A Quest for the Ideal:

Women, Work, and Family in *Desperate Housewives* and *The Stepford Wives*
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Abstract

There is no consensus about how women should engage with the issue of work. Conservatives, feminists, and postfeminists have endorsed very different views on the matter. These different views have also been reflected in film and television. This study is an examination of two contemporary texts, namely Desperate Housewives (2004 – present) and The Stepford Wives (2004). These texts feature women living in upper middle-class suburbs who have to deal with romantic relationships, family responsibilities, and employment. In this dissertation three paradigms for how women engage with working outside the home are studied. These are the career-oriented woman, the stay-at-home-mom, and the woman trying to combine having a family life with working outside the home. The dissertation analyzes the depiction of these different paradigms to determine the texts’ views on these different ways women can engage with work and family, and to see if any of them are presented as the ideal option for women. This dissertation also discusses how the depictions of the models are informed by conservatism, feminism, and postfeminism. It is argued that Desperate Housewives shows that difficulties come with all the models, and indicates that none of them are ideal, whereas The Stepford Wives appears to endorse the combination of family and career.
1. Introduction

The debate on what a woman’s sphere is appears to be a difficult one to settle. The past century has seen the endorsement of many different views on the matter, together with an increase in the amount of choices available to American women. Whereas feminists fought for getting women out of the house, conservatives have continued to favor a traditional role for women over the past decades: that of submissive housewife and mother. The views of postfeminists on this subject are less clear: some scholars argue that they support staying at home as well as having a career, but others believe they primarily endorse motherhood as the right choice for women.¹

During the first half of the twentieth century the number of women working outside the home rose gradually. World War II, however, “marked a pivotal point in [the] women’s labor force” (Moen 11). Whereas before the war only the poor and unmarried worked outside the home, during it middle-class housewives started to find employment outside the home as well. After the war the number of women working kept increasing, but woman’s sphere was again defined as the home. Barbara Ryan claims that in the 1950s “cultural ideology defined the wife/mother role as both women’s special duty and path to fulfillment” (41-42). Defining woman’s role as such “meant that work outside the home was done only with much maternal guilt, spousal shame, and ‘child deprivation’” (Ryan 42).

In 1963, Betty Friedan criticized this view on women’s role and sphere in her book *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan “argued that women were trapped in a system which defined ‘proper’ femininity as little more than domestic fulfillment” (“Feminine Mystique”). *The Feminine Mystique* greatly affected women. According to Sue Thornham, it “has been seen as heralding feminism’s second wave” (35). The second feminist wave argued in favor of actions that would give women other options than staying home doing housework and raising children. The feminist movement fought, amongst other things, for daycare and “new options for women in employment” like “greater access to traditionally male occupations” (Baxandall and Gordon 428). People’s views on the issue of women and work changed in this period. Phyllis Moen argues that

¹ According to Lancioni, a number of critics believe that “post-feminists accept both the stay-at-home mom and the career woman paradigms” (136). However, Douglas and Michaels argue that postfeminism only endorses motherhood (25).
the 1970s decade was marked by a notable transformation of public attitudes toward women’s roles. The majority of American men and women came to accept and even endorse the labor participation of married women, and the traditional housewife role became even more devalued, despite the fact that by 1980 half of all married women still functioned as full-time homemakers. (22)

The new opportunities and roles for women brought about by the feminist movement were not warmly welcomed by all Americans. Conservatism was on the rise in the 1970s and, “[b]y the 1980 presidential election, [it] had taken root” (Berry 6). Within the Republican party, the New Right came to exert an important influence in that period. For the New Right the family was “the sacred unit of society” (qtd. in Berkeley 87). In the opinion of these religious conservatives, men ought to be fathers, husbands, and the breadwinners of the family, whereas women’s appropriate role was that of wife, mother, and helpmeet. These roles were seen as “divinely ordained and hierarchical with men having natural authority over women” (qtd. in Berkeley 88). According to Berkeley, the New Right saw “the feminist agenda” – which included, amongst other items, the Equal Rights Amendment and child care – as going against God’s laws (88).

Conservative attitudes toward women and work dominated the 1980s. This decade “might best be called and era of backlash – a backlash against earlier political, social, sexual, and cultural movements that challenged traditional roles and ideas,” Steven J. Ross writes (313). This is what is argued by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Susan Faludi, whose Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women has become an often cited text on society’s views on women and work. In her 1991 book she “examines how the media, politicians, and experts undercut the struggle for women’s rights in the 1980s and made employed women feel guilty about their achievements, which supposedly neglected children and family” (Berry 29).

Postfeminism is also very relevant to the discussion of women and work. “[M]ost critics date the inception of postfeminism from about the mid-1980s onwards,” Gamble finds (45). Postfeminism claims that “the aims of feminism have been largely achieved, and that women can now accomplish whatever they want to, provided they are prepared to make sufficient effort” (qtd. in Richardson 87). Postfeminism’s position on women and work is different from that of feminism:
a postfeminist identity, … while informed by second-wave feminism, rejects the feminist identities associated with it, instead celebrating and understanding conventional modes of femininity as not necessarily in conflict with female power. (qtd. in Richardson 87)

More specifically, postfeminism does not reject the role pattern of the stay-at-home mom and male breadwinner. Lancioni writes that

post-feminism repudiates feminism’s rejection of traditional roles. While acknowledging the oppressiveness of patriarchy, post-feminists accept both the stay-at-home mom and the career woman paradigms, acknowledging that women can be traditional [and] radical […] at the same time. (136)

However, Douglas and Michaels, authors of The Mommy Myth, argue that according to postfeminism women should be mothers:

Postfeminism means that you can now work outside the home even in jobs previously restricted to men, go to graduate school, pump iron, pump your own gas, as long as you remain fashion conscious, slim, nurturing, deferential to men, and become a doting selfless mother. (25)

They believe that something they call “the new momism” is the “central, justifying ideology” of postfeminism (Douglas and Michaels 24). The new momism is defined by them as

the insistence that no woman is truly complete or fulfilled unless she has kids, that women remain the best primary caretakers of children, and that to be a remotely decent mother, a woman has to devote her entire physical, psychological, emotional, and intellectual being, 24/7, to her children. The new momism is a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet. (Douglas and Michaels 4)

Because of extensive media attention for motherhood in the last three decades this new momism “has become unavoidable,” Douglas and Michaels claim (6-7).
Proponents of the traditional family continue to argue in favor of their view of the proper roles for men and women. The Christian Right “seeks to reverse the progress of feminism – to re-establish traditional gender roles and restore the patriarchal family as the hegemonic family form in America,” Claire Snyder claims (19). In addition, the neoconservatives of the George W. Bush era are also proponents of the patriarchal family. Snyder writes that “[w]hile often associated with the Bush administration’s foreign policy, neoconservatism has long included the defense of the patriarchal family in its political agenda” (27). For neoconservatives it is so valuable “because they see it as the ‘seedbed of virtue’ that undergirds democratic self-government” (Snyder 28).

Clearly, women and work has proven to be a debatable and even controversial issue, which has remained relevant up to the present day. Unsurprisingly, different views on the issue of women and work have also been reflected in television programs and films, for films can “address,” what Ross calls, “the critical problems of the age” (xiv). Television does not exist in a vacuum either. “[C]ontemporary television necessarily reflects contemporary realities,” Rosalind Coward writes (32). Film and TV have provided the American public with various views on women’s roles. Feminist, conservative, and postfeminist ideologies are reflected in these media representations of women.

In the 1940s, films depicted working women in multiple ways. According to Faludi, “[d]uring World War II, in a brief burst of enthusiasm for strong and working women, a handful of Rosie-the-Riveter characters […] flexed muscles and talked a blue streak, and many female heroines were now professionals, politicians, even executives” (114). On the other hand, there were 1940s films that showed single career women going to a psychiatrist. Getting married, instead of working, was presented as the answer to these women’s problems (Faludi 115). In the 1950s, “strong women” disappeared from the screen altogether and were replaced by “good girls” (Faludi 115). The women in 1950s films were preoccupied with “catching-the-man” (Weibel 122). In 1960s films, marriage and family life were seldom depicted in a positive manner, and women left their husbands to start a new life (Weibel 127).

In 1950s and 1960s television shows, women were mainly depicted as happy housewives. In shows like The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (1952-66), Father Knows Best (1954-63), Leave it to Beaver (1957-63), The Donna Reed Show (1958-66), and The Dick van Dyke Show (1961-66) women were housewives that liked their role. However, Dow acknowledges, shows like I Love Lucy (1951-61), The Honeymooners (1955-56), and Bewitched (1964-72) featured “rebellious housewives” who showed “resistance to traditional domesticity” (Prime-Time xvi-xvii). Not all shows portrayed women as housewives, though;
some focused on single women. In 1950s series, these women’s professional capacities were not by definition denied, but the shows focused on them finding a husband. Shows about single women that started in the late sixties “introduced slightly more progressive potential,” Dow argues (*Prime-Time* xvii).

During the 1970s, housewives on the screen expressed doubts about their role. For example, according to Dow, the main character from the 1975 version of *The Stepford Wives* “could have leapt from the pages of *The Feminine Mystique* […] as a woman who wonders ‘is this all there is?’” (“Traffic” 117). “[S]he simply wants *more* than her role seems to allow,” notes Dow (117). Faludi observes that “suburban housewives driven batty by subordination, repression, drudgery, and neglect,” are the ones that “go mad” in the films of this decade (124). Films not only showed women’s doubts about their roles as housewives, but also showed them looking for a more fulfilling life, thereby reflecting what was happening in American society (Faludi 123). For example, a number of films in the 1970s dealt with “housewives leav[ing] the home, temporarily or permanently, to find their own voice” (Faludi 123).

On TV, unmarried career women were portrayed in a positive way during this decade. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) provided a new view on women and work. This show, Dow argues, “is generally acknowledged as the first [sit-com] to assert that work was not just a prelude to marriage, or a substitute for it, but could form the center of a satisfying life for a woman in the way that it presumably did for men” (*Prime-Time* 24). Being single was not presented as a problem either, Faludi claims. Even though the series’ main character was in her thirties, “marriage panic did not afflict her” (Faludi 156). However, even though the show had a progressive view on women and work, the series’ main character still fulfilled ‘traditional’ roles for women by “function[ing] in the recognizable roles of idealized mother, wife, and daughter” “[w]ithin her family of co-workers” (Dow, *Prime-Time* 40).

In the following decade, this positive depiction of career women was replaced by a negative portrayal of these women and of having a career. In contrast to the women in films from the 1970s, the women in many ‘80s films did not want a career. Faludi argues that it is as if Hollywood has taken the feminist films and run the reels backward. The women now flee the office and hammer at the homestead door. Their new quest is to return to traditional marriage, not challenge its construction; they want to escape the workplace, not remake it. (126)
These films “simply propose that women had a better deal when they stayed home,” she concludes (Faludi 126). The career women themselves are not presented positively either. As Faludi points out, “[t]he career women of the late-’80s cinema are an unappealing lot. They rarely smile and their eyes are red-rimmed from overwork and exhaustion” (127). She argues that in the mid-‘80s, the television backlash “reconstructed a ‘traditional’ female hierarchy,” in which suburban homemakers ranked higher than career women (Faludi 148). In the film Fatal Attraction (1987), a hierarchy is also present. Dow argues that it is

the easy and the right read to see Fatal Attraction as a film that juxtaposes a single ambitious, sexually aggressive working woman with a married, supportive, nurturing, stay-at-home mother and does so in such a way as to vilify the former and to make the latter a heroine […] ("Traffic" 124)

Devoting one’s life to motherhood was encouraged in the 1980s. According to E. Ann Kaplan, 1980s images “include a validation of the domestic sphere for women having already been successful in careers, while also promoting the woman who finds fulfillment only in mothering” (199). She believes “[i]t is clear that in the late 1980s choosing the child over career […], or going to college or taking up some kind of business only after the daughter is grown up […] represents the new ideal” (Kaplan 199). According to Faludi, “[t]he backlash films struggle to make motherhood as alluring as possible” (132). These films, she believes, were “marketing” “women’s return to total womanhood” (Faludi 132).

Women combining family and career were dealt with superficially or not at all in 1980s television (Faludi 153-154). In some shows, Faludi claims, “the mothers ostensibly have jobs, but their employment is in title only” (153). The mothers in Family Ties (1982-89) and The Cosby Show (1984-92), she argues, “are the same old TV housewives with their housecoats doffed, their ‘careers’ a hollow nod to the profound changes in women’s lives” (Faludi 153). Dow also finds that these shows do not really engage with the issue of combining work and family. In The Cosby Show, Family Ties, and Growing Pains (1985-92) both mother and father had careers. The mothers in these shows fulfilled their two roles without problems. This lack of work/family conflicts is made “believable” by “[t]he presence of sensitive, nurturing, postfeminist men,” Dow argues (“Traffic” 21). By featuring such men, shows express the message that “women’s problems are their own responsibility” (Dow, “Traffic” 121). “Any problems these women have really must be their own fault, because these men are depicted as truly supportive of the feminist project,” Dow explains (“Traffic”
122). So besides not dealing in a realistic manner with the issue of combining work and parenting, the shows blame working women for their problems.

Two major series from the late 1980s and 1990s – *Murphy Brown* (1988-1992) and *Dr. Quinn* (1993-1998) – portray strong career women, but emphasize the importance of motherhood. In these two shows motherhood is presented as a key element of a woman’s life and identity. *Murphy Brown* features a successful working woman, but the show conveys that women need more than their careers to make them happy (Dow, *Prime-Time* 159). By eventually making Murphy have a baby, the show “gives in to the postfeminist notion that a woman’s life is incomplete without reproduction […]” (Dow, *Prime-Time* 159). In addition, *Dr. Quinn*’s title character successfully pursues a – traditionally male – career, while being a devoted mother to her adopted children and a mother figure for the entire village (Dow, *Prime-Time* 178). According to Dow, “[t]o the postfeminist question, What is a woman?, *Dr. Quinn* offers the ultimate transhistorical answer: a woman is a mother” (*Prime-Time* 178).

In this dissertation, I will research how a major prime-time television series and a Hollywood film from the current decade engage with the issue of women and outside-the-home employment. These texts are *Desperate Housewives* (2004-present) and *The Stepford Wives* (2004). The hit series *Desperate Housewives* deals with the daily lives of the women who live on Wisteria Lane, a street in an upper middle-class suburb. The lives they lead and the choices they make are different, but they all have to cope with issues regarding romantic relationships, family responsibilities, and employment. The 2004 film *The Stepford Wives*, based on the 1972 novel by Ira Levin, portrays women struggling with the same issues. In the film, chips are implanted in the brains of the career-minded women of Stepford that make them docile housewives who live to serve and please their husbands.

Besides the theme of women and work, the texts have their setting in common, which makes it interesting to look at them together. The struggle with gender roles is hidden from view by a façade of perfection: the beautiful and meticulous decor of upper middle-class suburbia. Behind this façade the struggles are great, and reality is painful and ugly. Also similar are the choices the women have available to them. According to Mary Frances Berry, “[t]he availability of options is made more complicated by the constraints of race and class” (5). The women of Stepford and Wisteria Lane, however, are quite affluent and are almost all white. Therefore they have relatively many choices available to them. Coward claims about the female characters in *Desperate Housewives* that “[n]either hardship or tradition forces any

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2 I will focus on the first three seasons of *Desperate Housewives*. These seasons’ episodes aired in the period between October 3, 2004 and May 20, 2007.
of them to take their particular path” (38). This is just as true for the women of Stepford who have chosen to pursue careers, even though they were not financially forced to do so.

For my research I will build on the sociological and historical scholarship that has been done on women and work. In addition, I will use scholarship on the depiction of women and work in film and TV. These texts will provide a background for my research into the positions taken by The Stepford Wives and Desperate Housewives. Historical works are used to provide a brief history of how women have started to move outside the sphere of the home during the twentieth century. An important element of this historical background is the positions taken by feminism, conservatism, and postfeminism in the twentieth century and the current one. Scholarship in the field of sociology will provide information on how women deal and struggle with making decisions regarding work and family. Works on women and employment in film and TV show what positions on this issue these media have taken in the past.

I would like to argue that the women featured in Desperate Housewives and The Stepford Wives all engage with the issue of women and work, but approach it differently. The female characters can be seen as representing different models for dealing with the issue – the main ones featured being the career-oriented woman, the stay-at-home-mom, and the woman trying to combine having a family life with working outside the home. Whereas Desperate Housewives shows that difficulties come with all these models, and indicates that none of them are ideal, The Stepford Wives appears to endorse the combination of family and career. However, the film can only do this by not showing the day-to-day reality of combining the roles of mother, wife, and career woman.

Besides the introduction and conclusion, this dissertation contains three chapters. In the first of these chapters I will argue that the texts do not support the career woman model. The Stepford Wives’ Joanna and Claire are unsympathetic and their careers harm them in various ways. In Desperate Housewives traditional roles for women are promoted at the expense of Edie and her non-traditional way of life. However, the series also creates sympathy for Edie because she struggles with the incredibly high standards society expects women to meet.

In the second chapter the opposite model, the stay-at-home mom, is discussed. I will argue that this model is also portrayed as not being ideal. The women of Stepford have to be forced into the role of stay-at-home mother and housewife, which suggests that women may need more than a life at home to fulfill them. Desperate housewife Bree’s investment in housework and her family is not based on enjoyment but on a need for perfection. Lynette (in
season 1) struggles with staying at home with her children and does not find it completely fulfilling.

The third chapter focuses on the model of the woman who tries to combine having a family life with having a career. This model is embodied by Lynette (in seasons 2 and 3 of Desperate Housewives) and Joanna (at the end of The Stepford Wives). Whereas Desperate Housewives shows the difficulties that come with this model, The Stepford Wives presents it as ideal. The film is able to do this by not showing the difficulties that real-life women experience when they combine career and family.

I will conclude my dissertation by analyzing how the texts are informed by conservatism, feminism, and postfeminism. I will also make suggestions for further research on The Stepford Wives and Desperate Housewives. In addition, I will speculate on the effect that consuming these texts has on their female viewers.
2. Miserable “Career Bitches”: Discrediting Career Women and Their Careers

Stepford’s Joanna and Claire, and Wisteria Lane’s Edie Britt are career women. Joanna is a network president, Claire a physician and scientist, and Edie is a realtor. The women have different kinds of careers. Claire and Joanna work in medicine and business, which are, according to Stone, “traditionally male-dominated” professions (16). Their jobs cause them to be away from home often. The women spend much time working. This appears to contribute to them becoming successful – Joanna is “the most successful president in the history of [the] network,” and Claire was “the world’s foremost brain surgeon and genetic engineer” – but it leaves them with little time to spend at home. Edie’s job “is today gendered very much female” (Chambers 64). It has flexible hours and allows Edie time for other things. Many women choose the profession of realtor because they want to combine paid employment with care for their families (Wharton 189). Edie, however, uses the job’s flexibility to go jogging, or to meet her neighbors for coffee or a game of poker. What Joanna, Claire, and Edie have in common is that their home lives are virtually non-existent. I would like to argue that both Desperate Housewives and The Stepford Wives do not endorse the career woman model. Joanna and Claire, the female characters who invest heavily in their careers in The Stepford Wives, are made to look unsympathetic, and their careers are suggested to be bad for them. Desperate Housewives appears to prefer traditional roles for women, and attempts to make Edie’s non-traditional lifestyle seem unattractive. On the other hand, the show creates sympathy for Edie to some extent. She is shown to be struggling with the incredibly high standards society expects women to meet.

Career woman Joanna is discredited by depicting her as an unsympathetic person. She is concerned with achieving success, without caring about the fallout. Joanna is the creator of TV shows that set spouses against each other and test their relationships. The fact that she creates such shows does not make Joanna seem nice, but her reaction to a shooting incident caused by one of her shows makes her appear even more uncaring. When one of the participants of “I Can Do Better” tries to shoot her because his wife left him, she seems quite unshaken. In addition, she is not very upset when she is told that the distraught husband has

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3 Because of this, the women do not fit my model of the woman who combines career and family. Edie, even though she is a mother, does not struggle with combining work and family since she hardly ever sees her son. Joanna does not spend a lot of time with her kids, the viewer is told, and balancing her career at the network with raising kids is not discussed in the film. Claire does not have kids (at least it is never mentioned that she does) and did not spend a lot of time with her husband when she worked outside the home.
also tried to kill his wife and her lovers, who are now all in critical condition. Instead of becoming emotional, or feeling responsible, Joanna immediately comes up with an idea for a TV show about the couple: “Hank and Barbara: Let the Healing Begin.” Even her own husband does not believe Joanna is very kind. “Your whole attitude makes people want to kill you. It makes people try to kill you,” he tells her. Dow argues that “Joanna is such a caricature of a bitchy career woman that it is hard to sympathize with [her]” (“Traffic” 128). She is so unlikable that “[w]hen she is transformed into a fembot, it’s hard to feel badly about it,” Dow adds (“Traffic” 128).

In addition, Joanna prioritizes her career over her family, which makes her come across quite heartless. Although the film does not deal at great length with the period in which Joanna works at the network, it becomes clear that she did not spend a lot of time with her family during it. After coming to Stepford, Joanna’s husband Walter claims that her ambition has had a detrimental effect on their relationship. He tells her that their “marriage is falling apart” and reminds her of the fact that they have not had sex in over a year because Joanna was always working. It appears that her children have been affected by Joanna’s ambition as well: they “barely know you,” Walter tells Joanna.

Moreover, Joanna’s appearance is used to further discredit her. Black, her favorite color for clothes, is, according to her husband, a color only worn by “high-powered, neurotic, castrating, Manhattan career bitches.” In the Saussurean linguistic model “fashion is conceived as a system of signs organized into cultural codes” (Roberts 235). “[F]ashion styles are understood as a signifying system encoding class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, and other social variables […]” (Roberts 235). For Walter, a woman wearing black clothing signifies ‘career bitch.’ However, black clothing can have other meanings, many of them positive. Walter just chooses to see women wearing black as something negative because it suits his purpose. He prefers the archetypal femininity that the women of Stepford embody, and wants Joanna to dress and look like them. Joanna loves wearing black and appears to associate the color with more positive attributes. “Ever since [she] was a little girl” she wanted to be such a woman Walter describes to her. For her these black clothes probably symbolize success, or she believes they make her look serious and in control. However, by Joanna agreeing to wear something different, the film appears to opt for Walter’s negative reading of women wearing black.

The other career woman that the film deals with in greater detail, Claire Wellington, is depicted as unsympathetic and crazy. She is responsible for implanting the chips in the brains of the women of Stepford. She killed her husband and his mistress, and replaced him by a
robot. She uses her robot-husband to convince other men to get their spouses changed into perfect wives and homemakers. She does this because after she killed her husband she realized that her life choices were the reason for him cheating on her and her being unhappy. This gave her the idea to create “a better world. A world where men were men and women were cherished and lovely.” She wanted to realize her goal of “turn[ing] back the clock, to a time before overtime, before quality time, before women were turning themselves into robots.”

Claire’s crazy personality resembles a character from the backlash movie *Fatal Attraction*, thereby evoking backlash sentiment against career women. Claire is quite similar to *Fatal Attraction*’s Alex Forrest, a character that is also played by Glenn Close. According to Dow, “[i]n different clothing, in different decades and cultural contexts, *Fatal Attraction*’s Alex Forrest and *The Stepford Wives*’ Claire Wellington are the same woman […]” (“Traffic” 115). “Both are spurned women, both are crazy, both fantasize about a life that has been denied them, and both are willing to kill to get it,” Dow argues (“Traffic” 115). As in *Fatal Attraction*, the career woman in *The Stepford Wives* is driven mad because she realizes the choices she has made have not given her the life she wants. Elliott sees the choice of Glenn Close for the role as part of the “backlash-ification” of the original plot,” meaning the 1975 version of *The Stepford Wives* (54).

Like in *Fatal Attraction* and in other examples of 1980s film and television, in *The Stepford Wives* women are engaged in what Susan Douglas has called “the Battle of the Titans … between the traditional wife and mom, and the feminist bitch from hell” (qtd. in Dow, “Traffic” 122). In *The Stepford Wives* unsympathetic and crazy career woman Claire battles with a more caring Joanna, and, like in the 1980s, the career woman loses to the traditional woman. Joanna, even though she is not traditional at all at the beginning of the film, comes to really care about and fight for her marriage in the end. She convinces her husband not to change her, and together with him deactivates the chips of all Stepford women. Her willingness to work together with the man who was willing to take extreme steps to change her and the fact that they remain married make her look far more traditional than the Joanna from the beginning of the film.

*The Stepford Wives* argues against working outside the home, by suggesting that a large investment in a career can have a detrimental effect on a woman’s (mental) health. This echoes a backlash argument against working outside the home. During the 1980s, career women were believed to be suffering from burn-outs, “a syndrome that supposedly caused a wide range of mental and physical illnesses from dizzy spells to heart attacks” (Faludi 35).
Fallued refutes this and claims that there was no sound scientific evidence to support this belief. According to her,

whether they are professional or blue-collar workers, working women experience less depression than housewives; and the more challenging the career, the better their mental and physical health. Women who have never worked have the highest levels of depression. (Faludi 38)

Nevertheless, the women’s movement was blamed for this supposed rise in (mental) health problems. “If baby-boom women hadn’t received their independence, [...] the careerists would be home with their children [...] feeling calmer, healthier, and saner,” it was argued (Faludi 35). Therefore, leaving one’s job for a life at home was promoted (Faludi 38).

This backlash argument is reflected in The Stepford Wives in a number of ways. For example, Joanna’s career is so important to her that she has a nervous breakdown after being fired. As Vint argues, Joanna is simply “lost without her job” (163). She is even admitted to a hospital and her illness is so serious it requires electroshocks to cure it. Claire Wellington’s career affected her health as well. She reveals that when she worked as a brain surgeon and genetic engineer she was “[o]verstressed, overbooked, [and] [e]xhausted.” In addition, it is suggested that having a career makes you unhappy or even depressed. Joanna and her new friends – chaotic author Bobbie and flamboyant gay architect Roger – are all successful professionally but lack fulfilling personal lives. They moved to Stepford because they needed to make a new start, and they are all on anti-depressants. Joanna believes their unhappiness is caused by their lifestyles and suggests that turning their lives around may bring them the happiness they long for. “What if we could actually learn how to be happy, without Paxil or compulsive overeating? What if we actually gave this whole thing a try for real, the whole Stepford thing?” she says to Bobbie and Roger. Here Joanna is made to realize that the way she lived her life is actually not good for her, and that a quiet life in the suburbs may be the thing they all need to feel better.

By showing that their jobs make them stressed instead of fulfilled, the film argues against women working outside the home. The Stepford Wives deals with “the working woman who is always racing against the clock – the fevered, overburdened sufferer of what has been called ‘hurried woman syndrome,’” Elliott claims (54). She argues that
[i]n a fashion reminiscent of Friedan’s “problem that has no name,” the focus on white, middle-class heroines in such hurried-women tales serves to highlight problems of teleology in particular: by casting work outside the home as a zone of futurity and fulfillment rather than financial necessity, backlash discourse could insist that careers were worthless if they did not provide a trajectory of personal growth and transformation along with a substantial paycheck. From this perspective, a woman who is always hurrying forward but getting nowhere but the corner office might as well go home. (Elliott 54)

The problems the women deal with are presented as a result of their own choice to pursue a career. The film indicates, and the women are made to believe, that this choice has brought them unhappiness and has negatively affected their personal relationships. After being fired, Joanna wonders whether she has “made all the wrong decisions” and asks her husband if they cannot start over. Claire believes she is responsible for making her husband cheat on her. By suggesting that Claire and Joanna are responsible for their problems, the film displays a postfeminist outlook on women and work. This outlook entails that the “sex/gender system that limits acceptable choices,” as Dow calls it, is not presented as the cause of these women’s problems (Prime-Time 96). The hypocrisy of judging women for being career-oriented, while their behavior is quite similar to men’s, is not dealt with in this film. Even though The Stepford Wives does not pay attention to it, the women in it are clearly restricted in terms of acceptable choices.

In Desperate Housewives, being maternal and traditional appears to be preferred to Edie’s lifestyle that revolves around seeking pleasure. Edie is made to realize that the way she lives her life is not right and becomes an attractive partner for Carlos after she reveals that she is more traditional than she seems and has been in the past. Carlos rejects Edie because he is “looking for a girl who wants to settle down and be in a serious relationship” (3x17). He also scolds her for not committing to her son, for not spending time with him, and for using him as “sex-bait.” Edie is extremely insulted by this, and Carlos apologizes, telling her he has “no right to judge” her. He tells Edie that she is fine the way she is, but she disagrees. She is not happy with being a party girl any longer. She tells him to “stop seeing the person that I’ve been and start seeing the person I could be.” By telling him she is not who he thinks she is, she is able to make him fall for her. This new Edie is a much more attractive partner for Carlos.
The series also displays a preference for traditional roles for women by making Edie a realtor. The occupations of Wisteria Lane’s men and women are one way in which “the show upholds norms of binary gender […] [and] standards of femininity,” Chambers argues (64). Most men have good careers and most women are housewives. Edie has paid employment but she “holds a job that is today gendered very much female, one that has her relying heavily on her looks, and one that places her working in the neighbourhood (we never see her in the office),” Chambers notes (64). Edie, although she works outside the home, does not deviate from what is traditionally seen as feminine too much.

By suggesting that Edie’s work is not very valuable to her, the series tries to make having a career appear less attractive. Edie’s career is not very important to her identity. She does not appear to care about how well she does her job and does not seem to work very hard. One only sees Edie at work when new neighbors come to Wisteria Lane. There is a great contrast between Edie and fellow realtor Carolyn Burnham (Annette Bening) in the film American Beauty (1999). Carolyn is desperate to succeed and works hard to achieve her goals. She cleans the houses that are for sale until they are spotless, whereas Edie uses these houses’ bedrooms to meet Carlos for sex (3x19). The career woman character in the series could have been depicted very differently. She could have been portrayed working more often, being good at her job, and being fulfilled by it. She could have been a role model for women wanting to work outside the home. Instead, through the character of Edie, the series suggests that careers are really not that important and that family life is.

Her non-traditional lifestyle has left Edie unhappy and desperate for a fulfilling personal life, Desperate Housewives suggests. She has always focused on her career and on partying, and that, it is suggested, has caused her current lack of a home life. Edie is willing to take extreme steps to end her loneliness. Carlos likes spending time with her and her son more than spending time with just Edie, so she tries to get joint custody so Carlos will keep seeing her (3x21). In addition, when Carlos breaks up with her, Edie comes up with a new plan that will ensure her of Carlos’ company. Carlos would love to become a father, so Edie proposes to have a child together as friends. However, Edie secretly keeps taking birth control pills and when Carlos finds out she fakes a suicide attempt to guilt him into staying with her (3x22; 3x23). Like with Claire, Edie’s desperate behavior invites comparison to Fatal Attraction’s Alex Forrest. In this film, career woman Alex seduces a man, and is unwilling to let him go back to his family. She slits her wrists to keep him from leaving and tries to tie him to her by revealing she is expecting his baby. Like in this backlash-film, the single career woman in Desperate Housewives appears to desperately want a different kind of life.
The series suggests that women who are not primarily focused on their children will be criticized for it by other people. Edie met with such criticism and has come to believe she has failed as a mother. She is also criticized by Carlos, who finds her son playing outside at night while Edie has gone to a party. He tells Edie: “Thank God he lives with his father. I mean, come on, what kind of mother are you?” (3x16). The next day Edie says to Carlos: “I know you think I’m a terrible person” (3x16). Carlos tells her that he never said such a thing, to which Edie replies: “Terrible person, terrible mother. It’s the same thing. Because no matter what else she does, when a woman isn’t a good mother she’s a failure, right?” (3x16). This remark resembles an observation made by Douglas and Michaels. They argue that the new momism redefines all women, first and foremost, through their relationships to children. Thus, being a citizen, a worker, a governor, an actress, a First Lady, all are supposed to take a backseat to motherhood. (Douglas and Michaels 22)

They quote feminist writer Letty Cottin Pogrebin who argues that “‘[y]ou can go be a CEO, and a good one, but if you’re not making a themed birthday party, you’re not a good mother,’ and thus you are a failure” (Douglas and Michaels 22-23).

Even though the show condemns Edie for not being maternal, it also creates sympathy for her by showing that it is not her fault that she cannot live up to what is expected of women in present-day America. According to Sharp, “the contemporary ideology of femininity […] insists women should feel maternal and should find motherhood fulfilling” (124). Edie does not feel this way, and needs other things in her life. This is something she cannot change about herself, but she is judged for it. In addition, the new momism tells women how to be a mother. Women need to be devoted to taking care of their child, or they are not good mothers (Douglas and Michaels 4). Edie clearly fails according to these standards, but, according to Douglas and Michaels, the new momism’s “standards of perfection […] are beyond our reach” (5). The series suggests Edie tried to do the best thing for her son. She tells Carlos:

when I had Travers I knew I was in over my head and when Charles and I split I gave him custody. Because I wanted my son to have the best life possible. And that doesn’t make me a good mother but I like to think it makes me a realistic one. (3x16)
Edie’s failure to live up to this oppressive ideology of motherhood may create sympathy for her, but her personality and behavior take away much of the understanding and support that is created. She is presented as very self-interested which results in behavior that makes her not the most likable of characters. For example, it affects her parenting. Edie leaves her son at home by himself because she wants to go to a party. In addition, Edie’s lack of interest in other people’s well-being results in bad relationships with other women. Edie displays a lack of female solidarity that affects her relationships with the other women on Wisteria Lane. For instance, she goes after their ex-husbands, and is not willing to let these men go when she is asked to. Edie may feel that others have judged her, but she has not shown solidarity with other women herself. This makes Edie’s experience of being judged seem less worthy of sympathy. Moreover, Edie is dishonest. She deceives Carlos to make him stay with her, and tells horrible lies about drugs and prostitutes to Carlos’ landlady so she will terminate the lease and he will come live with her (3x22). There is very little Edie will not do to get what she wants, and this does not make her very likable.

