Academic Paper

Looking forward to going back? The experience of career decision-making for first-time mothers and the implications for coaches

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Abstract

The career penalty for professional women who become mothers is well known, while research scrutiny of career decision-making itself appears to have been largely overlooked. This study explores the experience of six London-based professional women, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) techniques to develop insights into the high-commitment behaviours which underpin female professional career identity; the effects of group norms, cultural messages and employer practices on women's decision-making; and, the solitary experience of establishing new narratives as a professional mother. It develops insights and implications for organisations and the coaching profession, to better support new mothers with their career decisions.

Introduction

The experience of new motherhood presents 'an important transition, when a number of significant personal, social and biological changes coincide' (Smith, 1999, p.281). With primary focus on the child, a woman's experience of change as an individual tends to receive secondary attention, mostly of a remedial nature related to 'getting back' to a target weight, physical fitness, and hormonal balance. While CIPD (2019) asserts that 'coaching interventions are particularly appropriate for challenging times', the provision of impartial maternity coaching rarely appears in maternity policy since employer priorities are primarily focused on a 'return to work'. It is also unlikely that mid-career women have already experienced the benefits of independent coaching support by the time of a first maternity leave: they too may prioritise managing the uncertainties of

becoming a first-time mother and respond to the rise in prominence of birth doulas, rather than look for career support in the form of a coach. Meanwhile, current UK statutory policy (up to 12 months' maternity leave), provides a decisional deadline on whether (or how) to return to work, allowing little time between adjusting to motherhood and making a career decision: the complexity of the process of transition during maternity leave is under-researched from an individual perspective (Mills, 2017) but is understood to carry a 'hidden toll' (Maxwell, Connolly & Laoire, 2019) which can lead to career disadvantage.

The transition to motherhood mid-career raises a series of questions in relation to a professional career identity which has often been developed through singular focus and years of working long hours: it may be unclear how this identity could transition to function within a family context. Common parlance refers to 'going back', as though a former career identity is waiting to be re-instated, a return to 'normal functioning': yet that identity may feel remote or incompatible with the new identity of motherhood. The concept of multiple 'possible selves' (Erikson, 2007; Yates, 2017) is also relevant to the experience of developing a career decision during maternity leave as a newly formed 'self' supporting a newly formed family unit. The characteristics of this pivotal career event will be explored with a view to developing research insights and specific recommendations for both Human Resource and coaching professions.

Recent commercial research into the consequences of professional women's career decision-making demonstrates the profound importance of this decision and the lasting career penalty to those who preference caring responsibilities over their career (PWC, 2016): the concept of 'Women Returners' has become familiar, referring to women who struggle to regenerate their former career after taking a significant break beyond maternity leave. 'Returnships' which are offered by some larger organisations offer a developmental programme of re-entry, but nonetheless two thirds of professional women return to work after an extended career break into roles at lower levels (PWC, 2016).

Meanwhile, the experience of returning to work at the end of a standard maternity leave, into the same role and with the same employer, is also not without challenges of adaptation. This is evidenced by increased attrition during the first year of return (Bussell, 2008) as women attempt to deliver full-time jobs through part-time arrangements, then scale back their aspirations in favour of greater balance (Sandberg, 2015; Modern Families Index, 2018). The longer-term impacts of professional women 'scaling back' results in lost skills and reduced gender diversity at Board-level: in 2014, KPMG (2014 p.5) research found that men are '4.5 times more likely to make it into an ExCo role than a woman starting out at the same time.' The far-reaching consequences of women's career decisions during a first maternity leave appear to be underestimated by organisations and potentially by women themselves.

This study endeavours to make a contribution to understanding the experience and psychological challenges of family-related career decision-making. The focus of the study is on the experience of the individual and her cognitive process in making sense of new constraints and shifting perspectives, in order to reach a career decision. Family scientists, Greenhaus and Powell (2012) asserted that 'family-related work decisions' are a 'common phenomenon…(which)... has generally been ignored in the theoretical, work-related decision-making literature' (p.247). This study aims to raise awareness of the experiences of first-time mothers in order to inform policy and practice of those professionals who can better support women in their career decisions.

Literature Review

While the majority of existing research on motherhood and its impact on career tends to focus on sociological implications, a broad review of literature was conducted with primary focus on the psychological factors of career behaviour supplemented by a review of associated coaching

literature where pertinent to women's family-related challenges. Making a career decision leading to an individualistic outcome is the subject of most career theory, yet theoretical models regarding decision-making as an individual but for a family-related outcome is relatively absent (Powell, Greenhaus, Jaskiewicz, Combs, Balkin & Shanine, 2017); mothers routinely adapt their careers, yet are 'widely overlooked in career theories and psychological research' (Grether & Wiese, 2016, p.109). Referencing the framework of social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2002), the main drivers of career behaviour *prior* to family-related considerations, offers a useful starting point for appreciating the impacts of change on identity, self-efficacy, outcome expectations and contextual factors.

