Who Deserves to Work?

How Women Develop Expectations of Childcare Support*

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Abstract

Studies demonstrate that kin-based childcare support enables mothers to stay in the workforce. This study extends our understanding of this positive relationship between kin-based childcare support and women’s work pathways by examining why and how women decide to seek such help. Using 100 in-depth interviews with married mothers in urban South Korea, I find that although childcare provided by grandmothers helps women maintain their employment, a woman will ask for support only when two conditions apply: she constructs strong career aspirations and generates agreement amongst her family members that she genuinely deserves support. Furthermore, women’s explanations of why they deserve support vary based on their educational backgrounds: less-educated women stress economic stability whereas better-educated women emphasize the symbolic meaning of sustaining their high public status. Most women, however, feel the need to “prove” to themselves and to certain others that they deserve childcare support. Based on these findings, I develop a theory of deservingness to explain how women account for their work and choose whether to seek childcare support.
INTRODUCTION

It is a worldwide phenomenon that motherhood hinders women’s paid work in terms of time and income (Abendroth et al. 2014; Cohen and Bianchi 1999). Yet the work-path changes caused by motherhood vary markedly within societies (England 2010; Goldin 2006). Explanations for such variation include work expectations developed prior to motherhood (Damaske 2011b; Davis and Greenstein 2009), workforce opportunities and constraints (Gerson 1985; Stone 2007), support from domestic partners (Hochschild 2012), and the availability of formal childcare (Bianchi and Milkie 2010; Haan and Wrohlich 2011) and informal childcare (Dimova and Wolff 2008; Leibowitz et al. 1992). Among different kinds of childcare, grandmothers’ help is one of the main forms of informal childcare and, particularly in most Asian countries, is seen as the most important resource enabling mothers to keep working (Fu 2008; Y.-S. Lee 2011; Oishi and Oshio 2006; Phua and Loh 2008) by decreasing the childcare burden (J. Lee and Bauer 2013; Leibowitz et al. 1992). The numerous studies that stress that childcare support allows women to keep working predominantly focus on the static relationship between childcare support and women’s employment status. However, the process by which mothers negotiate one of the key supports to employment, childcare, has been a black box.

Investigating the process by which some mothers decide to seek help while others do not and how these women receive childcare support is critical for two reasons. Theoretically, examining the process makes it possible for us to explain the relationship between how women account for their work and use available resources that help them to stay in the workforce. Childcare support is contingent not only on the availability of support but also on its accessibility and women’s motivation to mobilize support. Thus, understanding this process allows us to identify how women’s perceptions and their available resources collectively shape the process of
asking for childcare support. Second, childcare support has social implications for women’s work in the context of competitive labor market conditions where long working hours are the norm (J. Lee and Bauer 2013). In societies where daycare costs and operating hours simply do not align with pay and work hours, childcare support is expected to critically shape women’s engagement with paid work.

Despite the unequal gender division of childcare and rigid cultural norms surrounding maternal employment in almost all societies, prior work on the relationship between childcare support and women’s work says little about how gendered expectations about women's work and motherhood shape the process of women seeking (and receiving) help. There are both structural and cultural assumptions that suggest some people are more dependent than others on kin providing childcare. The structural approach mainly assumes that the inability to afford daycare increases the need for kin-based childcare, suggesting that requests for care from grandmothers will be greater when mothers’ financial resources are fewer. The cultural approach stresses how race and ethnicity shape cultural beliefs about who should raise kids; thus, women from particular racial/ethnic communities seek kin-based childcare support because they prefer it and expect to receive it. This study acknowledges that both factors matter, but goes beyond existing structural or cultural assumptions about who is more likely to seek kin-based support by combining the literatures on intergenerational childcare and women’s work. My purpose in this synthesis is to better understand how women account for their work after motherhood and about how women interact with families and communities as they make decisions about their work.

South Korea (hereafter Korea) is a compelling case for the study of the process of facilitating and receiving childcare support because childcare provided by grandmothers critically shapes women’s labor market participation there (J. Lee and Bauer 2010). Despite
having the highest female educational attainment in the world (exceeding that of men; OECD 2015) and in contrast to the low gender wage gap among childless men and childless women, Korea is a society where work-family conflict is amongst the sharpest for mothers (OECD 2014), due to intense workplace conditions including long working hours (OECD 2017) and to the persistence of distrust towards daycare or non-kinship childcare (Korea Women’s Development Institute 2015). Furthermore, mothers are under enormous cultural pressure to ensure their children’s educational success from early childhood (Park and Abelmann 2004). Reflecting this sharp work-family conflict, more than 40 percent of Korean women don’t work in the months surrounding the birth of their first child (Ma 2014). For mothers with young children who continuously stay in the workforce, childcare provided by grandmothers is the most important resource in helping them continue full-time work (J. Lee and Bauer 2013; Y.-S. Lee 2011).

This study uses 100 in-depth interviews with married mothers who have at least one preschooler and live in urban Korea but otherwise have diverse family backgrounds, occupational trajectories, and educational attainment. I find that regardless of their family background and educational attainment, a majority of women who sought childcare support received it, enabling them to have continuous work pathways in the competitive Korean labor market. However, an important part of this process involved constructing a legitimate reason to seek that help and obtaining agreement that they deserved to work as mothers. Only those who identified themselves as deserving to work as a mother and as having jobs that deserved childcare support ended up seeking that support. The logic of who deserves to work diverged: Less-educated mothers predominantly used narratives of the economic stability of the whole family. Better-educated mothers used the symbolic meaning of being employed and of maintaining the family’s “high-accomplishment” status. Nevertheless, a majority of mothers
shared the attitude that they needed to “prove” – first to themselves and then to others – that they deserved to receive childcare support before they would seek it. In the end, by exploring the process by which mothers found this proof, this study argues that the notion of deservingness matters and can explain why some mothers ask for child support and some don’t, even when they have similar resources and impressions of the desirability of care from grandmothers. Furthermore, I show that deservingness is not a single narrative, but is contingent on women’s class position.

