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Abstract

This study examines the identity transition of women when they become mothers and return to work. Twenty-two first-time mothers were interviewed at two points in time: just after giving birth and on re-entry into employment after maternity leave. The findings suggest that

this transition is influenced by multiple factors on different levels which include individual factors, such as partner support and career aspirations, organisational factors such as family-friendly work practices and role models, and societal factors such as social norms and attitudes towards the maternal body. The findings highlight the importance of context by stressing the interrelated nature of factors on micro-, meso- and macro-level in order to better understand the identity transition to motherhood.

Key words: identity, transition to motherhood, working mothers, multilevel perspective, re-entering the workforce

Introduction

Women are an increasing part of the labour market in many countries (OECD, 2017).

Consequently, many of them experience the transition to motherhood while being in employment. This is an important transition as it is likely to influence how women define themselves and how their careers unfold. Some studies have looked at women's identity transition during pregnancy (Hennekam, 2016; Ladge *et al.*, 2012) but few have focused on their re-entry into employment after maternity leave (see for an exception, Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). We argue that both the birth of the child as well as the re-entry period are crucial moments for working women. Returning to work is a turning point where women experience a work environment with their new sense of self. Their new maternal status is likely to influence how they perceive themselves.

We studied 22 first-time mothers at two moments in time: once within the first month after giving birth and once within the first month after going back to work after their maternity leave.

We make a contribution by providing a multi-layered understanding of identity transition by integrating macro-, meso- and micro-level factors. Building on Haynes' (2008) work, we examine how individuals make sense of their professional and maternal identities in relation to the wider social and cultural norms of employment and motherhood. While most studies are conducted on the organisational level, we argue that it is important to take into consideration the interplay of factors on different levels. Given that becoming a working mother bridges both the micro-individual and meso-organisational levels, an integrated understanding of both levels is necessary, along with the macro-societal influences on this interplay.

Context

This section discusses several aspects of the context in which this study took place. The Netherlands has a high labour force participation rate of women: 74.2% (WEF, 2017). One of the reasons why this percentage is so high is because 50% of the working population works part-time, against a European average of less than 20% (Eurostat, 2014). The laws and collective agreements in the Netherlands enable part-time work and take into account childcare responsibilities (Akgunduz & Plantenga, 2018). These collective agreements vary across sectors. For example, healthcare and education are known to provide extensive family-friendly policies and practices (Merens *et al.*, 2011). Women have 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, compared to 14 weeks as recommended by the European Union. They are paid 100% of their salaries during their leave, cannot be dismissed and have the right to return to the same position after their leave. In addition, they have time off for pre- and post-natal care and, after birth, they are entitled to have breaks to breastfeed until the baby is 9 months old.

National culture also influences social and cultural perceptions of what is considered the “right choice” for mothers (Charles & Harris, 2007). Previous research has shown that women are perceived to be less committed to work when they become mothers (Gatrell *et al.*, 2017) and that working mothers are simultaneously perceived as “bad mothers” in certain cultures (Cuddy *et al.*, 2004). In the Netherlands, both housewives and full-time working mothers are frowned upon (Ruitenbergh, 2014). Part-time is perceived as the “right choice” since mothers are expected to care for their children (Kremer, 2007; Plantenga, 2002). The literature suggests that women may internalise such cultural prescriptions and may experience feelings of guilt and confusion when they do not meet social norms (Feldman *et al.*, 2004).

Previous studies also suggest that individual characteristics influence the employment decision of working women. Educational level is positively related to labourforce participation of women and, in the context of the Netherlands, this relationship remains positive when they become mothers (Merens *et al.*, 2011). The role of one’s spouse (i.e., partner’s support) has been identified as another factor that affects the employment decision of mothers (Kangas & Rostgaard, 2007). Career aspirations of both the mother and the father, their respective income, the number of hours they work per week and career plans influence employment decision after childbirth and, consequently, how the mother sees herself (Tolciu & Zierahn, 2012).

Literature Review

Maternal identity and identity transition

We define identity as a ‘self-referential description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the question “Who am I?”’ (Ashforth *et al.*, 2008: 327). As people belong to

several social groups, the answer to this question depends on the situation. Adopting a post-structuralist approach in order to capture the situational nature of attitudes and behaviours, we argue that the way in which a woman constructs her identity is influenced and moulded by various ideologies and discourses (Haynes, 2008). While having a baby is a joyful experience for parents, it may also be a difficult period since it brings along a change that requires a new role and responsibility (Taskin, 2007). In case of working women, it adds an extra layer of maternal identity to their professional identity.

Identity is not stable and many individuals experience identity transitions as a consequence of changing roles or life events (Ashforth, 2001). When life situations are stable, identity work, referring to being continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness, are often unconscious (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). However, when one encounters an important event or transition in life, the awareness of one's identity is highlighted (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Becoming a mother is a life-changing event that can trigger an identity transition (Hennekam, 2016). Identity is transformed as women redefine their sense of self in the context of the socio-cultural expectations of motherhood and professional work (Haynes, 2008).

A multilevel framework

Previous research suggests that multiple life roles result in interrole conflict as individuals experience difficulty performing each role successfully because of conflicting demands (Kahn *et al.*, 1964) and interpret social expectations about their life roles (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Our review of the literature suggests that the identity transition to motherhood is influenced by the interplay of factors on three interconnected levels: macro-societal, meso-

organisational and micro-individual level. On macro-level, we discuss social and cultural norms regarding motherhood and employment as they provide coercive prescriptions of gender behaviour that influence most women's lives (Haynes, 2008). We focus on the norm to work part-time as well as the maternal body. On meso-level, family-friendly work practices as well as role models are discussed. On micro-level, we focus on individual partner support and career aspirations.

