

# Meditation on motherhood: multiple-identity negotiations within a changing sense of self

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Conceptualised as a bid to explore the experiences of mothers returning to the workforce following the transition to motherhood, this research uses an heuristic inquiry approach, relying on an autoethnographic study of my own embodied experience of negotiating the competing demands of motherhood and career, complemented by narrative interviews with other mothers. The heuristic research methods used draw on my experience of balancing mothering with other aspects of life: negotiating multiple identities as mother, learner and careers practitioner. A central theme of this study is the importance of a robust, multifaceted self-concept and its significance in relation to increased personal resilience.



*I just want to sleep. I just want to sleep – and she just wants to nurse... and nurse, and nurse! And then it dawns on me... My needs don't come into this picture – it is all about her needs right now. The humbling experience of birth was just the beginning of the dismantling of who I consider myself to be. This journey of motherhood will be a long process of annihilation of my ego.*

(Autoethnography excerpt)

## Introduction

Following the transition to motherhood, most mothers are faced with a choice, often dependent on socio-economic circumstances, as to the level at which they continue to engage in paid work. While social norms and familial set-ups are changing, and while it is now more common for men to be primary caregivers than in previous generations, in contemporary Ireland 'those looking after home/family are overwhelmingly

female' (CSO 2011: 10). While there is certainly merit for further research exploring the experiences of fathers and their stories of negotiating competing demands, as a mother, I have the richness of my own story to draw upon and this study makes no apologies for looking exclusively at the experience of mothers in this context. I chose participants or 'co-researchers' (Moustakas 1990: 45) for my study who had similar experiences to my own, in that they were mothers breastfeeding children for an extended period (beyond one year). I worked on the assumption that this would give me access to a group of participants who valued the mother-infant bond highly and prioritised their relationships over careers (Ryan 2003), finding creative ways to fit their paid work around their mothering work.

In researching the story of my own negotiation of multiple identities, I realised I was rebuilding my sense of self. In the course of my studies, I have marvelled at the lack of emphasis in lifespan career development theories (Boyd & Bee 2006; Sharf 2006) on the transition to parenthood as a major, life-changing event. Oberman and Josselson's (1996: 344) recognition of the experience of motherhood as 'a significant and multifaceted stage in the course of a woman's development' endorses my own sense of the enormity of the transition that motherhood represents. They have identified a matrix of tensions amid which mothers struggle to balance themselves, with one of the primary issues identified in their model of mothering being that of 'loss of self/expansion of self' (341).

The topic of balancing motherhood and career seems almost to have chosen me, more than I have chosen to study it. I began my adult guidance and counselling

training as a mother of a two-year old daughter, hopeful but unsure of how I could manage anything external in addition to mothering. I had given so much to my mother identity that most other aspects of myself had been significantly diminished, if not lost altogether. The dynamics of this negotiating act were intensified for me as I gave birth to my second child after my first year of training and undertook the second year of my studies with my infant son accompanying me to all of the workshops. Figuring out how I could be both a mother and a learner, as well as a guidance and counselling professional, was an integral part of this research and my emerging new identities contributed to a more rounded sense of self.

## Motherhood and identity in the literature

### Motherhood and mothering

In the emerging area of motherhood scholarship, an important distinction is made between the socio-cultural role of motherhood and the actual lived experience of mothering. Andrea O'Reilly (2006, 2004) has championed the importance of this distinction initially made by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1977). O'Reilly (2006: 11) differentiates between 'the patriarchal institution of motherhood which is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women' and 'women's experiences of mothering which are female-defined and centred and thus potentially empowering to women'.

O'Reilly argues that Rich's distinction enables feminists to recognise that 'motherhood is not naturally, necessarily or inevitably oppressive' (ibid: 11) and that mothering can be a potentially empowering experience and even a catalyst of social change. This insight has broadened my understanding of the oppressive and un-chosen nature of the role of motherhood and has led me to a powerful realisation regarding my relationship with my own mother. What I had perceived as rejection as a child was more likely to have been my mother's understandable rejection of the oppressive role of motherhood. O'Reilly discusses mother-blame and how recognising the error of blaming one's own mother for issues more accurately concerned with patriarchal values can lead to healing

within mother-daughter relationships (65). I had been aware that I was partly motivated to provide the most perfect emotional foundation that I could for my daughter in response to my own experience of being mothered. However, I had not seen that the feelings of failure and frustration I struggled with at times might be a response to the role of motherhood as currently constructed by society.

