This article examines mothers’ labours in recessionary culture, elaborating how mothers must become flexible, resilient and enterprising in order to keep their families happy and secure during precarious times. Through an ethnographic account of one mother’s unsettled post-recession life, we contend that mothers become mamapreneurial, augmenting their families’ incomes and ensuring their prosperity by rationalizing their everyday labours and emotions. Enlisting a range of technologies of appreciation, such as couponing and digitally enabled work-at-home enterprises, mamapreneurs thus embark on a fourth shift of labour, adding onto what Arlie Hochschild calls mothers’ ‘second shift’ of domestic administration and ‘third shift’ of emotional management. Demonstrating how mamapreneurialism promises to soothe the volatilities and impossibilities of family in precarious times by reconstituting all of life as an instrumentalized web of affective labour, we ultimately argue that it constitutes a relation of cruel optimism that channels mothers’ labours into the very systems that guarantee neoliberal precarity.

Keywords mothers; cruel optimism; neoliberalism; women’s work; precarity; digital media

Jenny

In 2008, 23-year-old Jenny, her husband Dan, his 5-year-old son and their 2-year-old son lost their financial footing when Dan was laid off from his well-paying job in the Wyoming oil fields. Jenny, a conservative Christian and committed stay-at-home mother, was just two weeks away from giving birth to their third son, and her parents and siblings were across the country in Northwestern Pennsylvania. Forced to short-sell their home and give up their family car, the family ultimately decided to move back to Pennsylvania to start over. Five years later, Jenny nursed her newborn (the couple’s fourth son) in the kitchen of their rented 1940s Cape Cod home as she matter-of-factly described the punishing tides of advanced neoliberalism that wrecked her family’s life:
When the economy tanked and when everything went south, he got laid off, and at that point we owned a home, we had a car. I mean, life was a heck of a lot different that it is now. And he lost, we lost everything. And then he had been unemployed for a year and half. And we were just, we had no help, we didn’t know what else to do. And we were trying to work our way up out there, but it just wasn’t going anywhere so we moved out here just to kind of start over. And my family’s here, and we had help here.

By the time Jenny told us this story, her husband had found a job as a deliveryman, and the family had settled into their new life. Jenny, now an active member of Mothers of Preschoolers (MOPS), a Christian support group for mothers, was also continuing to pioneer strategies for augmenting their family income, including engaging enthusiastically in online couponing, providing in-home daycare and becoming a consultant for Thirty-One, a Christian direct sales company specializing in handbags and totes. Though Jenny was non-complaining and optimistic, the damage of the past several years was clearly fresh and painful. She explained, ‘It was just, it was so much. And it was insane. I don’t know, I mean, by the grace of God we are still married. Because it, it’s been hard. There’s no doubt about it. It’s been hard’. Indeed, for Jenny the recession has had lasting effects. In response to losing hold on ‘the good life’, she has reinvented her approach to mothering and family. No longer solely focused on childrearing and homemaking, Jenny’s labours have intensified, as she continually seeks out ways to hold together her family in the face of overwhelming debts and losses.

Jenny is a mamapreneur. Flexible, resilient and enterprising, mamapreneurs perpetually retool their lives and labours, hoping to keep the family happy, prosperous and secure through deeply insecure times. As mass indebtedness and privatized risk load up mothering with new affective and economic demands, mothers like Jenny must work constantly to not only raise healthy children and future self-reliant citizens, but also appreciate their families; that is, to augment the family’s prospects by reimagining the scope and stakes of care work. Importantly, mamapreneurialism is not simply accomplished through recourse to new domestic enterprises (e.g. home-based businesses like Thirty-One) or financialized homes, but also requires mothers to optimize and appreciate their own capacities and affects through ongoing emotional reflexivity and self-work. Despite hardships, past and present, Jenny stays positive and hopeful, invested in the possibilities of her family and its future happiness.

As we show, this optimistic disposition is actively cultivated through Jenny’s mamapreneurial endeavours, from couponing to her most recent business venture with It Works Global, a direct sales company specializing in body sculpting wraps, as well as nutritional supplements and other health and beauty products aimed towards women. As an It Works distributor, Jenny spends much of her time on Facebook, enthusiastically selling It Works products and recruiting other mothers to join her sales team. Founded in 2001
to help struggling families ‘dream big’. It Works promises independence, autonomy and a debt-free, happy life to its ‘wrapreneurs’ like Jenny and their families.

