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Motherhood, Subjectivity, and Work

The subjectivity load: Negotiating the internalization of “mother” and “creative worker” identities in creative industries

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Abstract

This paper explores how mothers who are creative workers articulate their subjectivities and examines how their interdependent identities as both mothers and creatives lead to a constant and unresolved negotiation of subjectivity. This constitutes an additional cognitive work burden or a “subjectivity load” for mother-creatives. The study is based on a small-scale qualitative study of 40 mothers working in Creative Industries in Ireland. Venn's framework on subjectivity is used to explore the attitudes, values, expectations, and dispositions that respondents articulated when questioned about how they saw the self in relation to the identities of mother and worker. Key findings note that mother workers held ambivalent attitudes about the combination of mothering with work. In terms of their values, respondents internalized a negative and irresolute sense of self if they did not live up to social values on motherhood. With regard to expectations of themselves, mothers felt that they were always having to choose between conflicting demands and that there was an internalized expectation that motherhood should be prioritized over work. Finally, in terms of their disposition, respondents explained they felt that society refused to

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understand mothers as artists and so they could not easily achieve a settled subjectivity in light of the invisibility of mothers who were also creative workers. Consequently, mother-creatives are always engaged in a process of negotiation across identity contradictions to form their own subjectivities. This ongoing ambivalence creates another cognitive or subjectivity load around the making and remaking of the internalized self.

KEYWORDS

creative industries, creative worker, identity, motherhood, subjectivity

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to understand how mother-workers combine their socially ascribed identities as “mother” and “worker” at the level of the interior, through an examination of subjectivity, or how individuals understand their self-identity. Subjectivity is understood as the internalization of identities by the self, which can be a multi-layered and multilevel phenomenon in the context of work and mothers. Mothers who participate in the formal workplace confront the ongoing difficulty of mediating the relationship between home and work (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016). This negotiation is often seen to compromise their status, engagement, and well-being in both spheres, with implications for mothers' work and their everyday lives (Gatrell, 2007; Gatrell et al., 2017). While much analysis of motherhood and work has problematized these experiences at the sociological level of the structural (Cahusac & Kanji, 2013) or collective culture (Apple, 2006) or within work organizations (Acker, 2006), less examined is the question of how these structures impact on individual workers. We know relatively little about the worker as an individual or active subject (Banks, 2007, p. 28) and even less about the mother as a worker at the interior level (Hennekam et al., 2016; Tian & Chen, 2023; Zagefka et al., 2021). Further attention needs to be paid to the important focus of personal subjectivity and human agency in mothers' everyday work contexts.

This issue of subjectivity, defined as how the self is constructed and understood by the individual, has been relatively neglected to date. Much has been written about how family status or work shapes identity, but these accounts are offered as if everyone inhabits identity or reacts to identity categories in precisely the same way. While everybody has an identity, in this case worker and mother, and while those identities are recognized to be different, complex, contradictory, and tension-filled across different societies at different times (Martin et al., 2020), nonetheless “every person's relationship to their self-identity is assumed to be the same” (Adkins & Lury, 1999, p. 599). More can be learned by also looking at the various ways in which mothers' experiences of work and maternal identity get packaged in forms that are psychological, which create subjectivity (Wetherell, 2008, p. 74). Conceptualizing subjectivity allows us to move beyond a structural analysis of maternal identity at work to explore how individual mother-workers access practices of affect, relationality, and experience to shape self-production.

This paper shifts focus not just to the individual level and the identity work required of the mother-worker but rather to the interiority of that work and asks how identity is seen from the “inside” by those who are (re)shaped by experiences of combining motherhood and work. The focus here is on the internal articulation of the self's own understanding of its identities as “worker” and “mother,” in other words, through the construction of subjectivity. To that end, the paper asks a number of sub questions: From the available social scripts of the identities of mother-worker, what do mothers take and make psychological or internalize as subjectivity? How do they understand the self as mother-worker? Is there a permanent tension between motherhood and work that impacts at the level of

the self? Does this constant self-making constitute an additional psychological load that mother-workers uniquely carry? Is there a “subjectivity load” involved in negotiating who is the mother at work and who is the worker in mothering? The paper concludes that mother-workers are engaged in a constant process of subjectivity negotiation, an ongoing ambivalence between seeing the self as worker and/or as mother. This creates an additional “subjectivity load,” which is the constant negotiation or making and remaking of the self. This is required of mother-workers to live with those two contradictory identities simultaneously and further complicates their mother-worker lives when who they understand the self to be has to be negotiated continually.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 | Mothers and work

