

Supernanny's Solutions for Families: An Ethnographic Content Analysis of Parenting Messages on Reality Television

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Parenting messages in 15 episodes of the television show Supernanny were investigated through an ethnographic content analysis. Using feminist, social learning, and cultivation theories, nine themes emerged: Children are Misbehaving, Parents Need Help, Maintain Control, Don't Be Harsh, Be a Couple, Engage with Kids, Techniques and Skills, Change Takes Work, and It Works. Results showed that mothers were frequently being told to seize control of their children and employ certain parenting techniques. Fathers were encouraged to help with housework, engage with their children, and not be harsh. Issues related to the themes, as well as implications of the study for parent educators and clinicians, are discussed.

KEYWORDS *Supernanny, parenting, self-help, television, media critique, parent education, feminism, feminist psychotherapy,*

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INTRODUCTION

Parents seek multiple forms of support and skills to solve problems (Norcross et al., 2000) and generally seek information that is economical, easy to attain, and expected to be effective. Parents may also prefer to seek help that offers anonymity; use of media (inexpensive, accessible, and anonymous) is believed to equal or exceed the practice of turning to professionals or personal contacts for help. All types of media resources for parents are expanding rapidly, including print, Internet, and television.

One source of parenting information for millions of people in the United States and around the globe is the television show *Supernanny*. As 98% of American households contain at least one television (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006a), *Supernanny* is available without additional investment and is more immediately and anonymously accessible than therapy or even a book (although the franchise also offers *Supernanny* books). The program offers great promise of success as well: Serious behavioral problems are solved in the space of one hour.

In the United States, *Supernanny* has been on the air since 2005. It has shaped viewers' ideals and methods as it entertains and educates. Based upon social learning and social cognitive theories (Bandura, 2001), cultivation theory (Signorielli & Morgan, 2001), and feminist theories (Fox & Murry, 2000; Osmond & Thorne, 1993), this qualitative ethnographic content analysis seeks to understand the content and messages directed at parents from the television show *Supernanny*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies suggest that television, whether intended to inform or entertain, shapes the perspectives of those who watch it (Andreasen, 2001; Signorielli & Morgan, 2001). Many messages are subtle and are arguably absorbed without the viewer's awareness (Sanders, Montgomery, & Brechman-Toussaint, 2000), but messages that are considered and rejected also shape the viewer's consideration of the issues (Holtzman, 2000). Family members endorse the power of television, holding that television imagery affects their ideals and expectations of family life (Albada, 2000). Viewing programs combining education and entertainment to teach parenting skills have been shown to change mothers' sense of competence as parents (Sanders, Montgomery, & Brechman-Toussaint, 2000).

Supernanny

Supernanny is a popular reality television program in which families call upon British nanny Jo Frost to help solve children's behavior problems. Originating on British television, the program has been on air since 2005 in the United States and has aired in at least 47 countries worldwide, reaching millions of viewers (Associated Press, 2006). All three of Frost's books have appeared on best-seller lists and have been translated into 13 languages (Walt Disney Internet Group, n.d.). In the popular literature, *Supernanny* has received mixed reviews. According to *Supernanny* Media Pack, the audience (1) shares a common priority which is the well-being of children and family, (2) consists primarily of parents with children of any age, and (3) is actively seeking new information and knowledge (Ricochet Limited, 2006). The program has been praised for its emphases on consistency, non-punitive discipline, and play (Gilbert, 2005), and for the perceived message that "even the most out-of-control children are no match for parents who are consistent, and that children need love, praise, and crucial boundaries" (Calhoun, 2005, p. 30). Critics cite concerns, however, that some of the advice is oversimplified and perhaps misguided, and that the families portrayed are extreme (Gilbert, 2005; Maio, 2006). Kohn (2005) and Gilbert (2005) question any truth in families changing so quickly and dramatically with little attention on deeper family issues. They also unite in questioning the power dynamics of behavioral control and the harshness of some of the portrayed solutions (Gilbert, 2005; Kohn, 2005).

Supernanny is in a powerful position to shape parents' views and behaviors. This study addresses the following question: With attention to gender and practices of parenting, what might the public learn about parenting from viewing *Supernanny*?

METHODS

Qualitative document analysis (QDA; Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider, 2008) served as the methodological framework for the study. QDA, also referred to as ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1987), examines media for the communication of meaning through a process of inductive coding, rather than the use of deductive coding typical of classical content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004). Inductive coding grounds the examination of topics and themes in the data, as well as the inferences drawn from them (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Deductive coding tests hypotheses and addresses questions generated from theories or extant research.

To guide the study, researchers used a triangulation of theories which included feminist informed theory (Fox & Murry, 2000). Feminist scholars agree that feminist research demonstrates

“the ways in which families entail a complex, politicized matrix of meaning and structure. At its very core, feminist family studies theorizes gender as a key axis on which power is distributed, deployed, and misused in families . . . Feminist family scholars recognize, however, that gender alone is not sufficient to understand the pervasiveness and interlocking reinforcement of structural inequities . . . Analysis of social structures . . . must go beyond gender to multiple and layered identities and systems of power and privilege, including race, class, sexuality, age, nationality, and ability status.” (Allen, Lloyd, & Few, 2009, p. 4)

Within this framework, the researchers' use of feminist theory brought to the forefront awareness of issues associated with gender, ethnicity, power, and public/private dichotomies (Ribbens & Edwards, 1998).