Identity is widely seen as the foundation for decision-making, as it is 'about the meanings given to an individual by others and by themselves' (Yates, 2014, p.29). Since becoming a mother signifies 'a complex process of identity change and transformation' (Smith, 1999, p.284), and family-related career decisions are further complicated by 'the context of holding multiple identities' (Powell & Greenhaus, 2012, p.323), this potentially gives rise to disorientation and negative affect, with new mothers turning 'away from the public world of work towards the more local world of family and friends' looking for 'psychological convergence with key others' (Smith, 1999, pp.289-290). Meanwhile, research on adult development describes a process of 'reflexive ordering of self-narratives' (Giddens, 1991, p.244) in order to make sense of change and 'the dynamic relationship between different parts of the mind' (Lee, 2014). Coaching techniques which focus on developmental exploration of 'the whole person' can be especially relevant to new mothers as they negotiate the career aspirations of a former independent career identity and those of a mothering identity with a dependent: 'Coaches can help clients in accepting the fact of multiplicity' (Bachkirova, 2014, p.139). This development challenge is described as 'one of the most significant challenges women experience …(and)… relates to their ability to manage their evolving sense of self, as work and motherhood intersect' (Greenberg, Clair & Ladge, 2016, p.1). Just as maternity leave presents a physical separation from work, so the 'evolving sense of self' takes place at home, emphasising the perspective of family priorities. Without neutral support and a conducive 'thinking environment' (Kline, 2015), the reliance on core values to steer decision-making is unsurprising (Grady & McCarthy, 2008).

Within social cognitive career theory, concepts of **self-efficacy** and **outcome expectations** are seen as fundamental to decision-making, as they 'refer to beliefs in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required' (Bandura, 1997 p.3). Their effects on career behaviour are extensively researched (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 2002; Grether & Wiese, 2016), meanwhile a clear relationship has been established between levels of support, levels of expressed self-efficacy and maternal career decisions (Whitmarsh, Brown, Cooper, Hawkins-Rodgers & Keyser Wentworth, 2007 pp.230-232). The Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM), (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005) outlines the 'career parameters' of 'challenge', 'balance' and 'authenticity' receiving varying emphasis across a career trajectory. Findings within a recent study on new perspectives of the KCM (Elley-Brown, Pringle & Harris, 2018) indicate that 'women did not 'opt-out', or adopt a clear-cut gender beta career pattern' in respect of their caring responsibilities; rather their outcome expectations are influenced by context. Meanwhile a study of high-achieving professional women experiencing career re-entry (Knowles, 2017 p.ii) also found that although KCM supported the theoretical prioritisation of 'balance' over 'authenticity', an 'equitable and flexible work environment' is critical for supporting constructive outcome expectations: without a supportive context, even 'balance became a daily struggle'.

Despite 'career balance' representing a requirement for professional mothers, the role of 'outcome expectations' in terms of understanding the way to achieve it through optimum decision-making, is under-explored in career theory: 'there have been few studies of the sources of self-efficacy and outcome expectations regarding career process behaviors, such as decision-making ' (Lent, Ireland, Penn, Morris & Sappington, 2017, p.109). 'Outcome expectations' are particularly relevant to this research topic as they refer to 'personal beliefs about the consequences or outcomes of

performing particular behaviors' (Lent et al., 2002, p.262) for which new mothers are potentially under-equipped.

The critical role of **contextual factors** (such as societal norms and employer practices) in influencing individual perceptions of self-efficacy is well researched: Kossek, Su & Wu (2017) found that women's outcome expectations are heavily influenced by 'social contexts reflecting the climate for gender inclusion" (p.228). This meta-study on workplace equality assigns primary accountability to employers for 'pulling' mothers back into careers, through positioning 'the work environment as one involving social interactions, cultures and structures that are supportive.' (p.241). A recent report into the prevailing UK 'long hours' culture' in professional services and its links to female attrition, highlights the lack of workplace support for mothers (Modern Families Index, 2018). Further insights into professional women 'opting out' after new motherhood then struggling to return to their former career are covered in a recent Government Equalities Office report (2018) with ONS Labour Force Survey data (2016) highlighting longer term impacts of women's career decisions on their financial security: women are lone parents in 22% of UK working families with dependents.