The existence of a “maternal wall” in the workplace has been clearly established and operates across a broad range of sectors (Wajcman, 1998; Williams, 2004). Various researchers have demonstrated that mothers experience bias and discrimination in the workplace (Gatrell, 2007). This is in addition to and separate from gender-based discriminations (O' Brien and Liddy, 2020). Cahusac and Kanji observed (2013) many of the dimensions of mothers' negative experiences within hegemonic masculine work cultures. For example, the structure of the working day requires mothers to work long hours and to be available for social engagements outside of core hours and they cannot negotiate alternative hours because they report that they need to hide their motherhood (Cahusac & Kanji, 2013, p. 68). When mothers reduce their hours, they tend to be sidelined into lower status positions that are underpaid and undervalued relative to their experience. Motherhood produces differential outcomes in terms of income and career advancement (Budig & England, 2001). Working mothers also continue to take on the lion's share of household and childcare responsibilities (Burnett et al., 2010; Kossek et al., 2011; Hennekam et al., 2016, p. 919). Cultural narratives often perpetuate the image of idealized working and caring motherhood and fail to acknowledge the actual experiential realities of mothers as they work and care (Dean et al., 2022; Hochschild, 1983). As Cahusac and Kanji put it “unless mothers mimic successful men, they do not look the part for success in organizations” (2013, p. 57). Metz (2011) proposes that mothers are “squeezed out” of their organizations by discriminatory work practices and masculine work cultures. Mothers are also lured out of the workforce because of partners who are unavailable to co-parent (Orgad, 2019). Worker-mothers are frequently both pushed and pulled out of the workforce because of the impossible task of finding the “balance” between mothering and work (Stone, 2007). The insidious argument that mothers “choose” to leave work (Hakim, 2006) or that they are “opting out” (Belkin, 2003) presents mothers as uncommitted to their work, while simultaneously belying the irony that work is structurally biased against sustainable careers for mothers. As well as the struggles in the workplace and home, a number of researchers have also pointed to the struggle that exists between motherhood and work at the level of identity conflicts (Blair-Loy, 2003).

2.2 | Identity conflict

Identity is a complex and multidimensional concept that captures the external or socially agreed labeling or perceptions of others about oneself (Alsos et al., 2016). Martin et al. (2020, p. 312) see identity as fluid and changeable, performed through an ongoing process of identity work, which forms and reforms the self through individual sense-making (Weick et al., 2005). They propose that the processes of identity-making are shaped by “experiences, perceptions of experiences and through interactions with others to understand and fit with social norms (Alvesson et al., 2008; Hytti, 2005; Lee & Huang, 2018)” (Martin et al., 2020, p. 312). This definition nicely captures the social aspect of identity, which is other-oriented and shaped by socially agreed-upon rules and expectations. Individuals are not passive agents in that process but interpreters who create a sense of self by “storying their lives”

(Pullen, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, in Martin et al., 2020, p. 312). For mothers who work, Hennekam et al. note “multiple life roles result in inter-role conflict as individuals experience difficulty performing each role successfully because of conflicting demands (Kahn et al., 1964) and social expectations about their life roles (Katz & Kahn, 1978)” (2019, p. 917). Zagefka et al. in their study of mother-workers, identity, and well-being use the social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) to assert that belonging to social groups enhances well-being, as do multiple roles (2021, p. 2453).

However, Zagefka et al. (2021) also note that conflicts between identities for mothers who work exacerbate identity-related stressors and impact negatively on well-being. Unfortunately, they do not explore that conflict or stressor in terms of how individuals respond to it or how individuals internalize the conflicting identities, and so this paper attempts to address that gap. Tian and Chen's (2023) study of stay at home mothers in Shanghai comes closest to exploring how identity formation impacts mothers at an internal level; however, their study is limited to mothers who do not work outside the home. Their findings note that all stay-at-home mothers agreed that their self-identity had been dominated by motherhood and they also connected their maternal identity with a discourse of maternal irreplaceability, but Tian and Chen also noted tension among their stay-at-home mother identity, previous working female identity, and self-image. Tian and Chen propose that to avoid this tension and protect their self-image, participants incorporated aspects of their previous working identity into their stay-at-home mother identity, such as taking part-time jobs and framing their childrearing experience as a future career asset (2023, p. 1). Their study points to how work continues to shape women's self-image, even when they leave the labor market. However, the paper does not outline in detail how mother-workers experience the ongoing internalized tension between the identities of mother and worker while they continue to be both workers and mothers. Moreover, Tian and Chen do not examine very closely how identity is formed or understood and internalized by the mothers at an individual level. In order to better prioritize that question of mothers own self-understanding of identity tensions around motherhood and work, this study operationalizes the concept of subjectivity.