Both *The Stepford Wives* and *Desperate Housewives* do not endorse the career woman model. The two texts convey this by making the career women not very pleasant characters. Women who are more concerned with taking care of their family and marriage are presented as sympathetic. In addition, the women’s careers are shown to be bad for them. They apparently ruin relationships with family and/or spouses, and will make women miserable and lonely. Careers are also very bad for women’s (mental) health, the texts suggest. These ways in which the texts make the career woman model an unattractive one are reminiscent of the 1980s backlash against working outside the home. Even though *Desperate Housewives* incorporates a feminist critique of the ideology of motherhood, both texts are mostly informed by conservative and postfeminist ideologies when it comes to the depiction of career women.
3. Not So Happy Housewives: Exposing the Problems of Stay-At-Home Moms

The model of the stay-at-home mom is embodied by the women of Stepford and Wisteria Lane’s Bree Van de Kamp and Lynette Scavo. The women of Stepford do not work outside the home and devote their lives to their families and to homemaking. Perfect housewife Bree portrays a similar devotion. On the surface these characters appear to promote the model. The women spend most of their time doing housework and caring for their families and appear to enjoy it very much. Lynette is different from Bree and the women of Stepford. She is a former marketing advisor who “was clearly more successful than her husband in the corporate world” (Sharp 122). Now, however, she struggles with taking care of her four children and the home while her husband is the breadwinner of the family. Like the career woman model, the model of the stay-at-home mom is presented as less than ideal. The women of Stepford have to be forced into the role of stay-at-home mother and housewife, which suggests that women may need more than a life at home to make them happy. Desperate housewife Bree’s investment in housework and her family is not based on enjoyment but on a need for everything to be perfect. Her neighbor Lynette struggles with her role and does not find it completely fulfilling.

Stepford’s men and women have very conservative gender roles. The women are devoted homemakers and mothers, and the men are the breadwinners and heads of the household. Women are subservient and do not question their husbands’ authority. In Joanna’s opinion, they are “[w]omen who behave like slaves, women who are obsessed with cleaning their kitchens and doing their hair, women who never challenge you in any way, women who exist only to wait on you hand and foot.” The Stepford wives also appear to leave the thinking to their husbands. When Joanna wants to discuss The Life of Lyndon Johnson at a book club meeting, the women are completely uninterested, and instead go on to discuss The Heritage Hills Special Edition Golden Deluxe Treasury of Christmas Keepsakes and Collectibles, “probably the most important book any of us will ever read.” These women, although they are intelligent and well-educated (as the viewer later learns), do not display any interest in politics. This suggests that their husbands have programmed them not to think too much, which prevents the women from thinking about gender roles.

The women’s level of investment in their families and in perfect homemaking is not endorsed by the film. Their devotion to family life seems to make them the embodiment of the perfect mother Douglas and Michaels believe the media have been promoting (4-5). However, in the film this perfection and devotion is depicted as strange, abnormal, and even a little
scary. For example, Joanna’s friend Bobbie (after getting a chip implanted in her brain) calls her beautiful and extremely neat home a “pigsty” that is in desperate need of being cleaned. In addition, she fills her sons’ lunchboxes with everything they desire, and makes all their food from scratch. Her day revolves around cleaning and caring for her family and she does it all with an eerie smile on her face. In addition, Claire Wellington, the person who created these women, is discredited, which in turn discredits her ideas (Vint 165). According to Vint, “[Glenn] Close’s character [Claire] is clearly insane, and so on one level, the film distances itself from the dream she imagines” (165).

The women appear to like their lives and to benefit from the way they live them, which makes the model of the stay-at-home mother seem an attractive one. They smile constantly, and never appear discontented. For instance, after a chip has been implanted in her brain Bobbie tells Joanna: “I’m happy and I’m healthy because I understand what’s important in life.” It is no longer her new novel that matters most to Bobbie, but her “new cookbook. And my husband and my family and making a perfect home.” “It’s a lesson every gal needs to learn,” she tells Joanna. The women of Stepford also never look tired, and appear to have the energy to take good care of themselves, while newcomer Joanna looks pale and overworked. The women of the town make staying home look like a relatively stress-free option that makes a person look and feel good all the time.

However, the film shows that the women of Stepford are not really happy with the kind of life they live. They only find the role of homemaker and fulltime mother fulfilling because they were programmed to like it. In addition, their beautiful and rested appearance is not a result of their way of life, but of the “female improvement system” that transformed them into the docile and attractive housewives their husbands longed for. The women never chose the model of the stay-at-home mom. Before a computer chip was implanted in their brains they were all very successful career women. They were “CEOs, executives, [and] judges.” They were “Amazon queens,” Walter claims. The men in town did not want their wives to be so successful, because it made them “the wuss, the wind beneath your wings, your support system. […] the girl.” When the chips are eventually deactivated the viewer learns how the women really feel about being an obedient housewife. They are shocked and angry and demand to know: “What did you do to us?”

Desperate housewife Bree is the embodiment of the stay-at-home mother and homemaker whose life revolves around taking care of her home, husband, and children. She “believes in […] the importance of family,” Sharp claims (119). Coward describes Bree as “the ultimate homemaker, the perfectionist whose whole life is devoted to her immaculate
home, her perfect cooking” (38). According to Mary Alice, “everyone on Wisteria Lane thought of Bree as the perfect wife and mother […]” (1x1). This seems unsurprising since Bree always looks perfect – even when she gardens –, is an amazing cook, has an impeccable home, and always behaves perfectly when she is around other people. Her perfection is even reminiscent of that of the women of Stepford, her family finds. Her son Andrew tells her that she acts like she is “running for mayor of Stepford” (1x1), and her husband Rex calls her a “plastic suburban housewife,” and a “cold perfect thing” (1x1).

However, Bree is not always happy in and fulfilled by her role of homemaker and fulltime mother. She experiences moments of desperation and doubt and does not have a perfect life. For instance, she confesses that she “used to get so upset when Andrew and Danielle were little [she] used their nap times to cry” (1x8). In addition, she does not feel that everything she does is appreciated. This becomes evident when she tells her psychiatrist that Freud’s mother “must have felt so betrayed.” She dislikes Freud because

[h]is mother had to do everything by hand, just back-breaking work from sunup to sundown. Not to mention the countless other sacrifices she probably had to make to take care of her family. And what does he do? He grows up and becomes famous, peddling a theory that the problems of adults can be traced back to something awful their mother has done […]. Did he ever think to say thank you? I doubt it. (1x2)

Moreover, her parenting does not always have the desired effect. She observes that her son Andrew “do[esn’t] seem to have a soul” (1x8), and eventually feels forced to send him to juvenile detention (1x17). This makes her doubt herself as a mother (1x18).

Bree does everything so well because she believes that impeccable homemaking and investment in her family will give her the happy life she longs for. Unfortunately for Bree, it has the opposite effect. Anne Marie Bautista argues that Bree’s “constant striving for domestic perfection ultimately has a destructive effect on her relationship with her husband and children” (162). Rex cannot stand her need for flawlessness and tells her that he “just can’t live in this detergent commercial anymore” (1x1). Her kids are also bothered by it. They want her to cook “normal food” like other mothers instead of “cuisine” (1x1). According to Lancioni, Bree’s family problems make her see that perfect homemaking does not give her a perfect life. Bree “is convinced that domestic perfection is the key to happiness, but Rex’ divorce action and adultery, and her son Andrew’s lack of remorse for his hit-and-run accident and disrespect fore her, shatter her illusions,” Lancioni claims (138).
This way of caring for one’s family is not necessarily the key to success, the show indicates. Part of the new momism is the claim that one must be perfect if one wants to be a good mother, Douglas and Michaels argue in *The Mommy Myth*. Bree seems to have internalized this idea, but her devotion to providing her family with perfect care does not give her the desired result. Her children become unhappy, get into trouble, and come to resent their mother for the way she raised them. They do not see her as a good mother (1x1). As Lancioni points out, “Bree follows the traditional maternal ideal, but ends up rejected by her children […]” (140).

Bree’s investment in perfect homemaking is not based on enjoyment; it is something she cannot stop. This “obsessive/compulsive housekeeping,” as Lancioni calls it, “has a serious origin” (132). It was caused by what happened when Bree’s mother died in a car accident when she was a child, Lancioni claims. “When I looked out the window I saw all of my mother’s blood on the street […] so I got a hose and I washed it off and once it was clean I felt so much better,” Bree reveals (1x5). Sharp also believes that Bree’s “obsession with domesticity is not based on genuine affection for her family but is a product of her dysfunction” (126). One example of this is Bree making the bed before taking her husband who is having a heart attack to the hospital. This scene shows that Bree “cannot escape her own fastidiousness,” Lancioni claims (134). Another scene shows Bree trying to save her marriage by seducing her husband in his hotel room. Unfortunately for her, she cannot take her attention away from cheese dripping from a burrito. She needs to tidy it up, and her husband sends her away. Clearly, “Bree’s obsessive-compulsive disorder interferes with her sex life” (Sharp 127).

Moreover, Bree wants everything to seem perfect because she fears the judgment of others. Everything she believes is imperfect needs to be kept from other people. Bree has an “obsession with keeping up appearances,” Sharp argues (126). Bree even hides her tears from her own husband (1x1). Her friends and neighbors all believe that Bree and her family are flawless. However, they just “look[] perfect on the surface” (3x16), and Bree works hard to conceal this fact. “Rather than admit that her family has severe imperfections, Bree upholds a façade of perfection,” Sharp argues (126). One example is Bree keeping from her friends that she and Rex are in couples therapy. She pretends, and makes Rex pretend too, that they are taking tennis lessons (Sharp 126). In addition, Bree hides her daughter’s pregnancy and passes the child off as her own because she believes teenage pregnancy would negatively affect her family’s reputation (3x23).
Through Lynette, *Desperate Housewives* shows that contrary to what many people believe, staying home can be very stressful. As Akass argues, women with children often quit their jobs to become less stressed and tired (54). Lynette quit because her husband convinced her that staying home would be easier than combining taking care of their kids with working outside the home (1x1). However, Akass claims that Lynette’s life at home is anything but stress-free (55). Mary Alice reveals that it is actually quite hectic and tiring. The viewer learns that Lynette never had the time to make her great family recipe for fried chicken when she worked in advertising, but does not have it now either. Mary Alice comments that “Lynette would have appreciated the irony if she stopped to think about it, but she couldn’t. She didn’t have the time” (1x1).

Lynette becomes so overextended that she resorts to taking her kids’ ADD medication because of its energizing effect on people who do not have ADD. She starts taking the pills when she has to stay up all night making the costumes for her twins’ school play (1x6). Lynette soon becomes so addicted that when she runs out of pills two days before a major dinner party she resorts to begging, threatening, and stealing to get new pills (1x7). Her addiction makes her unable to sleep and she breaks down completely. She imagines Mary Alice handing her a gun which Lynette subsequently holds to her own head (1x8).

The series shows that being a mother is not always enjoyable. Lynette’s kids are always getting into mischief, and sometimes they drive her crazy. For example, her sons go swimming during a wake (1x1), steal from their neighbor Mrs. McClusky (1x14), and get kicked out of school (1x5). Parenting them is not easy since they do not really listen to Lynette. Therefore, Lynette feels forced to take unusual steps like getting into the pool during the wake to get her sons out (1x1), leaving them at the side of the road (1x2), and tossing a bag of chips up the stairs so they will go to bed (1x5). She loves them dearly, but does not want to spend more time with them than she already does. Therefore, she refuses to home school them even though getting them into private school will be very expensive (1x5).

Lynette does not find complete fulfillment in staying home. Sharp argues that Lynette “is privileged enough to be able to retreat to home and family but once there finds it unfulfilling” (123). As Mary Alice mentions in her voiceover, Lynette used to see herself as a career woman and a hugely successful one at that. But she gave up her career to assume a new label – the incredibly satisfying one of fulltime mother, but unfortunately this new label frequently fell short of what was advertised. (1x4)
“Lynette does not relish her role as housewife and mother and seems at times to hate her three unruly boys and young baby girl,” Sharp observes (123). Akass argues that “[h]er spontaneous punch to [Tom’s] jaw when he attempts to have unprotected sex with her shows just how disenchanted Lynette is with her role” (55). So when Lynette gets the chance to use her advertising skills once more, she takes it. She tells the partners at Tom’s firm who are over for dinner her views on their campaign (1x7). Lancioni argues that

[s]he steals [Tom’s] thunder and seems to enjoy it. Though Lynette tries to be the traditional wife and mother, this incident indicates her true milieu. Her character embodies one of ‘feminism’s contradictions’ […], an equally strong desire for fulfilment inside and outside the home. (138)

By showing that Lynette needs more than motherhood to make her happy, the series goes against the new momism that has taken hold of contemporary America. The show provides a view of motherhood that differs from what Douglas and Michaels describe as “the myth […] that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and rewarding, […] and that if you don’t love each and every second of it there’s something really wrong with you” (3). Lynette clearly does not always enjoy being a mother. She, “to some degree, rejects the contemporary ideology of femininity that insists women should feel maternal and should find motherhood fulfilling,” Sharp argues (124). Lynette is not condemned for not always enjoying motherhood. Instead, Desperate Housewives shows how difficult being a mother can be.

Lynette’s lack of complete contentment with her role could be explained by the fact that she, like many other women, never desired to become a fulltime mother. Through Lynette, Desperate Housewives shows that women do not always make the choice to stay home completely voluntarily or freely. In the last few years, the term “opting out” has been used to describe “well-educated mothers who le[ave] fancy professional jobs” (Akass 53). This term would also apply to Lynette’s situation. However, using this term, Miriam Peskowitz believes, “forecloses any discussion about what ‘choice’ means and about what kinds of options women have … ‘Opting-out’ suggests women have options” (qtd. in Akass 53). The amount of options, however, is not that extensive:

The constraints that the workplace places upon mothers are such that, when faced with working long hours, putting a large portion of their salary towards childcare costs and being too exhausted to enjoy their family, they will often surrender to domesticity.
This does not mean that they have made a free choice, or one based on a need to spend 24 hours a day with their children, but rather a choice based on the ideal worker system versus domesticity. (Akass 54)

Akass argues that Lynette does not really make the choice to stay home (54-55). In a flashback it is shown that Lynette’s “joy at discovering she is pregnant is quickly marred by her husband Tom’s suggestion that she should quit her job […]” (Akass 54). He told her it would be less stressful for her, and even though Lynette enjoyed working in advertising, this argument apparently convinced her that staying home was better for her.

When she and Tom had their first child, it was just assumed that Lynette would be the primary caregiver. The flashback exposes the persistent belief that women and not men should take care of children. Lynette loved her job and made more money than Tom did, but still he automatically assumed she would be responsible for their child’s care, and Lynette apparently did not think to object to this division of tasks. Clearly this arrangement is to Tom’s advantage since if Lynette takes care of the kids he is “free to work the extended hours of an ideal worker” (Akass 55). According to Berry, “[t]he issue of child care is really an issue of power, resources, and control among adults; it is not a battle over who is more suited for care” (41). Tom could just as well take care of the kids. Berry claims that the mother-care tradition is “neither traditional nor necessary” (ix). This tradition only “persists because we are acculturated to accept it and because it reinforces existing power arrangements,” she argues (Berry ix).

Desperate Housewives exposes the many downsides of the model, but is supportive of women who are stay-at-home mothers. The creator of the show, Marc Cherry, mentioned in an interview that “[t]he show is actually a love letter to all the women out there who have issues and are trying their best to be stay at home moms” (qtd. in Sharp 123). The show provides support by showing the viewers that nobody is perfect, and that struggling with being a mother is really not uncommon. It does this by providing the audience with an inside view of the lives of stay-at-home moms. The series illustrates that women hide the fact that being a stay-at-home mom is not always easy, and that therefore women do not always have a realistic view of how other women experience staying home with their children. As Bree says, “nobody likes to admit that they can’t handle the pressure” (1x8). Shuler, McBride, and Kirby argue “that showing weakness is difficult, perhaps especially hard when combined with the pressure to be the perfect mother” (184). This could be explained by the continuous competition women experience. According to Douglas and Michaels, women
are all in powerful competition with each other, in constant danger of being trumped by the mom down the street, or in the magazine we’re reading. The competition is not just over who’s a good mother, it’s over who’s the best. (6)

This is also depicted in the series. Lynette feels like she is competing with “the Bree Van de Kamps of the world, with their spotless kitchens and their perfect kids [...] where nothing ever goes wrong” and feels like she does not measure up (1x7). Lynette does not know – while the viewer does – that this perfection is just a façade, and struggles to achieve a level of perfection that is not even real. The viewers can learn from the show that perfection does not exist, and that struggling with one’s role is absolutely normal.

