

## Midlife mothers' perceptions on their work force behaviors

Sara Oren<sup>1,2</sup>

**Abstract:** The number of women participating in the work force has increased significantly during the past few decades. Unfortunately, the labor force behaviors of mothers are still greatly influenced by their parenthood. Consequently, even though their participation has increased, their motherhood remains a critical factor, one that plays a crucial part in their working behaviors and can trigger the motherhood penalty effect. Most of the previous research that explored mother's patterns concerning work force participation was based on the theme of motherhood as a single state. This research aims to introduce family life cycle perception of occupational status via the mother's points of view. The period of midlife has been selected, a period which enables introspection into former occupational history and a solid base for future planning. 50 Midlife mothers have participated in a mixed method research that explored their perceptions about their parenthood. Preliminary qualitative findings concerning their working behaviors are being introduced. The instrument selected for this qualitative study was in-depth semi-structured guide. The initial results support the idea that motherhood has a continuous crucial effect on mothers' work force decisions via their family life cycle. 44 out of 50 midlife mothers changed their working behaviors as a direct result of their parenthood.

**Keywords:** midlife mothers, women's work force behaviors, family life cycle.

### Introduction

The number of women participating in the work force has increased significantly during the past few decades. In Israel, 97% of women engage in the work force (Israel central bureau of statistics, 2016). Unfortunately, even though their participation has increased, their motherhood remained a critical factor which influences their working behaviors (Morgan, Marrell, & Rentschler, 2015; Doren 2018). This research aims to introduce life cycle perception of motherhood. The period of midlife has been selected, a period that enables introspection into former occupational history and a solid base for future planning. This article presents a new perspective on work force behaviors from the experiences of a cohort of 50 midlife mothers. The findings emerged in the context of larger PhD. research that sought to understand the perceptions of midlife mothers.

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<sup>1</sup> Doctoral School of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania

<sup>2</sup> Municipal welfare department of Gedera, Israel

\* E-mail of corresponding author: happyfamily.you@gmail.com

Motherhood has been described as a core social institution including “the activities involved in nurturing and caring for children in which women engage to ensure the growth of their children” (Francis-Connolly, 1998, p. 149). Previous standard of motherhood has urged mothers “to stay at home with their children, there by ostensibly maintaining consistency in women's nurturing and selfless behavior” (Hays, 1996, p. 3). This standard has been challenged by a contemporary standard of the good enough mother, who strives to give assurance to the growing number of women, who juggle both the demands of motherhood and career. The discourse on maternal thinking was elaborated by the description of mother as a person who can both take upon the responsibility of child care as an integral part of her working life. Thereby two factors have been introduced: first work as an elemental fact in women's life, second, motherhood as a part in this lifelong commitment. As noted beforehand, this study sought to examine the current perceptions of mothers on their working life.

### **Literature review**

A range of issues surrounding the complex relationship between work and motherhood have been presented in the studies of working mothers. Abendroth, Hofman and Trea (2014) point out that “motherhood hinders moves to jobs with higher occupational status and promotes shifts to less demanding, lower status jobs” (p. 993). Dex, Wards and Joshi (2008) emphasize the conclusion that a switch from full time to part time working hours by first time mother will decrease her job status, along with a wage penalty. They establish the distinction between mothers remaining with some employer, by contrast to mothers changing their employer. The first are able to maintain their salary. Abendroth et al. (2014) emphasize that motherhood work force behavior involves different jobs preferences by mothers and non-mothers, rather than within occupation pay differences. Furthermore, studies discovered motherhood wage penalty is due to mother's sorting of occupations (Gangl & Zeifle, 2009). Additionally, other studies compared the occupational status penalty of women up to two children to those with more children. Their findings reveal stiffer motherhood penalty of mothers to the last (Petersen, Penner, & Høgsnes, 2010).

Doren (2018) examined the impact of number of children on the chances of labor force exits. Her findings disclose that the likelihood to leave the labor force increases around the birth of the first child, or rather during the pregnancy of the first child. As women progress across parity transitions each additional child is related to a reduced probability to exit the work force. Abendroth et al. (2014) examined whether wage penalty is only one of the costs related to motherhood. They differentiated between first and higher order births and examined the possible wage penalty difference. Moreover, in order to check the long term life, course consequences of parities, their analysis of women

occupational status covered 13 European countries at 8 time points. In this manner, they strived to conclude whether occupational status is triggered by the immediate result of specific birth and is followed by an enduring or even long lasting penalty. Their findings display (e.g. Abendroth et al., 2014) the negative status implications of having first and second births. They observed that career interruptions have negative impact on women's occupational status. Another negative effect associated with birth is reduction in working hours and loss of working experience. Likewise, they emphasize that “the long –run penalty shown by time since birth cannot be explained by these initial adjustments or by a depreciation of human capital with lost work” (p. 1006). Therefore, further research is needed in order to determine how motherhood influences the occupational status trajectories in terms of long run implications.

This research aims to introduce the long run effects associated with motherhood from the point of view of the mothers themselves.

## **Method**

Recent decades have observed an increasing use of qualitative methods in research, this article is no exception. It is based on a qualitative study representing the philosophy of interpretive phenomenology. Morgan et al. (2015) describe phenomenology as “the study of people's experiences of phenomenon, and the meaning people attribute to their experiences” (p. 481). Taking this approach enables us to co-construct meaning with the midlife mothers as they express their long-run workforce experiences. Moreover, the qualitative –narrative mode of analysis is relevant for recognizing inner psychological constructs and is directed towards formation of conceptual models inductively (Gilgun, 2005). Consequently, this study is built upon the narrative and interpretive perspectives (Josselson, 2004; Toval-Masiach, 2006) and examines the meaning the mothers attached to their workforce behaviors.

### **Participants**

The target sample included healthy midlife mothers aged 40-60. All mothers did not have physical disabilities. All parents and were permanent Israeli citizens and lived all or most of their lives in Israel and were of middle socioeconomic status. All were Jewish and were either traditional or secular in terms of religion. To be included in the sample, participants had to have at least one child between the ages 12-18. Additionally, at least one off the participants' children had to live with their parents during their childhood. The sample did not include parents who had disabled or chronically ill (physically or mentally) children or adopted children. These inclusion criteria were obtained with the purpose of minimizing variability and producing a homogeneous sample that

would permit for developing conceptual understandings inductively (Gilgun, 2005).

### **Data analysis process**

The current research followed the narrative analysis techniques and intertwined phenomenological approach (Tuval-Mashiach, 2006). The systematic data analysis can be divided into two sub analyses as follows: categorical content analysis and cross case analysis.

### **Categorical content analysis**

The author read and reread each transcript interview. Categories were integrated based on the issues that came up in each interview. From specific categories the author shifted to more analytical and conceptual one (e.g. Tuval-Mashiach (2006).

### **Cross case analysis-clustering**

The above approach was introduced to each text on a case by case basis and then to all the cases by a cross case analysis. Levitski (2009) described the interpretation as “cyclic, as each stage was built on its predecessors; narratives were reread in light of new insights obtained, and readings of the professional literature sensitized the understanding of the empirical data” (p. 229). Pseudonyms were recruited in order to analyze and discuss the data. The comparison of the author's own interpretation with the analysis of other professionals was of great importance, as it ascertains high degree of accuracy of interpretations (Gilgun, 2005). It was apparent that the maternal workforce behaviors findings could be divided into two main factors relating to the intrapsychic level and to the actual behavioral level. The findings were divided into themes and each theme into several categories as described in the next section.

### **Procedure**

The sampling procedure endeavored to collect a wide range of mothers' experiences from Israeli mothers sharing the characteristics above-mentioned characteristics. The interviewees were recruited by purposive and snow ball sampling. As is customary in qualitative research the indicator to terminate participants' recruitment was “saturation” when the additional data provided previously devised categories. Pseudonyms were recruited in order to analyze and discuss the data. The comparison of the author's own interpretation with the interpretations of other professionals was of great importance, as it ascertains high degree of accuracy of interpretations (e.g. Gilgun, 2005).

A semi-structured interview guide was applied in order to elicit narratives from the mothers (Fontana & Frey, 2000). Two face to face meetings were

usually organized. Each interview lasted 50 to 60 minutes. The additional meeting enabled covering or repeating subjects that were not exhausted or approached in the previous meeting. All the interviews were conducted by the author. Before each interview the interviewer explained the purpose of the research. All the participants gave their consent to participate in the research. The study was approved by the Ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi and confidentiality of any form of data was maintained.

## **Results**

The study reveals three main themes: first, the crucial impact of motherhood on the work force behaviors of mothers; second, mothers' lifelong responsibility and care of their offsprings; lastly, motherhood as a primary role of women. In this article I will shed light on the first theme: the crucial impact of motherhood on the work force behaviors of women. This theme was divided into several factors: Changes in the work force behaviors prior to motherhood; changes taking place after the birth of children; motherhood hinders promotion from lifelong perspective; the long lasting penalty of motherhood; finally, justification and regret about the chosen work force behaviors. These findings support the research hypothesis that motherhood has a crucial, long lasting impact on the work force behaviors of women.