The array of factors involved in decision-making is extensive, with perceptions of contextual factors (such as responses to societal norms, peer groups, cultural messages) and actual contextual factors (such as financial constraints, employer practices, workplace culture) presenting additional complexity; 'processes in this life situation can be assumed to be multi-faceted and complex' (Grether & Wiese, 2016, p.117). Professional career support such as maternity coaching can significantly improve the experience of decision-making during this transition, with evidence-based benefits for both individuals and business (Bussell, 2008; Freeman, 2008; Filsinger, 2012). The notable benefit for individuals is an increase in 'psychological capital' to respond to challenges (Luthans, Youssef & Avolio, 2007): a recent practice-oriented study into the individual benefits of undertaking a coaching programme in respect of work-life decisions found that 'the coaching session served as a conduit for increasing hopefulness about future work-life balance as well as raising participants' confidence, positivity and resilience' (Brown & Yates, 2018 p.119). Meanwhile, studies into the business benefits of providing coaching support during maternity emphasise talent retention as a direct consequence of women being enabled to re-integrate with their careers (Vitzthum, 2017; Yasar, 2017).

Preference Theory (Hakim, 2006) meanwhile outlines the concept of women reaching career decisions following maternity from a default preference for prioritising home or work with 20% primarily 'home-centred', 20% 'work-centred' and 60% 'adaptive'. UK maternal employment rates (c.70%) potentially support this theory, with half of working mothers choosing part-time arrangements (OECD, 2016). However, additional considerations also influence decision outcomes, as explored by Knowles' (2017 p.ii) study indicating that 'most professional women did not willingly leave the workforce after having children. Instead, due to family pulls and workplace pushes, they felt like they had no other option.' This study will explore the experience of professional women who make career decisions on their own to the best of their ability, based on their specific context and their own psychological resources.

Methodology

Design

A qualitative research design was selected to reflect the person-centred nature of the enquiry, which aspired to give voice to psychological aspects of a specific change process. Through scrutinising the experience of first-time mothers as they engaged with career decision-making, the intent was to explore a 'psychosocial process…shaped by all the people, activities and understandings that make up (their) ever-changing context'(Yardley, 2017 p.295). An idiographic approach based on listening, reflection and interpretation was adopted for the study, using

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) techniques (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). This methodology operates a double hermeneutic approach to developing meaning, as participants reflect on their direct experience, while the researcher separately reflects on their reported experience. Reflexivity and the potential for Researcher bias (as a former Human Resources professional, coach and working mother) was acknowledged as a limitation: this was proactively mitigated through supervision and ongoing self-scrutiny, using a reflective log.

The priorities, scale and aspiration of the research study align well with the tenets of IPA methodology, aiming to generate 'emotionally recognisable' rather than 'statistically generalisable' knowledge: as Yardley outlines, the focus of interest for a qualitative researcher is the 'subtle interactive processes occurring in particular contexts' with the aim that 'insights … derived from studying one context would prove useful in other contexts that had similarities" (Yardley, 2015, p.259). Scott (2010) highlights the suitability of IPA as an empathetic approach particularly suited to working with women, in her work on 'The psychological effects of becoming 'Mum''. The present study focuses on the experience of six professional women, using an iterative IPA process to transform individual perceptions into interpretative insights, which may be of use to Human Resources, coaching and career professionals.

Participants

Participants were recruited as a 'purposive sample' of relevant individuals, through an informal 'snowball' approach targeting a diverse range of people. Criteria for participation were shared in order to attract women who would find 'the research question meaningful' (Smith et al., 2009 p.49). These criteria included a) professional women who are within (or recently completed) a first period of maternity leave, b) part of a two-parent family and c) involved in the process of making (or recently having made) a decision about their career. The response to the invitation was enthusiastic, delivering six participants aged between 31-41 from the worlds of journalism, Human Resources, chef/food styling, pensions, marketing and higher education career guidance:

Table 1: Participant profiles

Employment status before maternity leave	Working time before maternity leave	Working status at interview date
Employed	100%	Maternity leave
Employed	100%	Working
Employed	100%	Working
Employed	100%	Not working
Freelance	100%	Not working
Employed	100%	Maternity leave

After an introductory telephone discussion, interviews were arranged to offer reflective space away from a participant's domestic context and child. An outline of exploratory questions was shared in advance, to position the semi-structured nature of the interview and to minimise any potential anxiety.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews of 50-60 minutes were conducted within a humanistic spirit of enquiry, based on the schedule provided in advance:

a. What is/was it like, approaching the end of maternity leave and having to make a decision about work?
b. What were the main influences - how did they feel?
c. What kind of support did you have - how was it?
d. How did you find reaching a decision?