Sample

Selection of episodes. A purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) strategy resulted in the examination of 15 episodes of *Supernanny* (see Table 1). Five of seven episodes were randomly selected from the DVDs of the first ABC season of *Supernanny* (Powell, Armstrong, & Rowland, 2005). Season two episodes were not available, but the first 10 episodes of season three (Powell, Armstrong, Rowland, & Emmerson, 2007) were recorded on video-cassette by the first author, bringing the total number of episodes in the sample to 15.

Description of episode families. The families portrayed in the sample of *Supernanny* were limited in terms of many measures of personal and social diversity. In 12 of the 15 families, parents claimed or appeared to be married or permanently partnered, showing limited diversity in family form. Three of these families included stepchildren. One episode featured a

TABLE 1 Episode Guide

Family name	Original air date
Bowerstock	December 4, 2006
Bruno	February 12, 2007
Burnett	April 18, 2005
Fager	December 18, 2006
Gorbea	March 7, 2005
Haines	January 29, 2007
Jeans	January 17, 2005
McAfee	February 17, 2007
Mihalik	January 15, 2007
Nitti	February 5, 2007
Orm	January 31, 2005
Ririe	March 21, 2005
Smith	January 22, 2007
Swanson	January 8, 2007
Weinstein	December 11, 2006

mother with a live-in male partner, one revealed a divorced father, and one a widowed mother. In all families that included two parents, the parents were of two different genders, suggesting limited sexual orientation diversity in the sample.

Although feminist family studies theory posits that it is important to address a multitude of issues such as class, religion, ability level, and ethnicity, researchers in this study were unable to accurately ensure the demographic details of each member of each family due to limited information provided in the episodes. In the absence of questioning families directly about their self-identification and specific demographics, researchers were left with assumptions and inferences about other important demographic diversity such as ethnicity, religion, ability, and socioeconomic status. One indicator from which the public might infer socioeconomic status is the size of the home. There was a range, if somewhat limited, of the sizes of the homes in which the portrayed families lived: Everyone in the sample lived in a house or apartment; no families were homeless, nor did any families appear to inhabit mansions. Assumptions about ethnicity were based only on appearance for this study. From this perspective, researchers made the assumption that all members of all 15 families on the *Supernanny* episodes analyzed were white, and only one of those 15 appeared to have also been of Latino descent.

Most mothers in the sample (8 of 15) self-identified as stay-at-home mothers. Two mothers' work statuses were not discussed or referenced, and they were only shown at home. Four mothers mentioned their professions. Thus, between 57% and 71% of the mothers in the sample were stay-at-home mothers, which is in marked contrast to the national averages of 32% for mothers of children under 12 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006b). Most fathers in the sample worked for pay, with all but two referring to their work. Several fathers were reported to regularly travel away from their families for extended periods on business.

The families had a range of two to six children each, with a mean of 3.73 children per family, as compared to the national average of 2.1 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). There were four sets of twins in three of the families portrayed, also a marked variation from what would be seen in the population at large, in which 1 in 31 births is of twins (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). More boys than girls appeared on the program (35 and 21, respectively). The children's ages ranged from 1 year to 15 years of age, with a mean age of 5.66. Of 56 children, only 10 were 9 years of age or older. One child had cerebral palsy, and one had previously been treated for cancer.

Procedure

To review the programs as closely as possible to how they are viewed on television, the first author watched each recorded episode in its entirety.

While viewing each program, detailed notes were typed about what was being seen and heard. To ensure that the synopses created by the first author accurately captured the key content, the first three episodes were viewed and synopses were recorded both by the first author and several peers. After comparing synopses, all reviewers agreed that the synopsis developed by the first author captured the essence of the program. To further ensure trustworthiness of the study (Patton, 2002), peers were involved at each stage of the coding process, and an audit trail was kept in regard to method decisions, particularly the development of codes and themes.

Coding and Data Analysis

Coding for this study was inductive. Each of the synopses was first divided into segments, or short blocks of time in the program which told a discrete story. The total count of segments was 495, for an average of 33 segments per episode. To develop the codes, the first and last author reviewed the synopses of five episodes and inductively produced a “start list” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 58) of 55 possible codes that served as a base for subsequent coding. In accordance with template analysis (King, 1998), the start list was adjusted to reflect new codes and the combining of codes. Because the images and messages of each segment were complex, it was not unusual for segments to have multiple codes assigned. Once the initial coding was complete, the code list was used to induce a thematic structure of themes and sub-themes. For clarity, direct references to episodes will be denoted by the last name of the family written inside brackets that appeared on the episode (e.g., [Jeans]; see Table 1).

