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Maternal presenteeism: Theorizing the importance for working mothers of “being there” for their children beyond infancy

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Abstract

This study theorizes why full-time working women with partners and school-age children deploy talk of maximal irreplaceable maternal care. The concept of maternal presenteeism frames women's personal beliefs, perceptions, and ambitions as subject to normative pressures associated with intensive mothering and a postfeminist sensibility. The accounts of 20 women who combine motherhood of school-age children with full-time professional work are analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that even women in demanding careers with partners talk about seeking to be maximally visible to their children and construct forms of workplace flexibility as a matter of luck. By contrast, maternal irreplaceability was viewed as a matter of fate. Examples of resistance to maternal presenteeism served to highlight these normative assumptions and a conflation of ideologies within the accounts of some working mothers. Vestiges of “intensive mothering,” performative notions of “presenteeism” drawn from regimes of work, and a postfeminist sensibility can be identified in the intersubjective experience of some working mothers. A postfeminist sensibility explains why social practices consistent with forms of “intensive mothering” may persist beyond infant years, and yet get recast as choice

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KEYWORDS

intensive mothering, motherhood, postfeminism, presenteeism, working

One day, Warren turned round and went, 'Mum, I wish you were a proper mum' ... And that was the 'Oh, what have I got wrong?' I don't know if this [promotion] is what I really want. I got a package, and set up my own business ... and I generally, I will take Warren most days now to school. Okay, Wednesday this week, I was in Scotland so no, I didn't, I flew for the day but every other day this week, I've taken him to school. (Jennifer, Executive Coach)

1 | INTRODUCTION

A working mother finds herself navigating a particularly complicated space in contemporary western society. Those mothers engaged in career or professional work face competing demands for their commitment in relation to time, expertise, energy, and emotions. Effectively melding work with motherhood and life can look more like frantic juggling than a calm balancing act. The gendered ideologies of both working and mothering, while uneven in their impact (Perrier, 2012; Walls, Helms, & Grzywacz, 2016), offer limiting guides and punishing judgments for not getting it "right" or not "doing it all." Valorized notions of child-rearing emphasize the importance of maternal input to a mother's moral identity (Hays, 1996). Even if intensive childrearing is not open to a woman, or is resisted (Elliot, Powell, & Brenton, 2015), the underlying assumptions may still inform attitudes about women in the workplace. Most workplaces produce gendered outcomes in progression and income (Cha, 2013; Kim & Shirahase, 2014), but it is the "motherhood penalty" that is identified as having most significance in contributing to such outcomes (Benard & Correll, 2010; Gaunt & Scott, 2016).

In attempts to understand the persistence of gendered workplace outcomes for women, extensive scholarly attention has focused on a woman's transition to motherhood, because this is the most tangible and identifiable point when women may make decisions that impact their career and income (Blair-Loy, 2003; Crompton & Harris, 1998; Halrynjo & Lyng, 2009). Much less attention has been given to working women further on in the mothering journey.

This study aims to theorize why some women (drawn from a group of middle-class professional women in the Midlands, and South East of England) with school-age children and domestic partners describe forms of maternal presenteeism in their accounts of balancing work and care for children. The findings from this study identify that women may frame workplace arrangements of flexibility as a matter of "luck," but a child's need for maternal (over paternal) care as "fate." Notions of luck and fate get deployed to explain decisions to curtail workplace ambition. Yet, such decisions then get recast as a matter of personal choice. A postfeminist sensibility explains this recasting. This sensibility fetishizes notions of neoliberal individual choice, encourages self-surveillance, and endorses a resurgence of ideas about "natural" sexual difference (R. Gill, 2007). Forms of maternal presenteeism are a form of gendered social practice that arguably contribute to gendered workplace outcomes (ONS, 2017). Unchallenged normative assumptions subtly correlate maternal (over paternal) presence with essentialised assumptions about the needs of children for maternal care. These assumptions discipline women, such that the active shaping and, crucially, "privatizing" of their individual, self-determined work/life "choices" plays its part in persistent patterned outcomes.

2 | THE "WORKING MOTHER"

While women in general are disadvantaged in the workplace, it is mothers specifically who suffer disproportionately (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013; ONS, 2013). The surface assumption that women's work patterns are the result of lifestyle choices (Hakim, 2002) was roundly challenged by scholars pointing to structural conditions

that constrain as well as shape "choices": expensive and inflexible childcare; income imbalances within a family; as well as work practices and policies that favor men's greater autonomy (Crompton & Lyonette, 2007; Scott, Crompton, & Lyonette, 2010). Alongside such structural constraints, Hays (1996), in her study of a group of white middle-class mothers with preschool infants, identifies contemporary cultural and ideological developments. There is, she argues, a paradox that despite the extensive influx of women into the workforce since the 1980s, there has been a concomitant growth in an ideological emphasis on *appropriate* child-rearing. This work, it is generally assumed, *should* fall to the mother. Hays argues that Motherhood has become infected by the pervasive ideology of "intensive mothering." Child-rearing has become framed as something that should be labor- and time-intensive as well as emotionally absorbing women's work. It should also be "child-centric," which means that responding to the child's "needs" ought to be prioritized, even if eclipsing those of the mother. Hays's thesis revealed an ideology of mothering that was not available to (and in some cases was actively resisted by) many women (Christopher, 2012; Elliot et al., 2015; Roxburgh, 2012; Walls et al., 2016). Yet, it stands as the valorized and professionally endorsed hegemonic position against which state agencies police and regulate, especially "deviant" mothers (single, poor, black, and/or LGBT women), for the purported benefit of raising the future "good" citizen (Valencia, 2015).