2.3 | Subjectivity

Subjectivity is defined as the “substantive acting, thinking and feeling being,” evoking the processes by which a subject or self is constituted (Venn, 2006, p. 79). The subject is “the product of an interiorization of attitudes, values, expectations, memories, dispositions, instantiated in inter-subjective relations and activities that, through historically specific, self-reflexive practices of recognition, constitute a particular named person, a singularity” (Venn, 2006, p. 79). Analysis of subjectivity moves understandings of an individual's experiences from a purely social identity or structural analysis of the political economic forces that shape their experiences to an exploration of the worker at the level of the interior at the psychosocial and socio-psychic interface. Most often, the concept of subjectivity has been used to understand neoliberal power relations, which act through the assimilation of subjectivities (Gill, 2008). But the concept can offer more than an account of neoliberal self-disciplining (Wetherell, 2008). As Gill puts it, “we need to address questions of investment and desire in order to grasp the power of some constructions” (2008, p. 442). As Blackman puts it, “we do not simply internalize norms in any straightforward fashion. This opens up investigations of subjectivity to a complex realm of affectivity that is little known or understood, but is felt in a very real and profound way” (2008, p. 20). Understanding subjectivity involves, as Venn notes, “investigating the ideological and normative processes that define the content and power of any particular social identity as well as the psycho-social processes involved in coming to inhabit that identity” (Venn, 2006, p. 79).

This analysis of subjectivity will tell a relatively untold story of how a specific-self lives the available cultural slots of mother-worker at the level of the interior construction of the self. It explores how a mother-worker actively realizes the slots, “takes responsibility and owns them as an agent” (Wetherell, 2008, p. 75) or fails to realize and own the slots and does not inhabit them in a coherent manner. Subjectivity is a key site of contestation vis-à-vis motherhood and worker identities, full of multiple and contradictory possible outcomes. Mother-workers can choose to own, perform, deny, or refuse various aspects of the intertwined identities available to them. How or

why they make those choices needs to be articulated. The consequences of those choices for motherhood and work are important to explore, acknowledge, and articulate because they explain how mother-workers can variously be indifferent, resilient, or defeated by the conditions that those identities impose on them, because of what they do to the sense of self, to the interiorized identity. This paper outlines the psychosocial processes involved in coming to inhabit the interdependent social identities of mother-worker and does so through a case study of mothers who work in creative industries (CIs).

2.4 | CIs, work, and mothers

CIs can be defined as “Those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property, [which includes] advertising, architecture, the art and antiques market, crafts, design, designer fashion, film and video, interactive leisure software, music, the performing arts, publishing, software and computer services, television and radio” (DCMS, 1998). CIs are also characterized by a problematic employment structure. They are neoliberal, with risk delegated to workers who have few employment benefits derived from their casualized and sporadic work patterns (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). CI workers are required to take responsibility for their own training and constant adaptation to new technologies as well as being expected to construct themselves as perfect neoliberal self-enterprising and passionate “always on” workers (Gill, 2011; Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016). Inequalities are inherent in the CIs with workers excluded or marginalized on the basis of intersecting aspects of their identities (Wreyford et al., 2021), including their race (Nwonka, 2020), sexuality (Kerrigan, 2020), and gender (O' Brien, 2019). This dynamic of identity being central to inclusion and exclusion in CIs makes the sector a very useful one for a study of subjectivity because questions of how identities are accepted, rejected, or reshaped in the process of internalization are very live and vexing issues for workers in CIs.

A relatively small body of research has focused centrally on how motherhood shapes work in CIs. Mothers face obstacles to their career progression from the very beginning. While they are pregnant, they attempt to hide the fact so as not to be excluded from future work (O' Brien & Liddy, 2021). Following births, workers noted how maternity leave relegated them to “pink ghettos” or sidelined them from leadership roles (Tijani-Adenle, 2021; Wreyford, 2013). Thereafter, motherhood acts as a barrier to recruitment in a sector that relies on informal networks and word of mouth as integral aspects of hiring strategies (Wreyford, 2015, 2018). Even if they successfully overcome these barriers, mothers still experience a general devaluation associated with their roles as mothers (Dent, 2016). Wing-Fai et al. (2015) describe mothers experiencing bias and discrimination but doing so silently. Berridge (2019, p. 464) similarly establishes how mothers' testimonials on the UK Raising Films website reinforce narratives that emphasize self-regulation or self-responsibilization and only occasionally critique the structural exclusion of mothers from creative work but without ever calling for change or accommodations. Combining the identities of worker and mother in CIs is particularly challenging and this makes it a very rich site and context in which to explore how mother-workers negotiate subjectivities that are replete with tensions as well as potential. This paper explores how 40 Irish mother workers in CIs navigated their subjectivities derived from their identities as both mothers and workers.