Jenny’s tale of flexibility, enterprise and emotional labour discussed here is certainly not unique. During our 29 interviews with mothers of young children in Northwestern Pennsylvania and in ethnographic participation in a local MOPS group in 2011–2012, we heard a range of mamaprenuous stories, including meticulous budgeting plans, reconfigured career arcs and ambitious Do-it-yourself (DIY) home projects. We focus here on Jenny’s life in order to explore deeply how, in the face of uncertain financial futures and shaky family life, mothers meet pummeling shocks with a potent mix of economic and affective enterprise.

More pointedly, focusing on Jenny’s life helps to crystallize the ‘cruel optimism’ of mamaprenousialism. According to Lauren Berlant:

A relationship of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being (2011, p. 1).

Family, as the embodiment of the good life, is a scene of optimistic attachment, something that ‘moves you out of yourself and into the world’ (Berlant 2011, p. 1); its promises of wealth, security and happiness sustain and stabilize these investments. However, attachment to family becomes cruel when the attachment ‘actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially’ (Berlant 2011, p. 1). As we show through Jenny’s experience of recessionary mothering, mamaprenousialism constitutes a relationship of cruel optimism between mothers and their family scenes by obscuring the affective contradiction between neoliberal precarity and the promise of family happiness. Promising security, both affective and economic, in an insecure world by insisting that the stuff of everyday family life (relationships, consumption, leisure, affect, care) be recoded and rationalized as happiness work, mamaprenousialism remakes mothering into a perpetually expanding instrumentalized web of self and family appreciation that incites mothers to tightly control and manage daily life. Mothers like Jenny, chasing the promises of family, stay tethered closely not only to unrelenting domestic labours but also, perhaps more insidiously, to the ‘asphyxiating’ (Binkley 2014) idea that it is their responsibility to realize the impossible.

Family autonomy in the precarious ordinary

Jenny ‘always knew’ that she ‘wanted to be a mom’ and was delighted to become pregnant with her new husband at age 21. She threw herself into
mothering, happily staying home with her young sons; unlike many of the
women we spoke with, Jenny betrays no regrets about her role. She explained:

I didn’t really have the thoughts of, ‘Oh, I’m going to lose myself, I’m going
to lose my career’, all that stuff. Because I wanted to be a stay-at-home mom,
so I guess I never really had those expectations as far as, to have a career, you
know what I mean?

She worked as nanny through college, earning an Associate’s in Arts degree,
and moved in with her soon-to-be husband within a week of graduation. Jenny’s
comfort in her present maternal role is palpable: she’s a relaxed mom,
onplussed by her children’s antics and clearly settled into her beliefs about
family and childrearing, as well as into her new situation in Pennsylvania.
Situated in the post-industrial, economically depressed Rust Belt, Jenny inhabits
an austere milieu defined by shuttered factories and limited options on all
fronts. Once bustling with manufacturing, the region is now home to smaller
firms and a large service sector that includes insurance, health care and tourism.
Blue-collar Democrats maintain a tenuous majority here, and about half of the
area’s residents are religiously affiliated, with the majority (65 percent)
associated with the Catholic Church. Jenny’s family’s return to Northwest
Pennsylvania was not a move to a boomtown, but rather a return to familiarity
and the support that her extended family could offer.

It is important to see that Jenny’s experiences as a mother are shaped
powerfully by the rationale of family autonomy, the overdetermined idea that
self-governing, self-reliant families tended to by mothers are the backbone of a
free and healthy nation. Imagining the family as a separate, privatized sphere,
family autonomy constitutes the home as a ‘responsible’ and ‘voluntary
machine’ (Rose 1999, p. 129) that cultivates citizens outside of the influence of
the state and the immorality of markets (Brown 1995, p. 147). Social
responsibility for childrearing is privatized, falling to mothers, who are to keep
their families on the path to the good life and provide a ‘haven in a heartless
world’ (Brown 1995, p. 144) through their affective labours. While this
situation of systemic gender subordination maintains mothers’ felt responsibility
for domestic life, it also extends highly circumscribed gender freedoms
connected to promises of family autonomy. Indeed, family autonomy is
synonymous with the good life: well-kept homes, well-coiffed children and
family vacations signal long-term economic security and happiness, and
mothers’ individualized approaches to the work of domesticity are imagined
to provide the foundation for family autonomy. Put simply, mothers’ freedoms
are conceived in and put to work for the promises of family autonomy and its
visions of happiness, independence, intimacy and freedom.

