital status, or employment status. Patriarchal ideologies place women in traditional, subservient gender roles wherein their worth is found in bearing children and maintaining a kept home while relying on a male partner to provide the bulk of her financial security (Taylor, 2011). This view severely limits a woman's options and does not accurately reflect motherhood in today's society. Since women began entering the workforce in mass during the 1960s and 70s, the American family unit has been steadily diversifying and marriage does not always precede the birth of a child today (Geiger & Livingston, 2018). For example, in 1968 just 9.7% of births were to unmarried women (Ventura & Bachrach, 2000) compared to 39.8% in 2017 (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Drake, 2018). Livingston (2018) also found that 85% of children were living with married parents in 1968, and just 12% were living with a single mother. In 2017, those rates have shifted to 65% and 21% respectively. These changing norms have not necessarily found their way into mainstream media, however.

Romance has always been a popular movie genre, and feature films have used pregnancy as a theme for nearly a century. These films often reflect the cultural expectations, values, and beliefs of the time period in which they are produced. Hollywood producers rarely set trends or create a film that does not coincide with the attitudes of the general public, because after all, they are in the business to make a profit

(Boswell, 2014). With changing definitions of family and women assuming more diverse gender roles, films should be portraying a greater variety of families that are not limited to the traditional, nuclear family unit. However, mainstream Hollywood films that utilize pregnancy as a central theme tend to reinforce patriarchal ideologies by limiting their portrayals of family to the heteronormative, nuclear family unit. Using motherhood as a point of intersection, I further argue that patriarchal values are reinforced through the use of stereotypes in Hollywood films based on a woman's age, race, sexual orientation, employment status, and relationship status if/when she chooses to become a mother.

CHAPTER II:
LITERATURE REVIEW

The Changing Family

American families began drastically changing after World War II when women began entering the workforce in greater numbers and became more financially independent. Cherlin (2004) attributes much of the diversification of the family unit to the deinstitutionalization of American marriage by illustrating the changing needs of partners from one of practicality and financial dependence to one of companionship. While divorce rates have stabilized, there has been an increase in the number of blended families, or families that include step-parents or step-children, same-sex parent families, and single parent families. Approximately 4 in 10 new marriages include one spouse who has been married previously, and in 20% of new marriages both partners had been married before their current union (Geiger & Livingston, 2018). Many couples, accounting for approximately 35% of all unmarried parents, are choosing to forego marriage altogether in favor of cohabiting instead (Livingston, 2018). Single parenthood has also increased over the last half century as well as the number of same-sex couples who have started families after the legalization of same-sex marriage. In 2013, approximately 19% of same-sex couple households included children under the age of 18 (Gates, 2013). The term “family” has come to represent a much more varied group of people than in the past.

Even though the term has broadened, family units that diverge from the traditional two-parent, heterosexual unit are often subjected to scrutiny. Single and gay/lesbian parents often become negatively stereotyped even though less than half (46% in 2014) of children lived with two married parents who were in their first marriage (Stepler, 2015). A study conducted by Powell, Bolzendahl, Claudia, and Steelman in 2003 found that over

50% of Americans did not view two men with children (53.6%) or two women with children (55%) as a family, and if they did not have children, even less viewed them as a family, 26.2% and 26.8% respectively. Cahill (2005) argues that these negative stereotypes stem from a prevailing social policing of individual sexual choices and those differing from heteronormative, monogamous relationships are considered deviant. Women's bodies have historically been the subject of heavy policing, and poor sexual decisions have often been punished through social stigma. Pregnancy, especially as a result of poor sexual choices, has been stigmatized as a way of controlling women's bodies (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). This control can be seen as it has evolved through the film industry in the form of censoring women's bodies.

Film History

Beginning in the 1930s, the film industry was governed by the Hays Production Code, which provided moral guidance for directors and the films they produced. This code censored pregnancy and childbirth in accordance with popular opinions that pregnancy was an inappropriate topic for public discussion and should remain private. Many films of this period skipped from romance directly to couples who were already married with children (Oliver, 2012). By the 1950s, films were incorporating pregnancy more in the plot; however, it was typically an unplanned pregnancy and the woman usually died by the end of the film either by her own hand or in labor (Oliver, 2012). Women's pregnant bodies were often heavily covered in film, just as they would have been in public, to signify their immodest state of being. These films provided a warning against premarital sex and reinforced social sanctions of the era regarding sex, marriage, and pregnancy by showing the ultimate consequence as death both socially and literally (Boswell, 2014; Oliver, 2012).

The 1960s and 70s were a time of significant change in American history as well as in the film industry. America was experiencing a sexual revolution, and the mainstream media reflected the effects of this movement. The film industry encountered fewer forms of censorship as the production code was abandoned, and the pregnant body was no longer hidden. By the 1980s, pregnancy grew into a stand-alone theme of blockbuster movies, known as “momcoms” (Oliver, 2012). Just as sex scenes and nudity have transitioned in film, the portrayal of pregnancy and pregnancy-related topics have also transitioned from being hidden and subtle to completely exposed figuratively and literally (Oliver, 2012). The narrative films of today showcase the journey women take through pregnancy, highlight the choices that must be made in preparation for a baby, and portray this experience through scenes that may be very relatable to women's real life experiences. For example, women in their prime years of childbearing often hear comments made by well-meaning family members related to their “biological clocks” ticking away.