RESULTS

In the 15 episodes of *Supernanny* that were reviewed, 9 themes and 20 sub-themes emerged (see Table 2). The nine themes were *Children are Misbehaving*, *Parents Need Help*, *Maintain Control*, *Don't Be Harsh*, *Be a Couple*, *Engage with Children*, *Techniques and Skills*, *Change Takes Work*, and *It Works*. The first four themes did not contain sub-themes. The fifth theme, *Be a Couple*, contained three sub-themes: “*You need to be on the same page*,” “*Would it hurt you to put the dishes in the washer?*” and “*It's good that you spent quality time as a couple*.” The sixth theme, *Engage with Children*, included two sub-themes: “*We're going to have some fun*,” and “*I want to see affection*.” *Techniques and Skills*, the seventh theme, was organized into eleven sub-themes: *set expectations*, *organize*, *establish routine*, *set up for success*, *reward*, *warn*, *withdraw*, *use tone of voice*, *get down*, *monitor*, and *naughty place*. *Change Takes Work*, the eighth theme, contained no sub-themes. Finally, the ninth theme, *It Works*, was divided

TABLE 2 Results

Theme (bold) Sub-theme (<i>italics</i>)	Number of episodes	Number of segments	Percentage of total segments
Children are Misbehaving	15	162	33%
Parents Need Help	15	84	17%
Maintain Control	15	96	19%
Don't Be Harsh	6	38	8%
Be a Couple	9	69	14%
<i>"You need to be on the same page"</i>			
<i>"Would it hurt you to put the dishes in the washer?"</i>			
<i>"It's good that you spent quality time as a couple"</i>			
Engage with Children	13	109	22%
<i>"We're going to have some fun"</i>			
<i>"I want to see affection"</i>			
Techniques and Skills	15	170	34%
<i>Set expectations</i>			
<i>Organize</i>			
<i>Establish routine</i>			
<i>Set up for success</i>			
<i>Reward</i>			
<i>Warn</i>			
<i>Withdraw</i>			
<i>Use tone of voice</i>			
<i>Get down</i>			
<i>Monitor</i>			
<i>Naughty place</i>			
Change Takes Work	15	139	28%
It Works	15	113	23%
<i>"It actually worked"</i>			
<i>"Sitting with him at the table felt wonderful"</i>			
<i>"This family has made great strides"</i>			
<i>Silly kids</i>			

into four sub-themes: *"It actually worked," "Sitting with him at the table felt wonderful," "This family has made great strides,"* and *silly kids*.

Children are Misbehaving

Every episode and 33% of the total segments ($n = 162$) contained examples of children misbehaving. Overall, the children's misbehavior in *Supernanny* accentuated "acting out" behaviors and included images of children talking back to or ignoring parents, swearing, throwing tantrums, making messes, demanding too much attention, running off, yelling, and being violent with parents or siblings. Images of children misbehaving were especially prevalent at the beginning of each episode and were often part of the context

for another message, suggesting that parents were at their wits' end or that parents should punish more. Thus, while misbehavior added flair to introductions and discussions and was the subtext to many techniques and trainings, it was rarely the sole focus of a segment.

Parents Need Help

In the segments advancing the second theme, parents were shown struggling in vain with their children's poor behavior and reporting their frustration and discouragement. Either Jo or the parents claimed that the parent was at a loss as to what to do to change their current situation, which they found exhausting, difficult, stressful, and/or embarrassing. Every introduction by the parents at the beginning of the episodes included this message. In one introduction, for example, a mother commented that the day was long and exhausting, that she was afraid to take her kids out in public, and she spent so much time stressed out that she had not been able to enjoy her kids [Jeans]. This theme was apparent in 17% ($n = 84$) of the total segments. Many more mothers (58% of the segments) than fathers (19% of the segments) highlighted their exhaustion and discouragement.

Maintain Control

The third theme in *Supernanny* encourages parents to demand respect and take charge. Jo chastised parents—especially mothers—for not being in control, for being weak, and for letting their children treat them rudely. This theme was apparent in 19% ($n = 96$) of the total number of segments and appeared in every episode in the sample. Some of Jo's comments were expressed while she shook her head at the camera or in a tone of shock, such as: "Mom doesn't exercise authority—they don't look at her with respect" [Orm] and "I think it's crazy that she tolerates that kind of behavior" [Jeans]. The message that parents need to stand up was also advanced by Jo's praise of parents taking control, such as in the statement, "there's been a lot of change—Lisa [mom] has a backbone" [Nitti]. Mothers were the target of this message in 72% ($n = 69$) of the segments containing the theme, while fathers alone were the target of the message only six times (6%), with five of these segments occurring in the one episode highlighting the single father. Parents together also advanced this theme in their reflections on their own behavior and by talking about the behavior of their spouse.

Don't Be Harsh

Eight percent of the total segments ($n = 38$) in six episodes included the fourth theme, *Don't Be Harsh*. In these segments, both physical aggression and harsh tones were targeted for criticism and transformation, and when

parents learned how to eliminate these harsh techniques, the absence was celebrated by Jo, parents, and children. Jo coached parents to be less intimidating to children and was explicitly disapproving of “smacking” or spanking children and using soap to wash out children’s mouths [Bowerstock]. Fathers were criticized for being too harsh in 55% ($n = 21$) of the segments containing this theme, while mothers were corrected in 37% ($n = 14$) of the segments. In three cases, both parents together were told to be less harsh, aggressive, or intimidating. Two episodes [Bowerstock and Nitti] in season three accounted for more than half ($n = 21$) of the examples of this theme.

Be a Couple

The fifth theme, *Be a Couple*, reflected the recognition that parenting affects couple relationships and vice versa. This theme occurred in 9 of the 15 episodes sampled and was evident in 14% ($n = 69$) of all segments. It consisted of three sub-themes: “*You need to be on the same page*,” “*Would it hurt you to put the dishes in the washer?*” and “*It’s good that you spent quality time as a couple*.”

