"I am a person; I am not just the entity that is Julie's mum".
The experience of being a working mum with young children.
Jo Law, Dr Anke Franz

1. WHY DOES IT MATTER?

- **75.1% UK mothers with dependent children at work, record high**. 28.5% of mothers with a child aged 14 years and under had to reduce their working hours because of childcare reasons. This percentage decreased as the age of the child increased (The ONS, 2019)

- Returning to work after maternity **difficult and anxious experience** for mothers (Parcsi & Curtin, 2013); working mothers face **practical and emotional challenges** (Wattis, Standing & Yerkes, 2013), **negotiations, sacrifices** (Wattis et al., 2013)

- **Mother's employment affects family relationships** (Reynolds, Callender & Edwards, 2003)

- The issues with **social construction of motherhood and womanhood** (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002): **intensive mothering ideals** (Forbes, Lamar & Bornstein, 2020), **idealisation of motherhood** (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017), put pressure on women and challenge their wellbeing, **conflicting expectations from society** regarding mothers (Millward, 2006), "**daunting**" social expectations (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017) questioning concurrence of an ideal worker and a "good" mother (Christopher, 2012)

- **But work makes them happier!** (Guendouzi, 2006)

- Most studies on working mums from **Organisational** and **Occupational Psychology** (e.g., Raskin, 2006) and **predominantly quantitative** (e.g., Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017)

2. RESEARCH QUESTION

How do working mothers with young children make sense of their experience?

- How do they understand their decision to be a working mum?
- How do they think about the challenges and benefits of holding dual roles?
- How do working mums with young children perceive their roles and identity?

3. METHOD

PARTICIPANTS
- **Six British working mothers between 36 and 43 years old**, in a long-term relationship, with children under 7 (parents of young children have been found to struggle the most with competing demands of parenting and work; Haslam, Patrick & Kirby, 2015)

DESIGN
- Qualitative design
- Interviews via Teams, each circa 45 minutes, transcribed verbatim

MATERIALS
- Questions around challenges and enjoyments, perception and interpretation of their roles, understanding of a status and identity of a working mum

ANALYSIS
- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009)

4. FINDINGS

WORK-LIFE (IM)BALANCE

- **Clash of the roles, duty, guilt, stress**
- **Sense of missing out**
- **Childcare issues**
- **Pandemic burden**

"Like, that is my life now, is work and kids there's. At the moment, especially now, there's nothing else there most of the time. And that wasn't true before before I was. It was work. I was a wife. And I was friends and all these other things. And now it's just work mum"

"She was at nursery from 8 till 6 so I could do my hours at work. You know and then go home and get her to suddenly going right, well that they finish at 2:50 OK. And I'm going, aah, that's halfway through my day. You know, trying to work that through. This sort of a big epic shock!"

WORKING IMPROVES MOTHER'S WELLBEING

- **Empowerment and fulfilment**
- **Increased happiness**
- **Reestablished identity**

" I am a person, you know, I I'm not just the entity that is Julie's mum, I existed before Julie, I will continue to exist and. Who I am is very much a case of having that ability to something that I'm very good at is that I'm able to pick things up very quickly, and that's something I do at work."

"I felt like it was a spa day equivalent, it was really nice to sit still, relax and um yeah, it was actually really relaxing being at work and that's saying something being a social worker as well."

WOMAN IN A FAMILY, ORGANISATIONS AND SOCIETY

- **Gender (in)equality**
- **Challenging traditional roles**
- **Reflections on the upbringing and their own mothers**
- **Employee qualities enhanced by motherhood**

"And I think actually teaching our children as well, that mums aren't just, you know, cooking and staying at home cooking and cleaning and serving dinner that they're actually kind of developing their careers and themselves. And they can be financially independent and contribute."

"So, the thing that changed was I became a better manager because I was able to delegate more, and I was able to leverage the skills of those around me and now I'm really proud of that."

5. DISCUSSION

- Working increases **women's self-worth and happiness; it helps maintain their identity. Expansionist theory** (Barnett & Hyde, 2001): multiple roles (e.g., worker, spouse, and parent) are beneficial
- However, paradoxically, being a working mother means **sacrifices and compromises, negotiating the boundaries of parenting and working** (Dillaway & Paré, 2008), which results in **stress, burnout and feeling of guilt**
- **"Lose-lose" dilemmas** (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012), **'the inexorable motherhood situation'** (Forbes, Lamar & Bornstein, 2020)
- **The pandemic and lockdown added pressure to working mother's life**
- Women **consciously challenge traditional perceptions** of their role in a family, organisations and society
- **Persistent gender inequality** (Leahy & Doughney, 2006), **highly gendered sacrifices** (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005)
- **Ambiguity of cultural construction and definitions of mothering and working** (Dillaway & Paré, 2008),
- **Illusory freedom of choice** (Elvin-Novak, 1999)
- **Intrinsic meaning of work and 'career salience' central to perception of work-family balance** (Raskin, 2006)

6. FUTURE RESEARCH

- **Issues with the sample**: intersection of a work and family life considering contextual social and cultural factors education and income (Raskin, 2006), social class, housing, and marital status (Romito, 1994) have been found to affect mother's relationship with work – one participant prioritised children over work: dual nationality, no degree, self-employed
- **The value of motherhood** why is work empowering, but motherhood is not?
- **To what extend societal expectations and gender norms affect working mums' choices?**
- **Need for a comparative study with working mothers with different (lower?) education and status**
- **The study did not explore coping mechanisms and required/desired help and support**

7. REFERENCES

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