**CHILDCARE SUPPORT AND WOMEN’S WORK**

In many societies, childcare provided by grandparents is an important resource for employed mothers. It is common in Asian countries (Chu, Xie, and Yu 2011; Y.-J. Lee et al. 1994), some European countries (Fergusson et al. 2008; Geurts et al. 2012; Jappens and Van Bavel 2012), and for some groups in the United States (Sarkisian and Gerstel 2004; Vandell et al. 2003). Because grandmothers are more involved in childcare than grandfathers across cultures (Dimova and Wolff, 2008; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler 2001), several studies have focused solely on grandmothers (Bowers and Myers 1999; J. Lee and Bauer 2013).

To explain the reasons behind the prevalence of grandmothers as care providers, studies predominantly emphasize structural constraints or cultural preferences. Some assume that structural factors, especially economic resources, shape people’s need and willingness to depend on grandmothers’ childcare. However, empirical studies have demonstrated mixed results on the relationship between socioeconomic position (measured by income or educational attainment) and amount or frequency of childcare support – and sometimes no significant relationship at all. Some studies find that when adult children have higher household income it increases both the
likelihoods of providing and receiving support (Y.-J. Lee and Aytac 1998; Silverstein and Waite 1993). Others find that higher economic standing decreases the likelihood of receiving support (Benin and Keith 1995) and that grandparents are more likely to provide childcare when the parent is single (Hank and Buber 2009). An array of studies also shows no significant influence from maternal education, single parenthood, or family income on receiving grandparent care (K. Kim et al. 2015; Leibowitz et al. 1992; Vandell et al., 2003), thus the empirical evidence on the relationship between mothers’ economic resources and the amount of grandparents’ support received for childcare is still tenuous.

Another often used assumption in explaining intergenerational childcare support is that of cultural heritage or shared preference (Chin et al. 2012; Dimova and Wolff 2008; Hill 1999; Johnson 2000). Cultural determinism is often asserted in comparisons of different societies (for example, China versus the United States) or different racial/ethnic groups within a society (for example, African Americans versus white Americans). Such approach, which can be used on either side of the strong familial ties versus weak familial ties debate, stresses the salient role of communal understanding in determining expectations and obligations regarding intergenerational childcare. Proponents of this cultural assumption take the view that race and ethnicity shape normative beliefs and attitudes toward relatives providing childcare. For instance, a strong assumption concerning Asian mothers is that they seek childcare support because it is an expectation in Asian cultures that grandparents will provide downward support (Ko and Hank 2013). In sum, despite accumulating studies on the patterns of grandparental childcare and the impact of childcare support on maternal employment, research on mothers’ motivation to ask for childcare help and the process of mobilizing support from grandparents are scant in the literature.
In studies that use Asia as their research setting, an identical gap exists. Numerous studies demonstrate the positive relationship between childcare support and maternal employment in Asian contexts (Fu 2008; Oishi and Oshio 2006; Phua and Loh 2008). However, the mothers’ own expectations of childcare support and motivation to seek it are under-explored. An exception is the study by Lee and Bauer (2013), which attempts to fill this gap. Lee and Bauer (2013) uses interviews with 21 matched pairs of caregiving grandmothers and employed mothers to show that mothers use childcare from grandmothers because they trust family care over other forms of childcare and because they benefit from childcare support. However, because this study is based on mothers who are already being helped by their mothers or mothers-in-law, it does not capture whether different cultural beliefs about childcare provided by grandmothers shape dependency on childcare support. Furthermore, this study does not solve the gap in the literature regarding the motivation behind women’s mobilization of childcare support because it omits the group that decides not to reach out for help as well as the group that asks for help but fails to receive support.

Overall, the process of seeking childcare support remains as a gap in the literature. Mainly, from the stance of mothers, the motivation to depend on kin-based childcare has been under-examined. It is important to fill this gap because in many post-industrial societies and for many occupations, childcare arrangement is one main factor that shapes the divergent work pathways of men and women after parenthood. In societies like Korea where the average working hours is long for fulltime employees, childcare support provided by family members is one of the main resources for women who decide to engage in paid work after motherhood. Thus, exploring the motivation for asking for childcare support and the process of receiving support inevitably tells us something about how women account for their work. How women
account for their work is salient especially for mothers within the context of work-family conflict and of traditional motherhood ideologies (Damaske 2011a). This study therefore compares mothers who have different beliefs, are under different conditions, and have different experiences of intergenerational support in order to contribute to the literature of women’s work by adding our knowledge of how women seek childcare support and account for their work.

RESEARCH SETTING: CONTEMPORARY KOREA

Korea is a postindustrial society whose family and work schemas (Blair-Loy 2009) sharply conflict with its intensive motherhood ideology (Hays 1998; Ochiai and Molony 2008) and competitive workplace norms (Brinton 2001). Despite having the highest level of educational attainment among OECD countries, Korea ranks lowest for gender equality, especially regarding the motherhood wage penalty (OECD 2012) and unequal division of labor at home. Of those in their 30s, men spend 58 minutes a day on housework and childcare while women spend 5 hours and 2 minutes a day (Statistics Korea 2015). Korean mothers are under immense and early pressure to ensure their children’s educational success (Abelmann and Park 2004; Seth 2002). Korea’s average weekly working hours are the highest among all OECD countries (OECD 2017) and overwork (working over 50 hours a week; Cha 2013) is common (Bae and Chung 1997).

In this context, we see two important patterns. First, Korean women show relatively low labor force participation when they are of childrearing age compared to Korean men of the same age and compared to women in other postindustrial societies. For instance, in 2014, 58 percent of Korean women in their 30s were working, compared to 92 percent of Korean men and 69 percent of US women in the same age range (OECD 2014). Second, of dual-earner households with
young children living in Korea, 43 percent receive some childcare support from grandparents (Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Family 2009) and about 53 percent of dual-earner households in the Seoul metropolitan area receive childcare support from grandmothers (Korea Women’s Development Institute 2015). Due to wide distrust of public daycare facilities and to the short hours of public and private daycare centers, which do not accommodate Korea’s long working hours (J. Lee and Bauer 2013), only about 35 percent of children age two or younger are enrolled in formal childcare or pre-school² (OECD Family Database 2016).