### Identity and self

The dictionary definition of identity strips it down to 'the fact of being who or what a person or thing is' and gives a second definition which refers to 'the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is' ('Identity' 2012). Motherhood, as a socially-constructed role that mothers identify with to different extents, is a prime example of identity as an aspect of the self: informed by society and culture and absorbed into our self-concept.

One's identities contribute to one's 'idea of the self', the dictionary definition of self-concept, 'constructed from the beliefs one holds about oneself and the responses of others' ('Self-concept' 2012). Super (1990) also recognised the relevance of vocational identity to self-concept, which he understood to be supported by the twin pillars of personality and society (cited in Sharf 2006). Gottfredson (1981) associated social influences to self-concept and formed a 'circumscription and compromise' developmental theory regarding the impact of society on self-concept. More recently, Savickas (2011) has connected the relevance of identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003) and self-construction to narrative approaches to career counselling.

Watson (2009: 426) also connects the three concepts of identity work, narrative and the social construction of reality and uses the term 'self-identity' to describe 'the individual's own notion of who and what they are'. Similarly, Guichard, Pouyau and Dumora (2013: 58) echo the recognition of the importance of identity work, narrative and self-construction in career counselling, recognising it as the major issue in career counselling and guidance in society today. Their assertion that 'individual subjectivity is multiple' is crucial to their central concept of a 'subjective identity form' which they describe as 'a set of ways of being, acting and interacting in accordance with a particular

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way of representing oneself – of conceiving oneself – within a given context’ (ibid: 59).

This constructed self, fluid, multi-dimensional and responsive to social and cultural influences, can be fragile or robust. It is critical to how we navigate transitions and make sense of our experience. Self is one of the four key elements of Schlossberg’s (2011) transition model, with the other three elements that influence the potential resources we bring to a transition being situation, supports and strategies. Guichard et al. (2013: 61) connect self-construction to the fluidity of multidimensional identity and assert that ‘individual reflexivity plays a major role in the construction of the self’. They refer to the importance of reflexivity in the process to accurately describe what I have experienced and conceptualised as identity negotiations. They describe a dual process involving ‘synthesis and stabilization (of multiple identities)’ on the one hand, and, on the other, ‘self-transcendence and seeing oneself from different perspectives’ (ibid: 61).

This research naturally demanded a reflexive approach and the description of a dual process is accurate. The deep introspection needed to become familiar with the multiple identities featuring prominently within my self-concept during this study was complemented and enhanced by a self-transcendent approach. Heuristic research, with its emphasis on intuition and tacit knowing, presented itself during the course of this project as a method that would give a more expansive perspective over the experience of self-construction.

## Methodology

Heuristic research provided a key for me to understand that my study of the phenomenon of the interface between motherhood and the world of work needed to focus on my embodied experience of early motherhood. The term heuristic originates from the Greek word *heuriskein* meaning ‘to discover’ and it ‘refers to a process of internal search through which one discovers the nature and meaning of experience’ (Moustakas 1990: 9). Heuristic research methods, as presented by Moustakas, helped me to realise that rather than searching for alternative ways of combining paid work with mothering work and making them visible to other mothers, the purpose of this research

project could only be to authentically present my experience of engaging in balancing mothering work with the rest of life.

‘The passionate search for the illumination of a puzzlement’ (ibid: 54) led me to notice and reflect on changes regarding my sense of self and how I have managed identity negotiations on my journey through early motherhood. Moustakas describes heuristic research as a ‘way of engaging in scientific research through methods and processes aimed at discovery; a way of self-inquiry and dialogue with others aimed at finding the underlying meanings of important human experiences’ (ibid: 15). The primary data in heuristic inquiry is to be found within oneself (ibid: 13), and I used two methods, reflexive journaling and autoethnography, to access my own experience of early motherhood.

I primarily relied upon reflexive journaling to record my lived experience of studying while mothering, including undertaking this research and the transition back to work following my second maternity leave. It was also the main method I relied upon to capture illuminations and insights that helped me to reach the deeper essences and meanings of this experience. I used autoethnography to draw upon my past experience of my initial transition to motherhood and my return to work following a period of intensively mothering my first child and wrote rich, present-tense depictions of moments along that journey. To create an autoethnographic account, the researcher uses ‘systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall’ to understand an experience lived through and then writes her experience as a story (Ellis 1999: 671).

I then used the technique of narrative interviewing and conducted conversations with three other mothers as co-researchers to gather data on their experience of balancing motherhood with paid work. Although heuristic research can be undertaken with only one researcher, ‘a study will achieve richer, deeper, more profound and more varied meanings’ (Moustakas 1990: 47) when it also draws upon the experiences of others. In order to extract the themes emerging from the other mothers’ stories, I listened to each of the interviews repeatedly, noting down key words and statements and connecting recurring themes. When it came to writing an account of each mother’s

story, I tried to access a receptive and intuitive state, in an attempt to draw on tacit knowing to capture 'a sense of the wholeness or essence' (ibid: 21) of the person and their story, incorporating both immediately obvious and more subliminal factors. I then gave the co-researchers an opportunity to review the transcripts and respond to the thoughts and feelings they shared in their accounts, and incorporated the few minor amendments that they suggested.

## Themes and essences

The key themes of this research revealed themselves consistently throughout the inquiry through the heuristic processes of focusing, indwelling and self-searching (Moustakas 1990). The primary illumination came in the form of a metaphor for my experience of early motherhood, which, in my case, certainly was an experience that caused me to lose my shape<sup>1</sup> (Cusk 2001: 91) and not have a solid sense of self for a considerable amount of time. The metaphor of losing and later rediscovering my shape provides a way of understanding this experience of self-construction in its wholeness and allows the meanings and essences of the other key themes to emerge.

### Demands of motherhood

O'Reilly (2006: 46) argues that patriarchal motherhood makes mothering deeply oppressive to women because, in order to fulfil the demands 'expressed in the ideology of intensive mothering', 'the mother must repress her own selfhood'. This assertion has come to the fore in this research in terms of identity loss leading to a shaken sense of self, encapsulated in the concept of a loss of one's shape.

I've been thinking that it might actually be better for me to let go of the idea that I'm an organised person', I confess to Anya (one of my 'yoga mum' friends, who is so gracious about her lack of sleep and seems to keep on top of everything with her three boys). 'Not being able to live up to that idea

<sup>1</sup> In her painfully honest account of early motherhood (which I read when I first became a mother), Cusk (2001: 91) referred to her nine-month-old daughter having 'lost her shape' when Cusk and the baby's father went on holidays without her for a week; my research connects this 'loss of shape' to the concept of not having a solid sense of self.

of myself is probably harder than just letting go of it.

(Autoethnography excerpt)

Rich (1977: 15) evokes the effects of the demands of motherhood in eloquent terms, referring to living through something 'considered central to the lives of women' and remembering 'little except anxiety, physical weariness, anger, self-blame, boredom and division within [her]self': a division made more acute by moments of passionate love and delight in her children and their unconditional love for her.

One of my co-researchers described her experience of early motherhood as being like a 'fall from grace' when her baby struggled for many months with an undiagnosed food intolerance that led to sleepless nights and frustration – absolutely not fitting in with the idealised notion of the 'good baby'.

Why does it take so much effort? How could I fulfil this role with more ease? It seems like we have to fulfil this huge ideal with little or no support... I experience such deep, profound, true love for which I am deeply, deeply grateful. But the efforts involved still overwhelm me... Why do I find this so hard?

(Research journal, 5 August 2015)

### Multiple identities

My discovery that this research was, in fact, a study of engaging with multiple identities in an on-going process of self-construction gave me the perspective I needed to make progress with the inquiry and begin to uncover deeper meanings. My co-researchers' stories also highlighted the presence of multiple identities: 'Kate' mentioned a 'gut instinct' or drive to be with her babies and paid work becoming less important as voluntary work fulfilled the need for novel and stimulating projects; 'Maria' mentioned gaining strength and confidence from her career that helps in her role as mother; 'Lucy' spoke of a need for time and space to enable her to put a 'game-face' on. Their statements indicate some of the ways the conflict between loving and wanting to be with one's children and needing other avenues of self-expression manifests in identity negotiations.

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Time spent with children feels very busy... It contrasts sharply with how I felt during a day at work – competent, well-presented, relaxed, getting things done (satisfied), composed... I'm grateful, I know I'm lucky to have a nice job... It is the opposite, really, at home. I feel dishevelled, invisible, unappreciated...

(Research journal, 13 January 2016)

This week, I've been noticing how my work identity is taking up more space. I could actually feel it happening. I have been doing the work I enjoy – careers adviser instead of my admin role and I feel the difference in me. I noticed coming home feeling happier, lighter, more patient with the children. More fulfilled. I'm feeling more positive about myself in general, my ability to cope, my acceptance of the lack of control over completing housework...

(Research journal, 5 February 2016)

In witnessing the positive effects of getting a sense of satisfaction from my work identity, I came to understand that it was contributing to a more robust sense of self, and that I was rediscovering a shape I could recognise and feel comfortable in.

### Sense of self

One of the key themes that emerged later in the research was the importance of multiple identities in contributing to a solid sense of self. One of the changes I was asked to make to a co-researcher's story was to broaden the definition of her in the opening line of her story, to include all of her work roles and her voluntary work, indicating once again the relevance of these multiple identities to her sense of self.

As mentioned previously, other researchers (Guichard et al. 2013: 59) recognise the multi-dimensional aspect of identity, which they conceptualise as 'subjective identity forms', that contribute to how one represents or conceives oneself within a given context. In other words, they and others (Savickas 2011; Watson 2009) also connect the concept of identity negotiations to the process of self-construction.

The value of a solid sense of self... that would be the main message that I would be getting across

if working with a group of new mothers or mothers wanting to return to work... That was what helped me to feel strong and capable taking on Year 2 of my studies with a tiny infant – a solid sense of self that encompassed being mother, learner, guidance counsellor and everything in between.

(Research journal, 11 April 2016)

### Resilience

The value of maintaining and nurturing a solid sense of self, and the role of multiple identities in providing that solidity and strength, coming to the fore in the research led me to understand that a coherent self-concept brings with it greater resilience, or capacity to maintain one's 'core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changed circumstances' (Zolli & Healy 2012: 7). Resilience, the human capacity to recover quickly from difficulties, can also be described as the ability of an object to spring back into shape ('Resilience' 2012).

What is relevant is how I was more resilient when I had [my second child] because I had work to help me maintain my shape (my sense of self) and the change of circumstances wasn't as dramatic.

(Research journal, 11 March 2016)

### Conclusion

This research began with a question of passionate concern and a desire to bring about change in the world by exploring it from what I considered a positive angle: mothers successfully balancing mothering work with paid work. Adopting a heuristic research approach brought me back to my lived experience and, in a sense, to the darker side of this phenomenon, including the struggle to maintain a solid sense of self. When one considers the social context of motherhood as an oppressive patriarchal role, it is not surprising that a study of the interface between motherhood and self brought me to a place of overwhelming demands and frustration.

The main illuminations of this research concerned the importance of keeping one's shape and engaging in

multiple-identity negotiations to regain and maintain a coherent sense of self. This, in turn, increases the capacity to overcome difficulties and spring back into shape. I would argue that the importance of a robust sense of self in navigating transitions (Schlossberg 2011) is even more pertinent when one considers the significant loss of identity, possibly a feature of all transitions, that accompanies the transition to motherhood in particular.

The small-scale nature of this research means that the findings are particular to the experience of this small group of co-researchers. However, the depth of the heuristic method may have allowed essential, perhaps even universal, meanings of the experience of motherhood and self-construction to emerge. This piece of research has, on a small scale, answered the call for further research to 'explore how it is that women negotiate the balancing act of mothering; how they integrate their diminished former selves with their evolving mother-selves' (Oberman & Josselson 1996: 357). I believe that the rich material presented here supports the case for larger scale studies in a similar vein.

The themes and essences that emerge in this research also make a case for careers practitioners working with mothers to be cognisant of the identity negotiations mothers may be involved in when returning to the workplace. Oberman and Josselson's (1996: 357) declaration that 'only with a clearer reading of the phenomenology of the experience of motherhood [can] we hope to arrive at a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this aspect of women's development' can equally be applied to the role of the careers practitioner in supporting mothers in constructing and maintaining a robust sense of self in the face of competing demands. Careers practitioners can provide an exploratory space for identity work to take place and can also be mindful of the concept that the workplace can either support the traditional socio-cultural role of motherhood or, potentially, an empowering experience of mothering.



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