Stereotypes of Mothers

Traditional gender traits for women include being docile, obedient, warm, affectionate, and nurturing, and motherhood is greatly tied to a woman's value and worth. Haines, Deaux, and Lofaro (2016) found that despite increases in women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors of society, men and women are still judged using traditional gender stereotypes. Women who choose to remain childless are often stereotyped as being selfish and unfeminine. Berdahl and Moon (2013), in a study examining workplace mistreatment among men and women both with and without children, found that women who did not adhere to traditional gender norms by having children suffered the most mistreatment at work followed by mothers who were viewed as not actively caring for their children outside of work. Motherhood is still regarded as a

woman's primary achievement in life, even though some women choose not to have children.

Women who do wish to have children are typically expected to meet certain milestones before beginning a family such as getting married and more recently, finishing college. This is a very pervasive message that is learned through socialization from a very early age. These expectations are so prevalent that feature films often reflect the norms positively while exaggerating the consequences of social deviance from these norms (Boswell, 2014). When a pregnancy occurs within the context of a marriage or at least within a loving relationship in films, it is typically captured positively. Unexpected pregnancies and single motherhood, however, are frequently accompanied by themes of poverty and negative character traits illustrating the societal consequences associated with deviating from the normal sequence of love, marriage, and then children. As norms evolve regarding pregnancy, movies should also evolve over time to depict the cultural norms.

Because the ideal family unit is still the two-parent, nuclear unit, women who give birth outside the context of marriage are generally viewed negatively. Single mothers make up the largest group of solo parents; Approximately one-in-five children are currently living with a single mother. Even so, approximately 66% of Americans believe that greater numbers of single women having children without a partner is bad for society (Livingston, 2018). While it is true that single mothers are more likely to live in poverty (Livingston, 2018), single motherhood has also often been associated with character flaws such as laziness, promiscuity, and negligent parenting. In a study conducted by Dejean, McGeorge, and Carlson (2012), never-married, single mothers were viewed much more harshly on their ability to parent, and even on personal characteristics which included being viewed as less secure, less responsible, less moral,

and less reputable, compared to never-married, single fathers. Not all single mothers are uneducated and poor, however.

Teen pregnancy and births to women out of wedlock have been considered a pressing social issue, but teen pregnancy has overall been on the decline. According to the Center for Disease Control, births decreased for all women under the age of thirty and rose for women in their thirties and forties (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Drake, 2018). Common views have failed to acknowledge the growing population of mature women who are choosing to become single parents outside of the context of a romantic relationship. These women are often educated, have established careers, and can be considered financially stable. According to Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, and Golombok (2009), many of these women made conscious decisions to save money, move to better neighborhoods, and begin preparing a support system to help with needed childcare before they became pregnant. While many of the adverse outcomes that occur within single-parent families are directly related to poverty, these same outcomes often do not apply to women who consciously choose to become single mothers without partners in their later years.

Women are still to a great extent expected to marry before becoming a mother. If she wants a career, it is also expected of her to achieve an education and establish her career before having a child. Women who do not fit into traditional gender roles are criticized harshly in our society, and mothers especially face what has come to be known as “mommy shaming.” Approximately 8 in 10 adults, or 77%, believe women face a lot of pressure to be an involved parent, while only 56% say the same about men (Geiger, Livingston, & Bialik, 2019). Women today must face all of the pressures of “intensive mothering” as well as operate under a belief that they can and should “have-it-all” in regard to marriage, career, and motherhood (Hoffnung & Williams, 2013). Even though

there is a strong push for women to be successful in multiple endeavors, they consistently encounter judgment and obstacles.

CHAPTER III: CURRENT STUDY

According to a systematic review conducted by Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette, and Gosselin (2015), little has changed in attitudes regarding family structure in the last 30 years, and alternative family structures are still grossly underrepresented in academic research despite the growing diversity of the American family. The purpose of this study is to better understand the portrayals of mothers in feature films. I hypothesized that Hollywood films, that utilized pregnancy as an integral theme to the story line, would depict pregnant characters in heteronormative relationships more frequently than in other family units by the end of each film. I further hypothesized that these films would portray common stereotypes about motherhood that intersected with a woman's age, race, sexual orientation, and employment status.

When it comes to age, there appears to be a socially acceptable time frame for childbearing, which typically begins after marriage in the mid-20s and prior to age 35 when pregnancies become considered high risk due to maternal age. Teen mothers under the age of 19 are often stereotyped as being immature and making poor choices that lead to an unintentional pregnancy (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Jones, Whitfield, Seymour, & Hayter, 2019). These stigmas are so prevalent that Jones, Whitfield, Seymour, and Hayter (2019) discovered that the teen mothers in their sample engaged in “othering” to deflect negative stereotypes, and often judged other girls in similar situations very harshly while presenting themselves as having become pregnant under responsible circumstances (i.e. having finished school, being in a committed relationship, actively choosing to become pregnant). Deadlines for childbearing are perceived more frequently for women than they are for men, and women who choose to delay pregnancy into their 30s are often bombarded by remarks relating to their biological clocks (Billari et al., 2011). Women

who postpone even longer into their late 30s and 40s often face labels such as “high-risk” and “elderly primipara” from health care providers, which can lead to conflicts in their self-images as healthy women and create unnecessary anxiety relating to the pregnancy (Morgan, Merrell, Rentschler, & Chadderton, 2012).