The Researcher adopted an empathetic stance avoiding any 'leading' overtones and allowing the participant to guide the focus and pace of exploration. Data collected through audio-recordings were later anonymously transcribed by a professional third party and stored securely.

Data analysis

Interview transcriptions were analysed in depth for descriptive content, linguistic features and conceptual aspects. This iterative process delivered a variety of emergent themes which could be clearly linked back to individual data: through paying close attention to validity, "sound, legitimate and authoritative" conclusions may be derived as "trustworthy and useful" (Yardley, 2015, p. 259). While Yardley points out that interpretation is 'inevitably influenced by the assumptions, interests and aims of the researcher' (p.259), a robust referencing process ensured the findings were closely tied back to participants' lived experience. Smith characterises the more subtle discoveries as 'gems', which are a 'relatively rare utterance that is especially resonant and offers potent analytic leverage to a study' (Smith, 2011 p.6). In line with Yardley's (2015; 2017) principle of research quality delivering 'impact and importance', the study looked for patterns of emphasis and meaning, while also remaining alert to hidden 'gems'.

Findings

Interpretive analysis of transcribed interviews led to identification of patterns across the individual experience of considering a career decision during a first maternity leave; in addition, the personal accounts of *'what it is like'*, although uniquely expressed and resulting in different decisions, may also be seen to fit within the same cognitive process, as explored in the 'Discussion' section. The actual decisions, although not the focus of this study, fell into a familiar range:

Table 2: Career decisions

Employment status before maternity leave	Working time before maternity leave	Career decision	Planned working time after maternity eave
Employed	100%	Return to work	80%
Employed	100%	Return to work	100%
Employed	100%	Go freelance	60%
Employed	100%	Primary carer	0%
Freelance	100%	Primary carer	0%
Employed	100%	Return to work	60%

Although each participant expressed differing emphases, all engaged in a decision-making process based on constructed information gathered from a temporal approach: data from the past (former career self), the present (response to transition) and a projected future (potential ways forward.) The research found the overarching themes to be: Gaining new perspective on career self; Navigating transition; Negotiating contextual factors ; Sense-making; Rehearsing new narratives. The complexity of the experience is further captured through the associated sub-themes indicating the scale of the psychological task which each participant undertook:

Table 3: Themes and Sub-Themes

Themes	Sub-Themes
Gaining new perspective on career self	Career identity and values
	Self of self-efficacy
	High price of high commitment
Navigating transition	Shifting sense of identity
	Disruption to self-efficacy
Negotiating contextual factors	Sensitivity to contextual factors
	Sense of relatedness
Sense-making	Learning process
	Revised priorities and goals
Rehearsing new narratives	Self-efficacy within boundaries
	Emerging sense of identity

Gaining new perspective on career self

This theme was well supported by all participants as consideration of their previous 'career self' offered a familiar set of meanings, independent of whether they were connected to being drawn back positively to *'contributing to a work context, feeling important, basically'*(P5), or retreating from a career that was *'not really going where I wanted it to go'*(P1). The celebration of single focus, high commitment behaviours emphasised the benefits of a fulfilling career, while also providing specific information for considering how to adapt.

- **Career identity & values:** the concept of 'career' was emphasised as a central expression of pre-motherhood identity: *'part of who I am'*(P2), *'put all of myself into my work'*(P4), *'I need to go for the extra…it's my identity, it's who I am'*(P5), *'be the perfect career woman'*(P6).
- **Developed self-efficacy:** the psychological benefits of having a professional career were strongly evidenced as having a sense of self-belief, capability and financial independence: *'I did really well in all my performance reviews'*(P3), *'I'm quite confident in myself at work…you get published, that's the validation you look for'* (P4), *'I have the skill, I have the time, the knowledge to do it…the ability to command enough money'*(P5), *'earning my own money, most importantly'* (P6).
- **High price of high commitment:** this sub-theme outlined the positive enjoyment and pride in having the freedom to contribute high levels of 'elective effort', even to the point of personal sacrifice: *'you can stay late, you can 'give it your all' if that's what you enjoy – and I did enjoy it'*(P3), *'put all of myself into my work …evenings, weekends, holidays'*(P4), *'the plusses of being able to invest time'* (P5), however, *'I was really burnt out by my career'*(P3).

Navigating transition

This theme represented current state for participants, with the majority experiencing a conflicted sense of psychological disorientation, due the new constraints of first-time motherhood.