Family autonomy is signalled most powerfully by the prescription and
enactment of individualized family values through a privatized ethic of care, a
gendered practice typically executed by mothers and underwritten by parenting
literature that incessantly offers best practices advice to mothers. Jenny’s ethic of care is grounded in conservative Christian values and traditional beliefs about the family. Her children attend Children’s Church every Sunday and sometimes attend a children’s class that focuses on Bible verses. She invests deeply in service work, primarily supporting other families by volunteering as a leader for MOPS and organizing meal trains for new mothers, and she dreams of adopting a little girl, posting prayers on Facebook that foster children with Down Syndrome find their ‘forever families’. Jenny’s success in implementing her personalized practices for producing independent future citizens is, under the logic of family autonomy, indicative of the practice of her freedoms and her family’s path to the good life.

Regrettably, as Jenny’s post-recession life attests, economic precarity perpetually threatens family autonomy by destabilizing everyday family life and the material possessions of the good life – most visibly, the single family home. Family life is stretched and strained even by small matters – a car repair, a broken arm, a missed bill could each leave the family reeling. Consequently, the family, defined as an independent, self-reliant and free entity, feels increasingly tenuous and even impossible to maintain.

Indeed, the advancement of neoliberalism and its hard-nosed insistence on personal responsibility and privatization has made family, and, in particular, mothers’ affective labours, all the more integral to broader regimes of governance, while simultaneously undercutting their raison d’etre, that is, the promise of the good life. As the social safety nets that support family autonomy fray and dissolve, mothers are left to the increasingly unmanageable and ultimately impossible task of producing the conditions for family themselves. On the one hand, family, long a profoundly permeable yet privatized social sphere, emerges as an increasingly primary bedrock of social security, while the state continually dials back its own commitments to public welfare. At the same time, what David Harvey (2005) calls accumulation by dispossession – specifically, the transfer of wealth to corporate oligarchies via the gutting of social safety nets, the privatization of public resources, spaces and risks, and financialization – diminishes the family’s capacity for providing social stability, that is, for health, wealth and happiness. So, while resources, futures and peace of mind are stolen from people by the policies and activities of political economic elite, the private sphere of family is positioned as the site where folks must assume responsibility for and privately bear the socially and individually felt fallouts of this widespread dispossession.

Put a bit differently, Jenny inhabits what Kathleen Stewart (2007) calls the ‘precarious ordinary’, where individuals weather a generalized and weighty sense of uncertainty engendered by the privatization of risk. Mitchell Dean (1999) elaborates the privatization of risk as ‘the multiple “responsibilization” of individuals, families, households, and communities for their own risks – of physical and mental ill-health, of unemployment, of poverty in old age, of poor
educational performance, of becoming victims of crime’ (p. 166). Privatized risk makes personal responsibility the new means of social insurance; in turn, practices of everyday life become synonymous with risk management. Thanks to family autonomy, mothers come to bear the brunt of privatized risk, as their personal ethics of care and affective labours double as insurance agencies for their families.

As Randy Martin (2002) argues, the logic of risk is itself profoundly paradoxical: it ‘presents not only the limit to what can be known in the present, but also the burden of acting as if one could know’ (p. 106). Risk folds the future into the present; it asks subjects to imagine their present lives according to the uncertain futures they cannot, but nonetheless are compelled to control:

Integrating the future into the present could only leave room for more self-doubt, which in turn expanded the arena in which risk could serve as life’s barometer. So long as risk was everywhere, failure could be imminent at any turn for any possible venture, whether it be health, education, employment, investment, or personal affection (Martin 2002, p. 110).

Indeed, many of the mothers we spoke to experienced motherhood as an endless sea of anxiety and control: never really sleeping, always on alert, calculating and assessing, trying desperately to prepare, steady, manage, know. The paradox of privatized risk provokes what Berlant calls the ‘stretched-out present’ of the ‘impasse’, in which ‘the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one’s sea legs’ (pp. 4–5). Yet, while many mothers fret constantly about children, Jenny is, by and large, confident in her work as a mother. Her primary mode of hypervigilance concerns itself with a religiously defined ‘evil’:

the influences of the world ... What [my children] are learning from other people. I want them to love the Lord and to follow him, and there is just so much out there that could pull them in the opposite direction. You know, evil.

And, of course, financial worries always loom, and it is here that Jenny’s ‘sea legs’ feel most acutely threatened by the paradoxes of privatized risk and the material realities of precarity.

**Technologies of appreciation: becoming mamaprenurial**

In the precarious ordinary, family has become a safety net that is itself unravelling. Because family autonomy is no longer a given but evermore vital, family itself requires continual stabilization and underwriting: its very existence relies on mothers and their ongoing efforts to appreciate their families. Consequently,
mothers like Jenny become mamapreneurial. Mamapreneurs continually optimize and rationalize their capacities and affects as a practice of risk management, attuning their maternal labours to turbulent tides of the precarious ordinary in order to both stabilize the family and move it towards the good life. Mamapreneurialism is thus at once a defensive endeavour, working to stave off financial disaster and hold together the family, and a constructivist project, focused on actively reconstituting everyday life in the precarious ordinary as a hub of family happiness.