This study did not anticipate a large variety of racial and ethnic characters. A lack of racial diversity in Hollywood film is well documented in current literature (Erigha, 2015; Smith, 2013). Therefore, I only coded for White and Black characters. There is an abundance of literature on Black women and the many archetypes they have held over time (Collins, 2014). Negative stereotypes of Black mothers have often promoted the image of the “welfare queen,” which has been linked to disparities in pregnancy and postpartum health outcomes (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016). For example, even Serena Williams, a high-profile athlete, recently gave birth, and felt she was not taken seriously by doctors when she recognized she was suffering from a serious postpartum complication (Lockhart, 2018).

Stereotypes relating to parents who identify within the LGBTQ community also tend to be quite negative. Although same-sex marriage was legalized nationwide in 2015, pathways to becoming parents for same-sex couples have been less clear and have fewer legal protections (Gash & Raiskin, 2018; Polikoff, 2018). Approximately 40% of adults believe that the number of same-sex couples having children is bad for our society (Livingston, 2018). According to Gash and Raiskin (2018), participants discussed how they constantly contemplated the costs versus benefits of revealing their sexual orientation especially in the context of their parenting, and how even family outings felt risky creating the necessity to carry documentation proving their parenthood. Polikoff (2018) also argues that same-sex parents often face discrimination in family court.

Beginning in pregnancy, women also face stereotypes regarding their employment status. While pregnant employees should be protected under federal law, pregnant women who are seeking employment often do not make it past the application process due to interpersonal discrimination and the belief that pregnant women are incompetent, lack commitment, and are inflexible (Morgan, Walker, Hebl, & King, 2013). After the baby arrives, these stigmas persist causing some mothers to “opt-out” of the workforce (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Paustian-Underdahl, Eaton, Mandeville, & Little, 2019) and creating a motherhood penalty for those who choose to go back to work that results in lower wages and less opportunity for promotion (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Jee, Misra, & Murray, 2019). When employment status intersects with race, Glauber (2007) found that White women are more likely to experience higher wage penalties for marrying and having children than Black and Hispanic women. Women even face backlash when choosing to return to higher education following the birth of a child. Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, and Bedsole (2008) found that women who returned to higher education six months after the birth of a child were viewed as cold hearted, more arrogant, and less warm and agreeable than women who decided to drop out. Overall, women still face extreme amounts of backlash for becoming mothers when their other identities are taken into consideration.

Because women do face so many stigmas, I also examined the influence of partner support on the character’s relationship status to see if it would mitigate some of these negative stigmas within the films. Partner support has been shown to have many positive benefits in regard to maternal health (Greenhill & Vollmer, 2019; Thomas, Caughy, Anderson, & Owen, 2019). Mothers who were partnered compared to single have also been viewed more positively in previous literature (Dejean, McGeorge, & Carlson, 2012; Livingston, 2018).

CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the family structures of pregnant characters, I conducted a content analysis that recorded the demographics and relationship status changes of pregnant mothers, and whether their partner or the biological father of the baby was supportive of the character's choices regarding the pregnancy. I used both a quantitative and qualitative approach in order to gain a larger view of relationships as they developed within the context of a pregnancy.

Quantitative content analysis can be defined as “testing hypotheses through the systematic review of materials that have been converted into a quantitative data set” (Carr et al., 2017, p. 403). To do this, I recorded relationship status throughout the film, focusing specifically on relationship status at the beginning of the film and at the end of the film. I began coding the first time a romantic relationship or lack thereof was established within the plot, and then again at the end of the film prior to the credits.

Critical content analysis can be defined as “an interpretive analysis of media designed to uncover societal blindspots” (Carr et al., 2017, p. 403). To do this, I recorded comments from various characters relating to age, race, sexual orientation, employment status, and relationship status within the film. I also recorded the time that the remark occurred in the film. After transcribing the comments, I was able to separate them into categories. Knowing that gender stereotypes are still largely prevalent in our society, I expected to find similar gender stereotypes and roles within the films that were selected for analysis.

To compile a collection of films to sample for the data analysis, a keyword search for "pregnancy," "expecting," and "parenthood" was generated on the movie database, Whatismymovie.com, which utilizes the movie database's application programming

interface (TMDb API). Additional criteria that was included on the list was a release date between 2007 and 2017. This time period was selected in order to limit films to more recent representations and ensure films would be accessible via streaming sites (i.e. Amazon Prime Video, Netflix, Vudu, etc.). Horror films were excluded as they do not reflect real life scenarios (Oliver, 2012). Documentaries and films based on true stories were also excluded because the basis of the study sought to examine how fictional representations were depicted. Films were then screened to ensure that the film followed the full pregnancy from conception to full term, birth, or the termination of the pregnancy. A list of films that met the criteria are listed in Appendix A. Films that met the criteria were then numbered, and a random sampling of 10 films was selected. The films selected included: *Away We Go* (2009), *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (2012), *Knocked Up* (2007), *Expecting* (2013), *Waitress* (2007), *Baby Mama* (2008), *Bridget Jones' Baby* (2016), *Obvious Child* (2014), *Juno* (2007), and *Unexpected* (2015). Each film was then coded as follows:

Age

Age was separated into three categories in order to better understand how age at time of pregnancy is viewed and potentially stereotyped by other characters.

19 and Under: Characters who were 19 and under when they became pregnant were considered teenage mothers and may be portrayed more negatively.