Scholars examining gendered moral rationalities have found that women who negotiate work and family do this within a context of not just what is expected of them by others, but also in terms of what women expect of themselves (Duncan, 2005). Blair-Loy (2003) argues that "schemas of devotion" are lenses that operate to filter and lend meaning, comprehension, and post-hoc rationalization to decisions. Just as the "work devotion schema" demands an intensive commitment to the workplace, so the "family devotion schema" recommends intensive commitment to children. Both promise fulfillment and recognition for the woman, while also serving the moral agenda of meeting the "needs" of the work-place or the "needs" of children (qv, society; Perrier, 2012). Both schemas reify and thus naturalize such behaviors of devotion. Crucially, for working mothers, attempts to serve both will generate conflict.

When new mothers return to work, they may initially aspire to being "maximizers" (Crompton & Harris, 1998) in both devotional arenas, but they eventually find that being "irreplaceable" to both moral rationalities is unsustainable. Fearing the exposure of an insufficiency of career devotion, women in the transition to motherhood studied by Harlryngo and Lyng (2009) describe jumping before being pushed. They argue that, by shifting commitment from career to family, women are seeking to protect their sense of self-worth and dignity at a time when the invitation to feel vulnerable in the workplace is high. By framing shifts in commitment as choice, the overwork associated with career devotion necessarily becomes the father's domain, and a mother's so-called 'maternal' choices appear to endorse essentialist explanations. The contradictions associated with combining caring with a career are then rendered less visible, because the tensions are individualized, privatized, and naturalized.

While these empirical studies explain a career woman's reasoning for the patterned ways in which women resolve these tensions during early motherhood, they do not explain why a retreat to home gets framed as a matter of choice rather than obligation. R. C. Gill (2007) argues that a postfeminist sensibility has emerged within neoliberalism in which women are interpellated as empowered, self-regulating, and agentic on condition they construct a self that is both feminine and orientated toward motherhood. Postfeminism points to the contemporary entanglement between feminist and antifeminist discourses. The freely choosing subject is the socially constructed ideal. Compulsory individuality gets internalized, constructing an agentic sense of self both at home and work (R. Gill, 2007, p. 157). The rise of "choice feminism" (Ferguson, 2010) accounts for the resurgence of notions of "natural" sexual difference, dissociating choice from the broader political context and multiple gendered discourses in which choices are made.

Reference to "being there" (as maternal presenteeism)--a pattern among some full-time working women--revealed a series of normative assumptions. These women frame the provision of maximal irreplaceable maternal care as a matter of fate; flexible workplace arrangements as a matter of luck; and their own recasting of reduced career aspiration as a matter of choice. Maternal presenteeism explains how women's personal beliefs, ambitions, and expectations are subject to normative pressures associated with intensive mothering, presenteeism, and a

TABLE 1 Participants and their families

Name	Age	Work role	Age of children	Partner's employment
Marianne	40+	Teacher (F)	11 and 8	Teacher
Libby ^a	30+	Self-employed (F)	5	IT Manager
Naomi	40+	School Head	9 and 6	Teacher (F)
Abbey	40+	Editor	9 and 14	Freelance (F)
Harriet ^a	40+	Self-employed (F)	24, 19, 16, 15, and 14	Manager
Jennifer	40+	Self-employed (F)	14 and 10	Manager
Tanya ^a	40+	Health (F)	12 and 8	Teacher
Lily	40+	Director (F)	14, 12, 10, and 7	Chief executive
Samantha	40+	Civil servant (F)	13, 11, and 8	Director
Hilary	40+	Director	12 and 8	Accountant (F)
Sally	40+	Director	9 and 5	Self-employed (F)
Deborah	40+	Manager (F)	17 and 15	Lawyer
Adrienne	40+	Manager (F)	6 and 4	GP
Kali ^b	50+	Self-employed (F)	19 and 16	Self Employed
Susan	40+	Self-employed (F)	15, 15, and 13	Engineer employee
Heather	40+	Director	11 and 6	Academic (F)
Nandini ^b	40+	Director	9 and 6	Solicitor (F)
Faith	50+	Self-employed	16 and 13	Academic (F)
Christine	40+	Director	21, 17, and 13	Self-employed (F)
Leila	40+	Teacher (F)	11	IT employee

Note: (F) = workplace flexibility to facilitate "being there" for children.

