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Women's Experience of Resignation from Paid Work in Response to Motherhood in an Australian Setting

Despite workplace rhetoric moving towards provision of family-friendly employment environments, in Australia, approximately one fifth of working women resign from paid work at the birth of their child (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Research exploring this experience, whilst scare, is necessary to facilitate understanding of resultant expertise loss within the workplace, and implications to mother's mental health. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Sydney-based women who had resigned from paid work in response to motherhood in the last twelve years. Data was analyzed using relational methodology (Brown and Gilligan) giving consideration to co-created intersubjective space (Bradley; Slater). Results suggest that, as women move from the psychosocial space of employed individual into that of mother, they experience anger, guilt, substance abuse and/or depression and/or personal growth facilitated by agency and permission.

In Australia, approximately one fifth of working women resign from paid work at the birth of their child (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Despite workplace rhetoric moving towards provision of family-friendly employment environments, little research exists exploring women's experience of resignation from paid work in response to motherhood. Using Lyn Brown and Carol Gilligan's relational methodology, our research addresses this deficit. Moreover, we step outside existing psychological paradigms, which favor studying individuals in isolation, and explore the psycho-social experience of mothers, thereby acknowledging the complex interplay between their inner world and the external socio-political world (Hollway and Jefferson). Beginning with an exploration of the inherent incompatibility between the psycho-social spaces created by work and by motherhood, this paper moves into original research explicating

the resultant internal struggle experienced by ten Australian mothers who responded to this clash by resigning from paid work. Results suggest that, as women move from the paid work-role into that of mother they experience anger, guilt, substance abuse and/or depression and/or personal growth facilitated by agency and permission.

The Psychosocial Space of Work

Flora Gill defines the psychosocial space of work as integral to the Western adult individual's wellbeing. Work provides social identity, daily structure, collective purpose, and an enculturated means of minimizing or avoiding social isolation. Even work viewed by the employee as boring may fulfill this role (Molstad). For Gill and David Blustein, no alternative vehicle exists within contemporary societal frameworks to meet these psycho-social needs. People who are not in paid employment are generally financially dependent on others, or require social welfare (Rose). If this is the case, what does that mean for women who resign from work when they become mothers? Does the replacement of paid work with the unpaid role of stay-at-home mother create a suitable offset for any deleterious effects? And what (if any) are the broader societal repercussions of this decision?

The Psycho-Social Space of Motherhood

Susan Goodwin and Kate Huppatz suggest the psychosocial space of motherhood may be understood with consideration of the good mother discourse which they describe as:

> That formidable social construct placing pressure on women to conform to particular standards and ideals, against which they are judged and judge themselves … institutionalized in social arrangements and social practices, and hence operating beyond the belief systems or choices of individual women. (1-2)

They suggest this ideal stems from historic and current patriarchal discourse that maintain the status quo. Women internalize conflicting assumptions, expectations and judgments regarding how a mother should be, and seek to 'be that [impossible] woman.'

Existing Research: A Critique

Yet some research exploring the experience of women who resign from paid

work in response to motherhood assumes homogeneity of both personality and belief systems. For example, Cynthia Vejar, Octavia Madison-Colmore, and Mercedes Ter Maat commented that the unpaid mothers in their study each "possessed similar values and personality traits … [and] upheld traditional value structures … contextually associated with conventional religious ideals and gender-specific roles … " (24). Use of value-laden terms such as 'traditional' imply acceptance, and even embrace of the view that women's place is in the home (Chodorow). Concurrent to such language is the assumed belief system, stay-at-home motherhood is the God-assigned, biological calling of women (Murphy-Geiss).

Such research frames the narratives of women within currently dominant patriarchal models and ways of thinking, neglecting to explore what it means for women to exist within this "traditional" framework, or what the researcher's data might look like if women were allowed to Be in a paradigm of their own making (Brown and Gilligan; Gilligan). Alternatively, it may be that the participants in such research have internalised the paradoxical 'good mother' discourse outlined by Goodwin and Huppatz. However, whilst it is acknowledged that such research claims may accurately represent experience of mothers in that study, without reflexive consideration of how psychosocial space is constituted, an understanding of the impact of external and internalized expectations, assumptions and judgments on these women will remain elusive.