20 to 34: Characters between the ages 20 and 34 were considered within the ideal age range for childbearing and should be portrayed more positively

35 and Up: Characters who were 35 and up were considered to be of advanced maternal age when a pregnancy occurred and may be portrayed more negatively.

Race/Ethnicity

Racial and ethnic categories were defined according to the guidelines used by the United States Census Bureau (USA Quickfacts, 2013). I chose to only include films that portrayed either White or Black characters as the sample size was already limited.

White: A person having origins in any of the peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa, including those claiming Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian descent.

Black: A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa, including people who indicate their race as "Black, African Am., or Negro"; or report entries such as African American, Kenyan, Nigerian, or Haitian.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation was recorded to determine if non-heteronormative couples were equally represented.

Heterosexual: A character who was romantically, emotionally, and sexually attracted to the opposite sex.

Homosexual: A character who was romantically, emotionally, and sexually attracted to the same sex.

Employment Status

Employment status was recorded at the beginning of each film in order to determine if characters experienced stereotypes or biases related to work while pregnant or after having a baby.

Employed: A character who was gainfully employed either outside of the home or in a work-from-home position was coded as employed.

Unemployed: A character who was not gainfully employed either outside of the home or in a work-from-home position was coded as unemployed.

Pregnancy Intentions

Pregnancy intentions were recorded to examine attitudes related to the pregnancy.

Planned Pregnancy: A pregnancy was considered planned if the character was actively trying to conceive, and the method by which the character became pregnant was premeditated.

Unplanned but Wanted: A pregnancy was considered unplanned but wanted if the character was not trying to conceive or was actively avoiding a pregnancy through contraceptive use but decided that they wanted to continue the pregnancy and parent the baby.

Unplanned and Unwanted: A pregnancy was considered unplanned and unwanted if the character was not trying to conceive or was actively avoiding a pregnancy through contraceptive use, and, upon becoming pregnant, chose to pursue an abortion or place the baby for adoption.

Fertility Issues and Seeking Alternatives: This category was representative of characters, who after trying to conceive naturally, sought medical intervention to conceive and/or pursued adoption.

End Pregnancy Results

End pregnancy results were recorded to examine the choice the character made regarding the pregnancy and the subsequent baby.

Birth of Baby: This category was used if a character chose to give birth and parent the baby.

Miscarriage: This category was used if a character's pregnancy ended in a miscarriage.

Abortion: This category was used if a character chose to terminate the pregnancy through an abortive procedure.

Place Baby for Adoption: This category was used if a character chose to give birth to the baby, and then placed the baby with an adoptive family.

Still Pregnant: Characters who had not given birth by the end of the film but were in their final trimester were coded as still pregnant.

Adopt a Baby: This category was used for characters who were unable to achieve a pregnancy, either naturally or through fertility treatments, and chose to pursue an adoption.

Relationship Status

Relationship Status was recorded to determine the types of relationships that were depicted when a character became pregnant. Because relationship status is not fixed and is typically a major plot line in Hollywood films, relationship status was recorded at both the beginning and the end of the film to observe changes.

Single: The character was not in a romantic (emotional and/or sexual) relationship with another character, or a romantic relationship with another character ended either in a break-up or a divorce.

In a Relationship/Coupled: The character was romantically (emotionally and/or sexually) involved with another character, but not in a legally binding union.

Engaged: The character or the character's partner proposed marriage, and the proposal was accepted.

Married: The character was already in or entered a legally binding union that was marked by an exchange of vows, an exchange of rings, or the signing of a marriage license.

Partner's/Biological Father's Supportiveness

Along with relationship status, partner's/biological father's supportiveness was also recorded to determine if a character was supported or not supported in her decisions regarding the pregnancy.

Supported: A character was coded as supported if her partner or the biological father agreed with her decisions to remain pregnant and either parent the baby, abort the pregnancy, place the baby for adoption, or adopt a baby.

Unsupported: A character was coded as unsupported if her partner or the biological father did not agree with her decisions to remain pregnant and either parent the baby, abort the pregnancy, place the baby for adoption, or adopt a baby.

No Partner: Characters who were unsure of paternity or were utilizing fertility treatments such as donor insemination were coded as having no partner.

CHAPTER V:

RESULTS

Quantitative Results

Descriptive statistics were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. A total of ten films were randomly selected for coding, and of those, eighteen characters were followed from conception to the end of their pregnancies or through their fertility treatments and/or adoption journeys. Demographics for each of the characters showed that 88.9% were White (n = 16) and 11.1% were Black (n = 2). Age of the characters were 11.1% for those 19 and under (n = 2), 72.2% for those between the ages of 20 and 34 (n = 13), and 16.7% for ages 35 and up (n = 3). All the characters identified as heterosexual (n = 18). Of the eighteen characters, 72.2% were employed (n = 13), and 27.8% were unemployed (n = 5).

The initial response to the pregnancy and the end results of each pregnancy were also tracked. Initial response to the pregnancies showed that 16.7% of pregnancies were planned (n = 3), 38.9% were unplanned but wanted pregnancies (n = 7), 22.2% were unplanned and unwanted pregnancies (n = 4), and 22.2% were characters who were dealing with fertility issues and seeking alternatives (n = 4). By the end of the films, 55.6% of the pregnancies ended with the live birth of a baby (n = 10), 5.6% ended in a miscarriage (n = 1), 5.6% ended with an abortive procedure (n = 1), 22.2% ended in an adoption (n = 4), and 11.1% of characters were considered full term in their pregnancies (n = 2).