In this way, mamapreneurialism is both a financial and affective enterprise, for the good life of family autonomy is comprised of twinned financial and affective capital: happy families live in well-kept homes, possess nice things, have fun together and never worry about money. The linking of the economic and the affective, however, is complex for mothers, for the impingement of financial concerns on family life constrains family autonomy on multiple fronts. As Viviana A. Zelizer (2007) shows, the relationship between intimate bonds and economic encounters is vexed: financial exchange seems to undermine the authenticity and value of intimate relationships by replacing warm love and authentic care with cold, calculating economic rationality. Poor families, and especially poor African-American families, have long been vilified as immoral and undeserving [in discourses about, for example, ‘welfare queens’ and ‘crack mothers’ connected to the ‘criminalization of black culture’ (Stabile 2006)], but mothers who are too invested in material gain are also cast as immoral, ‘bad’ mothers. ‘Good families’, then, are meant to feel happy despite economic hardship, but they must also be financially self-reliant and avoid exposing the family to harsh social evaluation by turning to various, depreciated forms of public assistance, such as food banks or welfare.

Accordingly, while neoliberalism most obviously jeopardizes families’ financial prospects, mamapreneurs both temper and extend economic appreciation with affective appreciation. The work of augmenting the family income is to align neatly with the family’s personalized values, for the family’s emotional fates operate as a sign for the family’s well-being while economic precarity impinges on images of family as the driver and guarantor of happiness and the good life. Beyond working to align family values with the family’s economic value, mamapreneurs also labour to appreciate the self, developing their individual capacities – management skills, sales techniques, emotional regulation and so forth – to appreciate the family. The autonomous family should not only survive economically, but also thrive emotionally: keeping the family afloat and keeping the family happy are figured as one.

Mamapreneurs thus rely on a range of technologies of appreciation that augment the value and insure the prospects of families. Technologies of appreciation are the tools of mamapreneurialism: the strategies mothers use to absorb the shocks of precarity and maintain their ‘sea legs’. Mothers who have been encouraged to adopt a personal, private, fully formed ethic of care and
clear mothering lifestyle geared towards the family’s affective well-being must find ways to maintain this ethic while also taking on more labour. Though women’s labour has long been centred on investing in children to ensure their worth, neoliberalism extends and intensifies affective and material loads for mothers, who work ceaselessly to insure the family project by answering the impossible demand that the family should continuously be produced, appreciated and valourized through the myriad caring labours of motherhood.

Technologies of family appreciation rely first on mothers’ flexible labour. Mothers seek out strategies for enhancing the family income, both saving money through couponing and budgeting and accruing money through work-at-home jobs, direct sales and stepping in as staff for self-employed husbands. These technologies depend on mothers’ willingness to adjust their relationship to paid work and unpaid childcare and on the availability of digital technologies that expand available spaces and times for paid labour. Many mamapreneurs manage to maintain their personal, privatized ethic of care primarily by continuing to serve as their children’s primary care provider. As such, they can maintain family autonomy and augment family income only by performing paid labour during their time ‘off’ childcare.

Second, technologies of family appreciation rely on the development and enhancement of individualized capacities: mothers’ self-appreciation. Economic advancement and happiness are entwined with individual optimization and self-work, as many scholars have demonstrated. Jennifer Silva’s (2013) ethnographic account of working-class adulthood, for example, shows that citizens facing neoliberal precarity ‘privatize happiness’, finding self-worth in their individual ability to overcome hardship and articulating triumph through therapeutic discourses of self-transformation and actualization (pp. 18–22). These discourses have also entered the commercial sphere, according to Eva Illouz (2008), who shows that corporate managers embody ‘reflexive selfhood’, managing their own and their employees’ emotions as a mode of self-control and social control (p. 93). More broadly, ‘personality’ has become ‘a form of symbolic currency, defined by its ability to master, manage, and manipulate social bonds themselves’ (Illouz 2008, p. 94, italics in original). While self-management and personality operate as capital, happiness also works as an apparatus for monetary gain more generally. As Sam Binkley (2014) explains, ‘the new discourse on happiness’ stages happiness ‘both as a goal and a “monetary instrument”’ (p. 1). Happiness becomes ‘a work ethic’ (Achor, cited Binkley 2014, p. 36). Accordingly, while mothers remain firmly attached to the social institution of family, the work of keeping families happy is also an individualized project of self-transformation, as mothers seek personalized strategies to heighten their capacities in the service of optimizing their families’ prospects for happiness. The development of a personal ethic emerges as a path to not only the good life (riches, happiness), but also the experience and practice of personal and familial autonomy.
In other words, to appreciate the family, mothers must constantly labour materially and affectively, working to augment the family’s income, to optimize everyday family life and to materialize their happy visions and the evermore-elusive promise of the good life. Shaping highly administrated and controlled family life in the service of the impossible keeps mothers deeply attached to ‘lives that just don’t work’ (Berlant n.d.) even as they claim newfound freedoms and happiness realized through their always-increasing labours.