^aThree women described lower-middle class or working-class backgrounds.

^bTwo women were second generation British Asian.

postfeminist sensibility. The framing of these subjectivities as personal and a matter of choice deflects attention from an effective understanding of gendered empirical regularities in the workplace (Lewis, Benschop, & Simpson, 2017).

3 | STUDY DESIGN

This study examines the way women describe their thoughts, feelings, and experiences of being mothers of school-age children while also being in full-time professional work. In order to exclude women who may have had fewer choices about work, because for example, they are single-parent breadwinners, the study confined itself to women in an established domestic relationship. This did not necessarily have to be with the father of the children or a man (although all who came forward were in longstanding heterosexual relationships). These are women who, on the face of it, are straddling the career and motherhood paths, and yet, by virtue of having a partner, could be conceived of as having a wider range of choices about the nature and extent of their work commitment. I was interested in the ways in which women make sense of working within and between the workplace and family life as both full-time workers, partners, and mothers because this group has received very little scholarly attention.

I purposively sampled and conducted 20 in-depth semistructured interviews lasting up to 2 h with UK women who self-identified as combining work and motherhood of school-age children (5–16 years of age). Participants were selected on the basis that they worked full-time (taken to be 35+ hours per week). They were initially recruited informally through personal networks and then through snowballing. The combination of the recruitment strategy (middle-class networks), together with the quantity of work-time commitment, was taken as an indicator that these women would be more likely to be in “career devotional” roles in which they might see themselves as “irreplaceable” (Blair-Loy, 2003; Harlrynjo & Lyng, 2009). In other words, where the workplace is one of consuming commitment, and the employee perceives themselves and their role as essential for meeting the needs of the workplace. As Table 1 shows, the majority of participants were white and middle-class, two of the 20 were British Asian, and three described lower middle- or working-class backgrounds. Some worked within the public sector, others the private sector as employees or self-employed. All but one had personal incomes above £40,000 and more than one school-age child.

Alongside demanding work, all of the women reported that they or their husbands, or both, cared for their children around the school day, week, and term. Only two women employed a nanny or au pair, and in both cases these women worked away from home (either intermittently or regularly). Most of the women described their partners as supporting them in their working lives, and in this sense, these men were not conforming to the traditional stereotypical role of being *the* family breadwinner. In all cases, the men had employment, so their roles in the family were not being constructed as self-consciously reversed roles. Some men, however, were reported to have chosen work that provided more flexibility than the woman's work, or they had it anyway by virtue of their employment type.

The study received Faculty Ethics approval, and with permission, all interviews were electronically recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. Interviews began by asking women to talk about becoming a mother. While I had formulated a set of questions, I let women talk freely, only asking follow-up questions for clarification to tease out the intersection between work and family care, or where I heard assumptions and judgments about work arrangements, partners, children, “others,” or themselves. The interviews covered a woman's account of her external reality: becoming a mother; career biography; promotion; experiences at work; a typical working day; family division of labor; the interface with school; decisions about prioritization; sickness and holidays. Participants were also invited to reflect upon their internal reality: what it means to be a mother; why they work; and thoughts and feelings about how it feels to combine both. I also asked women about their own experiences of being mothered.

4 | ANALYTICAL METHODOLOGY

I employed thematic analysis and began with inductively derived open codes after reading and rereading transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I did this because my data covered accounts of feelings and experiences across a wide range of cross-cutting arenas from working, to mothering, to being a partner. Inductive open coding gave me the best possible opportunity to be data-led and to identify axial codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I asked several questions of my data: How do women think and feel about combining full-time work and children? What assumptions do they make about their role, the role of their partner, and decisions about who does what? How do they talk about navigating work and motherhood? What is given particular attention or focus when talking about work or motherhood? What are the silences and absences?

From the perspective of content analysis with its focus on counting data (Bryman, 2012), what stood out was that women overwhelmingly responded with the phrase “being there” when I asked, “what does it mean to you to mother a child?” I became curious about this response because, superficially at least, these women might be constructed as “not being there” or at least not prioritizing “being there” for their children. My interest in the use of the phrase “being there” led to an axial code with which to “read” their stories. It became apparent that their stories were replete with accounts of attempts and arrangements to maximize being there to care for children, as well as

justifications for, or anxiety about, not being there. For some, their stories about career decisions, the division of labor at home, interactions with school, the perceived differences in children, or their judgments about themselves or others were suffused with concerns about being there or not being there *enough*.

The axial code revealed a theme found in most accounts: talk of being *maximally visible* to their children. The “perceptions of paternal care” code identified accounts where partners, even though they were described as having more flexible working arrangements than women, were judged to be offering less than optimal care. In this way, women framed themselves as having ultimate responsibility despite partners “being there” around the school day. This generated the theme of *maternal irreplaceability*: only their maternal care is optimal because it’s treated as irreplaceable. I did have one “deviant” case in which the woman, in response to the question: “*what does it mean to mother,*” responded with “*it’s the care for others. And actually, I show that care to others who aren’t my children, just as much as to my children.*” She was also least likely to display concern about the impact of her absence on her children or her partner. In some accounts women appeared to embrace notions of maternal irreplaceability, yet simultaneously resisted such assumptions.

The “curtailing workplace ambition” code got linked within the accounts of some women to the theme of maternal visibility. In order to “be there” for children, women gave accounts of a variety of flexible working arrangements. However, their stories suggested that they saw these arrangements as ad hoc, individually negotiated and as such tied to their reputation as someone to be trusted. The subtheme of *luck* was prevalent for describing what was perceived to be a range of precarious and “one-off” arrangements at work, and in some cases to having partners who would assume and share the care of children. By contrast, in accounts where women saw their maternal care as irreplaceable (even if their partner had more workplace flexibility in order to participate in care), the subtheme of *fate* pervaded. These subthemes of *luck* and *fate* underpinned the quest for maternal presenteeism and figured in the rationales of some women for curtailing their workplace ambitions. Some were concerned that the flexibility they had achieved in their current work arrangements would not be replicable if they moved up or on.

Despite framing work and domestic circumstances in terms of luck and fate, when talking about career decisions, women took a different view. They saw themselves as in charge of their destiny. Their career decisions (including the option to curtail workplace ambition) were recast as a matter of their personal “choice.”

Notions of maternal presenteeism in talk points to a conflation of ideologies at work within the accounts of working mothers. Vestiges of “intensive mothering,” performative notions of “presenteeism” drawn from regimes of work, and a postfeminist sensibility can be identified in the intersubjective experience of some working mothers.

5 | REFLEXIVITY

The women I interviewed may have narrated their accounts in socially acceptable ways: despite have demanding, fulfilling work, we still want to be seen as “there” for our children. My own experiences of combining full-time work and motherhood of school-age children shaped my relationship with my participants and their accounts. One participant’s account offered a deviant case, and her account enabled me to more fully recognize myself in the other accounts, especially those where women described having “hands-on” partners available for child-care, but who still felt the call for maximal maternal presence.

6 | FINDINGS

In all cases, the women interviewed were committed (for a variety of reasons) to holding down sophisticated and hence demanding jobs, businesses or careers, involving significant amounts of responsibility, accountability, and complexity. Mostly the expectation was that the work was unlikely to fit within a “normal” working day. It may fluctuate or be out of their control, but it nevertheless had to be managed and executed.

6.1 | Maternal “being there”

Women gave extensive accounts of the various ways they and their partners, over time, had sought to organize themselves around work so that care for children could be navigated around school days, special school events, and terms. Emphasis, however, was put on what women had arranged in order to “be there,” even within the context of full-time working.

So that's when the idea of starting my own business ... I saw it as a way of getting some control over my life ... there was no longer this conflict, ... I could make myself available for the sports days. (Faith)

In a number of cases, the women described arrangements where it was recognized that, within the relationship, the woman was better suited temperamentally, or in terms of promotional or earning prospects, to be the main breadwinner. Men were reported to have become freelance, self-employed, or part-time. In other cases, the men were already in work identified as being more flexible. In one case, the woman's husband had negotiated an 11/12th contract so that he was home for school holidays. Where both adults were employed full-time, strategies of sharing who went in early or would stay late, and why, were described:

I couldn't do it without my husband's support. ... I'm ... slightly more ambitious than my husband in the career ... There's lots of times ... that I have meetings that he brings them to school, and sorts them out. (Naomi)

However, even where partners were depicted as the one with greater workplace flexibility, women still spoke about trying to organize things within their own work to also “be there” for children. These accounts generated two themes: a child's need for maximal maternal “being there” and maternal irreplaceability.

6.2 | Maximal maternal “being there”

A reported quest to be seen to be physically present and visible as mothers in the lives of children threaded its way through all but one account. It was striking that when I asked “what does it mean to mother,” most women responded with the expression “*being there*.” The assumptions behind the need for mothers to “be there” were twofold. Children were constructed as not only having basic physical needs, but also having a range of changing social and emotional welfare needs, which got more complex as the child got older. Second, meeting those needs required the mother's involvement or facilitation. Pressure for maximal maternal “being there” was taken for granted, and described as coming from family, school, “others” but also from children. Faith reports that after she missed the first assembly her daughter told her: “*you were the only mummy not there*.” Faith reports telling herself she can “*never do that again*.”

Lily took a job that involves international travel, because she says it enables her to organize her own diary:

I found it really hard having to have a job that did require me to sit at a desk, even if it was local ... this one suits me much better, I may do longer hours but I completely just sort out my own timetable ... you know, balancing all their various ... parents evening ... star of the week ... performances and just the need to be around ...

Lily assures me that even when she's abroad she has ways of “being there” for her children. She is, she reports, the last person they speak to at night. The telephone and her voice enable the mundane but “sensitive” forms of mothering to happen, even while her husband is home:

I've had, you know, moments [while working abroad] trying to coax him [son] ... on the phone, you know, get one of the other kids to hold the speaker phone under the bed while I'm having, you know, trying to coax him out [from under the bed] ...

Abbey, who works 130 miles from home and “loves” working for an organization with a 24/7 operation, nevertheless seeks to limit her time away from the children. She is often in the office at 4 a.m. in the morning, while also being required at 5 p.m. the same day. She stays away three nights per week but “always” travels home midweek for the school run:

... although I work strange hours, I can finish at lunchtime, I'm very much in control of my own hours ... typically, I would leave here [home] on Monday at about half seven, come back on Wednesday ... then leave again on Thursday after they've gone to school ... and get to the office late on Thursday... I could not take a job where I was away from the children Monday to Friday, [I] just wouldn't do it.

Samantha, a civil servant, whose rhetorical style was “angry,” is the most dissatisfied with combining full-time work and motherhood. Apart from finding she does most of the domestic work, she is aggrieved because she had moved from part- to full-time after her third child, believing that this would demonstrate workplace commitment and result in being able to “*move up the ladder more quickly.*” This turned out not to be the case. She then compares the quantity of maternal presence she has been able to give her three children, and locates blame for the perceived “suffering” in her third child with an insufficiency of her maternal presence:

So I now think that I could have done what I've done [at work], and still be where I am now, [but continued to] have worked part-time ... That is my biggest regret. That was it [being home part-time] for him [son]. And I now sometimes think, maybe he suffered for that a little bit.

Aside from the normative assumption that a child needs its mother, these women also describe experiencing external pressure from others (particularly school and family) who, in a range of ways, appear to endorse the importance of maternal visibility:

She'll [mother] routinely pepper her conversations [with] 'Oh, I hope the children are all right?' ... 'How come you're not home yet?' ... it's a kind of odd message from her in which she seems as uncomfortable as I should be with the whole working mum thing. ... You think, bloody hell, ... you've bought me up to be this fiercely independent woman ... and now you manage to, every time you speak to me, make me feel as if I'm doing the wrong thing. (Abbey)

The scrutiny some women felt led to a general unease that things could go catastrophically wrong if mothers are not sufficiently “there.”

I've always felt that they've [family] been waiting for signs of delinquency in my children. (Faith)

Accounts of maximal maternal “being there,” when associated with assumptions about what a child needs, reflected in some accounts a belief in maternal “irreplaceability.”

6.3 | Maternal irreplaceability

In some cases where the women reported having partners who could be there for children, these same women still sought to achieve maximal maternal presence. The notion of being irreplaceable meant some women expressed

concern or uncertainty about whether their contribution was good enough or of sufficient quantity. In other cases, women spoke in ways to suggest that they felt their care was or would be better than that of their (male) partner. In one case, a woman was sad because she felt her care was not better than her partners, but should be.

Sally travels internationally for work and describes herself as the main breadwinner. Her husband is described as flexible, because he runs his own business. Despite his flexibility, she also reports that she “tries” to work from home once a week. She goes on to suggest a belief in maternal irreplaceability even when she simultaneously compares herself unfavorably as a parent, to her husband, who she describes as more easily able to be there:

He's very easy going and a very positive optimistic character so that's good ... I mean I'm much more negative, and you know, worrying, I am a worrier and he's not, so they get a lot of that, he's a good influence on them, he's a good dad. ... I mean, I look at my ten, he's coming up to ten, my son, he's so lovely, despite me not having been around.

Even though she identifies her husband as a “good dad” who is able to be there for the children while she is working, Sally nevertheless expresses surprise at how well her son is turning out. Despite fears about the adequacy of her own maternal contribution, her husband's professed qualities as a father, and her son's loveliness, her sense of irreplaceability means that when things go wrong she blames herself, even when she has described her husband as “being there” *more* and herself as the main breadwinner:

He [son] had a tooth taken out recently, and I think that was probably a direct result of us not managing to get him to the dentist for about two months, even though he was telling us he needed to go. ... Because we just couldn't sort it out logistically. I just had no space.

Here, despite her son telling them both about his tooth, her observation that *she* “had no space” suggests she was at fault. Sally judges herself, not her husband, for her son's tooth extraction.

Abbey's partner is freelance and he has the flexibility to be home during the week while she works 130 miles away. Despite this, she is not sure his care is good enough. She is concerned that in respect of homework, he is not “looking at what he's [son] doing.” She describes her partner as doing very little in the home other than “being there” for the children, but even then she is concerned because she says his idea of being there with them is “switching on the tele.” Despite his presence for the children, she expresses the fear that really, *she* should be around for them more:

[w]hen Joel fails his GCSEs, you can ask me again... [laughs] ... what happens when you've got an absent mother.