Relationship status was tracked throughout the film for changes as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Relationship Status Changes from Beginning to End of Film

Time in Film	Relationship Status			
	<i>Single</i>	<i>Coupled/ Cohabiting</i>	<i>Engaged</i>	<i>Married</i>
<i>Beginning of Film</i>	33.3%	27.8%	0%	38.9%
<i>End of Film</i>	38.9%	27.8%	5.6%	27.8%

At the beginning of each film, 33.3% of characters were single (n = 6), 27.8% were Coupled and/or Cohabiting (n = 5), and 38.9% were Married (n = 7). By the end of each film, 38.9% of characters were single (n = 7), 27.8% were Coupled and/or Cohabiting (n = 5), 5.6% were Engaged (n=1), and 27.8% were Married (n = 5). When examining race with relationship status, none of the Black characters were married by the end of the film compared with 31.3% of White characters. No characters were raising a baby within a same-sex relationship by the end of the film.

Table 2 shows initial pregnancy response compared to relationship status at the beginning and at the end of the Film.

Table 2.

Initial Pregnancy Response compared to Relationship Status from Beginning to End of Film

Relationship Status from Beginning to End		Initial Pregnancy Response			
		<i>Planned</i>	<i>Unplanned but Wanted</i>	<i>Unplanned and Unwanted</i>	<i>Fertility Issues/ Seeking Alternatives</i>
<i>Single</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	0%	37.5%	50%	25%
	<i>End</i>	50%	12.5%	75%	50%
<i>Coupled/ Cohabiting</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	50%	50%	25%	0%
	<i>End</i>	0%	37.5%	25%	25%
<i>Engaged</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	0%	0%	0%	0%
	<i>End</i>	0%	37.5%	0%	0%
<i>Married</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	50%	12.5%	25%	75%
	<i>End</i>	50%	37.5%	0%	25%

When examining pregnancy intentions with relationship status, characters who experienced planned pregnancies were either coupled/cohabiting (50%) or married (50%) at the beginning of the film, but by the end of the film, characters were either still married (50%) or single (50%). Characters experiencing unplanned but wanted pregnancies were less likely to be married (12.5%), and more likely to be coupled/cohabiting (50%) or single (37.5%) at the beginning of the film. Characters who experienced an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy were most likely to be single (50%) at the beginning of the film, but even more so by the end of the film (75%). Characters who were suffering from

fertility issues and seeking alternatives were most likely married (75%) at the beginning of the film, but only 25% were still married by the end of the film.

Relationship status at the end of the film was also examined in regard to the end pregnancy results as shown in Table 3.

Table 3.

Pregnancy End Result Compared to Relationship Status at End of Film

Relationship Status at Beginning and End of Film		Pregnancy End Result					
		<i>Birth of a Baby</i>	<i>Miscarriage</i>	<i>Abortion</i>	<i>Place baby for Adoption</i>	<i>Adopt a Baby</i>	<i>Still Pregnant</i>
<i>Single</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	36.4%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%
	<i>End</i>	36.4%	0%	100%	0%	66.7%	0%
<i>Coupled/ Cohabiting</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	36.4%	0%	100%	0%	0%	100%
	<i>End</i>	18.2%	100%	0%	100%	0%	100%
<i>Engaged</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	<i>End</i>	9.1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
<i>Married</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	27.3%	0%	0%	0%	100%	0%
	<i>End</i>	36.4%	0%	0%	0%	33.3%	0%

Of characters who chose to birth and parent their babies, 36.4% were married by the end of the film compared to just 27.3 % at the beginning, 9.1% were engaged while none were engaged at the beginning, 18.2% were coupled compared to 36.4% at the beginning, and 36.4% were single which remained constant from the beginning to the end of the films. Of characters who chose to adopt, 33.3% were married at the end of the

movie whereas 100% were married at the beginning, none were engaged, none were coupled, and 66.7% were single whereas none were single at the beginning.

When examining the partners of the characters or the biological father of the baby, 61.1% were supportive of the characters decisions regarding the pregnancy (n = 11), and 27.8% were unsupportive (n = 5). 11.1% of characters did not have a partner because at the time of pregnancy they were using alternative methods such in vitro or the pregnancy was the result of a one night stand (n = 2). When examining the supportiveness of the character's partner with relationship status at the beginning and end of the film, results showed that all of the characters with unsupportive partners were single by the end of the movie while none were single at the beginning as shown in Table 4. Characters with supportive partners were more likely to be married (45.5%) by the end of the film, and couples who did not have a partner when they become pregnant were 50% more likely to be in a coupled relationship by the end of the film.

Table 4.

Relationship Status at Beginning and end of Film compared to Partner Supportiveness

Relationship Status at Beginning and End of Film		Partner Supportiveness		
		<i>Supportive</i>	<i>Unsupportive</i>	<i>No Partner</i>
<i>Single</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	36.4%	0%	100%
	<i>End</i>	9.1%	100%	50%
<i>Coupled/ Cohabiting</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	36.4%	0%	0%
	<i>End</i>	36.4%	0%	50%
<i>Engaged</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	0%	0%	0%
	<i>End</i>	9.1%	0%	0%
<i>Married</i>	<i>Beginning</i>	27.3%	0%	0%
	<i>End</i>	45.5%	0%	0%

Qualitative Results

For the qualitative analysis, comments were recorded and coded into themes relating to the stereotypes as mentioned above relating to age, race, sexual orientation, relationship status, and employment status. Partner Supportiveness was also observed.