3 | METHODOLOGY

Data were gathered through a snowball sample of 40 mothers who were engaged in work in creative sectors that included creative writing (5), theater (6), art (7), music (3), television (6), film (8), documentary (3), dance (1), and advertising (1). These sub-sectors are distinctive in terms of output but broadly similar in terms of their employment patterns, as described above. In terms of family status, 29 respondents were married, 5 were partnered, 3

were divorced, and 3 were solo mothers. Their employment status included 16 respondents who self-identified as freelance workers, 17 were self-employed, and 7 were employed respondents. Many of the respondents who were freelancers or self-employed were also married (35), and approximately half of those respondents made a connection between having the financial support of an employed husband or partner to lend some stability to their own more precarious employment status. However, only 4 mothers mentioned having a second income from alternative work undertaken, and several noted that freelance work allowed them increased flexibility and income compared to working for an employer. The total number of children among the 40 respondents was 71, giving an average of 1.78 children per mother, and the maximum number of children for any individual mother was three. The children ranged in age from 5 months to 35 years. Most of the mothers had children aged 1–18 years, 13 mothers had children aged 1–5 years, 13 had children aged 5–12 years, and 6 had children aged 13–18 years. Only two mothers had babies under 1 year and only one mother was on maternity leave, which is a statutory entitlement to 26 weeks in Ireland at the time of the study. All other mothers had adult children. Ethics clearance for the study was received from the authors' University. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted in Ireland over the course of a year; each interview generally lasted for 1–1.5 h and was digitally recorded. As Galletta (2013, p. 2) notes, “the semi-structured interview is particularly instrumental in achieving this type of texturing.” In interview situations, narratives unfold but the researcher engaged in dialog so that contextual issues were explored. Specifically, the interview schedule contained questions about experiences of motherhood, experiences of work and attitudes, values, expectations, and general dispositions among respondents to the enhancements or clashes that arose from being both mothers and workers in CIs. It asked key questions about how mothers understand their subjectivity as mothers, how that intersects with their subjectivities as creative workers, and how they see themselves in that overlapping space.

All interviews were transcribed and anonymized, and respondents were allocated a number. Data were analyzed according to a postpositivist feminist ontology that values individual experience as contributing to knowledge and respects context-dependent insights. This approach facilitates the nuance and multiplicity of perspectives on subjectivity, which is inherently difficult to describe in text and even harder to pin down empirically. The interiorization of motherhood and work and how that shapes sense of self is expressed subtly and momentarily and is therefore difficult to extrapolate and notice. However, mothers did speak of their subjectivity when they spoke about their values, attitudes, expectations, and outlook toward themselves as workers (Venn, 2006). These are the codes and categories through which women articulated how experiences of work and motherhood became packaged internally. Because data does not fall into simple categories, the first analysis of transcripts explored the general tone, key ideas, detail of responses, and recognized significant statements. Subsequent line-by-line readings revealed the full scope of the data as it related to the research questions. Data analysis followed this emergent strategy to reveal clusters of codes and eventually themes pertinent to the focus on subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Smith, 2008). Themes were assessed considering available literature to generate the findings below, which consider the complexities of the experience of being a subject or subjectivity.

4 | FINDINGS

“Subjectivity refers to an individual's feelings, opinions, or preferences” that comprise a person's identity (Siegesmund, 2008, p. 2). Acknowledging subjectivity is becoming aware of beliefs, emotions, and opinions that influence an individual's sense of who they are in the world and how we figure ourselves to ourselves (Wetherell, 2008, p. 74). To capture subjectivity involves an exploration of respondents at the psychosocial and socio-psychic interface of their lived multiplicity of positionings. To structure the findings that articulate the formation of subjectivity for mother workers, Venn's (2006) description of that psychosocial process is most useful. He proposes that subjectivity is made through an interiorization of attitudes, values, expectations, and dispositions (2006, p. 79). Venn's framework is used below to structure findings that explore the attitudes, values, expectations,

and dispositions that respondents articulated when questioned about how they saw the self in relation to the identities of mother and worker. In terms of their attitudes, mother workers were ambivalent about both of their identities, and they expressed both positive and negative attitudes toward the combination of mothering with work. In terms of their values, again, ambivalence appears. The mothers were clear that there were aspects of motherhood that were valued by society, but although the respondents did not always share those values, they still internalized a negative sense of self when they did not live up to the values. At the same time, the mothers also struggled to value themselves as creative workers and subjugated that identity to their maternal one. In terms of their expectations of themselves, mothers felt that they were always having to choose between conflicting demands and that there was an internalized expectation that motherhood should be prioritized over work. Finally, in terms of their disposition, respondents felt that society refused to understand mothers as artists and so they could not easily achieve a settled subjectivity in light of the invisibility of mothers who were also creative workers. Each of these findings is set out in detail below.