Macro-level

At the macro-level, the literature highlights the role of social norms including the norms with respect to the maternal body. Social norms partially set the parameters of what decisions, choices or behaviours are considered acceptable or unacceptable in society and therefore play a key role in defining and influencing gender roles and relations (Cerise *et. al.*, 2013). Social norms point out that women, mainly after having given birth, are very likely to reduce their work volume (Ruitenbergh, 2014).

The term 'maternal body' refers to women's capacity for reproduction, with a focus on pregnancy and the nurturing of infant children (Gatrell, 2013). Women can engage in forms of body work to try to conform to the prevailing masculine norms (Haynes, 2011). As discrimination related to pregnancy and motherhood persists (Gatrell, 2011a; Gatrell *et al.*, 2017) as a consequence of social and cultural attitudes towards the maternal body (Haynes 2008; Gatrell, 2011b), women may engage in maternal body work to avoid this. Haynes (2008) argues that the body becomes a vehicle for displaying (non)conformity to social norms which affect our women's sense of self. Women's reduced control over the maternal body conflicts with the need to present the self in a professional manner (Haynes, 2008). The female body, especially during pregnancy and when breastfeeding is perceived as "other" and out of place in a professional environment (van Amsterdam, 2015). Hopfl and Hornby

Atkinson (2000) suggest that professional environments privilege the male body and require the abjection and concealment of babies and maternal bodies in organisational settings. Similarly, Puwar (2004) argues that pregnant women are seen as ‘disruptive’ to the organisational space, leading to subtle but hostile reactions (Gatrell, 2011b; Joshi *et al.*, 2015). The masculine embodied norms of bodily control and stability are exacerbated with regards to the maternal body that cannot comply with those norms (Fotaki, 2013; Warren & Brewis, 2004) as the biological functions of the female body do interfere with organisational life (Brewis, 2000) disadvantaging female workers (Gatrell, 2007; Haynes, 2008; Warren & Brewis, 2004). As such, pregnancy is likely to affect a woman’s sense of self (Bailey, 1999).

Meso-level

At the meso-level, the literature points towards the importance of family-friendly work practices and role models in the workplace. Family-friendly work practices are employer-sponsored programs and policies that are designed to help employees manage work and personal life demands (Glass & Finley, 2002). Provision of such practices is likely to vary from organisation to organisation, as it is affected by various factors such as industry, firm size, firm age, the proportion of women, and the human resource system (Davis & Kalleberg, 2006). It is important to note that some employees who are entitled to family-friendly policies may not be aware of their options and report that they do not have family-friendly policies available to them (Budd & Mumford, 2006) or have a low sense of entitlement to make use of them (Lewis, 1997).

Family-friendly work practices are gendered (Burnett *et al.* 2010; Lewis *et al.*, 2007). While research has shown that family-friendly work practices have improved the working conditions of mothers in some ways (Lewis & Cooper, 1999), such initiatives have also resulted in negative outcomes (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016). Many organisations presume that

family-friendly work practices such as flexible working options are destined for mothers as they are thought to be the main caregivers at home (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016). As mothers indeed use some policies and practices more than fathers, these assumptions are reinforced rather than challenged (Lewis *et al.*, 2007; Lewis & Cooper, 1999; Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011). In addition, the use of family friendly work policies is often negatively perceived by others at work (Joshi *et al.*, 2015).

It is important to note that the gendered assumptions about career- versus home-orientation has led to the belief that men do not want or do not need family-friendly work policies although research has shown that this is not the case (O'Brien, 2009). Research by Miller (2010) has shown that fathers who want to be more involved in the care of their child(ren) and household are also frustrated by the prevailing social norms and expectations.

Role models are described as “individuals whose behaviours, personal styles, and specific attributes are emulated by others” (Shapiro *et al.*, 1978: 52). Social learning theory is useful in explaining how role modelling functions (Bandura, 1977). People observe the behaviour of others in given situations and note the outcomes of those behaviours. Previous studies have shown that role models can help young mothers to show how others have dealt with similar issues (Sealy & Singh, 2010) and can as such be a source of information, encouragement, and support (BarNir *et al.*, 2011) although it is not always positive (Durbin & Tomlinson, 2014). Hennekam (2016) found that role models are important during pregnancy in the sense that when realistic role models were available their identity transition went well, but that when role models were not available this transition towards motherhood was less successful. We expect that role models are not only important during pregnancy but likely also play a role also during the period when the new mothers return to work.

Micro-level

At the micro-level, the review points towards the role of partner support and career aspirations. A partner can provide support to working women who are juggling home, family, and community responsibilities. Such support includes sharing home and parenting responsibilities, encouraging ongoing career advancement, and giving interpersonal support. Over the past decades, fathers have become more involved in childcare when mothers are employed (Wang & Bianchi, 2009). According to Bröckel's (2016) study of partners' social support and women's re-entry into the labour market in Germany, both instrumental and emotional support by the partner play a role in women's return to employment.

Assumptions about career aspirations are gendered in the sense that employers presume women, and especially mothers, to be more home-oriented while they tend to believe that men are more work-orientated (Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011) although those assumptions have been challenged (Crompton & Lyonette, 2010; Gatrell, 2013; Gatrell *et al.*, 2017). In addition, mothers who opt for flexible working arrangements are often considered to be less work-orientated than fulltime workers (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016). Gatrell and Cooper (2006) argue that this inaccurate representation of mothers' work-orientation is then used as justification for constraining mothers career opportunities. As a consequence, the use of family-friendly work practices, despite their actual career aspirations, functions as a barrier to career advancement as they are put on the 'mommy track' which limits their career.

'Fractional' work, a form of part-time employment which offers optimum conditions for those working as a percentage of a whole time equivalent, is perceived to be a tool to increase work-family balance (Gatrell, 2007). However, Gatrell (2007) showed that fractional work often leads to negative outcomes in the form of fewer career development opportunities. She argued that discrimination towards mothers who work fractionally may be exacerbated because their corporeal absence at work makes them highly visible as they do not conform to the prevailing masculine norms of work (Gatrell & Cooper, 2006). Mothers working full-time

may be more able to conceal their maternal bodies and their infants by maintaining ‘presence’ at work, conforming to the male norm (Gatrell & Cooper, 2006).

Meeussen and colleagues (2016:7) revealed in their study on young adults’ work and family aspirations that ‘while young women’s family aspirations were positively related to female career norms, their career aspirations were not related to female family norms.’ This difference may be a result of high expectations for mothers (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). A strong focus on women’s careers may bring about feelings of guilt and hence push aspirations for their mother identity, while a stronger focus on family does not bring about the same guilt for their work identity and thus does not push career identity (Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010). This means high career aspirations may make women more vulnerable to work-family conflict once they enter parenthood. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) suggest that work and family may be incompatible domains due to their competing responsibilities. This may have different implications for women and men due to traditional gender roles (Williams *et al.*, 2016). Working mothers continue to take on the lion’s share of household and childcare responsibilities (Burnett *et al.*, 2010; Kossek *et al.*, 2011) and are generally perceived as second-income earners (Lewis *et al.*, 2007; Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011). In other words, work may be a greater source of conflict for women than men.

Method

The empirical study aimed to get more insights in the identity transition when working women become mothers. Twenty-two women were interviewed twice: once after childbirth and once after returning to work. We adopted post-structuralism as our ontological and epistemological position in order to provide a situational and fluid interpretation of the attitudes and behaviours expressed by individuals (Rittenhofer & Gatrell, 2012).

Sample

The sample consisted of 22 women who worked full time and had given birth to their first child. They worked in a wide range of functions and industries. An interview was scheduled within the first month following birth. The women were part of a bigger research project and were followed since the first trimester of their pregnancy. This article focuses on the last two waves of interviews: after childbirth and when returning to work. A blend of snowball and convenience sampling techniques were used (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Invitations to participate in the study were distributed at schools and day care centres and the details of the study were posted on websites related to pregnancy and motherhood. The participants did not receive an incentive to participate.

It is important to note that 22 out of the initial 24 women completed both waves of interviews. Only those women who completed both waves were included, leading to the analysis of 44 interviews. It is important to note that we cannot know in what way the women who agreed to participate differ from those who refused the invitation or from the two mothers who dropped out, leading to a selection bias. This leads to an attrition rate of 8.3% which is low compared to an average of 42% for studies with longitudinal designs (Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). The interviewees had different levels of education and Dutch national statistics have shown that employment patterns differ for higher- versus lower-educated women: 52% of mothers with a lower level of education are inactive in the workforce, compared to 12% of more highly educated mothers (Statistics Netherlands, 2011). Research has shown that the gender composition of a sector can influence the experiences of women at work (Germain *et al.*, 2012). For example, family-friendly working arrangements are known to be more common in female-dominated sectors in the Netherlands (Merens *et al.*, 2011). The women were between 23 and 38 years old with an average age of 30 years. The

characteristics of the interviewees and their intention to work full time or part-time after childbirth are provided in the table below.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Procedure

The goal of the study “to learn more about how identity changes when one becomes a mother” was explained and anonymity was guaranteed. While most interviews were conducted face-to-face, some were conducted by Skype when it was difficult to find a suitable moment to conduct a face-to-face interview. The participating mothers were asked to “tell their story” with the help of guiding questions about how they experienced their transition to motherhood, how this changed their sense of self and how they were going to juggle their maternal and professional responsibilities. The interviewees created as such a narrative about how their sense of self was changing as they became mothers and returned to work. It has been argued that the evolving sense of who they are is not only an internal process, but is in constant interaction with the environment (Ibarra, 2003). We aimed to shed light on the contextual factors that influenced the identity transition as they moved towards and into parenthood. We questioned interviewees about their co-workers, managers and supervisors, the ambiance or culture at work, habits such as overtime and other characteristics including work structure (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014). An interview guide was used, but this guide should be considered a rough guideline as it was constantly adapted as themes were brought up by the interviewees and then tested in subsequent interviews. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were held in Dutch. Transcriptions were later

translated into English by a native English-Dutch speaker. The researcher took notes and had a research diary where important aspects of each interview were noted such as whether the interviewees were talkative. Finally, as the first author, a female academic of Dutch origin, conducted the interviews, her role as data collector and analyst should be acknowledged. Indeed, the researcher is part of the sense-making process the interviewees engaged in and the way in which the data was interpreted.

Analysis

All the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed and analysed without the use of software. The analysis started by the identification of codes that emerged organically from the data. Initial themes were identified when reading the transcripts carefully. Some themes were expected based on the literature such as the availability of realistic role models or family-friendly work practices. Others, such as the social norm of part-time work, were not expected but emerged naturally from the data. We opted for an inductive interpretative approach as we aimed to understand the lived experiences of the mothers involved in the study by trying to let the themes emerge from their narratives. This approach is in line with the idea that research is socially situated (Warren & Brewis, 2004). At this stage, we stayed very close to the wording of the interviewees. All transcripts were coded along the identified codes and new codes emerged as more data were being collected. This process of analytical induction implied that initial codes were constantly tested as new transcripts were added. In line with Strauss and Corbin (1990), the different steps in the process were interrelated, making it an iterative process in which the researcher went from the transcripts to the coding and back to the transcripts while the coding process evolved. The observational notes were consulted during the process of data analysis.

To capture the transitional nature of the experiences of the interviewees, all interviews were analysed as part of a case occurring across two different times while also examining the cross-case patterns in the process to identify both similarities and differences. In order to be transparent about the data analysis, below a diagram that outlines the data structure is presented. This way of presenting data is based on Gioia and colleagues (2013). In the first column, the different codes are provided, then those codes are put into a broader, overarching theme to which the other codes relate and finally conceptual categories are created in the column on the right. While the initial themes were formulated in the words of the interviewees, the second step moved to a higher level of abstraction and were derived from going to the literature and aligning the codes with the existing body of knowledge. The last step involved creating aggregated theoretical dimensions and building relationships among the themes identified. The findings were then interpreted and put in perspective by going back to the existing literature. It is at this moment that we could develop a framework, write up our findings and make sense of the way the interviewees had made sense of their experiences (Miller, 2005). Interviews were ceased when saturation point was reached and no new information was obtained (Locke, 2001).

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Insert Figure 1 about here

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Results

The findings suggest that the interplay of factors on macro-, meso- and micro-level influenced women's identity transition to motherhood. Social norms on macro-level, the availability of family-friendly work practices and role models on meso-level and the support of the partner and their career aspirations on micro-level were identified. The model is

depicted in Figure 2, and Table 2 provides data examples of the main concepts. The findings are explained in more depth below.

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Insert Figure 2 about here

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Becoming a mother was an overwhelming experience for all interviewees. While most of them already actively engaged with their future maternal identity during pregnancy, they still felt overwhelmed by and unprepared for the arrival of the baby raising many questions about who they were, who they wanted to be and how the answers of such questions were related to factors on micro-, meso- and macro-level.

And then you're all of a sudden a mother, it's such a strange feeling and so natural at the same time. It changes everything, not just how I see myself, but how I see the world. I'm overwhelmed by the beauty of motherhood, it's much stronger than anything else (Interviewee 4, Nurse).

Now that the baby is here, we can no longer postpone asking ourselves crucial questions. Who's going to look after our girl? How much will I work, how much will my partner work, how many days of daycare can we afford? Those are painful

questions for me as it makes me realise I can't be and the perfect mum and the perfect colleague at work (Interviewee 9, Business Consultant).

Macro-level

Social norms about working mothers were brought up by the interviewees. In the Netherlands, there is the norm to work part-time when one becomes a mother. Those expectations were strongly felt. When they acted in line with those social norms, their decisions were well-received and validated by their environment. However, decisions that violated those norms were criticised both in personal and professional circles:

When I announced my pregnancy, people were really happy for me. However, the tone and ambiance changed when I told them I didn't want to be with the baby as much as possible as I planned to keep on working full time. They reacted with horror as if I was from another planet. They even dared to say that as my husband is making good money I should work less, as if financial reasons are the only valid ones to work full time (Interviewee 11, business consultant).

The maternal body was another issue that emerged from the interviewees' narratives and influenced how they saw themselves.

I always thought I fitted in, but during pregnancy I felt like they looked at me in a different way, like I had become someone else. Although I tried to hide it, dressed professionally and even worked up to birth, the perception that people saw me differently stayed. Worse, I have the impression that even after giving birth and

working like before, people see me as a second-class worker (Interviewee 6, administrative clerk).

When you don't feel accepted because you feel you don't belong, it's difficult to let your professional self grow. As such, those negative presumptions and ideas about working mothers push me to focus on my role as mother (interviewee 20, banker).

Meso-level

On meso-level, the availability of family-friendly work practices and role models came up. Upon their return to work, the interviewees started to look for more information on how to juggle motherhood with work. They looked for information about what the company could offer. Interestingly, instead of requesting this information directly from the organisation or their manager, they relied on other mothers to know more about how to deal with child(ren) and paid employment. The availability of family-friendly work practices emerged from the findings as an important factor that influenced their sense of self. In line with the literature, two categories were identified (Bailyn *et al.*, 2001): services that help to dedicate oneself as much to work as possible and benefits that give employees the flexibility to balance work and family. In the first category, we found women that had day-care at work, laundry services and warm meals to bring home:

They do everything to make you be at work as much as possible. Sport facilities, warm meals over lunch as well as the possibility to deliver groceries at work so you don't have to go shopping after work. I have to say I quite enjoy it. The underlying idea isn't great, as they basically want you to live here, but in practice it does help (Interviewee 7, financial advisor).

The second category consisting of practices that led to more work-family balance were highly appreciated and reassured the future mothers that they would be able to balance children and work, which allowed them to project themselves as a working mother. One interviewee reflected on this after birth:

My colleague who has three kids told me that she's allowed to work from home one day a week. We have a similar position, so I don't see why I would be denied the same possibility. Day-care is very expensive and being able to reduce it by one day a week while keeping my full time position would be really helpful (Interviewee 2, lawyer).

The young mothers actively looked for role models, as they did during pregnancy (Hennekam, 2016). Those role models were mainly other working mothers in their organisation. The presence of role models had a reassuring function: it was seen as a signal that it was possible to be a mother and work simultaneously. Similarly, the absence of role models led to increased feelings of stress and perceptions of incompatibility of their professional and maternal identity:

There are hardly any mums here and I know why. Operating at this level requires a 100% of your attention, you need to devote yourself to work. Most women can't do it and all drop out when they become mothers. It only confirms what I already knew: you can't have it all... (Interviewee 11, business consultant).

Micro-level

On micro-level, two factors emerged influencing the way the interviewees experienced their transition to motherhood: one's career aspirations and the support from one's partner.

Support of the partner was an important factor and led to the feeling that they were not alone, while a lack of partner support led to feelings of stress. The following interviewees mentioned this after their child was born but before going back to work:

I really didn't like being pregnant and I'm happy it's over. I found it really tiring and it affected my work as I had less energy and found it more difficult to concentrate. Now my husband can help, he's good with the baby and does most of the work giving me time to get back in shape to go back to work. I can't wait, this whole baby-thing is not for me (Interviewee 10, interior designer).

My husband has to travel a lot for his work, he's often absent for a week or two. In the past I didn't really care, but that's different now. With the baby it's going to be difficult alone. I often work late and I don't see how I'll manage to pick up the baby on time every day. It's pretty stressful as there doesn't seem to be a solution (Interviewee 17, English teacher).

A second micro-level factor that emerged from the data was career aspirations. Some interviewees had their priorities clear: they put either their professional or maternal identity above the other and this helped them to establish a clear sense of self:

I already felt it during pregnancy and I can only confirm: my baby comes first and my career comes second. I'm a mother and nothing can change that. At work, I can be replaced, at home I can't. I'll be happy to go back to work in a few weeks' time

probably, but my priorities are crystal clear which helps me to have clearly in my head who I am: I'm a working mother, with an accent on mother (Interviewee 7, Financial Advisor).

I don't care much about my work, I never really cared. I'm working for financial reasons and I enjoy being with the baby. If there is a possibility to take a longer leave, I'll definitely take it (Interviewee 19, waitress).

Others, who were strongly attached to their careers and professional identity, perceived the arrival of the baby as more problematic especially since their career aspirations clashed with social norms of part-time work and because the use of family-friendly work options were perceived to possibly hinder their career advancement in the future.

I've been thinking about working more from home, but you know, I don't think they take you seriously then. I have to keep up the professional image if I want them to take me seriously for good assignments and promotions in the future (Interviewee 9, Business Consultant).

Discussion

This study examined the identity transition of working women when they become mothers and when they return to work. Twenty-two women were interviewed at two points in time: once after they gave birth and once upon their return to work. The findings suggest that the way women experience this transition is related to the interplay of micro-, meso- and macro-level factors. We identified women's career aspirations and the support they get from their partner on micro-level, family-friendly work practices and role models on meso-level and

social norms regarding their maternal bodies and labour participation on macro-level. The factors are interrelated and affect the way in which women experience their identity transition to motherhood. New working mothers who return to their organisation following maternity leave question who they are, who they should be, and how good they can be as a professional and as a mother (Johnston & Swanson, 2006). We show that the identity transition to motherhood is influenced by factors on multiple levels.

On macro-level, the social norm of part-time work (Ruitenbergh, 2014) needs further discussion. Previous studies have shown that constructing a new self is influenced by how others react to it (Ibarra, 2003). People want an identity that is validated by the external environment and feels authentic. In terms of societal expectations, previous research found that gendered beliefs about ‘the proper thing to do’ influence choices mothers make (Charles & Harris, 2007). The interviewees highlighted that when they continued working part-time, this decision was warmly welcomed by the environment. However, women who decided to keep a full time position had to deal with critical comments. The prevailing part-time norm in the Netherlands was therefore perceived as an obstacle in their personal choice regarding their labour market participation. In addition, the social and cultural masculine norms and attitudes towards the maternal body lead women to engage in maternal body work (Gatrell, 2011b, 2013; Haynes, 2008, 2012). Pregnancy, breastfeeding and related issues lead to non-conformity to social norms (Fotaki, 2013; Puwar 2004; van Amsterdam, 2015; Warren & Brewis, 2004) which influences women’s sense of self (Bailey, 1999; Haynes, 2008) in that constructing and maintaining professional identity is difficult when maternity blurs the boundaries that social norms impose (Gatrell *et al.*, 2017).

On meso-level, we focused on family-friendly work practices and role models. The availability, feeling of entitlement and use of family-friendly work practices relates to the career aspirations on micro-level and the social norms on macro-level. It has been argued that

taking advantage of such policies and practices influences how one is perceived at work: as less work-oriented (Gatrell & Cooper, 2016). This in turn influences women's career development opportunities (Gatrell & Cooper, 2006; Gatrell, 2007) which "pushes" women to focus on their maternal identity instead of their professional self. In the same line of reasoning, family-friendly work practices may lead women to be more absent from work by for example working from home. A corporeal absence from work might increase their visibility and the fact that they do not fulfill the masculine norms (Gatrell & Cooper, 2006), negatively affecting their careers. Therefore, it is not the pure availability of family-friendly work policies that influences how working women see themselves, but also their sense of entitlement (Lewis, 1997) which is affected by prevailing organisational and macro-level social norms such as presentism and beliefs about gender roles. Finally, there is a persisting belief that family-friendly work practices are mainly for working mothers (Lewis *et al.*, 2007; Lewis & Cooper, 1999; Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011), which can form a barrier for women to use them as this will confirm the belief that women become less career-oriented when they have a family, pushing them towards a focus on their maternal identity. Role models also influence the extent to which women feel they have a choice regarding who they are and who they want to become as working mother (Hennekam, 2016). This is not only the case during pregnancy, but continues after their return to work.

On micro-level, the support of one's partner as well as one's career aspirations emerged. The extent to which one's partner is involved in paid employment, childcare and household duties influence not only the employment decision after birth but also the different selves a working woman can consider (Bröckel, 2016; Wang & Bianchi, 2009). Related to the support of one's partner, a woman's career aspirations also influence how she sees herself. The findings highlight that mothers who either put the accent on their work or their maternal status were able to prioritise one identity over the other. In some cases, this was

related to their educational level in the sense that a lower educational and occupational status led women to care less about their professional identity, putting their maternal identity at the forefront. While those career aspirations are personal, they are influenced by societal assumptions that are gendered in that women are often thought to be more oriented towards the home, especially when they become mothers (Özbilgin *et al.*, 2011).

Practical implications

Our findings showed that the identity transition to motherhood is a complex process and influenced by factors on multiple levels. The following recommendations blur the boundaries between micro-, meso- and macro-levels, stressing the need to tackle issues on all levels simultaneously.

Firstly, and related to the persisting assumption that women will be less career-oriented once they become mothers, maternity coaching could be helpful in maintaining workplace status after a mother's return to work (Bussell, 2008).

Secondly, organisations could better communicate the available options for working parents, such as the possibility to work some days at home or flexible working hours. It is important that family-friendly programs do not disadvantage workers who use them by providing them less career development opportunities (Gatrell, 2007; Gatrell & Cooper, 2016) or by negatively affecting relationships with coworkers (Teasdale, 2013). Haynes (2008), who focused on women in accounting, found that where opportunities for investments in the professional self are maintained, women appeared to experience less discontinuity between their professional and mothering identities, and a more successful entwining of the professional and personal.

Furthermore, workplace norms, such as corporeal presentism and a culture of long working hours should be tackled. For example, the existing norm of working long hours in

Japan has been argued to increase structural gender inequality as well as pushing women to either opt out of work or emulate workplace masculinity (Nemoto, 2013). A shift in implicit masculine workplace norms asks for a change in corporate culture so that mothers do not have to deal with those challenges themselves (Gatrell, 2013; Haynes, 2012).

In addition, it has been argued that family-friendly policies should be offered to both men and women, challenging the assumption that it is only for women (Rittenhofer & Gatrell, 2012). As an increasing number of fathers wishes to be involved in the upbringing of their child(ren), they could also benefit from such policies thereby changing the attitudes of employers and challenging the assumption that women are more family oriented than men (Burnett *et al.* 2010).

Regarding the prevailing social norm of part-time work, organisations should better outline the different options available to women, stressing that it is their personal choice to work part-time, full time or withdraw completely from the labour market. They should be careful in crafting an ambiance in which all working women feel valued, regardless their employment status.

Finally, we join Hausman (2004) who argued that pressures to integrate maternal bodies with the norms of male embodiment at work should be removed. Rather, new mothers should receive help to be able to deal with breastfeeding and other aspects of early motherhood without facing hostility for disturbing workplace routines.

Theoretical implications

Our study takes a holistic approach by identifying factors on three different levels that affect the way women experience their transition to motherhood. Moreover, the findings stress the interplay between those factors.

The majority of work-family studies that apply an identity lens are quantitative and cross-sectional, measuring women's identity at a single point in time on a career- versus family-identity salience spectrum (Lobel & Clair, 1992). Such studies tend to categorise women as "career-oriented" or "family-oriented," as though women are inherently inclined to prioritise one domain over the other. This study looks at women who are juggling both paid work and motherhood, providing deeper insights in their identity transition.

Another way to change gendered assumptions about one's social roles and career-orientation relates to the concept of "gender as performativity" in which gender and behaviours are defined as fluid, situated and negotiable (Rittenhofer & Gatrell, 2012). Here, gender is not perceived to be fixed but can shift depending on the social context and is related to behaviours rather than gender (Rittenhofer & Gatrell, 2012).

A final theoretical contribution relates to our multilevel perspective, which is in line with our post-structuralist approach. Scholars have outlined the benefits of a multilevel approach to research in organizations (e.g., Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). However, a multilevel framework is rarely used in research on identity and identity transitions. As the transition to motherhood and the re-entry period after maternity leave involve complex decisions that are influenced by factors on different levels, our multilevel approach adds to our understanding of the context in which this takes place.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study shows the importance of taking into account the interrelated factors on micro-, meso- and macro-levels in order to better understand the identity transition to motherhood. Firstly, while we have focused on several factors that emerged from our data, it is likely that other factors also influence this process such as work centrality, financial considerations and class (Crompton & Lyonette, 2010), that should be examined in future studies.

Secondly, as this study was conducted in the Netherlands with its cultural particularities such as the high female labour participation and the part-time norm, more research in other national contexts may be conducted for cross-cultural evaluation.

Thirdly, several characteristics of the sample are likely to have influenced the findings and more research to better understand the importance of those factors is needed. One of them is age. The interviewees in this study were between 23 and 38 years old. We did not look at possible differences between mothers in different age groups, but it is possible that differences exist. Moreover, cohort effects may play a role as employment decisions of mothers and how women see themselves both professionally and as a mother have changed over time. We recommend longitudinal studies that enable to include possible generational differences.

Finally, the type and position of the interviewees might have influenced the findings. For example, women in high paid managerial and professional employment are more likely to have access to family-friendly policies than their lower paid, lower skilled counterparts (Deitch & Huffman, 2001). Future studies may look into the experiences of mothers with different occupational statuses and different degrees of stress or responsibilities across different sectors.

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Figure 1. Data structure

First order concepts

- Wondering “who they are” and “who they want to be”
- Observing work, society and family to explore “who they can be”
- Different factors intersect, interact and reinforce one another

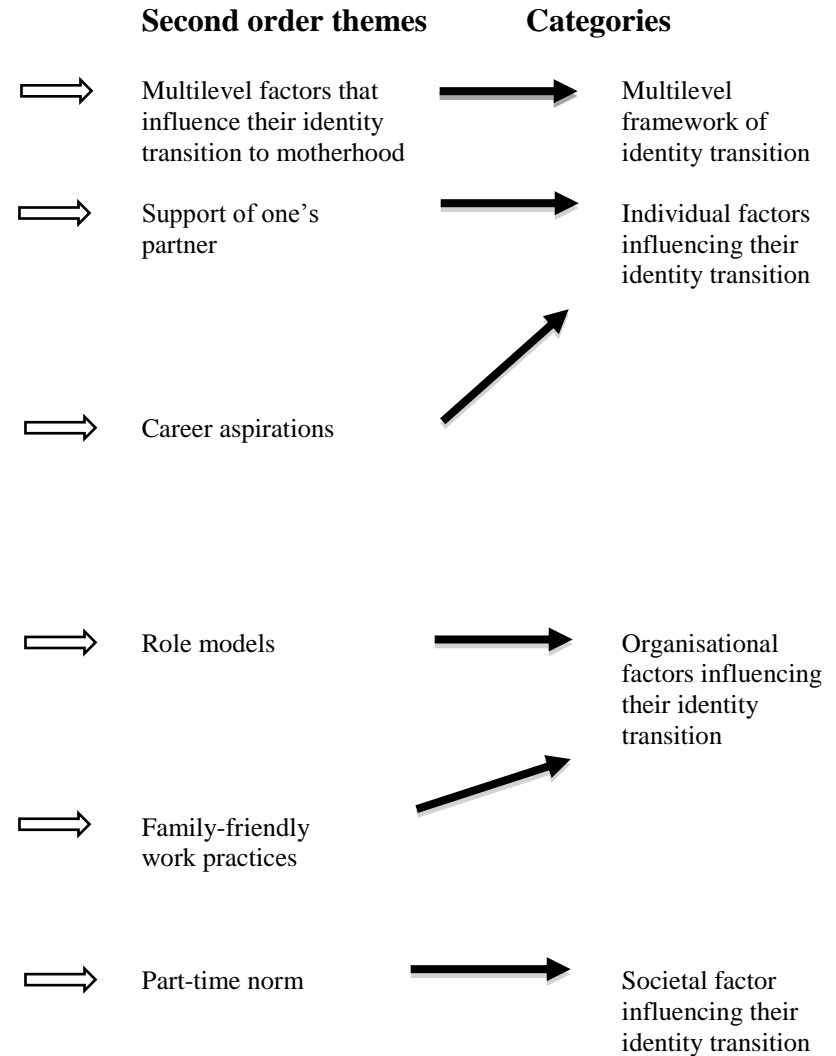
- Becoming aware of one’s own beliefs regarding parenting and work
- Sharing one’s ideas on parenting with one’s partner
- Discussing with one’s partner how they will divide the care for the baby
- Thinking about how one’s parents divided paid work and parenthood
- Perception of involvement of one’s partner
- Lack of involvement/help of partner increases stress of juggling work and baby

- Own upbringing influences ideas on division of roles and parenting (whether they are from a dual-income family, the way their own parents divided caring and household tasks)
- Personal ideals about raising a child (is daycare considered a suitable option?)
- Personal preferences about staying in the workforce
- When work is important, care for the baby and maintaining one’s career is stressful
- When career aspirations are low, professional identity is easily put aside

- Asking advice and observing other mothers on juggling motherhood and work
- Thinking back about one’s own mother and her way of juggling motherhood and work
- Looking for additional role models on forums and blogs
- Lack of role models makes them wonder whether it is possible to a working mother
- Many realistic role models reduces uncertainty

- Asking colleagues informally about family-friendly practices in organisation
- Asking HR about existing policies is avoided as it makes them look less committed
- Especially practices that provide a balance between work and private life is appreciated
- The availability such practices leads to confidence that one can be a working mother

- Full time working mothers are perceived as “bad mothers”
- Mothers who withdraw from the labour market are uninteresting
- Financial reasons should be the main driver for employment decision
- Not fulfilling the part-time norm leads to disapproval of others



- Maternal body perceived to be out of place
- Maternal body negatively perceived by others
- Maternal body perceived as unprofessional and out of control
- Feeling that pregnancy does not meet the “norms” at work
- Feeling that one has to conceal one’s maternal status



Social norms regarding
maternal body



Figure 2. Interrelated nature of multilevel factors influencing the identity transition to motherhood