Devoting one’s life to motherhood has been romanticized, Douglas and Michaels argue (4). Women are told that being a mother is incredibly fulfilling (Douglas and Michaels 3). In addition, staying home with one’s children is believed to be less stressful than combining working outside the home with childcare (Akass 54). The Stepford Wives and Desperate Housewives, however, de-romanticize stay-at-home motherhood by showing that staying home is hard work and is often not fun or fulfilling at all. The women of Stepford do not enjoy their lives that revolve around their families and housekeeping, and only seem to do so because they were programmed to express joy. When they were still free to choose, they opted for a life in which they worked outside the home and used their intelligence and talents. In Desperate Housewives Bree seems to enjoy her life of caring for her family, cooking, and housekeeping. However, she just invests so much time and energy into homemaking and childcare because she needs things to be perfect. In addition, Lynette clearly shows that stay-at-home motherhood is very stressful, tiring, and not always enough to make a person happy. Desperate Housewives and The Stepford Wives do not promote the conservative ideal of the woman who does not work outside the home. They suggest that women may need more than motherhood and homemaking in their lives. However, even though the model is not ideal, it is not a bad one either. Neither text depicts the stay-at-home mother herself as an unsympathetic person, as they do with the career woman.
4. The Ideal Option? Combining Career and Family Life

By the end of *The Stepford Wives*, Joanna has taken on a new role: that of the woman who combines a career with a family life. She is no longer just focused on her work, but apparently tries to find a balance in her life that will make both her and her family happy. In the second season of *Desperate Housewives*, Lynette, who stopped working when she had children, is made to go back to work by her husband. He stays home with the children, and Lynette finds a good but demanding job in advertising. Lynette wants to maintain a good relationship with the members of her family, and needs to help her husband out on a number of occasions. She is focused on both her family and her job. In *Desperate Housewives*, the paradigm of the woman who combines a career with a family life is shown to be less than ideal, in a fashion similar to the way the stay-at-home mom is represented as a difficult option. Lynette endures the many difficulties that come with the model. In *The Stepford Wives* this combination model is portrayed as the ideal option. The film makes this believable by only superficially portraying the model.

*The Stepford Wives* promotes the model by showing that being a working woman with a good family life makes Joanna happy. Being a career woman without a substantial family life was not the ideal option for her, the film shows, since she was depressed and her career led to a nervous breakdown. In addition, because of her job at the network, Joanna ruined her marriage and alienated her children. The opposite model of staying home fulltime she found unappealing. At the end of the film, Joanna appears to have come to realize that combining working outside the home with having a family life is the best option for her. When Joanna gives an interview to Larry King about her award-winning documentary “Stepford: The Secret of the Suburbs,” she seems genuinely happy and relaxed for the first time in the film. She and Walter “[a]re doing just great,” and he and the kids have come along to the studio. Joanna combines her new career with spending time with her family, and appears to enjoy this new way of doing things.

In addition, the film portrays Joanna’s new role as beneficial to the members of her family and her relationship with them. The kids are happily playing video games backstage, and Walter contentedly watches his wife give an interview. While Joanna talks about her marriage she and Walter look and smile at each other. They appear to be really happy and in love. They spend time together, and Walter seems supportive of his wife’s new career. Even though Joanna tells King that their marriage is not perfect, and that she and Walter “know for sure that it’s not about perfection. Perfect. Perfect doesn’t work,” they look like the perfect...
couple and family. This makes this model seem attractive, and smoothes over the fact that Walter tried to forcibly change Joanna into a docile housewife. Instead of the film condemning him for almost transforming her into a robot-like person, he is commended by King, who tells Joanna her husband “really came through for [her].” Because he de-activated the chips, Dow notes, he is “not a villain but a hero” (“Traffic” 128). Joanna also does not seem to hold a grudge, even though Walter wanted to make her his domestic servant and sex slave. As Dow observes, “[a]ll’s well that ends well, although the motivations that created Stepford in the first place, and the problems that […] landed Joanna in [Stepford], have hardly been addressed” (“Traffic” 128).

The film is able to make this option look ideal by not showing the problems women usually face when they combine work and family. The scene with Larry King is the only glimpse the viewer gets of Joanna in her new role. What remains unclear is how the day-to-day reality of her life is. How Walter and Joanna have divided household chores and childcare duties is not discussed or portrayed. As the example of desperate housewife Lynette will show, the lives of working mothers are quite complicated, something which is not acknowledged by *The Stepford Wives*. In addition, the way the film portrays the life of a woman who combines a career with a family life is not very realistic. It is unlikely that someone is able to spend time with their family while being at work. It is a lovely image, but living this model is much more difficult than is suggested here. Moreover, Joanna, by making a documentary about something she experienced, and about a town she lived or still lives in, does not have to go through the trouble of commuting to the office on a daily basis. In addition, it is unclear whether there are people who need this documentary to become a success in order for them to be able to support themselves or their families. This lack of socio-economic context contributes to making this depiction of the combination model quite unrealistic.

*The Stepford Wives* promotes working women as having a good family life. The film encourages women to remain focused on having a family (Vint 162). Discussing *The Stepford Wives* and *Bewitched* (2005), Vint argues that these films represent a shift in the strategy of backlash. The old backlash attempted to frighten women into accepting traditional gender roles and identifying with such roles as their only authentic source of personal happiness. The new backlash realizes that it is unlikely that women en masse will be forced back into the home and exclusively domestic roles, yet still tries to distance women from feminism and convince them that
their lives should be focused around the heterosexual family, even if greater independence and outside work are part of this vision. (162)

The film distances women from feminism by making it seem irrelevant. In the new backlash, Vint claims, “feminism is made to seem ridiculous and passé in its insistence on still talking about gender discrimination when we all clearly live in a postfeminist utopia” (162). In addition, this new version of the backlash proposes an alternative to feminism for women dealing with issues regarding gender. Women should not solve their problems by “changing societal gender roles or other systemic discriminations;” they must find the “right man,” “one who will refuse to act on the ways culture privileges his gender,” as Vint explains the message of the new backlash (162). In the film Joanna has found such a man. Walter has the power to make her into his fantasy wife, but he chooses to let her be herself. In the end, their Stepford adventure only strengthens their love and commitment to one another. As Vint argues, the “[n]ew backlash motivates not through fear as in 1980s backlash culture, but through love” (163).

Lynette’s story shows what is left out in Joanna’s: everyday reality. One of the difficulties Lynette encounters is that she is not able to completely focus on her work, as men often are. As Apter notes,

> [m]en often do get, when they marry, a partner who looks after their domestic needs, cares for their children, accommodates their changing occupational needs, and puts family responsibilities first and foremost. The ‘woman behind the man’ is the wife who takes care of everything else so the man can concentrate on his career. (1)

Lynette was such a partner to Tom, and she always kept him “free to work the extended hours of an ideal worker,” as Akass phrases it (55). Tom did not have to worry about what happened at home. “Remember that time when you were away in Tucson, and I had a 104 fever, but I still managed to take the kids trick-or-treating?” Lynette reminds him (2x1). However, Tom does not want to return the favor. Since he is staying home with the kids, Lynette should be able to function as an ideal worker. However, Tom is unable or unwilling to provide the “immunity from family work,” Akass claims is a precondition for being such a worker (56). When Lynette tells him “[she] promised [her future boss] [she] would not let the kids interfere with this job” he tells her “that was a stupid promise” (2x1). Apparently, he finds this unrealistic, even though Lynette always made sure that the kids did not interfere with his
career. As a result of Tom’s reliance on her, Lynette needs to take her baby girl to a job interview (2x1), and take time off from work to take care of her children who have chicken pox. Tom is afraid he will become sterile if he gets the disease at his age (2x12).

In addition, Lynette’s new role includes a heavy workload because she has to take care of the kids and the house after she comes home from work. As Mary Alice comments, “[w]hen Lynette went back to work she was aware her new job would be demanding. What she hadn’t anticipated was the nightshift” (2x2). When Lynette comes home one day she finds that Tom is already asleep while the house is still a complete mess. She has to load the dishwasher and change the bed since one of the children threw up in it and Tom just covered it with a towel. Because Tom feels his homemaking skills are fine, and he mistakenly believes that the house is not messier than when Lynette was home fulltime, Lynette resorts to desperate measures: she lets a rat loose in the house so Tom will start cleaning more (2x2). In addition, Lynette has to make sure her children are not still playing outside when she comes home from work. Tom believes it is safe for children to be outside at night, and Lynette has to stage a kidnap attempt to convince him it is not (2x8). However, even though Tom may not take his new role very seriously, Lynette is a relatively fortunate working mother. Pamela Stone claims that many “working women have a ‘second shift’ – performing the bulk of childrearing and housekeeping – equal to about an extra month of work per year” (63). Lynette does not have to do “the bulk,” even if she does more than Tom did when he was the family’s breadwinner.

Another problem Lynette is confronted with is feeling guilty about not spending much time with her children. She cannot always be there for her kids when they want her to be, and can no longer be present at every milestone they experience. She has to miss her son Parker’s first day of kindergarten, and to make the situation worse Parker makes her feel really bad about it. (2x3). In addition, Lynette feels very guilty about working outside the home when Parker gets an imaginary friend that resembles Mary Poppins. Lynette feels that this Mrs. Mulberry is like a “surrogate momm[y]” (2x4). When the school tells her that imaginary friends can be “a manifestation of some deep-seated unhappiness” she breaks down in tears. “Maybe I shouldn’t be working,” she says to Tom (2x4). Evidently, even when her children are cared for by her husband, Lynette feels guilty about leaving them. Therefore, her views on how to be a mother appear to have been affected by the new momism. This includes the belief that good mothers are with their kids all the time (Douglas and Michaels 4).