“*You need to be on the same page!*” The most dominant sub-theme of *Be a Couple* (46% of the theme) provided the message that parents must spend time together rather than “tag team” and stand together as parents. Jo repeatedly exclaimed, “You need to be on the same page!” [Ririe] and exhorted parents to “keep talking, Mom and Dad” [Bowerstock]. In one segment, she explained to the audience with shock in her tone, “The minute mom got home, dad was gone. Never mind not being on the same page—they aren’t even in the same place” [Swanson].

“*Would it hurt you to put dishes in the washer?*” In 23 of the segments (33% of the theme), *Be a Couple* took the form of a call by Jo for a parent to give more support to his/her spouse by more fully participating in parenting and/or household duties. In 91% ($n = 21$) of the occurrences, fathers were the recipients of this message. Fathers were exhorted to notice that their spouses were conducting the majority of the parenting and household chores and that the fathers would be expected to provide equal work with children and in the home. Fathers were specifically criticized for unequal parenting and housework. Jo asked one father, “Why can’t you make it easier for Joanne? Would it hurt you to put dishes in the washer?” [Burnett]. Watching another father read a newspaper while his kids acted out, Jo exclaimed to the audience, “How come Dad isn’t doing any of the discipline?” [Ririe].

“*It’s good that you spent quality time as a couple*.” This general message about parents needing to spend time together, show affection, and trust each other was present in 14 segments and comprised 20% of the segments in the theme *Be a Couple*. For example, Jo told parents, “It’s good that you spent quality time as a couple. Letting go is important time” [Fager].

This sub-theme was also apparent in comments about success, such as one father commenting that Jo gave his wife and him back their life as a couple [Weinstein].

Engage with Children

A sixth theme in *Supernanny* was that children need their parents' positive attention. Twenty-two percent ($n = 109$) of the total segments advanced this theme in 13 different episodes. Dads were the vehicle of this message in 57% ($n = 62$) of the instances and mothers in 13% ($n = 14$) of the cases. The message was evident in two forms, described by the sub-themes, "*We're going to have some fun*" and "*I want to see affection.*"

"*We're going to have some fun.*" The 56 segments (51% of the theme) included in the sub-theme "*We're going to have some fun*" suggested that kids need the attention and involvement of their parents by stating that this time should be fun, play is important, and parents should bring imagination and liveliness to their children's lives. For example, Jo created a detective game for one "emotionally absent" father and later commented, "It was so important for him [Dad] to show enthusiasm—he really got into it" [Haines]. This message was directed at fathers 41% ($n = 23$) of the time, as opposed to mothers in 11% ($n = 6$) of the segments in this sub-theme. Forty-eight percent ($n = 27$) of the occurrences of the sub-theme referred to both parents needing to be more fun or to entire families needing to have fun together, such as when Jo narrated a family trip to the bowling alley with the comment, "I wanted to get them having fun because there's that side too" [Mihalik].

"*I want to see affection.*" The second sub-theme of the exhortation to engage with children was evident in 53 segments, or 49% of the theme occurrences. These segments focused on the relationship itself, and the necessity of parents to give their children attention, affection, time to communicate, and often the need to repair relationships. In one segment, for example, a father commented about what he had gained from Jo's presence: "Two weeks ago Taylor and I couldn't even have a normal conversation. Now I respect her to the utmost and talk to her" [Bruno]. Seventy-four percent ($n = 39$) of the occurrences of this focused on fathers, 15% ($n = 8$) centered on mothers, and 11% ($n = 6$) emphasized families, parents together, or more general comments.

Techniques and Skills

Supernanny is a blend of general messages about parenting and specific techniques to employ. References to *Supernanny* techniques and other specific skills for parents were made in 34% ($n = 170$) of all segments and were among the most overtly taught lessons of the episodes. Eleven skills were

evident and are described below as the sub-themes: *set expectations*, *organize*, *establish routine*, *set up for success*, *reward*, *warn*, *withdraw*, *use tone of voice*, *get down*, *monitor*, and *naughty place*. In 8 of the 11 sub-themes, mothers were told to model the skill more often than fathers or parents together.

Set expectations. The most commonly referenced skill (42 times in 12 episodes) was to set rules and clearly communicate them to the children. In a number of episodes, Jo delineated household rules, such as “no hitting” and “listen to your parents” and posted them on the wall. At varying times, Jo encouraged parents to remind their children of the expectations, such as instructing parents to tell their children how to act before walking into a hotel [Fager]. This advice was more often directed at mothers in 55% of the cases ($n = 23$) than fathers in only 12% ($n = 5$) of the instances, with the remaining 33% ($n = 14$) of statements directed to both parents, entire families, or as general statements to the audience.

Organize. Getting organized was encouraged 15 times in seven episodes. Jo told parents to establish systems in their homes. In one episode, she watched parents searching for shoes and commented that the “. . . house badly needs organization” [Jeans]. In another episode, Jo equated disorganization with stress and expressed shock that it took an hour just to get out the door [Mihalik]. This theme focused on mothers in four instances (27% of the sub-theme) and was only once solely directed at a father (6% of the sub-theme). In 67% ($n = 10$) of the occurrences of this sub-theme, either Jo or the parents together modeled that organization was needed.

Establish routine. Establishing a routine was another technique regularly encouraged on *Supernanny*. Overall, routines were discussed 22 times in 8 episodes. Jo explained that children like structure and to know what is coming next, while parents find it helpful to have a plan for the day. In one episode, Jo laughs that she could not blame a child for throwing his food rather than eating it, because mealtimes were too close together and the child was full [Burnett]. In 55% ($n = 12$) of the segments, both parents and families as a whole were targets of the theme, compared to fathers in 32% ($n = 7$) of the cases, and mothers in 14% ($n = 3$) of the time.