Theorists such as Brown and Gilligan, Gilligan, Natasha Mauthner, and Joanne Slater seek to create research which questions androcentric frameworks and ways of interpreting data obtained from women, and challenge resulting perceptions of who women are. Whilst imperfect, their relational methodology seeks to allow the voices of women to be heard, simultaneously providing a lens through which the researcher can infer what it means to Be woman, as opposed to a lesser form of man.

Motherhood and Social Status

Expectation States Theory (Berger, Cohen, and Zelditch Jr.) predicts dominant discourse regarding a group's superiority is internalized to some degree by all societal members and reinforced by individual and social interactions. According to Scott Reid, Nicholas Palomares, Grace Anderson, and Beverly Bondad-Brown, and Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll, gender conforms to the predictions of this theory, informing perceptions regarding an individual's status. In many domains, males are socially constructed as having higher status and greater competence than females. For example, a male and female with equivalent qualification and work experience may be employed by an organization, however, during daily interactions, and as result of internalized

societal discourse regarding gender roles, the female may defer to the male seeking their advice, reinforcing the perception of greater male competence.

Motherhood is found to be even more deleterious to a woman's status than gender. According to Ridgeway and Correll, a crude measure of social status is financial reimbursement for services rendered. A study by the Centre for Childcare Workforce applied this thinking to their exploration of the status of mothering. They defined the role of childcare workers and teachers as comparable to motherhood, and accordingly found them to be paid at significantly lower rates than other professions. Results by Paula England, and Barbara-Stanek Kilbourne, Paula England, George Farkas, Kurt Beron, and Dorothea Weir concur. These researchers operationalised motherhood as a nurturing profession, and found that controlling for education, experience, and other factors, increasing levels of nurturance required in a profession correlated with decreasing pay levels. Extrapolating from the findings of the above-mentioned research, it could be posited that job resignation does not have the primary negative impact on a mother's social status. The main negative is the commencement of motherhood per se.

Work and Motherhood: The Clash

Like Goodwin and Huppatz, Mary Blair-Loy suggests discourses regarding work and motherhood are conflicting and incompatible. According to Blair-Loy, the good worker is constantly available, self-sacrificial and responsive to the needs of the workplace, finding complete fulfillment in the employee role. The good mother is also constantly available, self-sacrificing and responsive, but to her children, and finds complete fulfillment in the mother role (Blair-Loy; Maher and Saugeres). For Blair-Loy, it is not possible, within current discourse, for a woman to be both good worker and mother: ultimately she is required to make a choice.

Research by Lynne Millward concurs with Blair-Loy's assertion. She interviewed ten professional woman aged 24-40 years who had resigned from full-time work in response to motherhood. Two major post-birth themes emerged: women experienced a change in their workplace identity, and; pre-birth psychological contracts within the workplace shifted. Interviewed women experienced conflict between their mothering role and work-place identity. For most of these women, being a good mother meant staying at home with their children: work and motherhood were opposing desires. Further, women reported experiencing a gradual invisibility within the workforce during pregnancy and work-return required re-establishing themselves as contributing employees. Mothers felt their legitimacy as effective staff-members was challenged, and they moved from being sought-after employees to workplace-burdens. Res-

ignation became an easier option. Similar themes were identified by Slater in her work with pregnant mothers.

Pamela Stone and Meg Lovejoy interviewed 43 stay-at-home-mothers who had resigned to care for their children. The researchers found 90 percent of the women were ambivalent regarding their choice, and 86 percent resigned as a result of inflexible work options and broader perception that being a mother equalled decreased work-place efficiency. This study suggested despite popular rhetoric women did not have a supported choice to remain in the workplace. Their research also questioned the reinforcing effect of mother's resignation on dominant discourse suggesting mothers lack commitment to paid work, creating a double bind for women, and supporting the posits of Expectation States Theory.