She refers to her absences and her husband's parenting combined as a form of “neglect,” but still concludes that if Joel fails his GCSEs it will be a result of *her* absence not his “neglect.” Despite being promoted four times since the arrival of her children, and having a “hands-on” partner, her belief in maternal irreplaceability leads her to conclude:

The older I get the less ambitious I am. ... I think it is harder being a working mother when the children get older ... as they get older, they need me ... more ... than they did when they were tiny.

Assumptions about children needing maximal and irreplaceable maternal care mean women talk about striving to “be there” for children, even if partners are available, conceive of their care as optimal or feel guilty about not being there enough, and then construct their working lives accordingly.

6.4 | Luck, fate, and choice

Maternal visibility and irreplaceability were themes derived from the stories women told about how they juggled being there for children, with forms of workplace and partner flexibility, as well as fears about not being there for children enough. These stories about combining motherhood with full-time work were underpinned by three sub-themes. A sense of precarious unease pervaded their accounts about the fine balance that had been achieved between meeting workplace needs and being there in regular and ad hoc ways for children. Luck and fate threaded their way through their accounts of this balance, and yet when it came to decisive claims about future career aspirations, here the framing was one of choice. The arrangements women achieved at work for maternal visibility at home were seen as fragile, and so a sense of luck pervaded. Being trusted with unconventional “work styles” that were earned and tolerated within the workplace meant constant vigilance and caution about losing what was not treated as “normal”:

...that's why I would probably not move from this job for a good while because I cannot imagine an employer ... I mean, possibly, if they knew to trust me and my work style but, you know, I'd have to earn that. (Lily)

Adrienne, who has permission to work from home describes this as

...just fantastic ... it does promote loyalty. ... My boss is a difficult woman ... whatever you've done is wrong ... [yet] I feel in a way, quite lucky because she likes me ... people ... know you're a hard worker ... I'll try and catch up at night.

Reputation and ad hoc arrangements leave women feeling lucky when they have arrangements that enable them to maximize maternal care alongside work commitments. In many cases, women erred on the side of caution in the workplace, not wanting to push their luck:

I'm not wanting to ever feel that things had gone wrong at home [with children's exams] because of me [laughs] making that choice [to go for promotion]. (Deborah)

This maternal commitment to be there for children was frequently associated not with reduced commitment to the job, but rather with reduced career aspirations. There was a tendency for their perceptions of their own maternal irreplaceability to be down to fate. Marianne says:

My priority's got to be the children. ... I've made a decision that I'm not going to go for promotion, when there's a very good chance that I could get promotion this year, ... I can manage what I'm doing in my present job.

Abby too accepts her fate

I think I'll be lucky to just about make this work over the next four or five years, ... I do worry about that ... I stopped looking to the next thing professionally, and I think far more about the next thing for the children. ... I would feel differently about it if I didn't have the children.

Despite describing various forms of work flexibility as a matter of luck, together with the need to prioritize maternal care (even when partners have more flexibility) as a mother's fate, women nevertheless recast their talk about career and promotion as a matter of choice:

... it's not the job of my dreams, but it lets me have the home life that I want. (Heather)

As I've got older though I'm nowhere near as ambitious as I was since the children. So, I've turned down opportunities at work. We have a talent pool at work and a couple of times I've been asked ... if I'd like to have my name put ... forward, and I've asked not to have my name put forward. (Nandini)

Decisions about how to balance career aspirations with irreplaceable maternal care for children are seen as hard and difficult to balance, but the "balance" nevertheless gets conceptualized as a choice.

6.5 | Resistance

Hilary was the participant whose talk most consistently resisted the assumptions of maternal irreplaceability. The difference in how she spoke served to highlight and expose some of the silences as well as the normative assumptions being made by other women. She was interesting because, apart from full-time working, she described herself as having a social life, and as retraining for a career change, which alongside a full-time job involved evenings and weekends away from home:

I think my husband feels that ... the childcare has come on to him much more than on to me and [he] has therefore ... not been able to do other things ... or ... have another interest. And so I think it has deprived him of having another outlet. ... I think it makes him a bit fed up that ... he's there doing most of the childcare in the evenings.

The striking thing about Hilary's account is that she did not locate the "blame" for his deprivation with herself. She says "it" deprived him, rather than assuming that her choices are causal, nor does she assume responsibility for him being "a bit fed up." Hilary's account was unselfconsciously free and unencumbered by notions of maternal irreplaceability, and her description of how she combined work and family life suggested a sense of perceived autonomy not evidenced in the other women's accounts. She did not once described herself as feeling guilty, or lucky, or as being faced with a dilemma in respect of the competing arenas of work, family, and a social life.

While some women's accounts were framed in terms of maternal irreplaceability, their talk simultaneously resisted this framing:

[W]e were reading *Cosmopolitan*. And ... yes, we should all be able to work and ... have a family ... men have been doing it for years. Why can't we? (Samantha)

Some cast around for alternative narratives to frame their maternal absence: it is "good" for men to build relationships with their children; it's "good" for children to see mothers having fulfilling work; work is necessary for a woman's mental health and older children are evidence that it cannot be too harmful:

I think that's a very good thing for him [husband] and for his relationship with [boys] ... I just couldn't do it [stay at home], I'd go crazy. (Abbey)

Yet, these same women talked of *guilt* and their *luck* while also displaying an unease about the potential impact of maternal absence on their children. Only Hilary explicitly framed the new career she was working towards as having higher social value than mothering. For many of these working women, mothering was bedeviled by uncertainty about the difficult choices they were making to maintain their maternal presence in the moment. It was the future which would deliver a reckoning on their "choices."