The fourth shift: flexible labours and digital nets

Mamapreneurs are oriented first and foremost towards their families’ autonomy. As mass indebtedness exerts continued pressure, threatening families’ bottom lines and mothers’ familial freedoms, mamapreneurs seek out strategies for insuring their families’ fiscal lives while also striving to maintain the family as an independent, self-reliant machine. Thus, while mamapreneurs must be adaptable in their approaches to paid work and unpaid caring labours, they also pursue flexible modes of family appreciation that will allow them to continue enacting their personalized method of childrearing and family care while augmenting the family’s viability.

Mamaprenuerial flexibility is enabled primarily through time-shifting, with discourses of work-at-home enterprises and family budgeting plans promising mothers that they can achieve family happiness by properly expending their energies on flexible labour. As Jenny explained, she first turned to home-based sales for precisely this reason: ‘I didn’t really want to do daycare any more just because I wanted to focus on my other children when I was home’. She began to sell totes and organizational accessories for Thirty-One, a Christian home-based sales company, for which she could complete sales and administrative work ‘while the kids are either A.) playing or B.) sleeping’. For Jenny, it ‘was a nice way to make money and still be able to stay home with the kids during the day’. Mothers’ flexibility is reserved solely for the proper use of their limited leisure time (when children are sleeping or otherwise occupied): they must be steadfastly uncompromising in their caring labours, never sacrificing their ethic of care for the family’s bottom line. Consequently, mamaprenuerialism enacts a doubling of mothers’ labours and nearly always takes the place of any leisure time that a mother may have left in her day (or night, as the case may be). While Arlie Hochschild has famously identified mother’s ‘second shift’ domestic labour (1989) and the ‘third shift’ (1997/2001) of emotional labour that they must perform to maintain familial harmony, mamaprenuerialism as flexible labour operates as a fourth shift. Snuck in during naptimes or late at night, multitasked with the use of mobile technologies during brief moments at the playground or while waiting in the carpool line, this is labour performed in the interstices of family life.
Digital media are more often than not the conditions of possibility for becoming mamaprenuerial, as devastated yet relentlessly optimistic mothers like Jenny are offered up fourth shifts as strategies for reimagining their home lives to successfully optimize their families and their labours as mothers. This fourth shift reinvents the work of mothering for precarious times: flexible digital labours are positioned as the means of family stabilization and the path to future happiness. For example, like many mothers we spoke to, Jenny is an avid couponer, delighting in watching her savings add up at the cash register during weekly shopping trips. She clips coupons in her spare time, often with the television on in the background, and keeps a binder to organize all of her materials. Indeed, Jenny spends most of her media life engaging with couponing blogs, including sites like Target One, Totally Target, Discount Queens, Krazy Coupon Lady, Southern Savers, Fabulously Frugal and The Frugal Girl. She actively chooses a fourth shift of couponing over leisure time, telling us ‘I’d rather be playing with my kids or clipping coupons’ than watching TV. Discount Queens, one of Jenny’s favourite sites, hosts a dizzying array of daily and weekly specials organized by retailers, as well as plenty of tips for newcomers, allowing Jenny to augment the family income while engaging in everyday caring labours. For Jenny, couponing is a mode of risk management, a way to methodically and tangibly stitch economic security into the precarious present. While popular media discourses variously ‘praise and pathologize’ (Negra and Tasker 2014, p. 7) these mamaprenuerial efforts, for Jenny, couponing is a common sense, empowering practice of maternal freedom and family appreciation, one that offers significant rewards, both affective and material, in the precarious ordinary. Jenny admitted that couponing adds to her labours significantly; yet, unlike other efforts that she puts into family, these practices of appreciation feel immensely gratifying: ‘it’s so rewarding’, she told us, ‘when you go in and see your grocery bill just starting to be cut in half. It’s worth it. It’s worth it to me’.

