Managing working mother identities in the creative gig economy through identity integration narratives

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"There is no more somber enemy of good art than the pram in the hallway"
- *Cyril Connolly, theater critic*

A majority of working women will become mothers at some point during their career and the transition to motherhood is a profoundly transformative experience for many women (Smith, 1999). For working mothers, despite the potential for the work identity and mother identity to enrich each other (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), many experience conflict between the expectations for each role (Gatrell, 2007) and the demands each role makes on their time, resources and emotional energy (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This incongruence challenges a woman's identity and "to establish a strong sense of self, [she] must find a way to link the dual identities that comprise a 'working mother' (Ladge, Clair, & Greenberg, 2012: 1453).

Most research on the working mother identity has focused on women who return to work full-time, typically in professional roles (Ladge, Clair & Greenberg, 2012; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Millward, 2006). However, these findings may have limited generalizability to the majority of working women who return to work only part-time after giving birth (Rake, 2000). Moreover, the world of work is changing with the rise of independent work (Cappelli & Keller, 2013; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006), referred to as the "gig economy" (Ashford, Caza & Reid, 2018). Independent workers are only loosely affiliated with an organization or are entirely self-employed. Although independent work can offer the practical flexibility that many working mothers deem essential to balance both roles, it brings an array of additional identity challenges.

Work identity dynamics are fundamentally different for independent workers. Without secure affiliation with an organization and codified role definitions, attaining and sustaining a

stable work identity is problematic (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). These workers lack the readily available narrative repertoire offered by organizational identities (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Moreover, they must construct their own personal holding environments to manage the emotional tensions of their more precarious and more personal work identity (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019). To my knowledge, research has yet to examine how women manage the working mother identity in the context of the gig economy.

In this research I aim to understand how women manage the identity dynamics of becoming a mother in a boundaryless work environment—the context of creative careers. Creative careers are typically characterized by informal employment arrangements and project-based work (Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019). To answer this question I conducted an inductive, qualitative project with members of a grassroots community for women who have children and are engaged in some form of creative work. Analysis of the data revealed that to make sense of the relationship between their identities as mothers and as creatives, women employed four distinct narratives each with implications for how the identities are enacted and granted.

This research makes two main contributions. First, it introduces the concept of identity inquiry. In contrast to identity transitions in which a person shifts from one equilibrium to another (Ibarra, 1999), identity inquiry is an ongoing open-ended process of exploring the interplay of multiple identities. Second, while four distinct narratives emerged from the data, these narratives were not mutually exclusive, but rather the same respondents often articulated multiple narratives. This extends earlier findings that identity enhancement and identity conflict are independent and can coexist (Ramarajan, Rothabard, & Wilk, 2017).

THEORY

One stream of identity research focuses on identity as self-narrative, defining identity as "the internalized and evolving story that results from a person's selective appropriation of past, present and future" (McAdams, 1999: 486). Organizational scholars have examined narrative identity both empirically (Ibarra, 1999; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and conceptually (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). While narrative identity work has been studied in the context of post-traumatic growth (Maitlis, 2009) and integrating organizational discourses (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), limited research exists on how narrative identity work applies to multiple identities. This is surprising given that narratives effectively make sense of ambiguous situations, constructing a coherent portrait from fragmented or contradictory experiences (Boje, 2001).

Scholars have long acknowledged that individuals have multiple identities (James, 1890). While most research on multiple identities has focused on the number or relative strength of identities (e.g. Pratt & Foreman, 2000; George & Chattopadhyay, 2005), a more recent stream examines the intrapsychic relationship between multiple identities: whether they are experienced as conflicting or enhancing (Ramarajan, 2014). Identity conflict is the experience of feeling torn between meanings, values and behaviors associated with one identity in order to maintain another (Ashforth et al., 2008; Burke & Stets, 2009). This conflict creates stress (Hirsh & Kang, 2016) and causes insecurity about one's sense of self (Thoits, 1991). To resolve this identity threat individuals may engage in identity-restructuring responses: changing the meaning or importance of the identities or choosing to exit one of the identities altogether (Petriglieri, 2011).

An alternative to identity conflict is identity enhancement, the experience of complementarity and wholeness that occurs when multiple sets of meanings, values and behaviors are verified (Dutton et al., 2010; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). Evidence from the domain of work-family research suggests people can experience

synergy between work and non-work identities (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, & King, 2002; Tiedje, et al, 1990). While some researchers have conceptualized identity conflict and identity enhancement as opposites (Brook et al., 2008; Pratt & Foreman, 2000), others have found evidence that they are independent constructs (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006; Rothbard, 2001; Ramajranan, Rothbard, & Wilk, 2017). Tiedje and colleagues found that working mothers who had high enhancement and low conflict scored highest on measures of mental health and role satisfaction whereas the lowest scores came from women with low enhancement and high conflict (1990). This suggests that conflict is purely negative. Yet other scholars have noted that further research is required to clarify the conditions under which people respond differently to identity conflict and when identity conflict has positive or negative effects (Ramarajan, Rothbard, & Wilk, 2017). This study is a response to this call for future research. In it I examine how women engage in narrative identity work to alter the meaning of the apparently conflicting identities of mother and creative.