- **Shifting sense of identity:** this sub-theme focused on the experience of feeling consumed by the priorities of motherhood over-riding a previous sense of identity, with associated feelings of loss: *'I feel like a completely different person'* (P1), *'I was losing myself within … a very small circumference'* (P4),*'wanting to be a professional, wanting to be me again…I fantasise about having my old life back...being my own person…this is all foreign'*(P5).
- **Disruption to self-efficacy:** this sub-theme highlighted the main effect of transition as a perceived loss of capability and confidence: *'before I had children … I'm quite focussed and single-minded and (now) I find it quite stressful'* (P1), *'oh my god, just get me back into the office where I know what I'm doing…how I do a good job'* (P6).

Negotiating contextual factors

This theme represented the high degree of importance placed by participants on the particular challenges of transition relating to new constraints, perceived group norms and changing sources of influence. The emotions most frequently expressed were connected to a sense of uncertainty and anxiety:

- **Sensitivity to contextual factors:** this sub-theme evidenced participants' search for external reference points and their heightened sensitivity to them. For some, this manifested as a need for validation: *'anything that kind of confirms what you're doing just like reassures you… because it's OK, someone else is doing it'*(P2) while others constructed negative scenarios relative to their former peers, online forums and new mother groups: *'it's difficult to feel secure in my decision when I'm speaking to other people…(who are)...really forging ahead and being incredibly successful'*(P1), *'mothers often don't talk about things…like it's too sensitive a topic and people (might) get upset'* (P1), *'how would that look to people around me? Am I going to be judged for it?'*(P5).
- **Sense of relatedness:** this sub-theme was powerfully expressed as a loss, with most participants referring to feelings of isolation in the decision-making process: *'it's perhaps quite isolating being stuck in a new experience which you can't really communicate - a 'silent chasm' slightly opens up'*(P1), *'the difficult thing is that you are doing this in a vacuum…even my partner… he couldn't really help me to make decisions because actually it's about my own identity'*(P2), *'you don't know who to turn to...there's no sort of advice out there'* (P4). However, the positive effect of an inclusive employer was evidenced by P6: *' I'm just not there at the moment, but I'll be back - that's how it feels.'*

Making sense of change

This theme emerged as a constructive response to significant disruption, generating new perspectives, revised priorities and adjusted outcome expectations in order to reach a workable career decision with all its implications: *'actually making a decision was easy… it was more the impact of that decision – that felt really difficult'* (P2).

- **Learning process:** this subtheme highlights human adaptability in the face of changing circumstances, generating new perspectives to make a pragmatic decision which fits with a revised identity: *'there's just so much ambiguity – no black and white answers here'* (P1), *'this weird period of sort of getting used to this new situation…I feel like I'm coming out the other side'* (P1), *'I care less about the things I can't do anything about'* (P2), *'you just have to do the best that you can'* (P6).
- **Revised priorities, goals and expectations:** this subtheme outlines the process of revisiting personal priorities and making adjustments to render new constraints manageable, including the amount of psychological 'space' previously given to career: *'working out how (career) fits together with having a child'* (P1), *'I knew I needed something else'*(P4), *'I actually want a bit of space'*(P5), *'the priority isn't the career any more. It's sort of joint priority…for me to be the mum I'd want to be, some things have to give.'*(P6).

Rehearsing new narratives

This theme was strongly evidenced as all participants appeared to enjoy the opportunity to 'rehearse' an adapted future within the interviews, with positive orientation towards making personal changes that could lead to a family-friendly career scenario *'that will allow me to have something that fulfils me and that I enjoy, with hours that work around a family'* (P3), and *'something that defines me as 'me' rather than my greater combined role'* (P6).

- **Self-efficacy within boundaries:** this sub-theme indicated optimism about the potential for a new sense of career self-efficacy, based on adapted behaviours to better manage work choices: *'despite being three days a week…it's great. I've had to learn new boundaries…I'm much more strict now'* (P4), *'learning a new way of working'* (P5), *'being much more careful about what I agree to say yes to'*(P6).
- **Emerging sense of new identity:** this sub-theme evidenced an outward-looking, positive shift in identity based on constructive acceptance: *'there's a process of acceptance…and realising its fine…its different and you're not going back, but that's OK'* (P1), *'I am actually more…relaxed in my job…a bit more confident and …kind of more content strangely at work'*(P2), *'how you see yourself…how others see you…what your ultimate goals are…I think that changes a lot once you have children'*(P6).