Summation

Minimal research exists exploring women's experience of resignation from paid work in response to motherhood. Extrapolation using established theories regarding the value of work in people's lives, the experience of motherhood, and social status, are consonant with new mothers resigning from paid employment. The psycho-social spaces of paid work (Blustein; Gill) and motherhood are described (Goodwin and Huppatz), but it is suggested a shift from one to the other may result in an experience of inner conflict.

Criticisms of existing research include its failure to position women as experts on their experience, and suggestions that stay-at-home mothers have common personality characteristics, and share traditional values (Vejar et al). Moreover, previous research interprets the experience of mothers through an individualistic framework, neglecting psycho-social factors (e.g. Johnston and Swanson; Lupton and Schmeid). The aim of our research is to explore women's experiences of resignation from paid work in response to motherhood using a method that validates their voices, positions them as authorities on their experience (Brown and Gilligan), and recognizes the impact of the psychosocial space on the creation and communication of experience (Hollway and Jefferson).

Method, Findings and Analysis

The predominant story emerging from this research explicates some women's experiences as they move from the psychosocial space of employed individual into that of mother, manifesting as anger, guilt, substance abuse and/or depression or an experience of personal growth facilitated by agency and permission. The research involved interviewing ten culturally diverse, English speaking

women from Sydney, Australia, who had all resigned from paid work at the onset of motherhood in the last twelve years. A principle question was asked, with clarification sought throughout the interview using the language of the interviewees, as recommended by Hollway and Jefferson. Additional questions were asked at the conclusion of the interview. The main tenets of the relational methodology (Brown and Gilligan; Gilligan; Mauthner) were used to analyse resulting data, an approach requiring a minimum of four readings of the transcript each targeting different components of what was said.

Reflexive consideration was given to the influence of co-created intersubjectivity during interviews (Bradley; Slater), thereby recognising the influence of differing psycho-social spaces within and between researcher and interviewees on resulting data (Hollway and Jefferson). The psycho-social space refers to the varied influences that shape individual's subjective experiences including: their biography; available discourse; internalised or resisted societal expectations, their assumptions, judgments and beliefs (Hollway and Jefferson).

Maintenance of Self

Data analysis began as an exploration of the impact of work resignation on mother's self-esteem and social status. However, in keeping with the tenets of the relational methodology, our focus shifted as it became evident that women were talking instead about their struggle to maintain their sense of self within the experience of being a stay-at-home mother. The women spoke of the almost oppressive weight of competing and conflicting expectations, assumptions and judgments directed towards them by the broader community, and experienced in their psycho-social, intersubjective space. Anna expressed her confusion around this by saying:

> *One day you're one thing, and the next day, miraculously because you pushed something out your vagina, you're supposed to be something altogether different … all of a sudden you are a mother, when yesterday you were just Anna, and that was okay.*

The women described these forces as external to themselves, supporting the suggestions of Goodwin and Huppatz who label the powerful forces acting on this space 'the good mother discourse' (2). Bella commented:

> *the guilt of [pause] not being the perfect mother that society says you should be … on one hand it's people expect you to go back to work, and then on the other hand, people kind of go "Whoo, wow, you're going back a bit early aren't you?"…You either go back to work too early and you're abandoning*

*your children in those early years (J:yeah, yeah) or you don't go to work,
and then people view you as being lazy and not wanting to work.*

Use of the words "abandoning" and "lazy" are suggestive of overt societal
judgment. A perception of judgment is strengthened by Bella's reference to
"guilt" at not being the "perfect mother."

The Experienced Meaning of Paid Work

As predicted by previously mentioned research (Blustein; Gill; Rose), some
women identified work as central to their lives prior to the onset of mother-
hood. Work provided a stable, socially-sanctioned framework within which to
express themselves creatively, be rewarded financially, connect relationally with
others, and be recognized and validated for their contribution to the broader
community. Cate, outlined the creativity and mental stimulation of the paid
work environment for her:

> *It was a great challenge, we were starting a company from scratch (J: yeah),
> and I was the fourth employee [pause] and [pause] you know it was, it was
> going to be something really interesting to do … so we did it, and um, and
> it was brilliant, it was really hard work, but we had a great team of people,
> and you know, we sort of, we made little miracles happen.*

For Cate, it seems that work provided her with opportunity for personal, and
ongoing evolution and growth: "we made little miracles happen"—the implicit
chime of this phrase favorably comparing the creativity of her pre-baby work
with the rewards of having a baby (colloquially: a baby = "a little miracle").
Further, she refers to the inherent relationality of the workplace "we had a great
team of people." Cate's enthusiasm for her work is evidenced in both her voice
and manner as she narrates her story. Her emphasis on the words "great" and
"brilliant" further attest to her excitement.

Motherhood and Paid Work: A Clash

Yet as the interview progresses, Cate reveals that, despite her overt esteem for
her mothering role, "I just, I couldn't, I just couldn't stay home all the time
[pause] I felt like I was [long pause] ohhh, I just felt like I was just [pause]
turning into a zombie." Later Cate comments that she needed to do "anything
that meant I could achieve something out of home" and that this was "really
important [long pause] for my state of mind." However despite her decision
to both seek, and ultimately return to work after resigning, Cate's ongoing

conflictedness regarding that decision is evidenced in the long pauses between her words as she attempts to verbalize her feelings, and continual emphasis on the word "couldn't."

Prior to resignation, some women expressed difficulty in voicing exactly what they were experiencing to those in power within their workplaces. Oliver suggests this is indicative of oppression, as mothers lack suitable vocabulary, and socially-sanctioned forums with and in which to explore what is happening to them. This sense was reiterated throughout the interviews as women continually spoke over even minor interruptions. They spoke as if the interview was their first formalised opportunity to share their experience, and be heard.

Resignation

The act of relinquishing paid work was seldom taken lightly: women experienced intense inner turmoil before, during and after their resignation. They spoke of giving up something socially sanctioned and replacing it with something that was not. Being a stay-at-home mother was experienced from the onset as tolerated, but ultimately not a role valued within the broader community. The overwhelming sense articulated by the women was that they should be back at work. Ingrid comments on her angst at not earning an income

> *Having to rely completely on the income of my partner, feeling that if I went out and bought something that I liked, that that was wrong because I wasn't making the money, it wasn't my money to spend [long pause] and [pause] it didn't matter that I was at home [pause] raising a child [pause] which was [long pause] you know extremely important work. It's unpaid work.*

Ingrid's comment reveals her perception that motherhood is undervalued within society as evidenced by its lack of pay. Her long pause before stating mothering is "extremely important work" suggests a clash between her own value system which positions the role of mother as "the most valuable job on the planet" and her belief, or experience that this is not a value attributed to motherhood by the broader community.

The Dark Side of Motherhood: Anger, Substance Abuse, Boredom and Rage

Whilst the women loved and valued their children, they described motherhood as taking a toll. Some woman spoke about feelings of disconnection from themselves and their past friendship groups as they resigned from paid work, feelings of isolation, being trapped, overwhelming guilt, boredom, resentment,

fits of rage, substance abuse, the seeking of a different life, loss of power and post-natal depression. Whilst only one woman had been formally diagnosed with post-natal depression, whispers of depression echoed in the narratives of all the women interviewed. This plethora of emotional angst is at odds with existing research regarding the experience of stay-at-home mothers which suggests that it is the ideologies of women which inform their resignation decision (Johnston and Swanson; Lupton and Schmeid) or their traditional beliefs and personality-type (Vejar et al.). Ingrid stated:

> It's the breeding ground for mental illness really … when I say mental illness I mean neurosis, I mean obsessive compulsive, I mean quick fixes an drugs and. … Anger [pause] unbelievable fits of anger that I just never knew i had inside me … dealing with impossible situations … feeling this great well of anger about [pause] this is too much to ask of me, how can I solve this problem, I have a screaming child here [pause] I have another one on my lap, I have [pause] the younger one trying to bite the other one (J: laughs–still crying though), because they're upset that I'm cuddling that one (j: yep) and I'm having to physically kick the young child, who mentally doesn't understand what's going on really, other than that he wants his mummy. I've got to physically kick him with my foot to stop him from biting the other one who I'm comforting … I'll never forget that day, where I just thought, this, requires more than one person [pause] this requires a village.

Motherhood unveiled for the women, a whole new world of expectation as to how they should be. Brown and Gilligan suggest that "should" denotes the moralistic voice of expected societal norms that contort psycho-social inter-subjective space (Bradley). Moreover, the use of "should" shifted the women from a position of agency into child-like incompetence, requiring guidance from external sources. Bella spoke about the impact of the moral voice on her, the increased difficulty of discerning her own voice, and even an awareness of punishment, or at the very least censure if you chose a different path.

> I think the tag of "mum" is you know a nurturing, loving kind of [pause] term [pause] and when you don't conform to that, when there's moments of, you know, you're in the supermarket, your kids are losing it [long pause] there's a certain expectation on mums as to how you should behave in that situation … when you don't conform to that, that's when I think the added pressure on yourself, becomes more of [pause] more of a failure as a mum [pause] because you're not doing the right job, you're not doing what society expects of you.

The Lighter Side of Motherhood: Permission and Choice

The women whose experience of motherhood was currently least angst-ridden, seemed to have been able to create a psycho-social space influenced by factors other than work or motherhood. Xena shared her experience:

> *I've been lucky all along [long pause] 'cause a lot of it has been my choice. I've been able to direct [my decisions], so that's I guess why I don't feel [pause] um [pause] um [pause] bad about it … I made the choices (J: mm) yeah [pause] which I think is important, whereas I think if you felt you were forced out, and you didn't want to, then I think you'd maybe feel more resentful.*

Interestingly these more contented women had either achieved many of their life aims prior to having children, or had consciously chosen a "traditional" existence. The premeditated act of choice seemed to have facilitated empowerment within these women, deflecting negative emotions experienced by other interviewees. Alternatively socially sanctioned structures such as school and pre-school appeared to provide women with permission to participate in interests outside of the home. A corresponding lightening of the spirit seemed to result. Moreover, women who voiced a tumultuous experience of motherhood also reported alleviation from their angst with this shift in focus. However, without social sanction, the women experienced guilt. Cate stated:

> *I felt sadness that he was at school … but I didn't feel any guilt [pause] because … that was the done thing … when he got to school, I was allowed to [long pause] to have that time [long pause] between [pause] 9:30 and 3:30 [pause] I could now do what I wanted because he had to be at school [long pause] … I wasn't a bad mother for leaving him in childcare.*

Conclusion

Our research suggests that, as Western women move from the psycho-social space of paid worker into that of mother, their sense of self is compromised. The prime carer role is experienced as scripted, contradictory and undervalued, making mothers struggle to redefine themselves within it. Interviewed women suggest this is due to external expectations, assumptions and judgements regarding how they should be as mothers, and lack of societal sanction to do as they choose. The fruits of compromise manifest as anger, guilt, substance abuse and/or depression. Alternatively women who have learnt to deflect the force of internalized discourse regarding the good mother, may experience personal growth facilitated by agency and social permission from for example,

socio-political structures such as pre-school and school. Further research is required to determine whether this experience is shared by other women who resign from paid work at the onset of motherhood, and also what is the value (or not) of that struggle to the women concerned.

Some recommendations can be extrapolated from our findings, premised on the belief that the mothering/prime carer role is valuable, and at least within Australia, dominated by females. To promote maternal mental health, the larger society may benefit from providing real choice to women shifting into this role via the provision of: diverse quality childcare arrangements; sufficient workplace flexibility to allow women time with their child; flexible workplace advancement opportunities such as job-sharing managerial positions; and support/creation of forums facilitating exploration of what maternal choice might/could look like. Additionally research could be conducted comparing cultural differences in experiences of motherhood, and what are the organizational/political structures in countries which enjoy better maternal mental health. By positioning the experience of women who resign from paid work in response to motherhood within a psycho-social framework informed by community and relationship as opposed to positioning distress as the problem of the individual, we may be able to move away from viewing mothers as functionaries, gaining greater insight into the experience of being human.

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