Set up for success. Messages in this sub-theme included knowing children’s developmental capabilities and providing age-appropriate activities and expectations as a way to decrease children’s acting out behavior. Jo explained to families that children are less likely to misbehave when appropriately stimulated and coached parents on how to get children involved at the grocery store, bring along activities, enlist youth in getting ready to leave the house, sooth children when upset, and know age appropriate expectations. This skill appeared in 12 episodes and was referenced a total of 31 times. It was directed at mothers 39% ($n = 12$) of the time and to the couple 39% ($n = 12$) of the time. The remaining 23% of the occurrences were directed at fathers.

Reward. Jo also advocated rewarding children's good behavior by offering praise or treats and incentives. Messages in this sub-theme involved Jo's suggestions to parents to positively reinforce their children's correct behavior through praise and age appropriate incentives, such as an opportunity to ride the mechanical toy horse after a positive experience at a store. These types of statements were apparent 29 times in 14 episodes. Forty-eight percent ($n = 14$) of the occurrences centered on mothers and 14% ($n = 4$) focused on fathers. In 38% ($n = 11$) of the messages in this sub-theme, both parents together or general messages from Jo encouraged positive responses to good behavior.

Warn. Comparatively, when children did not behave as parents had instructed them to, Jo recommended reminding children of the expectation with a clear warning that if they did not change their behavior they would be disciplined. In almost every case the discipline was to be the "naughty place," but losing privileges was also a possibility. Jo coached one mother: "This is the time that you should stop the nonsense. Lower your voice and give a warning" [Orm]. Warnings were referenced 20 times in 11 episodes. Mothers advanced the sub-theme in 60% ($n = 12$) of the cases, and fathers in 30% ($n = 6$) of the occurrences. General messages accounted for the sub-theme twice (10%).

Withdraw. Jo suggested that once a parent had clearly communicated with his/her child, the parent should withdraw or even "just walk away" when a child was being too clingy, having a tantrum, supposed to be going to sleep, in time-out, or "stalling a situation." In one episode, Jo instructed a mother whose child would not stay in the naughty place to "Put them back and say nothing. Again and again" [Burnett]. Withdrawing was discussed as a skill for parents in 27 instances spanning 12 episodes. In 78% of the cases ($n = 21$), the mother was the target of the message, while fathers were the focus 15% ($n = 4$) of the time, and general statements made up 7% ($n = 2$) of the segments containing the sub-theme.

Use tone of voice. A simple but recurring message to parents in 26 references over 9 episodes was to practice using their tone of voice for both praise and warnings. Several times, Jo coached parents on how to change their tone to be taken more seriously, show joy, or be less intimidating. For example, Jo took a father outside and demonstrated how his children perceive his voice [Weinstein]. Mothers were the target of comments about tone in 65% of instances ($n = 17$), and the message was directed at fathers in 27% of the cases ($n = 7$). It was otherwise advanced in 8% of the occurrences ($n = 2$).

Get down. To communicate effectively with children, Jo repeatedly told parents to get down to the child's level and establish eye contact. Jo encouraged parents to kneel down so they were not towering over their children and could more directly connect for both praise and warnings. At least 12 references in six episodes encouraged this technique. Seventy-five percent of

these ($n = 9$) references centered on mothers, 17% ($n = 2$) on fathers, and 8% ($n = 1$) on parents together.

Monitor. In six episodes, 19 references were made to parents needing to monitor their children more closely in response to children running off, such as at the mall or leaving the house without asking. In some cases, Jo directed parents to put locks on doors above the reach of young children. In 68% ($n = 13$) of the cases, this message to monitor was directed at mothers, and the remaining six cases (32%) targeted parents together; in no cases were fathers alone told to monitor their children.

Naughty place. The naughty place was a widely referenced technique that incorporated many of the other skills and was the second most commonly referenced technique (34 times in 13 episodes). Essentially, time-out was a designated place where children were to be sent if they continued to misbehave after a warning. Parents were instructed to give a warning preferably by getting down to the child's level and using a low tone. If that did not cease the behavior, a parent was to put the child in the naughty place, come down to his/her level, and explain why the child was there and how long the child would be there (one minute per year of age). The parent was then to walk away. If the child did not remain in the naughty place, the parent was to silently and repeatedly put them back until they finally remained. In several episodes, it took hours of work before the child stayed in the naughty place. After the designated amount of time, the parent was told to return, tell the child again why he/she was put in the naughty place, ask for and receive an apology, and then hold no grudges.

In the segments promoting the naughty place, mothers referred to or practiced the technique 53% ($n = 18$) of the time, as opposed to 26% ($n = 9$) of the time for fathers and 21% ($n = 7$) of the cases in which Jo or the parents together implemented the naughty place. In addition to the naughty place, Jo taught other composite skills to parents, such as the sleep separation technique to get children asleep at a chosen time and in their own beds and the off-the-hip technique to help a parent encourage more independence in children who wanted to be held all the time.

Change Takes Work

The eighth theme, evident in 139 segments (28% of the total) and in every episode, was that accomplishing change takes work and requires endurance and commitment to consistency, despite discomfort. The most extreme examples were endurance contests between parents (usually mothers) and children. In one segment, for example, a child was shown repeatedly getting out of bed and being put back. At times, a count displayed at the bottom of the screen showed that the child was getting out of bed for the 30th or 42nd time. This sense of conflict was supported by comments from Jo such as "This was going to be war," and "Tina's going to do what she can

to make you do what you used to do" [Weinstein]. Despite being based in difficulty, the underlying message of the theme was paradoxically one of hope: Parents had the power to make changes if they were tough enough to calmly and consistently follow through. This message focused on mothers in 40% ($n = 56$) of the occurrences, fathers in 26% ($n = 36$) of the cases, and both parents together or general comments in 34% ($n = 47$) of the segments.

It Works

Whereas the initial portion of *Supernanny* episodes demonstrated how miserable parents were, the episodes became increasingly focused on amazed parents expressing shock that their kids were behaving, praises from Jo for a job well done, and gratitude expressed by families at the conclusion of the episodes. *It Works* was evident in 113 segments (23% of the total segments) and in every episode, and was further classified into four categories: "*It actually worked*," "*Sitting with him at the table felt wonderful*," "*This family has made great strides*," and "*silly kids*."

"*It actually worked*." Thirty-five of the successes (31% of the theme, *It Works*) in 14 episodes were connected to teachable techniques resulting in good results. Examples include a mother smiling at the image of herself calmly putting her child on the naughty mat and saying, "It's important—we didn't have that before" [Smith], and Jo commenting that the dad was following the routine and putting dishes in the dishwasher for the first time [Burnett]. Of these successes of technique, 49% ($n = 17$) were accomplished by mothers, 23% ($n = 10$) by fathers, and 23% ($n = 8$) by both parents.

"*Sitting with him at the table felt wonderful*." Thirty-five segments (31% of the theme) occurring in 10 episodes contained relational successes such as talking and playing with children or engaging with a spouse. In one segment, a father was seen playing with his young daughters; Jo commented that the girls were craving this stimulation, and the dad concluded that he had never had time like that with them and did not want it to end [McAfee]. Of the 35 relational successes, 21% ($n = 7$) were accomplished by mothers, 56% ($n = 19$) were accomplished by fathers, and the remaining 24% ($n = 8$) referenced family or couple successes. Only 2 of the 35 segments containing this theme aired in the first season.

"*This family has made great strides*." Thirty-three of the segments in the theme, *It Works*, were general statements, usually occurring at the end of the episodes about the many changes that had been accomplished, often referring to redemption. One segment, for example, was a dad commenting that they were better parents and mom concluding that Jo gave them their family back [Ririe]. These changes touched on a number of themes already discussed, including having a solid couple relationship, maintaining control, and enjoying time with the kids/family.

Silly kids. The last sub-theme of *It Works* was found in the final clips of each *Supernanny* episode as a backdrop to the credits. Eleven segments (10% of the theme, *It Works*) fit into this sub-theme and included images of children acting very silly, happy, playful, but still slightly mischievous. For example, several small children in their small chairs repeatedly tip themselves over onto the carpet of their cleaned-up playroom, laughing as they tumble [Weinstein]. This silly behavior is clearly a sanctioned behavior in the structurally-improved family environment. Although the segments suggest that parents can engage in a very different type of interaction with their children, the images are in marked contrast to earlier visions of the same screaming, unhappy, violent children.

DISCUSSION

This feminist-informed study was conducted to understand the types of messages conveyed to participant parents in the television show *Supernanny*. In sum, 20 sub-themes were present in 9 overarching themes: *Children are Misbehaving*, *Parents Need Help*, *Maintain Control*, *Don't Be Harsh*, *Be a Couple*, *Engage with Children*, *Techniques and Skills*, *Change Takes Work*, and *It Works*. While some of these messages were positive and consistent with research on effective parenting, other advice presented was more problematic. The researchers in this discussion are guided by a number of principles of feminist theory, most notably that of focusing on process (Fox & Murry, 2000). This study embraces the notion that in order to examine important processes such as parenting, parenting must be viewed in the context of ongoing time and other important life events. Like feminist-informed studies before, this study will embrace the notion that we are studying not only the parenting practices of the people involved, but their ever-evolving sense of self as a member of a family and larger system.

Change: Who Needs It and How Does It Happen?

The exhaustion, devastation, stress, and uncertainty that parents on *Supernanny* experience is consistent with what research shows about the challenges of being a parent (Benzies, Harrison, & Magill-Evans, 2004; Galinsky, 1999; Mockford & Barlow, 2004). *Supernanny* also portrays the message that screaming, cursing, fighting children are, indeed, unhappy, out of control, and a problem that warrants attention. Thus, parents may find their own frustrations and concerns normalized by these messages of the program and may be encouraged to seek help by viewing other parents doing so. However, the overemphasis on externalizing behaviors may also serve to blind parents to more subtle difficulties, such as depression, that their children are experiencing. Also, comparing themselves to the televised

imagery of extreme misbehavior and stress, parents may internalize the message that their families are functioning comparatively well. Instead of seeking help, parents can instead say to themselves, "We're not as bad as *that*."