4.1 | Attitudes to motherhood and work

Many respondents had a very positive attitude or way of thinking and expressing their feelings, about their role as mothers who were also creative workers. They spoke of the joy and passion that underpinned their maternal identities "I love being a Mom. Every phase is so great..." (3). One respondent described how a particular art piece grew from the identity and circumstances of mothering.

It's a really big, big work but it was made over two years and the statement that goes with it clearly states I made all of these between nappy changes and whatever... So no art work is ever just a product of the person who's making it, it's all the circumstances surrounding it. So... the work is about the daily lived reality of being a parent... it's kind of a cry for help and also a celebration...

(6)

One of the clear positives for many of the respondents was that they became more confident about their creative work when they became mothers. As one respondent said

I feel a lot more confident when I work, I'm way more self-assured and I don't know if that's because I'm a mother or not... I think it's just that you stop giving a shit or something... with work I just don't feel that self-conscious anymore, I don't feel like I have to prove anything.

(3)

Many respondents expressed the attitude that creative work was a liberation from the mundanity of mothering. As one respondent puts it very succinctly "The word creative means something totally different to me since I've had a baby... and I now see a creative act as a complete act of liberation against the mundanity of domestic life" (3). In a similar vein, another respondent said

I'm so glad that I have my art background because it gives me such escape from, kind of, like, the daily slog... So, art, now, post baby has become a refuge for me and I'm not so concerned about the success of it... but yeah, I think, my whole relationship to art has changed.

(6)

Writing was vital to one mother.

In the first few months of motherhood all I wanted to do was write....and especially with your first baby like, you feel like you've just lost your sense of self and you don't know who you are anymore and I think because writing was such a big part of my life and so important to me that being able to do that was like one way of getting back to my past self and I think that is why I was so desperate to do it so soon after having him.

(16)

However, ambivalence was also a clear characteristic of mother-workers attitudes about the interwoven identities. Respondents spoke of the negative ways that their maternal responsibilities clashed with their availability to work. They found motherhood got in the way of creative work because it was so relentless, causing constant interruption to anything else. As one respondent put it "what I didn't count on was just the tiredness—the mental tiredness that was involved in having a child" (2). Another respondent commented on the unending nature of maternal work, "I signed up to be a Mother, I didn't sign up to do the constant, never ending house work... the intensity of it, there's not even a word for it, the manual labor..." (6). Another respondent concurred "The thing I'm finding hard is the relentlessness... this constant loop of catching up" (4). The mother-creatives spoke of how interruption was a key feature of life for mothers that rendered the cognitive labor required for creative work particularly difficult to do. Interruption was never predictable, as one respondent described "What tends to happen is I'm working and I'm also having a baby crying in the room next door and I have to go... You're trying to kind of manage everything at the same time" (4). As another respondent put it "You can never finish anything, your interruptions get interrupted. Nothing ever gets done in a way you think it's going to get done" (3). In terms of how respondents internalized the identities of mother and worker, the most salient feature was ambivalence. All of the mothers had both positive and negative attitudes about their roles as mothers and workers. Attitudes were not fixed but rather negotiated between benefits and costs, and in an ongoing way over time. Thus in terms of attitude about themselves as mother workers there is an interlinked duality to be parlayed, which means that subjectivity remains in perpetual negotiation between positives and negatives. This was also the case with how they internalized values as subjects.

4.2 | Values as mothers and workers

Respondents noted the aspects of motherhood that were valued by society and, while they did not necessarily share those values, they still internalized a negative sense of self when they did not live up to the values. Respondents felt that there were social judgments that accrued to maternal identities. As one respondent puts it

Society has a very strange idea of what it is that you do... there's all these kinds of presumptions made... about Mothers, like when you hear when somebody has a child you make these assumptions about them and it falls into these really strong tropes that are carted out regularly in representations of (mothers).

(16)

Another mother documented the extent to which maternal identity was socially judged.