Beyond transforming mothers’ leisure time into a fourth shift of flexible labour, mamapreneurialism transforms mothers’ digital nets – their social networks and capital – into economic relationships. It Works Global, Jenny’s latest home-based enterprise, promises, ‘Work the hours you want. Make the money you deserve. Be the Mom you want to be’ (figure 1). A multilevel marketing company, It Works incites Jenny to parlay her social networks – her ‘warm market’ – into both clients and ‘downstream’ distributors for the company. Much of this labour takes place on Facebook, where Jenny peddles happiness and hope to her client-friends, posting daily stories of clients’ body transformations, her own newfound freedoms as an It Works distributor and inspirational memes branded with It Works logos. For Jenny, digital media is the material medium of risk management; it is the means by which her labours become flexible and her self mamapreneurial. For, in the face of losing ‘everything’, Jenny absorbed the everyday shocks of privatized risk and
precarity through voracious online networking and digital performances of happiness.

Transforming digitized friendship networks into economic relationships, however, comes with its own risks. Jenny told us that she has lost several friendships since becoming an It Works distributor, fielding criticism from friends who find her frequent posts annoying or troubling. Believing deeply in the company’s ability to grant her financial freedom and newfound family autonomy, Jenny has thrown her emotional, spiritual, social and financial capital into It Works. She recently posted:

I know some people don’t get what I am doing these days with this wrap business. That’s ok. But please let me explain: Not only has It Works helped me gain my health, wellness, and pre-baby body back. BUT over
In the precarious ordinary, free time and friendships become expendable as mamapreneurs dig in to appreciate the family. Mothers’ flexible labours become a defence strategy, serving as a safety net to protect everyday family life and ensuring the family’s continued independence in the face of neoliberal precarity. Mamapreneurs circle the wagons with flexible labours, focusing their energies relentlessly on the family’s happiness as a means of mitigating the always present risk that their families might fall apart. ‘Before I started with It Works I had 18 reasons to fail’, posted Jenny, including ‘I thought it was a scam. I had little to no sales experience.’ But, she continued, ‘I had 4 reasons to succeed’: her little boys and the daughter she hopes to adopt.

Capacity mom: happiness as work ethic

It is crucial to see that mothers’ fourth shift of family appreciation hinges powerfully on constant self-work and ongoing affective modulation. While unpaid and unacknowledged care work runs at odds with post-feminist discourses of capacity (McRobbie 2009) that idealize enterprising, high-achieving young women as the success stories of feminism, conservative mothers like Jenny develop their own versions of ‘can-do’ (Harris 2004) capacity and gender empowerment through mamapreneurialism. Jenny recently posted:

As a stay at home mom I felt lost and considered myself as someone doing nothing. I woke every morning and took care of my littles and knew that my life was important but wanted more. I was stuck in a rut. I had stopped dreaming, stopped setting goals, and stopped having a fire for life. Everyday was the same and the stress of life pushed at me in every direction.

Beyond insuring her family’s autonomy, It Works promises to help Jenny reach her capacity, realizing her optimal self and a reinvigorated life. Technologies of family appreciation thus merge and blur with technologies of self-appreciation,
as mamapreneurialism relies on mothers’ affective investment in becoming self-enterprising. In this way, caring labours are again doubled, layering forward-thinking, efficient and creative enterprise on top of personalized ethics of care centred on optimizing children’s capacities.

It Works promises on their website that a ‘stressed out working mom with a boring job just trying to make ends meet’ will find a life of ‘friendship’, ‘fun’ and ‘freedom’ in the It Works world. Would-be Wrapreneurs are told that just 25 dollars and a willingness to share the promises of It Works products on their personal social media feeds will launch them into a life free of student loan and credit card debt and full of quality time with their children (figure 2). ‘I’ve got the life I’ve always dreamed of’, gushes the animated Wrapreneur on the It Works homepage. ‘And you can have it too! To start redreaming your life, join the party today!’ Jenny concurs, posting on Facebook, just three months after becoming a distributor, that the company had:

changed my life, my families life, and our future. It Works has renewed that fire for life, has us dreaming again, and has us setting goals. And this time not little dreams but BIG Dreams! And you better believe we are ready to ‘DO SOMETHING’! I love our products, I love our company, I love the opportunity and I cannot wait to share it with the world. I have said it before and will say it again, this company is unlike any other and it is helping to change lives UPSIDE down! Maybe you have felt lost. Maybe you feel lost now. Maybe you want to gain back your health, maybe you want some extra money, maybe you want a different lifestyle, maybe you want financial freedom. ————MAYBE you just want to dream again and DO SOMETHING! Message or text me friends, let’s talk!