Similarly, parents may be either encouraged or discouraged from working to improve family functioning by the portrayals on *Supernanny* of how change happens. *Supernanny* teaches that accomplishing change takes persistent, hard work but simultaneously portrays quick successes which appear inspiring. This may set parents up to be intimidated by the amount of hard work it takes to make changes and to be discouraged when new techniques they do try do not work as immediately as they did on the program. The final transformations highlighted at the end of a *Supernanny* episode, as evident in the theme, *It Works*, may suggest to parents that changes can be accomplished once and for all, with little ongoing work needed.

A final concern about how change is presented on *Supernanny* is based on the limited sphere of change that is targeted on the TV program. One message of the theme *Change Takes Work*, that parents alone are responsible for the change, may obscure societal influences impacting families; every problem becomes personal in an isolated context, and work-family policies or economic factors that impact multiple families are obscured. Yet, these broader social factors have a large impact on parenting (Moran & Ghate, 2005). Similarly, the gendered societal message that mothers are solely responsible for the change in their child's behavior could also have a serious effect on viewers who take it to heart. Finally, people in the United States routinely describe the father's role in childrearing and housework as "helping" the mother. This gender-biased perspective was observed in some of the messages from *Supernanny* and are likely to perpetuate the stereotype of fathers as secondary in importance in the private family realm.

The Fine Line of Discipline

Jo's encouragement of parents to be in control and clear about expectations and limits without being harsh is a positive lesson. The message of the theme *Don't Be Harsh* is well supported by the research literature which associates harsh parenting with psychological difficulties in children (Bettner & Lew, 2000; Roelofs, Meesters, ter Huurne, Bamelis, & Muris, 2006). An authoritative parenting style, in which parents are consistent, involved, and clear about boundaries has been shown to be the preferred model (Galambos, Barker, & Almeida, 2003; Shamir, Schudlich, & Cummings, 2001; Simons & Conger, 2007). *Supernanny* balanced the message of discipline with the messages that parental acceptance of children (Dick & Bronson, 2005; Laible & Carlo, 2004; Roelofs et al., 2006; Wilkinson, 2004) and play (Ginsburg, 2007; Tsao, 2002) are important, both to children's development and to family cohesion.

Time-out, the most frequently referenced parenting technique, is a largely respected practice in the research literature (Arnoscht, 2000; Eaves,

Sheperis, Blanchard, Baylot, & Doggett, 2005; Everett et al., 2007). However, time-out can be difficult to use effectively (Eaves et al., 2005; Mockford & Barlow, 2004) and is perhaps not as simple as *Supernanny* teaches. Parents are encouraged not to use time-out with very small children, not to threaten time-out, and not to engage in a physical struggle to get children to time-out (Dunlop, Fox, Hemmeter, & Strain, 2004; Schreiber, 1999). *Supernanny's* overreliance on this one behavior technique may be a concern because research also suggests it may increase frustration in children rather than help them to learn to deal with their feelings (Schreiber, 1999). With these factors in mind, it would likely be preferable for parents to be exposed to a broader scope of positive discipline practices to augment time-out, for example, natural consequences (e.g., Fox & Langhans, 2005), or Love and Logic (Cline & Fay, 1993).

Prioritizing Parental Mental Health

Several different themes, such as *Parents Need Help*, *Be a Couple*, and *Change Takes Work*, convey the message that parents need to take care of and replenish themselves and their relationship. This is consistent with research connecting parents' (especially mothers') emotional problems with developmental difficulties in children (Lyons-Ruth, Wolf, & Lyubchik, 2000) and has been associated with decreased stress and improved psychological well-being with more positive family outcomes (Mistry, Stevens, Sareen, DeVogli, & Halfon, 2007). Similarly, Jo's encouragement of parents to be equally involved is consistent with feminist-informed research on what leads to successful relationships and satisfying family lives (Ehrenberg, Gearing-Small, Hunter, & Small, 2001; Haddock, Zimmerman, Current, & Harvey, 2002; Haddock, Zimmerman, Ziembra, & Current, 2001).

However, instead of encouraging time alone, alone as a couple, or help-seeking from friends and professionals as described in the literature (Haddock et al., 2001; Haddock et al., 2002), the troubling take-home message for parents was, "Work harder (or at least smarter). Put your feelings aside, get parenting right, and everything will be okay." With research literature clear on the positive impact of social support on parental well-being (Mistry et al., 2007; Stewart, 2001) and the negative impacts of parental conflict on children (Erath & Bierman, 2006; Shamir et al., 2001), this was a missed opportunity to convey the messages that parental mental health and the couple's relationship is important to the health of the family as a whole.

Differences in Portrayals of Mothers and Fathers

Equality in parenting, regardless of the gender of the parents, is a key tenant in feminist theory, especially feminist family studies theory (Allen et al., 2009). Feminists have often critiqued the media portrayal of women as solely

responsible for parenting activities while fathers were depicted as inept or uninterested in that arena. Some have studied media portrayals of parenting and claim that the media depiction of motherhood remains highly traditional (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). The results of this study showed Jo encouraging parents to be equally involved in parenting and to share responsibility for housework and discipline. On the other hand, with the exception of the theme *Children are Misbehaving*, all the themes contained gender bias (see Table 3). Parents were praised for achieving balanced partnerships in parenting, but the actual picture presented was similar to what research shows about families in the media: Fathers are seen playing with their children more often (Kaufman, 1999) while mothers do the background work, such as housework and discipline, to make the father's engagement possible (Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Reep & Dambrot, 1994).