If you're a Mother you should be breastfeeding for a certain amount of years, you should also be doing this, that and the other... be there 100% for your child...Why should a mother have to justify what they're doing for them and their baby... you're judged, all the time.

(2)

These social judgments were frequently internalized, as one respondent put it

You are always being blamed as a Mum that you're not doing the right thing... You have these books that tell you what you should expect and when it doesn't go by the book then you're kind of in this space of I'm crap like, I'm basically crap.

(3)

The mothers articulated their values generally in relation to what they thought society valued about mothers, leaving them with a negative internalization of the self, when they did not live up to those social values.

Relatedly, the mother-creatives sometimes struggled to value themselves as creatives; they observed how hard it was to find both space and time for creative work alongside motherhood. Time was at a premium for respondents. "The biggest shift, it's just that lack of time, like your time is not your own anymore and especially as a writer or any sort of artist the thing that you need is time to work" (16). Space was also in short supply both in a physical sense "There's no space to work... I'm not going to pay for a studio" (6) and in a metaphorical sense of having no headspace to work "there was totally no space for me, as me, as an artist... I was needed for my son" (3). Mother-creatives responded by trying to fit their creative work in gaps of time "I try and fit it in the gaps, you know, after bedtime, before sitting down to relax" (4) and "I'm taking little windows where I can... it's all very bite size pieces" (9). They also tried to do creative work on time "borrowed" by having other mothers provide childcare. "If my Mum or partner's Mum has her then I usually use that time for art and I don't feel guilty about that" (6). The impact of this lack of time and space was felt heavily by the mother-creatives.

I would feel like I was failing at everything. I wasn't able to give work the amount of time it needed but I also wasn't with the baby as much as I wanted to be. There were times when that was quite overwhelming.

(11)

The consequences of trying to resolve contradictory identities into a viable subjectivity were extreme with some contemplating giving up on their creative identity altogether "I was really afraid that part of my life would just kind of wrap up and be done" (11). As another mother-creative puts it "I found myself suffocating with the lack of space for myself but then I would never allow myself to take the space because everything else was so important... I was nearly on the verge of depression..." (15). The struggle to value themselves as artists was in direct conflict with their value as mothers and the outcome was again ambivalence and a lack of resolution to form a settled subjectivity. Just as their values were ambivalent, so too their expectations were contradictory and unresolved.

4.3 | Expectations as mothers and workers

Mother-creative workers documented how they expected that they would have to choose between the identities of mother or worker. This choice was present in their consciousness before they even had children. As one respondent recounts "I know some artists who haven't had children because they're artists... it's so sad" (4). Respondents spoke about limiting the number of children as a compromise on resolving the two identities "I made a conscious choice of only having one child... if you want to be a good parent you do have to commit loads of time to it. And it's a conscious decision with me..." (8). Another described her unresolved ambivalence about the idea that mothers had to choose between motherhood and work.

You're told you can have it all, then you're told you can't have it all... And there's kind of all these different ideas and I think what I've realised and probably witnessed as well and I'm realising it more now as I live it is that you can have it all but not necessarily at the same time.

(16)

Respondents were not resolved to this choice or at ease with the expectation of making a call between their identities as mothers and as creative workers. As one respondent put it

I was trying to put together motherhood and my working life and trying to figure out how they can both fit (but I) feel kind of stuck and you know that you can't really do what you were doing in the past....

(3)

Many respondents felt that when expected to make a choice between prioritizing their identities as mothers or as creatives they were under immense pressure to prioritize the former. As one respondent put it "I was quite looking forward to going back to work, but to be honest, you feel you shouldn't be saying it too loud" (9).

This expectation that motherhood was the identity that should be prioritized manifested in a number of ways. Respondents felt motherhood was supposed to be their only identity. They had internalized that idea in profound and arguably damaging ways. And conforming to the idea that motherhood should be privileged as the main or only identity they could hold was something that perplexed respondents even as they found themselves conforming to the expectation. A key idea expressed by respondents was that once they became mothers this was the only identity that mother-creatives should hold. As one respondent described,

In almost every movie, there is a Mom character and at some point she will be serving breakfast, I'd say in 70%–80% of all movies... It just reinforces this idea that mommy is in the kitchen and she cooks... it reinforces this idea that mothers are mothers first and nothing else and that is not true.

(1)

As another respondent put it

What's most prevalent is the idea that as soon as you become a mother that's all you are. You're not anything else anymore... you're just a mammy and that is not good because a woman is so much more than motherhood. Motherhood is an integral part of your personality and of your psyche and of who you are but it's not *all* you are....

(1)

Many respondents moreover recognized that they had internalized this expectation that motherhood should be the primary identity. As one mother-creative put it

Why don't we see Mothers in the credits?, I think, we tend to limit ourselves, as well, we tend to think "oh, I shouldn't put myself ahead of my children, I shouldn't put my artistic career ahead of my children". Maybe not ahead but even on the same level....

(1)

This internalized expectation could be very stark and presented in extremely black and white terms, where facilitating any creative work was equated with abandonment of all maternal care duties. One respondent described this characteristic as central to her internal dialog around "leaving" her children in the care of others, which she equated with an emotional betrayal or "hating" them. As she put it

I don't want to abandon my children...What will I profit if I leave them with a childminder every day until six o'clock? Ten euros a week? It's not really worth leaving them. Do I hate them that much and want to be away from them.

(5)

And yet simultaneously this same mother missed her work “It took me ages to say actually, I really need to write... I kept putting that on the back burner... and I think it caused a lot of frustration...” (5). Another respondent had a similar relationship with the tension of having internalized the expectation that motherhood be her primary identity. She also acknowledged that any compromise on this expectation was generally understood as equivalent to “bad” mothering. As she says

I internalised those things myself about being a bad mum... and it kind of bothers me and I know that's wrong and that it's bullshit and that mothers are just humans who are trying to do their best and you can't be everything to everyone and do everything and that 'having it all' is just a way of making women do it all and I know all of this stuff... but I'll have an internal monologue telling me that I'm some kind of failure or something... why am I still susceptible to this even though I know it's bollocks.... (4)

Mother-workers were genuinely perplexed to find themselves caught up in very traditional expectations of identity-roles, and at a loss as to how to internalize the combination more effectively. As one respondent put it

I dunno if it's societal or how we've fallen into these very normative roles and how, like, we don't question them too much... we try and divide up the housework quite equally... so, there's a lot of equalness there, but not as a mother. I'm the mother. (2)

Much as was the case with how they expressed their attitudes and values, so too with their expectations of themselves as mothers and workers, there was a fundamental and unresolved ambivalence and unsettled equation in operation that meant the mother-workers were constantly negotiating how to resolve the internalization of their identities as mothers and workers. This dynamic also appeared when they spoke of their dispositions toward motherhood and work.

4.4 | Disposition toward motherhood and work

In terms of how they arranged the identities of motherhood and work in relation to each other, when it came to how they understood themselves or their subjectivity, there was again evidence of ambivalence and unresolved interconnection, which meant the question of subjectivity remained unsettled. On the one hand, many respondents said that they could find positives in combining both identities within their subjectivity. “Motherhood shapes me in such a way that I don't think I would be the same person if I weren't a Mother and I wouldn't be the same artist if I weren't a Mother” (1). Another respondent spoke to the idea of the positives that were to be gained from being both a creative and a mother “My good friend who is an amazing artist... she said coming over to your house and seeing how you nicely join those worlds together, she said it made me think that if you are an artist and you're not a Mum you're missing so much” (3). Art and motherhood were identities that shed light on each other for many of the respondents. As one respondent explained

Working in the studio as a visual artist is very similar to parenting... like at the beginning you're like, “what the hell is this, I can't do this, I hate this”, to “this is amazing, this is the best thing that ever happened to me”... So, that feeling like you're constantly failing... It feels like that as an artist as well. There's no trajectory where you begin and you get better and you climb the ladder because there is no ladder to climb. So, it's just this kind of circling... I see a lot of similarities in the daily life of being an artist and the daily life of being a parent.... (6)

On the other hand, there were negative dispositions too. Respondents were clear that whether they prioritized their maternal roles or their work roles, either way they were “disappeared” from creative work. The explanations they offered for this were that mothers were simply not understood as fitting the stereotype of creative workers, or they were understood as not adequately committed to their work, or they were perceived as not productive enough at work. A number of respondents articulated those ideas clearly. With regard to the stereotype of the creative worker, one respondent said

I know it feeds from this idea that an artist is a guy sitting over a dark, gloomy desk typing on a typewriter. That is a writer. A writer is not a mother juggling three kids and a dog and a husband and a day job, writing her novel on the kitchen table....

(1)

Another respondent agreed

People think of writers as that stereotype of the man in the tweed jacket with the elbow patches and the satchel... that image of being serious about their craft. Whereas, if you're a woman who's a mother and a writer, you're going to be in your house, tidying your house, ferrying kids to and from school and working your writing around that, and maybe that's the side that's not seen as much, that's not visible, so maybe people aren't as aware of the writer as a mother too.

(16)

In terms of being perceived as not being committed to their work, one respondent felt that mothers were always questioned “how can she be committed to what she's doing, sure she's doing all these other things, she's not going to be committed to this, let's go with the guy” (1). Another respondent concurred

I think it influences how other people perceive parents who are artists because there might be a presumption that you can't be focused on your work now and I just think it's really damaging and it doesn't capture the whole kind of, I guess, experience because humans are interconnected, complicated beings, it's not like you can section your life into neat blocks.

(11)

In terms of not being productive enough a respondent noted “The art world is obsessed with productivity and that's really the main problem with people having children. If you don't produce a body of work, if you don't keep pumping out work you're just glossed over... that's just absurd...” (6). Whether they saw motherhood and work as identities that enhanced each other or detracted from each other, a key issue is that all of the respondents understood that there was a societal disposition toward them that they could not disregard in what they internalized about themselves. Being both a mother and a worker created identity conflicts that were not easy to solve or resolve or internalize in any kind of straightforward manner.

5 | DISCUSSION

In sum, Venn's framework (2006), outlining how attitudes, values, expectations, and dispositions capture subjectivity, is a useful model to structure how respondents saw the self in relation to the coexistent identities of mother and creative worker. In terms of their values, respondents professed ambivalence about “ideal” motherhood and the limitation it puts on creative work. Expectations regarding motherhood also left respondents in a no-win situation, choosing between conflicting demands. With regard to disposition, respondents felt that society refused to

understand mothers as artists and so they could not easily achieve a settled subjectivity in light of the invisibility of mothers who were also creative workers. This articulation of subjectivity across these dimensions reveals a further and new key finding in relation to mother-workers' subjectivities, which is that there is a constant negotiation of subjectivity in operation between the intertwined identities of mother and creative worker. In terms of how the "outside comes to be interiorized as an inside" (Venn, 2006, p. 89), trying to achieve a settled sense of self as a mother-worker involved ongoing and ultimately unresolved work across incompatible tensions. Mothers are consistently ambivalent about combining work identities with mothering identities and vice versa, and they are clear that their subjectivity, the internalization of both of those identities, remains unresolved or in flux as a result of the ambivalence. Subjectivity therefore becomes a key site of contestation for mother-workers, replete with multiple and contradictory possible outcomes. Mother-workers do inhabit, perform, deny, and refuse different aspects of the interlinked identities available to them, but the key point is the constant negotiation and ongoing internal psychosocial work they undertake to function within that dynamic. The key point is that mother workers do not have a final, resolved, accepted, and internalized subjectivity, they have an ongoing, irresolute process of negotiation among interconnected possibilities. This negotiation constitutes an extra cognitive load or a subjectivity "load" for mothers who are also creative workers.

While the study outlined above is limited by scale, based on interviews with only 40 mothers, and limited by sector, being based on data from mothers who work only in CIs, nonetheless, the consequences of this finding for understandings of motherhood and work are important. There are three immediate implications. Firstly, subjectivity loads are invisible work and so are not seen or addressed in workplaces nor apparent to individual workers. They constitute another burden for working mothers to carry, where mother-workers are negotiating all of the time between the pros and cons of their working and mothering situations and weaving their subjectivity between that ambivalence. This is a process relevant to gendered and maternal experiences of work that needs to be further explored on a broader scale in different national contexts and across various sectors. Secondly, research needs to better capture the extent, depth, and multiplicity of the challenges that mothers face in combining work with motherhood in Western societies. These challenges include practical issues such as care facilities and unequal allocations of care work, as established in research to date (Belkin, 2003; Hakim, 2006; Stone, 2007), but this paper moves beyond that literature to show that the challenges for mother-workers extend even to the realm of identity and its problematic internalization in subjectivity. The study adds to existing research on gendered mental loads, cognitive loads, and care loads (Reich-Stiebert et al., 2023) that are unequally distributed in society and calls for more attention to be paid, not just to the practical and sociocultural challenges for mother workers but also to the psychosocial problem of subjectivity that mothers face when combining work with mothering. Finally, the findings outlined above also add to gender and work literatures by pointing to the relevance of intersectional aspects of women's identities to understanding how subjectivity is formed. Family status or motherhood further complicates gendered dimensions of experiences of work. But it is also further complicated by other aspects of identity such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability, all of which can create additional challenges for individual workers. Understanding subjectivity in an intersectional way will add even greater nuance to understandings of work and subjectivity and identity more broadly and how workers are impacted by these dynamics. For all of these reasons, further attention needs to be paid to the important focus of personal subjectivity and human agency in mothers' everyday complex work contexts.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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