TABLE 2 Presenteeism

Being there	Workplace presenteeism	Intensive mothering presenteeism
Visible	High visibility and commitment to the needs of the organization	Visible time and intensive commitment to the needs of the child
Irreplaceable	Professional identity of irreplaceability	Essentialist maternal identity of irreplaceability
Performative	Insecurity + choice	Uncertain outcomes and moral context + luck, fate, and choice
Competition with	(Unpaid) domestic sphere	(Paid) workplace

7 | DISCUSSION

Women's accounts of maternal "being there," being maximally visible together with a construction of themselves as irreplaceable, and with an uncertainty about their performance, are telling insights into the experience of working motherhood. It is striking that the quest to "be there," to maintain visibility because of a sense of irreplaceability, is similar to factors in workplace presenteeism (see Table 2). Data from this study suggest that some mothers who are in full-time paid work with domestic partners frame their talk in ways that suggest a domestic version of presenteeism. Presenteeism describes the propensity for workers to choose to be visibly at work, beyond the time that is paid or necessarily productive (Correll, Kelly, O'Connor, & Williams, 2014; Zhou, Martinez, Ferreira, & Rodrigues, 2016). Employees feel compelled to work long hours in highly visible ways to demonstrate their commitment, loyalty, and irreplaceability to the institution or their colleagues (Johns, 2010). It is said to derive from cultures of insecurity and competitiveness in which rivalries thrive on professional identity constructions of irreplaceability (Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009). Conceptions of workplace presenteeism and the hegemonic ideals of intensive mothering were found to have striking ideological similarities, as well as significant distinctions.

Workplace presenteeism is a performative behavior deriving from a performative culture (Macfarlane, 2015). Women in my sample adopted narratives in which they described handling shifts in the perceived needs of children, both expected and unexpected, even when partners were available. They also described being observed or judged by others and themselves. Just as with workplace presenteeism, what constitutes "enough" work (for raising a child) is understood as uncertain, fluctuating, and as having no discernible end: there is always more that could or should have been done, or done better (Perrier, 2012). In circumstances where women are in full-time paid work and have involved partners, maternal presenteeism signals the possibility that women as mothers are either "overworking," beyond the point which may reasonably be described as productive, or worrying that they may not be giving enough time to their children (Clarke et al., 2009). The paternal contribution may also be undervalued (Chesley, 2011). The performativity of maternal presenteeism is underpinned by the moral assumptions of "intensive mothering" which associate maternal care with what a child "needs." Chodorow and Contratto (1982) argue that child-centric care involves "needs" getting erroneously conflated with "wants." While what counts as a "need" in postwar liberal democratic societies has been extensively contested in respect of adults (Berlin, 1969), such contestation is less obvious when it comes to children. Lawler (2000) argues that the theories that a child's needs can and should be met, and met by a mother, have become "so naturalized, so much part of 'common sense' that they cease to be recognizable as theories" [original emphasis] (p. 144).

Seeing maternal presenteeism in relation to career as a matter of choice, even when notions of luck and fate also prevail, is arguably a function of a wider postfeminist sensibility. Lewis et al. (2017, p. 213) contend that "notions of choice, individualism, opt-out, opt-in, merit and make-over – frequently used ... as reasons for the

persistent inequalities that women experience in the world of work – share common (unacknowledged) post-feminist roots.” These roots involve the selective uptake of feminist principles that emphasize neoliberal notions of choice and agency at the same time as we see the reappearance of a retraditionalization of “natural” sexual differences. “Postfeminist femininity compels women to be self-actualizing choosing subjects who cultivate their professional ambitions while also having children and a fulfilling family life” (Lewis et al., 2017, p. 215). Aside from essentializing women as “natural” carers, children’s needs are also essentialized.

Women who talk about forms of maternal presenteeism are compelled to emphasize their own choices in their organization of work and life. In so doing, they simultaneously signal both femininity and feminist credentials. Yet it is women who must “self-transform” and “self-reinvent” at the expense of their career to combine work and family life, and do so in gendered ways. The performativity of maternal presenteeism serves to ward off the possibility that problems with children will get retrospectively attributed to maternal absence. “Successful” outcomes bring eventual relief—their “choices” were not the wrong ones. “Choice feminism,” as Ferguson (2010, p. 250) argues, is “deployed to punish women who have made the wrong choices.” Postfeminism serves to deflect attention away from “transformative strategies and interventions, aimed at changing the ways that work is routinely divided, organized and valued to counter gender inequalities” (Lewis et al., 2017, p. 216). Maternal presenteeism serves to produce, reproduce, and challenge gendered practices and outcomes among women who combine work and family life.

Talk of maternal presenteeism among mothers who work full-time contributes to a deeper understanding of and explanation for gendered workplace outcomes (Ellison, Barker, & Kulasuriya, 2012). If, as Ferreira et al., (2017) argue, workplace presenteeism is an antecedent variable to work-family conflict, then so too is maternal presenteeism. As such, maternal presenteeism shapes the family division of labor as well as perceptions and judgment about the quality of paternal care. In the same way that the payoffs for workplace presenteeism are uncertain (job security or promotion), so the payoffs for maternal presenteeism are uncertain (a well-adjusted child, “good” GCSEs). However, maternal presenteeism is motivated by an added moral dimension because of the possible consequences of not being there. Workplace presenteeism differs from maternal presenteeism in that the payoffs for workplace presenteeism can accrue to both the individual (a job, more money/status) and their identity (committed professional), whereas the payoff for maternal presenteeism only accrues to a woman’s maternal identity (the good mother), yet is likely to have a deleterious effect on her career and material status. Indeed, the costs of both forms of presenteeism are borne in gendered ways. Workplace presenteeism has been found to mean reduced involvement in the (unpaid labor of the) domestic sphere (Michel, Kotrba, Mitchelson, Clark, & Baltes, 2011). Maternal presenteeism appears to signal reduced involvement in the (paid labor and career advancement of the) workplace. The binary construction of work and family devotional schemas ends up looking like family devotion for women (Blair-Loy, 2003) and the gendering of ambition (Ben chop et al., 2013), even when women are highly committed to and engaged in interesting and valuable paid work.

8 | CONCLUSION

This study offers maternal presenteeism as a new theoretical concept to explain why women in full-time work with school-age children (and partners) frame the balance between work and maternal care in a way that emphasizes a perceived “need” to maximize their irreplaceable maternal input as a matter of choice. The ideology of intensive mothering is not only germane to women mothering infants, but vestiges appear to persist and for some women become more relevant, as children get older. In this study, women deployed normative assumptions that frame any flexible arrangements at work and with partners as a matter of luck, whereas the perceived “need” to maximize maternal input gets seen as a matter of fate. Despite putting their circumstances down to luck and fate, decisions about how to combine motherhood and working draw from regimes of work, and get treated as matters of personal choice. Maternal presenteeism is performative yet functions within the moral self-regulatory context of a

postfeminist sensibility. This reconfiguration of gender politics eschews the so-called excesses of feminist critiques, in favor of a model of feminism which emphasizes individualism and choice while valorizing traditional notions of femininity and motherhood. Maternal presenteeism means women may double up on their care for children, and undervalue the contribution of partners, while also making career “choices” that divert attention from the normative, taken-for-granted gendered assumptions that disadvantage women in the workplace. The framing of these subjectivities as personal and a matter of choice deflects attention from an effective understanding of empirical gendered regularities in the workplace.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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APPENDIX

Interview Schedule

Name and contact details:

Nature of employment:

Number of staff (if any):

Salary: £20 000–29 000, £30 000–39 000, £40 000–49 000, £50 000+

Age: 20–30, 30–40, 40–50, 50+

No, age, and sex of children:

Employment status of partner:

I may ask questions which seem to have obvious answers. So far, this has not been the case. There are no right or wrong answers and I have no interest in judging your choices or decisions. I am only interested in your perceptions, experiences and feelings, and how you make sense of your life. I am also interested in how your circumstances and the society in which you live, influence what you do, and how you do it.

Mothering

Tell me about becoming a mother?

What does it mean to you to ‘mother’ a child?

How influenced are you by your own experience of being mothered?

Has your experience of mothering changed as your children have got older? If so, in what ways?

What support networks do you have?

How do you manage childcare?

How do you handle the school interface?

How do you handle school holidays and sickness?

Did your mother work while you were growing up?

Paid employment

What are your reasons for working?

How did you feel about returning to paid employment after maternity leave/career break?

What is the nature of your work?

What does a typical working day look like?

How do you manage any extra hours that may be required?

Does your work involve much travel?

What is your work culture like for mothers?

Are there opportunities for you to progress your role at work?

Have your expectations of work changed? If so, in what ways?

Do you find it easy to share your dilemmas/concerns/difficulties with other parents at work?

What is your understanding and experience of the boundaries of the two roles--worker and mother?

How easy is it to move between roles?

Does your experience of being a mother have any bearing on your role as a manager?

Have changes in your work culture impacted on your work practices? If so, in what ways?

You and Your Partner

What are your partner's expectations of you in terms of your contribution to the family?

What are your expectations of him/her?

Can you tell me about the division of labor at home? Does it work?

How do you spend your time when you're not doing your paid work?

Describe your relationship with your partner.

Do you make time for yourself?

Can you describe some of your more challenging moments?

Can you describe any uplifting moments?