### **The crucial impact of motherhood on the work force behaviors of mothers**

Out of the 50 midlife mothers who participated in the interviews, 44 claimed that motherhood had a direct impact on their work force behaviors. The remaining 6 were manager at a public company, construction supervisor at the municipality, bookkeeper at the municipality, school headmaster, worker at a geriatric hospital and cleaning agency owner. All work at women friendly domains. The manager and the worker at the geriatric hospital also received massive help from their family. Others such as the bookkeeper and the school headmaster had to face feelings of anger and neglect from their children. Mother No. 41, the school headmaster said: “my eldest daughters cannot forgive me that I sent them away to a dormitory. I am a grandmother now but they still remind me. I didn't send my son and he is the only one which lives close by”.

### **Changes in the work force behaviors prior to motherhood**

Among the 50 mothers, 4 mentioned that they made changes in their positions even before becoming mothers, only while planning to raise a family. To demonstrate, following here are a few examples from the mothers' perspectives.

Mother No. 2, a computer programmer - when she planned to become a parent, even before the pregnancy took part, she resigned and started to work for a company where she knew her employer will permit less working hours for mothers, or in other words “mother's position”.

Mother No. 4, an Israeli defense officer revealed that when she was planning to start a family she took a vacation leave and considered an early retirement. Only her future husband promised that he will take an active part in raising their children and also prohibited her from making this drastic move. On the interview she revealed that “The promise didn't last long. I was always responsible of the children's errands and the one in charge. I was the one participating in all the parents' teacher groups, and when I had to participate at a school meeting, I put it as part of my daily schedule”.

Mother No. 5 used to occupy a management position at a family firm, then prior to motherhood she decided to resign. To her words: “I made a decision to leave before birth and become a housewife”, nowadays she claims that “she is the manager from behind the scenes” and transferred her position to her husband.

Mother No. 7, a high school teacher, was studying commerce at the university when she got married. Consequently, she paused her studies, to her words according to a family pressure: “I had a pressure from my husband and family to stop my studies and to devote my time for my husband and future family”. As a result, she didn't complete her academic degree.

Mother No. 9, a youth worker said: “I was offered a wonderful post as an education officer at prison. I refused even though the position included an increase in salary and excellent side benefits”. She says that she refused since the position entailed long working hours and it wasn't possible to exchange it into part time position.

### **Changes taking place after the birth of children**

These changes were the most common strategy among mothers. 23 mothers out of 50 claimed that the birth of their first born had a direct impact on their work force behaviors. By comparison only 2 mothers referred to second parities as a trigger of similar changes. The changes refer to working conditions:

Mother No.1, an economist said: “I reduced my working hours; I didn't care about the implications to my salary. Family is above everything”. Mothers left their current positions and found positions with working hours more “suitable for motherhood”.

Mother No. 5 used to give sports coaching in the evenings, after the birth of her first child became a secretary working morning hours. She said “I knew that one of us needed to remain with the children, my husband was the breadwinner, so it had to be me”.

Mother No. 7 used to work at marketing, resigned and begun to work at the post office since it afforded her flexible working hours.

Mother No. 13, with a master degree, used to be a partner at a private business of groups' coaching. After becoming mother at 43 she closed the business and worked part time as a youth worker at the local municipality.

### **Motherhood hinders promotion from lifelong perspective**

A total of 31 mothers claimed that motherhood played a crucial role in their plans for promotion at work.

Mother No. 44, who works in special education as a kindergarten assistant, said: "The children were always my first priority. When they were little I stayed at home until my youngest son was in sixth grade then I had to be available while he was at school so finally I had to become an assistant. This was the only position available nearby".

Mother No. 43, kindergarten assistant said: "I wanted to study in order to get promotion. It came on the account of the house and family, therefore I gave up my dream of studies and possible promotion. Today I tell my daughters: go to study".

Mother No. 6, a social worker assistant: "I have so much to donate; currently because the children are so young I am not in a hurry to give (for work)".

Mother No. 21, a municipality department manager: "When the children were young I didn't even consider promotion, I gave it up so I could spend time with them. Now when they have grown up my time has arrived".

### **The long lasting penalty of motherhood**

Some 35 midlife women out of 50 said they are not interested in getting promotion at work. Few claimed that that now it is too late, since they want an easy life.

Mother No. 14, a youth worker said: "I don't want to make an effort. I want to enjoy to the full my previous accomplishments."

Mother No. 44, a kindergarten assistant said: "Children always have priority. When they were younger the money went for private education. And now when they are grown up the money goes for higher education, so there will never be enough for my long lost dream to become an architect."

Mother No. 2, a programmer said: "to learn new things doesn't interest me, all my friends are the same. We all have pangs of conscience."

Mother No. 4, an Israeli defense force officer, told prior to her retirement: "I made a decision that family is my first priority. I gave up my career in advance and told my superiors that I won't be interested in positions that were far from home. My career in the army came as a surprise to me. My future plans after retirement are to take it easy".

Mother No. 5 a homemaker, said: "I have a life until the children return from school. After school hours my children are my life. I don't see it changes".

### **Justification of the chosen work force behaviors**

Out of 50 mothers, 23 justified their work force decisions.

Mother No. 9, a youth worker said: "I didn't make any attempt to get promotion. I put my children' welfare at the first place. I didn't see it as degradation."

Mother No. 7, a high school teacher said: "to my daughters I say don't do what I have done, first take care of yourselves, education first".

Mother No. 10, a cleaning lady told us: "When the children are happy everything is Ok, about myself I don't care."

Mother No. 16, a kindergarten assistant said: "I think I gave up on myself, and I don't have any regrets".

Mother No. 12, a manager at the municipality told us: "To me parenthood takes the first place, I don't feel as a victim. It's our legacy. It's the essence in my eyes".

### **Regret of the chosen work force behaviors**

Only a minority of the women express regrets, 8 out of 50.

Mother No. 7, a high school teacher said: "To my daughters I say, don't do what I have done. Don't become a teacher at 40 and make a compromise. First take care of yourselves, education first and then family".

Mother No. 19, an administrative assistant says: "Because of the children I compromised, I gave up to myself instead of prolonging my academic education. I was an honored student and now I work as a secretary. I gave up my dreams too soon".

Yet, even those who express regret continue devoting themselves to their children and their experiences are transferred as guide to their daughters to avoid repeating the cycles. To conclude the research findings, the majority of mothers expose the lifelong impact of motherhood on their work force behavior. An impact that time cannot overcome.

## **Discussion**

The participants of the study revealed their perceptions and the crucial impact of their motherhood on their work force behaviors. Out of 50 midlife mothers who participated in the interviews, 44 claimed that motherhood had a direct impact on their work force behaviors. Those findings resemble the findings of Abendroth et al. (2014) which discovered that career interruptions have negative impact on women's occupational status. Another negative effect associated with birth is the reduction in working hours and loss of working

experience. Moreover, 35 out of 50 midlife mothers claimed that motherhood hindered their promotion at work. These results take after previous findings that showed motherhood hinders moves to jobs with higher occupational status, and promotes shifts to less demanding lower status jobs with fewer advancement prospects (Abendroth et al., 2014; Dex et al., 2008).

In addition, the study emphasized the long lasting penalty of motherhood, 35 out of 50 commented on this phenomenon and the fact that even though their children have grown the majority of women were not interested to bridge the gap and resume their career. These findings take after the findings of Gersick and Kran (2002) who discovered that midlife mothers favored balance in their life and preferred to postpone new obligations in relation to work.

Furthermore, 23 out of 50 midlife mothers mentioned changes that they initiated in their work force behaviors after to the birth of their first child and even 4 mothers out of 50 mentioned the changes they undertook prior the birth of their first child. By comparison only 4 mothers refer to the birth of the second child as a tipping point for a possible change. This resembles the findings of Doren (2018) who observed the birth of the first child as a tipping point and declared that women are likely to abandon the workforce when they are pregnant with their first child. This also matches the discovery of Doren (2018), who said that “each subsequent child is associated with a smaller increase in the probability to exit” (p. 334).

### **Conclusions and further relevance on practice**

The research examined the perceptions of 50 midlife mothers concerning their work force behaviors. The research sheds light on the crucial long lasting impact of motherhood on the mothers' careers, an impact which the majority of mothers denies and is still willing to undertake. Although they recognize the long lasting penalty of motherhood, mothers are not willing to change their perceptions concerning the standards of being a good mother. Mothers still strive towards the previous, traditional standard of motherhood that has urged mothers “to stay at home with their children, thereby ostensibly maintaining consistency in women's nurturing and selfless behavior” (Hays, 1996, p. 3). This matches the research of Morgan et al. (2015) who showed that mothers whom voiced strong ideals about how to be a good mother rearranged their work schedules to be more available to their offspring. To my understanding until the women won't change their perception and continue in their efforts to put motherhood in the first place, they won't change their work force behaviors. Additionally, in spite the fact that their participation in the work force has increased considerably, this numbers won't reflect the reality of part time jobs and “mother positions”. The findings show that even government assistance to the mothers in the form of day care opportunities didn't affect the mothers' work force behaviors (e.g. Abendroth et al., 2014).

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