METHODS

I sought a research context that would provide access to women who are mothers and also engaged in creative work. Creative work is characterized by informal work arrangements, loose ties to organizations and other features of the gig economy (Petriglieri et al, 2019). I reached out to Mothers Who Make (MWM), a grassroots organization founded with the goal of providing a community which values mothering equally alongside making. In that way, MWM functions as an identity workspace (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010). MWM consists of 24 regional communities across the UK and an active online community of over two thousand members. The regional communities, called "hubs", meet monthly in arts spaces. The meeting is facilitated by a host and consists of equal time allotted to all attendees for open sharing of their

experiences. After initial conversations with both founders, I attended a hub meeting in London and engaged in 2 hours of participant observation. I also joined the online community and actively reviewed the content of recent postings. Once I had gained familiarity for the context and reviewed the relevant literature, I designed the interview protocol to focus on narrative identity work and conducted 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the MWM community. The data collection focused on life stories related to creativity and motherhood.

MWM is an ideal context for my research question. Because the primary purpose of the organization is identity work, its members will be those for whom managing the multiple identities of mother and creative is a salient challenge. Women who do not experience any tension between their identity as a mother and as a creative will likely be excluded from my sample. In this way, MWM is an extreme case which makes it more valuable for theory building because the dynamics of interest are more visible (Eisenhardt, 1989). None of my participants was engaged in full-time employment. This is characteristic of workers in the gig economy.

To analyze the data, I adopted a narrative identity approach (McAdams, 2001; McAdams & McLean, 2013) using structural narrative analysis (Maitlis, 2012; Riessman, 2008).

RESULTS

Analysis of the data revealed that motherhood functions for many as an *identity shock* – a sudden and surprising challenge to the self's status quo. One woman described motherhood in extreme language:

> The identity that you have beforehand, before your children, is gone. It's annihilated. You don't know this when you're pregnant. You can't know before. And then you come out the other side and you go, 'shit! I'm going to have to put myself back together'. It's really an unexpected part of mothering.

Women used four distinct identity integration narratives to navigate the identity shock of motherhood: incursion, interstitial, interwoven and inquiry. Findings are summarized in Table 1.

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TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS – FOUR IDENTITY INTEGRATION NARRATIVES

Identity integration **narratives**	**Description**	**Enacting**	**Claiming**	**Implications for conflict and enhancement processes**	**Sample data**
Incursion	Motherhood threatens pre-birth creative identity. Motherhood entails a risk of encroachment and must be defended against.	Setting strict goals in creative work Carving out and protecting dedicated time and space for creative work in the home	Needing to prove to others that motherhood has not diluted commitment to creative work	Reinforces the fundamental nature of the conflict while downplaying the impact of the conflict Limited scope for experiencing identity enhancement due to threat perception of new identity to established identity	"People were saying you won't have time for that when the baby's born so I had a goal that I would do a painting within a week of the birth". "I know my husband doesn't quite agree with me on this but I don't feel like my life changed that much when he was born…I would strap him up and go to private views, go to the pub, go to exhibitions, just carry on."
Interstitial	Mother identity is prioritized and creative work is put largely "on hold" Creative work must fit into the small gaps left over from enacting the dominant mother identity	Fragmenting creative work into small pieces that can fit into stolen moments Shifting to more flexible work roles that are experienced as less creative (e.g. teaching art)	Feeling insecurity about legitimacy of claiming the identity publicly if creativity is temporarily dormant Dissatisfaction with uncreative others when creative identity is invisible--"there's more to me than just a mum"	Inevitability of conflict is reinforced with identities framed as zero sum, each requiring full commitment Appears to resolve the conflict by lowering expectations on enacting old identity but does not resolve the question of "is it dormant or is it dead?"	"Acting is all consuming and I couldn't do both…I couldn't because I couldn't give 100% to my child and 100% to my acting and so something always had to give… So what do I do? Do I give up because I can't give 100% or do I do performances I'm not happy with…because you can't say to your child I'm not going to give 100% to you " One woman who put her sculpting on hold explained why she joined the online MWM community but hasn't "(yet) been to a meeting. I was curious to see what others were doing but hesitated before joining about labelling myself at this point in life as someone who "makes" in any formal sense."

Interwoven	Creativity and motherhood inform and enhance each other with role definitions expanding and overlapping Confidence gained from mothering functions as a resource for taking more risks in creative work.	Mothering infuses content of creative work Increasingly enacting both roles simultaneously Creativity informs approach to mothering—e.g. engaging in imaginative play with their children	Meeting other creative mums, joining and actively participating in a community of similar others	Although the potential for conflict is still present, in this narrative the emphasis is on enhancement Reframes and integrates new and established identities into one joint identity	Women primarily adopting this narrative draw or paint their children, write poems about breastfeeding and blog about motherhood. A woman who has a contract working 2 days per week at a local theatre company commented: "I feel really really fortunate that I am within an organization who respects and supports the fact that I am a mother and are happy for me to try and integrate my working life and my Mothering life into one."
Inquiry	No clear boundary or distinction between being a mother and being creative The meanings of the identities are fundamentally called into question resulting in the expansion and dilution of what it means to be a mother or to be creative.	Fluid and ongoing inquiry into the ways in which the meanings diverge and converge Expand to new mediums of creative expression rather than remain attached to original form of creative expression Mothering and creativity are seen as being potentially enacted in any situation.	Seeking and contributing to inclusive safe space to explore and question what it means to experience both identities on an ongoing basis Joining a conversation with others who are interested in similar questions	Paradoxically, simultaneously engage and transcend the conflict Frames conflict as generative with no need to resolve or necessarily seek enhancement	"Challenging and questioning is at the heart of Mothers Who Make. This challenge to the very strong idea of the incompatibility of motherhood and creativity. I don't think it's obvious, there's an interesting dialogue to be had about it at the very least…it's really easy to retreat into the quite conventional position of motherhood and never try to make. And I think the great thing about MWM is allowing to challenge that and encouraging others to spiral off in their particular relationship to that question."