In summary

Through the techniques of interpretive analysis, participant emphasis in the data revealed some natural divergence but also significant convergence, as outlined in the themes above: 'Negotiating contextual factors' and 'Making sense of change' received the greatest amount of collective emphasis in participants' accounts, while individual differences more closely reflected their unique personalities and circumstances. The early stages of analysis paid close attention to individual expression, including the value of metaphor to aid with communicating complexity: *'this **enmeshed thing'** (P1), 'a **silent chasm** which slightly opens up'* (P1), *'doing this **in a vacuum'*** (P2), *'a very **small, little world'** (P4), 'I felt a bit of **a husk'** (P4), 'there isn't **enough space'***(P5), and *'it's all sort of merged together, in this very sort of **wibbly wobbly mash'*** (P6). Capturing these unique attempts to express the essence of an experience underlined the benefits of a qualitative study in developing recognisable truths which may be of wider benefit.

Discussion

The research findings confirm the challenges in generating adaptive behaviour to reach a family-related career decision. Furthermore, the singular experience of managing the transition is portrayed as solitary, creating anxiety and loss of psychological capital. All research participants aspired in time to become role models as mothers with successful careers, but the impending decision and its impacts *'felt really difficult'* (P2) . Through the IPA process of 'situating the means by which our participants make sense of their experiences' (Smith et al., 2009, p.40), themes were developed which link to existing theory. These also provide insight into the practical aspects of individual enquiry: gathering available data from the past, present and imagined future to construct a 'home-made' coherence, based on individual style, values and constraints.

Gaining new perspective on career self: looking back

The study confirmed that mid-career decision-making relies on an honest reappraisal of the past. This accords with Levinson's (1978) description of three stages of cognitive activity involved in adapting to a significant change, consisting of: a) re-evaluating the past, in order to b) make appropriate adjustments in the present and c) develop a coherent sense of the future. Social-cognitive career theory also presents the concept of self-efficacy being 'acquired or modified via four primary sources of information (or learning experiences): 1) personal performance accomplishments, 2) vicarious learning 3) social persuasion, and 4) physiological and affective states' (Bandura, 1997, as quoted in Brown, 2002, p.262). Through re-examining past career identity and behaviours, the majority of participants associated high levels of self-efficacy and autonomy with their professional life: 'modifications' to their sense of self-efficacy occurred through motherhood impacts to all four sources of reinforcement. Gaining new perspective through looking back at former career behaviour was used to inform narratives for a balanced future: *'my life is different so I can't have that 100% anymore'*(P5), *'I cannot afford to do that anymore'*(P6).

Navigating transition: observing the present

Consistent descriptions of *'the chaos'* (P2) of new motherhood confirmed that this experience registers at a fundamental level of identity (Smith 1999). With 2018 NICE guidelines reporting depression and anxiety affecting '15 20% of women in the first year after childbirth', many of the individual emotions described by participants were negative (feeling consumed, overwhelmed, confused, conflicted). However, when viewed as 'transitional affect', linked to a shifting sense of identity and associated loss of self-efficacy, they may be seen as symptoms of necessary disruption making way for new ways of being. Social cognitive career theory recognises 'Person inputs' as fundamental to career management while 'personality traits' feature alongside contextual influences as 'proximal to adaptive behavior,' (Lent et al., 2017 p.108). Nonetheless, existing career theory is under-developed in terms of taking account of an identity in transition or expressed through multiple 'possible selves' (Erikson, 2007; Yates, 2017). As participants articulated: *'I feel like a completely different person'* (P1), with a need to *'have something that defines me as 'me''*(P6).

The concept of post-partum adjustment is popularly characterised as a physiological change exacerbated by sleep deprivation, heightened emotions and lowered cognitive functioning ('baby brain'). This caricatured description is perpetuated in absence of a more psychological narrative of change, as the author Naomi Stadlen (2004) outlines: 'there is a real shortfall of useful words to describe mothering' (p.21) and 'mothers live in a universe that has not been accurately described' leading to 'the fundamental isolation of not being understood' (p.12). The concept of an experience remaining 'undescribed' indicates the challenge to professional mothers who are for the most part, attempting to make a career decision in isolation, even *'with my husband as well - like in a different experience - I don't quite know how to communicate'*(P1).

Negotiating contextual factors: engaging with the present

Having a strong sense of relatedness is understood to be an important psychological resource, as outlined in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan,1985) and developed through Positive Psychology tenets and practices (Lomas, Hefferon & Ivtzan, 2014).The topic of sensitivity to external mesosystems and exo-systems was a question of interest to all participants and drew a consistent response: levels of personal resilience and wellbeing are improved through a sense of relatedness, as the transition to first-time motherhood inevitably reduces an individual's sense of competence and autonomy. Yet for participants this was largely unsatisfied by external forums, peer groups and employer relationships: *'I feel like I have to explain what I'm doing now…culturally, we're very judgemental of what people do'* (P1), *'they either feed into your anxiety or make you cross'*(P4).

With respect to Smith's claim that a mother electively moves 'away from the public world of work towards the more local world of family and friends' and looks for 'psychological convergence with key others' (Smith, 1999, pp.289-290), the supporting role played by partners in decision-making appeared to be surprisingly peripheral, suggesting that professional women are used to taking responsibility for their own career decisions, without significant assistance from work or 'key others': *'it impacts me more than it does him… it invariably falls to the woman, not the man'* (P6), *'he couldn't really help me to make a decision, because it's about my own identity'*(P2). Within consideration of alternative 'work-family constellations', joint financial and employment factors were *theoretically* considered as variables in a shared approach (P4, P6) though only one partner had committed to a change *in practice*, 'flexing up' to allow her (P3) to *'take time out'*.

In respect of the contextual influence of an existing employment relationship, for the majority of participants it was interesting to note the absence of relational dividends from their career investment in 'the public world of work': *'kept saying it'd be good to know at least a little bit in advance… but there was no feedback'* (P2) *'received very little formal support - I just didn't hear back'* (P5), while one felt discriminated against in a job application process and was refused

consideration for flexible working: *'I've never encountered sexism in my career…but it really exists around maternity issues'*(P4). Clearly, where there is a proactive 'climate of inclusion' created by progressive employers, well-being and positive career-orientation are significantly enhanced (Kossek et al, 2017).

Making sense of change: emerging from the present

'The re-transition to work after a period of maternity leave has evolved into an important developmental task for most women' (Grether & Wiese, 2016 p.105). This element of the career decision-making process was most emphasised by participants, reflecting their current status. The research findings pointed to a common developmental experience despite a sense that the process had been unexpectedly complex: *'I must admit, I thought it would be more straightforward'* (P6). This resonated with Levinson's (1986) work on adult development being a life process of encountering 'stability and change, continuity and discontinuity, orderly progression as well as stasis and chaotic fluctuation' (p.3). This type of adult, adaptive learning is unique and personal, with scope for confusion and negative affect: *'having no language for what the experience is…its quite problematic, it means that its quite hard to unravel'*(P1).

Constructivist career theory proposes that 'sense-making is the process by which people structure and give meaning to uncertain or ambiguous situations,' exploring 'tacit preconceptions of the self' in order to construct a coherent way forward (Savickas, 2015 p.14 and p.35). Through the attempt to 'make sense' of changing priorities, participants revisited career selves and referenced familiar decision-making styles to consider variables, constraints and stakeholders. Bimrose and Barnes (2007) propose four different styles of decision-making: evaluative, strategic, aspirational and opportunistic and three of these styles were identifiable within the participant group, supporting the premise that 'decision-making does not, in reality resemble the completely rational and conscious process often assumed' (p.28). While 'strategic careerists' (P5,P6) did apply a more 'rational decision-making style', 'evaluative careerists'(P2, P4) tended towards referencing 'greater levels of self-awareness and self-knowledge…as the basis for future action and decision' with 'aspirational careerists' (P1, P3) demonstrating 'distant career goals…career decisions… intertwined with personal circumstances and priorities.'

The desire to prioritise balance within the career decision was apparent for all participants, in line with KCM (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005): *'everything is a balancing scale'* (P6), *'I can still flex the levers of challenge versus flexibility versus money'* (P5). Yet the PWC (2016 p.3) finding that 'two-thirds of returning professional women work below their potential' points to the longer term impacts of prioritising balance during mid-career: this is despite the developed skills of strategic prioritisation and adaptation demonstrated in this study, which are akin to the leadership behaviours which organisations claim to value.

The research findings on the experience of 'sense-making' highlight the opportunity for impartial, coaching support to improve the experience of managing a complex decision-making process in isolation. Coaching aims and practices provide 'thinking environments' which enable individuals to explore options, find coherence and develop resilience in their decision-making: moreover, they remind coachees that they matter as individuals (Kline, 2015). With the exception of tailored career services focused on 'Women Returners' following an extended career break, there appears to be a considerable gap in the awareness of support networks available to professional mothers, with poor societal understanding of mothers' needs as individuals: *'everything is outward…and not much goes back in for a very long time'* (P1), *'how do you keep back some of yourself, or replenish that?'*(P4).

Rehearsing new narratives: looking forward

A fundamental premise of coaching is that the 'potential…already exists within each person' to find the way forward, but this can be 'locked away' at a pre-conscious level: that it can be 'unlocked' through reflective articulation within a supportive environment is 'the central essence of coaching' (van Nieuwerburgh, 2014, p.19). As participants moved from expressing a sense of confidence in their emerging narratives during the research interview, the language shifted from use of metaphor and tentative self-talk to that of direct statement: *'work right now…not my priority, but I don't see that in the long term'* (P1), *'I knew that I needed to work, and I know that I wanted (x) to see me as a working mother'*(P4), *'I need to be a manager, to really learn to trust, to delegate, so…new skills'(P5), 'the ultimate decision is, do you want to go back to work?'*(P6).

The research process had invited participants to reflect and articulate in a calm environment of impartial attention, as explicitly agreed. An unexpected outcome of the interview itself was expressed by some participants as a sense of enjoyment and positive benefit from having been listened to, despite minimal intervention from the Researcher: *'I've really enjoyed it. It feels good to, to **know** that I want to go back'*(P5), *'I've really enjoyed that actually, it's been very interesting talking about it…vague ideas in my mind, sort of at 3 or 4 in the morning…but I've never really had the chance to sit down and talk about it'*(P6). The perceived benefits of the interview experience align with understanding that 'life story coherence… (bears)… significant relationship to well-being' (Baerger & McAdams, 1999, p.69). Positive Psychology links wellbeing to meaning: 'a potent way to generate coherence (is) through constructing a meaningful narrative about one's life' (Lomas et.al., 2014, p.43). This also suggests that narratives crystallise and gain traction through being vocalised, involving the 'mesosystem' of an external listener. Research findings pointed to an absence of impartial or constructive listening support in participants' experience of career decision-making, with an associated sense of personal struggle: *'it's so difficult to have any of these conversations'*(P1), *'you just do it on your own, because who are you going to discuss it with? There's no obvious person'* (P2), *'you don't know who to turn to'* (P4). For P6, the benefits of a positive employment relationship provided ongoing confidence in the scope to craft a 'strategic' career around a new narrative of balance: for her, disruption from individual subjective aspects of change were mitigated by the supportive mesosystem of employer practices. All participants expressed a sense of relief and achievement at emerging from the experience of transition, *'coming out the other side'*(P1) with career decisions anchored in their personal career style, values, influences and context.

Implications

This study contributes to the research base relating to women's experience of a critical career transition. By adopting a qualitative approach, subjective data of a highly personal nature was made available to the study: this gave rise to valuable insights into the process of adaptation, which was seen as a pre-requisite to family-related career decision-making.

The findings highlight the need for more systemic approaches to supporting women's ability to manage their career decisions during a first maternity leave. As the coaching profession matures, partnerships with bodies such as National Childbirth Trust could become a natural pathway for reaching out to new mothers, raising awareness of the psychological effects of juggling motherhood with a career, and facilitating access to individual coaching support. In parallel, organisations are well placed to improve the inclusiveness of the work environment for working mothers. Specific actions for Human Resource functions could include: auditing maternity policy and practices from the perspective of female talent retention, with specific input from working mothers; raising internal awareness of the importance of work-life balance, training managers to navigate the specific constraints of professional mothers; and, providing women with access to a programme of independent career coaching while on maternity leave. Based on the experience of participants in this study, specific actions for coaches who work with professional women on

maternity leave could include: adopting a humanistic stance to optimise the experience of a neutral space and 'thinking environment' away from the domestic context; employing a positive psychology approach to exploration of 'the whole person', acknowledging an identity in transition with opportunities in both private and public worlds; dependant on the individual, considering use of creative techniques (Clean Language, Life Design) to aid with constructing personally meaningful career narratives based on authenticity and balance.

Future research could usefully build on this study, through a mixed-methods exploration of the impact of tailored coaching support on career decision-making during maternity leave, with a comparison between those who received coaching and those who did not. Further research could also probe the theme of self-reliance in women's decision-making and the absence of 'psychological convergence' reported in this study.

Limitations

In reviewing findings, it is accepted that the qualitative research method is idiographic and not generalisable: 'hidden gems' are the result of rigorous interpretation. Researcher empathy with the small group of participants may also have led to a positive bias in the data, and identified themes are inevitably coloured by the Researcher's own experience.

Concluding remarks

The research has attempted to give voice to an essentially private process of adaptation and learning. We are grateful to all the participants in the study who generously shared their reflections: their voice, referenced extensively throughout, demonstrates a nuanced but consistently pragmatic response to the question of 'looking forward to going back?' The experience of making a career decision during maternity leave is essentially about 'looking back, but going forward'; because *'it never goes back to being just you'* (P1).

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