Marriage as a Precursor to Motherhood

Several comments within the films mention marriage after a pregnancy announcement is made, though not all characters became engaged or were married by the end of the film. Several of the characters also expressed guilt or shame as a result of societal expectations regarding the circumstances under which a pregnancy should occur, specifically after marriage.

Comments that occurred with the films support the social belief that marriage should occur in the event of a pregnancy, even if the pregnancy was unplanned. Rosie, in *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, becomes pregnant after a hook-up with a high school crush, he is shocked and responds, "It was one time..., shit, should we get married?" In *Away We Go*, Verona and Burt are in a long-term, cohabiting relationship. A friend asks if they will finally get married now that they are pregnant. Another friend exclaims, "You're still not married? Why don't you just propose?" Bert then explains that he has proposed, but Verona does not want to get married. In *Unexpected*, Sam, who is cohabiting with her boyfriend, John, finds herself in an unplanned pregnancy. Though they are initially both shocked, John proposes the very next morning, and they later wed at the courthouse. When Sam is announcing her pregnancy and marriage to her mother as "happy things," her mother responds with, "but they're not happening in a happy way. You're supposed to have a white wedding first, then get pregnant. What am I supposed to tell people?" In *Knocked Up*, when Allison's partner Ben shares the news of their pregnancy with Allison's adolescent niece, she responds, "Well, you're not married. Aren't you supposed to be married to have a baby?"

In *Bridget Jones' Baby*, Bridget apologizes to her father for not knowing who the father is and asks if he thinks she should be on *Jerry Springer*. Bridget also asks her mom if she is ashamed of her to which her mother replies, "No darling, it's just the circumstances." Allison (*Knocked Up*), becomes pregnant after a one-night stand. Her mother responds to the pregnancy by saying, "Take care of it...I cannot be supportive of this...Now think about your stepsister...She had the same situation as you and she had it taken care of. And you know what? Now she has a real baby." When the circumstances surrounding a pregnancy occur outside of a marital relationship, there is a belief that the pregnancy is somehow not the equivalent of a legitimate pregnancy. This comment of

what is considered “real” regarding the formation of a family led into another theme that was evident in other films relating to fertility issues, and women who must find alternative solutions to becoming mothers when natural conception does not work.

Fertility Issues and Alternatives to Pregnancy

For women desiring to become pregnant, fertility issues can be a significant source of stress. Wendy, in *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, has been trying to become pregnant for two years with her husband, Gary. She eventually tells him, “I think we should take a break from trying, and if that doesn't work we'll do three rounds of IVF, and if that doesn't work we'll just adopt. I have no fears genetic or otherwise.” Though she conceives naturally that very night, the stress of fertility issues and fears regarding adoption are addressed in several of the films. Holly (*What to Expect When You're Expecting*) feels guilt over being unable to conceive. She tells her husband, “I just couldn't handle one more thing that's my fault. I'm the one with the bad eggs, I'm the one who made us spend our 401k on IVF, and I'm the one who can't do the one thing that a woman is supposed to be able to do.” Kate (*Baby Mama*), after nine rounds of failed IVF, tells her surrogate, “You have a God-given ability that I just don't have.”

Fertility issues are stressful for partners as well. Lizzie, in *Expecting*, has been dealing with fertility issues and is exploring different options. Lizzie's husband, Peter, says regarding fertility treatment, “how are we going to pay for it? We could barely pay for it the last three times.” Lizzie's friend, Andie, becomes pregnant accidentally and rather than have an abortion, she offers the baby to Lizzie. Peter's adopted brother brings up the fact that he is a “bad apple,” which leads Andie to ask if Peter is afraid of getting a bad apple through adoption. Ultimately, Lizzie and Peter divorce by the end of the film, and Andie pulls out of the adoption after the baby is born. Likewise, Vanessa (*Juno*), is the adoptive mother to Juno's baby. Her marriage also dissolves by the end of the film with

Mark explaining that he “never said [he] would be a good dad,” even though Vanessa had been trying to get pregnant since they got married. It almost appears that had these women conceived naturally, their partners would have been more willing to become fathers.

Age

As Billiari (2011) determined, women are subjected to socially acceptable age deadlines for childbearing, and those who do not adhere to these social sanctions are often scrutinized. Teen mothers often face stereotypes that label them as immature and having poor decision-making skills (Jones, Whitfield, Seymour, & Hayter, 2019). For example, Juno (*Juno*) describes being used as an example of what not to do and is referred to as the “cautionary whale” in school once her pregnancy is visibly noticeable. At Juno’s ultrasound, the tech expresses approval of Juno’s decision to place her baby for adoption because she sees a lot of teens, and it’s “just a toxic environment to raise a baby in.” The comments portrayed in the movie do support stereotypes that occur today regarding teen pregnancy that view teen mothers as irresponsible, immature, and even toxic. Teen pregnancies often become cautionary tales meant to warn others to postpone sex.