FIGURE 2 In order to augment the family, mothers appreciate the self, maximizing their capacities via emotional reflexivity and enterprising optimism. It Works incites mothers to ‘dream big,’ setting their sites on richer homes and happier families.
The enterprising mamapreneur reaches her capacity primarily through retooling her habits and adopting an optimistic attitude. As Illouz (2007) demonstrates, the ideal neoliberal subject ‘intellectualizes’ everyday life in order to achieve future success, carefully reflecting on and controlling the habits and emotions for optimal results. The It Works website is filled with stories of families gaining control over their lives with the help of It Works and the optimistic and energized attitudes it engenders. Brandon and Denise Walsh, for example, quit their careers in aerospace engineering and clinical psychology in order to focus primarily on It Works. The couple, who have moved into a new home on six and half acres with an indoor basketball court, say, ‘We’re in the midst of our story. Thankfully we have the power to change the ending’. Denise, claiming to be a ‘zombie’ in her old job, says, ‘With It Works, you’re always wanting to become a better person and stay engaged in life’. Continuously working towards self-improvement becomes a way of reclaiming family autonomy, as the couple can now, supposedly, control their lives through the proper management of finances and emotions.

Jenny claims deep belief in the promises of It Works, maintaining that her commitment to the company and its values and her willingness to conquer fears and assert herself will bring her family eventual security and freedom. Her ‘dream’, what she’s ‘working for’, is to earn enough income to allow her husband to retire from his physically demanding and time-consuming job as a deliveryman. ‘Lovin this leap of faith I took’, Jenny recently posted on her Facebook page. ‘I couldn’t ask for a better group of women to look up to! I absolutely love hearing your stories and listening to all of your tips! Thank you for proving that you can dream big and make it happen!’ Big dreams and happy attitudes here become the path towards individualized freedom defined as family autonomy and removal from collectivized and community-oriented technologies of care.

Jenny’s corporate persona exemplifies what Binkley calls ‘happiness as enterprise’. He explains, ‘Agency, enterprise, and responsibility for oneself are both the means for achieving and the very content of happiness itself’ (2014, p. 31). Happiness becomes a ‘work ethic’ as neoliberal subjects shed old habits of dependency and collective thought engendered by the welfare state in favour of ‘undertaking life as an enterprising endeavor’ (p. 23) and constructing their own evermore privatized paths to happiness. The enterprising subject therefore becomes ‘the utopian horizon of neoliberalism’ (p. 23), and happiness is overlaid with economic logics that incite neoliberal subjects to ‘reflect back upon themselves, assess themselves for their potentials and aptitudes for independent conduct, and work to optimize their freedom as self-responsible actors’ (p. 24).

Indeed, mamapreneurialism hinges on a kind of rationalized happiness, taking happiness as both a goal and an instrument for achieving that goal. For mothers, maintaining sea legs entails rationalizing everyday family life and affect
in the service of holding onto family autonomy. According to Illouz (2007),
rationalization is the process of meticulously assessing and systematizing the
means to achieve a carefully considered life guided by clear ‘value principles’
(p. 31). The work of rationalization, a sort of domestic immaterial labour,
engenders new forms of affective labour and self-work, as mothers become
highly self-reflexive, constantly interrogating and evaluating their affects,
capacities and everyday movements towards happiness and autonomy. As
Illouz’s research suggests, fraught ordinary affects germane to everyday family
life and stemming from the inequalities, impossibilities and paradoxes of family
autonomy come to be seen not only as unwanted affects, in need of regulation and
management, but also as ‘objects to be thought of, expressed, talked about,
argued over, negotiated, and justified’ (p. 37). Emotions lose their indexicality –
that is, both their sense of embeddedness in everyday life and their volatile,
transient nature – as communicating about them ‘locks’ emotions down and
‘gives them an ontology’ of their own (p. 33). In other words, emotions come to
be something to be controlled, managed and rationalized rather than something to
be felt, experienced or connected up to existing structures of inequality. But
beyond controlling their emotions, mothers must also capitalize on them:
technologies of family appreciation both enhance and are undergirded by
emotional regulation and affective modulation.

Happiness defined as enterprise is deeply intertwined with neoliberal beliefs
about freedom. As Binkley explains, neoliberalism is not only constructivist but
also necessarily destructive, for the perceived ‘docility of social dependence, and
the negative thoughts that lull us into a state of torpor’ must be rendered
uninhabitable and unimaginable. In their place is ‘the vital, enterprising life-
spirit that is the wellspring of life’s activity, or freedom’ (2014, p. 31). It
Works hinges its business model on promising this life-spirit to both its
customers and its distributors: customers purportedly find vitality through the
company’s nutritional supplements and minimizing wraps, while distributors
come alive through their labours for the company. This life-spirit comes to
stand in for publicly funded social safety nets, as enterprising optimism, rather
than a community-minded social contract, promises its adherents the good life.
Indeed, Jenny assured us that she believed deeply that It Works would release
her family from debt and her husband from long hours by recounting
enthusiastically that two of her close friends ‘got off welfare’ after becoming It
Works distributors.

Featured distributor Megan Baker says on It Works’ website, ‘If you want
to change your life, you have to change your life. You have to let some things
go’. Of course, what mothers are to let go of are not the never-ending labours
aimed towards achieving family autonomy and happiness, nor the sense that
their labours can insure their families’ futures. Rather, women are to release
negative, pessimistic thinking – fear of failure, old habits, fear of rejection – in
the service of an increasingly impossible family autonomy.
Staying stuck

In the It Works net, women who have ‘let go’ of supposedly negative thinking stay firmly tethered to impossible visions of neoliberal family autonomy anchored by ongoing cycles of credit and debt. Additional money earned goes to fund family vacations, bigger houses, new cars and sometimes, larger charitable contributions. One family on the website described cutting pictures from magazines to paste to their family’s ‘Dream Board’, removing pictures from the board after they have achieved each dream. ‘Next Ronda is eyeing a California Closets makeover and an African safari’, the website enthuses. ‘The Hartmans are learning to dream big’. It Works’ depiction of women who have earned enough income to allow their husbands to retire and now spend their days caring for children on their own schedules in large, debt-free homes is immensely appealing, as, in theory at least, mothers can optimize and realize themselves while stabilizing and valourizing their families amidst the growing uncertainty of the precarious ordinary. But, as Jenny’s life attests, behind celebrations of digital moms are women who are simply doing everything it takes to appreciate their families. Let us not forget that Jenny and her family are bearing crushing blows, working still to recoup the money they lost to the bank in short selling their home and returning their car. Jenny is absorbing these shocks, maintaining her sea legs, fitting her flexible, mamapreneurial labour into the small moments of rest in between the demands of caring for four young children and her husband working long hours on a low-wage job. And crucially, Jenny must fit these new labours in while maintaining an optimistic outlook and drawing on and diminishing her own social capital to build her business and strengthen her earning power.

In the end, Jenny shows us how mothering through precarity requires the cruel optimism of mamapreneurialism. Indeed, her story demonstrates how technologies of family- and self-appreciation keep women attached to the mounting impossibilities of neoliberal family autonomy and cruel paroxysms of privatized risk. Jenny’s story of personal transformation via It Works signals a new mode of gendered subordination, one that works as ‘an active practice of ringing out the ambiguity from life, of choking off the potentiality of uncertainty, of indetermination, of doing things differently’ (Binkley 2014, p. 175). Indeed, through technologies of appreciation, mothers tamp down on their unworkable family scenes, staying attached not only to family autonomy but also to what Binkley (2014) theorizes as the asphyxiating horizons of neoliberalism and its happiness regimes, ‘in which one’s departures and interventions, one’s aspirations to freedom and moments of escape are already anticipated, already contained … captured in a tightly woven fabric of subtle domination’ (p. 174). Mamapreneurialism allays the affective volatilities and contradictions of mothering in the precarious ordinary, reconstituting all of life as an instrumentalized web of affective labours promising freedom, independence and autonomy. Consequently, through their unrelenting pursuits of family
happiness, mothers come to actively construct and underwrite the very systems of neoliberal precarity that threaten their families.

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**Notes**

1 Financialized homes, as Randy Martin demonstrates, manage risk and strive for the good life via financial management and innovation (e.g. mutual funds, retirement plans, insurance). In the enterprising home, citizens learn ‘to invest wisely, speculate sagely, and deploy resources strategically’ (p. 17). Financialization provides the backdrop for the enterprising labours of mamapreneurialism, and mamapreneurs also practice financial self-management, but, as we elaborate, their labours extend beyond those that Martin describes.

2 Sara Ahmed (2010) argues that ‘the promise of happiness’ is an affective structure shaping our investments and desires by attaching us to ‘happy objects’ (p. 24). The family is the ultimate happy object, drenched in the promise of happiness, and this promise continues to circulate despite the frustrations and fears of everyday family life. Jenny’s labours are clearly animated by the promise of family happiness.

**Notes on Contributors**

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