Lynette struggles to find a balance between work and home, but finds that her employer is not very accommodating. Lynette’s boss Nina has made it clear that she does not
like mothers “sloughing things off onto co-workers because of a pediatrician’s appointment or a dance recital” (2x1). She believes that the fact that Lynette has a family is not her problem, and tells Lynette that people who do not have children “might need a little more balance in their lives” too (2x3). Therefore she refuses to give Lynette part of the day off to take her son to kindergarten for the first time. Lynette’s employer’s unwillingness to take into account her desire for a family life reflects the problems that real-life American women like Lynette encounter. Stone argues that “the workplace [is] stuck in an anachronistic time warp that ignores the reality of the lives of high-achieving women […]” (19). Since Lynette’s boss does not want to help her balance work and family, Lynette solves the kindergarten problem creatively. She drops coffee in Nina’s lap to get out of a meeting and back to her computer so she can be with her son via web cam (2x3).

At one point, Lynette needs to decide which career takes precedence: her own or her husband’s. Tom pressures her into assisting him instead of going to work, which puts Lynette in a difficult position. It is supposed to be Lynette’s first day back at work after recovering from being shot. Tom is selling pizzas at a street fair to promote his pizzeria that day, but his manager quits. When Lynette tells him that “[i]t is time to get creative,” he responds by saying that he has an idea, but that “it would require some sacrifice” (3x11). This sacrifice needs to be made by Lynette, who pretends she is still recovering and goes with Tom to the street fair but is found out by her boss who fires her. Lynette acts as many women do. Stone claims there is a “pervasive pattern” of “women defer[ring] to or accord[ing] privilege and priority to their husbands’ careers over their own […]” (64). Lynette gives Tom’s career such priority by risking hers.

Lynette helping Tom puts her in an even more difficult position at work than she was in before. In order for her boss to take her back Lynette has to give up on time with her family and the right to negotiate about leaving work early and working overtime. She tells her boss she “will give [him] one hundred percent” (3x11). He asks her: “So if we have to work late, you’re gonna do it. If I ask you to miss your kid’s baseball game, you’re gonna say, ‘No problem, Ed?’” (3x11). Lynette promises to do all this, while her son overhears and runs away hurt. Her boss appears to use Lynette’s poor negotiating position to make her into the ideal worker that “works at least forty hours a week year round” (qtd in Akass 53), and “with an expectation to work overtime at any given moment” (Akass 53).

Lynette, like many other women, finally decides that she cannot combine a career with a satisfactory family life. She decides not to go back to work under the terms she and her boss agreed on and chooses to work in Tom’s pizzeria instead. She wants to spend more time with
her family, because they are the most important thing to her (3x11). According to Stone, women who quit their job do this because combining career and family is too complicated. She argues that

[w]omen at home – the vast majority of them anyway – do not want to choose between careers and kids. They make the choice – and come to believe they have to – on the basis of their lived and observed realities, not their deep-seated preferences for a mother-only existence. Far from rejecting the true (not caricatured or distorted) feminist vision of an integrated life containing both work and family, these women pursued and persevered in trying to live it. (Stone 215)

Even though Lynette does not quit her job to become a stay-at-home mom, she has much in common with the successful career women Stone interviewed for her book. Lynette tried to combine work with having a family, and dealt with the difficulties that came with this, but decided to quit when she learned that no accommodations would be made for her family life in the future. Like the women Stone talked to, she could not “obtain flexibility” (19).

Even though Lynette appears to make a choice here, her so-called choices are constrained by the workplace. The way the workplace is structured does not benefit women. Working women face a “maternal wall,” Williams and Peskowitz believe:

[R]ather than thinking about it as a personal decision, a ‘choice’ to ‘opt out’, it is more helpful to see it for what it is – a ‘maternal wall’ – a phrase that ‘helps us see what we all face individually as something broader and more generally shared among women.’ (Akass 54)

Women just do not have the same opportunities as men have. According to Akass,

the women who are now suffering were born into a post-feminist world that gives them education, careers and the illusion of equality; only to have that illusion shattered when they attempt to combine motherhood and work. (58)

This, Akass believes, explains the desperation of the women of Desperate Housewives. She comments that “[t]he ladies of Wisteria Lane may be desperate, but is it any surprise when we find that equality no longer extends to them?” (Akass 58).
*The Stepford Wives* and *Desperate Housewives* portray the model of the woman who combines career and family life very differently. Whereas the film makes this model look ideal, the series shows a number of difficulties that come with combining working outside the home with having a family life. *The Stepford Wives*, Sherryl Vint believes, is an example of the new backlash that attempts to keep women focused on family life. This would explain the film’s lack of attention for the real-life difficulties that come with this model. In *Desperate Housewives* Lynette experiences what many American women who try to ‘have it all’ experience. Combining work and family is presented as not ideal, because it is a difficult thing to do. Finally, Lynette gives up trying to combine the two, something that reflects American women’s experiences as well. She likes working in advertising but is unwilling to sacrifice even more family time to keep her job. The series appears to support this decision, and therefore comes across as quite conservative. The character of Lynette is not made to fight the conventions of the workplace, even though they are clearly unfair to mothers. Working outside the home is not disapproved of, but ultimately family is what matters most. So in the end, *The Stepford Wives* and *Desperate Housewives*, even though their treatment of this model differs greatly, both appear to support a lifestyle for women that includes a focus on family.
5. Conclusion

Desperate Housewives and The Stepford Wives both portray different ways women can engage with the issue of work. The texts portray the career-oriented woman, the stay-at-home-mom, and the woman trying to combine motherhood with working outside the home. Through their depiction of these models, the texts’ views on them can be discerned. Both Desperate Housewives and The Stepford Wives are quite negative about the career woman model. A more traditional role for women appears to be favored. The model of the stay-at-home mom is portrayed as a potentially difficult and unfulfilling option, and is therefore not ideal, but also not a bad option. The texts’ depiction of the combination model differs. The Stepford Wives makes this option seem ideal, while Desperate Housewives shows the problems that in reality are part of combining work and family. Both texts suggest that working women should have a good family life.

The texts are similar in that they lack criticism of American society. The female characters are clearly limited in terms of options, but no real criticism is uttered. The texts seem to be informed more by postfeminist and conservative ideologies than by feminism. As Vint argues about The Stepford Wives, “[t]he film is feminist only to the extent that it agrees that making one’s wife into a robot is not necessarily a good thing” (165). Desperate Housewives is somewhat critical of the pressures society puts on women. However, generally, in both texts the women are often depicted struggling, but society, apparently, is not to blame. This suggests a postfeminist outlook. Desperate Housewives’ preference for individual solutions instead of collective ones also suggests it is informed by postfeminism. In the series women deal with their problems on their own, and tackle one problem at the time, instead of fighting the cause of their various problems. An example of this is Lynette who finds creative but not constructive solutions for her problems relating to work and family. Instead the women turn to the individualism Americans are known for. The negative depiction of the non-maternal career woman and the support for family life could be seen as informed by postfeminism or conservatism.

By studying The Stepford Wives and Desperate Housewives together it becomes clear that a beautiful façade can hide complicated lives from view. The women that have been discussed appear to have everything going for them: they live in beautiful homes, in lovely communities, are prosperous and intelligent, and benefit from their racial as well as class identity. However, the texts reveal that they, too, face difficulties in their lives. They all struggle with negotiating gender roles and with what society expects from them as women.
The texts hint at what problems may be present in suburban homes all over the United States. Just because they are not always directly visible, the issues of gender roles and women and work are still a problem in present-day America.

Naturally, this study is not exhaustive. Only three models for how women can deal with the issue of work have been discussed. *Desperate Housewives* shows a number of additional options for how to engage with this issue. For example, Susan is a single mother who works from home, and childless Gabrielle does not work outside or inside the home. This series provides many opportunities for further study. This is also true because the characters keep changing their lives. Not only in the first three seasons do the women switch models, but in the seasons after that they take on new roles as well. In addition, *Desperate Housewives* and *The Stepford Wives* appear to be mainly about women, yet they feature many different male characters. It would be interesting to research what constructs of masculinity are offered in these texts.

It could also be useful to look at how actual women respond to these texts and to the different models they are presented with. To what degree are they pushed into a model, and do they take the texts’ conservative message to heart, or do they resist it and make their own choices? It is unlikely that female viewers will simply let these texts dictate their lives. What *Desperate Housewives* and *The Stepford Wives* probably can do is make women question their role, or reinforce the belief that the way they have chosen to engage with the issue of employment is the right one (for them). However, viewers ought to remember that the potential to undermine these conservative messages is present in these texts as well. By watching carefully a more radical message may be discovered.
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