Women who are older when they become pregnant also face stigmatizing labels such as being “high-risk” or elderly mothers, which often clashes with their own self-images of being healthy (Morgan, Merrell, Rentschler, & Chadderton, 2012). Jules (*What to Expect When You’re Expecting*) personifies this clash in social versus self image. Jules is a personal trainer who hosts a weight-loss television show and is in ideal health when she becomes pregnant. When she is chosen as the cover model for the pregnancy issue of a magazine, she asks the editor, “Can we just try to keep it positive? There are a lot of articles out there that make pregnant women over 35 feel like crap.” Ironically, by the

end of the film, Jules is placed on bed-rest due to pregnancy complications. Her partner, Evan, says, “You’re pushing yourself too hard, Jules, especially at your age.” At the beginning of *Bridget Jones’ Baby*, Bridget refers to herself as a spinster because she is turning 43, is single, and has no children. Bridget refers to her single life as being a “shallower compensation” than if she were married with a child. Her mother calls her to wish her a “Happy Birthday” which Bridget describes as an annual phone call reminding her to “take [her] ovaries out of retirement,” alluding to the belief that the fulfillment of femininity is linked to motherhood. Later, Bridget is referred to by her doctor as a geriatric mother who then recommends additional testing because of advanced maternal age and higher risks associated with the pregnancy. Kate (*Baby Mama*) is a successful business woman, but at 37 she still has not found a romantic partner and she wants to become a mother. Kate’s mother refers to her single life as an “alternative lifestyle” and notes that not everyone is as tolerant. Her mother also expresses her hope that Kate will “put the baby mania to rest” denoting that women past a certain age should no longer be trying to have a baby. Even to just be single past a certain age, is regarded as outside of the norm and scrutinized.

Race

The films overall were not representative of Black women as only 2 of the 18 characters (11.1%) were Black, and several negative comments referring to darker skin tones were made. Jazmin (*Unexpected*) is a senior in high school when she becomes pregnant and lives with her grandmother, siblings, and niece and nephew. Jazmin’s grandmother relies on welfare to support the household, and even petitions her caseworker for more food stamps due to Jazmin’s pregnancy. Jazmin describes her mother as “so strung out, different men in the house, and once we didn’t have no electricity for six months.” Jazmin explains to Sam, her teacher and friend, that she

“made a choice to be a better mother to her child” and that is why she cannot go to a university three hours away after having her baby despite her aspirations. While Jazmin’s mother would be considered a “welfare queen,” Jazmin is not portrayed negatively, and certainly prioritizes her baby as a “good” mother should.

In *Away We Go*, when Burt and Verona are announcing the news to his parents, they are initially very supportive of the pregnancy, but Burt’s mother later asks Verona, “just how black do you think she’s going to be?” Similarly, Kate (*Baby Mama*) describes her failed IVF procedures and the difficulties single women face when trying to adopt when her mother requests, “Please don’t get a black baby.” Similarly, when Holly (*What to Expect When You’re Expecting*) and partner, Alex, are being interviewed by the adoption agent, she asks why they chose to adopt from Ethiopia. Alex responds in jest that, “all the white babies were gone.” Darker skin tones are most likely to be associated with negative stereotypes, and these comments show that Black characters are still more negatively viewed within the films.

Sexual Orientation

All the characters who met the qualifications for coding were heterosexual. While a few of the films mentioned same-sex couples who were starting a family (*Bridget Jones’ Baby*, *Baby Mama*, and *Juno*), gay and lesbian individuals were not represented as main characters. When teen Juno (*Juno*) finds herself in an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy, she decides to place her baby for adoption telling her friend, “I can have this baby and give it to someone who needs it like someone with a bum ovary or a couple of nice lesbos.”

Employment Status

Employment was a major theme in several of the films, and a significant source of identity for many of the characters. In pregnancy, many women fear being discriminated

against regardless of legality (Morgan, Walker, Hebl, & King, 2013). During their pregnancies, both Allison (*Knocked Up*) and Jenna (*Waitress*) conceal their pregnancies for fear of losing their positions. Though neither employer responds negatively, these scenes represent real fears that women face even in pregnancies that are planned.

Postponing pregnancy until a career is established is also a very real scenario for many women. Over time, the average age at first birth for women has risen to 26 in 2016, up from age 23 in 1994 (Geiger, Livingston, & Bialik, 2019). In the opening scene, Kate (*Baby Mama*) is speaking to a blind date. She says, “I did everything that I was supposed to do...Is it fair that to be the youngest VP of my company, I will be the oldest mom at preschool? Not really, but that’s part of the deal. I made a choice. Some women got pregnant. I got promotions.” Kate chose to pursue her career like many women today, and certainly writes it off as a sacrifice that she consciously made.

Finally, many women face the decision to remain at home or return to work once their baby is born. Sam (*Unexpected*) is a teacher but finds out that they are closing the school at the end of the year, and she will lose her job. Her unplanned pregnancy gets in the way of her dream job, which causes several emotional discussions with her husband about the decision to stay home when the baby arrives or return to work. When her husband finds out that she has applied for a job that starts in the same month that she is due, he is upset and tells her that staying home “could be a nice break.” She retorts, “You think that staying home and taking care of an infant is a break? Why don’t you quit your job and stay at home?” This scene highlights the belief that the role of mother is not a “real” job and that it is only appropriate for women to stay home when a baby is born. Sam later says, “I don’t want my whole identity to be someone’s mom...I wish it would be enough for me to just stay at home but it’s not and I just feel so guilty.” Even though motherhood is portrayed as being the ultimate goal of femininity, many women get as

much or more satisfaction from having a career (Hoffnung & Williams, 2013; Morgan, Merrell, Rentschler, & Chadderton, 2012). The guilt that is felt from returning to work often stems from societal beliefs that motherhood should be fulfilling, and that to be a “good” mother, women must stay home with their children (Taylor, 2011). This struggle becomes all too real when deciding whether to return to work after the transition to motherhood, and it becomes especially difficult when negotiating these choices with a partner.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION

As was expected, the majority of characters were married or in a coupled, heteronormative relationship by the end of the film. Qualitative analysis also showed that marriage prior to pregnancy was still an ideal frequently cited within the films, and several characters who conceived outside of marriage felt guilt or shame regarding the circumstances of their pregnancies when they did not meet social expectations. White women were more likely to marry, as neither of the Black characters married which aligns with current demographic data (Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). There also were no characters involved in same-sex relationships. Although 92% of LGBT Americans believe that society has become more accepting in the past decade (Pew Research Center, 2013), this acceptance has not necessarily transferred to film, especially when it comes to same-sex couples raising children. Further research examining same-sex couples with children should be conducted to examine in greater detail the stigmas that may be presented.

Characters who experienced fertility issues also faced struggles that were relatable to women today, especially in those who postponed motherhood until later in life. In some instances, characters desiring to become mothers, particularly those who chose to adopt, placed a greater priority on becoming mothers than on their marriages, which is why only those characters who had supportive partners were still married by the end of the film. In some ways, it appears that motherhood, as it relates to femininity, is almost more important than marriage to these women. As more women face infertility and pathways to motherhood expand, more research is needed to explore the ways that this experience is portrayed within media.

In the transition to parenthood, partner support appears to be the biggest indicator of a successful marriage within the films. Characters who were with unsupportive partners when they became pregnant or chose to adopt were all single by the end of the film. Partner support has been shown to influence pregnant women's health and eating habits, both healthy and unhealthy (Greenhill & Vollmer, 2019), and higher levels of relationship distress has been associated with higher levels of maternal depressive symptoms (Thomas, Caughy, Anderson, & Owen, 2019). Women of color are also more likely to face adverse maternal outcomes (Louis, Menard, & Gee, 2015), and partner support could potentially improve those outcomes. Couples who cohabitate, rather than marry, are at a higher risk of separating after the transition to parenthood because of the stresses that a new child creates, and cohabiting fathers are especially vulnerable to decreases in commitment towards the relationship (Kamp Dush, Rhoades, Sandberg-Thoma, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2014). Women also seek and require support outside of their partners during the transition to motherhood from family and friends, and a lack of support can have adverse effects on her mental health (Morgan, Merrell, Retschler, & Chadderton, 2012). Results from this study can be used to identify support needs that may be lacking in real-time relationships as women transition to motherhood.

CHAPTER VII:

LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations of this study. The sample size was small which led to a limited view of mothers as they are portrayed within film, especially within the context of pregnancy. Only women transitioning to parenthood for the first time were selected for this study. Future studies should examine motherhood as it is portrayed for women with older children as well, and not just those experiencing pregnancy. Also, this study only examined the formation of family when it was coupled with a pregnancy. Future studies should examine family formation as a broader topic that is not necessarily bound within the context of a pregnancy. Specifically, more studies should be done to examine how infertility and alternatives to becoming mothers are being portrayed in film.

CHAPTER VIII:

CONCLUSION

An exploration of motherhood and the creation of families within film illustrates the pervasive nature of societal norms and common stereotypes of motherhood that intersect with age, race, employment status, and relationship status. Data suggests that the ideal family is still one that includes heteronormative marriage prior to childbearing even though families are continuing to diversify in real-time. Data also supports the belief that motherhood is still inherently tied to femininity, even though women are seeking and struggling to find identities outside of motherhood which includes employment. Women's choices, age, and race are also still commonly used within film to determine who is a "good" mother, and who is labeled a "bad" mother. These stereotypes that create images of bad mothers can and often do lead to adverse effects on quality of life and health, particularly mental health. Research on stereotypes as they are presented in films should continue as they can be used to identify significant changes in social norms.

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APPENDIX A:
LIST OF FILMS THAT MET CRITERIA

1. What to Expect When You're Expecting (2012)
2. The Switch (2010)
3. Mother and Child (2009)
4. Juno (2007)
5. Knocked Up (2007)
6. Loosies (2012)
7. Unexpected (2015)
8. Waitress (2007)
9. Labor Pains (2009)
10. Preggoland (2014)
11. The Greatest (2009)
12. Baby on Board (2009)
13. Expecting (2013)
14. Friends with Kids (2011)
15. Away We Go (2009)
16. Bridget Jones' Baby (2016)
17. Misconceptions (2010)
18. Expecting Mary (2010)
19. Baby Mama (2008)
20. Gayby (2012)
21. L!fe Happens (2011)
22. Miss Conception (2008)
23. The Brothers Solomon (2007)

APPENDIX B:
FILM ANALYSIS WORKSHEET

Pregnant character 1:

Race/Ethn: Age: Orientation: Employed? Relationship Status:

Pregnant Character 2:

Race/Ethn: Age: Orientation: Employed? Relationship Status:

Pregnant Character 3:

Race/Ethn: Age: Orientation: Employed? Relationship Status:

Pregnant Character 4:

Race/Ethn: Age: Orientation: Employed? Relationship Status:

Common Stereotypes Related to Motherhood:

Category:

_____ Time: _____

Description:

Category:

_____ Time: _____

Description:

Category:

_____ Time: _____

Description:
