

BETWEEN A BABY AND A BOARDROOM:

Social constructions of mothers' employment decisions

by

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SUPERVISOR: Dr N Themistocleous

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moederskap en werk sterk beïnvloed is deur strukturele struikelblokke by die werk en tuis, interpersoonlike verhoudings met ander ma's, sowel as intrapersoonlike ervarings. Borsvoeding is uitgeken as 'n prominente onderwerp binne die verskillende temas.

UHLAZIYO NGOLUKAMAGEBA:

Eminyakeni yamuva nje ukulinganisela phakathi komsebenzi nokuphila kwasekhaya kube undabamlonyeni. Indaba eseqhulwini kuseyiwo umthelela wokusebenza komama enhlalakahleni yabesimane nezingane, yize sekube nezinguquko emphakathini endabeni yokulingana kobulili. Inhloso yalolu cwaningo kwakuwukuhlola lokho okwehlele omama abakhethe ukuhlala ekhaya ngemva kokuzalwa kwezingane noma abaqhubeka besebenza isikhathi esigcwele; nokuthi isinqumo sabo sibe namuphi umthelela ekuphileni kwabo. Lolu cwaningo olwalubheka umnyombo, olusekelwe embonweni weNhlanganyelo Yomphakathi, kanye ne-Cybernetics Yohlelo Lwesibili Nemibono Yabalweli Besifazane, lwalubandakanya izingxoxombuzo nomama abane baseNingizimu Afrika abasebenza isikhathi esigcwele kanye nabanye abane abahlala ekhaya. Ulwazi lwahlaziywa kusetshenziswa uhlaziyo lokucubungula okulotshiwe. Okwatholakala kubonisa ukuthi izinto ezaziyingqinamba kubabambiqhaza ngokuphathelene nokuba umama nokusebenza zazilawulwa kakhulu yizithiyo zesikhundla emsebenzini nasekhaya, ubudlelwano nabanye omama, kanye nalokho ababhekana nakho uma bezihlola ekujuleni. Ukuncelisa ibele kwakubhekwa njengesihloko esiqavile phakathi kwalezo zihloko ezinhlobonhlobo.

Name: Liezel van Beek

Unisa student number: 33692513

Degree: Masters of Art in Psychology

Supervisor: Dr N Themistocleous

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BETWEEN A BABY AND A BOARDROOM**Declaration**

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Social constructions of mothers' employment decisions

I declare that the above dissertation is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.



23/04/2020

SIGNATURE

DATE

Abstract

The topic of work-life balance has gained much attention in recent years. A focal point remains the effects of maternal employment on the well-being of women and children, despite shifts in society towards gender equality. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of mothers who either had chosen to stay at home after having children or to continue with full-time employment; and how their decision impacted their lives. This qualitative study, based on the Social Constructionist paradigm, and Second Order Cybernetics and Feminist Theories, included interviews with four full-time employed and four stay-at-home South African mothers. The data were analysed using hermeneutic analysis. The findings suggest that the participants' tensions regarding motherhood and employment were strongly influenced by structural obstacles at work and at home, interpersonal relationships with other mothers, as well as intrapersonal experiences. Breastfeeding was identified as a prominent topic within the various themes.

Key terms: mothers, stay-at-home, working mothers, mommy wars, social constructionism, feminist, feminism, patriarchy, second order cybernetics, qualitative research, work-life balance, breastfeeding

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To my sisters and brothers, and especially my parents, Wynand and Celesté, whose love and support is the springboard from which I embark on all my endeavours, thank you.

To all my wonderful friends, who have been patient, encouraging and curious – I'm finally done, so please cash in all those rain checks. Corneli, thank you for being unwavering in your supply of emotional library step liquorice. A heartfelt thanks also to Petrus, for the hours of intellectual sparring and for your willingness to sincerely grapple with the concerns and hopes that form the basis of my feminist approach. Thank you also for the mountain of creative carrots with which you lured me towards completion.

To all the participants in this study, thank you. The generosity with which you trusted me with your stories, is humbling and a true inspiration. My thanks extend in this regard to all mothers who share similar stories, and to the non-mothers and *othered others* who take up a place in the margins of society – I wish for a world where our choices will not be catch-22's by design.

Finally, to my life-partner, Dian, I am forever grateful for your fortitude and care. You are an enormous source of support and humour and cups of coffee. Our love is the centre of my universe.

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Dedication

The inspiration for this research, and my motivation for contributing, in a very small way, towards knowledge that might improve the world for them, are the children in my life. Thank you, Stella, Emile, Milan, Olivia, George, and the little Pistachio. May you always be free to choose to swim or to fly with abandon.

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Chapter 1: Introduction*Poems of the Mothers*

*I was kissed, and I am othered: another,
because of the pulse that echoes the pulse in my veins;
another, because of the breath I feel within my breath.*

My belly, now, is as noble as my heart...

*And now I feel in my own breathing an exhalation of flowers:
all because of the one who rests inside me gently,
as the dew on the grass!*

— Gabriela Mistral

Introduction

In recent years, the topic of ‘work-life balance’ has received much attention in academic literature (Allen, Johnson, Saboe, Cho, Dumani, & Evans, 2012; Baral & Bhargava, 2010; Cranney & Miles, 2017; Grawitch, Maloney, Barber, Mooshegian, & Hurrell, 2013; Hill, Erickson, Holmes, & Ferris, 2010; Keeney, Boyd, Sinha, Westring, & Ryan, 2013; Lambert-Griggs, Casper, & Eby, 2013; Phipps & Prieto, 2016). For no group has it been more of a predicament in our fast-paced and competitive age, than for mothers of young children. Movements towards equal economic opportunities for women are becoming increasingly customary (Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Yu & Lee, 2013), thus allowing women more freedom to choose a lifestyle that best suits their values and personal ambitions (Cranney & Miles, 2017; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). With the advent of children, this freedom might include the decision to return to full-time employment or to become a stay-at-home mother. One of the most important factors that influences this choice is access to financial support.

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While increased freedom in lifestyle choices is widely regarded as ‘social progress’ (Milkie, Pepin, & Denny, 2016; Yu & Lee, 2013), mothers frequently report that they experience stress-related conditions associated with their lifestyle and employment decisions (Bobat, Mshololo, & Reuben, 2012; Schnittker, 2007). These tensions may be embedded in expectations of what a woman should ‘be’ and achieve in a modern social context (Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Milkie et al., 2016). In addition, the tensions may be vested in the unequal domestic burden that still falls on women in the realm of childcare (McRobbie, 2013). Social discourse places a strong emphasis on how children are influenced by maternal employment or non-employment (Newcombe, 2007). Therefore, women who choose employment after childbirth may be concerned that returning to work might have a long-term detrimental effect on their child(ren), or that their choice appears to be selfish. On the other hand, stay-at-home mothers may experience isolation and lowered self-esteem because they are not actively involved in economic society (Milkie et al., 2016).

In view of the above, this study, which builds upon my previous unpublished research (Van Beek, 2015), focusses specifically on (1) the experiences of mothers who either chose to stay at home or to continue full-time employment after having children and (2) their apprehensions regarding their employment choices and how such decisions impact on, and is impacted by their social context, relationships and inner well-being. A discussion of the background and significance of the study is provided next.

Background and Significance

High expectations for professional productivity for women have developed alongside, but have not replaced, conventional roles of maternal nurturing and homemaking (Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Milkie et al., 2016). The task of finding a solution to integrate different roles and responsibilities within the framework of personal and societal expectations, which is a

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process unique to each individual within her specific context, results in a variety of outcomes and different choices.

Looking at the larger context, however, it is noticeable that even within the expanded freedoms of employment choices, men still constitute the predominant breadwinners in the majority of heterosexual households (Sallee, 2008), and, even in dual-income homes, childcare is mostly considered a female responsibility (McRobbie, 2013). In the past decades in South Africa, there has been a steady increase of women entering the workforce, assuming leadership positions and performing traditional male-directed jobs, such as construction, mining and engineering. This trend is largely attributed to post-apartheid legislation and affirmative action policies (Kosakowska-Berezecka & Safdar, 2015). The numbers of women in executive positions have also been rising. The 2010 Employment Equity Report shows an increase of “18.6% in 2009 to 19.3% in 2010 and 21.6% in 2011” (Kosakowska-Berezecka & Safdar, 2015, p. 333). However, these numbers are still regarded as unsatisfactory, and a “profound yet covert effect of socially constructed norms and stereotypes” still permeates organisational culture (Noback et al., cited in Kosakowska-Berezecka & Safdar, 2015, p. 341). These norms have profound effects on the choices and well-being of women, and especially mothers.

Although a growing number of women opt to remain childfree, pronatalism (i.e. the tradition of encouraging procreation) remains a powerful sociocultural force (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016). One longitudinal study showed that more than 85% of women became mothers, regardless of whether they considered childlessness at one stage (Rybinska & Morgan, 2018). Along with motherhood comes a myriad of additional responsibilities and expectations in a woman’s life, which have to be balanced with modern notions of equal participation in the economic sphere. The modern ideal for successful motherhood is the ‘intensive mothering principle’, whereby a mother is expected to be constantly attentive to

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her children (Crowley, 2015; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017). The unattainable social expectations to be successful in both the professional and mothering arenas, often leave women with a debilitating sense of defeat (Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009).

The internal tug of war that mothers experience between society's conflicting codes for success in work and mothering, often spill over into the relationships between mothers. The *mommy wars* discourse is a well-documented battleground, wherein women resort to stereotypes about each other, which leads to the formation of in- and out-groups between mothers. In these binary categorisations, the distinction is implied between the *ideal mother*, who stays at home and earns the merits of intensive mothering as the highest standard in motherhood, and the *supermom*, who is celebrated for achieving success in family, work and life (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017). Despite freedom of individual choice, the language that mothers use to describe each other continues to be critical of opposing choices (Young, 2006). This censure of alternative decision making, is done in lieu of critique of the impeding societal ideals for work and motherhood and the social systems that enforce those ideals.

From a feminist and social developmental perspective these trends are significant, since they point to the barriers that deter social equality and women's ability to achieve their highest potential. Unattainable and contradictory standards for motherhood undermine all women, not only mothers, as childless women are forever excluded from reaching 'social triumph' through mothering. Furthermore, when mothers and non-mothers continue to demonstrate infighting within these oppressive idealisations, they participate in upholding these unjust social constructions (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017). Women then become contributors and accomplices in the patriarchal system within which they are subjugated.

A growing number of women are entering the workforce, but the conditions under which they have to compete to achieve the same work standards and successes as men, while also striving to be successful mothers, are fraught with overt and covert discrimination and

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sexism. Businesses and workplaces are still largely organised around male centred frameworks where men are seen as the norm and women are expected to adapt by suppressing or concealing their *otherness* in order to fit in (Bailey, 1999). Sustaining and supporting work environments that favour patriarchal heteronormative ideals and hierarchical constructions of value where men are seen as superior, have implications not only for women and mothers, but also for other marginalised groups that might be inhibited based on their race, class or sexuality.

It is hoped that the information contributed by this study will (a) assist professionals and mothers to understand the tensions surrounding employment decisions within the framework of personal and socially constructed expectations of motherhood and professional success, and (b) drive the process towards practical implementation of work-related and social support structures to facilitate an improved environment based on equality and dignity. This study may motivate future researchers to investigate the topic on a larger scale and across communities. In addition, more knowledge in this field could inform support programs for employed mothers to boost productivity and job satisfaction, as well as support for full-time mothers to enhance self-esteem and social embeddedness. Ultimately, the hope is that this study will foster a more tolerant and supportive society for both mothers and non-mothers on all sides of the employment divide.

Aim and Rationale of the Study

This study builds on, and contributes to, work that explores the effect of maternal employment choices on the psyches of mothers. The dramatic increase in recent decades of maternal employment has stimulated a substantial body of research regarding the effect of mothers' work-force participation on children's health and well-being (Lombardi & Coley, 2014; Milkie et al., 2016; Newcombe, 2007). Many studies have also investigated the reasons

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as to why mothers choose to stay at home or continue to work (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005; Bridges, Etaugh, & Barnes-Farrell, 2002; Chang, 2013; DeMeis, Hock, McBride, & Scarr, 1986; Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Ericksen, Jurgens, Garrett, & Swedburg, 2008; Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002; Halpern, 2005; Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). A plethora of studies have also analysed mothers' stress levels, caused by balancing family and work responsibilities, and the factors that contribute to this kind of stress (Connerley & Wu, 2016; Darnton, 1985; Matthews & Rodin, 1989; Stansfeld, Shipley, Head, Fuhrer, & Kivimaki, 2013). However, there seem to be few in-depth readings in a South African context of mothers' perceptions of rejection or support for their decisions, and of the possible contribution these perceptions have to stress-related issues.

In view of the above, the aims of this study were, therefore, to explore the experiences of mothers who had either chosen to stay at home after having children or to continue with full-time employment; and how this decision had impacted on their lives and welfare. The research sought to give voice to the women themselves, by providing them with an opportunity to tell their stories in their own words. Furthermore, the context within which these stories existed was taken into account. The aims mentioned above lead to the following research questions:

What are the experiences of mothers who make the decision to be a stay-at-home mother, or to be a working mother? The sub-question that follows is: What meaning do mothers attach to the tensions experienced in making employment decisions, and how does this meaning impact on, and how is it influenced by their social context, relationships, identity and emotional well-being?

Before proceeding with a thorough discussion of the literature pertaining to these research questions, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of *a stay-at-home mother* and *full-time working mother*. Forthwith a short clarification of these delineations is provided.

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Stay-at-Home Mother

A stay-at-home mother could be defined as a woman who relinquished a professional career to be at home with her children (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002). Stay-at-home mothers could also be described as women who work at home, and not in the economic sector, as caretakers of their children and the household (Reid Boyd, 2002). Dillaway and Paré mention that the dominant modern Western culture prescribes that the stay-at-home mother is a “full-time” mother who adheres to the principles of intensive mothering. This presumes that childcare is primarily the domain of the mother, and that childcare must be centred around the needs of the child, including constant developmental stimulation (2008, p. 437).

Full-Time Employed Mother

There is no one universal recommendation as to how many hours constitute full-time employment. However, it is generally accepted that a full-time employed mother should work the minimum required hours, as defined by the employer, to earn the employment benefits (e.g. health insurance, annual leave and sick-leave) that are not typically offered to part-time or temporary workers. The South African Department of Labour (2014) does however stipulate that an employee who works five, or fewer, days a week is prohibited from working more than 45 hours a week and in excess of nine hours a day. If the employee works more than five days a week, workdays may not be longer than eight hours.

In the following section a brief outline of the chapters is provided.

Chapter Outline

In *Chapter 1* an introduction to the study is provided. The background and significance of the study, as well as the aim and rationale of the research and the research

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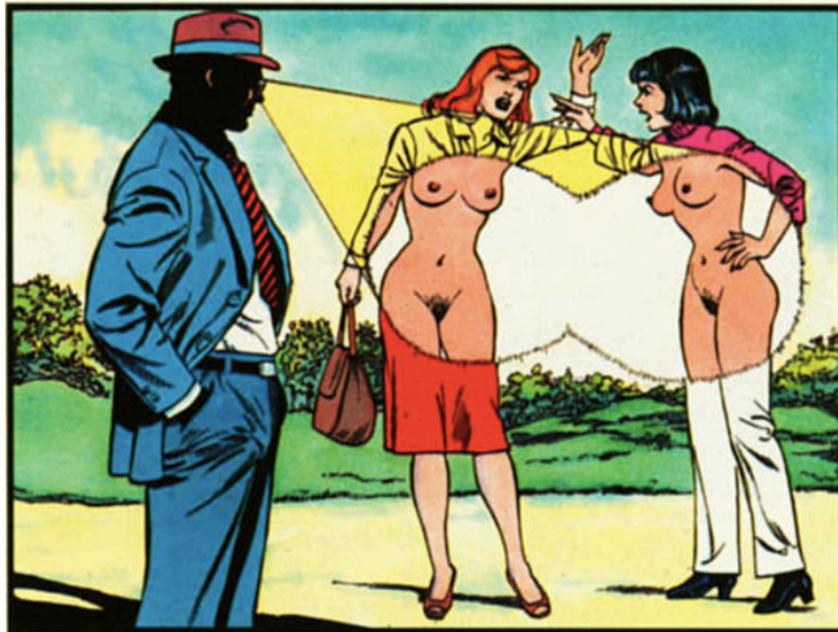
questions are explained and discussed. *Chapter 2* reviews relevant literature, research and findings pertaining to the topics discussed in this study. The social construction of gender, the background and influence of feminist theories, existing theories on motherhood and vocation, the typical life stages of women and the social phenomenon referred to as the *mommy wars*, are examined. *Chapter 3* describes the research design and methodology used for the study. This chapter's main focus is on qualitative and social constructionist approaches and informs the reader of the feminist and ecosystemic theoretical foundations that support the method and analyses. Congruent to the social-constructionist and ecosystemic perspective, in which the researcher is seen as a participant-observer and not a detached observer (Becvar & Becvar, 2014), the researcher will occasionally refer to herself as "I" in order to adhere to the aims of transparency and fairness. In *Chapters 4* and *5* the participants' stories and the themes that emerged from the data are revealed. *Chapter 6* concludes with a discussion of the themes and findings, an evaluation of the study's strengths and limitations, and recommendations for future action.

Chapter Summary

In the sections above, the reader was introduced to the scope of the study and how it pertains to the popular topic of work-family balance, as well as to the specific group of women, namely mothers with young children, who were the focus of this study. The background and significance of the study, as they relate to the context of women in the workforce and issues concerning motherhood, were explained. The aim of the study, to give voice to a few mothers in the exploration of their experiences of employment choices, was explicated and the final research question was posed: *What are the experiences of mothers who make the decision to be a stay-at-home mother, or to be a working mother?* The sub-question that followed is: *What meaning do mothers attach to the tensions experienced in*

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making employment decisions, and how does this meaning impact on, and how is it influenced by their social context, relationships, identity and emotional well-being? The concepts stay-at-home mother and full-time employed mother were clarified before an outline of forthcoming chapters was provided. The next chapter contains a review of the relevant literature that relates to the topics associated with the aim and scope of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

- Larry Niven

Introduction

Finding an effective work-life balance in modern, industrialised societies is a much-researched subject (Bobat et al., 2012; Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Schnittker, 2007). A holistic approach to success, which encompasses achievements in several categories pertaining to family, career and leisure (Stansfeld et al., 2013), is central to the topic of a *work-life balance*. Since the steady upsurge of maternal employment in recent decades (Zimmerman, Aberle, Harvey, & Krafchick, 2008), the specific challenges relating to women with children have also received increased attention. Topics such as parenting ideologies, cultural and social norms and support, gender roles and identity, and physical and mental well-being often arise when examining these challenges (Zimmerman et al., 2008).

Interconnected with the topics mentioned above is a woman's choice, when starting a family, to either continue with full-time employment or to stay at home to raise children.

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Women on both sides of the decision seem to experience at least some stress and conflict (intra- and interpersonally) about their choices and often turn against each other with criticism and disapproval (Johnston & Swanson, 2007). This phenomenon is typically described in the media and literature as the *mommy wars* (Crowley, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2008). In light of the above, this study aimed to explore the experiences of mothers who decided to either continue working, or to stay at home to raise their children.

In order to dissect the dynamics of this topic, it is necessary to look at the cultural and contextual milieu within which these women belonged. A discussion of the conceptual constructions of women, gender, gender roles and family dynamics follows. In addition, feminism, patriarchy and feminist theories are explored in order to embed the study of motherhood and employment in a historical context.

With these concepts in mind, the specific contexts and conflicts pertaining to motherhood are explored. Attention is paid to constructs such as *motherhood* and *vocation*, *identity* and *blame*, as well as how *class* and *race* intersect with these constructs. The *mommy wars*, as is described in the literature, is briefly discussed before considering the most prominent concern emerging from these debates, namely the welfare of the children. Here we turn to Developmental Psychology and Attachment Theory as well as cognitive development studies to enlighten the subject.

The practical realities of motherhood, such as breastfeeding and parenting styles, are examined before finally exploring the stereotypes and societal discourse that still persist regarding motherhood and employment. The effects of these stereotypes on the physical and psychological health of mothers are then discussed.

Women and Gender: Social Constructions of the Female in Society

“Those who speak largely of the human condition are usually those most exempt from its oppressions - whether of sex, race, or servitude.” – Adrienne Rich



“Listen to me. Gender is a construct, society is a construct, money is a construct. But bedtime is very, very real.”

@willmcpHail4

Gender is traditionally delineated in terms of the concepts of male and female. This demarcation does not necessarily correspond with the conventional classifications of men and women (since men can display feminine traits and conversely women can display masculine qualities). Gender exemplifies the differentiation of the values and behaviours that culture traditionally ascribes to men and women (WHO, 2019). It is posited that gender is a culturally and socially constructed concept (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). It may vary between societies and its demarcations are fluid (WHO, 2019).

The social construction of the concept *woman*, and the characteristics associated with this concept, are problematic since it is impossible to demarcate the inception and scope of the cultural and societal influences that define women. In a patriarchal society the concept of *woman* is defined essentially as an *other*. The word *man*, refers to *human*, which suggests

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that the *male* category is the norm and that the concepts *fe-male* or *wo-man* are derivations of the primary descriptor, and therefore of secondary consequence (Alcoff, 1988).

The dilemma of defining *women*, which is demonstrated by Sigmund Freud's description of the female psychology as an "impenetrable obscurity", endorses the notion that our concept of woman is imprisoned by gender (Turkel, 2000, p. 229). After Freud, Carl Jung, in his theories of psychoanalysis, advocated the individual's integration of masculine and the feminine traits, but "he splits these two principles and their workings in the individuation process along gender lines" and deems feminine qualities, which are more prevalent in women, as inferior (Griessel & Kotzé, 2009, p. 183). The hierarchical distribution of gender qualities impacts on how gender roles are assigned in society and on the psychology of women who wrestle to balance the traditionally conflicting roles of motherhood (feminine) and employment (masculine).

Gender Roles: Institutionalised Stereotypes

In the previous century, literature often implied that caregiving should be a natural extension of the maintenance of familial relationships, a role typically regarded as female (Carroll & Campbell, 2008). In their 1955 publication, Parsons and Bales argued that the family (and society) benefit most from an arrangement where the man took on outside labour (instrumental leadership), while the woman was responsible for 'expressive leadership' in ensuring family solidarity. In recent decades, such set divisions of gender roles have been diminishing. However, despite this decline, in approximately 80% of heterosexual family households, men are still the main breadwinners (Sallee, 2008).

Reid (2018) found that even in dual-career households a significant portion of the men in the heterosexual couples, who were interviewed, downplayed or discounted the worth or social status of their wives' work. In an in-depth study on breadwinning mothers, Chesley

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(2017) found that even if women provided 80% to 100% of the family earnings, less than 40% of the women (and their husbands) identified themselves as the primary financial provider. Chesley theorised that discounting traditional gender roles in favour of career success could lead to increased conflicts between employment and mothering when women feel pressure because of the “role it plays in undermining husbands’ masculinity” (2017, p. 2594).

Most traditional mothering ideologies require women to put their own aspirations and needs aside for their children and husband, and often discounting traditional gender roles is regarded as unfeasible or morally problematic (Gross, 1998; Heath, 2013). Although binary notions of gender and fixed ideas of being masculine or feminine are increasingly questioned, they are still prevalent in attitudes about caregiving (Carroll & Campbell, 2008). In practice, childcare is still generally associated with women (McRobbie, 2013). Notwithstanding, fathers are becoming more involved and sentiments about shared caregiving responsibilities are shifting. For instance, compare the traditional notion that a father who looks after an infant for a day is regarded as *babysitting*, to the more modern notion that he is merely *parenting*.

For Carrol and Campbell (2008) it is important to note, however, that a maternal style of caregiving is usually distinguished from a male-oriented style, with the assumption that the female approach is still superior. Indeed, a popular belief is that, stereotypically, fathers accept rough play and allow children to autonomously choose their schedule and diet. Whereas, mothers are regarded as more ‘responsible’ than fathers and tend to endorse strict rules and careful surveillance of children’s behaviour and needs.

These deeply embedded sentiments about gender roles often come to the fore, also on an institutional level, when families fall apart. In 2005 a new Children’s Act was promulgated in South Africa. There was a shift from “parental power towards parental

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responsibilities”, which was a departure from the practice of affording preference to mothers as “naturalised” residential parents in case of divorce (Themistocleous-Rothner, 2017, p. 49). Although the principle of the *best interest of the child* guides custody decisions in recent years, courts still, more often than not, afford primary residency or contact rights to the mother rather than to the father.

Overall, there does seem to be a loosening of culturally demarcated assumptions and expectations as to how people should act in all areas of life, from family, to work and leisure in relation to their gender. So too is the customary definition of family changing to be increasingly inclusive of alternative forms and arrangements. In the following section the family as an institution is discussed in more detail.

Family Dynamics: Fixed or Fluid?

Traditional notions of *family* consist of a man, woman and children who are differentiated according to roles based on gender (for example, mother, father, son, daughter) and generation (grandparent, parent, child) (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). Modern discourse has challenged the traditional definition of a family to be more inclusive of same-sex parents, single parents et cetera (Rosenblum, 2012). Traditional tasks and roles within the family structure are also questioned. It is suggested that responsibilities should be assigned according to temperament and personal disposition, rather than gender. It is within this more open structure that stereotypes are broken down and, as is proposed by Bachiochi (2016, p. 40), even fathers can be “mothers”.

Swiss developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, posited that children go through three stages in defining their families (cited in Ford, 1994). In the first stage all the people who live with the child are included. Then the notion of biological relations develops and gains importance, and finally the definition of family expands to include “those persons perceived

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as performing parenting functions, regardless of their place of residence” (Ford, 1994, p. 68).

While marriage is not necessarily a requirement for a domestic unit to be defined as a ‘family’, it is stereotypically a wedding that indicates the inception of a new family unit.

After the breakthrough of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) rights movement during the past decades, a more open view of acceptable variations of sexuality emerged. These movements led many societies to recognise same-sex marriages as legal family units. South Africa, for example, included gay and lesbian rights in the first post-apartheid constitution (Adeagbo, 2018) and legalised same-sex marriage on 30 November 2006 when the Civil Union Act came into force.

The South African Constitution forbids discrimination and accounts for family configurations not previously addressed by the law. According to Sloth-Nielsen and Van Heerden (2014), this includes alternative marriages such as between same-sex partners, unformalised heterosexual partnerships and marriages of custom and religion. The constitution also recognises members of the extended family/step parent/foster parents; and acknowledges child-headed households (cited in Themistocleous-Rothner, 2017).

However, the traditional notion that marriage, as an institution, is strictly between a ‘man and a woman’ is still widely advocated, especially by religious groups. Heterosexuality and heteronormativity are still considered the norm that “structures and organises the social institutions of marriage and monogamy” (Moss, 2012, p. 405). Overt and covert discrimination against groups that diverge from the normative ideal are still prevalent and widespread across communities. LGBTQIA youth are especially vulnerable to the negative effects of discrimination and report much higher rates of anxiety, depression, low self-esteem and substance abuse than non-LGBTQIA youth (Halliwel, 2019).

Same-sex marriages are more widely accepted than in the past, but mainly if they comply with the same heterosexual conditions of monogamy. It can therefore be argued that

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homonormativity is then used to police the boundaries of legitimacy in LGBTQIA relationships and deter alternative relationship styles, such as being single or polyamorous. And while it can be reasoned that monogamy developed centuries ago to protect patrilineal guarantees and ensure economic support, to insist, in our modern age, that monogamy is the only feasible option for clan stability, is to “allow marriage to become a mechanism of social control in hopes of eliminating deviant sexual behaviour” (Moss, 2012, p. 409).

In defence of fluid family dynamics, Moss argued that family constructions should allow for polyamory, especially regarding simultaneous partners of different genders, as equally legitimate and lawful as the normative monogamous variation:

This practice, if legitimated, would create visibility for a family population that would otherwise remain on the margins, that would otherwise remain invisible, and that will, otherwise, continue to be cast as deviant and, therefore, suffer from multiple discriminations because of their individual (bisexual) and family (polyamorous) identity. (2012, p. 407)

Also refer to the section below, *Patriarchy – Society’s Omnipotent Father Figure*.

Feminists have consistently been vocal in challenging socially constructed gender roles and the rigid idea of what a family is supposed to be. According to Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra (2015), feminism does not have a neutral position towards the idea of family, since gender itself is problematised, and a continual effort is made to find more equitable ways of navigating the power imbalances inherent to gender.

While society owes the feminist movement credit for fighting for the equal rights of women, which includes the right to paid employment, the term ‘feminism’ is often found to be ambiguous. Frequently even the women who experience the most direct benefit from its achievements are hesitant to associate themselves with the movement. A brief summary of

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the course of the feminist movement over the past decades and feminism's applicability to the theme of motherhood and employment needs to be outlined.

Feminism: The Complicated Marriage of Equality and Identity

*“I am not free while any woman is unfree,
even when her shackles are very different from my own.”*
– Audre Lorde

“One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water, since they have no anti-environment which would enable them to perceive the element they live in.”
– Marshall McLuhan

Feminism is a term that has accumulated a long list of confusing and contradictory attributes through the decades (Renegar, 2003; Richard, 2004; Snyder, 2008; Van Esterik, 1994). On the one hand the movement is perceived as a platform for a group of angry ‘man-haters’ who try to topple men’s control in society and take the power for themselves (Anderson, 2009). On the other hand, it is seen as an inclusive movement that embraces all people, regardless of sex, gender or status, who strive towards a society where all people can enjoy equal opportunities in life (Anderson, 2009). People who live in societies where such equal treatment exists experience the right to vote, earn equal wages, own property, receive education, make free choices concerning their own body, and enjoy the right to safety (Sallee, 2008).

The literature reviewed describes three broad movements within the history of Feminist Theory. These are often referred to as the first, second and third waves of feminism. The *first wave* is characterised by the early Suffragettes who advocated women’s right to vote, while the *second wave* focussed more on advancing social and cultural equality, alongside political equality (Hewitt, 2012). The phrase *The Personal is Political* became the slogan of this second phase of the feminist movement (Van Esterik, 1994). An example of a

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famous personality associated with the second wave, is the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir who provided a Marxist approach and existential view in her book *The Second Sex*. A decade and a half later Bettie Friedan's widely published book, *The Feminine Mystique*, provided a voice for the dissatisfaction of modern women (Williams, 2001). As there are no clear boundaries as to where the waves begin and end, many feminists suggest an approach that focusses on feminism's continuity (Evans, 2015). The *third wave*, which roughly started in the early 1990s in the USA, was to a large extent a reaction to the perceived failures of the second wave. Issues such as celebrating female sexuality, challenging heterosexuality, and exploring race-related biases came to the forefront (Van Esterik, 1994).

The importance of language and rhetoric in forming social constructions are also emphasised by this movement (Renegar, 2003). It also highlighted the differences of opinion within the movement, and amplified debates such as whether there are inherent differences between the sexes and to what extent gender roles are socially constructed (Van Esterik, 1994). Feminist positions on motherhood and employment are discussed in the section *Development of Feminist Theories of Motherhood and Employment*.

While there have been many different and opposing voices within the feminist movement since its conception, there are intersections and commonalities shared by most feminists. According to Allen and Jaramillo-Sierra, feminism wishes to “draw attention to the dialectics of oppression and privilege and to spark empowering strategies, both individually and collectively, to change such disempowering conditions” (2015, p. 94). Feminism strives to eliminate patriarchal inequality of power, benefits and burdens, and encourages fairness, inclusivity and equality (Kirkley, 2000; Rittenour, 2014). This naturally puts forth the importance of understanding the patriarchal ideology, and the linkages to feminism, since it is within the patriarchal paradigm that feminism finds its roots of inequality and oppression.

Patriarchy – Society’s Omnipotent Father Figure

The roots of the term ‘patriarchy’ literally translate to the *rule of the father* and can be described as a social structural phenomenon of dominance of one group over another (Darity, 2008; Kretzchmar, 1995). According to Darity, this “phenomenon is manifested in the values, attitudes, customs, expectations, and institutions of the society, and it is maintained through the process of socialisation” (2008, p. 173). In Feminist Theory, patriarchy refers to the unequal distribution in society of economic, political and social power and the oppression of women and other groups that are considered inferior because of their race, class, sexual orientation, gender or disability (Russell, 1999). A patriarchal system, which is based on hierarchical judgements, is characterised by dualism and favours oppositional rather than complementary thinking (Kirkley, 2000; Swan, Schramm, Rivera, Warren, White, & Satcher, 2018).

In a patriarchal system, these hierarchical schemes are often maintained by coercion, oppression or even violence (Kretzchmar, 1995; Moane, 2003; Swan et al., 2018). These methods of domination are sometimes overt, but often subtler so that the workings of patriarchy in social structures can be obscured, and therefore ignored or denied (Hunnicut, 2009). In her book, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, renowned feminist scholar, bell hooks (*sic*)¹, argues that these hierarchies consist within several other societal categories apart from gender, such as sexual orientation, race, class and religion. Each person’s experiences of these hierarchies and categories might differ, and the point where they traverse in an individual’s specific context is referred to as ‘intersectionality’ (hooks, 2000).

¹ bell hooks is a post-modernist feminist scholar who deliberately chooses not to capitalise the letters of her name. By subverting grammar prescriptivism she challenges language as a construct that supports sexism and racism.

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This idea relates to the structuralist notion of gender in a patriarchal system: Hierarchies within gender divisions influence resource distribution and institutional organisation, but function independently of the attitudes and aspirations of the participants within the system (Hunnicut, 2009; Swan et al., 2018). So, regardless of whether members of society agree on the cause and legitimacy of the origins and existence of patriarchy, the effects of it remain to be seen in the day-to-day realities of individuals. Such as in the global unequal distribution of women and men in leadership, wage disparities, domestic abuse ratios et cetera, where the interests of the more powerful are chiefly served (Timimi, 2009).

Hunnicut (2009) maintains that the concept of patriarchy is an especially useful concept since it focusses on social contexts rather than on individuals (usually men) who are determined to dominate. It is a system that is provoked and maintained by all involved: “Under patriarchal orders, there are privileges as well as costs that men and women incur” (Hunnicut, 2009, p. 565).

It is further noted that patriarchy could be such a prevailing force in society that even structural change cannot guarantee to deplete its effects. So, for example, women may overcome the structural hurdles (e.g. access to education) of participating on an equal level in paid work vis-à-vis their male counterparts, but income parity is of no value where enduring patriarchal ideology continues to measure a woman’s worth by her ability to procreate and care for her offspring. In that case it might even lower her status and worth in society when she enters the workforce (Hunnicut, 2009).

Kretschmar (1995) differentiates between external and internal oppression of women by patriarchy. External oppression is further divided into three types: The first is *androcentrism*, which refers to a dominating male centred worldview that “devalues and excludes female perceptions, critique and contributions”. Furthermore, it also prohibits women from defining themselves or their roles and consistently puts them in the position of

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the *other* (Kretzchmar, 1995, p. 150). The second form of external oppression is *exclusion*: Refusing women the opportunity to enter equally into social and domestic positions of influence and power. Third, external oppression can take the form of *subjection*, which refers to the hardships that women often suffer in terms of abuse, violence, harassment, unfair wages et cetera (Kretzchmar, 1995).

Internal oppression occurs when oppressed persons internalise their subjugation, by believing that they are somehow to blame or deserving of their fate. When patriarchal order systems (whether religious, theoretical, economic or legal) are accepted as legitimate, certain patterns of behaviour, which promote the idea that oppression is normal, or ‘just the way things are’, ensue. Often, feelings of low self-esteem, fear, self-criticism, depression and guilt signals internal oppression (Kretzchmar, 1995).

Since patriarchy is prevalent in the majority of societies across the world (Darity, 2008), it is necessary to consider this ideological position as part of the context that informs the discourse on motherhood and employment. Feminists have accepted this challenge, and some of the most important points in the development of feminism are discussed below.

Development of Feminist Theories of Motherhood and Employment

Since the early days of the feminist movement the concepts of marriage, motherhood and a woman’s role in society have been expanded upon and continue to be developed. Early voices such as Mary Wollstonecraft at the end of the 18th century, and William Thompson, Harriet Taylor and John Stuart Mill in the 19th century paved the way for a lively debate that has taken several turns, and remains as relevant today as in those early years.

These early feminists located marriage and motherhood at the core of a system that uses economic, religious and political norms to maintain male power by exploiting women and children as ‘property’ (Heilmann, 1996; Mill, 1869). Children were described as the

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patriarchy's weapon against women's dreams of independence, since the motherly instinct would always prove stronger than the need to revolt (Heilmann, 1996).

Liberal feminists focussed on the legal constraints that forced women into familial servitude and out of the work force (Kirkley, 2000; Sallee, 2008). Marxist feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, argued that class and the sexual separation of labour kept women at home and out of the office (Van Esterik, 1994). For her, it was imperative that women earn their financial independence by joining the paid work force (Kirkley, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2014).

De Beauvoir said that motherhood could be fulfilling, but "under the condition that it is freely assumed and sincerely desired; the young woman must be in a psychological, moral, and material situation that allows her to bear the responsibility; if not, the consequences will be disastrous" (De Beauvoir, 1949, pp. 1770-1). A woman's context is central and cannot be separated from her identity, as De Beauvoir famously declared in *The Second Sex*: "One is not born, but becomes a woman" (1949, p. 301).

Some opposing views exist within feminism: On the one hand some liberal feminists, especially those from the second wave, promote androgyny and discourage motherhood, since biology is seen as the root of women's oppression (Rogan, 1997; Sallee, 2008). On the other hand, more recent feminist voices claim that motherhood is inherently liberating and a force of power and worth (Kirkley, 2000).

Care feminism focusses on enhancing the status and cultural esteem of caregiving and embracing human vulnerability as noble acts in society, rather than striving first and foremost towards sexual equality (Bachiochi, 2016). Care feminists, who seek to de-gender caretaking work, argue that the unbalanced distribution of caretaking between men and women in society is a socially fabricated aspect of patriarchy (Bachiochi, 2016). Care feminists also envision a society where caretakers are financially compensated by the state, thus reducing

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the opportunities for exploitation of unpaid caretakers based on gendered responsibilities (Bachiochi, 2016; Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009).

While liberal feminism is criticised for wanting to eradicate the differences between men and women and ignoring biological diversity, cultural feminism is accused of ignoring differences between women. Shared anatomy does not necessarily imply that identities and experiences are the same for all women, therefore cultural feminism is criticised for excluding women who do not conform to the idealised description of a nurturing woman and mother and for ignoring the socialised aspects of gender and disregarding oppression through culturally constructed and inherited roles (Sallee, 2008).

Criticism of the first feminist movements retorts that the efforts were mainly centred around white, middle-class women's problems (Kirkley, 2000; Lewis, 1992; Press, 2012) that ignored inequalities based on race and class. Nonetheless, while inequalities in terms of race, class or culture certainly need to be resolved, it is agreed that social equality is of interest to women regardless of these distinctions, and motherhood is often a unifying factor that brings all voices together. As unequal importance and unbalanced expectations are still attributed to men and women, a conflict of interests is expected when women enter the traditional male territory of employment while continuing to fill the traditional female role of motherhood.

Conflict of Motherhood and Vocation

*“Because I feel that, in the Heavens above
The angels, whispering to one another,
Can find, among their burning terms of love
None so devotional as that of ‘Mother’”
– Edgar Allen Poe*

Balancing motherhood and employment, not only in the practical sense of juggling time and resources, but also in the mental and emotional management of needs and values, is

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a concern for most mothers. Donohoe (2010) provided a philosophical explanation for this struggle. She argued that the conflict between motherhood and career vocation is a function of the necessary sacrifice in having to choose, on a continual basis, between absolute values based in the realm of love. It is thus not a question of hierarchical priorities between roles and identities (being a mother and being a career woman), but a tension between two absolute subjective values (a mother's love for her children, and the love for her work). The attempts to compromise and accommodate through sacrifice can lead to a cost in identity if a woman's identity depends on both realms (i.e. motherhood and employment) (Donohoe, 2010).

Mothers often report a debilitating sense of defeat in the realisation that both intensive mothering and high achievement in the professional sphere are unattainable (Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009). A gendered division of the labour of motherhood continues to persist in society (Press, 2012) and managing domestic care, often referred to as the *second shift*, alongside formal employment, continues to be a substantial burden on women.

Choosing to be a mother as one's sole and primary vocation will, however, not solve the issue of career, since career development theories mostly do not recognise motherhood as a legitimate profession (Schultheiss, 2009). According to Rogan, "new motherhood is characterised by profound change, a strong sense of loss, isolation and fatigue" (1997, p. 877). These motherhood tasks and challenges are often overlooked, or are seen as less important than those in a formal working environment.

By failing to dignify motherhood as a formal position in society, a major part of most women's identities is also disrespected and disregarded (Schultheiss, 2009). Women often respond to this injury to their feeling of worth by engaging in blaming. Since women often turn on each other in this blame game, the injuries accumulate, while the system that supports it persists. A closer look at the mechanisms of identity in this pervasive pattern is necessary and is discussed next.

Identity and Blame

Women most often cite motherhood as the principal role in their personal identity (Rittenour, 2014). However, women also report that the adjustment to first-time motherhood disrupts their identities, and that the resulting tension causes them to feel physically and emotionally depleted (Rogan, 1997). According to Donohoe (2010), the delineation of identity depends on ‘otherness’, meaning that the process of developing a personal identity relies on a process of differentiation from others.

Following this argument, a woman’s identity as mother and/or career woman depends on a process of critique that contrasts and compares herself with women who make alternative choices. This could be an explanation as to why women often turn on each other in their descriptions and justifications of their own choices regarding employment and motherhood. Instead of regarding these disagreements as negative, Donohoe (2010) considered that it could contribute to a culture of continuous evaluation and renewal of values in society. On the other hand, it could be argued that it would be more constructive to direct frustration and critique towards the root of the disagreement. Namely, towards the systems and structures that enable and perpetuate gender inequalities and create barriers to the support and respect that women need, both for those who choose to nurture career and motherhood, and women who choose to be full-time mothers (Press, 2012).

Radical feminist, Adrienne Rich (1976) argued that women blame each other, rather than the system because of an institutionalised severance of female bonding. This severance is the result of a lack of positive mothering of daughters in a social structure in which mothers unwittingly unload their own low self-esteem, anger, frustrations and guilt about their disempowered positions in society onto their daughters (Heilmann, 1996; Rittenour, 2014).

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Rittenour (2014, p. 228), states that “communication is both a mirror and mechanism of identity”. The socio-political dynamics of working mothers is embedded within a patriarchally structured setup (Schultheiss, 2009). So, it could follow that career women marginalise stay-at-home mothers as a way of confirming their own value and social integration. Conversely, full-time mothers might criticise or question the quality of mothering that an employed woman can provide, in order to bolster their own sense of worth and identity.

Identity cannot be separated from context and the meaning that an individual attaches to circumstances (Sallee, 2008). Since race and class are deeply embedded in the discourse about equality and opportunities, these concepts cannot be ignored when issues surrounding employment and motherhood are discussed.

Class, Race and Motherhood

The mothering role, and how it is approached on a practical level, is not only influenced by biology, but also by cultural and historical contexts (Schultheiss, 2009). Important contextual factors that influence the choice between employment and full-time mothering, are class and race. A shortage of day-to-day survival necessities would be a reasonable motive for a mother to seek employment in order to take care of her family. However, some studies have shown that women on lower income levels are more prone to give up paid employment when having children than those in higher income groups, since childcare expenses are often the same or more than paid salaries (Charles & Baum, 2002; Schultheiss, 2009).

In industrialised, predominantly white societies, there is, traditionally, the cultural expectation that women should stay at home when they have children, and the social prejudice towards mothers who choose to work, still persists today (Borelli, Nelson, River,

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Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2017; Romito, 1997). However, in these societies, black, Latino and mixed-raced women have long taken up work outside of the home, regardless of their motherhood status (Schultheiss, 2009). Feminist Theory has started to challenge the notion that the conceptualisation of women often disregards the contexts of black, working class women or women in third-world societies, in order to find a homogenised depiction (Lewis, 1992).

According to a study by the United Nations, between 40% and 80% of women in East and West Africa take part in the labour force (Fetterolf, 2017). Further south the same trend exists. However, employment does not necessarily mean security: More than 80% of women workers in Sub-Saharan Africa are in vulnerable jobs, such as part-time or contract work, and since they are often also the main caretakers in the family, they are typically less available for formal, secure employment (Connerley & Wu, 2016).

In South Africa where 52% of the population comprise women, 41% of adult women actively take part in economic work (Urban, 2010). However, they mostly work in the informal sector and those who are entrepreneurs, such as in crafts and hawking, operate in businesses that use little technology, which is often an indicator of low income and low growth positions (Urban, 2010). South Africa is usually commended for good legislation towards gender equality and for having relatively high participation of women in government positions and company boards (Connerley & Wu, 2016), but these conditions of higher status work have yet to filter through to the lower classes, where women are still principally seen as mothers and wives.

South Africa ranks at the top of the African Gender Equality Index (2015), alongside Rwanda, Mauritius, Malawi and Namibia (cited in Hingston, 2016). And much has changed since the end of Apartheid for many women (Mamalobo, Langa, & Kiguwa, 2016). However,

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it is far from achieving gender equality. While policy and legislation purport to encourage equal opportunities and treatment of women on a professional and societal level, it yet has to translate to equality in terms of social, political and economic benefits, as well as in true access to productive assets, such as property, financial credit, and personal security for most women (Hingston, 2016). The barriers to these tangible indications of equality might be found in the pervasive patriarchal practices and attitudes in society.

Hingston (2016) argued that culture and religion have a large role to play in the sustained low status of women in Africa. In most religions, it is still preached that men should be the dominant sex and often women are excluded from serving in positions of leadership and influence. Many cultures still tolerate, or wholly condone, violence against women (Krob & Steffen, 2015), which is often committed against women by a family member or intimate partner.

The World Health Organisation's 2013 global report on violence against women showed that 36.6% of African women in low- and middle-income regions will suffer physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in her lifetime (Krahé, 2018). And other practices such as the rejection of the use of contraceptives, early or forced marriages, denial of education to girls, rigid family responsibilities, and discrimination against women, further constrain women. These practices are frequently overlooked as they are perceived to be 'traditions' (Hingston, 2016; Kretzchmar, 1995). Many of these practices hinge on the assumptions that society and positions of power are entrenched in the male domain, while a women's place is at home mothering her children (Maqubela, 2016).

According to literature, mothers are regarded as the first and most influential agents in the gender socialisation in their children. This is particularly evident in the correlation between a daughters' self-perception and ambitions and the beliefs and behaviours of their mothers (Rittenour, 2014). Gross (1998) noted that while early white feminist literature often

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harks on the betrayal of women by their own mothers, who were considered to be complicit in their own oppression, women of colour rather prized the sacrifices that their mothers had to make to survive, which included taking up employment. Maqubela (2016) states that in African theorisation women are seen as visionaries, where motherhood surpasses the context of direct caring and embraces the notion of prosperity for the future generations.

Intersectionality of factors such as class, race and gender is often highlighted by the dilemma of motherhood and employment in a society where employers continue to adhere to masculine work-cultures with long, inflexible work hours. While women still carry most of the family responsibilities (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011), Maqubela noted that women compensate for these burdens by making use of “social-networks-of-care” (2016, p. 7228). These may include family members, such as a parent or grandparent, as well as neighbours and friends who help with household and childcare tasks.

In South Africa, it is not uncommon for households to employ a domestic worker or nanny who becomes an integral part of this network. But while this was traditionally an arrangement in white families, the social situation has shifted after South Africa became a democracy. With the rise of a larger black middle-class, and relocation to more affluent neighbourhoods, nuclear families have become separated from their natural support systems, and the need for paid domestic help has increased (Maqubela, 2016; Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011).

This trend emphasises the class factor in the tension between motherhood and employment: As more affluent women are able to employ additional help that is needed to cope with balancing work and family life, the pattern of stress is shifted downward to low income women who have no choice but to adhere to the long work hours and who suffer inadequate support to take care of their own families (Maqubela, 2016; Radey & McWey, 2019).

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Achieving work-family balance can be especially difficult for mothers who have low-income jobs, or live in rural areas, or who work non-standard hours, such as evenings, weekends, or shift work (Katras, Sharp, Dolan, & Baron, 2015). Eden (2017) reported that women who have temporary and casual contracts, are not only at risk for unstable work and lower pay, but are also likely to be vulnerable to challenges related to pregnancy and childcare caused by the weaker maternity rights associated with these types of work agreements.

Alongside categories such as race and class, a woman's life stage must be taken into account when trying to make sense of the tension between motherhood and employment. The life stages of adulthood provide important details to the overarching context within which a woman finds herself during motherhood. In view of this, a short discussion on the life stages of womanhood follows.

Metamorphosis: Life Stages of Womanhood

*“Such a mysterious business, motherhood.
How brave a woman must be to embark on it.”
– M.L. Stedman*

According to Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2008), a family is a social system that develops in a continually cyclical and interactive way in the linear dimension of a passing lifetime. The women discussed in this paper were in the family life stage of ‘families with young children’ as described by Carter (1989). Following Goldenberg and Goldenberg's (2008) analysis, many women in this stage of life have found a partner, and moved from independence to interdependence to start a family. In this phase, lifestyle choices and changes could influence an individual's health (Papalia, Sterns, Feldman, & Camp, 2007).

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This phase is typically marked by important choices that may have far-reaching consequences: This stage requires decisions regarding family practices, traditions, rituals and choices as to which cultural and historical contexts (of each partner) are retained, and which new habits (pertaining to their unique situation) should be adopted. The consequent expansion phase, when children arrive, represents the most significant milestone in the family lifecycle (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008).

This correlates with Sigmund Freud's middle-genital stage, in which he describes a person as moving towards the freedom to love and to work and the capacity to care for others (Corey, 2013). Erik Erikson's stage of young adulthood is also echoed: He asserted that intimacy must be achieved to avoid isolation and alienation (Corey, 2013). In this stage, which usually occurs between ages 19 and 45, the focus is on forming loving relationships with other people (e.g. spouse, family and/or friends). Failure to achieve close, honest connections could lead to loneliness and a loss of self (Corey, 2013).

Many social scientists have developed their own theories about the processes and patterns prevalent during this phase of a person's life. Most assert that development (cognitive, social, physical and emotional) is an ongoing process that continues beyond childhood far into an adult's life and into old age (Corey, 2013; Papalia et al., 2007). Many of these theories describe the implications of the typical experiences of women in early adulthood, specifically those pertaining to womanhood, motherhood and career. A short summary of some such contributions is the following table:

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Table 1. Summary of the development of womanhood, motherhood and career

Contributor and Stage of Development	Womanhood	Motherhood	Career
Paul B. Baltes' Lifespan Developmental Approach – Young Adulthood.	Development is lifelong.	Lifestyle choices are made during this phase, including decisions about having children.	A person's development depends on history and context.
Sigmund Freud's Middle Genital Stage.	Mature adult sexuality.	Capacity to care for others.	Freedom to love and work.
Erik Erikson's Intimacy vs Isolation and Generativity vs Stagnation stages.	Identity is further stabilised and mature relationships are formed with close others.	A focus on establishing the next generation and furthering their demands and needs.	Connection and belonging can be found at work as well as an opportunity to share knowledge.
Warner K. Schaie's Life Span model – Achieving, Responsible, Executive stages.	Knowledge acquired is used to pursue personal goals such as family and career.	With maturity comes solving practical problems associated with responsibility towards others.	Complex relationships are maintained on different levels. Societal systems and social movements are maintained.
Lawrence Kohlberg's Moral Reasoning – Autonomous moral principles.	Morality is internal and conflicts between moral standards and own moral judgements are recognized.	Mothers deal with children in the Preconventional Morality stage where they have to set rules and inflict punishments.	A balance has to be found between the moral standards of authority figures and internal moral standards.
Carol Gilligan's Levels of Moral Development in Women.	A woman realises her connection with others and transitions through stages to integrate responsibility and sacrifice, with self-care and survival.	Women often sacrifice their own wishes and feel responsible for the actions of others, and hold others responsible for their choices. Mature development includes taking care of her own needs also and taking responsibility for her choices.	Being <i>good</i> is offset against being <i>honest</i> , in that a woman can be responsible towards others and also to her own needs. Mature development requires a moral equality between self and others.
G.E. Vaillant's Personality development stages.	Development involves creating a separate personal identity from that of your original family, and building intimate connections with other people.	This stage involves building relationships where commitment and interdependence prevail.	A job can be turned into a career by meeting these criteria: commitment, competence, compensation, and contentment.
Daniel Levinson's Life Structures.	A person finds out what is most important to her in life and builds her life structure around those priorities.	Most people build their life structure around work and family and start to settle down. Studies show that women's transitions take longer than men's, because of cultural divisions of roles.	Two vital tasks are creating a dream and finding a mentor. To develop, a person must have goals as well as moral and practical support.

(Corey, 2013; Papalia et al., 2007)

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These descriptions of the development of womanhood correspond to the average trajectory of women's lives since time immemorial. However, it could be argued that these developmental theories contribute to, and perpetuate, marginalised and rigid views of womanhood and the associated expectations placed on women, of which becoming a wife and a mother are central.

Pronatalism, which promotes parenthood as normative and an inevitable part of becoming an adult, often leads to an equation of womanhood with motherhood, and many cultures still position parenthood as a social or moral duty (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). Some religious institutions even regard infertility as a "spiritually caused condition" (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2007, p. 440). Nonetheless, in recent decades there has been a steady increase of women who opt not to have children, especially in industrialised societies (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012; Rybinska & Morgan, 2018).

The cultural ideal of 'good' versus 'bad' motherhood is increasingly criticised by women, so too is the notion that it is a natural progression for a woman to become a mother, more frequently questioned. Childless women follow predominantly two life course paths: Those who firmly decide not to have children, and those who repeatedly postpone childbearing (for instance those who remain undecided or who favour a career), until finally accepting a childless position at an advanced age (Rybinska & Morgan, 2018).

The growing trend of childlessness, has repercussions for social ideals of family formation. There are also consequences on an individual as well as on a societal level if parenting is perceived as optional. On an individual level, women may find alternative routes towards individualisation and fulfilment and use the opportunity to develop and experience non-familial social roles through career and leisure activities (Rybinska & Morgan, 2018). On a societal level, the social regulatory function of parenthood towards sexuality and gender identities fall to the wayside, as well as the capitalist function of the parent consumer

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producing more child consumers (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). (Also refer to the above section, *Family Dynamics: Fixed or Fluid?*)

Although the traditional diagram of the metamorphosis of women into adulthood is slowly expanding to include variations other than the progression to motherhood, most women still emerge from this life stage with a swollen belly. The majority of these women experience the transition to motherhood as a pivotal life event. Some even find it to be a spiritual experience, and a time to rearrange values and evaluate existential goals (Prinds, Hvidt, Mogensen, & Buus, 2014; Sennott & Mojola, 2017).

It is also, however, a time when women are confronted with a myriad of expectations that dictate how they should navigate this ‘natural’ stage of their lives. One such set of expectations relates to body image. The expectations to be both sexually desirable and simultaneously youthfully innocent, is a burden that many women experience from an early age. Furthermore, the inability to achieve an unattainable socially desirable body ideal has been associated with low self-esteem (Izydorczyk, Sitnik-Warchulska, Ostrowska, & Starosta, 2019), depression and eating disorders (Uhlmann, Donovan, Zimmer-Gembeck, Bell, & Ramme, 2018).

Mothers are not exempt from these expectations, and the term *yummy mummy*, subtly coerces mothers to regain a fit figure as soon as possible after giving birth (Prinds, Nikolajsen, & Folmann, 2019). Littler (cited in Malatzky, 2017), argues that the *yummy mummy* ideal fetishises motherhood by infantilising the maternal as both sexualised and as well as childlike. Malatzky positioned that it is within social discourses that individuals build upon their own subjective and social realities, and therefore representations of the *yummy mummy* “regulate how women experience their bodies and their identities as mothers, and how they perceive other women” (2017, p. 25).

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Fortunately, social discourse also naturally embraces its own antithesis: Refer to the Foucauldian notion that the power of resistance against the ideals transferred through the discourse, is contained within the discourse dynamic (Foucault, 2002), since power can be altered by responses to actions (Malatzky, 2017). Therefore, even though women are not immune to internalising expectations such as the *yummy mummy* ideal, they can, by being conscious of this internalisation, act critically towards ideas that perpetuate these expectations, and thereby bring about transformation of these ideals.

Against the backdrop of the discussion above, having a child may bring about new and unique challenges for a woman. The early stages of womanhood might be characterised by deliberating the variety of lifestyle choices available and carving out a personal stance on matters relating to morality, responsibility and individual aspirations. However, once a woman becomes a mother the practicalities of having to care for a child frequently overshadow these philosophical reflections. The realities of everyday life suddenly become very visceral, and a family needs to draw on all available resources, including finances, time and energy to survive. This could result in increased conflict at home and at work if flexibility with regards to the tasks at hand are not achieved (Erickson, Martinengo, & Hill, 2010).

For a woman, this flexibility of tasks often implies the ability to incorporate several different roles and identities. Women's interpretations of achieving this role flexibility can take on many variations. In defending their standpoint, women often come into disagreement with each other. This conflict, which is popularly termed the *mommy wars*, is elaborated on in the following section.

The Mommy Wars

*“When mother-cow is chewing grass
its young ones watch its mouth”
– Chinua Achebe*

The traditional view of a mother is a woman who is selfless and caring and who puts her family’s needs above her own (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002). Nowadays mothers are also expected to be role models for modern views of the *empowered woman*. This often includes being career driven and successful outside of the family context (Johnston & Swanson, 2007; Milkie et al., 2016; Stone, 2007). Women are expected to have and do it all – they must be boundlessly nurturing, sexually attractive and professionally successful (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017). The practical and emotional repercussions of balancing these notions and the conflict between supporters of employment or staying at home have paved the way to a further well-documented discourse, popularly referred to as the *mommy wars* (Crowley, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; 2006; 2007; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017; Zimmerman et al., 2008).

The concept of *mommy wars* identifies mostly with the intensive ideology of mothering, which follows a highly individualistic view of parenting, where a mother should set aside her own interests so that she can be constantly attentive to the needs of her children (Crowley, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; 2007). One may question whether an employed mother is capable of this kind of attentiveness, and furthermore whether this mothering style is the most beneficial for the family. These interrogations of the roles of women, which are further influenced by the media, may well play an important role in enforcing and promoting the *mommy wars* debate, thus contributing to a larger culture of ‘mother blame’ (Crowley, 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2008).

While the *mommy wars* discourse is usually described in the media and literature as a white middle-class problem fuelled by defending a specific interpretation of the intensive

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mothering ideology (Crowley, 2015), certain studies have shown that parenting styles are predicted much rather by class than race (Lareau, 2003). The choice to continue to work or to stay at home to raise a family suggests a financial position where it is possible for a mother to relinquish her financial contribution to the household, thus positioning the *mommy wars* discourse in the sphere of the middle-class.

Zimmerman et al. (2008) suggested that the thrust of the debate diverts the discussion away from the most pressing concerns such as affordable health care and quality childcare. Other matters that are veiled by the *mommy wars* discourse are paternal roles in parenting, gender and racial equality, the responsibility of the media, fair wages and family friendly work arrangements in the workplace. Crowley (2015) echoed this and stated that family units and workplace environments will have to adapt to a more equal structure of responsibilities in order to reduce pressure on mothers.

Many women proclaim that they would, if they could, leave their jobs to be stay-at-home mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). Women who decide to leave formal employment and stay at home with their children usually cite the importance of family responsibilities and time with the children as reasons for their decision (Bourke-Taylor, Howie, & Law, 2011; Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Milkie et al., 2016) However, research has also found that some mothers would have continued with their careers if conditions at work had enabled them to manage both roles (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Milkie et al., 2016; Stone, 2007).

Instead of collectively taking on issues to make the choice to work or to stay at home easier, and with less of an impact on both mother and children, mothers often turn on each other (Young, 2006). Johnson and Swanson's (2004) research suggests that mothers frequently define the 'ideal mother' using references that exclude women who opt for mothering choices that differ from their own. Although taking opposing views, both working

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mothers and stay-at-home mothers use employment status as a way of evaluating the quality of mothering. Working mothers may see employment as a condition to be a good mother as they feel that when a mother is content the child will be happy and that a mother's contentment is dependent on being able to pursue different roles and interests. On the other hand, stay-at-home mothers may deem that being employed is inconsistent with good mothering. According to at-home mothers, being self-sacrificing and available for one's children makes a good mother (Johnston & Swanson, 2004; 2006)

Crowley (2015) suggested that the media is a pivotal force in creating the rift between the two groups of women and that each group is presented as inadequate in some way. Johnston and Swanson (2004; 2007) proposed that work status and mothering are not inherently exclusive, but culturally constructed as rigid binaries. This implies that it is impossible for a woman to achieve societal success since thriving in one area, for instance being a stay-at-home mother excludes her from the work force. Or a woman who is successful in her work cannot claim to provide sustained maternal attention to her children.

This potentially affects working women who have no choice but to work (to provide for her family), as she will be judged according to the work-mothering binary. Such judgments may result in feelings of extensive guilt, self-doubt, and stress that is induced by a mother's feelings that she might be damaging her children (Zimmerman et al., 2008). The stress that mothers experience regarding their employment choices contributes to the societal discourse that a mother should make choices that are in the best interests of her children. These choices, and how children might be affected by a mother's choices, are discussed in the following section.

Concern for the Children

It is very common, in recent decades, for women to take on full-time employment (Hofferth, 1996; Hoffman, 1989; Milkie et al., 2016). This may, in part, be due to increased exposure to more flexible gender responsibilities at home, education, and the economic benefit of double incomes for families (Gilbert, 1988, cited in Scarr, Phillips & McCartney, 1989; Hyde & McKinley, 1993; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). However, the option to work seldom comes without a hefty social price tag if the woman is also a mother. No matter what the decision, many mothers seem to feel that they are missing out on something (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). Working mothers often believe that they fall short in some aspects of their mothering role (Milkie et al., 2016; Newcombe, 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2008; Van Beek, 2015). And since society often regards female gender roles as ‘weaker’ and second-rate compared to masculine roles (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008), stay-at-home mothers frequently feel inferior to working mothers.

Although the *mommy war* rhetoric seems to be most extensively internalised by at-home mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2004), there is agreement from both sides that either option has challenges and difficulties. At-home mothers acknowledge that women who continue with full-time employment, when they have children, need to apply meticulous management of their time and resources to integrate both their jobs and their mothering responsibilities (Scarr et al., 1989; Milkie et al., 2016). Working mothers are also willing to concede that it is an extraordinary challenge to take care of children all day long (Crowley, 2015).

Conflicting ideas as to whether it is best to stay at home or stay employed have nevertheless created dissent between supporters of both stances (Milkie et al., 2016; Newcombe, 2007; Stone, 2007), since mothers seem to have at least slight to emphatically

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negative opinions of other mothers who make different employment choices from their own (Crowley, 2015). The effects, of this decision, on children is usually at the centre of the debate (Newcombe, 2007) and since professionals' advice, with regard to the best way to raise children, has changed often over the past two centuries (Lareau, 2003), this is a complex argument.

In the past, when viewed from a developmental and economic standpoint, the concern was expressed that the mother-child attachment and/or relationship may be negatively impacted due to the limited time available to working mothers (Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Newcombe, 2007). These limitations also increase parental stress and could lead to substitute care that might not be effective in promoting healthy child development (Lombardi & Coley, 2014). Later studies, however, have noted that the most consistent predictors of attachment are a mother's temperament and sensitivity, regardless of whether she is a stay-at-home mother or a working mother making use of alternative childcare (Bigelow, MacLean, Proctor, Myatt, Gillis & Power, 2010; Leerkes, 2011; Newcombe, 2007; Tomlinson, Cooper, & Murray, 2005). While alternative care is not necessarily inferior to parental care (Bernal, 2008; Clarke-Stewart, 1989; Scarr et al., 1989), a mother's productivity at work could improve if she were confident and relaxed in the knowledge that her children were receiving quality care (Boyd, 2012).

Developmental Psychology, especially Attachment Theory, expounds the importance of cultivating sensitive, responsive parenting skills and children's needs to develop secure attachments with their mothers or caregivers. Proponents of these theories caution that the reduced time that employed mothers have may hamper the development of these bonds. Since secure or insecure attachment styles may impact a child's early development, the quality of attachment is especially relevant (Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Lombardi & Coley, 2014). Furthermore, certain theories, particularly in cognitive behavioural studies, suggest that

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maternal employment can have a detrimental effect on the cognitive development of children. Indeed, re-evaluation of past data indicates some negative effects in the emotional or intellectual abilities of children whose mothers were employed full-time for the first year after giving birth (Bernal, 2008; Hill, Waldfogel, Brooks-Gunn, & Han, 2005).

However, most recent studies show that there is no significant effect on certain cognitive abilities, particularly children's math and reading skills (Lombardi & Coley, 2014). Newcombe (2007) reports that centre-based childcare could have positive outcomes in areas such as language and cognitive functioning, although some negative outcomes, for example problematic behaviour, have also been noted.

Zimmerman et al. (2008) further confirmed that the literature often contains conflicting reports. They stated that, in general, there are few differences in the developmental outcomes of children who are looked after by their mother, childcare centres or grandparents. In the cases where there were differences, the centre-care children performed better in cognitive development and social-emotional tests than the other two groups. Related studies on academic and developmental achievement have confirmed that maternal employment, under most conditions, does not impact negatively on children's achievement. Indeed, some studies have reported that achievement may be enhanced by maternal employment (Goldberg, Prause, Lucas-Thompson, & Himsel, 2008; Romito, 1997). Possible reasons for this are specialised stimulation at care-facilities and maternal modelling of achievement. Some data show better self-confidence, higher school grades and an increased likelihood of daughters pursuing careers if their mothers were employed, compared to daughters of non-employed mothers (Hoffman, 1989; Zimmerman et al., 2008).

Maternal employment, whatever the concluding result on the potential benefit or detriment to children may be, poses some practical challenges that women need to address (Otoo, Lartey, & Pérez-Escamilla, 2009). Breastfeeding is one such challenge. Extensive

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research has confirmed the positive impact of breastfeeding on mother and child health in the short- and long-term (Dieterich, Felice, O'Sullivan, & Rasmussen, 2013; Smith, McIntyre, Craig, Javantarast, Strazdins, & Mortensen, 2013; Witters-Green, 2003). This makes it an important issue in the discussion pertaining to maternal employment and child welfare. The section that follows is dedicated to the phenomenon of breastfeeding, as it pertains to the current study.

Breastfeeding and Parenting Styles

Mothers' employment decisions often affect practical issues such as breastfeeding. Full-time work by no means excludes the possibility of breastfeeding: In South Africa the Department of Labour expressly orders employers to make arrangements "for employees who are breast-feeding to have breaks of 30 minutes twice per day for breast-feeding or expressing milk each working day for the first six months of the child's life" (1998, p. 4). However, many workplaces do not support or provide appropriate facilities for continued breastfeeding and childcare (Witters-Green, 2003). Bourke-Taylor et al. (2011) added that, according to the mothers in their study, limitations in service systems (i.e. the organisational services that satisfy the needs, wants and aspirations of the employees) are one of the primary obstacles to participation in paid employment.

Although feminist scholars have been vocal in the past about possibly overstating the benefits of breastfeeding and undermining women's agency in deciding what is best for themselves and their children (Smith, 2018), it can be argued that breastfeeding is an essential feminist and human rights issue (Drouin, 2013) and that it can contribute to gender equality "because it requires rethinking basic issues such as the sexual division of labour, the fit between women's productive and reproductive lives, and the role of physiological processes in defining gender ideology" (Van Esterik, 1994, p. 41). To improve conditions for

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women, feminist theorists argue that certain structural changes are needed within society (Sallee, 2008). It follows that breastfeeding addresses several of the important issues in the effort towards equality and dignity: The right to control your own body; the integration of productive (economic) and reproductive (maternal) characteristics of being a woman; cooperation in household and community tasks; and the acceptance that a woman's body is more than a sex object (Van Esterik, 1994).

The common public expression of the undesirability of breastfeeding in public, relates to the sexualisation of breastfeeding women, where breasts are viewed first and foremost as objects for sexual pleasure, rather than for nurturing offspring (Grant, 2016; Lee, 2018). Breastfeeding mothers are therefore often marginalised in a patriarchal society that finds breasts problematic, since it unsettles the boundary between motherhood and sexuality (Lee, 2018).

Conventionally, this boundary is a necessary divide to sustain the seemingly incompatible notions of a woman being either a pure nurturer, or a corrupted seducer. The use and display, and even the sensual enjoyment of breasts, for anything other than sexual pleasure, becomes a repulsive act (Lee, 2018). The media's insistence that breasts are sexual objects, therefore, often make it challenging for women to breastfeed in public (Boyer, 2011; Grant, 2016; Van Esterik, 1994). (Also see the section above: *Metamorphosis: Life stages of Womanhood.*)

The pressure that women experience to conceal their natural bodily processes, such as menopause, menstruation and breastfeeding at work could link to a broader societal script where women need to conform to the structural frameworks of businesses and organisations, where being male is regarded as the norm and superior to being female (Bailey, 1999; Van Esterik, 1994). At the same time, there is a movement, which presupposes that breastfeeding is a measure of good mothering, that encourages breastfeeding of young children. This

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premise is supported by studies that indicate that breastfeeding is advantageous for both child and mother health (Boyer, 2011; Drouin, 2013; Goldbas, 2015; Johnson, Williamson, Lyttle, & Leeming, 2009; Zilanawala, 2017). This leads to the expectation that mothers should fulfil a moral duty by breastfeeding their children. A reluctance or the inability to do so could lead to stigmatisation and the reinforcement of a dominant narrative of being a ‘bad’ mother.

Women have reported navigating past the difficulties of breastfeeding with a compromise of expressing breast milk (Johnson et al., 2009), thereby managing a sense of independence and the logistics of feeding in public or while at work. Child-centred discourses have, however, criticised that expressing milk instead of directly breastfeeding could deter the bonding process, even though it also allows more possibilities for a shared parenting style that entails increased paternal involvement (Johnson et al., 2009).

Some argue that promoting a parenting style that requires the caregiver to be constantly attentive, makes it more difficult for women to partake in salaried employment, therefore upholding gender inequality (Carroll & Campbell, 2008). The high cost of intensive mothering is also questioned (Bean, Softas-Nall, Eberle, & Paul, 2016; Gross, 1998) considering the time, emotional investment and financial expenditure that it requires.

This is true for middle-class women, and more so for low-income mothers who often have less resources in terms of time and money. Mothers who try to provide intensive mothering may suffer from (a) excessive guilt when they have to leave their children in another’s care, or (b) feelings of a lack of accomplishment in other aspects of adult life, such as formal employment (Gross, 1998).

Most traditional mothering ideologies require women to put their own aspirations and needs aside for their children and family, and often alternatives are regarded as unfeasible or morally problematic (Faircloth, 2017; Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009). These expectations of

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sacrifice and servitude are based on stereotypes of an ideal family setup, which can have far reaching effects on all involved. These stereotypes are elaborated on in the next section.

Stereotypes and the Effect of Society's Constructions on Mothers

Despite opposing and varying results of the effects of maternal employment on both mothers and children, as well as the myriad of ways in which families accommodate practicalities around employment choices, some stereotypes persist. Stereotypes, which are powerful in shaping behaviour and attitudes (Gahagan, Loppie, Rehman, Maclellan, & Side, 2007; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Milkie et al., 2016; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017; Stone, 2007), are highly resistant to change. Stereotypically, stay-at-home mothers are viewed as having traditional gender values that include valuing a traditional male breadwinner family format and female domesticity over personal professional accomplishment (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Milkie et al., 2016). Zimmerman et al. (2008) suggested that the media contributes to the depiction of at-home mothers as needy and dependent, and employed mothers as selfish and lacking warmth towards their children.

Mothers also engage in stereotypes of each other based on their employment decisions. Johnston and Swanson's (2004) research found that working mothers focus more on the feelings and desires of at-home mothers, for example "the serene earth mother", while at-home mothers are prone to criticise working mothers for being superficial in appearance and distracted, such as "the crazed working mother who neglects her home and family" or the "efficient java guzzling machine" (2004, p. 502). Furthermore, the authors stated that at-home mothers are effective in creating a psychological barrier between themselves and employed mothers, reinforcing binary constructions. At the same time employed mothers are more likely to identify with the shared mother identity and see their different roles at work and home as situations on a continuum, instead of a dichotomy (Johnston & Swanson, 2004).

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While being in a position to have more time with their families creates a sense of contentment, stay-at-home mothers have reported feeling ‘dislocated’ (Stone, 2007; Walters, French, Eyles, Lenton, Newbold, & Mayr, 1997). Mothers who are employed may, due to financial gain, experience satisfaction and affirmation for being able to provide resources that contribute to their children’s well-being. Non-employed mothers, on the other hand, may experience social isolation and a lack of social embeddedness, which could lead to a myriad of symptomatology, including anxiety and depression (Buehler & O’Brien, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2008). Internalisation of gender roles forced upon women by socially constructed notions may create vulnerabilities among mothers (Cranney & Miles, 2017; Gahagan et al., 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2008), such as feelings of inferiority, unimportance, or isolation.

According to Scarr et al., being formally employed may enhance a sense of purpose and social importance (1989). So, for stay-at-home mothers a feeling of invisibility and social irrelevance may arise. Some studies have found women report decreases in depressive symptoms when resuming employment after having children (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2011; Buehler & O’Brien, 2011). Employed women are less prone to have health problems than stay-at-home mothers (Frech & Damaske, 2012), but less skilled women, in low wage professions, suffer more often from health issues than higher paid women (Belue, Halgunseth, Abiero, & Bediako, 2015; Romito, 1997). Staying at home could also aggravate pre-existing health problems, including sleep and eating disorders and anxiety, which may create a ripple effect on other household members (Gahagan et al., 2007).

Working mothers have reported satisfaction with their diverse roles, social support, interaction with other adults, and contact with the outside world (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2011; Repetti, Matthews, & Waldron, 1989). Conversely, balancing work and home commitments may lead to added stress symptoms and even depression (Hyde, Klein, Essex, & Clark, 1995;

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Lee, Altschul, & Gershoff, 2013) and burnout (Hill, Jacob, Shannon, & Brennan, 2008; Kulik, 2010). This is especially so if spousal support, including support for maternal employment and collaboration in household and childcare responsibilities, is sparse (Arber, Gilbert, & Dale, 1985; Bean et al., 2016; Gilbert, 1985; Hartley, Popay, & Plewis, 1992; Scarr et al., 1989).

From their studies, Johnston and Swanson (2004; 2008) concluded that most mothers find that they lack social support for their maternal position. Furthermore, the impact of cultural discourses such as the *mommy wars* could be aggravated or pacified by their social support systems. Also, a mother's identity is influenced by sociocultural influences (e.g. family and friends) and the presence or lack of support can impact on the psychological health of mothers (Bean et al., 2016; Golden, 2001). There could therefore be severe psychological implications for mothers if support is lacking on both a societal and personal level.

Johnston and Swanson (2004) reported that at-home mothers defended their choices by critically opposing the values and misguided priorities of employed mothers and society at large. Furthermore, at-home mothers often felt undermined by their intimate partners and belittled by employed mothers. On the other hand, full-time working mothers reported receiving more emotional backing from their partners, probably as a result of shared worker-parent identities, but not enough support from circles further removed from their intimate social network (e.g. the work place, the church, non-specific acquaintances or culture at large). When they experienced negative feedback from at-home mothers, feelings of self-doubt were evoked (Romito, 1997). Zimmerman et al. (2008) labelled this emotionally taxing uncertainty (of whether what is being done for the family is sufficient), as *the third shift* (after the first and second shifts at work and taking care of the home). In both cases mothers who stay at home and those who work outside of the home seem to find support from people with

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whom they feel they have a context in common (Johnston & Swanson, 2004) which could drive the two groups further apart and prevent understanding and empathy.

Chapter Summary

Motherhood and formal employment have seldom been concepts that fuse seamlessly in society. There are countless opinions as to whether it is tenable, beneficial or even possible to find a suitable balance between raising children and building a career. That we are at all in a position to grapple with these issues as a practical reality, is to a large extent thanks to the efforts of the feminist movement that started advocating women's rights in the public sphere from the late 18th century (Heilmann, 1996).

Since the early days, various feminist theoretical solutions have advanced women's liberty, often times as a reaction to earlier attitudes. Although there are many opposing views within the feminist paradigm, they are usually united in their opposition to a patriarchal system that supports and sustains inequality for women and other oppressed groups based on race, class, sexual orientation, gender or disability (Russell, 1999). Many advancements have been made, so that most modern societies now accept women's employment as a natural choice. However, since there is still a pervasive gendered division of parenting responsibilities (Press, 2012), and since mothering tasks are still seen as less important than those in formal professions (Schultheiss, 2009), mothers continue to experience an unequal burden when faced with the decision to take on formal employment or not.

Apart from the effect on their own well-being to balance motherhood and employment, women mostly cite their children as the most important consideration when faced with the choice to work or not. And while there is no conclusive evidence to support which scenario is best for the children, women seem to struggle to find ways to justify their own personal position and identify the source of the persistent tensions surrounding this

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choice. Instead of uniting against the patriarchal system, which seems to enforce the status quo, women appear to turn on each other in a pervasive culture of blame that is documented as the *mommy wars*.

The myriad of diverging reports on the effects of maternal employment or non-employment, on children and the emotional well-being of mothers, gives rise to the need to explore further and follow the threads of subtler themes that influence this topic. By focusing on the affiliation between mothers, the nuances of internally driven stress, so often reported alongside the practical difficulties of motherhood, can be uncovered. It is clear that most mothers experience some turmoil related to their ‘mother’ identities, which is then projected onto other mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2004).

The cultural ambivalence around being a mother in modern society is situated within larger dominant discourses around race, class and gender (Zimmerman et al., 2008). Some untenable role expectations could be created for mothers through the belief of a dichotomous ‘good versus bad’ mothering *identity*, as opposed to distinguishing between ‘good and bad’ mothering *behaviours* (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). How mothers relate to each other highlights the assumptions and meanings that underpin these identities. By focusing on how mothers relay their own experiences, some useful themes may arise to further clarify this subject. In order to explicate the methodology in exploring this topic, the design and methods of the study are described in the next section.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

*“The baby understands that its mother loves it.
Words have their origin in baby talk, so words have their origin in love.”
— Yasunari Kawabata*

Introduction

Motherhood and choices about employment are conceptions that are influenced by the societal context within which they exist. The network of influences includes, inter alia, issues pertaining to class, race, political and religious ideologies. These choices are further influenced by the prevailing societal values and traditions that are in turn influenced by the historical context in which they are embedded. In order to provide a coherent and integrated discussion, it is necessary to revisit the research questions and aims that guided the study. As indicated in *Chapter 1*, the main research question is: *What are the experiences of mothers who make the decision to be a stay-at-home mother, or to be a working mother?* The sub-question that follows is: *What meaning do mothers attach to the tensions experienced in making employment decisions, and how does this meaning impact on, and how is it influenced by their social context, relationships, identity and emotional well-being?*

These questions spawned the following research aims: To explore the experiences of mothers who had either chosen to stay at home or to continue with full-time employment after having children; and how this decision had impacted their lives and well-being.

Throughout the centuries, humankind has developed theoretical constructions to analyse and examine the notion of ‘reality’. When doing research, we name and connect the elements that we observe and describe the methods and means with which we go about it. In studying women’s concerns, we owe much to the different movements of feminism for the

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conceptualisation of womanhood and for bringing to light the rights and issues pertaining to motherhood.

In this chapter, wide-angle lenses are used to look at the themes of motherhood and employment. The paradigmatic framework of Social Constructionism is discussed, including how it relates to the current study. Thereafter the choice of a qualitative research approach is justified, with reference to how feminism and qualitative research relate. In addition, a brief discussion of an exploratory case study is provided. Feminist Theory and Second Order Cybernetics are discussed as the guiding theories that informed the thesis, before the lenses' focus narrows somewhat to the methodology of the current study. The relevant details of the participants, the selection technique, and the collection and analysis of the data, are then described. Following from the above, the methods and practices are evaluated in the discussion of trustworthiness as it relates to credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability. The chapter concludes with a pertinent discussion of ethical considerations.

Paradigmatic Framework: Social Constructionism

Social Constructionism was chosen as the paradigmatic framework of the study. In Social Constructionism reality constitutes the distinct experiences of an individual related to his/her context. Each person's unique reality can be regarded as valid and true (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). This post-modernistic approach, which acknowledges a world where multiple realities exist, questions the dominant authorities of knowledge (Doan, 1997). According to Gergen (2001, p. 37) the "social is given primacy over the individual" in constructionism. Furthermore, constructionism "opens the door to multiple ways of seeing the world; it is an invitation to creativity, and it asks the researcher to think carefully about what is being contributed to the culture and the world" (Misra & Prakash, 2012, p. 121). Given this stance, we cannot rely on predictability, since our knowledge about the present is insufficient to

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make a valid prediction about the future. ‘Causality’ is viewed as circular, instead of linear (Hsu, 2005).

The framework introduced above was used to explore the personal narratives of the participants in this study. Language and context play important and integral roles in the creation and understanding of narratives, since qualitative research and social constructionism are both concerned with interpretation and meaning (Ahl, 2004; Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Becvar & Becvar, 2014; Gergen, 2008; Nagar, 2002).

Through language, we participate in conversations and interactions with others which contribute to how we come to know our world. Thus, language generates the meaning we assign to our unique experiences (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992; Gergen, 2008). Meaning (i.e. the value and significance we apportion to experience), therefore, cannot be separated from context, and as no two contexts are ever identical, meaning is not stagnant.

From a social constructionist perspective of co-constructed realities, it is understood that reality is created through language. According to Gergen “truth is replaced with intelligibility” (2001, p. 42). This implies that there is no ultimate, universal truth and that language is not an identical reflection of the world. Language is a means to an end and only offers one interpretation amongst limitless possibilities (Misra & Prakash, 2012). Therefore, it is especially important *how* the participants talk about their experiences of employment decisions and other mothers’ reactions towards, and perceptions of, such decisions. The social context and the way in which the participants perceived and described their contexts came to the forefront in this study.

Social Constructionism and the Current Study

To achieve the aims of this study, namely to explore the experiences of mothers’ employment choices and how their decision impacted their lives and well-being, a social

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constructionist paradigm was deemed the most appropriate approach. As indicated above, Social Constructionism focusses on co-constructed meanings that are attached to knowledge (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2001). It also acknowledges that meaning is created within a framework of socially shared understandings, which are the foundations for the norms against which people measure and evaluate themselves (Doan, 1997).

Social constructionists, who challenge these norms or *grand narratives*, include perspectives that are typically excluded from social discourse (Doan, 1997). For example, in a patriarchal society, there is still a shared understanding that childcare is mainly the responsibility of women and that children are best nurtured by their mother. However, these beliefs and practices should not necessarily be seen as absolute truths, but as socially constructed customs, that could well be replaced or expanded by alternative or additional viewpoints. In modern societies for instance, it has become prevalent for fathers to co-parent equally in all aspects of child-rearing, and research often shows that there are no negative consequences to child development when there are alternative childcare routines (Bigelow et al., 2010; Leerkes, 2011; Newcombe, 2007; Tomlinson et al., 2005).

This study, which focussed on the unique stories of eight women, aimed to achieve a deep understanding of their experiences. A social constructionist paradigm was chosen rather than a modernist approach that focusses on a single truth, or a quantitative study in which details are slotted into measurable categories of behaviour and perceptions. The intention of this research was to illustrate the richness of unique experiences and add to existing knowledge, and not to dispute the findings of previous studies, or make a case for a specific research method. The emphasis is thus on illuminating unique experiences and not to impart *expert* comprehension (Hoffman, 1993), while acknowledging that meaning is derived from social interchange and mediated through our use of language.

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The use of social constructionism to study these women's accounts of employment decisions in a social context illuminated their personal analyses about how society and the roles within these social systems are constructed. The wider grand narratives and how they relate to the specific meaning that women attribute to their experiences was also explored. The study discovered that the influences of patriarchal power are instrumental in the process of meaning making, by means of the intricate chemistry between knowledge and action (Burr, 2003). Therefore, it is considered that the dominant discourses, such as what constitutes a 'good mother', impact on the attitudes and behaviour of society towards women and mothers, and at the same time these discourses impact on the way women see themselves and how they direct their own actions. The embeddedness of each individual in his/her social context as well as his/her family system into a larger culture thus become evident.

In line with the epistemological principles of social constructionism that guided the study, a qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate. This approach is discussed forthwith.

Qualitative Research Approach

In general, research is categorised into two broad approaches, namely qualitative and quantitative research. These two paradigms differ in their assumptions about the nature of reality and from that flows different perspectives on how research should be conducted. Quantitative research follows a modernist approach to science along the lines of Cartesian-Newtonian principles where numbers are assigned to objects or attributes in such a way as to represent quantities of attributes (Creswell, 2012; Durrheim, 1999).

Qualitative research, on the other hand, is consistent with post-modern and social constructionist principles, which strive to understand people in context and acknowledge that each individual perceives reality differently. The purpose is to explore depth and detail that

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cannot necessarily be quantified in numbers (Yin, 2016). So instead of the numbers approach, the researcher provides “thick” descriptions and multi-layered interpretations of the data (Willig & Willig, 2008, p. 276). The researcher is seen as an integral part of the research process and ideas of neutrality and objectivity are redundant (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). The researcher knows that he/she influences, and is influenced by, the research process and that all drawn conclusions, which are to some extent self-referential, should be seen as a co-created reality between researcher and participants. Thus, in light of the idea that total objectivity and neutrality are impossible, the researcher as a participant-observer (as opposed to an expert observer) is regarded as consistent with the qualitative approach. In addition, the particular historical and cultural contexts are also taken into account by the researcher when analysing the data (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Becvar & Becvar, 2014).

In view of the above, it was deemed appropriate that this research be based on a qualitative research methodology using interpretation and inductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning makes broad generalisations from specific observations of individual accounts. A qualitative design was used to explore the rich, dense material that was gained through the analysis of the personal narratives of the mothers in their specific contexts. Themes that might have been overlooked by quantitative studies (Creswell, 2012; Durrheim, 1999) were uncovered. Although generalisability is reduced, qualitative research uses the different and complex perspectives of the participants to uncover underlying leitmotifs. In this research, mothers’ employment decisions and the effects thereof on their emotional well-being and their perceived position in their social contexts were explored.

Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (1990) specified the following characteristics of qualitative research: Qualitative research is informed by theory, either implicitly or explicitly. The theoretical approach determines the researcher’s epistemology or world-view, which needs to be made overt. Furthermore, the purpose of the study should be clear and the

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research questions open-ended and exploratory. *What*, rather than *Why* questions are favoured to encourage participants to express their unique understandings and experiences of a particular phenomenon (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). In addition, the researcher and participants' roles are more active and participatory in qualitative research methods than in quantitative research. It is necessary for the researcher, as the primary data collection instrument, to clarify his/her role and make his/her biases clear when reporting the research.

Qualitative researchers generally prefer small samples since they are concerned with detail and in-depth analyses that aim at discerning patterns. These patterns emerge from the data, rather than being imposed on the data (Moon et al., 1990). Rather than being statistical, data is usually visual and/or verbal. These features of qualitative research make it a logical choice for research in which Feminist Theory is applied.

Feminism and Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative research methodologies, which are often favoured by feminist researchers, focus on individual experiences and presume that there is an equal relationship between participant and researcher (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). Social constructionism is also a natural theoretical fit in a feminist approach, where the meaning and origin of the gendered experiences of individuals are examined (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). Since the interpersonal and sociocultural experiences of the research subjects are taken as central to the understanding of their experiences, qualitative research can empower those who are often overlooked in society, and give voice to the challenges and strengths of the marginalised. For example, because of the discovery-oriented approach of qualitative methods (i.e. research directed towards discoveries rather than developing hypotheses based on existing theory) it can be used to enhance our understanding of mothering tasks as legitimate work, something that is seldom described as such in mainstream literature (Schultheiss, 2009).

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Post-modern Feminist Theory, which guided this study, views gender as a form of discourse (i.e. it is socially constructed and informed by varying cultural and social expectations), therefore fixed ideas about women and mothering and their roles in society are discarded (Cosgrove, 2003). This view stimulates researchers to probe new possibilities regarding gender and mothering roles. A researcher, working within a feminist framework, should keep in mind the qualitative objective of asking open-ended and exploratory questions.

Within a qualitative approach there are numerous designs on which a study can be modelled. I considered that the most fitting design for this study was an exploratory case study, since the qualitative case study design provides an opportunity for a case to be investigated even if the boundaries between the phenomenon to be studied and the context are unclear. This method honours the integrity and importance of context to the phenomenon, which also receives precedence in feminist theorisation (which concentrates on the deep and focussed experiences of specific individuals and their personal and unique stories). While the sample size of such studies is typically small, the rich data collected within this structure can significantly contribute to illuminating the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As such, this study aimed to provide insights into the dynamics underlying mothers' experiences related to their employment decisions, and specifically the meaning they ascribed to perceived resistance or support from other mothers about their decisions. The nature of exploratory case studies is discussed next in more detail.

Exploratory Case Studies

Case studies, which are reports on important experiences in people's lives, identify specific sets of interesting or challenging events or relationships as they occur naturally in an individual's life. Case studies, which use in-depth investigations of groups' or individuals'

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experiences, aim to analyse the context and processes that are involved in the phenomenon under study (Meyer, 2001). Experiences are understood and studied in the case-specific context and the larger social environment, thus making it difficult to identify defined boundaries between the case and its encompassing context (Stark & Strohschneider, 2012).

The case study design was chosen as an appropriate fit for the current study, since it provides sufficient validation of the importance of the individual mothers' stories, while simultaneously promoting an exploration of the wider significance of their experiences, by looking at the contexts and the social-cultural influences (e.g. traditions, norms and expectations) with which the individual and the social structures within which they exist interact. So, for instance, the case study method enables the researcher to integrate the subjects' personal descriptions and the socio-cultural influences that permeate their accounts.

According to Baxter and Jack (2008) a qualitative case study methodology is a useful aid when inquiring into complex phenomena when the case's specific context is relevant for enhanced understanding. This holds with the study's feminist theoretical focus on context and the constructionist paradigm of a socially constructed reality. And in keeping with a second order cybernetic stance, a case study methodology, which provides a platform for stories to be told, encourages a close collaboration between researcher and participant (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

As mentioned above, a case study design is especially useful when the distinction between the studied phenomenon and its context becomes blurred (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to Djuric, Nikolic, and Vukovic (2010), case studies are also useful to get a glimpse of an instance in a more general category. For example, the connection between participants' feelings of guilt could illuminate the context of unattainable social expectations for mothers. So, without having to generalise, a case study can contribute to the investigation

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of a phenomenon that has significance beyond the boundaries of its own scope. The three aspects of case studies that are focussed on in this study, are:

- an investigation of a real-life phenomenon
- focus on a single phenomenon that is flexible
- unclear boundaries between phenomenon and context (Rule, Davey, & Balfour, 2011; Willig, 2001).

Case study research is considered a flexible design and not a research method in itself, and therefore various data collection and analysis methods can be utilised (Willig, 2001). Furthermore, its flexibility allows the researcher to tailor the procedures according to the study's research questions (Fisher & Ziviani, 2004). The focus of case study research is on the case as the unit of analysis (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2011). The present study considered '*the experiences of mothers regarding their employment choices*' as the case to be investigated. The context within which these experiences are embedded is pivotal to understanding the phenomenon, especially since it is expected that the boundaries between mothers' experiences (as the case studied) and the context within which they subsist, are not clear. The aim was therefore exploratory, rather than explanatory: In case studies, it is expected that the experiences evaluated will have no defined, singular set of outcomes (Yin, 2011). Consequently, a study of the context specific experiences relayed by mothers about their employment choice and the impact that it had on their identity, relationships and well-being provided opportunities for varied feedback from which themes could be drawn. Having a single case (the phenomenon of mothers' experiences surrounding employment choices) with embedded units (the individual mothers that take part in the study) has several advantages, even for a small sample group:

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data can be analysed *within* the subunits separately (within case analysis), *between* the different subunits (between case analysis), or *across* all of the subunits (cross-case analysis). The ability to engage in such rich analysis only serves to better illuminate the case. (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 550)

Since this research was interested in personal accounts of women's experiences of their employment decisions after having children, a qualitative research paradigm, with an exploratory case study model, was deemed to be the most fitting technique to follow. It is not only the most appropriate fit from a social constructionist perspective, it also supports the guiding frameworks of feminism and Ecosystemic Theory, specifically Second Order Cybernetics, which are discussed next.

Guiding Theories: Feminist theory and Second Order Cybernetics

No (wo)man is an island, entire of itself. This popular metaphor, originally taken from a seventeenth century lecture given by the English poet, John Donne, expresses one's unavoidable connection to, and dependence on, a larger social context. This relates to the notion that all people and events are part of a system of relationships, where movement or perturbation in any direction affects all parts. Feminist Theory and Ecosystemic Theory (specifically Second Order Cybernetics), were chosen as the theoretical backbone of this study, since both support the notion that context is central to a study. Furthermore, the notion of a universal, objective reality is rejected by both theories in the observation of an individual's experiences. Since all parts of a system affect all other parts, it is also important to describe the researcher's position within the 'system' of the research context. In the next sections, Feminist Theory, Second Order Cybernetics (and feminist critique of Systems Theory), and the researcher's own worldview are discussed to elucidate the theoretical basis of the study.

Feminist Theory

Many definitions of feminism exist, but for the purpose of this study it is regarded as an inclusive movement that involves all people regardless of sex, gender or status, who strive towards a society where all people can enjoy equal opportunities in life (Anderson, 2009). At the root of Feminist Theory is the notion that there exists an unequal distribution in society of economic, political and social power, and women and other groups considered inferior to the norm, are routinely discriminated against because of their race, class, sexual orientation, gender or disability (Russell, 1999). Patriarchy is the system that enforces and sustains these inequalities, and is characterised by dualism and hierarchical positions, where oppositional rather than complementary thinking is encouraged (Kirkley, 2000; Swan et al., 2018).

Feminist Theory shares the ecosystemic focus on the importance of language as well as social context, whereby individuals are impacted by, and in turn influence, their environment through communication and everyday actions. A patriarchal system therefore is sustained and maintained by all involved and conversely influences individuals on a deeply personal as well as societal level. A feminist stance makes it possible for power imbalances to be studied on a macro level (e.g. laws, religions, institutions) and micro level (e.g. behaviour patterns, family dynamics, personal attitudes), and to explore the symbiosis between micro and macro systems. The above-mentioned feminist standpoint towards the concept of patriarchy allows for a wide understanding of the model, where fluidity of social arrangements and the complexity of relationships within societal structures are acknowledged. Universality and consistency in the manifestation of patriarchy are expanded to a post-modern notion of a system that is ever shifting and ambiguous (Hunnicut, 2009).

The feminist position adopted by this study, draws upon the post-modernist stance of the third wave feminist movement. Such a view addresses power imbalance in society and

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focusses on individuals' contexts, with an awareness of the influence of intersectionality (e.g. of race, class, gender, culture and sexuality) on these contexts. According to Snyder (2008, p. 184), universality (i.e. applicability in all contexts) is disregarded by third wave feminists and "the personal story constitutes one of the central hallmarks of third-wave feminism", which links to the notion of a 'multiverse' in Second Order Cybernetics.

Second Order Cybernetics

From the perspective of Ecosystemic Theory, specifically from a second order cybernetic stance, the researcher is seen as a participant-observer, and is thus part of the system being observed, and by deduction all interpretation of the data is therefore purely self-referential. Thus, I, the researcher, was an active agent in the process of collecting and interpreting information through the lenses of my own world-view and I acknowledged that the mere process of interviewing could impact the participants' views and thus the outcomes of the interview data.

The focus of second order cybernetic inquiry, relates to the notion that every context can be seen as a network of relationships, or a system, in which the researcher is an active part. Each system is said to function according to its own implicit and explicit sets of rules, roles and assumptions (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). Meaning, which is assigned to experiences according to these assumptions, in turn influence the behaviour and emotional responses of the individuals in the system. In Systems Theory it is assumed that systems operate to maintain themselves, and are therefore described as structurally determined and autopoietic (a system does what it does in order to do what it does) (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). Yerby (1995, p. 340) pointed out that Systems Theory advocates that we "pay attention to our interdependence". Therefore, for instance, to understand the tensions that mothers experience regarding their employment choices, rather than only focussing on their intra-psychic

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responses, it is important to explore the dynamics of the relationships to which these women belong.

Since the first systems theorists, Cybernetic Theory has developed through several different stages. The most important shift was introduced when First Order Cybernetic Theory developed from a modernist, 'expert' stance where the researcher was seen as an objective observer looking in on the system, to the intersubjective active observer position, at the onset of the second order cybernetic movement. This shift introduced the focus on the awareness of *perspectives* rather than on a belief in *facts* (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). Thereby, a researcher cannot act as an observer who delineates accurate representations of reality (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). Therefore, I actively took part in the 'meaning making' process by conducting the interviews and analysing the data against the backdrop of my own world-view and experience.

Reality, in a second order cybernetic stance, is thus not an external 'truth' that can be discovered and observed, but is rather an inter-subjective, co-constructed reality. The aim is not to find fault with, or blame what is being dialogued, as is common in the patriarchal influenced discourses about motherhood, but rather to stay with the notion of reciprocal causality and a multiversality of epistemology and knowledge. For example, a mother being judged by another mother is only problematic if she experiences and expresses it as such. Linked to this concept is the view that *how* participants communicate about their problem is more important than the problem itself.

In the notion of reality as a multiverse, Second Order Cybernetics also relates to Social Constructionism. Each individual perceives the system (i.e. the network of relationships) and context in which it operates in a unique way. Indeed, for each individual there is an altogether distinctive system. Each observer's reality is valid and underlines the fact that objectivity is impossible (Becvar & Becvar, 2014).

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Proponents of Feminist Theory and Systems Theory do not always see eye to eye. Feminist critique of First Order Cybernetic Theory, which is oftentimes quite severe, accuses the objectivist belief systems and position of the ‘expert’ therapist of upholding a sexist status quo (Hare-Mustin, 1978). Even Second Order Cybernetic Theory, where the researcher or therapist is seen as an active participant, has been criticised in light of the circular paradigm of responsibility that could perpetuate patriarchal inequality by refusing individual accountability for oppression and discrimination (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). More recent systems theorists place greater focus on social, political and economic influences, and acknowledge the effects of patriarchal power dynamics on relationships and individuals.

There are, in fact, also intersections between feminist theories and second order cybernetic approaches, which support and complement the other. For example, Hanson (2001, p. 545) points out that cybernetic causality “reflects notions of discourse and fluid identities, allowing analysts to move beyond blame and dichotomous units”. The notion of ‘agency’, whereby even victims of social inequality may assume some power in response to their circumstances, is also supported by both third wave feminists and ecosystemic theorists.

In order for Feminist Theory and Second Order Cybernetics to exist hand in hand, it is necessary that I, as a researcher, observe and acknowledge my own values and biases, and recognise how I might influence the system that is being observed (Becvar & Becvar, 2014). Second Order Cybernetic Theory supports the view that participants’ experiences should be listened to objectively and without judgement, while acknowledging that this is not entirely possible. All parties, including the researcher, influence the context of reporting by involving their own world views, preconceptions and biases by interacting through language and actions. In order to account for these influences, and to be aware of their possible impact on the research, it is useful for the researcher to be cognisant of his/her own biases and positions and declare her world view.

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Researcher's Own Worldview

I accept the notion that the researcher plays an active part in the research process and inevitably has an impact on the outcome. In order to control for, and understand, my influence on the study it was important to acknowledge my personal vantage point, ideologies, strengths and limitations.

I believe that we live in a society where the nature of being a woman and a mother is richly influenced by assumptions and rules enforced by our history and language, which in turn actively shape gender role expectations, hierarchical structures of value and expectations for the future. It is my view that even the notion of gender is socially constructed and that there is in fact an infinite scale of grey area between masculinity and femininity and that the consequent roles that we assign to men and women, which are largely superficial, often to the detriment of both sides, may cause great stress and strife in our societies.

It then follows, I believe, that the traditional construction of what we call a family, with a mother, father, children and extended members, is a social fabrication. I believe there are multiple possible permutations of relationship arrangements that could constitute a family. These may include configurations of same-gender partners, intergenerational connections, or commitments that are not acknowledged by law. I acknowledge that our societal structures and the expectations surrounding child-rearing are still heavily influenced by traditional notions of family life. Women who find themselves in traditional family configurations are in a special position to illuminate the shortcomings and challenges of these structures, since they experience it first-hand. Studying women's experiences in these contexts could encourage a broadening of acceptable employment and child-rearing alternatives. I acknowledge that I would be pleased if this was the result of studies such as this one, although I did not directly pursue such an outcome.

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I believe that women should have the freedom to make their own employment and family choices and that no choice is superior to another. I acknowledge that my own situation as a childless, married, full-time employed woman put me in a specific position with regard to both the non-employed and full-time employed mothers interviewed in this study. My situation may have influenced the way they perceived me, and also the way in which I perceived them. I believe that the choice to be employed or to stay at home with children both have advantages and drawbacks, but I acknowledge that since I do not have personal experience in this regard I cannot fully grasp the facets of either choice.

When listening to the stories of women's experiences, I did not assume to be an expert on their situation, but hoped to observe it with respect, curiosity and a sincere will to understand it from their specific point of view. I endeavoured to be a *conversation architect* (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) by drawing from the rich experiences of all participants.

I assume that the study brought about some change in all parties involved, including myself. Apart from undertaking to not deliberately manipulate and direct the outcomes of the study, I cannot predict what this change will involve in the long term. I sincerely hope that any change as a result of the perturbation, brought about by a curious stance in conversation, will be uplifting and growth inspiring for all involved.

Research Method

In the next sections the methods used to extract data are elucidated. This entails a description of the participant selection process, and explanations of the selection technique, data collection process and data analysis procedures. This is followed by a section on trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Selection of Participants

The population under study comprised South African women, that were either full-time employed or stay-at-home mothers. Therefore, the sample of mothers for this study was drawn from this targeted population. Through the technique of purposive network sampling (described below), eight mothers were interviewed separately for this study: Four were full-time employed mothers and four were stay-at-home mothers.

The candidates ranged between 25-45 years of age, since this is when women usually start a family and face the decision to either continue to work or stay at home (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Statistics South Africa (2018) shows that most registered births in the country are for mothers between the ages of 15 and 44, with the majority being between the ages of 25 to 29. This is also the age group of women who generally have some years of work experience. A further consideration when selecting the participants was that they had at least one child under the age of five years, as most studies that investigate the impact of maternal attachment focus on the stages of infancy and early childhood (Bowman, 2019). It was also a prerequisite that the mothers be part of a family with an alternative source of income, such as a working spouse or parent, to ensure that their employment choices would not be based purely on financial necessity. The sample was heterogeneous and did not control for race or number of children. Considering the small scope of the study, some cases were excluded from the research, such as single working mothers without additional financial support, or part-time employed mothers. In view of the above, the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the selection of participants are summarised as follows:

Inclusion criteria: Mothers were considered who

- were between 25 and 45 years old,
- had a background of full-time employment,

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- were either full-time employed or a stay-at-home mother,
- were part of a household setup with an alternative income source, such as a working spouse, partner, sibling or parent,
- had at least one child under five years of age,
- were available for a face-to-face meeting in Cape Town or Stellenbosch,
- were able to understand and express themselves in English or Afrikaans.

Exclusion criteria: The following mothers were not considered for interviews:

- Single, breadwinning mothers.
- Part-time employed mothers.
- Stay-at-home mothers without an employment background.
- Mothers younger than 25years or older than 45years.

The selection parameters are summarised in the table below with the participants' specifics:

Table 2. Participants profile summary

Participants	Participants age range: 25-40 years	Child(ren)'s age: At least one under 5 years	Employment status: Full-time employed/ Stay-at-home	Alternative income source: Yes
Participant 1	36	1 & 3	Stay-at-home	Husband
Participant 2	33	2 & 4	Stay-at-home	Husband and parents-in-law
Participant 3	42	3 & 15 & 17	Full-time employed	Self and husband
Participant 4	38	2 & 4	Stay-at-home	Husband
Participant 5	40	4 & 7 & 9	Full-time employed	Self and husband
Participant 6	25	3	Full-time employed	Self and brother
Participant 7	34	6months & 2 & 4 & 7	Stay-at-home	Husband and parents-in law
Participant 8	36	1	Full-time employed	Self and husband

Selection Technique

Purposive network sampling, which is the most widely used sampling technique in qualitative research, was used to select the participants (Marshall, 1996; Yin, 2016). This sampling strategy entails purposefully identifying interview candidates who fulfil the required research criteria. This sampling method is useful for exploring complex human issues where the understanding of a phenomenon is more important than the generalisability of results (Marshall, 1996). According to Yin, the “goal or purpose for selecting the specific instances is to have those that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data—in essence, *information rich*—given your topic of study” (2016, p. 93).

To initiate the selection of the participants, I requested the assistance of my personal extended social groups, including neighbourhood and community networks, via email. The message detailed the purpose of the study, and a request was made to identify women who fulfilled the criteria of the study and to forward the attached information brochure to them. Interested candidates were requested to contact me to make arrangements for the interviews. The information brochure included a consent form and a detailed description of the intention of the study, the criteria and scope, as well as what was expected of each participant. A separate document asked for some biographical information (see Addenda A, B and C).

After sending the request message to 35 people, I received responses from 18 extended contacts who were willing to take part in the research. From that group, an initial 6 participants were chosen by selecting the ones that best matched the criteria. According to Babbie and Mouton (2010), sample size is dependent on the focus and research questions of the study, as well as the relevant population group. Data saturation is also an indication of ample sample size (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, & Delport, 2011). Evidence that data saturation was being reached was found in themes that started recurring by the fifth and sixth

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interviews. To ensure full data saturation two more interviews were conducted to reach a final number of eight participants.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews used in this case-study enabled the understanding of “real-world situations as they unfold naturally; non-manipulative and non-controlling; openness to whatever emerges (lack of predetermined constraints on findings)” (Patton, 2001, p. 40). A total of eight mothers participated in the interviews for the data collection. The interviews took place between May and September 2018, and were conducted in the regions of Stellenbosch and Cape Town, South Africa.

The face-to-face interviews, which were conducted at a time and location convenient to the mothers, consisted of informal open-ended questions related to the topic under consideration. The aim was, as far as possible, to encourage flexibility, spontaneity and responsiveness for a deep discussion of the topic. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

I recognised that I was an active participant in the study and therefore influenced the process, outcome and interpretation through my own world-view. (Also see the Ethical Considerations section for a further discussion on this topic.) Nevertheless, I aimed to conduct the interviews in a natural, comfortable, safe setting, with minimal prompting, influence, control and manipulation. However, in line with the paradigmatic perspective and theoretical orientation of the study, manipulation is seen as unavoidable. However, manipulation in such contexts is not viewed as a means to malicious control, but rather seen as a reflexive position acknowledging that as a participant-observer, one cannot *not* influence. This is viewed as an ethical stance, that is, when one is aware of one’s possible influence over another.

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Before the interviews, I explained, to each participant, the purpose and nature of the research and what was expected of them. In addition, I informed each participant that (1) she was free to withdraw from the process at any time, without any negative consequences, (2) should she feel the need for debriefing after the interview, arrangements with a professional counsellor would be made. This information was included in the informed consent form, which was signed by each participant after agreeing to being interviewed.

The conversations during the semi-structured interviews were led by the interviewee's responses to the questions that I set out in the pre-prepared interview schedule. (See Addendum D for the broad outline of topics and examples of questions asked.) The topics were used only as a guideline. The aim was to be flexible and allow a natural process of unfolding information and stories (Creswell, 2012). In this way rich, descriptive data were gathered from which themes emerged during the analysis phase.

After the interviews, I sent a message to each participant thanking them for their time and willingness to participate in the study. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed to text shortly after each interview, and supplemented with notes that were taken during the interview. In addition, comments on body language, facial expressions and tone, which were observed during the conversation, were noted. This material, combined with the biographical information requested before each interview, formed the foundation of the data.

Data Analysis

Hermeneutic analysis, which is a common tool used in qualitative research, was used to analyse the data. In this revelatory approach, which entails the capturing of categories or themes by engaging with the data, researchers look for recurring patterns, make inferences and generate theories. The goal, which is to uncover the meaning of experiences by achieving understanding within a context (Bleicher, 1980), echoes the feminist and second order

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cybernetic theoretical scaffolding of this study, in that it is also concerned with individually constructed meaning through language in a specific context.

The hermeneutic cycle allows interpretation to be achieved in a circular movement between the whole and its parts, whereby the meaning of the parts is reflected on in connection with the meaning of the whole, and the whole is understood by considering its component parts (Terre Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2011). This is achieved by revealing patterns and exploring themes through immersion in the data (Bleicher, 1980). In the current research, the steps taken for the data analysis followed the hermeneutic circle as described by Kelly (1999):

- Familiarisation and Immersion
- Thematising and Coding
- Elaboration and
- Interpretation and Checking.

Familiarising and immersion presuppose that analysis of the data does not follow a fixed linear approach, rather it is an iterative, ongoing process that is already underway in the data collection phase. The researcher continually deepens a preliminary understanding of the patterns as they emerge, by reading through the text repeatedly, connecting ideas, drawing maps and making notes. From this *immersion*, it then becomes possible to induce themes by locating the principles that underlie the patterns. It is not only a summary of the content, but an analysis according to processes, sentiments, motivations and contradictions that trigger the descriptions and events. During this process of developing themes, the researcher is also coding the data. This involves labelling parts of the text as they pertain to a specific theme or themes. In the *elaboration* phase the coding and thematising are further refined by looking for finer nuances of meaning. This could involve recoding or revising themes, and identifying

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subthemes (sometimes of several levels), until no new insights appear. At last the researcher assimilates the categories from the final thematic analysis to conclude the closing interpretation. When that is done, a *final check* is made to find any possible cases of over-interpretation, missed prejudices or contradictions (Kelly, 1999).

During this process of following the hermeneutic cycle, some key findings are isolated through social constructionist-led analysis. Thereby, some of the systems of statements are examined that informed the context and language of the participants by looking specifically at binary oppositions (e.g. flow vs. stagnate), recurrent terms, phrases and metaphors, and the human subjects that form part of the subtexts. Simultaneously, the themes identified are related to how they link to their effects, or the actions that flow from them. This is done by critically questioning the language and by considering alternatives that could have been used (i.e. direct statements vs evasive language) and how these subtexts are used to achieve certain effects.

Central to a social constructionist analysis is context, so, in addition to exploring the interactional contexts when analysing the data, researchers also take into account the macro context of institutions (i.e. family, religion, media) and ideologies (i.e. ethnocentrism, sexism, racism) (Terre Blanche et al., 2011). In accordance with these principles the historical background and patriarchal heritage of the South African milieu, for instance, were considered.

In the next section the trustworthiness of the study is discussed.

Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability, which are two fundamental features of traditional modernist research studies (Cypress, 2017), have their roots in Positivist Epistemology. Validity refers to the extent to which research truly measures what it intends to. Reliability denotes whether

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results are consistent over time and when reproduced, and generalisable across a population (Golafshani, 2003). In a qualitative report, however, reliability and validity are conceptualised differently and there are numerous variations of terminology and models used to delineate the quality of research. Although the models used in qualitative research vary (Morrow, 2005), they mostly point to the same underlying concepts related to trustworthiness.

Durrheim (1999) labels reliability as the dependability of a measurement instrument, meaning that it yields the same results on repeated trials; and validity is seen as the “degree to which the researcher can produce observations that are believable for her or himself, the subjects being studied and the eventual reader of the study” (1999, p. 46). Lincoln and Guba (1985) encourage researchers to measure the trustworthiness of their studies against four major criteria: Transferability, dependability, confirmability, and credibility.

Cypress (2017) asserted that *rigor*, which denotes the mechanisms of quality, thoroughness and exactness in qualitative research, equates to the concepts of validity and reliability in quantitative studies. Cypress recently stressed that meticulous attention should be given to the principles of quality in qualitative research, as “the researcher's subjectivity can so readily cloud the interpretation of the data and where research findings are often questioned or viewed with scepticism by the scientific community” (2017, p. 254).

Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002), pointed out that it is not only important to pay attention to the *way* these concepts are applied to suit the qualitative design, but that it is also important *when* these assessments are accounted for. While validity and reliability tests are usually performed after the data are collected and analysed in quantitative studies, they emphasised that evaluations should be actively built into the process of enquiry during and after data management in qualitative research.

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In keeping with these practices, the methods whereby the principles of trustworthiness were achieved by evaluating the credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability throughout the research process, are forthwith discussed.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the measure to which the findings of the study are adequately linked to the original participant accounts as collected during the interviews. Lincoln and Guba explained that the conclusions must be “credible to the constructions of the original multiple realities” (1985, p. 296). *Prolonged engagement*, which is one method to ensure credibility, was employed in this study by interviewing the participants until data saturation was achieved, as well as by taking sufficient time to fully immerse myself in the data during the analysis phase until all possible interpretations and conclusions were replete.

Stiles (1993) prescribed several other strategies to ensure credibility in a qualitative research report, with which this study aimed to comply. The first strategy was to disclose my own orientation and expectations, preconceptions, values and theoretical allegiance. In this way, I was able to put the interpretations into perspective with regards to my own context. Further, the report describes the social and cultural context of the study, once again to add to the reader’s insight of the perspective taken. This links to the cybernetic principle of multiple realities and perceptions. I also attempted, as far as possible, according to Stiles’ (1993) prescriptions, to be open about my intrapersonal processes and the impact thereof on the investigation and reporting; and to be upfront about personal observations and inferences made throughout the interviewing and analysis process.

Moreover, a relationship of trust and openness was established in order to be in the best position to understand the material and perspectives of each participant. By shifting between interpretation and observation, a process that Stiles (1993) labelled ‘iteration’, was

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honoured, which means that the accuracy of analyses is distilled. In addition, grounding interpretations in the content and context of the data (Patton, 2001) means that I continually checked and rechecked that the theoretical interpretations were in tune with direct observations. Finally, I once again followed Stiles' (1993) process of constantly focussing on asking *what* rather than *why* to draw out nuanced storytelling.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the conclusions of a study can be traced back to the raw data and focus of the study. In order to achieve this Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that the researcher leaves an adequate audit trail whereby the interpretations, findings and recommendations of the study can be traced back to the original sources.

In this study confirmability was achieved by electronically documenting each step of the process, from notes made in preparation for the interviews, correspondence with my supervisor, and disclosing my expectations. In addition, the interview recordings, interview notes and researcher's remarks, interview transcripts, coding and reduction notes, all first drafts and revisions, up to the final document with findings and conclusions were organised and documented.

Transferability

In qualitative research the concept of validity (specifically external validity) is often replaced with the idea of transferability, which applies to the transferability of the findings to other situations or people (Patton, 2001). Mostly, generalising specific outcomes from a wide base of data entries, as in quantitative research, is considered a secondary priority when exploring complex human issues of a few cases in qualitative research (Marshall, 1996). However, in qualitative research it is possible to make representational generalisations, where

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learning occurs through the immersion in a rich case and results in deepening knowledge over time (Patton, 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985) prefer the concepts of *transferability* and *fittingness* to describe this process.

For this study, I hoped to transfer the new ideas, which emerged from the rich material and analyses of the participants' accounts, into the pool of existing knowledge. By adding to the conversation, new generalisations and arrangements of reasoning are enabled, which could refine further deductions and generalisations in future studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2001). These new insights and deductions, could then be transferred to practical applications that could influence a wide range of subjects directly or indirectly linked to this study.

In addition, collecting rich and detailed descriptions (which ensures a 'thick' account of the data) and persistently including descriptions of the contextual factors (which impact on the participants and the study), the potential of transferability is further enhanced (Guba, 1981). So also does the portrayal of the participants experiences as "lifelike, believable and possible" enhance transferability, since it is likely that others might relate to the information (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Dependability

Parallel to the quantitative imperative of reliability, which requires a study's findings to be replicated by repeated enquiry (Yin, 2011), qualitative studies seek to be dependable. Due to the nature of the enquiry, where the unique experiences of specific individuals are investigated, reality will not be static, and divergent interpretations of circumstances are to be expected. Therefore, results are expected to be unpredictable and volatile (Yin, 2011).

Yin (2011) viewed dependability, in qualitative research, as the consistency of the data collection process, by for instance constantly making use of detailed field notes and

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triangulation (i.e. making use of multiple data sources, researchers and theoretical schemes). These methods, which are also used to ensure confirmability and correspond to the quantitative measure of objectivity, aim to establish the “value of the data” (Yin, 2011, p. 204). During this study, field notes were gathered in the form of audio recordings of each participant’s accounts. Furthermore, the written notes for every participant included observations not captured by audio recordings, such as expressions, displays of emotions et cetera. In addition, the processes of coding and interpreting were recorded and applied equally for each participant’s data. And a record, by means of journaling, was also kept of my own reflections and feelings during the research process.

The following guidelines as recommended by Stiles (1993), further supported dependability in this study: Disclosure of the researcher’s orientation; descriptions of the social and cultural contexts of the participants and the researcher; an explanation of the processes of investigation; vigorous and prolonged engagement with the data; grounding of the interpretation by linking the contexts and content of the interviews with the interpretations; and shifting between interpretation and observation.

In the following section the ethical considerations of the study are explained.

Ethical Considerations

In studies that involve the intimate details of people’s lives, it is essential to safeguard the well-being of the participants (De Vos et al., 2011). Strict ethical attention was observed while harvesting the data and conveying the information in this study. In this section the aspects of ethical practice, which are particularly important in social studies, are discussed, namely ethical clearance, voluntary participation and informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, as well as beneficence and nonmaleficence. In line with the second order

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cybernetic and postmodernist perspectives of this study, Second Order Ethics is also addressed.

Ethical Clearance

To comply with the ethical standards as set out by South Africa's Health Professions Act (Act No 56 of 1974), I applied for, and was granted, ethical clearance by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at the University of South Africa (see Addendum E). The clearing process included approval of the information distributed to the participants and the research methods to be used during the interviews. Clearance was obtained before data collection commenced.

Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent

Measures were taken to ensure full voluntary participation, which is considered a central principle of conducting social research (Babbie & Mouton, 2010; De Vos et al., 2011). Before the interviews, the participants, who provided verbal and written consent to confirm that they had made an informed choice to participate, were fully informed of the nature of the study. A written document (see Addendum B), which was given to the participants prior to consenting to take part in the study, contained the following information:

- Aim and objectives of the research
- Criteria for taking part in the study
- What participants could expect from the interviews in terms of format and time
- The methods and procedures to be followed during the study
- Who would have access to the findings of the study
- The credentials of the researcher
- How sensitive data would be kept secure

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- Voluntary participation and the option to withdraw without penalties at any time.

In addition, prior to the interviews, the purpose, aim, expectations and method of the study, and option to withdraw were explained verbally to each participant in non-technical language. Participants were also cognisant that the interviews would be audio recorded and transcribed. I can therefore declare that the participants were in no way coerced or deceived before, or during, the interviewing process, and that their autonomy was respected since they could withdraw at any stage without consequences.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Due to the private nature of the participants' information it was important to provide the highest level of confidentiality as set out by the guidelines of De Vos et al., (2011) and Terre Blanche et al., (2011). Therefore, to protect their identities and ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in the reporting of the accounts and obvious information that could identify specific individuals was left out or disguised. Full anonymity cannot be guaranteed as the participants are known to the researcher.

Hard copies of the biographical information sheet, and interview transcripts will be stored for a minimum period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at the researcher's home for future research or academic purposes. The electronic information is stored on a password protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be submitted to a new Research Ethics Review panel for approval if required. When the information is discarded, hard copies will be shredded and electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the hard drive of the computer through the use of a relevant software program.

Beneficence and Nonmaleficence

Beneficence and nonmaleficence are considered particularly important aspects of ethical practice (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008). Beneficence refers to the aim of the research outcome to be beneficial, if not directly to the participants, then to society by contributing to the field of study (Terre Blanche et al., 2011). Nonmaleficence refers to the aim of not doing harm, and is connected to the practice of identifying and mitigating risk. Beneficence was aimed for by being thorough, truthful and attentive while listening to and reporting on the stories of the participants. It is possible that the interviews may benefit the mothers in that the conversations may have stimulated self-reflection and an enhanced awareness of the decision they had made. Therefore, it might lead to personal growth and development. The research can also be advantageous in the professional arena, in that professionals working with mothers and their employment decisions could benefit from the insights obtained through the study.

During the research process, nonmaleficence was aimed for by considering the risks involved for the participants when speaking about personal and sensitive topics, and attempts were made to counteract it as far as possible. The research participants were at no time deceived about the research process and were free to withdraw at any time if they experienced emotional discomfort. Although the participants were not identified as being part of a sensitive population, and the risks and impact of the study were deemed low, care was taken to limit emotional and psychological effects of the interviews and to protect participants' identities. Furthermore, the participants were made aware that a debriefing session would be provided, free of charge, by a certified clinical psychologist, if required.

Second Order Ethics

Taking a social constructionist and second order cybernetic stance, I, as the researcher, was compelled to consider the ethical considerations, as recommended by Becvar and Becvar (2014), of being a participant-observer in this study. This meant that I had to acknowledge and act upon the knowledge, as described by Keeney (1983), that the observer and the observed are continually interconnected. Self-reflexivity required that I address my own biases, paradigms and worldview that could impact on the data or the interpretation thereof. Where appropriate, I disclosed the fingerprints of my own 'multiverse' to the participants and the readers of this text by using self-reference.

Research integrity, as discussed by Yin (2011), was aimed for by directing my own behaviour, demeanour and techniques in such a way to continually strive towards truthful accounts and interpretation of the participants' stories without disregarding their dignity and privacy. This entailed committing to a 'not knowing' stance, whereby an attitude of openness and curiosity was adopted, rather than an expert position that demands tailing existing hypotheses to confirm or refute the data. Finally, considering the study ethically from a meta-perspective, encouraged me to set a clear intention for the processes and the outcomes of my research without holding on to specific expectations about the results.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter the paradigmatic framework of Social Constructionism, wherein it is acknowledged that there are as many different realities as there are individuals (Becvar & Becvar, 2014), was introduced. The research approach that is most in line with this paradigm was deemed to be qualitative research. It follows post-modernist and social constructionist principles in striving to understand people's unique experiences in context. The purpose is to

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explore depth and detail and not to quantify findings. In qualitative research the idea of true objectivity is redundant and the researcher is regarded as a participant-observer and therefore the researcher's epistemology or world-view must be made clear.

This qualitative study adopted an exploratory case design. This format enables researchers to study complex phenomena in their specific contexts (Baxter & Jack, 2008), where the aim is exploratory, rather than explanatory. This study design was also supported by Feminist Theory and Second Order Cybernetics. Qualitative research studies are favoured by feminist researchers, since equal relationships between observer and participant and a focus on individual experiences are underscored (Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015). With a focus on language and social context, Feminist Theory makes it possible to study power imbalances on a macro level (laws, institutions, religions) as well as on a micro level (behavioural patterns, family dynamics, personal attitudes) and the symbiosis between the two. Second Order Cybernetics shares the feminist perspective that the researcher is an active agent in the study, and thus part of the system being studied. The researcher's own worldview and reality as experienced by the researcher were included for clarity.

In the Research Method section, it was revealed that eight mothers were selected for the study, four working mothers and four at-home mothers, all with a background of full-time employment. The selection technique was purposive network sampling, a widely used technique in qualitative research since it is useful in exploring complex human issues where understanding a phenomenon is more important than generalisability (Marshall, 1996). Data collection involved face-to-face semi-structured interviews that were audio-recorded in a comfortable and informal setting. After the interview recordings were transcribed, the hermeneutic analysis technique was used to capture themes, by engaging with the data, looking for recurring patterns, making inferences and gathering theories. The hermeneutic

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analysis included: Familiarisation and immersion, thematising and coding, elaboration and interpretation and checking (Kelly, 1999).

While validity and reliability are central features in successful modernist research (Cypress, 2017), these concepts are conceptualised differently in post-modernist qualitative research. This study attempted to adhere to the principles of trustworthiness by aiming for credibility, confirmability, dependability and transferability. Finally, the ethical considerations focussed on respect for the integrity of the participants stories, their personal well-being through informed consent, privacy and confidentiality as well as beneficence and nonmaleficence. Second Order Ethics, which engages with the processes of self-reflexivity and self-reference, was also discussed in line with the constructionist and second order cybernetic stance of the study.

In the following sections the participants of this study are introduced. Thereafter, a discussion of the themes and findings that emerged from the data follows.

Chapter 4: The Research Participants

*“It’s very important that we tell the truth.
Don’t tell everything you know, but do tell the truth.”
– Maya Angelou*

Introduction

In this chapter the participants’ biographical information is presented. Each of the women interviewed relayed vivid and interesting accounts of their experiences of motherhood. While the mothers all fell within a fixed range of parameters set by the research design (see *Chapter 3*), each articulated a unique context of circumstances, experiences and perceptions. Their stories provided a deep quarry of rich data that could be mined for themes (discussed in *Chapter 5*).

A total of eight mothers participated in semi-structured interviews for the data collection. The interviews took place between May and September 2018, and were all conducted in the regions of Stellenbosch and Cape Town, South Africa. The interviews were conducted in Afrikaans and English. The participants ranged between the ages of 25 and 42 years old. The following table presents a summary of the biographical data of the participants, as per the inclusion criteria described in *Chapter 3*. The table is followed by a synopsis of their personal circumstances. In accordance with ethical considerations, pseudonyms were used to protect the participants’ privacy.

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Table 3. Biographical data summary

Name	Apple	Clara	Sandy	Greta	Tammy	Bongi	Linda	Eve
Age	36	33	42	38	40	25	34	36
Number of Children	2	2	3	2	3	1	4	1
Children's ages	1 & 3 years	2 & 4 years	3 & 15 & 17 years	2 & 4 years	4 & 7 & 9 years	3 years	6 months, 2 & 4 & 7 years	1 year
Full-time employed/ Stay-at-home	Stay-at-home	Stay-at-home	Full-time employed	Stay-at-home	Full-time employed	Full-time employed	Stay-at-home	Full-time employed
Current/ Previous job	Lawyer	Teacher	Beautician and Business Owner	Journalist and Educator	Lecturer and Academic	Youth Facilitator	Nurse and Cook	Specialised Medical Practitioner
Marriage/ Relationship status	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Single	Married	Married
Main source of family income	Husband	Husband and Parents-in-law	Self and Husband	Husband	Self and Husband	Self and Brother	Husband and Parents-in-law	Self and Husband
Language	Afrikaans	English	English and Afrikaans	Afrikaans	Afrikaans	Xhosa and English	English	Afrikaans

From Apple to Eve: Introducing the Participants

The following sections, in which the eight research participants are introduced, provide the reader with a brief overview of their circumstances, including their employment background, family setup, social situation and temperament.

Participant 1: Apple

Apple was a lively and confident thirty-six-year-old stay-at-home mother of two small children. She described herself as a typical middle-class white South African woman who had an opportunity to study at university. She stated that, although she valued her education highly, she regretted that she had not applied her hard-earned skills by participating professionally in society while at home with the children.

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Apple worked as a lawyer until the birth of her first child and then became a full-time mother in line with the plan that both she and her husband had prearranged for their family. Her decision to stay at home to raise the children was heavily influenced by her own positive experience of having a stay-at-home mother as a child and also by her husband's negative experiences as a child, of having a working mother.

Although Apple said that it was difficult to be a full-time mother and cited too little time for herself and a loss of social status as the biggest challenges, she was content with her decision since she felt that she had had an adventurous life of work and travelling before having children, and that her current situation was only temporary.

Apple was vocal about the conflict that exists between mothers. She said she experienced patronising attitudes from working mothers towards stay-at-home mothers that usually culminated in the question, "so, what do you do all day?". Conversely, she thought that stay-at-home mothers feel that they are better mothers and that they raise well-adapted children, and that mothers, who choose to work, outsource their parental responsibilities and opt for the easier way. However, she said that she hoped that mothers would trust each other's intentions to do the best for their children even if their methods differed.

Participant 2: Clara

Clara, a soft-spoken and serene stay-at-home mother of two young children, lived in a wealthy suburb with a culture that she described as "very Afrikaans and not very diverse". She was raised in an English middle-class home but married into an Afrikaans family and although she said she felt as if she were straddling two different cultures, she regarded herself as fortunate to live and raise her children in a safe environment in which she was looked after by her husband and his family.

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Clara was happy with her decision to be a stay-at-home mother and said that she loved being a mother and taking care of people. Before she had children, Clara studied psychology and worked in Community Development before becoming a teacher, first at a high school in a traditionally black community and later at an all-girls primary school with a diverse mix of pupils. Clara disclosed that she enjoyed the diversity and wider social contact when she was working and said it was something that she missed as a full-time mother.

She also recalled feeling useful when she was working, and reminisced that she loved her students and that they loved her. However, her 'at home' life was much less stressful, which according to her, suited her personality well. Clara asserted that although she enjoyed working, deep down she knew that she actually just wanted to be a mom. Clara said she did not identify with being a feminist since she herself did not have very strong views on independence.

Participant 3: Sandy

Sandy was a vivacious and confident mother of two teenagers and a three-year-old newcomer in the family. She was an entrepreneur who, ten years prior, opened her own business after years of working for a large company in the beauty industry. The beauty salon that she founded was a first for her community, which she described as a traditional coloured neighbourhood.

Sandy stated that she loved her job, even though she worked long hours and had very little time for herself. She said that she was able to manage her time and responsibilities by being organised, and by maintaining a structured diary that contained all her appointments, events and tasks, including work, family time and socialising. She said that she relied heavily on her strong support network to get everything done. Since her husband was also a business owner and worked equally long hours, Sandy's mother, who lived with them, took care of

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most of the household tasks, including the cooking during the week. Sandy and her husband also employed a domestic worker for cleaning tasks and her mother in law, aunt, brother and grandmother of 88 years, regularly assisted in taking care of the children.

Sandy said she made an effort to spend all her free time with her family, to provide her children with her undivided focus and attention. She reported that she seldom spent time socialising with friends. She said that she sometimes felt guilty for working such long hours, especially when her clients asked her whether she ever saw her children. At the same time, she acknowledged that her job was her passion and that she was content to be at work and satisfy her clients.

Participant 4: Greta

Greta, a mother of two young children, professed that she had an ambitious and competitive streak, and a strong need to achieve and to carefully manage the details of her life. She reported that after deciding to start a family, she changed her focus from her career achievements in media and journalism to the mothering triumphs of raising two small children. While she loved bearing witness to her children's development, she said she found her time at home to be extremely challenging.

For the first time in her life Greta reportedly suffered from depressive symptoms, so that she was urged to seek psychological help. She received both pharmacological and psychotherapeutic treatment for her depression. For Greta, the transition to motherhood exposed the weaknesses in her relationship with her husband, as well as her need for encouragement and validation outside of her marriage that she used to get when she worked, but lacked while being a stay-at-home mother.

Greta had strong support from her parents, sister and mother-in-law who lived in the same upper middle-class suburban neighbourhood. In addition, she took great comfort in the

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role that her psychotherapist played in her life – she said that through therapy she had gained new insights into her position as a stay-at-home mother, and that it had helped her to feel much better about herself. She also joined a support group for mothers where the women enjoyed a strong camaraderie in their shared trials and tribulations of motherhood.

She described her family's role division at home as extremely unequal and conservative, unlike what she had expected when she got married. Greta reported that the decision that she be the full-time caretaker was made mainly because both Greta and her husband were raised with strong ideas of men's and women's roles in the home. Greta persisted with her decision to be a stay-at-home mother regardless of the difficulties, as she was convinced that it was best for her children's development if a parent paid attention to them full-time in the early growth phases of their lives.

Greta admitted to feeling extreme pressure to be a good mother. She said, as a mother she found it difficult to separate her own identity from those of her children. She felt that all her children's achievements (or lack thereof) reflected back onto her. In addition, she had a strong need to achieve and excel in all her tasks and stated that her accomplishments as a mother took centre stage.

Participant 5: Tammy

Tammy, who had a PhD, worked full-time as a university lecturer. She had three children of which the first two were born when Tammy and her husband lived in England. At that time, she was a stay-at-home mother working part-time on her doctorate degree. Tammy was pregnant with her third child when they moved back to South Africa. For the first year after the third baby was born she was a full-time stay-at-home mother. When the child was two years old she accepted a part-time post as a lecturer, and was promoted a year later to a full-time position at the university.

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Tammy reported that although she decided to go back to full-time employment, it was important to her that she arranged her schedule in such a way as to be able to spend the maximum amount of time with her children. She considered herself fortunate that academic work (particularly in her department), was more flexible than being employed in a corporate environment. She related that this flexibility enabled her to arrange her lectures when her children were at school, so that was able to spend some afternoons at home. She said she caught up with her administrative work during the evenings.

Tammy was resolute about the fact that she wanted to work. She reported that she was certain of this because she previously had experience of working full-time and also of being a stay-at-home mother. According to Tammy, being at home with her children full-time was the right decision at the time, however, it became tedious and frustrating. She said she enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of her working environment, in addition, she felt satisfied using her hard-earned degree and applying her knowledge.

In order to balance the domestic and childcare tasks with two full-time jobs, Tammy reported that she and her husband made use of an extended support network. The family employed a full-time domestic helper, as well as a part-time au pair to take care of the children and drive them to their various activities when Tammy was unavailable. Tammy reported that her parents in law, who lived close by, occasionally supported the children at sports events if she was unable to attend. Tammy's own mother, who lived far away, was also available to visit in situations of high stress, for instance during exam times, or when Tammy had to travel to conferences.

Participant 6: Bongi

Bongi was a gregarious twenty-five-year-old single mother of a three-year-old boy. She lived with her son, mother and two brothers. Bongi reported that her son's father was not

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involved in his upbringing. Bongi's brother, who was a policeman, provided the main financial support for the family. Bongi also earned a salary as a full-time youth facilitator at a Non-Governmental Organisation in the informal settlement in which they lived.

Bongi described her family as a modern Christian Xhosa family. While her parents were originally from a traditional village in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, Bongi said she was raised in a modern setup close to the city and stated that although she knew her cultural roots, she did not strictly follow her family's traditions and beliefs.

Bongi enjoyed her job as a facilitator, and said that working with teenagers was her passion. She reported that most mothers in her neighbourhood, even those that stayed at home, wanted to work to provide for their children, but that stable employment was hard to come by. Bongi confessed that even if she did not need the money, she would still have chosen to work, since she admitted to being afraid of becoming depressed if she had to stay at home.

According to her, being a working mother was challenging, even though it was her first choice. She reported that it was especially hard in the beginning after her child was born. Having a child at a young age, she had to relinquish many of her normal social activities. She mentioned that she also had to adapt to the fatigue of working all day and then taking care of a young child at all other hours.

Bongi said that her mother supported her in taking care of most of the household tasks, including looking after her grandson in the afternoons when he returned home from the crèche. Bongi stated that she believed that children need love and time from their mother, even more than money and material goods. Therefore, she said, she tried to spend all her time away from work with her son. She relayed that she became upset when she saw other young mothers neglecting their children to follow their own pleasure and happiness.

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Bongi said that although it was difficult to measure, she felt that she was a good mother since people kept telling her so. She was of the opinion that motherhood is a blessing and that her son was a precious gift, and that he was an inseparable part of her.

Participant 7: Linda

Linda was a stay-at-home mother of three boys and a baby girl. She was raised in England, but became a permanent resident of South Africa when she married her husband ten years ago. Linda, who trained to be a nurse, worked briefly in emergency services before she decided that it was not the right job for her. She then became a cook in a restaurant, something she said she enjoyed very much. Later, when she had her first child, Linda worked part-time as an administrator at the church where her husband was a minister. After her second child, she decided to give up paid employment to raise her children full-time.

Linda stated that she enjoyed being a mother and was mostly satisfied with her job as a nurturer. She said that she might consider going back to work when her children were older, but she admitted that she did not feel adequately qualified to do anything apart from being a mother. She shared that she missed being part of a team of people working towards the same goals, and earning her own money.

According to Linda, to watch her children develop and grow, and to witness the relationships that they built with each other, was very special. She said that although she spent most days only with her children, she never felt lonely because they were like little friends. Admittedly, one of the biggest challenges for Linda was that being a stay-at-home mother requires constant attention, and that there is never a break. Especially since she was breastfeeding again, she said she could never go anywhere without the baby.

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Linda said that there were several simple things that made her feel like a supermom: Simply being able to get everyone ready on time, or make her sick child feel better by holding him/her tight, or make her children laugh.

Participant 8: Eve

Eve was a thirty-six-year-old specialised medical professional in a state hospital. She had a daughter of just over one year old. Eve's husband was also a specialist doctor who was simultaneously studying for a further qualification. Both of them worked extended hours in addition to a long commute to get to and from work in the neighbouring city every day.

Eve reported that she spent five months at home on maternity leave before going back to work full-time. She said she found her time at home challenging. Although she was glad to spend time with her baby, she missed the mental stimulation and especially the positive feedback that she received from colleagues and seniors for being productive and effective at work. Eve reported that she started having repetitive negative thoughts while she was on maternity leave, which were exacerbated by being isolated at home for the greater part of every day.

Going back to work was always part of Eve's plan, however, while on maternity leave she became anxious about balancing the practicalities of managing her demanding job as well as being a new mother. She said she looked into possible post-sharing options at a reduced salary, but her workplace would not accommodate this. Eventually Eve confided that she had to face the choice of giving up her job completely or making arrangements to return to work. In her own words, she had to "make a mind shift" and admit to herself that she wanted to work and that it was the most "enjoyable" option for her.

Eve said she considered herself fortunate for having the support of her parents to take care of her child before and after day-care. She lamented however, that because they helped

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so much during the week, she could not rely on their support over weekends. She said this left her with limited time for herself. Even though Eve and her husband had an equal relationship in terms of task distribution, she complained that a 50/50 arrangement does not manifest in reality when a baby is involved. She admitted that she confided in her husband that she questioned whether women between the ages of 30 and 45 years could deliver the same work as men of the same age, because of the added domestic pressures on women. She confessed that she was reluctant to voice these opinions in public, since she was afraid that it might not be perceived as feminist, a term with which she generally identified.

Chapter Summary

The eight participants all gave rich and stimulating feedback on their experiences of motherhood. They provided personal accounts of their circumstances, including information on their employment backgrounds, family setup, social positions and temperament. Although these women all fell within the parameters of specific inclusion criteria, each one's account was completely unique, and reflected diverse contexts and singular responses to the conditions and circumstances of motherhood and employment. The overviews of their stories provided the backdrop against which a tapestry of themes could be embroidered with information gained from analysing the data. These themes are discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Themes: Structural, Inter- and Intrapersonal Influences

*“What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open.” – Muriel Rukeyser*

Introduction

In this chapter the four main themes and subthemes that emerged during the analysis of the data are discussed. The findings are supported by corresponding outcomes in the literature and by quotations from the participants as captured during the interviews. The aim was not to generalise the experiences and contexts of the participants to all women and mothers, but rather to validate their specific stories as important in the broader appreciation of mothers' experiences. The themes that emerged were the result of analyses of the responses of selected participants, at a particular time. Therefore, the themes cannot be considered as fixed truths or final inferences that are applicable to all mothers. Rather, the themes should be regarded as reflections on individual experiences in a specific context.

It is also important to note that these themes are the result of data analyses conducted by a single researcher. By recognising the foundations of Social Constructionism and Cybernetic Theory, which support the notion of reality as a 'multiverse' (Becvar & Becvar, 2014), the researcher acknowledges that all deductions were to some extent self-referential and that the influence of the researcher's own personal and cultural perspectives was inevitable (Baxter & Jack, 2008). It then follows that a different observer could potentially have reached dissimilar conclusions and could possibly have identified different themes.

The following table summarises the four main themes, and the dual-level subthemes contained in each, that emerged from my analyses:

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Table 4. Themes identified in analysing the data

Themes:	Subthemes A:	Subthemes B:	
1. Woman vs The World: Untangling the Tentacles of the Patriarchy	1.1. Seasons Come to be Passed on		
	1.2. The Impossible Balancing Act		
	1.3. The Uninhabitable Planet Called Work	1.3.1. Workplace Ignorance – Turning a Blind Eye on Mothers	
		1.3.2. Workplace Inflexibility – Opening a Door without Hinges	
		1.3.3. The Spiralling Cost of Finding a Middle Ground	
		1.3.4. Workplace Equality – Same Same but Different	
	1.4. At Home: Superheroes with Invisible Superpowers	1.4.1. Life (Partner) Support	
		1.4.2. Money Money Money	
		1.4.3. Second amongst Equals – The Struggle for Household Parity	
	2. Woman vs Women: Tea with an Elephant in the Room	2.1. When Choice Equals Judgement	
2.2. I Don't Judge, But...			
2.3. Hot Topics, Cool Affect			
2.4. In Your Facebook			
3. Woman vs The Self: The Voices in my Head	3.1. Measuring Mothers		
	3.2. The Impossible Balancing Act		
	3.3. Tailoring a New Identity		
	3.4. The Scramble for Self-Worth		
	3.5. The Burden of Guilt		
	3.6. Self-Care or Self-Sacrifice?		
4. The Breast of Life: A Stone in the Pond	4.1. Feeding with Meaning		

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In analysing the data, the emerging themes progressed from a wide to narrow focus. The widest level, which relates to societal influences, involves the mothers' socio-cultural circumstances. The second level illuminated the interpersonal relationships, particularly between mothers. And the closest level revealed mothers' intrapersonal experiences and the effects of inner dialogue on their psyches. These levels illustrated the extent to which employment choices affect mothers, and how these effects permeate all aspects of their lives. The final theme, which focussed on a single aspect of motherhood, namely breastfeeding, illustrated the factors uncovered in the other themes as they apply to everyday reality. The four themes and their dual-level subthemes are forthwith discussed in detail.

Theme 1: Woman vs The World: Untangling the Tentacles of the Patriarchy

*The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom.*

– Maya Angelou

During my conversations with the eight mothers about their experiences surrounding employment choices (whether to stay at home or continue working after having children), it became evident that all participants experienced at least some tension in their choice, and in exercising that choice. In some cases, the tension was rather severe, to the extent that it impacted on their mental health and relationships. These stresses have their origins in interpersonal and intrapersonal interactions as well as in structural organisations of society. *Theme 1* relates to the structural origin of the tensions that these mothers experienced

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regarding their employment choices, and the pervasive, however obscured, influence of patriarchy on their lives.

Modern industrial society places foremost importance on characteristics such as competition, profitability, quantifiability and effectivity. The ability to earn money and prove your worth in competing against others in your field is a common way for adults to claim a stake in the patriarchal hierarchy. This adheres to the distinction between masculine and feminine roles in society, which favours the masculine (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). The tasks and skills required to be a mother or a nurturer, which unfortunately seldom fit within the bounds of societal achievement, are not easy to measure and are not financially lucrative. These outcomes frequently leave mothers feeling that their impact on society is not respected (Schultheiss, 2009). With the nurturing tasks of motherhood enjoying very little status in a patriarchal society, it is no wonder then that, where possible, women justify their lifestyle choices in terms of financial reasons or in measurable costs and contributions. This position was highlighted in the quote from Eve:

Eve: "But in my head I almost justified it that I have to work for financial reasons. And then my mother one day told me you don't have to work, your husband is a doctor, you will not... so now you must perhaps change your mind, make a mind-shift, that you just want to work."

Some women justified their choice to work by saying that providing for their children financially is a form of good mothering. Or that they owe it to their parents, or to society, in order to show that their hard-earned and expensive educations did not go to waste. The inability to express their worth in these terms carries a heavy cost on their self-esteem, as expressed by Greta:

Greta: "I myself look down upon me because I'm a stay-at-home mother. Because I feel that I don't use my brain at all. Or that I don't use it enough. And I feel extremely guilty

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towards my parents because they paid for my education, and because of my own wishes for myself as a young woman when I just started a career. I thought that one day I will not only be a magazine editor, but a CEO. And I feel very bad that it didn't, that I didn't accomplish this.

Greta's masculine centred world-view of her failure to achieve her dreams of career success when she chose to focus on mothering, relates to Kretzchmar's (1995) description of patriarchal oppression as androcentrism, where female ideals are devalued and women are prohibited to define their own ideas of success outside the masculine norm. The notion that employment choices for mothers (independent of what their eventual decisions are) hold certain personal sacrifices and losses, is something that all the participants considered inevitable. This parallels findings that most mothering ideologies require women to put their own aspirations aside for their families (Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009), and that social prejudice towards mothers who choose to work, still persists today (Borelli et al., 2017; Romito, 1997).

The view that the 'vessel' of their personal resources could hold only so much, and that, from that supply, it was impossible to fill the equally large vessels of home and work to the brim (and also have something left over for themselves), was a commonly shared assessment by the participants. Their views correspond with the outcomes of the much-researched topic of finding *work-life balance*, and societal pressure to be accomplished in all areas, including family, career and leisure (Stansfield et al., 2013). Even though all participants bemoaned the near impossibility of finding such a balance (refer to the subtheme, *The Impossible Balancing Act*), they seldomly expressed the expectation that change could, or should, come from a structural or societal level. Instead, an acceptance of the status quo was often voiced as a forbearance that this 'season' too shall pass. This corresponds to

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Hunnicutt's (2009) notion that the workings of patriarchy in social structures are often obscured and therefore ignored or denied.

From the interviews it was clear that the participants mostly blamed themselves for their burden and failings in balancing work and family life, and sometimes they deflected the criticism onto other women who make choices that differ from their own (this is elaborated on in the second and third themes). However, they seldom looked at the system, of which they were a part and in which they actively participated, for potential change. In the few instances when the women commented on structural restrictions, which make a feasible balance between family and work impossible, they did so almost as an after-thought or insinuated that their suggestions would not be heard. This once again mirrors Hunnicutt's (2009) view that patriarchy is so pervasive that even structural change might not be enough to deplete its effect. It follows then that even if women do find a way to achieve in the masculine sphere, it might be detrimental to their overall status and circumstances, since their feminine merits, which they are also expected to achieve, are often recognised by a fully immersive mothering style (Crowley, 2015; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017), which is impossible to accomplish when also being employed.

None of the participants acknowledged that their choices and/or toleration of unequal conventions might contribute to preserving the system that causes them so much tension. These views bring to mind Hunnicutt's position that the patriarchal system is maintained by all involved, since there are privileges and costs that both benefit and handicap men and women (2009). The complicated dynamic of patriarchal conventions, that are upheld by men and women, is powerfully illustrated in conversations that women have about their employment choices, as in the examples of Clara and Apple:

Clara: "Their [companies'] focus is to make money... and now obviously women are going to be more of a burden when they fall pregnant... They can't bring their child to

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work... (pause) Or they should make it equal so that it's not just on the mother. In a lot of countries, they give the father equal leave so maybe give the mother two months and the father two months so that everybody is on the same level playing field. But now everything's on the mother. And it's a woman's burden. Yes, maybe that would level it. Then again, I know women get paid less of a salary than a man for the same position, so maybe that is why they must just suck it up when a woman has to go on maternity leave, because she was getting paid less than the man who did the same work in that position anyway. So, otherwise they must make everything equal so that women get the same salary for the same work, same maternity leave, paternity leave, I don't know if that will help, I don't know."

Apple: "But I think in strict corporate and strict professional environments there is very little understanding and little grace with each other. Because the competition is so fierce and because it is so cut-throat. Uhm, and in that respect we as women are often each others' worst enemy. So, the men just have no idea, but the women who know, and the women who are supposed to understand must probably do more pioneering work."

Modern society is generally open to women who want to work and contribute profitably and professionally to the economic arena. Large shifts in that regard have been made in recent decades (Zimmerman et al., 2008). But the movement towards equal responsibility in the domestic sphere has barely developed, with most of the burden of household and childcare tasks still falling on women (McRobbie, 2013). Furthermore, the status of domestic work remains dismally low (Schultheiss, 2009). The participants in this study reported that women are supposed to balance the house work on a knife's edge, while wearing an invisibility cloak for their efforts, and are then expected to dash off to work just as hard as men, on a planet that is not inhabitable for mothers. In the following subthemes these tentacles of patriarchal influence on the mothers' experiences are further untangled.

Subtheme 1.1: Seasons Come to be Passed on

*"Motherhood is the strangest thing;
it can be like being one's own Trojan horse."
– Rebecca West*

The participants in this study often pacified their discomfort, which resulted from their struggles related to motherhood, by asserting that it was a 'season' that would pass. And while children grow up and circumstances relating to motherhood are constantly in flux, the seasons pass just to be repeated in the next generation. The pattern in which these 'seasons' manifest, just as in the climatic seasons, is often a recurring episode in families and in society. All but two of the participants followed the example of their mothers' employment choices when starting a family, and all participants said that their decision was influenced by the setup of their family of origin or that of their husband's. As Apple indicated:

Apple: "My mother was an at-home mother when we were little. They say that you often do what your mother did. And I can absolutely say that it is the case with me. Some days I'm shocked about the fact that it is so. It was interesting for me to realise that the decisions that we make is so strongly grounded in our picture of how things should be, which is formed by the people in our lives, like our mother."

Apple's report relates to the trend of pronatalism, which promotes the progression to parenthood in adult development as a social norm, remains a powerful sociocultural force (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016). The example of her own childhood home as well as her husband's, where both families had stay-at-home mothers, also influenced Greta's decision. Greta persisted with her choice to be a stay-at-home mother, regardless of the difficulties, because she was convinced that it was in the best interests of her children's development in the early growth phases.

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Linda also pointed out that having her mother around, when she was a child, influenced her decision to be a stay-at-home mother. Even though her mother had to work to supplement the family's income, she chose employment, such as au pair work, that she could do from home, or where she could take her two children with her. Linda's husband also comes from a family where the mother chose a working arrangement that could accommodate her need to be with her five children – she opened her own playschool.

These mothers' experiences of *mother see, mother do*, correspond with the findings that mothers are the first and most influential agents in the gender socialisation in their children (Rittenour, 2014). Darity's opinion, which affirms that patriarchal structures are maintained through socialisation and familial values and practices, was also reinforced (2008).

Following familiar historical patterns however, is not always congruent with the practicalities of women's current realities. Optimal circumstances for financial provision and emotional nurturing are some of the main factors to consider for an effective family setup. So, in past generations, it would have made sense, when employment and educational equality between men and women were less prevalent, that the women stay at home and the men go to work, since men had a better chance of providing financially. Often, however, these patterns persist, and in practice, childcare is still mostly associated with women regardless of her ability to earn money (McRobbie, 2013). The employment wheel has largely turned and the numbers of women in executive positions have also been rising, (Kosakowska-Berezecka & Safdar, 2015). However, although a woman may have the potential to earn more than her husband, in reality the notion of breaking with tradition is often relegated as can be seen in the case of Greta:

Greta: "Yes, despite the fact that I have better educational qualifications than my husband, and maybe I would have been able to get further than him in my career, there was

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never even a question about it. Once I, as a joke, suggested to my husband that he could just as well do it [stay at home], and he glared at me, he was very upset with me, he really, he couldn't even. He couldn't even think about it."

Whether the participants experienced the repeating seasons of motherhood as a phenomenon that persists across generations, or as a struggle to cope with the challenges of motherhood as four seasons in one day, it is clear that the meteorology of motherhood is extremely complicated, as is the balancing act of juggling all related expectations.

Subtheme 1.2: The Impossible Balancing Act

*"Motherhood is a Sisyphean task. You finish sewing one seam shut, and another rips open. I have come to believe that this life I'm wearing will never really fit."
– Jodi Picoult*

During the interviews, the participants all stated that they had, on a practical level, a great deal on their plates and had to balance their time and resources between children, work, and home. In addition, on an emotional level, they felt that it required mental acrobatics to make peace with their decisions and circumstances. In staying with a familiar family metaphor, an additional burden on these mothers was that nobody seemed to notice their struggles and that they did not get to 'eat any of the food on their plates'.

This echoes Steiner and Bronstein's (2017) findings that women in modern society are simply expected to do and have it all, from being a nurturer to being sexually attractive and successful in their careers. Not only is there a lot on their plate, but they must balance many plates at once, and the inability to balance it all carries a hefty cost.

Whether it is the practical and emotional costs of leaving a new baby with a caretaker in order to go back to work, or the disregard for the work that stay-at-home mothers do and the emotional effects thereof on their psyches, these matters do not seem to register on the

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scoreboard of society. The costs of their decisions, as reflected in the following statement by Eve, endorse the findings of Gross (1998) that mothers experience a sense of defeat in realising that it is unattainable to optimally achieve in both intensive mothering and professional ambitions:

Eve: "The first night before I had to go back to work, I totally had a panic attack. I cried and told my husband, I can't do this. So, after the first day I also sat at home and cried for an hour. It was a huge switch to make. Because you really feel like you are abandoning the baby, because it is such a small little baby."

The sum also does not add up for women who choose mothering as their primary vocation and often doubt the value of their choices, since, as Schultheiss pointed out, society does not recognise motherhood as a legitimate profession (2009). As Linda mentioned:

Linda: "Maybe it's just the sense of, of worth maybe. Like you want to feel you are doing something worthwhile, and you forget that actually raising little people is worthwhile. That you are the main influence in their life and you shape them and their thinking."

Johnston and Swanson (2007) urged that the binary position between the status of mothering and paid work is a socially constructed phenomenon, and that the two positions are not inherently exclusive. However, according to the participants, the weight and costs of the decision to stay at home or to go back to work are evidently calculated on two distinct scales. Eve, for example, had strong opinions of women who give up their medical careers to raise their children full-time. She felt that the enormous investment of the state to educate these women in order for them to help many people in society might be wasted if they stay at home and only pay attention to her own children.

The principles for success do not seem to add up if (a) a gainfully employed mother 'misses out' on being a fully invested mother, or (b) a stay-at-home mother 'misses out' on

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being successful in the workplace. This unattainability of balancing all the plates at once, which is particularly pronounced in the sphere of work, is discussed in the next subtheme.

Subtheme 1.3: The Uninhabitable Planet Called Work

“If women are expected to do the same work as men, we must teach them the same things.” – Plato

The women in this study all had a personal history of full-time employment. Half of them chose to go back to work after having children and the other half chose to be stay-at-home mothers. All except one of the stay-at-home mothers said that they would have continued working, or would have gone back sooner, had the workplace conditions been more accommodating for the needs and responsibilities of mothers. Since childcare is still mainly the domain of women (McRobbie, 2013), it follows that workplace inflexibilities, in terms of family responsibilities, may deter women from entering or remaining in the economic sector after having children. The structuralist view of gender in a patriarchal system, which is upheld by these conventions, reinforces the notion that gender divisions influence resource distribution and institutional organisation (Hunnicut, 2009; Swan et al., 2018). So, whether members of society agree on the cause and legitimacy of the origins and existence of patriarchy, or whether they indeed consider it, the effects of patriarchal structuralism nevertheless reverberate in the day to day realities of individuals such as the mothers included in this study.

The mothers who chose to return to work, reported that being away from their children and attempting to be as productive at work as before they had children caused them mental stress. These reports correspond with the study findings of Lee et al. (2013) that balancing work and home commitments often leads to stress symptoms and even depression. As illustrated in the words of Bongi and Eve:

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Bongi: "I know how painful it is to leave your child behind when you have to leave home to work, and the child is crying for you."

Eve: "And everybody always tells you that you will feel divided, and that you always feel guilty, people always tell you that. And you can understand that academically, but you cannot really understand it until you have to do it."

Often the mothers, in this study, chose types of employment that would mitigate the difficulties of balancing work and motherhood to an extent, but they all admitted that there is no ideal arrangement. They reported that the burden of managing both work and family life was heavily skewed in the direction of mothers and away from workplaces. Their experiences reflected traditional mothering ideologies (which regard alternatives to traditional gender roles as unfeasible or morally problematic) that require women to put aside their own aspirations and needs for their children and family (Gross, 1998; Heath, 2013).

In many cases the participants relayed that workplaces are ignorant of, or indifferent to, the difficulties that mothers face. It then follows that institutions that fail to provide flexibility in the working arena, may force some of the women out of the workforce. The participants also protested that mothers and fathers certainly do not 'breathe the same office air'. These matters are explicated further in the following sections on workplace ignorance, inflexibility and inequality.

Subtheme 1.3.1: Workplace Ignorance – Turning a Blind Eye on Mothers

Sometimes practical implications of a job may make it impossible for new mothers to return to employment and perform the same tasks as they did before having children. Oftentimes participants described that even if they wanted to go back to work, they would not have been able to perform the same duties as before. They claimed that their workplaces were

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seemingly ignorant of the possible restrictions of being a new mother. As in Greta's experience:

Greta: "So, it was interesting for me that while I was pregnant before my colleagues knew that I would be going away, it wasn't an issue for them that I was pregnant. There were no conversations [about] it at all, about whether my job would change after I have children. One thing that was very important for me in my job, was that I travelled a lot. And after I had children I would not at all have been prepared to travel. And that was interesting for me – my boss never tried to have a conversation with me about the possibility that I would perhaps not be willing to travel any more for my job. They just accepted that I would still be willing to travel."

Apple, a qualified lawyer, said that corporate and strict professional environments also show little understanding and are ignorant of the challenges that women face when becoming mothers. She admitted that she was guilty of the same ignorance before she had children of her own.

Apple: "My problem when I go back is that they expect twelve-hour days. Everyone else works twelve-hour days. And I cannot do twelve-hour days again."

These experiences play out against the backdrop of a steady increase of South African women in the workforce who take on leadership positions and perform traditional male-directed jobs, which is in part a result of post-apartheid legislation and affirmative action policies (Kosakowska-Berezecka & Safdar, 2015). But while the number of women in managerial and executive positions has been rising, the numbers are still regarded as unsatisfactory. The reasons for this being the "profound yet covert effect of socially constructed norms and stereotypes" that still permeate organisational culture (Noback et al. cited in Kosakowska-Berezecka & Safdar, 2015, p. 341) and prevent some women from joining the workforce.

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Some women do find a way to go back to the same employment as before, regardless of employer ignorance about their new mothering responsibilities, which is evident even in settings where teaching healthy mothering practices is part of the job. Eve for example, who worked in a state hospital that publicly advocates breastfeeding, spoke of some of her colleagues' discomfort and even disgust of women who have to take time (and refrigerator space) to express breastmilk at work. She admitted that before she went back to work she was extremely doubtful and anxious that she would not be able to manage her new mothering responsibilities at work, and therefore seriously considered resigning. Her experience corresponds to findings that service system limitations (i.e. the organisational services that satisfy the needs, wants and aspirations of the employees) could be one of the primary obstacles to participation in paid employment (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2011). Workplaces often turn a blind eye towards the challenges that mothers face, even if solutions are presented that could lighten their load. The influence of workplace inflexibility is discussed next in more detail.

Subtheme 1.3.2: Workplace Inflexibility – Opening a Door without Hinges

New mothers cannot readily assume that their places of work will accommodate the responsibilities and challenges that accompany their new roles. The women in this study reported that even if women propose solutions, it is often like trying to open a door that has no hinges. Women are left to scramble for other alternatives if they cannot find a way to fit the mould of traditional work cultures, or in some cases, are forced to opt out of employment entirely. This reflects Bailey's stance that businesses and workplaces are still largely organised around male centred frameworks where men are seen as the norm and women are expected to adapt by suppressing or concealing their *otherness* in order to fit in (1999).

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Women consider themselves fortunate if they do succeed to find some sort of balance within existing employment structures, although it is seldom an ideal solution.

In Tammy's case, she managed to design her career path around a professional direction that allowed her enough freedom to find an adequate balance between work and family. She found this direction in academia, however, there were limits to the flexibility. In her own words:

Tammy: "And I also think that it influenced my decision between corporate and academics. Because before I had kids I always worked corporate, and it was good, but I ticked that box and I know that you just don't have the flexibility there that you have in academics. There isn't another... there are few other careers where you enjoy that kind of flexibility..."

"There are certain things that ... when I have classes... I can't get off from a class... My son had a rugby game sometime last week and it was on a different afternoon as normally. I chose my classes in such a way that it is on a Wednesday afternoon when there are no rugby games and now suddenly they had one last week. And so maybe in a corporate environment I would have been able to take off that afternoon, but I can't cancel a class with 200 students."

When asked what practical suggestions participants could think of that would make workplaces more inhabitable for mothers, the ideas were forthcoming. The suggestions ranged from changes in leave policy to allow parents to stay at home when their children were sick, to options of split positions where two people share the workload and salary, to flexitime to work at more convenient hours, or the option to work from home. Consider the comments from Eve:

Eve: "But then of course when I was on maternity leave I got really tense about how I would manage it all. And then I considered the option to share my post with someone, where

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you earn half the salary and work half your hours, I explored this all, and sent a lot of emails, you know, to my boss to ask what are my options. Because I didn't think I would be able to cope. And because I'm such a planner, and controlling type person, you know, I pre-empted it... So, I think that idea of flexitime is something that can be supported, and posts that can be shared, because there isn't, there isn't a nice setup for us."

Families, with young children, face unique challenges with regards to available resources, including finances, time and energy. According to Erickson et al. (2010), these challenges could result in increased conflict at home and at work if flexibility with regards to the tasks at hand are not achieved. To avoid these conflicts of interest, some women choose to opt out of employment. The participants oftentimes reported that they themselves, or other women that they knew, would have gone back to work more readily had it been easier for them to re-enter the job market. Apple and Linda expressed frustration with this situation:

Apple: "That is why I say, there was so much investment to get someone to article, the investment of the law community in me to which I am not giving back now because there isn't a space for me to give back now."

Linda: "I think I would have known a lot less women who worked for themselves, who felt like they had to start a business or do something to earn extra cash so that they could still support the family. Uhm yeah, then they would probably work in an office if it was more flexible. I think there is just a lot less, I don't know, there is less flexible work. You are kind of forced to fit a mould."

When women are forced to fit into an employment mould that hinders their goals and responsibilities at home, they are either forced to opt out of employment or to find alternatives (e.g. part-time positions) that provide a closer match to their circumstances. These concessions come at a high price, and as will be seen in the following section, the costs

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of the unequal burden between men and women of balancing home and family, are often passed on to a wider social circle.

Subtheme 1.3.3: The Spiralling Cost of Finding a Middle Ground

A number of studies have shown that mothers, who have to work for financial reasons, often point out that they would have stayed at home if they could have afforded it (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). Some studies have also found that many stay-at-home mothers would have chosen to continue working if conditions at work were more favourable in accommodating their new responsibilities (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Milkie et al., 2016; Stone, 2007). Many mothers try their best to negotiate the middle ground, often, however, with hidden costs, especially for those lower down in the patriarchal hierarchy.

The inflexibility of workplaces to accommodate the needs and responsibilities of mothers or to encourage men to share these responsibilities, in order to uphold the historically masculine working arrangements, often disperses the burden of providing support to other areas of society. Eve reported that, at her place of work, taking the maximum legal amount of maternity leave or not volunteering to work overtime, were heavily frowned upon by her employers, and she had to rely on the support of her parents to take care of her small baby after day-care hours.

Tammy explained that arranging flexibility in her job, was only possible because employing additional help at home is relatively affordable in South Africa. When she lived in the UK, many mothers she knew quit their jobs, since childcare, especially if one has more than one child, is often more expensive than one's salary. When access to support is dependent on finances, inequality of gender intersects with class, and the weight of patriarchal inequity is passed down, often to mothers at lower income levels (Maquebela, 2016) instead of the problem being solved in the workplace.

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The difficulties of inflexibility in the working sphere, are therefore exacerbated for women who belong to a lower economic class when they have to adhere to a masculine work culture that expects them to work long, inflexible hours. This is further testimony to the concept of ‘intersectionality’, as described by bell hooks (2000), which refers to the overlap of influences connected to factors such as race, class and gender. As a consequence, women often experience more tension at work than men in finding a balance between employment and family responsibilities. And, women who belong to a lower economic class are disadvantaged even more, since low wage work is usually the least flexible.

Being a business owner herself, Sandy recognised that it is difficult to accommodate working mothers in a trade environment. She relayed the circumstances of one of her employees who did not have family support at home and could not afford any form of childcare. The plight of Sandy’s employee illustrates the stress that low income women experience when they have no choice but to work long hours and suffer inadequate support to take care of their families. So, by employing someone to relieve Sandy’s (and most of the other participants’) pressure in balancing work and motherhood, instead of eliminating the stress, it was merely shifted downward on the class scale (Maqubela, 2016; Radey & McWey, 2019).

Sandy expressed her doubt as to whether it was indeed possible to have a mother-friendly work setup, since the work needs to be done, and mothers’ external priorities may indeed hamper their work performance. The division between work and home responsibilities is still mainly a problem that befalls women (Riordan & Louw-Potgieter, 2011), even if progressive workplaces maintain that they adhere to modern rules of equality. This issue of equality is considered in the following section.

Subtheme 1.3.4: Workplace Equality – Same Same but Different

The participants reported that although, on paper, men and women seem to be treated equally in the workplace, the experiences of the sexes on the office floors are often completely different. The participants mused that men are perhaps disadvantaged as they have fewer opportunities than women to acknowledge their family lives in conversations at the workplace. Women, on the other hand, are denigrated for having too many family responsibilities that impose on their work. As indicated by Greta:

Greta: “For the men it was just like, you are a man, you are here now. They were not even aware that they had lives outside the workspace. And for the women... for the women there was a bigger space available to talk about their children and the fact that they have a life outside of work. But it was also looked down upon, because they have to, they want to, go home earlier, for example.”

For a stay-at-home mother such as Greta, who struggled with her self-esteem, the respected position of the working man may seem idyllic, which was declaredly different from how she viewed the position of the stay-at-home mother. In her own words:

Greta: “I think they [men] succeed in having a much more balanced view, where their self-fulfilment does not depend so much on the children. And... But mainly because of the fact that they work. In my milieu all the men work. And through their careers they can create a lot of value in themselves.”

Although a disproportionate weight of family responsibilities usually falls on women (Press, 2012), Sandy noticed from her clients’ feedback that the weights were slowly shifting:

Sandy: “You know, I talk to many clients, I have woman clients and men clients, and it sounds to me like more and more the man also takes responsibility, because it’s not always

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only the woman that stays at home for the sick child any more. The husband also stays at home and then she can go to work. Which is very new. It is a very modern man."

The data revealed that the participants were mostly eager to contribute to the formal job sector. However, they were not willing to do so if it would impact negatively on their family life. They therefore followed the prevalent trend of pronatalism that prescribes parenthood as a natural progression in adulthood (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016) and, in most cases, adhered to the intensive mothering principle, whereby a mother is expected to provide optimal stimulation and attention to her children (Crowley, 2015; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017).

Tammy said that her choice to not miss out on important events in her children's lives did have a detrimental effect on her career growth. Even though she could manage all her teaching and administrative responsibilities, there was little time left to spend on research output which is an important factor, in academia, when being considered for promotions. Tammy made a conscious choice to relinquish her ambition to progress as far as she could have in her career, in order to prioritise her family and the demands of being the primary caregiver.

Eve also considered the costs and benefits of maternal employment in the medical industry. She echoed the sentiments of Boyd who posited that productivity can be boosted if mothers are confident that their children are receiving quality care (2012). Eve believed that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. However, she thought that different social expectations for men and women force women out of the medical profession. She deemed, therefore, that fewer women should be admitted as medical students (women usually comprising the majority of intakes), since so many women will opt out later. Eve was reluctant to publicly voice her opinions, since she was afraid that it would not be perceived as very feminist. However, she believed that women are different from men and perhaps people

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should “face it and live with it”. Note that Eve did not consider that the social expectations that create a situation that hinder women to persevere in their careers, be changed.

The participants disagreed on the boundaries of their role as mothers (discussed in the next theme, *Woman vs Women*). They were, however, all partial to finding a better balance between their life at home and in society. While the topic of *Work* was discussed above, the other side of this spinning coin, *Home*, is examined in the next section. But, as Greta pointed out, for a mother the connection between work and home is never completely severed:

Greta: “My ideal would be if all the companies in the world’s CEOs are woman and uhm... the majority of management of companies in the world are made up of women. Because then they would make the circumstances at work better to make space for family life as well. And that would filter down to the houses. Then in households, there will also be made more space for a better balance where women don’t slave themselves to raise good children and determine their own value by the function of raising children.”

Subtheme 1.4: At Home: Superheroes with Invisible Superpowers

“Housekeeping, the art of the infinite, is no game for amateurs.”
– Ursula K. Le Guin

“Men doing more, however, is not the same thing as men doing enough.”
– Jessica Valenti

Systemic inequality does not only hide away in the backstreets of society or in the tea kitchens at the office. Often the tentacles of the patriarchy creep and crawl their way into mothers’ most intimate spaces, and into the habits and attitudes that add tension to their lives at home. It became apparent from the mothers’ feedback that the privilege to have a choice to either continue to work or to stay at home does not safeguard them from tensions surrounding their choices. Indeed, they often had to grapple with issues of inequality, disrespect, guilt or

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feeling undervalued for their contributions at home. These concerns, which have far reaching effects on the emotional well-being of the women, correspond with the findings of Hartley et al. (1992) who found that conditions of support and structure at home influence women's health equal to, or more than, that of employment status. These psychological effects are further discussed in the third theme, *Woman vs The Self*.

The findings of Johnston and Swanson (2007) concluded that most mothers feel that they lack social support for their maternal position and that support is often glaringly absent at home. A lack of support was also echoed in the feedback from many of the participants. Three issues that exacerbate tensions in the home, are discussed next: First, the support that women receive from their partners for their choices and the division of domestic responsibilities. Second, the influence of financial matters, and last the sticky fingerprints of inequality found in situations where household parity is actively sought.

Subtheme 1.4.1: Life (Partner) Support

In modern marriages, couples are free to marry whomever they choose, and the norm is to find someone who is worthy to be a principal advocate and pillar of support for life. In practice however, this does not always happen, as was revealed by the participants' accounts. The tensions that the women experience, when they become mothers, frequently originate in their struggles to communicate and defend their worth and contributions to their life partner. This is illustrated by the experiences of Apple and Greta:

Apple: "I have to fight so hard to still have a voice with these extremely traditional roles in which we have fallen. And I think men, maybe it's printed in their DNA, they so easily go into these patriarchal roles. I have to often go and get John out of it and remind him, remember again who I am, remember who you are married to, remember that these

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things are not forced down on me, it is not because I can't do anything else, these things are my choice. I can choose differently tomorrow if I want to."

Greta: "My life feels to me completely out of balance, it is skewed to the side of nurturer, child raiser. And then also, not really society, but because I feel that my relationship with my life partner, the person with whom I share this experience, is not one of respect. He does not have as much respect for me as I think he should have."

While Sandy, on the other hand, was satisfied with her domestic arrangement, there was a time when she did not feel supported. Sandy had her first children when she was very young and at that time the nuclear family was living on their own. She always knew that she wanted to keep on working after having children, but starting a new business and balancing domestic responsibilities and work became stressful and resulted in a strained marital relationship. The conflict at home could not be resolved without the help of a professional counsellor, particularly about matters where there was a break with traditional family patterns:

Sandy: "And my husband's mother is also a housewife, so he isn't used to a wife like me that doesn't [stay at home]. It was a big adjustment for him in the beginning. Especially when I started my own business. But we got counselling for it. Because it was quite a big adjustment. I couldn't do what a housewife does. Impossible."

Sandy said that with the help of a therapist her husband began to understand that they were in the same position and they started sharing all the domestic tasks equally. In effect, Sandy and her husband began to de-gender caretaking work and rectify the characteristic unbalanced distribution of care between men and women, which according to care-feminism is a socially fabricated aspect of the patriarchy (Bachiochi, 2016).

Greta illustrated a situation in which such de-gendering of roles did not take place and associated her circumstances with a distressing feeling of disillusionment. She described the

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division of roles at home as extremely unequal and conservative, unlike what she had expected it would be when they first got married. Apart from some garden work and “babysitting” their children now and then, her husband did not take part in any of the domestic chores.

Sandy relayed that this was also a common complaint amongst her clients. She said that they often complained about their life problems to her, and that some women told her that their husbands expected them to do everything at home, even though both worked outside the home. She reported that some women became depressed because their responsibilities were just too overwhelming. However, they often did not complain or insist that things change. This tallies with findings that balancing work and home commitments can add to severe stress symptoms and even depression (Hyde et al., 1995; Lee et al., 2013) and burnout (Hill et al., 2008; Kulik, 2010).

Life partner support for mothers can take on many forms, whether it is by sharing a workload, offering a sympathetic and understanding ear, or by providing financially. As will be seen in the next section, money however, is often a double-edged bread knife, which, while being great for bread, is often too blunt to cut through inequalities at home.

Subtheme 1.4.2: Money Money Money

Issues relating to money caused strife and tension at home for many of the participants. Most of them adhered to the wider trend that men should still be the predominant breadwinners in heterosexual households (Sallee, 2008), and even in dual income homes childcare is mostly considered to be the female’s responsibility (McRobbie, 2013). The working mothers in this study stated that earning their own money provided them with a sense of independence and worth in society and at home. The stay-at-home mothers, however, struggled with the notion that the one who holds the purse also holds the power.

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Both Apple and Greta disclosed that it was a joint decision between husband and wife that they would resign from their high paid jobs in order to take care of the children. Once becoming stay-at-home mothers, the decision-making, however, shifted towards the husband, justified by the fact that he was the one earning money for the family. Their situations are congruent with the pervasive assumptions that positions of power in society is the domain of men, while a woman's place is at home mothering her children (Maqubela, 2016). These notions, which further reflect institutionalised gender stereotypes, suggest that masculine traits are superior to feminine traits, thus relinquishing males from caregiving roles that are typically regarded as a female responsibility (Carroll & Campbell, 2008). The mothers' experiences, which can be seen as an exemplar of patriarchy at work, demonstrate the unequal distribution of economic and social power towards women, who are considered inferior because of their gender (Russell, 1999).

Apple reported that she did not accept this power imbalance without resistance. However, since the perception of the differences in value of what a full-time mother contributes to the family, compared to financial support provided by the father, is so engrained, she felt as if she had lost the battle against inequality:

Apple: "...and the power struggle in your marriage because you don't contribute financially to the family unit... You do contribute in other ways, but it is not financially. It is a great challenge in your marriage because it creates a power struggle and power struggles are always linked to finances for some reason. So, at the moment we are not necessarily equals. Although I fight very hard for it, it is also a big source of conflict, because I regularly have to say I do contribute, I do contribute, not financially, and you cannot see what I do, but I do contribute."

Greta's experience was linked to a feeling of being disrespected in her role as a full-time mother. She said that her husband did not respect her as much as he did when she was

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successfully working and earning her own money. Her example illustrates once again the perceived difference in value between mothering tasks and undertakings that are linked to monetary gain. It also points to the phenomenon of androcentrism, which refers to a dominating male centred worldview that “devalues and excludes female perceptions, critique and contributions” (Kretzchmar, 1995, p. 150), as well as a form of internal oppression, whereby the oppressed begin to believe that they are somehow inferior.

The inequality in her domestic setting and her dependency on her husband distressed Greta. The skewed perceptions of the importance of the contributions that mothers and fathers make towards the family household, is what prompted care-feminists to envision a society where mothers and caretakers are financially compensated by the state, thus reducing the opportunities for exploitation of unpaid caretaking based on gendered responsibilities (Bachiochi, 2016; Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009).

When asked what their opinions were of the suggestion of paid mothering work, the participants all reacted positively towards the notion that mothering tasks receive more recognition. However, they lamented that paid mothering would not be practical in a country such as South Africa as the economic situation of the state would not be able to afford such compensation. Bonggi pointed out that it would not be feasible for mothers to expect financial support from the government, if fathers did not even take responsibility for their own children. She said that being a single parent living with her mother and brother, was financially taxing. It was a common occurrence that the men in her community were rarely involved in childrearing, and she herself could not rely on paternal support:

Bonggi: “Because most of our kids they don’t have fathers. Even though they have fathers, their father is like... after the baby... the child won’t have a father.”

Money can be a simple indication of how the abacus of patriarchy is weighted in a family, since the work of breadwinners is often regarded as more important than that of

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caregivers (Reid, 2018). Even when the purse is divided equally, the ledger of equality does not always add up, as illustrated in the next section.

Subtheme 1.4.3. Second amongst Equals – The Struggle for Household Parity

The inability of women to uplift the status of their mothering tasks to the same level as that of financial contributions to the household, reiterates that a patriarchal system is characterised by dualism, where oppositional, rather than complementary thinking is favoured (Kirkley, 2000; Swan, et al., 2018). Some of the participants reported that in their family there was a conscious effort to disengage from such dualism and rather balance the distribution of responsibilities and status between the family members, regardless of gender. However, even in the homes where there were conscious efforts towards greater equality, for instance where both parents worked and shared the household tasks, the participants reported that equality was not always possible to uphold. For example, as illustrated by Tammy and Eve:

Tammy: “So, it is very different for me than it is for him, to say, listen I’m going away for a week, and then you pack your bags and say goodbye. For a mother it is very different... There are examples where it is the father, but mostly, I don’t know why it is that way around, whether by choice or social construct, but it is usually the mother that knows who likes peanut butter, and who doesn’t like peanut butter, and who has to be where, which friend has a birthday, and so on.”

Eve: “So, what’s nice for me is that my husband is one hundred percent a 50/50 kind of guy. It’s not at all as if we apply any specific gender roles. It is something that of course I knew from the beginning, and I like it... [but] she [the baby] just wants to sit with me. So, this is a challenge. Because I want to give her to him 50% of the time, because it is rather fair,

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and that is how we do all the other things.... It doesn't work so well with a child, that 50/50 thing."

On the ladder of equality at home, it seems that only one can get to the top first, and usually the mother is the second amongst 'equals'. While traditional stereotypes are broken down to such an extent that even fathers can now be "mothers" in modern family households (Bachiochi, 2016, p. 40), it seems as if it is difficult for mothers to shift upwards towards the position of 'fathers'. This once again mirrors Hunnicutt (2009) in the position that patriarchy is so pervasive that even structural change, or efforts within the household, might not be enough to deplete its effects entirely.

Perhaps women will have to climb a lot higher to be able to appreciate, from afar, the tenacity of patriarchal tentacles to grab at mothers' ankles. It seems that motherhood and maternal employment are embedded in, and governed by, a patriarchal system that is so vast in scope that it cannot be clearly seen except from a considerable theoretical distance. And since mothers are so entrenched in the business of motherhood, it is no wonder that they look to the cause of their discomforts in closer matters, such as in the choices of their sisters, or in themselves, as is discussed in the following themes, *Woman vs Women*, and *Woman vs The Self*.

Theme 2: Woman vs Women: Tea with an Elephant in the Room

*"The quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives."
– Esther Perel*

*"There's no way to be a perfect mother and a million ways to be a good one."
– Jill Churchill*

Eve: "... I would never say this in front of someone else or to them. But I'm saying this to you now because I have to be honest."

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During the interviews the mothers expressed their feelings and relayed experiences surrounding their employment choices, sometimes with great emotion. It is clear that mothers' choices were strongly associated with experiences of inner tension, which were often related to their perceived view of other mothers' opinions of the lifestyle choices they had made. However, when asked if they felt judged, many of the participants retreated and negated any mention of tension and became non-committal about the criticism that they perceived. When asked directly, some participants denied outright that they had received any negative feedback from other mothers. These statements were directly followed by reports of how they felt hurt by implied criticism or exclusion, without registering that they had contradicted themselves. The following are examples of how the elephant in the room was wilfully overlooked:

Greta: "No never. (Silent) I can't say I have ever [felt judged]."

Tammy: "Uhm... I can't think of a situation where I was really directly disadvantaged or felt hurt that somebody questioned my choices."

Linda: "But, no... I don't think I do feel judged actually."

It would seem that the participants were inclined to uphold an ideal of mutual support and respect amongst mothers. The impression was that the mothers were willing to internalise their tension in order to keep the peace, and metaphorically speaking, meeting other mothers for tea while ignoring the elephant of tension that threatens to crush the delicate crockery of goodwill. A strong reluctance to engage in direct conflict was communicated by all participating mothers, even though indirect comments were often expressed in thinly masked confrontational terms. Apple, for example, said that the patronising attitudes, which she experienced from working mothers towards stay-at-home mothers, usually culminated in the question, "so, what do you do all day?" She perceived this as a disrespect for stay-at-home mothers' time.

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The roundabout jabs between acquaintances were sometimes replaced with direct disagreements, provided that the women were either (a) their closest friends, or (b) strangers. On the other hand, there was a strong tendency to avoid conflict to preserve their relationships with the women in their wider social circle (e.g. extended friends, or community groups such as church, school and neighbourhood).

Some of the participants reported, for instance, that under certain circumstances they were willing to engage in conflict about motherhood topics with their best friends. Conflict was once again seen to be more acceptable with strangers, such as in online chat groups. For example, the participants often expressed that certain topics were very seldom discussed amongst a group of mothers, but that they were more likely to engage in such conversations with strangers, online or direct. Consider the statements from Linda and Eve:

Linda: "And I find more often that strangers will tell me if they disagree... but if my friends disagree with me they don't tell me. But uhm yeah, maybe I would like to know if my friends disagreed with me."

Eve: "I don't think there are many people that openly talk about [the effect of employment on the children]. I mean, how will you ever say something like that without hurting someone's feelings. I can talk to my best pal about it. Uhm. But I'm still careful about what I say."

This phenomenon might point to the fact that the participants had faith that their closest relationships would be able to endure the pressure of interpersonal tension relating to disagreements about certain topics. On the other hand, their wider groups appeared to be more fragile in terms of tension. And as these relationships may be considered valuable assets to the women's social survival they should therefore be guarded with greater care than with anonymous or unfamiliar contacts.

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Apple illustrated this when she mentioned that it was rare for confrontations between mothers to be direct and that she would usually keep to “safe topics” unless she knew the person well. Contrariwise, women perhaps do not care so much about the approval of individuals outside their own social circles. So, they might be more likely to tug at the elephant’s tail and engage in conflict in more detached social networks, such as online platforms.

This links to the *mommy wars* phenomenon wherein women resort to stereotypes about each other that lead to forming in- and out-groups between mothers (Crowley, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2008). Odenweller and Rittenour (2017) ascribed these binary categorisations to the distinction implied between the *ideal mother*, who stays at home and earns the merits of intensive mothering as the highest standard in motherhood, and the *supermom*, who is celebrated for achieving success in family and work. Despite freedom of individual choice, for instance in employment matters, the language that mothers use to describe each other continues to be critical of opposing choices (Young, 2006).

Regardless of their frequent denial of the tension, the participants did share some accounts of when the elephant became visible closer to home, and sounded an audible trumpet of criticism. Bongi said she was judged in her community and was directly confronted at church for being a single parent, even though it was very common in her circles that the fathers were absent in childrearing. The foundation of the judgement is the belief that sex before marriage is wrong, “so if you’re single and you have a baby then it tells them that you have been having sex.” This links to Hingston’s (2016) position that culture and religion have a large role to play in the sustained low status of women in Africa, and that discrimination against women is frequently overlooked as ‘tradition’.

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The fact that Bongi received criticism from the women in her religious circle, points to the fact that the mechanisms of discrimination are first internalised and then applied by women who are oppressed themselves. So, when mothers contribute to these oppressive idealisations, they participate in upholding unjust social constructions (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017).

Bongi was willing to be confrontational when she felt that it was necessary. Nevertheless, she articulated that she would not judge other mothers, although she would get angry and speak up if a child were neglected. For instance, when she noticed that a child was not dressed warmly, she would confront the mother. Bongi believed that since children cannot look after themselves, all mothers should be the voices for the children in the community.

Whether, or not, mothers used the word 'judgement' in connection with their experiences of other mothers, it was clear that there were strong underlying currents of tension. This conclusion relates to the findings of Johnston and Swanson who found that mothers often turn on each other with criticism and disapproval (2007). Tension is centred around the notion that making a choice in one direction, automatically entails a rejection of the opposite choice, and an inferred judgement of those who take that alternative route. In the following subthemes it is explained how any choice can be perceived as a form of judgement. The way in which women often justify their choices as masked judgement is also assessed, followed by the topics that exasperate mothers. In addition, a consideration of how online platforms influence the tension between mothers is presented.

Subtheme 2.1: When Choice Equals Judgement

*“Once in a golden hour
I cast to earth a seed.
Up there came a flower,
The people said, a weed.”
— Alfred Lord Tennyson*

Employment choices is just one of the numerous lifestyle options that mothers face. The women in this study reported that, by virtue of exercising these choices, mothers automatically step on the toes of women who make dissimilar decisions. Eve digested the tension between opposing mothers, by speculating that women are confronted with their own relinquished alternative reality. Perhaps being reminded of the lost opportunities associated with surrendering the alternative route, make women uneasy. As expressed by Eve:

Eve: “Because I do think, on the one hand I do judge them a little bit, on the other hand they are a mirror for me who did not make that choice. So, I feel a little bit uncomfortable with it.”

The discomfort for many of the participants were prompted by the act of comparison. This is illustrated in Apple’s admission that mothers are not always so confident about their decisions and often fear that they might have made the wrong choice. Also, then, the possibility of success achieved on the other side of the choice divide, might indicate failure on this side of the fence, or suggest a pointlessness to the sacrifices made. As seen in Apple’s comment:

Apple: “As an at-home mother I have to convince myself that it was worth the pain and time. And I’m still so scared that I made the wrong choice that I can’t bear that the mother that works Might Be Right! Because if she was right and she gets it both juggled... So, I mean, if she really gets it right, if she really gets it all juggled, what does it say about me? Does it mean that I can’t juggle so many things? Am I not also a supermom? So that is

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why there are so many factions and why we attack each other, because we are actually just so unsure of our own choices.”

Sandy was also of the opinion that mothers clash when there is competition between them. She said that mothers sometimes use their children to compare and compete with each other. Tammy also acknowledged that the career sacrifices that she had made for her family only became a problem when she compared herself to others, and when she overlooked the fact that she had made a conscious choice. Her opinion was that people fail to realise that what is good for one family is not necessarily right for another. She said, that is probably why stay-at-home mothers think that they are making the unselfish choice for their children, while they see working mothers as selfish, and why working mothers think they mean more for society than someone who stays at home.

These comments from the participants are congruent with Donohoe's (2010) opinion that the demarcation of a person's identity depends on 'otherness' and a differentiation from others. So, by criticising alternative options and comparing themselves to other women, mothers fortify their own position and character regarding their choices. Eve confirmed this further when she said that it is probably human nature for people to judge each other. She said it is a way to reinforce and defend one's own decisions, since it is more comfortable to feel certain than to accept the grey areas of ambiguity.

While mothers all share an affinity towards pronatalism by virtue of choosing to have children, this powerful sociocultural force (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016) is not a strong enough connection to safeguard mothers from disagreeing about the decisions regarding this overarching life choice. The findings of Johnston and Swanson (2004) suggest that mothers define the ideal mother by excluding mothers that opt for mothering choices different from their own. The modern ideal for successful motherhood is the intensive mothering principle, (Crowley, 2015; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017), but mothers nowadays also have to grapple

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with their need for personal fulfilment and the pressure to be as successful as men in society. Women are often left with a debilitating sense of defeat (Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009) because of the unsolvable dilemma of trying to reach social expectations to be successful in both the professional arena, as well as in the intensive mothering ideal.

Attempts to compromise and accommodate through sacrifice can lead to a cost in a woman's identity if success depends on both realms: Motherhood and employment (Donohoe, 2010). Women are often urged to defend the flawed choices that they were forced to make when confronted with this impasse. However, it seems as if the defence of their choices are skewed towards protecting their claims to being good mothers (for stay-at-home and working mothers), rather than towards their abilities in the realm of employment. This corresponds to Rittenour's (2014) findings that women most often cite motherhood as the principal role in their personal identities.

It seems that mothers feel a strong need to meet their own mothering standards, but since the quality of motherhood is very difficult to measure, it is easier to create a binary opposition to criticise. Eve conceded that judging each other is probably more commonplace than mothers like to admit, and simply making a choice to do your best is a form of judgement:

Eve: "And it must be human nature to judge each other. I mean, you must think that your way is the best way to do things otherwise you wouldn't have done it that way."

As seen above, simply choosing a position can be experienced as a form of judgement, but very seldom did the mothers voice their controversial opinions outright towards other mothers. Nonetheless, that does not mean to say that the message did not get across loud and clear. This is explored further in the next section.

Subtheme 2.2: I Don't Judge, But...

*Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak
of our own doubts, while dubiously
we mother man in his doubt!*
– Denise Levertov

“Do not wait for the last judgment. It comes every day.”
– Albert Camus

The way women communicate their choices regarding matters of motherhood, impacts on their relationships with other mothers. Young (2006) found that mothers often use language that is critical of mothers who make opposing choices. During the interviews the mothers in this study often masked their judgment of other mothers through non-committal language. The following examples from the interviews show how women justify their own decisions by expressing it as criticism of the alternative choice. The criticism might allude to the consequences of making the opposite choice, or imply something about the characteristics of someone who would make such a choice. These comments were made in passing, probably without the conscious intent to hurt or harm, even though their remarks had an evident sting. These criticisms might shed some light on the tensions and strife in the broader phenomenon popularly described as the *mommy wars* (Crowley, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2008).

On the topic of time, which all mothers in this study agreed is the most important thing that children need from their parents, Apple indirectly voiced her stance that the quantity, not only quality, of time is the important element, and with that implied that mothers who choose to spend their time at work during the day, are unable to provide unconditional love to their children:

Apple: “While if I had to work I would have had to say, I simply don't have the time to invest to find out why [the child is] anxious, I have to go now because I have all these

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other balls to juggle... because just inside time can you love unconditionally (hesitates) I almost want to say... (stops herself) I now sound extremely judgemental towards mothers that don't have time as a commodity to give..."

Apple's experience was consistent with the basis of the *mommy wars* as described in the literature, in that she identified with the intensive ideology of mothering, which prescribes a highly individualist view of parenting where a mother should constantly be attentive to the needs of her children, and set aside her own interests (Crowley, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; 2007). In the following example, Clara's sentiment also mirrors this inclination to self-sacrifice when she explained why she chose not to go back to her teaching job after her children were born. With the declaration that she thought it the unselfish thing to do, working mothers with enough alternative resources were indirectly labelled as selfish:

Clara: "But I feel like with the resources that we have, I feel like it would be selfish to carry on working."

Working mothers, on the other hand, also justified their choices by belittling stay-at-home mothers. Tammy explained that her children had the benefit of a successful role model: A capable working mother with a wide range of interests. She described the alternative of staying at home in disdainful domestic terms, which could possibly be heard as condescension by a sensitive stay-at-home ear.

Tammy: "You don't have to, when you are a mother, stay at home and only talk about washing powder and cookies... you can also have wider interests than that."

Her comment supports the social notion that mothers are regarded as the first and most influential agents in the gender socialisation of their children, and that children, especially daughters of employed mothers, report better self-confidence, higher school grades and an increased likelihood to pursue careers themselves than daughters of non-employed mothers (Hoffman, 1989; Zimmerman et al., 2008). Her remark, however, also echoes the

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sentiment described in the literature that women who choose to stay at home are stereotypically viewed as having traditional gender values, which includes valuing domesticity and a traditional male breadwinner family format over personal professional accomplishment (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Milkie et al., 2016). This links to the additional stereotype that stay-at-home mothers therefore have less to offer with regard to interesting conversations or knowledge or in terms of a general contribution to society.

Eve also felt the need to justify her choice to keep pursuing her career in the medical profession after having her baby, and imparted that after some internal struggles she had to admit to herself that the main consideration was not for financial reasons, but that she enjoyed working more than staying at home with the baby. But when she elaborated on her reasons for working, she compared the value of her decision with the alternative and admitted that a certain amount of judgement was present:

Eve: "So, maybe deep down I do think to give all your attention to two or three children is not worth as much as doing the job that I do now. But when I say it I know that it sounds wrong. And certainly, it is also not true either. It is probably not right to say it, but it must be something that I think."

Sometimes the oblique comments from mothers were a form of self-defence, where mothers felt that they had to protect their own invalidated position. Consider the following quote from Apple wherein lies a double-layered confrontation between mothers, albeit in indirect terms. First, Apple mentioned the common question she received as a stay-at-home mother, about her daily schedule, which implied that she must spend her days in idle uselessness. She retorted by implying that working mothers conveniently outsource their mothering responsibilities. Consider the direct quotation:

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Apple: "I feel the world as a whole, even mothers that work, they go, Apple what are you actually doing all day long? Then I'm going, that what you pay (exclamation) the nanny to do all day, that I do all day."

It seems that mothers are very sensitive to indirect messages from other mothers that might allude to criticism of their choices. Donohoe (2010) argued that the reason for this is contained in the direct impact that these choices have on the sense of identity that mothers experience. Press (2012) debated that it would be more constructive to direct frustration and critique towards the systems and structures that (a) enable and perpetuate gender inequalities and suppress support for women who choose to nurture both career and motherhood, and (b) disrespect women who choose to be full-time mothers.

It seems as if mothers simultaneously experience and express insecurity and pride about their decisions. On the one hand the mothers in this study felt insecure about their own choices, but on the other hand they acted with smugness in commenting indirectly on the shortcomings of other mothers' choices thus bolstering their own convictions. So, when mothers fall back on the remark that their discomfort might arise merely from thoughts in their "own head" (refer to *Woman vs The Self*), this sensitivity to other mothers' opinions is voiced as a denial of real external tensions, thus avoiding conflict that might expose their own insecurities. The following comments illustrate this sensitivity:

Linda: "They'll go, oh you wouldn't know because you don't work. Or... is it okay if we do that, I mean I know you don't work so you do you have any money, that kind of thing. And it's like, my husband... we do share things, you know. So, it's kind of, there are some assumptions that... you know, that you don't have any money of your own, to call your own, and that sort of thing. But, no... I don't think I do feel judged actually."

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Eve: "I think maybe it's because they are doing the thing that some people think I should be doing. And... I think that maybe they judge me, if you know what I mean. Because it is always this ... elephant in the room."

The participants often engaged in stereotypes of other mothers based on their employment decisions. Stereotypes are considered to be powerful forces in shaping behaviour and attitudes (Gahagan et al., 2007; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Milkie et al., 2016; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017; Stone, 2007), and could have a serious impact on the relationships between mothers and also on the paradigms that are created and maintained about motherhood in society. This in turn could contribute to their feelings of dislocation (Stone, 2007; Walters et al., 1997) and in severe cases to symptomatology such as anxiety and depression (Buehler & O'Brien, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2008).

Even though many of the sentiments that mothers entertain about each other will never be spoken out loud to other mothers, their attitudes are reflected, at least indirectly, by the ways in which mothers communicate verbally or otherwise. The women reported that it was often unnecessary to even have 'real' conversations about these contentious issues since they were simulated very effectively in imagined conversations in their own minds. The effects of these imagined conflicts resound and manifest in a pervasive underlying tension between mothers that is only ever touched upon directly when naming the specific topics about which women disagree. These 'hot topics' that can cause such a cool affect between mothers, is discussed next.

Subtheme 2.3: Hot Topics, Cool Affect

“The conversations I had with other new mothers stayed strictly within the bounds of the list: blankets, diapers, creams. Every conversation I had was the wrong conversation. No other mother congratulated me and then said: I’m overcome by the blackest of thoughts. You? This is why mothers don’t sleep, I thought to myself. This is why mothers don’t look away from their children. This is why, even with a broken heart, a mother will bring herself back to life.”
 – Claudia Dey

This study explored the themes that emerged in the stories of a few mothers about their employment choices, with particular interest in how their choices impacted on their relations with other mothers. During the interviews the women frequently referred to topics other than employment decisions about which women disagree, often fiercely. While the women were reluctant to admit that they judged or felt judged, and usually chose elusive language to describe the broad relations between mothers, this sentiment of amity shifted when specific topics were raised. Some of these topics are briefly noted. Consider the comment made by Apple that describes the rigour with which mothers sometimes defend their positions:

Apple: “Because people are very passionate about those topics. So, we are so passionate about it and so convinced of it, that it is really difficult to make room for someone that thinks differently from you. Simply because you really think that they are wrong (laughs). So, there is a reason why it is a hot topic.”

The following excerpts, which relate to the main topic under discussion, namely employment decisions, show two opposing opinions about which is the easier option, to stay at home, or to continue with full-time employment. Mothers’ opinions on this matter apparently also dictated who was entitled to complain about their situation.

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Linda: "But yeah, it does feel like historically it's been thought of, it's an easy option you know, you stay at home and look after your kids, because it's easier than going to work. Maybe. That's definitely something that I thought, I think."

Apple: "Yes, we feel, mothers that choose, I'm not talking about mothers who don't have a choice, mothers that choose to work, outsource some of their responsibilities... and choose the easier way. Because they have an excuse to go, I'm in the office for eight hours, I can sit in a hot office and drink my coffee, and I can still get that affirmation. Their identity crisis and the part of themselves that they lose is a lot less than ours. So, their transition is easier. They still have a career and they are mothers."

Greta: "We can't complain towards each other about it because you chose to do what you are doing. You chose to be a stay-at-home mother. You chose to be a working mother. So now you have to sleep in the bed that you made."

According to Greta, there is a divide between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers and when women talk to each other they usually stay with safe topics to avoid conflict. The safe topics include matters related to children and schools, and mothers rarely inquire about the reasons for making certain decisions, such as whether to work or to stay at home. It is especially off-limits to complain about your situation to mothers who made a different decision.

The participants reported that mothers are often pigeonholed by each other for their differences. This once again points to the contradiction discussed in the previous section (*I Don't Judge, But...*), where mothers were reluctant to admit to the tension between mothers, but simultaneously had clear examples that described these frictions. Oppositions are usually created according to mothers' views on certain contentious topics and these delineations can become a complicated crosshatch of relations fraught with underlying tension that reflects the countless permutations within the choices contained in each topic.

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A focus on the well-being of the children is often reflected in the themes of these ‘hot topics’. This relates to the findings in studies, which locate the centre of the debate about motherhood employment decisions in the effect that their choice may have on the children (Newcombe, 2007). And while it is often regarded to be morally problematic to seek alternatives to the self-sacrificing mothering identity (Faircloth, 2017; Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009), these hot topics substantiate the conclusions of Young (2006) that mothers often turn on each other, rather than collectively tackling the issues that afford complications within the scope of their choices.

Some of these other topics, which mothers reportedly disagree about and that are centred around the children, include whether you should give your child antibiotics, whether you are pro or against vaccinations, when babies should start eating solid foods, whether children should be sleep trained, what kind of childcare is safe and sufficient and from what age, how many children a woman should have, how parents should discipline their children, and so forth. Professional and academic debates on these contentious issues do not contribute to conciliation and clarity about what is best for the children. While some theories, for instance, express concern that the mother-child attachment and/or relationship may be negatively impacted due to the limited time available to working mothers (Hsin & Felfe, 2014; Newcombe, 2007), other studies maintain that alternative care settings are not necessarily inferior to parental care (Bernal, 2008; Clarke-Stewart, 1989; Scarr et al., 1989).

Topics that relate to a woman’s body, which are included in the scope of the prickly debates, comprise, *inter alia*, whether a natural or a caesarean birth is best, whether a woman should have an epidural when giving birth, how long a mother should breastfeed (if at all), and how quickly a woman is expected to regain her pre-baby figure. These disagreements might point to the unsolvable tug of war between, on the one hand, traditional notions of the self-sacrificial mothering figure, in which her own body and needs are secondary to those of

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her family (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002), and the expectations that mothers should also be sexually attractive and appealing (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017). This also corresponds to the *yummy mummy* discourse in which the expectation is that mothers regain a fit figure as soon as possible after giving birth (Prinds et al., 2019). Malatzky positioned that patriarchal representations of the *yummy mummy* “regulate how women experience their bodies and their identities as mothers, and how they perceive other women” (2017, p. 25), thus contributing to disunity and strife.

The various ‘hot topics’ mentioned by the participants confirm the argument posed in a previous section that choice equals conflict in the mothering sphere. These ‘hot topics’ illustrate that tension exists, even though the frictions between mothers are often suppressed, denied or internalised. And since modern mothers have many choices to make, on a daily basis, the amount of tension promises to be titanic. As Eve pointed out:

Eve: “Everything is actually an issue for mothers... And the people really get heated about it, I tell you.”

It appears that the tensions that exist between mothers cover a very broad base of interests and that the alignments between mothers have innumerable permutations based on with whom they agree on which topics. Mothers who agree on one topic, such as breastfeeding, might get along quite well until a topic arises about which they disagree, such as discipline styles. While the participants indicated that mothers are often reluctant to divulge their real feelings and ideas about these issues face-to-face with the women in their immediate social groups, the conflict became more pronounced and overt in the larger context of social media. This trend is examined more closely in the next section.

Subtheme 2.4: In Your Facebook

*“Breastfed. Bottle-fed. Stay at home or work.
We’ve all knocked our kid’s head on the car trying to get them in the car seat.”
@notsomumy*

In our modern age of technology mothers are more connected to each other than ever before, without even having to leave the house. They are able to tap into the popular discourses of the day at any time through their smart phones, where they can choose to what extent they want to participate. The exposure to a vast online platform for discussion on the internet in the form of forums such as mommy blogs and Facebook, where people can comment publicly on relevant topics, is a buzzing centre point for the tensions between mothers. Whether mothers feel that these platforms aggravate the conflict and sow the seeds of self-doubt, or whether they experience its potential to unite mothers in knowledge and mutual support, the online sphere definitely radiates a great deal of mothership energy. First, note the comments of mothers who perceive the internet in a negative light.

Linda said that she often visited motherhood related sites on her smart phone to curb boredom while breastfeeding. She expressed her shock at how aggressive the discussions sometimes became:

Linda: And People are just making judgements about people they have never met, for decisions they had no part in, and that is none of their business. You often just want to go and say, [would] you say that to someone’s face, and how would you say it, in what tone of voice? Yeah. Mom shaming. It’s terrible.”

The impression Linda got from reading about motherhood online, is that women cannot get ahead – if mothers go back to work, then they do not love their children enough and they are seen as money grabbing, and if they decide to stay at home to raise their children they are seen as lazy and irrelevant to society. This corresponds to the unattainable

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expectations that women are supposed to have and do it all – they must be boundlessly nurturing, sexually attractive and professionally successful (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017). And mothers' reactions to these expectations are once again coherent with the findings of Young (2006) that women often turn on each other, rather than find structural solutions that would make binary judgements unnecessary. Women who reported that they are affected by what they read online by, and about, other mothers, were inclined to draw general comments and criticisms and relate them to their personal circumstances. This is illustrated by Tammy:

Tammy: "... you know, social media is not always a good thing. You might see the judgement on social media, and then you generalise it to your own experience, whether it is about working or not working, or breastfeeding and not breastfeeding, and things like that."

Although Eve said she hardly ever participated in the debates that she followed from the side-lines (about matters such as breastfeeding, natural or scheduled births, child discipline and nutrition), she thought that the media plays a big part in forming women's expectations of motherhood and the pressure to achieve in their different roles. However, she believed that women put more pressure on each other, compared to the media. Her opinion was in opposition to those of the other participants and also with Crowley's (2015) findings that the media is regarded as playing an important role in enforcing and promoting the *mommy wars* debate, which might contribute to a larger culture of 'mother blame'.

According to the participants, the effect of online blaming and shaming has apparently become so severe that a counter movement has become popular, where mothers focus on supporting each other and advocating non-judgement. Greta explained:

Greta: "The moment I come across someone that expresses a rather strong opinion that I specifically don't agree with, then I keep quiet. But it is also... it's going to sound weird for me to say, but I learned through Facebook that you really have to... just leave people be... no wait, let mothers just be. Everybody makes... in so few cases can we really

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say with certainty what the right decision is, and mothers must really try not to judge each other too much. Because I read a lot of mommy blogs, and it's a very big topic for them that mothers shouldn't judge other mothers."

The media may also have a positive impact on the interaction between mothers, and some of the women reported that they experienced less isolation and loneliness because of social media. This mitigates the effects of motherhood, as reported in studies, which found that especially stay-at-home mothers often experience isolation and lowered-self-esteem (Milkie et al., 2016). Apple said that the digital village gathers the voices of other women that have the same struggles as one's own. It also drives home the idea that all mothers experience an overlap in certain experiences, regardless of the variations in choices that they make. These commonalities are often humourised, in the media, in light-hearted jokes or comical complaints.

Greta also noticed that mothers take what they read on social media very seriously and that it helps them to make decisions about how to raise their children. Apart from practical advice and information, social media also performs a psychological function for mothers. Greta said that, in a way, social media replaced her psychologist and that she found a social tribe online that mirrored and validated her emotions about parenthood and about being a stay-at-home mother.

Tammy also experienced her contact on social media as a source of support. She relied on mommy groups to arrange practical help, such as transport or baby-sitting in emergencies. Social media is also a platform for emotional support, where mothers can share their experiences. Tammy thought, however, that people should be selective about the social media to which they expose themselves. In addition, she was very serious about keeping her children away from social media for as long as possible. Her opinion was that although technology can be very convenient, it also requires a great deal of responsibility. This opinion

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connects with the previous section, *Hot Topics, Cool Affect*, which described how issues pertaining to the well-being of the children are often the centre of discussion and consideration for mothers.

These accounts of online support between mothers reflect the outcomes of studies which were mentioned in the literature: Even though mothers often tend to antagonise each other, they are also willing to concede the other side's point of view when pressed. According to Johnston and Swanson (2004) there is cognition on both sides that either option has challenges and difficulties. Apple expressed this well when she said that she hoped that mothers would be willing to trust others' intentions that they all want the best for their children, and even though their methods differ – “the mother heart is the same.”

Whether women use an online platform as a support centre for shared experiences and advice, or as a battle ground for fighting over opposing choices, there does not seem to be much attention diverted away from themselves to the structural foundations of the difficulties contained in their choices. This relates to Zimmerman et al. (2008) who suggested that the *mommy wars* divert the discussion away from more pressing concerns such as affordable healthcare and quality childcare. And while mothers battle (or soothe) these conflicts online, matters such as paternal roles in parenting, gender and racial inequality, the responsibility of the media, fair wages and family friendly arrangements in the workplace, are ignored or neglected.

Mothers often choose to ignore or deny that they are judged by other mothers (as discussed in the section *I Don't Judge, But...*), but now and then the virtual daggers glisten online, or the peacemakers break the silence and make their voices heard to appease the tension. Whichever way mothers choose to engage with one another regarding their differences, in the end the exchanges add to the underlying tension that women frequently

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internalise. These intrapersonal tensions that the participants revealed during the interviews are examined in the next theme.

Theme 3: Woman vs The Self: The Voices in my Head

“Mothers are all slightly insane.” – J.D. Salinger

In the previous two themes, *Woman vs The World* and *Woman vs Women*, it was posited that the tension, which is experienced by women in terms of their employment choices when having children, possibly stems from (a) a patriarchal imbalance of status or worth that is attributed to some functions in society compared to others (e.g. professional work vs mothering tasks), and/or (b) mothers’ justifications of their choices expressed in terms of a comparison or criticism (directly or indirectly) of other mothers who make different choices. These two themes represent the structural basis, on the one hand, and on the other hand the interpersonal motivations that account for the tension.

The third theme and its subthemes refer to the intrapersonal stimuli that cause the tension endured by the participants regarding their employment decisions. As has been mentioned previously, the participants often referred to the discomfort that they experienced when thinking of others’ regard of their choices as “probably being only in my head”. This phrase was a ringing leitmotiv throughout the interviews. The women persistently discounted the external legitimacy of the tension (i.e. identifying the structural or interpersonal roots of their discomfort) in order to draw the possible cause of their distress to themselves. This brings to mind Kretzchmar’s (1995) investigation on oppression in which internal oppression is described as the internalisation of the subjugation by the oppressed, in that the oppressed start to believe that they are somehow to blame or are deserving of their fate.

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In the first two themes, several significant explanations were uncovered that could validate the discomfort that mothers experience in their choice to either stay at home or to work. These corroborations are embedded in causes outside the realm of their own doing, such as possible loss of status, child-unfriendly working conditions, disproportionate home-care responsibilities, and direct or indirect criticism from other mothers. However, from the interviews it was apparent that a large portion of the tension was directed inward, in the form of internal dialogues, self-doubt, and negative emotions, such as guilt and isolation. This once again corresponds to the description of internal oppression as the manifestation of feelings of low self-esteem, self-criticism, depression and guilt (Kretzchmar, 1995).

Through their internal processes, the mothers grappled with several issues that resulted from their employment decisions. Amongst these was a sense of inevitable loss (of opportunities and experiences at home or in society), as well as a deep need for recognition and sympathy. In addition, the mothers were frustrated because of the immeasurability of mothering, which make it impossible to justify their true worth as mothers and citizens. Similar processes are described in literature, in that mothers experience unattainable social expectations as personal defeat (Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009). The participants often referred to attempts to mitigate their internal tension. Eve mentioned that she refused to “*put the bar too high with weird thoughts*”. And Sandy made a conscious decision to trust her natural reflexes: “*I think your mother instincts kick in and you just know what to do, and you know what’s the best for your child*”. But most mothers admitted that they were guilty of a good dose of self-inflicted pressure that compounded these other issues. To illustrate this, refer to Greta and Linda’s comments:

Greta: “It comes from myself. I put pressure on myself to... when I see mothers around me, to be as good as them. Or even better than them. And I accept totally that other

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mothers also put that pressure on themselves, and also feel that they want to be as good or better than the mothers around them.”

Linda: “All the time. Mostly from myself. Not necessarily from other people. Yeah. Sometimes with my husband when we are lying in bed late at night I’ll say, I feel like I was a terrible parent, and he just reminds me that the kids are still alive and that they’re healthy and fine. And I’m just like, okay, maybe I didn’t do too badly today, they’re fed, okay great, I achieved something today.”

The intrapersonal tension related to motherhood weighed heavily on the participants’ psyches, specifically in terms of their employment decisions. While they often tried to minimise this tension by claiming that it was *only in their heads*, it had a profound effect on their emotions and sense of personal accomplishment. The participants reported that the tension was amplified by the immeasurability of the worth of mothering tasks, as well as by self-inflicted pressure to be ‘perfect’. Temperament seems to be a factor that differentiates mothers that are more or less prone to such internal pressures, with the less ambitious women taking less strain than the results-driven mothers. All the mothers however, reported that they suffered from feelings of guilt and a fear that they were not doing enough or not doing it well enough. These fears were usually centred around their role as a mother (which was often cited as *the* central role in their lives), but also included guilt about their performance in their professional jobs.

In the following subthemes the intrapersonal tension that mothers experienced are discussed in more detail. Special attention is given to women’s difficulties relating to the immeasurability of their motherhood achievements, their search for a personal identity linked to their choices, the effects of motherhood and employment choices on their self-esteem, the commonly expressed burden of guilt, and last, the issue of self-care.

Subtheme 3.1: Measuring Mothers

“To be a mother is to shuttle between extremes – altruism and narcissism, neediness and self-sufficiency, pride and abjection, love and hate – hounded by fear and self-doubt.” – Merve Emre

One factor that added to the mothers’ tension was the problem of measurability. Mothers often pressurised themselves to be good mothers, but few agreed upon the ideals that constitute a ‘good’ mother. In addition, women complained that the value that mothers add to the home has very few measurable outcomes, compared to contributions in the economic sphere, where one earns a salary and receives feedback in terms of appraisals or task evaluations. Therefore, since female gender roles are seen by society as weaker than, and often second-rate compared to, masculine roles (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008), stay-at-home mothers especially struggle with the immeasurability of their jobs at home and feelings of inferiority towards working mothers (Eccles, 1987).

The stay-at-home mothers reported that they struggled to express the value of their daily activities in the absence of formal feedback. This is consistent with other studies that found that, while being in a position to have more time with their families creates a sense of contentment, stay-at-home mothers also report feeling dislocated (Stone, 2007; Walters et al., 1997).

On the other hand, working mothers also find it difficult to know if the value that they add at home is sufficient and effective. Zimmerman et al. (2008), labelled this emotionally taxing uncertainty, of whether what is being done for the family is sufficient, as the third shift (after the first and second shifts at work and taking care of the home). Linda and Tammy illustrated this situation:

Linda: “Yeah, and I guess, doing something that you can get to at the end of the day and you’ve produced a book, or you changed someone’s wound dressing, or you’ve helped

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deliver a baby, or there is something that you've done that you can talk about at the end of the day, whilst when your husband comes home and says what did you do today? Uh, I did the washing."

Tammy: "I think, you do love your children, but you can't help to question yourself. Like when you were angry about one thing today, at night when they are asleep, then you think, maybe I was too strict, maybe I reprimanded them too much. That one thing this afternoon, so-and-so... I think I feel more pressure from myself, instead of from people around me."

It seems as if a mother's temperament influences the way in which she internally deals with the pressures of motherhood. Compare, for instance, Clara, who did not appear to have a competitive or overly ambitious personality, with Greta, who admitted that she was a high achieving organiser. Clara seemed to experience considerably less tension in her decision to stay at home to raise the children than Greta who reported that her life felt completely out of balance and that she was unsure of herself at home. In their own words:

Clara: "Teaching was lovely, but it had a lot of stress and deadlines... which is fine, because I slept a lot better. Now I don't sleep as much, but I don't have to do a presentation the next day, I don't have to hand in marks. I have to build blocks and go for a walk with the pram... I'm a very relaxed person, so it suits me."

Greta: "I have always seen my whole life as projects. I do project management. And everything I take on must end like the perfect project, with all the tick marks, everything has to be done perfectly right. I planned my wedding that way... And right up to having children. So, to have children must also be a success story in the end. So, I will definitely put pressure on myself to be bloody good. And I accept totally that other mothers do the same."

Temperament might be mitigated by experience, as in the case of Tammy who mentioned that her sensitivity to criticism, whether perceived or real, decreased with her

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second and third children. She attributed her improved confidence in her own judgement to her accumulated experience as a mother. As a first-time mother she was very focussed on doing things right and according to the book, while with subsequent experience she realised that no two children are the same, so a one-size-fits-all approach is unrealistic. She said that she had to learn to trust her own ‘inner mommy voice’.

In the absence of tangible and assessable outcomes that can act as measurements for their worth and achievements at home, mothers often lapse into identity crises which urge them to reconsider the terms and descriptions of what they call the ‘self’. This search for a new identity is discussed next.

Subtheme 3.2: Tailoring a New Identity

“Birth is not merely that which divides women from themselves, so that a woman’s understanding of what it is to exist is profoundly changed. Another person has existed in her, and after their birth they live within the jurisdiction of her consciousness. When she is with them she is not herself; when she is without them she is not herself.” – Rachel Cusk

*“Human nature is like water. It takes the shape of its container.”
– Wallace Stevens*

Apple: “... and the identity crisis that you fall into. You saw yourself in a certain way... when you were young, and you were relatively successful in your career and you earned good money, and you drove a nice car and you wore nice clothes, whatever... and now, the roles are so far removed and you find yourself in an identity crisis. Which means that you have to reinvent yourself.”

The participants in this study were all employed women who later became mothers and either chose to continue with full-time employment or to resign their jobs and stay at home with the children. In both instances a new layer was added to their previous personal identity, namely motherhood. In most cases, it at least adds a complexity to the women’s

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existing identity with which they need to come to grips, but for some, as illustrated in Apple's quote above, the transition to motherhood requires a complete overhaul of the way they perceive themselves. This is consistent with Sallee's (2008) statement that identity cannot be separated from context and the meaning that an individual attaches to circumstances, as well as with reports from Rogan (1997) that claim that the adjustment to first-time motherhood can lead to great disruptions of women's identities, causing them to feel physically and emotionally depleted.

To make peace with their new reality, these mothers reported that they needed to accept a certain loss, which is associated with discarding, or adapting their old identity. This is reflected in the findings of other studies that conclude that an internalisation of gender roles, which is forced upon women by socially constructed notions, creates great vulnerabilities in mothers (Cranney & Miles, 2017; Gahagan et al., 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2008). For some participants it was the loss of a lifestyle or social status that they needed to accept, or the loss of personal freedom that came with having children. In others it was the loss of achieving their highest professional potential, since they were not able to perform their mothering tasks to their own high standard, as well as achieve fully in their professional capacity. Other times it was the loss of support, or the disillusionment when the expectation of support (at home or at work), when starting a family was not met. Golden (2001) theorised that in the construction of identity, the importance of sociocultural influences must be noted, and the presence or the lack of support, which could impact on the psychological health of mothers. Apple and Tammy illustrated their experiences of a sense of loss in the following passages:

Apple: "Above my bed I have a collage with photographs of us at the pyramids, on a camel, at the Colosseum, in front of the Eiffel Tower... So, now when I'm up at 3am with a baby, I can look at it and say, it's fine, I had a life. So, I can be content with the choices that I

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made, and of this season in my life... The fact that I have all the other emotions that are negative, is okay. It is okay to feel alone now, or trapped, or not so mobile. All those things are okay, because I have had the privilege to have all those experiences.”

Tammy: “Not because somebody will hold it against me personally, but in academics, how you advance is through... conducting classes are the things that are constantly in-your-face and that you spend most of your time on, because you can’t stand in front of a class without preparing. But in the end, for promotions and for future career options, what matters are research outputs. And research is always in the back of the line with me, although I enjoy it very much, but I must prepare for the next day’s class, and it has to be done, and then I also have my children, and whatever is left then goes into a research. And that is way too little time to create proper publication outputs. If I have to compare this for instance with somebody who doesn’t have children or don’t have that type of setup, they have a lot more hours to... So, I think, and I’m completely realistic about it, that I will not, I cannot expect to have the same, to have the set same career path as somebody that does not have children.”

Apple: “Yes, so even if I go back to work in future I will not be as successful as what I could have been. I know that. And I have made peace with that. Because my priorities are divided, my heart and my brain are divided. That is why I said in the beginning – a part of my brain will never work again. A part of my brain has gone away from me.”

Mothers in this study sometimes expressed that they evaluated their own identity by comparing themselves to other mothers. This is consistent with Johnston and Swanson’s (2004) reports that at-home mothers defend their choices by being critical of opposing values and by claiming misguided priorities of employed mothers and society at large. Rittenour (2014, p. 228), stated further that “communication is both a mirror and mechanism of identity”. In effect, at-home mothers create a psychological barrier between themselves and employed mothers, thus reinforcing binary constructions (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). For

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example, consider Apple, who embraced the identity of the self-sacrificial mother by relinquishing her career identity that working mothers are not willing (or able) to forgo:

Apple: " [working mothers] outsource some of their responsibilities and choose the easier way. Because they have an excuse to go, I'm in the office for eight hours, I can sit in a hot office and drink my coffee, and I can still get that affirmation. Their identity crisis and the part of themselves that they lose is a lot smaller than ours. So, their transition is easier. They still have a career and they are mothers."

Furthermore, some mothers found it very difficult to disconnect their personal identity from their functions as a mother, so much so that once they separated themselves from motherhood little else remained. This mirrors Rittenour's (2014) statement that women most often cite motherhood as the principal component of their personal identity. It is then perhaps no wonder that when mothers try to orient themselves to pinpoint meaning or worth for themselves, they do not ask questions such as *am I a good citizen?* Or *am I a good person?* Rather they try to measure their success in motherhood, sometimes to such an extent that the children are seen as an extension of themselves. Note in this regard the comments of Bongi and Greta:

Bongi: "And then I'll say, you know what, this [child] is my precious gift, it is something that I cannot take away from me, it's me! (animated). He's part of me now."

Greta: "If we don't try so hard to be good mothers, then what else! It's really very hard to distinguish between I'm a good mother and I have amazingly good children. It's extremely difficult to make that distinction. And everything we do for our children we think reflects onto us... It is really very difficult to not want to do the best in whatever you do, and coincidentally it feels to me... I put a lot of what I use to put into my career, I apply now in my work as a mother. And the single biggest thing is, I have to achieve. I tried to achieve in my

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job, so why wouldn't I now try to achieve in motherhood. And motherhood is the one single thing that I'm doing at the moment."

Greta: "I took part in this class, and the woman who was presenting it asked everyone, what are you proud of in yourself and then the only thing that I could think of was, and I said it, was that I think I am a very good mother. And it was for me, it is something that I'm really proud of, but it was like, shit is this the only thing you can think of? So closely is my identity connected to the fact that I am a stay-at-home mother."

When women start a family, they have to add and tailor the extra layer of motherhood to their existing identity, and some choose to redesign their identity wardrobe altogether. Related to this process, is coming to grips with the losses of their new roles as mothers (whether it is losing freedom or status), and they often use the thread of comparison to other mothers, or the elastic extension of their children, as material for their new identities.

Closely linked to the women's concept of identity, was the way in which they felt about themselves. The next subtheme reveals how the participants' self-esteem was affected by motherhood and the choices surrounding this stage in life.

Subtheme 3.3: The Scramble for Self-worth

*"Who, that was ever truly called, believed himself worthy of the summons?"
– Charlotte Brontë*

In this section, the participants' management of issues related to their feelings of self-worth and self-esteem are discussed. The feedback from the participants revealed that the stay-at-home mothers seemed to struggle to maintain a healthy self-esteem. The working mothers reported that although it was extremely challenging to balance work and home responsibilities, the stimulation that they received at work and the feedback from colleagues and friends outside of their domestic sphere enriched their lives and gave them a sense of

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purpose and connection that they would not have had if they did not work. These viewpoints reflect the outcomes of other studies that found that being formally employed can provide a sense of social importance (Scarr et al., 1898), as well as studies wherein employed women were found to be less prone to have health problems than stay-at-home mothers (Frech & Damaske, 2012). Other studies found that women reported decreases in depressive symptoms when resuming employment after having children (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2011; Buehler & O'Brien, 2011).

Tammy, who was a stay-at-home mother when her older children were small but later resumed full-time work as an academic, was able to give a balanced view from both sides. She mentioned that the frustration of being at home is offset against the stimulation and sense of accomplishment of working again. In Tammy's own words:

Tammy: "...I think just to stimulate yourself intellectually. Uhm, maybe because I can look at it from both sides. Because I was at home and it was nice, but it also started to become frustrating. There is also just so long that you can sit with your child and build blocks. Yes. I feel I studied for very long, and I enjoy my work, and it is good to be able to apply it."

Linda, a stay-at-home mother of four children, who lamented that she missed being part of a team of adults, such as the one she was part of as a nurse, highlighted a need for social connection and feeling embedded in society.

Linda: "Adult conversation. (Laughing) You get... so working as a nurse, you are part of a team, and you're all doing the same thing and you're all working together. And I really enjoyed that."

When staying at home to raise children, mothers reported that they suffered from the lack of recognition for the work they did at home. Schultheiss (2009) validated this notion by mentioning that failing to dignify motherhood as a formal position in society results in a

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major part of most women's identities being disrespected and disregarded. At work, women's worth might be affirmed by colleagues' comments, formal evaluations or simply earning a fee or a salary, while the work that mothers do at home largely goes by unnoticed and unacknowledged. Linda and Greta lamented:

Linda: "Maybe it's just the sense of, of worth maybe. Like you want to feel you are doing something worthwhile, and you forget that actually raising little people is worthwhile."

Greta: "And then when I married my husband, it was better because... because I got my self-confidence from the outside, and because I was successful in my job. And now that I'm not successful in... that I don't have an outside job... it's difficult for me to put... it bothers me a lot that... that we are not equal in the household. Oh! it bothers me extremely much."

The stay-at-home mothers, who often felt undervalued, isolated, and unable to look to others for support, had to rely on themselves. This was demonstrated, as a broad trend in society, by Rogan in the statement: "new motherhood is characterised by profound change, a strong sense of loss, isolation and fatigue" (1997, p. 877). Apple and Greta illustrated this from their personal vantage points:

Apple: "When you only work inside the house there is however no-one that ever tells you you are doing a good job. And there are no fixed objectives to meet or targets to reach or boxes to tick. So, no-one goes, great Apple, job well done, this presentation is amazing, you are such a benefit to the company."

Greta: "I didn't realise until I stayed at home, how much of my... uhm... motivation I get externally. How much I need that other people tell me that I'm doing a good job. Now I have to do it, now I have to teach myself to tell it to myself [that I'm doing a good job]."

Feeling unacknowledged for her role could contribute to strained relationships for a stay-at-home mother. Some mothers said that they sometimes felt insecure and unsure of

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themselves in large social settings, which could once again point to the problem that motherhood is not regarded as a dignified position in society (Schultheiss, 2009). Mothers also reported that the disregard for their roles had a negative influence on their primary relationships. Linda and Greta expressed their personal experiences:

Linda: "Like if we go to a party without our kids and people don't know we are parents, if we go to a party and people are like what do you do, there is that kind of, not nervousness, but there is that kind of strangeness about saying you are a stay-at-home mom, because you don't really know what other people think of that. Because some people think that you just sit at home and watch TV all day. And other people will definitely see the worth in it."

Greta: For the first time in my life I'm on antidepressants. I am amazed. If we didn't have the children I would never have realised that I struggle so badly to get along with my husband. But to have children, and to go through that thing together, and for me not to have that outlet any more of going to work, it's completely exposed that I, that myself and my husband are struggling, that our marriage is terrible. And that I would definitely not have realised, if we didn't have children... I had other things that I could focus on when I was working, and then I could very easily just go on with my life, and sweep things under the rug. But when I had children, and especially when I started staying at home with the children, I was much more dependent on him for emotional... for an emotional shoulder to cry on and for... for a boost of my self-esteem, that he never provided. And then I realised, he was actually always like that, I've just never noticed it because... but now I am so much more dependent on him."

The need for recognition and respect is a human necessity. Without positive feedback and acknowledgement from others, a person may soon succumb to negative emotions and even symptomatology such as depression and anxiety (Buehler & O'Brien, 2011;

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Zimmerman et al., 2008). The stay-at-home mothers in this study communicated the immense difficulties of dealing with their feelings of isolation, a lack of social embeddedness and of generally feeling undervalued for their work at home. In the literature these experiences of feeling inferior, unimportant, or isolated indicate the internalisation of gender roles, which are forced upon women by socially constructed expectations (Gahagan et al., 2007; Zimmerman et al., 2008).

The continuation of the human species depends on the fundamental role of caregiving to bear and nurture the young that will take humankind into the future. However, this fact is rarely acknowledged with the required deference, so that mothers, upon whom this task mostly befalls (Carroll & Campbell, 2008), often have to claim it for themselves, in exasperation:

Apple: "Because that is the point: We work just as hard. And not only for ourselves, we are really the backbone of society!"

This scramble for self-esteem and self-worth is closely accompanied by a deep-seated burden of guilt experienced by mothers regardless of their employment choices. The effects of this weighty emotion are examined next.

Subtheme 3.4: The Burden of Guilt

"guilt to motherhood is like grapes to wine" – Fay Weldon

One of the most prominent negative emotions that the mothers reported during the interviews, was guilt. Donohoe (2010) explained that when choosing between staying at home or continuing to work, rather than establishing these two functions on a hierarchical ladder, a tension forms between two absolute subjective values, whereby the choice in itself

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creates a cost that cannot be assuaged by compromise. Failed attempts to accommodate both functions, through sacrifice, may lead to emotional burdens such as guilt.

This might explain why working mothers feel guilty about not spending enough time with their children, enjoying their professional work more than household tasks, or perhaps for not performing as well as they think they should at work while also tending to domestic responsibilities. And conversely, stay-at-home mothers may carry a burden of guilt, in that they are unsure as to whether (a) their efforts at home are enough, (b) they are a good role model for their children, and (c) they stimulate them sufficiently. Stay-at-home mothers also reported feeling guilty about their own unmet potential when giving up professional work. Refer to these examples from the interviews:

Greta: "And I feel extremely guilty towards my parents because they paid for my education, and because of my own wishes for myself as a young woman when I just started a career."

Linda: "That idea of you not being the person that you want your kids to be. And I mean, I think it's a double standard. You basically want to say, I want to be perfect so that my kids are perfect, but nobody 's perfect, so how does this work? Like how do you stop feeling guilty about the things that you've done that day that haven't been perfect?"

Sandy: "I feel guilty because I work such long hours. My clients always ask me, don't you miss them? Don't you think you are at work for too long hours? Why do you work so hard? They always ask me why I work so hard. Then I say because it's my passion, I want to do it, I love what I'm doing, and I feel... I just feel so content. Every client is so happy. And I feel guilty sometimes about the time that I don't spend with my family."

Tammy: "You feel guilty, even though I was open from the beginning, and I told them that if I don't have class I will not be sitting here, and sometimes when you see that there are other people sitting here, then you feel guilty. But I think it is just my own baggage, I don't

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think it is at all, well, that somebody is checking up on me, or finding it strange, and I know I have the same workload as other people who choose to sit here from eight to six, so I make my hours up at strange times.”

It seems as if these feelings of guilt were mostly associated with expectations related to an intensive mothering ideology, whereby mothers are expected to forswear their own needs (Gross, 1998; Schultheiss, 2009). Carrol and Campbell (2008) argued that promoting a parenting style that requires a mother to be constantly attentive to the needs of her family, essentially contributes to upholding gender inequality. Therefore, mothers who feel that they are not succeeding in realising unremitting focus on their children, may experience anxious bouts of guilt. Consider Tammy’s description of this phenomenon:

Tammy: “Before the baby even arrives, you feel guilty about what you eat while you are pregnant, or whatever... the mommy guilt. Yes. But I don’t think it’s limited to working mothers. I think stay-at-home mothers think maybe they didn’t breastfeed long enough, or I was too strict today, or I didn’t teach enough colours, or built enough blocks, or didn’t give enough educational stimulation to my child today, but I think if you are working mother there is an extra layer.”

Guilt is also associated with contradictory needs and desires. The women reported feeling guilty for wanting, or not wanting, to be with their children, and also for wanting, or not wanting, to work. Eve, for instance, reported that even though she felt that she had made the right decision to continue working, because of her own personality and her family’s needs, she did experience persistent feelings of guilt while at work. While she constantly thought about the time that she could spend with her child, she also had a great desire for wanting time alone, which added to her feelings of guilt.

Mothers’ responses to the impossible balancing act of doing it all at home or at work, often resulted in feelings of guilt. The burden of guilt, together with the other difficulties and

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losses associated with motherhood, must somehow be absorbed, or relieved, in order for mothers to cope. In the following subtheme, mothers' attempts at mitigating these tensions are discussed.

Subtheme 3.5: Self-Care or Self-Sacrifice

*“(24/7) once you sign on to be a mother,
that's the only shift they offer.”
– Jodi Picoult*

Motherhood, which is an important developmental phase in most women's lives, represents a significant milestone in the family lifecycle (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). The advent of a child, which brings about new and unique challenges to parents, draws on all familial resources, including finances, time and energy. Studies have found that these challenges often result in increased conflict at home and at work if flexibility with regards to the tasks at hand are not achieved (Erickson et al., 2010). In the previous subthemes the emotional effect on mothers' psyches was explored, in terms of the immeasurability of success in motherhood, the challenges in asserting a new identity, the scramble for self-worth and the heavy burden of guilt on mothers. The mothers in this study appeared to have a natural resilience to their challenges: Even though their energy gravitated towards their children, which is consistent with reports that women often regard mothering as the principal role in their personal identity (Rittenour, 2014), as well as their work responsibilities, most of them had learnt to see the value in self-care. According to Apple:

Apple: “It took me a while to learn that the better I look after myself the better it is for my entire family. And I think that is where I find the balance.”

Many mothers concluded that self-care is a necessity, not only for their own emotional benefit, but ultimately also for the well-being of the entire family. This

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corresponds with findings that being a stay-at-home mother, for instance, could aggravate pre-existing health problems (e.g. sleep and eating disorders, and anxiety) that can create a ripple effect on other household members (Gahagan et al., 2007). Linda illustrated her awareness of these potentialities:

Linda: "I am aware that it is something that I need to be better at because when I find myself to be angry with my kids, and I'm short or bad tempered, then I notice that I'm doing this because I'm not taking care of myself."

Self-care can take on many different forms, such as taking some time to be alone, doing physical exercise, meeting friends, seeing a therapist or going to a support group, adopting a hobby and so forth. Bongi and Greta provided their examples:

Bongi: "I found that whenever I get money, I would buy something for him not for me. I don't care about me now, it's all about him. Which is wrong. I saw it's wrong because I also need, I have needs as well. So, maybe if I am cutting his hair, I'll do my hair as well. All those things."

Greta: "I also have... for a yearlong I also saw a psychologist, when I went on antidepressants for the first time after my first child was born. It changed my world. She saved my life. She gave me wonderful new insights, and she made me feel so much better about myself. And once a week I also go to a support group for mothers, we just sit and talk nonsense with each other, and moan about how difficult it is to be a stay-at-home mother."

The mothers in this study all led lives that required them to make considerable sacrifices in order to try to find a balance between their mothering ideals, their personal ambitions and the expectations placed on them by society. Gorman and Fritzsche (2002) posited that the traditional view of a mother is to be selfless and caring, but nowadays mothers are also expected to be role models for the modern ideal of the *empowered woman*.

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Although the mothers all acknowledged that sacrifice is an inevitable part of being a mother, they recognised that self-care is necessary to maintain a sense of balance.

This concludes the theme, *Woman vs The Self*, in which the intrapersonal stimuli and responses to the tensions experienced by the participants are discussed. Women often internalise, rather than recognise, the external factors that contribute to the difficulties connected to their choice to stay at home or go back to work. This was evident in their struggles to overcome the immeasurability of their motherhood contributions, to search for a new identity in motherhood, and to ward off guilt and maintain self-esteem. The light at the end of the tunnel of motherhood turmoil, seems to be women's resilience in finding ways to cope: Especially in realising that self-care is an essential part, not only for enduring their sufferings, but also for ensuring that they can fulfil their commitments at work and home.

In the final theme these women's natural resilience once again becomes apparent when the topic of breastfeeding is elucidated.

Theme 4: The Breast of Life: A Stone in the Pond

Birth

- Louise Erdrich

*When they were wild
When they were not yet human
When they could have been anything,
I was on the other side ready with milk to lure them,
And their father, too, the name like a net in his hands.*

The tensions that women experience regarding their employment decisions after having children are illustrated vividly in their choices concerning breastfeeding, therefore warranting a dedicated theme. Like a stone dropped in a pond, the issue of breastfeeding demonstrates the concentric circles of influence within which mothers' tension is contained. In the largest and most encompassing circle, the challenges of breastfeeding can be

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exacerbated or minimised depending on the extent to which society and workplaces accommodate this natural practice. Moving inward to an interpersonal level, the relationships between mothers are also affected by opinions about breastfeeding. And finally, the most intimate ripples undulate on an intrapersonal current in mothers' private experiences of nurturing their children.

Although breastfeeding was not a prerequisite in the inclusion criteria, the participants in this study all chose to breastfeed their children and each shared enthusiastic recollections of breastfeeding. Many of these women reported that, on a structural level, workplaces make it difficult to continue breastfeeding. So, many of the stay-at-home mothers, in this study, reported that they may have made different employment decisions had it been easier to go back to work and uphold their mothering objective to breastfeed. Indeed, their wish to breastfeed sometimes even tipped their decision to stay at home. This is consistent with accounts in the study by Bourke-Taylor et al. (2011) who stated that service system limitations are one of the primary obstacles to participation in paid employment. Feminist theorists argue that to improve these conditions for women, structural changes are needed within society (Sallee, 2008).

Even in workplaces that focus on female issues, the structural setup of the working conditions seems to be ignorant of, or even hostile towards, the practical needs of mothers. Eve, for example, continued to breastfeed after she went back to work full-time as a specialised medical practitioner at a state hospital. This required her to take fifteen minutes twice a day to express milk with a breast pump. In the fast-paced environment where she worked, even taking a bathroom break was considered a luxury, so making time to express milk seemed excessive to her.

She said that even though she worked in a hospital that strongly advocates the benefits of breastfeeding for mother and child, having to express milk at work was fraught

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with awkwardness and discomfort. She relayed an account of one of her colleagues who was driven to severe emotional distress because she received criticism and comments of disgust after keeping her expressed breast milk in the communal freezer at the office. The pressure that women experience to conceal their natural bodily processes, such as breastfeeding, could link to a broader societal script where women need to conform to the structural frameworks of businesses and organisations, where being male is regarded as the norm, and as being better than their female counterparts (Bailey, 1999; Van Esterik, 1994).

Mothers also relayed that breastfeeding openly in public was often frowned upon. This is consistent with Lee's (2018) position that patriarchy finds breasts problematic, since it unsettles the boundary between motherhood and sexuality. Drouin (2013) argued that breastfeeding is an essential human rights issue, and according to Van Esterik (1994), it can contribute to gender equality, since it "requires rethinking basic issues such as the sexual division of labour, the fit between women's productive and reproductive lives, and the role of physiological processes in defining gender ideology" (1994, p. 41). The common public opinion that breastfeeding in public is undesirable relates to the sexualisation of breastfeeding women, where breasts are viewed first and foremost as objects for sexual pleasure, rather than for nurturing offspring (Grant, 2016; Lee, 2018).

On an interpersonal level, breastfeeding, which is one of the 'hot topics', often takes centre stage in the so-called *mommy wars*. The participants reported that mothers do disagree about different aspects of breastfeeding, such as how long a child should be breastfed, whether it is acceptable to choose not to breastfeed, and whether a mother should cover up while breastfeeding in public. These issues put strain on relationships between mothers, even if the conflict is not directly communicated but only implied. As was discussed in *Woman vs Women*, mothers are reluctant to confront each other directly, but the arguments about the best way to care for children can become quite vehement in online platforms such as

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Facebook. The debates in favour of breastfeeding are usually informed by the belief, which is consistent with research findings, that breastfeeding is advantageous for both child and mother health in the short and long-term, (Boyer, 2011; Goldbas, 2015; Johnson et al., 2009; Zilanawala, 2017).

The notion that breastfeeding is the healthiest option for both mother and child, could lead to expectations that a woman has a moral duty to breastfeed. Therefore, feminist scholars have been vocal in the past about possibly overstating the benefits of breastfeeding and undermining women's agency in deciding what is best for themselves and their children (Smith, 2018). A reluctance, or inability, to breastfeed might lead to stigmatisation and the reinforcement of the dominant narrative of being a 'bad' mother. Not only does this lead to tension between women, but on an intrapersonal level mothers could also experience severe difficulties with stress and guilt about not being able to breastfeed because they struggle to or because of work responsibilities.

In staying with the intrapersonal effects of breastfeeding on mothers, the responsibility of always having to be available to breastfeed a child also has severe consequences for women. One of the biggest challenges for Linda, a stay-at-home mother, was that her child required her constant attention, thus preventing her from being able to 'take a break'. Her social interactions and independent movements were limited as she was unable to go anywhere without the baby.

A woman who does not have sufficient support, could be prevented from practicing self-care, by constantly being on call. The traditional view that a mother should put all her own needs aside for her family (Gorman & Fritsche, 2002), frequently results in experiences of isolation and a lack of social embeddedness that can lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression (Beuhler & O'Brien, 2011; Zimmerman et al., 2008). And this might have a roll-over effect on the rest of the family (Gahagan et al., 2007).

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After giving birth, feeding a baby is the first and most urgent task in a new mother's life. And while breastfeeding is considered universally linked to the biological marvel of motherhood, it is also closely linked with the emotional and circumstantial tensions that mothers experience regarding their role as mothers. Mothers, however, do not necessarily experience breastfeeding only as a negative and problematic chore. In fact, all the participants, who had diverse accounts of breastfeeding, told animated stories of resilience and achievement. These accounts are briefly reviewed in the next subtheme.

Subtheme 4.1: Feeding with Meaning



@willmcphail4

Although some mothers have trouble breastfeeding or willingly choose alternative methods, all the mothers in this study breastfed their children (or were still breastfeeding at the time of writing) and were eager to include stories of breastfeeding in their personal accounts of motherhood. The women communicated, directly or indirectly, that breastfeeding was not only a way of sustaining their child, but also carried special personal meaning in their

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journeys as mothers. Anecdotes of the mothers' unique experiences of breastfeeding and how they constructed their own personal meaning around it, follow.

For Apple, breastfeeding was a personal feat. She overcame excruciating pain and eventually achieved her goal of providing her child with what she believed to be the best form of mothering. More than just nourishment, breastfeeding became a symbol of perseverance and resolve.

Apple: "So, I am the kind of person that breastfeeds in front of everyone. All our friends have seen me breastfeed. All their husbands have seen me, all their children have seen me and I invite everyone to come and see how I breastfeed. Because when I started breastfeeding I didn't have a clue. I cried for six weeks long. It was excruciating. Because I didn't know how. With my second child it was as easy as falling out of a tree.

"People with inverted nipples usually just don't breastfeed – it is just too difficult and just too painful – but then you are still a good mother. But the fact that I could get over it and that I could give her what I believe in my core to be the best for her, and to breastfeed her for an extended period... then I really felt like I was a good mother [laughs]. That I could do this for her, and for the thousands of benefits of breastfeeding on a physical level, on an emotional level for her and me. The biggest privilege of my life."

Sandy was determined to continue working when she had her children. She admitted that she would not have been able to do so without the support of her extended family, who assisted daily with the household responsibilities. She was proud of herself for being a successful businesswoman and a good mother at the same time. For Sandy breastfeeding a new-born baby while still working full-time was proof that she was able to do it all – balancing both motherhood and career.

Sandy: "But with my last one, I was on maternity leave only for three days. Within three days I was back. I give birth easily, no pain, every three hours going home to

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breastfeed... do you understand, I can do it. I feel I'm physically strong enough, I was just lucky."

Like Sandy, Greta was also a natural achiever. However, she decided to become a stay-at-home mother. In her career, before having children, she was a go-getter who liked to get things done, and done well. She found it difficult not being able to identify tangible markers for success in being a stay-at-home mother, which often left her despondent and depressed. However, in breastfeeding she found the ultimate emblem of motherhood, and it became for her a sign of success and achievement in her new role as mother.

Greta: [Breastfeeding] enhanced for me the feeling of being the perfect mother... I'm very very smug about it, that I breastfed my children. I loved it! I bonded with my children and also felt, look at how awesome I am because I provide for my children."

Bongi was also confident that she could call herself a good mother. She was a young single mother who had a lively social life before having a baby. She had to give most of it up with the dawn of young motherhood, and although she did it gladly, she was aware of the sacrifices. Bongi could have tasked her mother to take care of the child, however she relinquished her social life to take care of and breastfeed her baby. To her this sacrifice represented her commitment and responsibility towards the child and her new role as mother.

Bongi: "Most of the mothers that I know do breastfeed. But as I mentioned, to have a little one can be depressing as well, because there are certain things that you must do, like you mustn't drink when you breastfeed, because what you eat is what the child eats. So, that's where it can be difficult, because people want to go out, want to have fun and stuff."

While Bongi was relatively new to motherhood, Linda already had four children and was well aware of the trials and sacrifices of being a mother. She was also seasoned in knowing what to expect at each age, and accustomed to the fact that things change over time. While one of her frustrations, at the time of the interview, was that she had very little time on

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her own, she realised that the lack of personal time is a common problem for mothers with babies and that it would change with time. So, for Linda breastfeeding was a symbol of this particular stage of motherhood, and by viewing this stage as transitory reminded her that the challenges would pass.

Linda: "Yeah, and I think particularly having a tiny one, they, I'm still breastfeeding, so I can't really go anywhere without her."

Eve made the decision to leave her child with caretakers when she went back to work. She is a medical professional who spends long hours at the hospital during the week while her daughter is either at day-care or with her parents. Eve had to overcome severe feelings of guilt before she could admit to herself that she wanted to go back to work for the enjoyment of her job rather than out of necessity or for financial reasons. In Eve's profession one is expected to work extra-long hours with hardly any breaks. Eve enjoyed the reputation of being a particularly steadfast employee. However, she managed to take fifteen minutes every now and then to express her breastmilk, without feeling guilty for abandoning her colleagues for those few minutes, or wondering if they judged her for it. For Eve, this represented an accomplishment and a sign of change: It signified a transition from feeling guilty about trying to juggle all her responsibilities, to an inner peace in that she can care about both work and family.

Eve: "Because I express milk at work. But luckily, I have my own office, and obviously our department is supposed to be open about those things. And I'm in a senior position, so I can excuse myself for 15 minutes. So, for me it was a very positive experience, but it is a challenge. It is not easy."

"It was quite symbolic of the transition that I made – that my job isn't my whole life... and I will give it to myself to take 15 minutes twice a day to provide for my child. So, for me it

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was quite empowering to make that shift to... I don't really care what they think now, I'm doing this now for myself and for my child."

Apart from a means to feed a child, breastfeeding can also hold other meanings for mothers. What breastfeeding represented for them differed greatly between the participants: Signs of perseverance and resolve; achievement and success; commitment and responsibility; shifting stages of life; the ability to balance multiple responsibilities; or a transition to a new inner reality. What these meanings have in common is that they are all in some way a sign of personal empowerment. These constructions of meaning converge and build upon the universal image of the nurturing and enduring mother. But what is evident in their stories is that breastfeeding also corresponds with the themes regarding the tensions and discomfort that mothers experience on a societal, interpersonal and intrapersonal level.

A brief summary of the chapter precedes the concluding chapter containing a discussion of the findings.

Chapter Summary

In the sections above, the main themes and subthemes, which were identified in the analyses of the data, were discussed. The mothers' own words and findings in the literature were used to support and elucidate each theme. Four main themes, with several dual-level sub-themes, were identified and elaborated upon. *Woman vs The World: Untangling the Tentacles of the Patriarchy*, considered the structural origins of the tensions that mothers experience regarding employment choices. *Woman vs Women: Tea with an Elephant in the Room*, explored the interpersonal tensions between mothers, and *Woman vs The Self: The Voices in my Head*, grappled with the inward directed tensions within the mothers' own psyches. In the final theme, *The Breast of Life: A Stone in the Pond*, the first three themes

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were tied together in a demonstration of how they all manifest in mothers' experiences of breastfeeding.

The concluding chapter includes a summary of the findings as well as final reflections on the data results. The strengths and limitations are also highlighted, where after recommendations for further studies are made.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

“Is not this contribution of the devoted mother unrecognized precisely because it is immense? If this contribution is accepted, it follows that every man or woman who is sane, every man or woman who has the feeling of being a person in the world, and for whom the world means something, every happy person, is in infinite debt to a woman.” – Donald Winnicott

Overview

In this chapter a summary of the themes and a discussion of the main findings, which addressed the research question that guided the study, are provided. Thereafter an evaluation of the research in terms of its strengths and limitations, and recommendations for future research are deliberated. Before discussing the findings, it is necessary to provide a broad overview of the research to remind the reader of the context.

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of mothers in terms of their employment decisions, and to investigate how they attach meaning to this choice and how it influences, and is influenced by, other aspects of their lives. The paradigmatic framework of the study was Social Constructionism and the data were viewed through the lenses of Feminist Theory and Second Order Cybernetic theory. A qualitative case study design was used to gather and analyse the data. The participants comprised a small sample group of women in the Cape Town and Stellenbosch regions of the Western Cape, South Africa.

The research question that this study aimed to answer was: *What are the experiences of mothers who make the decision to be a stay-at-home mother, or be a working mother?* And the sub-question that followed was: *What meaning do mothers attach to the tensions experienced in making employment decisions, and how does this meaning impact on, or how is it influenced by their social context, relationships, identity and emotional well-being?*

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The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight mothers of young children, four were stay-at-home mothers, and four were full-time employed. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using the hermeneutic cycle of familiarisation and immersion, thematising and coding, elaboration and interpretation and checking (Kelly, 1999). Feminist and social-constructionist perspectives, which directed the data collection and analysis, focus on context and language. A further guiding light was provided by Second Order Cybernetics, which emphasises a deference for multiple realities and the integrated influence of the researcher's personal stance.

Four main themes and corresponding dual-level subthemes were extracted from the rich data provided by the interviews. The themes followed a wide to narrow focus progression: From a socio-cultural perspective, to an interpersonal assessment and finally to the intrapersonal ramifications of the participants' experiences. A brief summary of the findings follows next. This is followed by reflections and concluding remarks on these findings.

Summary of the Research Findings

In this section a concise summary of the study findings reacquaint the reader of the main themes uncovered in the research. In the first theme, *Woman vs The World: Untangling the Tentacles of the Patriarchy*, the effects of the patriarchal system within which mothers make their employment decisions were explored. In the first subtheme a recurrence of similar choice patterns over generations was discovered, followed by the mothers' accounts of how trying to balance the expectations placed on them by society is unfeasible. This was followed by a close look at how workplaces can influence mothers' employment decisions, mothers' experiences of workplace ignorance and inflexibility, and mothers' views of persistent gender inequalities. In the final subtheme, women's experiences at home were investigated, with

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enlightening descriptions of how mothers' work at home is not respected in society. To elucidate further, related issues of life-partner support, or the absence thereof, the effect of how the finances are managed in families, and mothers' on-going struggles for household parity, were described.

The second theme, *Woman vs Women: Tea with an Elephant in the Room*, explored the relationships between mothers with regards to their employment choices. It was found that there was often much tension between women even though there was a strong reluctance to engage in direct conflict. The first subtheme discussed the predicament that judgement of others is an inbuilt function of making mothering choices. This was followed by examples of how mothers justify their decisions by expressing criticism of the alternative choice, even after expressly denying that they judge others or feel judged. The next subtheme explored the different topics about which mothers disagree. And finally, the effect of the media on the relationships between mothers was explored.

The third theme, *Woman vs The Self: The Voices in my Head*, looked at the intrapersonal tension that mothers experience when deciding to stay at home or return to employment after having children. It was found that although there were several legitimate external factors that caused tension, women regularly directed the causes of the tension inward. This internalisation was summarised by the theme's leitmotiv "perhaps it is only in my head". In the subthemes, several of the difficulties that mothers experienced were explored, such as the predicament of the immeasurability of achievement in mothering, as well as struggles that women experienced in creating new identities for themselves when they became mothers. The scramble to find self-worth in the unsung world of mothering, and the heavy burden of mother-guilt further illuminated the theme. Finally, mothers' attempts at mitigating the tension through self-care were examined.

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In the final theme, *The Breast of Life: A Stone in the Pond*, the findings in the first three themes were applied through examples of breastfeeding. It was found that the structural, inter- and intrapersonal effects of mothers' employment decisions were all illustrated by their breastfeeding experiences. On a structural level, women reported that workplaces make it difficult to continue breastfeeding when new mothers resume full-time employment, and may thus influence the decision to return to work or to become a stay-at-home mother. Interpersonally, breastfeeding was considered one of the 'hot topics' that divided mothers. And intrapersonally, women often experienced anxiety and guilt about breastfeeding, particularly if they struggled to breastfeed, or could not breastfeed, because of work responsibilities. The themes section was concluded by the participants' accounts of how they managed to cultivate resilience in the face of their struggles with motherhood, and how they found in breastfeeding a sign of personal agency and empowerment. A final overall discussion of these findings, in relation to the research questions, follows below.

Concluding Remarks: Putting Baby to Bed

In the previous sections, the four main themes and several subthemes were summarised and the meanings attributed to the eight participants' experiences of motherhood and employment were highlighted. With this freshly painted background, a closing discussion, framed around the themes, is now presented to provide answers to the research questions posed at the beginning of this thesis. Thereafter, an evaluation of the strengths and limitations of the study and recommendations for further research are considered.

The themes, which were revealed during the research analysis, tracked the mothers' experiences in concentric circles: From the broadest level that encompassed their experiences linked to society and social structures, to the middle level that focused on interpersonal relationships with other mothers, and last to the narrowest level that consisted of the

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intrapersonal experiences vested in the mothers' own psyches. Breastfeeding, which was found to be a common denominator in all three themes, was added as a final (centre point) theme.

The results of the analyses echoed the very technique that was used to extract the results. The hermeneutic cycle of analysis allows interpretation to be achieved in a circular movement between the whole and its parts, whereby the meaning of the parts are reflected on in connection with the meaning of the whole, and the whole is understood by considering its component parts (Terre Blanche et al., 2011). Indeed, the research results reflected an interplay between the participants' wider social context and the parts contained within it, which included the relational constructions between different mothers and the dynamics within their own psyches. This wide to narrow focus progression is visually presented in the following diagram:

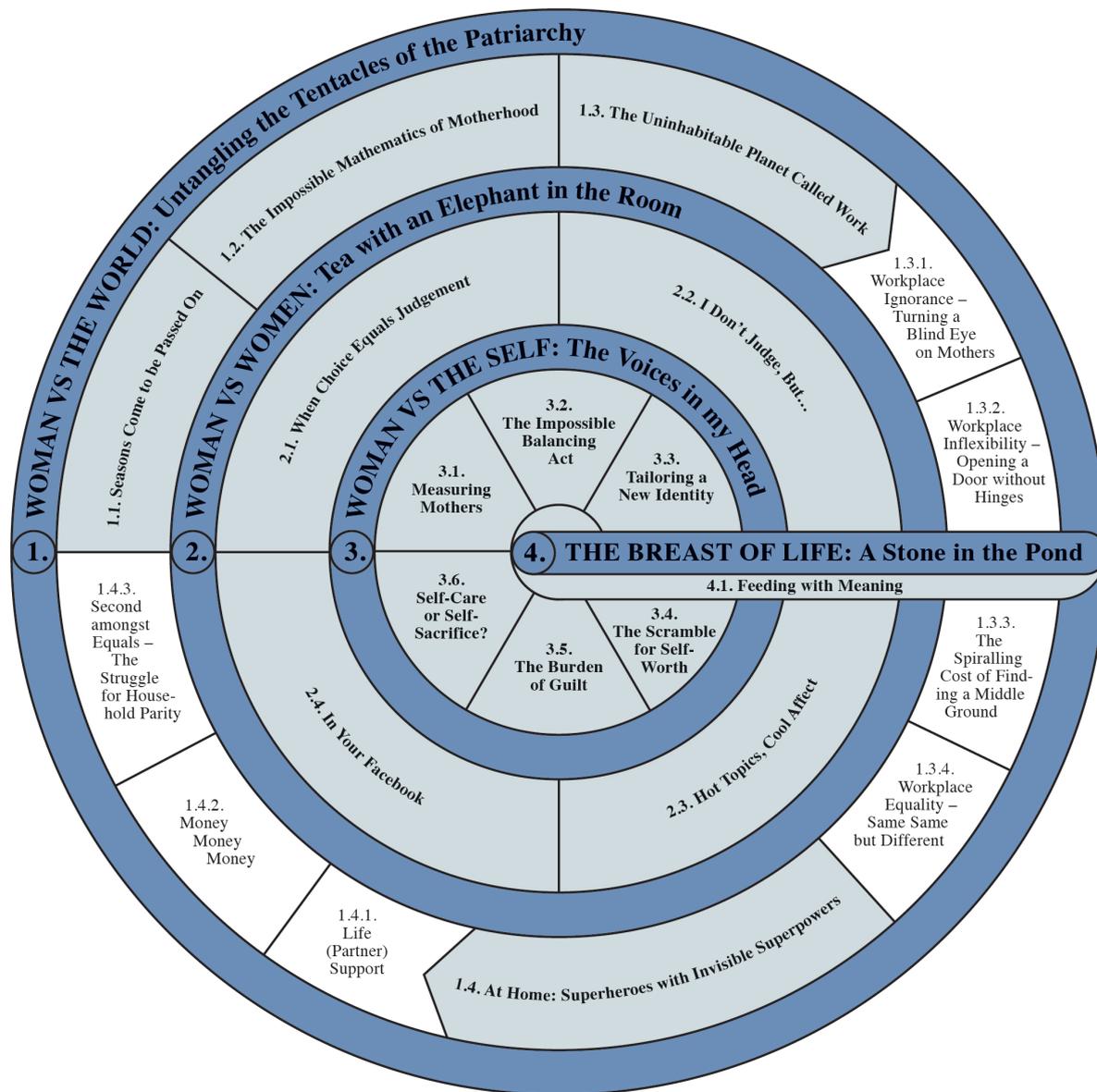


Figure 1. Themes illustrated as concentric circles

As illustrated above, four main themes were identified in the analysis of the mothers’ experiences of their employment choices. The study, which followed the paradigm of Social Constructionism, obtained data through interviews with eight mothers, who spoke of their

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motherhood and employment experiences. I acknowledged that the beliefs and meanings attributed to the matters discussed were mutually co-constructed between interviewee and researcher throughout the entire process, which began with interviews and continued throughout the analysis phase and conclusions of the study. The analyses also followed a deeper co-constructed reality in which the meanings fashioned on a societal level between mothers, genders, systems of patriarchy, as well as in matters related to labour, worth and social expectations, were discovered.

From the stories that the women told, it is clear that they suffered because their societal system placed most of the burden of the home and of childcare on women (Dillaway & Paré, 2008; McRobbie, 2013; Newcombe, 2007). They felt that this liability had a detrimental effect on their ability to achieve their highest potential. Within this system the mothers experienced a lack of societal status for the nurturing tasks of motherhood, which resulted in them feeling despondent and unappreciated. Not surprisingly, where possible, the participants expressed their choices in terms of values or functions that enjoy more prominence in society, such as financial motivations. In the absence of measurable justifications, some women reassured themselves that this ‘season’ in their life would soon pass.

This ‘season’, however, seems to be a recurring one, over generations, with most of the participants reporting that they followed in the footsteps of their own mothers, or that of their husband’s mother, in their decision to stay at home or keep working after having children. In this way, parenthood, as a powerful sociocultural force (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016), is sustained according to age-old patterns, regardless of its practical feasibility in modern society. At least one woman said that, even though she could have been a more successful breadwinner than her husband, her family dynamics imposed the ideal that it is the woman who stays at home with the children and not the man. This belief reinforces the

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patriarchal notion that women belong at home, and men in the work sphere. It also advocates that alternatives to traditional gender roles are unfeasible or morally problematic (Gross, 1998; Heath, 2013).

Although the women clearly struggled with patriarchal barriers (as discussed in *Woman vs The World: Untangling the Tentacles of the Patriarchy*), none of the mothers directly acknowledged that the social system was the cause of their discomfort. Moreover, they did not recognise that they might have a role to play in the preservation of this system. Hunnicutt's (2009) notion is hereby echoed that the workings of patriarchy in social structures are often obscured and therefore ignored or denied.

Large shifts, which invite women to partake profitably and professionally in the economic arena (Zimmerman et al., 2008), have been made in recent decades. However, numerous examples were given of how workplaces are often unaccommodating or unaware of the special needs of women who also have to take care of a family. As seen in the subtheme, *The Uninhabitable Planet Called Work*, the women, some of whom were frustrated by the limited options at their disposal, adapted their career paths towards jobs that were more flexible, while others chose to stay at home. When prompted to provide some practical suggestions that would make it more feasible for mothers to stay in the economic sector, the participants proposed leave policies that include time away from work when their children get sick, options for split positions where two people share the salary and workload, and flexitime arrangements where employees can work at more convenient hours or from home. The participants confirmed that contractually women mostly enjoyed the same privileges at work as men, however, their situations differed considerably, primarily due to their added responsibilities at home. The structuralist view that gender divisions influence resource distribution and institutional organisation in a patriarchal system, which

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disadvantage women in terms of employment choices, is thereby upheld (Hunnicut, 2009; Swan et al., 2018).

The burden that women bear, when their work at home is undervalued or unrecognised by society or by their life partners, was revealed in the subtheme, *At Home: Superheroes with Invisible Superpowers*. In some cases, the participants struggled to convince their life partners that the worth of their work at home was as valuable as the husband's job of earning money for the family. Some women said that they did not feel respected or equal to their partners because of the unequal hierarchy of these functions. The mothers also reported that they had to defend themselves against societal assumptions of domestic roles, for instance when they had to correct people in saying their husbands were not 'babysitting' but simply 'parenting'. These burdens all seem to stem from society's inability to recognise motherhood as a legitimate profession (Schultheiss, 2009), as well as from a structural preference for the binary division of mothering and work (Johnston & Swanson, 2007) based on a hierarchical notion that favours traditionally masculine undertakings over feminine roles (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). This trend reiterates the mainstay of a patriarchal system, in that it is characterised by dualism, where oppositional, rather than complementary thinking is favoured (Kirkley, 2000; Swan, et al., 2018).

Apart from tensions caused by socio-cultural constructions in society, participants also reported that tensions existed *between* mothers. These tensions were discussed in *Woman vs Women: Tea with an Elephant in the Room*. While the participants undoubtedly experienced a certain amount of strain or uneasiness in their relationships with other mothers, the origin or particulars of the conflict were so obscured or disguised that the women often doubted whether the tension really existed. The mothers demonstrated a strong inclination to uphold an ideal of mutual support and a firm reluctance to engage in direct conflict with other mothers. However, during the interviews, criticism or defensiveness was unequivocally

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present in their communication. This finding corresponds with the outcomes of other studies in which (a) mothers were critical of each other's choices (Young, 2006), and (b) mothers often turned on each other in denigration and disapproval (Johnston & Swanson; 2007).

The women reported that they were less likely to engage in conversations about controversial topics with women in their close social circles, than with women further removed. It seems likely then that women feared the judgement of women closer to themselves more than the criticisms of remote or anonymous connections. This correlates with the participants' experiences of witnessing aggressive discussions about motherhood on social media and other online platforms. These online displays of judgement between women, constitute the phenomenon popularly named the *mommy wars* (Crowley, 2015; Johnston & Swanson, 2004; Zimmerman et al., 2008). Most participants were weary of the negative effects of social media and mirrored Crowley's (2015) position that the media plays an important role in enforcing and promoting the *mommy wars* debate, which might contribute to a larger culture of 'mother blame'. However, according to some participants, this practice of blaming and shaming of mothers prompted an online countermovement in which mothers are encouraged to support each other and advocate non-judgement.

One explanation as to why mothers are sometimes reluctant to discuss topics on which they might disagree, is that a choice in one direction inevitably implies a choice against the alternative, thus creating an unsolvable impasse. Donohoe (2010) posited that the demarcation of a person's identity depends on 'otherness' and a differentiation from others. Advocating a certain position in order to uphold one's personal mother identity, could then automatically be seen as criticism of opposing positions, hence creating an unbridgeable rift between women. Some participants said that when they were confronted with mothers who made different choices, they felt an inner uneasiness since it made them unsure of their own

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decisions. This insecurity about their own positions, made mothers particularly sensitive to indirect messages from other mothers that alluded to criticism, which they then internalised.

In the subtheme, *I Don't Judge, But...*, the participants justified their own choices by criticising and engaging in stereotypes of alternative choices. Stereotypes, which are powerful forces in shaping behaviour and attitudes (Gahagan et al., 2007; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Milkie et al., 2016; Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017; Stone, 2007), can have a serious impact on the relationships between mothers. So, by consciously, or unconsciously, realising these consequences, mothers might be deterred from admitting or demonstrating judgement towards other mothers.

More direct disagreement was expressed when the participants spoke about specific topics related to motherhood. In *Hot Topics, Cool Affect*, some of the other volatile discussion points, apart from employment decisions, were identified. These topics often centred around the children and included issues such as vaccination, sleep training, childcare options, nutrition, and discipline styles. Topics related to a woman's body included the choice between natural or caesarean births, breastfeeding (whether at all, and for how long) and how quickly a woman should regain her pre-baby body shape. The participants reported that the affiliations amongst women around these topics were sometimes quite complicated, with women agreeing on certain issues but disagreeing on others.

This feedback corresponds with the conclusions of Young (2006) that mothers often turn on each other, rather than collectively tackling the instigators that afford complications within the scope of their choices. Press (2012) argued that it would be more constructive to direct frustration and critique towards the systems and structures that uphold the barriers that do not support or respect women. Mothers often focus their frustrations towards each other and the unsolvable dichotomies of their choices, but do not voice their sentiments. This can lead the mothers to internalise their tension.

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This internalisation was discussed in detail in the third theme, *Woman vs The Self: The Voices in my Head*. In this section it was shown that the participants experienced tension about their choices surrounding motherhood and employment that manifested as internal dialogues, which contributed to negative emotions such as self-doubt and guilt. Most of the women admitted that much of the pressure to be good mothers was self-inflicted. And that this pressure was aggravated by the external pressures they experienced on interpersonal and societal levels.

The tendency to internalise the tension that they experienced could have been the result of the ambiguous and often unspoken manner in which criticism was conveyed. On the other hand, it could also indicate symptoms of internal oppression (Kretzchmar; 1995), whereby mothers start to believe that they are to blame for, or deserving of, unfair patriarchal practises.

The lack of measurable outcomes, or feedback, for mothers who work at home, compared to working formally, causes many mothers to struggle to assess the true value of their domestic contributions. This inner turmoil is often referred to as the 'third shift' of caretaking (Zimmerman et al., 2008). These struggles seemed to be mitigated or aggravated by the participants' temperament. Ambitious, or task-oriented mothers appeared to experience more tension than relaxed or unambitious mothers. Tension could be moderated further by age and experience, since slightly older mothers with several children described less inner angst. However, since the sample size in this study was limited, more research is needed to confirm or discount these findings.

All the mothers in the study indicated that they experienced feelings of guilt in matters related, but not exclusive to, their employment decisions. Stay-at-home mothers wondered if they provided enough developmental stimulation for their children while at home fulltime, and felt guilty for not using their hard-earned educations. Working mothers

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felt guilty for not spending more time with their children, or for enjoying their jobs, or for not performing as well at work as they did before having children. Guilt often results from the internalisation of failure to achieve the untenable expectations set by society. Women are expected to have and do it all – they must be boundlessly nurturing, sexually attractive and professionally successful (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017).

These intrapersonal tensions are further narrowed down by the notions of identity and self-worth (refer to the subthemes, *Tailoring a New Identity* and *The Scramble for Self-worth*). The participants' transitions from being childless to being a mother necessitated a shift from their old way of life to a new life stage that often entailed adapting or discarding their previous personal identity. The participants frequently noted that by choosing a pronatalist path, they had to accept a certain loss, whether it was the loss of a previous lifestyle, personal freedom, social status, or achieving their professional potential. Since identity cannot be separated from socio-cultural contextual influences (Golden, 2001), as well as from the meaning that individuals attach to their circumstances (Sallee, 2008), it makes sense that motherhood can cause disruptions in women's identities (Rogan, 1997), and could lead to feelings of loss if they are confronted with the consequences of their choices.

Most of the participants, who described themselves according to their mothering tasks, reiterated Rittenour's (2014) position that women mostly see motherhood as the principle role in their personal identities. These perceptions, which support pronatalism, reinforce parenthood as normative and an inevitable part of becoming an adult. If mothers discarded their status as a mother, little else of their identity would remain. In some cases, mothers also communicated that their children were extensions of their own identity. This sentiment corresponds with the pronatal inclination of equating womanhood with motherhood (Bimha & Chadwick, 2016; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018).

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In *Measuring Mothers* and *The Scramble for Self-worth*, it was shown that the stay-at-home mothers struggled to maintain a sense of self-worth. Furthermore, the stay-at-home mothers felt that they lacked affirmation and recognition for the work they did at home. This resulted in feeling undervalued, and oftentimes adversely influenced their social relationships with their life partners. One participant reported that she suffered from mental health issues that resulted from these tensions. This relates to the reports of Frech and Damaske (2012), that stay-at-home mothers are more prone to health problems than working mothers. The working mothers, on the other hand, felt enriched and supported by their colleagues' feedback.

Most mothers recognised the importance of self-care as a way to cope with life's tensions and challenges (see *Self-Care or Self-Sacrifice?*). Not only does self-care benefit the women themselves, but it enhances the well-being of the entire family. This ripple effect of mothers' state of well-being on other members of the family was also reported by Gahagan et al. (2007). Forms of self-care included physical exercise, socialising with friends, joining support groups, adopting a hobby and/or engaging in professional psychotherapy.

In the final theme, *The Breast of Life: A Stone in the Pond*, the common mothering practice of breastfeeding was found to be more than a way of providing a baby with nutrition, but also as an emblem of empowerment. Each woman communicated that they attached a specific and personal meaning to breastfeeding that embodied notions of empowerment. The personal meanings included beliefs that breastfeeding is a symbol of perseverance, an achievement in mothering, and/or commitment and responsibility. One mother saw it as an emblem for the shifting stages of life, while another regarded it as a sign that she had the ability to balance all her responsibilities. For yet another participant, it signalled a transition to a new inner reality.

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Apart from representing a sense of empowerment, the participants' stories of breastfeeding also related to the tensions discovered and described in the first three themes. On structural and societal levels, as well as on interpersonal and intrapersonal levels, breastfeeding experiences exemplify the difficulties that women endure regarding their employment choices. Service system limitations (Bourke-Taylor et al., 2011) include, *inter alia*, inflexible work arrangements and public aversion to mothers breastfeeding in public (Grant, 2016; Lee, 2018). These limitations not only create tension for mothers they also influence their employment choices.

Tensions relating to breastfeeding do not only occur in the work environment but also within interpersonal relationships. Antagonism between mothers (Young, 2006) may be sparked by disagreements regarding various available alternatives (such as whether to breastfeed at all, or how long). While feminist thinking demands that structural changes are needed to improve conditions for women (Sallee, 2008) and that breastfeeding is a fundamental human rights issue (Drouin, 2013), the participants seemed to be oblivious to the requisite of change on this level, or else they considered it completely futile to attempt to transform the patriarchal structures that disadvantaged them. In addition, it seems that when women discover that disagreements between mothers lead to unsolvable impasses, and when there is no concrete right or wrong answer, the tensions are directed inward.

Considering the aim of this study, the research found that the participants experienced considerable tension surrounding their employment decisions. The meanings, which that they attached to this tension were mostly directed towards themselves, and led to feelings of guilt, self-doubt or self-inflicted pressure. The women reported extensively that their experiences around the choice to stay at home or continue working after having children were influenced by their societal contexts at home and at work, as well as by the fraught relationships between mothers, however indirect the conflict might be. And yet, the participants seldom pursued

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answers or solutions for their tension in the societal or interpersonal spheres. Rather, contradictory to their vivid accounts of structural and relational conflicts, the leitmotiv frequently rang out in their stories that the tension was perhaps “all in my head”.

Each participant’s experiences about motherhood and employment choices, which were unique and varied, underscored the multiverse stance of the ecosystemic theorisation on which this study was built. From a feminist and social constructionist position, the contexts within which these experiences manifested were also highlighted by the findings. I, the researcher, acknowledge the poignancy with which the contradictions in the mothers’ tales stood out, and how it urged the analysis to go deeper than the surface level data of the interviews, to find the point where the women’s personal experiences and social contexts converged.

It is clear that these mothers suffered because of unattainable and contradictory standards for motherhood in society, which create real barriers for their success and welfare, even though the meaning that they attached to these notions differed. However, it is my belief that the women unconsciously participated in maintaining the status quo, by failing to recognise and act on the real causes of their tensions: The structural obstacles that prohibit a feasible balance between motherhood and employment. Rather they diverted the tension towards an inter- and intrapersonal relational focus.

It seems as if women would rather choose self-doubt than openly admit to judging or feeling judged by other mothers, and would rather crouch in guilt than raise themselves up against the patriarchy. This underscores Odenweller and Rittenour’s (2017) opinion that mothers participate in upholding unjust social constructions, for example when they demonstrate infighting within these oppressive idealisations. This inclination underlines Hunnicutt’s position that the patriarchal system is maintained by all involved, since there are privileges and costs that both benefit and handicap men and women (2009).

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These findings may seem bleak from a feminist viewpoint, which has an inherent wish to see the elimination of patriarchy's unequal distribution of power, benefits and burdens, in favour of fairness, inclusivity and equality (Kirkley, 2000; Rittenour, 2014). Fortunately, there is hope in the power of social discourse. Even if some common discourses, such as in the *mommy wars*, establish or sustain unrealistic expectations for motherhood and employment, their antithesis is also contained in those very discourses. Consider for instance the Foucauldian notion that the power of resistance against the ideals transferred through the discourse, is contained within the discourse dynamic, since power can be altered by responses to actions (Malatzky, 2017). Therefore, even though mothers are not immune to internalising the tensions created by unfeasible motherhood and employment ideals, by becoming conscious of this internalisation and eventually acting critically upon their realisations, transformation may begin.

Following from the above reflections and discussion of the findings, a thorough evaluation of the research, which follows forthwith, focusses on the strengths and limitations of the study, as well as recommendations for further research.

Evaluation of the Study

After considering the findings of the research, it is important to finally evaluate the study in terms of its strengths and limitations and to consider recommendations for future research. These issues are discussed in the following sections.

Limitations of the Study

Although factors that might have a limiting effect on the outcome of the research were avoided, there were some elements that were inevitable and inherent to the nature of the study that could not be controlled. One such limitation of qualitative studies is the

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researcher's subjectivity. In light of the ecosystemic view that the researcher is an active participant in the research (Becvar & Becvar, 2014), it must be understood that the researcher's own personal context influences all aspects of the study, from choosing the topic, designing the study, interviewing the participants and analysing the data. It is thus impossible to extricate the findings and conclusions from the personal context of the researcher. To account for this, my own worldview was described in the methodology section in an attempt to provide a balanced outlook on the conditions that influenced the research. In addition, the research was supervised by an experienced researcher and clinical psychologist to mitigate any bias. Self-reflexive and self-reflective views provided an ethical framework from which to proceed, as purported in a second order cybernetic perspective.

The feminist ideals of striving towards equality in the interviews and in reporting were upheld, however, being entirely egalitarian is unachievable, since it is the researcher that ultimately decides the research questions, analyses the responses and makes inferences about the participants' stories. I acknowledge that the descriptions and analyses of the mothers' constructions of the meaning that they derived from their experiences surrounding employment choices, were at least partially influenced by my own social, cultural and economic situation. Therefore, it is possible that under different circumstances, or in the hands of another researcher, a different study and findings could have emerged.

Another possible limitation is response bias: The inclination of participants to answer questions untruthfully. For example, they may feel pressure to give socially acceptable answers or provide information they think the researcher wants to hear. Since I am full-time employed, stay-at-home mothers might have felt a need to defend their positions, while working mothers might have suffered from assumed shared bias. Conversely, since I am not a mother, the participants might have been reassured of my impartiality, or tried to

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convince me of my ignorance in maternal matters. Special care was taken to solace participants with the knowledge that I had no agenda other than to listen to their stories.

The small sample group of the study limits the generalisability of the findings as the sample was not a true representation of the diverse racial, socio-economic and cultural groups in South Africa. This is not to say that the data gained in this study are not valid, but rather that the information gathered is applicable only to the mothers in this study at the time they were studied. However, the small sample size can be considered a strength in that depth of information could be obtained, thus this type of research gains validity at the expense of generalisability (Moon et al., 1990). The aim was to use the themes and concerns, which emerged from the study, to inform theory and to incite follow-up research with a broader context in mind.

Strengths of the Study

While there are many quantitative studies that focus on women's employment decisions after having children, there are few studies that illuminate the personal stories of women who go through this decision-making process. One of the strengths of this study could therefore be described as giving a voice to the numbers hidden in the literature, or colouring in the picture with enhanced vividness and depth.

Another strength is the paradigmatic, theoretical and methodological coherence of the study. Qualitative methodology was a successful fit for the research aim and contributed to the intensity of information that was extracted from such a small sample. Hermeneutic methods of data analysis, which are successful in ensuring in-depth descriptions of real people, allow enough tractability that leaves the final accounts open for further interpretation and discussion (Terre Blanche et al., 2011).

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From an ecosystemic viewpoint the study, which was considerate of the stance of multiple realities, respected and incorporated the views of the participants as well as those of the researcher into the findings. I acknowledged that the findings ultimately reflect my own worldview since all observations are self-referential, and that the reader's own epistemology will influence his/her perceptions. I aimed to be open and honest about my personal circumstances that could possibly influence the interpretation of the data. These revelations observed Becvar and Becvar's (2014) guidelines of providing the reader with a vantage point from which to perceive the researcher's effect on the findings.

The ethics of the research were addressed by adhering to the following important aspects of ethical practice, as recommended by De Vos et al. (2011), Terre Blanche, et al. (2011) and Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2008): Ethical clearance, voluntary participation and informed consent, privacy and confidentiality and beneficence and nonmaleficence. Through curious and sincere interest in the participants, the aim of illuminating the stories of real women was achieved. And furthermore, the analyses highlighted their stories within a social context where several themes were revealed and discussed, with the hope to inspire further debate.

Recommendations

This study builds upon an existing body of research concerned with the tension that mothers experience in having to balance domestic and professional responsibilities. However, there are few studies in the literature that are concerned with the impact of this balance on mothers' unique psyches, social relationships and general circumstances. While the tensions described in this study are perhaps very common and pervasive in society, the personal narratives that describe them are rarely recorded and explained within their specific contexts. The themes identified in this study show that employment decisions have an impact on, and

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are impacted by, a wide-ranging network of circumstances that permeate women's social-cultural position in society, their interpersonal relationships with other mothers, and their own inner world and mental health. These themes could be further explored on their own and in more detail in expanded research projects.

While the current study was an exploratory investigation into the topic, it could be interesting to observe the results in qualitative comparative studies between stay-at-home and working mothers, although a much larger sample group would then be advised. Furthermore, while the scope of this study included only mothers who had a choice to stay-at-home or continue working, there is a wealth of unheard stories from women who do not enjoy this choice. To learn how those mothers attach meaning to their circumstances and how their situations subsequently affect their relationships and mental condition would be a valuable addition to existing knowledge.

Another aspect that came to the fore, in the current study, that might warrant further investigation, is the effect that temperament has on the tension that mothers experience regarding their employment and mothering choices. The study could also be adapted or built upon by including the narratives of men and their views and experiences of women's employment choices. Studies that address the experiences and perceptions of same-sex families are also recommended.

As discourses shift in society, there is a move away from the dominance of masculine traits in favour of including and regarding feminine traits. And so, there is also a shift in focus from traditional gender binaries to more diverse gender allocations, therefore, meanings around roles and relationships may change. Follow up studies could investigate these changes. A final conclusion to this thesis follows next.

Conclusion

The final chapter contained the conclusions, evaluations, recommendations and final remarks on the research. In a last broad overview, the reader was reminded of the scope and aims of the study. Thereafter a summary of the research findings, which included a synopsis of the four main themes that emerged from analysing the data, was provided. The concluding remarks contained a diagram with a visual representation of the findings, as well as a thorough discussion of the findings. The evaluation of the study contained an explication of the limitations and strengths of the research as well as recommendations for further actions and research.

This study hoped to give voice to a few women with regard to their experiences of motherhood and employment choices. A qualitative research method proved to be valuable in achieving this aim, despite the method's limitations. The data suggest that the participants often internalised tensions surrounding motherhood and employment and personally undermined these stresses as being "only in my head". While the findings are not meant to be generalised to the experiences and contexts of all women and mothers, I hope that through this study the participants' specific stories are validated as important in the broader appreciation of mothers' experiences in the world.

The themes, which were excavated through analysing the data, revealed that the origins of maternal tension about employment matters might be found in the larger societal context of the patriarchal system in which they exist, which then manifest in conflict between mothers and in inner turmoil within the psyches of the mothers themselves.

The ecosystemic and feminist theoretical approaches of the study proved a successful fit to tackle these predicaments, especially because of the reverence for context, language, personal perspective and the integral role of the researcher contained in these models.

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It is my wish that this research will contribute to a public dialogue that will assist mothers and non-mothers in breaking down the barriers that deter them from fulfilling their full potential, whether these barriers are located in the social structures of a patriarchal society, in injurious relationship dynamics, or entrenched in the pathways of her “own head”.

*Life the announcer.
I assure you
there are many ways to have a child.
I bastard mother
promise you
there are many ways to be born.
They all come forth
in their own grace.*

– Muriel Rukeyser

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Addenda

Addendum A. Participants Informed Consent Form



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

Title of Study: Between a Baby and a Boardroom: Social Constructions of Women's Employment Decisions

Name of Researcher: Liezel van Beek

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person (Ms Liezel van Beek) asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the interview.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname..... (please print)

Participant Signature.....Date.....

Researcher's Name & Surname...Liezel van Beek.....(please print)

Researcher's signature.....Date.....



Addendum B. Participants' Introduction to the Study**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

Ethics clearance reference number: 33692513

16 April 2018

Title of Study: *Between a Baby and a Boardroom: Social Constructions of Women's Employment Decisions*

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Liezel van Beek and I am doing research with Dr. Nikki Themistocleous, a senior lecturer in the Department of Psychology, towards a MA degree at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled *Between a Baby and a Boardroom: Social Constructions of Women's Employment Decisions*.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

I am conducting this research to explore themes of motherhood and employment, looking especially at the experiences of women with young children who decide to stay at home, and also mothers who decide to continue full-time employment.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You have been selected to receive this request through the following process: In order to broaden the range of the participants, I contacted a selection of people from my extended social group and women in the neighbourhood and community networks to which I belong, to request them to identify women who fit the criteria of the study. We are thus connected by a mutual contact and you have been invited because you fit all of the following criteria of the study:

- Mothers between 25 and 45 years old.
- At least one child must be 5 years old or younger.
- Either full-time employed or stay-at-home (previously employed).



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- Must be part of a household with an alternative source of income, such as a working spouse, partner, or parent.

It is a small study with a limited sample size that will take into account the stories of approximately 8-12 women. Real names will not be revealed in the final report and all personal information will be handled in the strictest confidence. If you are willing to participate in the study, or require further information, please contact me directly and I will provide the necessary information.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

Participants will take part in a one-on-one semi-structured conversation style interview conducted by me, in English or Afrikaans, and that will be audio recorded. The interviews will be scheduled and take place at a time and place convenient for you. You will also be asked to send back a document with some biographical information and written consent that you agree to take part in the study.

Approximate time needed to participate:

- Filling in and sending back the consent documents: 15minutes
- Arranging a suitable place and time for the interview: 10minutes
- Transport to arranged interview venue: 0-30minutes (depending on the venue)
- Interview conversation: 1 hour 30minutes
- TOTAL: Approximately 2hours.

You can expect the conversation to cover the following broad topics:

- Biographical information (as obtained through the attached document)
- Contextual and Circumstantial information:
 - Education/ Training background
 - Family background
 - Cultural awareness
- Support
 - Main sources of support
 - Challenges and needs
- Family Setup
 - Gender roles



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- Parenting style
- Employment
 - Current / past employment
 - Benefits/ drawbacks of employment
 - Employer's attitude towards motherhood responsibilities
- Experiences of Motherhood
 - Joys and challenges
 - Expectations and pressures
 - Personal vs children's needs
- Experiences Related to Other Mothers
 - Frequency of contact with other mothers
 - Perception of other mother's opinions of employment decisions
- Broader Society
 - Feasibility of balancing motherhood and employment
 - Barriers to employment
- Personal and Emotional Experiences
 - Current emotional position
 - Experiences of belonging

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. If you decide to withdraw, any information that you have already submitted up to that point will not be used in the research report.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Although the outcome of the study cannot be predicted in advance, the research hopes to inform and supplement the existing body of literature that studies the issues surrounding motherhood and employment. Since the focus of this study is the personal stories of a small selection of women, it aims to benefit existing knowledge by uncovering new themes and adding in-depth, nuanced information not usually obtained in data-driven research projects.



ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

Apart from giving up approximately 2 hours of your time, I hope that the research will not have any negative consequences for the participants. However, while most people experience a positive effect when being able to express their ideas and in talking about their lives, others might find it uncomfortable to talk about personal issues or about situations in which they experience conflict. Participants will not be expected to talk about any topic unless they feel comfortable to do so. If a participant finds that she feels distressed after the interview, even though she willingly participated, she will be given the option to arrange a debriefing session with a trained counsellor at the researcher's expense.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Participants might be concerned about the consequences of having their identities revealed in the study report. In order to prevent any breaches of identity protection, no real names will be used. Your responses will be given a pseudonym and you will be referred to in this way in the data, any publications, or other research reporting methods such as conference proceedings. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

Your responses may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including a transcriber and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee. Where applicable these individuals will maintain confidentiality by signing a confidentiality agreement that will be submitted to the Research Ethics Review Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study (myself and my supervisor), unless you give permission for other people to see the records. In this way, the confidentiality of your identity will be carefully guarded and your personal information will be kept private. Keep in mind, however, that anonymity cannot be guaranteed fully, since at least our mutual contact that forwarded this request will be aware of your possible participation. In addition, your identity will be known to myself, as the researcher.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

Hard copies of your biographical information sheet, and interview transcripts will be stored by me for a minimum period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at my home for future



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research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. At the time that the information must be discarded hard copies will be shredded and/or electronic copies will be permanently deleted from the hard drive of the computer through the use of a relevant software program.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

Participants will not receive payment or incentives for taking part in the study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL?

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Psychology at Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact myself on Tel: 0766440902 or e-mail: liezelvanbeek@gmail.com. The findings will be accessible from March, 2019.

Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact me at the same contact details as above.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr Nikki Themistocleous at the Department of Psychology, Tel: 012 429 8277 or e-mail: themini@unisa.ac.za.

Contact the research ethics chairperson of the Department of Psychology, Prof Piet Kruger, at e-mail: krugep@unisa.ac.za if you have any ethical concerns.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

Liezel van Beek



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Addendum C. Participant Biographical Information Sheet**PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHICAL DATA SHEET**

Title of Study: Between a Baby and a Boardroom: Social Constructions of Women's Employment Decisions

Name of Researcher: Liezel van Beek

Research participant criteria:

- Mothers between 25 and 45 years old.
- At least one child must be 5 years old or younger.
- Either full-time employed or stay-at-home (previously employed).
- Must be part of a household with an alternative source of income, such as a working spouse, partner, or parent.

If you comply with all of the criteria, and agree to take part in the study, please fill in the following information:

- **First name:** _____
- **Age:** _____
- **Number of children:** _____
- **Children's ages:** _____
- **Full-time employed/ Stay-at-home mom:** _____
- **Current/ previous job:** _____
- **Marriage/ relationship status:** _____
- **Main source of family income (e.g. husband/ parent/ self):** _____
- **Interview language preference (English/ Afrikaans):** _____
- **Contact details:**
 - **Cell phone number:** _____
 - **Email address:** _____



Addendum D. Interview Structure**INTERVIEW STRUCTURE**

Ethics clearance reference number: 33692513

16 April 2018

Title of Study: *Between a Baby and a Boardroom: Social Constructions of Women's Employment Decisions*

Interview Introduction:

Thank you once again for taking the time to take part in my study and to participate in this conversation. As you already know I am a student at Unisa, doing my Masters Degree in Psychology, and my topic is *Between a Baby and a Boardroom: Social Constructions of Women's Employment Decisions*. I am specifically interested in the experiences of women with young children surrounding their choice to stay at home or to continue with full-time employment. It is an in-depth study that is interested in the personal stories of a few women.

I trust that you have read through the information document that I sent to you via our mutual contact. Would you like us to go through it again? If you have any questions you are welcome to ask me at any time. I would like to remind you that the interview will be audio recorded. And also, that your participation is completely voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time without consequences. Although there are a few people that might know that you had the opportunity to take part in the study, such as myself, my supervisor and our mutual contact, your information and the details of our interview will be handled with the strictest confidence and your real name will not be revealed in the study report.

It is my wish that you will find this experience personally beneficial and enjoyable. And that you will feel relaxed in the knowledge that since you are only speaking about and for yourself there can be no wrong responses. If, however, you experience distress during or after the interview, please feel free to request that I arrange a debriefing session with a professional counsellor for you.



Do you have any questions before we begin? If not, we can proceed to sign the Informed Consent Document and I will start the recording.

Core questions to be asked during the interview:

Family background:

Please tell me more about yourself. Where did you grow up, do you have brothers and sisters? Are you married? How many children do you have? How old are they? What are their names?

Employment background:

What job do you do/ did you do before having children? What is your education background? How long have you been doing this job? Tell me more about what you enjoyed/disliked about working full-time. What are/were the benefits of being employed? Tell me about your reasons to stay full-time employed/ decision to stay at home. What influenced your decision?

Motherhood and Identity:

Tell me more about your experiences of motherhood and being a mother. What are the biggest joys and challenges? How is it different from what you expected before you had children? What do you think your children need most from you? How do you balance your own needs with those of your children? How important is it for you to be a good mother? How do you separate your idea of yourself as a mother and of that as a woman or a person, if at all?

Family Setup and Support:

Give me an idea of how your family arranges and distributes day to day tasks. How do you decide who has to do what? Do you have fixed roles for certain tasks? Who would you say is your main support in your family? Do you have an extended family that is involved in the household? How does your household arrangement compare to that of the family that you grew up in?

Family Support

What is your family's view of your decision to work full-time/ stay at home? Partner? Parents? What do you think were their expectations? What do you think are the benefits/ drawbacks of your decision for them?

Work Support:



How do/did your workplace handle the changes that come with motherhood? Do you find your workplace to be supportive of mothers? Do you think your workplace is different from other companies? Do you think men and women are dealt with in the same way by employers when they become parents?

Workplace suggestions:

In your opinion, what would be some practical suggestions to make the workplace more mother-friendly? If these suggestions were implemented do you think you would have made the same choice about staying at home/ working full-time? How do you feel about the suggestion that stay-at-home mothers should be paid for raising children?

Society:

What do you think is the perception of mothers who work full time? What do you think is the perception of mothers who decide to stay home? Do you think society thinks women who work full-time/ stay at home are successful? Do you think society views women who work full-time/ stay at home as good mothers? How would you say your culture differs from other cultures in this regard?

Other mothers:

What about other mothers – do you feel other mothers support your decision to work full-time/ stay at home? Do you ever feel judged by women who made the opposite choice? Do you think you judge other mothers that made the opposite choice? Why? In what ways? How does it make you feel?

Conflict (if appropriate to the conversation)

What are the topics that mothers usually disagree/argue about? How do you usually deal with opinions about mothering and lifestyle that differ from your own? What would you like to say to mothers who made the opposite employment choice? And to mothers who made the same choice as you?

Pressure

Do you ever feel pressure to prove that you are a "good mom"? Where do you think that pressure comes from? What are the expectations of a good mom, in your mind? Do you think women carry a heavier burden than men in this regard? What role do you think the media plays in the expectations of mothers and employment decisions? How do you think women can support each other more? How do you think men and society can support women more?



Wrap-up

Do you often get a chance to talk about these matters? How do you feel now after talking about the issues that we discussed?

To end off on a light note, I would like you to tell me about a time when you felt really successful at being a mother. Something that made you feel like you were the best mom in the world.

Thank you:

Thank you so much for telling your story and for sharing your thoughts. It has been extremely insightful and I can learn a great deal from you. Your contribution is very valuable to my study and I am grateful for this sincere and open way in which we could conduct the conversation. Thank you also for spending your valuable time. I wish you all the best for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or queries.



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Addendum E. Ethical Clearance

Ref. No: PERC-17012

**Ethical Clearance for M/D students: Research on human participants**

The Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at Unisa has evaluated this research proposal for a Higher Degree in Psychology in light of appropriate ethical requirements, with special reference to the requirements of the Code of Conduct for Psychologists of the HPCSA and the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics.

Student Name: Liezel van Beek**Student no.** 33692513**Supervisor:** Ms N. Themistocleous**Affiliation:** Department of Psychology, UNISA**Title of project:**

Between a baby and a boardroom: Mothers' perception of being judged for their employment decisions

The proposal was evaluated for adherence to appropriate ethical standards as required by the Psychology Department of Unisa. The application was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology on the understanding that –

- All ethical conditions related to voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality of the information and the right to withdraw from the research must be explained to participants in a way that will be clearly understood and a signed letter of informed consent will be obtained from each of the participants in the study;
- If further counseling is required in some cases, the participants will be referred to appropriate counseling services.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in purple ink, which appears to read 'M Papaikononou'.

Prof. M Papaikononou

[For the Ethics Committee]
[Department of Psychology, Unisa]

Date: 2017-03-01

Addendum F. Turnitin Digital Receipt

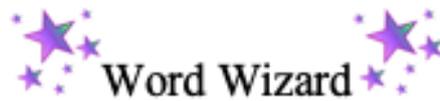
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 Page count: **247**
 Word count: **64,909**
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 Submission date: **05-Jan-2020 05:04PM (UTC+0200)**
 Submission ID: **1239333457**



Addendum G. Editing Certificate

Date: 5 January, 2020

To: Whom it may concern

This letter confirms that I, an accredited editor of the University of South Africa, edited the thesis detailed below.

I make no claim as to the accuracy of the research content or objectives of the author. The author had the option to accept or reject suggestions and changes to the document after my editing. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me on email (carylochse@gmail.com).

BETWEEN A BABY AND A BOARDROOM:
Social constructions of mothers' employment decisions

by

LIEZEL VAN BEEK

submitted in accordance with the requirements for
the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in the subject
PSYCHOLOGY

Dr Caryl Ochse (D.litt et Phil)



Name: Liezel van Beek

Unisa student number: 33692513

Degree: Masters of Art in Psychology

Supervisor: Dr N Themistocleous

January 2020

TITLE: BETWEEN A BABY AND A BOARDROOM:

Social constructions of mothers' employment decisions

ENGLISH ABSTRACT:

The topic of work-life balance has gained much attention in recent years. A focal point remains the effects of maternal employment on the well-being of women and children, despite shifts in society towards gender equality. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of mothers who either had chosen to stay at home after having children or to continue with full-time employment; and how their decision impacted their lives. This qualitative study, based on the Social Constructionist paradigm, and Second Order Cybernetics and Feminist Theories, included interviews with four full-time employed and four stay-at-home South African mothers. The data were analysed using hermeneutic analysis. The findings suggest that the participants' tensions regarding motherhood and employment were strongly influenced by structural obstacles at work and at home, interpersonal relationships with other mothers, as well as intrapersonal experiences. Breastfeeding was identified as a prominent topic within the various themes.

AFRIKAANSE OPSOMMING:

Die kwessie van 'n werk-lewe balans geniet die afgelope paar jaar baie aandag. 'n Brandpunt in die literatuur is steeds die gevolge van ma's se indiensneming op die welstand van vroue en kinders, ondanks verskuiwings in die samelewing ten opsigte van geslagsgelykheid. Die doel van hierdie studie was om die ervarings van vroue te ondersoek wat óf kies om tuis te bly, óf om voltyds te bly werk wanneer hulle kinders kry; en hoe die besluit hul lewens beïnvloed. Die kwalitatiewe studie, gebaseer op 'n sosiaal-konstruksionistiese uitgangspunt, en ekosistemiese en feministiese teorieë, het onderhoude met vier voltydse werknemers en vier tuisbly ma's in Suid-Afrika ingesluit. Die data is ondersoek met behulp van hermeneutiese analise. Die bevindinge dui daarop dat die deelnemers se spanning rakende

moederskap en werk sterk beïnvloed is deur strukturele struikelblokke by die werk en tuis, interpersoonlike verhoudings met ander ma's, sowel as intrapersoonlike ervarings. Borsvoeding is uitgeken as 'n prominente onderwerp binne die verskillende temas.

UHLAZIYO NGOLUKAMAGEBA:

Eminyakeni yamuva nje ukulinganisela phakathi komsebenzi nokuphila kwasekhaya kube undabamlonyeni. Indaba eseqhulwini kuseyiwo umthelela wokusebenza komama enhlalakahleni yabesimane nezingane, yize sekube nezinguquko emphakathini endabeni yokulingana kobulili. Inhloso yalolu cwaningo kwakuwukuhlola lokho okwehlele omama abakhethe ukuhlala ekhaya ngemva kokuzalwa kwezingane noma abaqhubeka besebenza isikhathi esigcwele; nokuthi isinqumo sabo sibe namuphi umthelela ekuphileni kwabo. Lolu cwaningo olwalubheka umnyombo, olusekelwe embonweni weNhlanganyelo Yomphakathi, kanye ne-Cybernetics Yohlelo Lwesibili Nemibono Yabalweli Besifazane, lwalubandakanya izingxoxombuzo nomama abane baseNingizimu Afrika abasebenza isikhathi esigcwele kanye nabanye abane abahlala ekhaya. Ulwazi lwahlaziywa kusetshenziswa uhlaziyo lokucubungula okulotshiwe. Okwatholakala kubonisa ukuthi izinto ezaziyingqinamba kubabambiqhaza ngokuphathelene nokuba umama nokusebenza zazilawulwa kakhulu yizithiyo zesikhundla emsebenzini nasekhaya, ubudlelwano nabanye omama, kanye nalokho ababhekana nakho uma bezihlola ekujuleni. Ukuncelisa ibele kwakubhekwa njengesihloko esiqavile phakathi kwalezo zihloko ezinhlobonhlobo.