In sum, Korean mothers face a sharp conflict between (a) workplace and childrearing demands and (b) norms of overwork while the structural (short hours) and cultural (distrust) issues concerning formal childcare affect their willingness to keep working. Within this context, roughly half the employed women leave the workforce after motherhood and, among employed mothers, childcare provided by grandmothers is important in shaping their work pathways. Korean mothers with young children are therefore an ideal case with which to investigate the process of how women construct meaning in seeking childcare help while responding to work-family conflict.

METHODS

The data for this study are 100 in-depth, in-person interviews conducted over a period of 10 months in 2013 and 2015, when I lived in Seoul. To investigate mothers’ motivations for mobilizing childcare support, I restricted my sample to mothers who were married, lived in Seoul,³ had at least one child younger than six, had at least a high school degree, and had worked at least one year after completing their education. The rationale for not recruiting the sample based on employment status and amount of childcare support from grandmothers was to include
those who were and were not motivated to seek help and those who did and did not arrange for it. These rich data enable us to better understand the process of using intergenerational support.

Also, because the research goal was to investigate the general pattern of using childcare support, my standard for the number of interviewees was to recruit until I had sufficient sample diversity. I purposefully recruited mothers with different amounts of education: one-third of the sample had completed high school or some form of two-year college, one-third had a bachelor’s degree from a university other than the top three Korean universities or any American university, and one-third had a bachelor’s or advanced degree from one of the top three Korean universities or any US university. The reason for having a separate elite-educated group is that roughly 69 percent of the cohort I investigated had a tertiary qualification and because, as S. Lee and Brinton (1996) show, the prestige level of a particular degree and university explains the variation in labor market experiences among well-educated Koreans.

I used two sampling strategies. First, I recruited 50 mothers through a panel from Ovey, an online and smartphone-app–based survey company whose clients including merchandisers, broadcasting companies, and scholars conducting opinion surveys. Its pool of respondents included 350,000 people (0.1 percent of the Korean population). Of the approximately 10,000 respondents, I randomly selected 60 who matched the criteria for my study. Of these, 50 agreed to meet with me for an interview. Second, because respondents to online or app-based surveys might share unobservable characteristics (such as being active in responding to online surveys or apt to share their views), I recruited the other 50 interviewees through restricted snowball sampling of my personal ties, allowing no more than three referrals from each tie.

Interviews lasted from 50 minutes to two hours, with the majority taking about 90 minutes. All interviews were structured with roughly 40 open-ended questions starting with
questions about a typical day, continuing with work- and family-related questions (chronologically from high school graduation), and ending with anticipated work trajectory and plans for children. Work-related questions covered expectations, aspirations, trajectories, and experiences. Family-related topics included relationships with parents from adolescence and with parents-in-law after getting married. To understand perceptions, I asked their thoughts on marriage, childbearing, motherhood, and mothering and their definitions of happiness and success.

My analytic sample of 100 mothers was diverse, with different family backgrounds, occupational trajectories, and educational backgrounds. The less-educated third of my sample included 29 high school graduates and 5 with two-year vocational college degrees, the well-educated third included 28 with bachelor’s degrees from non-elite or non-US universities, and the elite-educated group included 38 with bachelor’s or graduate degrees from any of the top Korean universities or any US university. My sample is on average highly educated compared to the population, largely because I have one-third of the sample in the elite-educated group to study variation based on university and degree in the well-educated group. All had at least two years’ work experience and they had changed jobs on average twice. Women in the less-educated group typically worked as assistants or secretaries, in factories, or in the service sector. Well-educated women had diverse jobs, including flight attendant, teacher, music instructor, assistant at a law firm, and manager at a local bank or a small to mid-size company. Elite-educated women had jobs such as lawyer, consultant, start-up CEO, manager at a large company, or symphony orchestra musician. Among employed mothers, including part-time and self-employed, the mean monthly wage was US$3,600.
The educational attainment of the grandmothers was on average high school, ranging from elementary school to graduate school. This reflects the massive educational expansion between these two generations. Almost all the respondents had earned a higher degree than their mothers or mothers-in-law. Two-thirds of the grandmothers had been stay-at-home mothers, reflecting the cohort group of grandmothers who had very low labor force participation after marriage and motherhood (approximately 30 percent in the age range of 25-29 for the cohort born in 1955–1959; Statistics Korea 2014). Most of the rest had gone in and out of the workforce.

The respondents’ mean age was 35, ranging from 25 to 42. Roughly two-thirds had only one child. Eighteen lived with their parents or in-laws and 30 lived within a 10-minute drive. In three cases, the children lived with their grandparents and the respondents visited their parents’ house with their husbands on weekends. The rest lived more than an hour away from their parents. As expected from plentiful time-use survey data, husbands’ participation in childcare was reported to be low (on average, 30 minutes per day during weekdays). All husbands worked over 40 hours per week.

An initial finding is that mothers took two distinct work pathways. Half the sample had continuous work pathways, meaning that they had spent most of their lives in the paid workforce after finishing their schooling. While they may have taken a short maternity leave or taken time off between jobs, they had never been out of the workforce longer than three months. The other half had discontinuous work pathways. They had worked during young adulthood, but left or greatly reduced their paid work after having children. Most mothers following this pathway were not employed at the time of the interview. A few had returned to the workforce for part-time or irregular (contract-based) full-time jobs. As Table 1 shows, women with more years of education
were more likely to have continuous work pathways: 44 percent of less-educated, 50 percent of well-educated, and 58 percent of elite-educated had continuous work pathways.

Following multiple readings of the transcripts, my inductive analysis identified themes and narratives. Using Dedoose, a software for qualitative analysis, I used two stages of coding to determine how normative constructions were developed. First, I used open coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to organize the data into four primary themes of interest: rationale behind work decisions, current childcare arrangement, motivations to seek childcare support, and the process of negotiating and maintaining that support. When unexpected patterns emerged, I conducted a second round of coding with a focused coding strategy (Lofland and Lofland 2006, 202). Emergent themes for focused coding included the importance of educational accomplishments, the meaning of being employed being shared among family members (including grandparents), and the stage of thinking about deservingness that preceded seeking and negotiating childcare. The following sections explain two major findings.

**CHILDCARE SUPPORT AND WOMEN'S WORK PATHWAYS**

Women in the sample who had continuous work pathways emphasized that they were able to stay in the workforce after childbearing because they were supported by the child’s grandmother. To have a general idea of the number of people who were receiving childcare support and the hours of childcare support, Table 2 descriptively shows the amount on a daily basis. 43 out of 50 mothers with continuous work pathways were receiving at least one hour of childcare support a day from grandmothers. In contrast, fewer number of 15 out of 50 mothers with discontinuous pathways were receiving support and because they were not working or did not require support, those who were getting childcare support were receiving less. The bigger
difference is in intensity (measured by hours on a daily basis) of childcare support for women with divergent work pathways. Of women who were receiving childcare support, some were receiving 1 to 3 hours of help daily and some were receiving full support; that is, 4 to 12 hours daily. Women with continuous work pathways on average received 6.5 hours of childcare assistance from grandmothers per day; women with discontinuous work pathways received 0.9 hours a day.

- Table 2 here -

Women with continuous work pathways stressed that support from the grandmothers was specifically intended to allow them to keep working. Overwork being the norm and daycare hours being shorter than the average working hours, childcare support really mattered for mothers who aspired to stay in the workforce. As Ari (34, high school graduate) explained, “Owners of daycares in my neighborhood want mothers to drop their kids off around 10 and pick them up around 4 pm. It’s hard to find a job that fits the daycare hours, so if you are a working mom, you need someone to take care of your baby in the morning and afternoon.” Additionally, within this context of long working hours, the fact that fathers provided very few hours of childcare sharpened the work-childcare conflict for mothers. Haein (38, well-educated) explained how the overwork expected in her job meant she needed help from multiple people: “I usually work from 7 to 7 on weekdays, so I have to totally depend on multiple heroes. My mother, mother-in-law, and one ah-jum-ma [home care worker]. Without them, you cannot work, period.” However, within the multiple hero category, her husband was not included: he also had long working hours. Mirroring Haein’s situation, most of women in the sample had husbands who had longer working hours than their own.
Continuously employed mothers emphasized that childcare support helped them not merely practically but also emotionally. For many, the emotional cost of working as a mother of young children led to anxiety and guilt concerning formal daycare. As Jiyoo (35, elite-educated) explained, “All the news about nannies and teachers at the daycare hitting children really made me anxious, so I only considered my mother or mother-in-law for childcare.” Similarly, Juwon (32, elite-educated) explained, “I can only trust my mom. She was only available to help me out three days a week, so I decided to work as a part-time dentist depending on her schedule.” Additionally, the guilty feeling of working as a mother was lessened by the childcare support provided by grandmothers. As Sul (35, well-educated) explained, “My mother-in-law loves my children a lot and she encourages me every day so that I can work without feeling guilty.” Similarly, most employed mothers who were receiving childcare support expressed that emotional encouragement from grandmothers made them feel less guilty, which enabled them to stop thinking about quitting their jobs.

In sum, consistent with existing findings that childcare support positively influences maternal employment, mothers in this study who received childcare support from grandmothers were able to keep working. Furthermore, both instrumental and emotional support were interwoven to keep mothers in the workforce, as is consistent with prior research (J.Lee and Bauer 2013), grandmother support addressed both structural issues - daycare hours and long working hours - and cultural ones - distrust towards non-kinship childcare and unequal division of childcare between husbands and wives.

DESERVING OF CHILDCARE SUPPORT AND OF WORK?

THE PROCESS OF ASKING FOR HELP
Despite the fact that childcare support is extremely useful to women in staying in the workforce within the current setting of long working hours and unequal division of childcare labor between the husband and wife, only roughly half of the sample reached out for childcare help. The analysis on who, why, and how women asked for support reveals that before asking for help and throughout stages of receiving help, women went through an emotional, mental, and normative processes of finding a reason to mobilize childcare support. At the center of this process was how a mother and her family members, mainly the grandmothers who were providing the childcare support, evaluated the meaning of the mother’s occupation. The following subsections explain this process in detail by dividing the sample into groups of mothers who did not seek help and those who sought help.

**Failing to Find a Motivation to Ask for Support: Mothers Who did not Seek Help**

The 50 mothers who had discontinuous work pathways due to childbearing and childcare did not actively ask the grandmothers for childcare support. In this group, 20 mothers were less-educated, 14 were well-educated, and 16 were elite-educated. Overall, this group of women shared an understanding that a mother’s decision not to seek childcare support in order to work full-time was highly related to her expectations about her work pathway and to whether she considered her job worth keeping.

One of the main ways that these women assessed whether they deserved to work was highly related to each woman’s own career aspirations and to how successful she saw herself to be. Kyongha (32, elite-educated) illustrates this by saying, “I started working at this mid-size company that no one around me had heard of. At first, I was happy that I had a job. I started as an irregular worker, expecting that I would eventually become a regular employee.” To a follow-
up question about what happened to her position, she said, “The company postponed giving me regular employee status and when I got married, I thought hard about whether I should work at this place. I concluded that working at this not-so-famous company as an irregular employee was simply worthless.”

When mothers reflected on their rationales for staying or not staying in the workforce, they emphasized the jobs that were likely to be available based on their work histories. As Haru (34, high school graduate) described, “Before quitting, I was a secretary at three firms, all of them related to interior design. Although I worked at different firms, I was not accumulating skills or professional knowledge because I was conducting a simple task that anyone could do. My fourth job was likely to be a secretary at another firm and it was hard to want to keep doing the same thing.” Such thinking about whether they wanted to keep working as a mother spilled over into their reasons for defining who deserved to do so. Who deserved to work was highly related to whether a specific job was considered worth keeping.

Additionally, for some women, assessing whether they deserved to work was so tightly interwoven with the childcare issue that they viewed making decisions about work and arranging childcare as one package deal. Shinhye (36, well-educated) is a representative case because she explained her decision to quit her work in relation to childcare: “It is really hard to work as a mother in this country. For me, there was no reason to embrace every step you need to take, in order to continue to work as a mom. Mainly, I have to persuade my mother-in-law to provide childcare and I have to work until late at night at this company that isn’t even well known.” Frequently, the under-valuation of one’s own occupation spilled over to the issue of whether it was worthwhile to even ask for childcare support. For some, like Song (40, high school
graduate), the thought process proceeded in a different order: “I would ask, ‘Should I tell my mom that I need her help?’ then I asked myself whether I plan to keep working.”

For some, this process of assessing whether they deserved to work also involved interactions with multiple generations of their family. Grandmothers, of course, played a salient role because they were the ones providing the childcare. Jungyeon (32, elite-educated) recalled how it was initially hard to expect any support because even before her pregnancy, her mother had consistently told her that her job was too ordinary to keep after becoming a mother. Hyosun (37, high school graduate) echoes this process by describing how interactions with others shaped her perceptions of whether she deserved to keep working. She had been living in the same apartment building as her parents-in-law and explained why she did not consider seeking help from her mother-in-law:

   After I got married, I initiated a conversation with her about the possibility of keeping my job at the office. She was shocked that I wanted to continue working after getting married because I was working at the front desk at a small local dentist. She shook her head wildly and said that it is best to just focus on having children and raising them instead of doing such meaningless job.

Several women who were not sure about their work pathways had found out, either directly or else indirectly through their husbands, that their parents or parents-in-law saw no value in their maintaining their jobs after motherhood. The accumulation of such comments was sufficiently discouraging that they did not plan to stay in the workforce. Some were depressed to find out how their jobs were viewed. In these cases, women often identified themselves with the kinds of
jobs they had held and their specific work trajectories. Shinhye (36, well-educated) put it explicitly: “There are women who deserve to work whereas there are women who are not as deserving.” Although each woman’s notion of deservingness was based on her specific position or job, mothers tended to speak of “who deserves to work” in general.

In a few cases, respondents stressed desire rather than deservingness as their main motivation for continuous employment. Noeul (34, high school graduate), who quit working when she married, argued, “I was really tired of working for 10 years straight since high school. I worked as a secretary, a treasurer, and as a salesperson, all at small companies. When I was getting married, to be honest, I felt like marriage was an exit from my boring life. So, I just could not see myself working happily.” Most of these outlying stories came from less-educated women who did not consider asking for childcare support because they had no wish to keep a job they didn’t like anyway.

In sum, one of the main mechanisms for choosing a continuous work pathway was finding worth in one’s job despite one’s motherhood status, unequal labor market conditions, and unequal division of household labor. Mothers in the sample explained this process with the language of who deserves to work. Those who could not find such normative meaning decided not to seek childcare support and to ramp down or cease their careers.

**Economic and Symbolic Logic of Why I Deserve to Work: Mothers Who Sought Help**

Half of the sample had continuous work pathways and of those 50 mothers tried to persuade their mothers or in-laws to help with childcare. Not all, but most of them - 45 mothers – received some childcare support. Similar to the group of mothers who did not attempt to ask for help, most mothers who ended up asking for childcare support spent significant time reflecting
on their career aspirations and talking with the grandmothers about working full-time as a mother. This too happened well before seeking help for these women. Yoonji (30, elite-educated) exemplifies this process. At the time of the interview, she was on a nine-month childcare leave after a three-month maternal leave.

Recently, I have been thinking about how to arrange things when I return to work. I questioned about my job a lot: Is it worth keeping? Is my job that important to me and to my family? Am I being greedy wanting to work? I would need to find a nanny and a daycare and ask my mother-in-law for help. But before all that, I kept questioning about my job.

Although the women in my sample provided a complex narrative of childcare availability, time and energy, job satisfaction, and identity in explaining their decisions to work and to depend on grandmothers’ childcare, beliefs about who deserves to work and to have childcare support were critical in motivating them to ask for that support. Sodam (30, well-educated), who had recently returned to work, explained that taking care of a young child required repetitive, physically and emotionally demanding labor and that she never took for granted that her mother would provide such intense labor:

Taking care of an infant is hard. When I had just had my baby, my mother came to my house to help me out, but she would have a wrist ache after holding my daughter all day. So when I was about to return to work, I had to think hard about what to do about my job and about childcare. I felt like I was being selfish by
depending on my aging mother, but I ended up reaching out to her and asked her to stay with us during the weekdays.

This process of envisioning childcare support involved women’s own thoughts about their school and work achievements as well as the meaning of maintaining work as a mother.

Notably, in contrast to beliefs that economic incentives might dominate how women depend on grandmothers’ childcare, the mothers in my sample rarely used money as the main or sole reason behind why they sought childcare help in order to work. Most of the women who had continuous work pathways felt that it would be useful to the family if they contributed to household income, but they avoided using money as the rationale for their employment decisions. Reasons for not claiming economic incentives were different based on the educational attainment level. For the less-educated group, their income was perceived as a minor contribution to the household income, given childcare costs and the taxes on dual-earners. As Bobae (40, high school graduate) stressed, “Our family was not starving and my earning some money would not make a big difference to the quality of our family’s lives.” Echoing Bobae, Purum (38, high school graduate) described that she would be sacrificing the opportunity to spend enough time with her daughter and that it simply “does not make sense to spend money to hire a nanny and give up having quality time with the child on a daily basis in order to earn 2K a month.” On the other hand, well- and elite-educated women had jobs with higher wages, but their husbands’ incomes were considered sufficient for the family. As Jooyoung (35, elite-educated), who earned around $7,000 a month, explained: “As an employed mother, I still have to go through endless arrangements for childcare and household. And at work, I have to pretend to be childless because I don’t want to cause any trouble to the firm and to my colleagues who
are working their guts out.” She continued with a statement that was echoed by several others: “There are so many reasons to quit unless you have a really good reason why you should continue to work.”

Importantly, this section takes one more step further from the existing studies that stress how mothers commonly experienced pressure to stay home with their children and focus on educating them. Findings demonstrate that asking for childcare support demanded women to have a strong motivation and rationale behind why they should work. Mothers felt that they had to have good, legitimate reasons to expect childcare support and this was a critical step that preceded seeking help. Because extended family members and the labor of grandmothers were involved in this process of mobilizing childcare support, mothers constructed high standard in evaluating their own work and constantly asked themselves whether they deserve to work. The following sections further develop this finding by grouping mothers who sought help by their educational attainment level – mothers with and without college degrees – and additionally by dividing each group based on divergent ways of receiving childcare support – smooth versus difficult negotiations with the grandmothers.

*Symbolic Logic of Deserving to Work: College-educated Mothers*

Among the 100 mothers whom I interviewed, 50 sought childcare support. Of these, 36 had a college education. As addressed above, these women explained how they ended up negotiating for childcare support because they understood that they were contributing to the whole family, including extended family members, by staying in the workforce. In particular, for the college-educated group, status – which university the woman had graduated from, the name of the company, and specific job she had – was important in defining her contribution. Because
this group saw status and the symbolic meaning of maintaining status in the public sphere was important in defining who deserves to work, this group of elite-educated women experienced a rather smooth process of childcare negotiations; in contrast, well-educated mothers (those with degrees from non-elite institutions) had to actively persuade in order to receive childcare.

Smooth Mobilization and Status Seeking. Elite-educated mothers who mobilized childcare support reported that their continuous employment path was chosen to ensure the happiness of the whole family, including their own family of origin. Women who had achieved high status – graduating from prestigious universities or who were doctors or lawyers – more frequently expected that their parents would resent them staying home. When I asked Dahee (27, elite-educated) about the process of leaving and reentering the workforce and her ideas about childcare arrangements, she frequently ended her statements by talking about what her parents would think or feel about her employment status: “One of my main motivators to be a mother who works and to ask my mother for [childcare] help was my parents’ expectations about my accomplishments.” When asked who would be most disappointed if she stayed home, Dahee said, “My dad will be so disappointed, almost furious. I was part of his dignity, his pride. Now he is retiring, all he talks about with his friends is where my husband and I work.” These elite-educated women were those who had excelled in school, defeated boys in competitions, attended prestigious universities, and worked at well-regarded firms. They took their parents’ and parents-in-law’s high expectations as a sign of love and support and thus tried to predict how their parents would think about their work decisions. Saerom, an elite-educated mother with one child, said:
My parents, who run a restaurant, will be extremely upset and disappointed if I quit. Both my parents and my husband’s parents are happy with me working. It is not just [my parents]. My mother-in-law has always been so proud of me as well. I once thought about staying home when I was pregnant, but when I told my mother-in-law that I might quit, she was just shocked and thought in the long term I would regret all the opportunities that I had given up.

Such frequent conversations with parents about whose work and whose educational background made it “worthwhile” to stay in the labor market provoked respondents to reassess their own success and to strive to maintain their status.

For a few, a relatively smooth process of receiving childcare support was made possible by their own mothers and not their mothers-in-law. Hyojo (37, elite-educated) recalled: “My mother-in-law told me from the moment I got pregnant to stay home and focus on educating my children. My mom, on the other hand, strongly encouraged me to maintain my job. She explicitly said that she would be sad and resentful if I just stayed home and did housework after all those years of accomplishments from hard work.” Hyojo ended up depending on her mother for childcare and has been continuously working as an analyst in the banking industry. This exemplifies how arranging childcare sometimes involved different sets of family values. Such preparation, as scholars have found (Bass 2015; Damaske 2011a), involves gendered expectations about who should adjust their working conditions in favor of family demands. For women in my sample, this preparation was a function of interpreting which mothers deserve to work which for some, involved conversations with the grandmothers. Notably, in this case, the question of who deserves to work went beyond a moral interpretation of who should work as a
mother and was based on a judgment about which jobs are worth keeping even beyond motherhood. For the elite-educated women who went through a smooth process of asking for and receiving childcare support, the prestige attached to specific jobs that they had was important because the meaning of staying in the workforce and the deservingness for childcare support were centered on the symbolic meaning of maintaining the status in the public sphere.

*Contested Embrace and Active Persuasion Work.* For women with a four-year university degree from a non-elite institution, drawing a communal agreement that they deserve to work and receive childcare was relatively more challenging. Analysis on the process of persuasion that these mothers had to go through shows that the contested agreement was mainly because the subjective definition of success and high status, more readily ascribed to elite-educated mothers, influenced ideas about who deserved to receive support. Many mothers with a bachelor’s degree from a non-elite institution felt that they were stuck between their family’s status seeking behaviors and a traditional gender ideology that expects mothers to use their skills at home to educate their own children. As a result, amongst the mothers with a bachelor’s degree, those who found themselves more deserving than other women were more likely to seek help. Yunseo (33, well-educated), a daycare teacher, described how this process could involve interpreting how one’s relatives perceived the status of one’s work: “You have to consistently tell your parents that you achieved something because adults like big names or brands. I work at the daycare center owned by a very famous corporation and my mother-in-law often brags to her friends about where I work. People are really sensitive to names.”

Some mothers had to make comparisons with siblings or with other women to “prove” that keeping their jobs was worthwhile. Soi (37, well-educated) also addressed the dynamic nature of persuading her mother-in-law to provide childcare:
Since my parents are still working, I had to ask my mother-in-law for childcare help. She hesitated because she had already told my sister-in-law that she could not provide childcare support. I carefully explained how hard I worked to obtain my current position and she acknowledged that I do work in a much bigger and more famous company compared to my sister-in-law, who was a secretary at a small firm. I felt bad for bringing my sister-in-law into the picture in order to persuade my mother-in-law that my job was more… well, more worthwhile… to keep, and therefore I needed her help. I persuaded her and she agreed to help out.

Most mothers who ended up seeking help mirrored what Soi explained: That the initial step of thinking about who deserves to seek help and to work as a mother was critical and that the availability of childcare support is determined not strictly by how many hours the grandmothers have available but by whether there is agreement that it makes sense for one to work as a mother. Throughout the process, mothers had to challenge traditional gender ideology, negative evaluations of maternal employment, and the perception that their income wasn’t really essential to the household. In such context, the mothers who interpreted that their employment had the symbolic meaning of maintaining their family status in the public sphere and that this gave the whole family – often including extended family members - something to be proud of.


Among the 50 mothers who sought childcare help, 14 were high school graduates or had received two-year vocational training after high school. In contrast to the group with a college degree, mothers in this group mainly cited the importance of economic stability as the reason
why…add explanation here. As mentioned earlier, mothers in my sample rarely used the language of economic need when explaining why they decided to keep working and to seek childcare support. Instead, they explained their role in stabilizing the family’s economic resources, which they distinguished from monetary need. Dabin (41, high school graduate) explains this distinction:

I have worked at this bank for more than twenty years and now I am at the managerial level. I started as a clerk, so my wage has been increasing little by little. However, compared to my friends from high school, my job is more stable and at least in this company, the more years I work, the higher my position gets. I am not earning a lot, but my company and my job is a good place. So when I was asking my parents-in-law to move in [to our house] and help with childcare, I explained how it is not the money that I am earning now but the fact that I could also be the financial pillar of the household in the long term.

Noeul (34, high school graduate), who was quoted in the prior section as one of the mothers who did not seek childcare help and quit working when she got married, also describes the importance having job stability from a different perspective. Explaining how she had to look for jobs every two years to raise her wage a little or because the company she worked for closed, she expressed, “There are just very few jobs that you can have for the long term. You work so hard but you will have to look for a different job because you were fired, you were replaced by a younger woman, or the company goes bankrupt.” Bomin (34, two-year college) is a relevant, yet unique case. She had a turning point because she experienced very precarious working conditions during her early
career stage and then got a job as a secretary at a child development research center. Bomin is one of the women who sought childcare help in order to maintain her job. She further clarifies the distinction between stable versus non-stable jobs using her own case:

I was very unlucky because all three of the companies that I worked for as a secretary went bankrupt. I was poor because I did not receive any wage for the last few months. Then, I started working at the current research center, doing similar work. Because this is a child development center and since the budget is pretty stable here, I always get my monthly wage on time and there is very little fear of getting fired. This place, for me, is unusually stable and good, so I think I must try my best to keep working here.

Smooth Operators. Similar to the mothers with a college degree, less-educated mothers who sought help also were composed of those who experienced a relatively smooth process of receiving childcare support and those who had to proactively persuade others to receive help. Hasun (37, high school graduate), shows that the process of determining the value of having a paid job can be influenced by other family members. Before becoming a mother, she had worked in a number of department stores. When she was pregnant, she quit her job and was planning to take a long break with vague plans to eventually return to the labor market. Her mother-in-law persuaded her to find her own job instead of staying home: “My mother-in-law said that regardless of how much one earns, the act of engaging in paid work is good because it gives more power to the whole family in the long run.” Hasun opened a nail salon and her mother-in-law in turn provided childcare support. Many other less-educated mothers who ended up seeking
childcare support echoed Dabin and Hasun in stressing their contribution to the economic stability of the household “in the long term.” They agreed that they would not immediately have monetary problems, but shared the notion that a long-term job was worth keeping even as a mother because it would benefit everyone in the future.

Proactive Negotiators. Some of the less-educated mothers had to persuade others before getting childcare support. One insurance saleswoman, Sanga (36, high school graduate), had had three irregular, contract-based jobs. These offered no leave, so she sought a new job after having her first child. When she found an insurance sales job, she sought childcare help. Initially, her parents were against her working because they were embarrassed that she was going to work as a saleswoman. She explained the process of persuading them to help her out: “My parents’ generation has a bad impression about this kind of job. So my mom really disliked my job at first and for some time she refused to talk to me, because she was embarrassed. When I asked her to take care of my child while I was at work, I had to promise her that if I was not doing well and if it was giving other family members a hard time, I would quit right away.” After one year, Sanga received an award as the best salesperson of the year. She explained how her mother subsequently became the biggest supporter of her work: “I worked really hard and every day, when I come home to pick up my kid, I would brag to my mom about my performance and how I am able to help my household to be stronger financially. Slowly, she got interested in hearing how many insurance items I sold. Now she is actually a VIP client who introduces me to other people.”

In sum, for most of the women in my sample who ended up using childcare support from grandmothers, it was necessary to “persuade” or “prove to” them why the mother had to work and why she deserved childcare support from her aging mother or mother-in-law. Forty-five of
the 50 who sought childcare support got it, though they used different logics to define their deservingness based on their educational attainment level and on the specific job. For well- and elite-educated mothers, status seeking attitudes and the value of professional success defined who deserves support; that is, the grandmothers would help only if the mother’s job was of sufficiently high status. For less-educated mothers, deservingness was premised on the economic stability that their jobs guaranteed. All, however, identified obtaining childcare support as a part of striving for the family’s well-being, a finding similar to Damaske’s (2011a) finding that mothers accounted for their work decisions within the framework of what is best for the family. My sample particularly shows that when grandmothers help a mother keep working, we have to include them in that “family” that benefits. More importantly, how women account for their work, however, evolved around the prestige or stability that a specific job guarantees and the notion of deservingness was the key in making work decisions and in motivating them to seek help.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study shows how kin-based childcare support is important in helping women stay in the workforce. Specifically, childcare provided by grandmothers enables women to maintain continuous work pathways in a context in which overwork is normal and non-kinship childcare lacks ideological and systemic support (that is, it is neither widely trusted nor widely available). However, despite the benefit of childcare support for employed mothers, facilitating it is influenced by persistent negative views of maternal employment and gendered expectations of who should work as a parent. Women with different educational backgrounds used different logics to define whether they deserved to receive childcare support, but a majority of the sample
had to prove that they deserved to work and used the language of “for the whole family” to do it. Persuading family members, mainly grandmothers, that women deserve to work was highly gendered because the women had to fight against gender-essentialist ideas about maternal employment and motherhood. In sum, the notion of deservingness dominates how they construct their work expectations as well as their motivation to seek and arrange for intergenerational childcare support.

My findings contribute to the literature on women’s work by introducing the idea of deservingness. The pressure to pre-arrange childcare and to think about who deserves to work falls predominantly on the women. When the women in this study prepared for parenthood, they went through an intense process of constructing meaning and identifying legitimate reasons to keep working, as other scholars have also found (Bass 2015; Damaske 2011a). This preparation stage involved identifying who deserves to receive childcare support, an internal process that begins long before the external process of seeking it. Women who thought they deserved to work – which was defined by whether their jobs were worth keeping – started persuading grandmothers to provide childcare support. Such normative process of defining the worth of a job was contingent on how the woman defined her contribution to the whole family including grandmothers.

The theory of deservingness expands our knowledge of how mothers with young children assess the value of maintaining their jobs. Existing frameworks focus on the compatibility of demands from work and family (Blair-Loy 2003; Stone 2007) and on aspirations for paid work, which are highly related to multiple factors including family background, gender ideology, and the opportunities and constraints that women face (Correll 2004; Damaske 2011b). The concept of deservingness adds to this work by pinpointing how a woman evaluates the worthiness of her
own job and her status in the public sphere. It is not simply a matter of who deserves to work, but of whether one’s own job is worth keeping. As my findings show, making this decision is a subjective process because individuals make reference to different groups of people, but status seeking behaviors were commonly observed in those who found a reason to pursue continuous work pathways.

Another contribution, particularly to the class-based literature on how women with different social positions and family backgrounds account for their work after motherhood, is that the narrative is not monolithic across groups. The notion of deservingness in this study is contingent on specific constraints that women face in the workforce and relationships with multiple family members whom women interact to receive physical and normative support for workforce participation. Mothers in this study did not use either economic need or cultural preference rhetoric to justify their aspirations to keep working; this provides empirical support the ongoing demand from feminist scholarship to go beyond the “need” and “choice” rhetoric in explaining how women with different socioeconomic backgrounds account for their work (Damaske 2011a; Williams 2001). Most of the women in my sample resembled those in other countries, including the US, where women account for their work paths as something undertaken for the family (Damaske 2011a) and where cultural contradictions about mothers working leave them feeling that their choices are under attack and have to be justified (Luker 1984). However, an important new finding is that although my respondents shared the pressure to explain why their jobs deserved to be maintained after motherhood, the less-educated claimed the long-term economic stability of their jobs as their main motivation, while for the better-educated, the motivation was higher status in the public sphere. The values and logics that structured their definition of deservingness varied with their social position. My findings imply that for less-
educated women, more opportunities to accumulate professional skills and to have a stable job enabled them to define their jobs as worth keeping, whereas for better-educated women, more opportunities to move up in the workforce enabled them to define their jobs as worth keeping.

One limitation of this study is that the sample is composed of mothers in heterosexual marriages; the findings may not generalize to single mothers or mothers in same-sex partnerships. While these are minorities in Korea, it is important to investigate them, as they are a growing population in all post-industrial societies. Analysis suggests that the process of facilitating help is much more complicated than we might have assumed. This might also hold for single mothers depending on their normative constructions of maternal employment and relationships with the grandparents of their children. Future studies should investigate how groups other than heterosexuals deal with childcare support and work decisions. Additionally, although my findings imply that families of origin play an important role in how women normatively construct work expectations, my sample does not include the grandmothers themselves. A similar study could be conducted with a sample of grandmothers in order to understand how the notion of deservingness does or does not apply in offering childcare support.

Finally, while the literature focuses on how family background influences women’s career aspirations and expectations until young adulthood, future studies should consider the whole life course – especially when grandmothers’ childcare support is salient – and elucidate the roles of the family of origin and of in-laws in how women facilitate childcare support and develop their work expectations beyond young adulthood.
### TABLES

Table 1. Percentage of Mothers with Continuous Work Pathways by Educational Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Less-educated</th>
<th>Well-educated</th>
<th>Elite-educated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of interviewees (N)</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage with continuous work pathways (%)</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Amount of Childcare Provided by Grandmothers by Work Pathway

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Continuous (N=50)</th>
<th>Discontinuous (N=50)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean of daily childcare hours by grandmothers</td>
<td>6.5 hr</td>
<td>0.9 hr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not receiving any support for childcare</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 hrs. of childcare support daily</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4+ hrs. of childcare support daily</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


---------. 2017. *Average Annual Hours Actually Worked per Worker*. 


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ENDNOTES

1 Throughout this study, the term grandmothers is used to indicate mothers of the female interviewees or grandmothers of the children of the interviewees.

2 Government-funded daycare for children under three costs 300 USD per month, which can cover local daycare centers.

3 The capital city, with approximately 27 percent of Korea’s population.

4 My rationale for using education level instead of income to explore social status is because a high proportion of women are not employed after motherhood (Ma 2014).

5 The average ages at marriage and first childbearing were 29 and 31, respectively. These are similar to 2015’s averages for the whole population (28.9 and 31.8).