The fact that the feedback provided to parents was so strongly related to gender is not the concern in and of itself; Jo's directions may simply reflect what is most needed, a response to equalize unbalanced roles. Rather, the concern about the gendered messages rests on the disconnection between the overt message and the still unequal model of success continuously presented in the media where mothers on television do more of the instrumental work of families while fathers are portrayed engaging with kids (Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Kaufman, 1999; Reep & Dambrot, 1994). These distorted depictions of what shared parenting actually looks like may explain the research finding that wives do considerably more housework than husbands, even in families in which both partners report a fair division of labor. This subtly reinforces mothers as more responsible for families, which in turn arguably perpetuates stereotypes on mothers. Furthermore, the literature suggests that stay-at-home mothers are rarely presented as competent (Johnston & Swanson, 2003), and the high number of portrayals on *Supernanny* of struggling stay-at-home mothers may continue to reinforce this stereotype for viewers.

TABLE 3 Occurrences of the Sub-Themes of *Techniques and Skills* by Target

	Episodes	Total occurrences	% Mothers	% Fathers	Other
Rule/expectation	12	42	55%	12%	33%
Reward/praise/incentives	14	29	48%	14%	38%
Withdraw/don't engage	12	27	78%	15%	7%
Tone	9	26	65%	27%	8%
Set up for success	11	23	39%	23%	39%
Routine	8	22	14%	32%	55%
Warn	10	20	60%	30%	10%
Monitor	6	19	68%	0%	32%
Get down	6	12	75%	17%	8%
Organize	7	9	27%	32%	66%
Naughty place	13	34	53%	26%	34%

Clinical Implications

By understanding the manner in which the mass media may be shaping parents' efforts or understandings, a practitioner is more aware of what information is available or invisible, and can shape interventions accordingly. For example, a therapist might choose to emphasize alternatives to time-out in a conversation about responding to misbehavior to offset the emphasis on time-out on *Supernanny*. Focusing on parenting messages in the media is also an effective way for therapists to build rapport or deepen conversations with families. The familiarity of television may provide a sense of safety, which could make discussions easier for newer clients. A group could begin with the parents together reflecting on what they have learned about parenting and parenting equality from watching television; this is both a more social enterprise that would help parents connect with one another and less threatening for public discussion than focusing only on one's own family.

Practitioners may also choose to incorporate *Supernanny* clips or episodes into homework assignments by asking clients to rehearse how they would respond to the behaviors portrayed on *Supernanny* episodes. Or, a parent could be instructed to take notes about the emotions they experience when viewing footage that is comparable to the situations they are experiencing in their own lives, such as a tendency to be harsh or not to draw boundaries for children. Practitioners and clients could view clips of the show together in session to critique the parenting of the families depicted as a learning tool for change. This would also enable parents to discuss why certain techniques may or may not work in their particular situation. They could also point out where they see issues of consistency, positive tone, and good boundaries as a way to demonstrate their developing knowledge of improved parenting practices. Finally, issues of power in the couple relationship may come to light after viewing *Supernanny* episodes such that couples begin to explore how gendered stereotypes influence the power distribution in their relationships.

Given some of the messages in *Supernanny* about how daunting and challenging change can be, practitioners should bear in mind that viewing *Supernanny* may not be an asset for parents beginning to seek help. Parents may both have heightened expectations about rapid change and concerns about the message that change requires painful endurance. Practitioners would be wise to address these messages about how change occurs directly with clients who are fond of *Supernanny*. This will enable clients to better prepare for the reality of how long change can take and how much consistency is required. Finally, practitioners could explore with parents which set of values they would like to use to guide their parenting. This would be an excellent opportunity to discuss how "one size does not fit all" and that the values that guide *Supernanny* may not be appropriate for all families.

Limitations and Future Research

The scope of these results are limited to the *Supernanny* episodes included in the sample and may not be generalized to other aired episodes due to variations in family types and problems depicted. Whereas the themes suggest what parents might be learning about parenting in two-parent, heterosexually-led families, it indeed remains unclear what viewers actually digest and learn from the show; it is possible that viewers more easily absorb certain messages than others. A third limitation is that the content conveyed in *Supernanny* is extremely complex, including sound, sight, verbal segment, and nonverbal communication. Although some of this imagery was captured by the synopses, this study has been biased toward the verbal aspect of the program. In addition, all of the episodes would have been heavily edited and may have been biased by the editors and producers in terms of the clips shown in the one-hour episode. Finally, due to the complexity of the messages and the focus on parenting, this study likely emphasized the portrayal of parents over the representation of children.

A number of research directions are suggested by this study. Future studies should examine how families' perceptions of their own parenting and relational problems are altered by exposure to programs that depict parenting problems, especially in order to compare and contrast what certain viewers take from certain types of family depictions. Other studies should determine whether parents are more or less likely to recognize unproductive behaviors in themselves and their children after watching these types of programs. An exploration of how levels of understanding of child behavior and behavior management change over time among parents exposed or not exposed to such programming could be of use. It may also prove useful to explore whether this increased knowledge leads to self-motivated change or to expanded help-seeking. Finally, the subjective experience of participants of reality shows, especially of underage children, is unexplored territory.

While the researchers were influenced by their feminist lenses in this study, and feminist theory informed the entire process, other theories could be used to study the content and processes depicted in *Supernanny* episodes to reveal a different but equally valid point of view. Many sociological, psychological, family studies, human development, and psychotherapeutic theories could be applied to a similar study which might reveal different insights and conclusions.

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