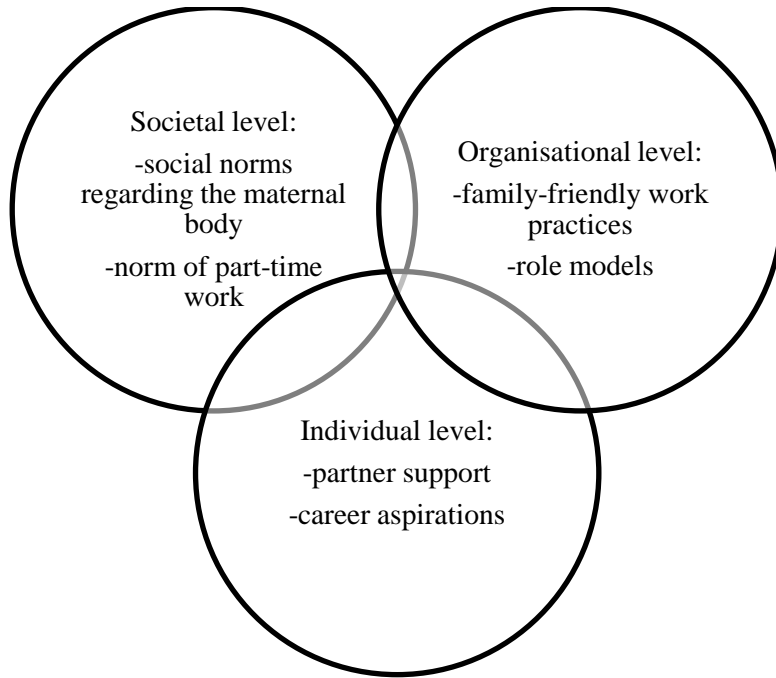


Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample

Int.	Age	Function	Educational level	Sector composition	Gender	Intention to work after birth
1	32	HR Assistant	Higher vocational	Administration	Female-dominated	Part time
2	37	Lawyer	University	Law	Gender-balanced	Full time
3	26	Teacher	Higher vocational	Education	Female-dominated	Part time
4	24	Nurse	Higher vocational	Healthcare	Female-dominated	Part time
5	28	Cleaner	Lower vocational	Cleaning	Female-dominated	Full time
6	31	Administrative Clerk	Intermed. vocational	Administration	Female-dominated	Part time
7	30	Financial Advisor	University	Financial services	Male-dominated	Part time
8	31	General Practitioner	University	Healthcare	Female-dominated	Part time
9	33	Business Consultant	University	Professional services	Male-dominated	Full time
10	25	Interior Designer	Higher vocational	Creative	Gender-balanced	Full time
11	23	Psychologist	University	Healthcare	Female-dominated	Part time
12	35	Osteopath	Higher vocational	Healthcare	Female-dominated	Part time
13	30	Illustrator	Higher vocational	Creative	Gender-balanced	Part time
14	31	Cook	Intermed. vocational	Hospitality	Female-dominated	Full time
15	32	Daycare Provider	Intermed. vocational	Care	Female-dominated	Part time
16	30	Dancer	Intermed. vocational	Creative	Gender-balanced	Full time
17	31	English Teacher	Higher vocational	Education	Female-dominated	Part time
18	22	Cleaner	Lower vocational	Cleaning	Female-dominated	Part time
19	29	Waitress	Lower vocational	Hospitality	Female-dominated	Part time
20	36	Banker	Higher vocational	Financial services	Male-dominated	Full time
21	38	High School Teacher	Higher vocational	Education	Female-dominated	Part time
22	29	Working in a bakery	Lower vocational	Sales	Gender-balanced	Part time

Table 2. Data examples for key concepts

Concept	Data examples
Partner support	<p>Becoming a mother has made me think about my own parents and how they managed to keep their two jobs while raising me and my brother. My dad has always been involved in our education and I'm clearly expecting my husband to do the same. My husband's mother has never worked and he recently mentioned me staying home with the baby. He knows I want to continue working and he's fine with that, but somehow I can feel that the burden of care and household will fall on me.</p> <p>My partner and I feel strong about sharing the care of the baby. During leave I started to see how difficult it would be to have to manage both a career and a baby, which was stressful really as I could not see an easy straight-forward solution. Luckily, [partner] has taken the lead in arranging grandparents and nannies to look after the baby while we're at work. That was very comforting.</p>
Career aspirations	<p>I have done a master's degree in order to get something out of it, not to end up being home with children and do the laundry. It doesn't mean I don't want to spend time with my child, but my career really is important to me. No one ever died from going to day care and I don't feel bad or guilty to bring her there five days a week.</p> <p>Now that the little baby is there, I could not care less about my job. I like my colleagues and stuff and it provides some extra income, but I clearly prefer to stay home at least for a year or two so that I can really see him growing up.</p>
Role models	<p>Women are in the minority here and my women colleagues are all divorced or single. It really doesn't help in providing some kind of model on being a working mother.</p> <p>I find inspiration in observing other working mothers in my department or by talking to other mothers on forums. The online community is a safe place for me to express my concerns and share my doubts and questions. Knowing that others have made it happen before you gives me strength to just do it while using their advice and supportive comments such as that kids of working mothers do better at school.</p>

Family-friendly work practices

I was not going to ask HR about it. I mean, saying like, can I work from home once I'm back at work sounds really like "pass me over for future promotions and put me on the mommy-track now". That's not the image I want to project. So it's been more of an informal search for information by hanging out with other mothers and asking them subtle questions about how they are doing it.

My manager has been very pro-active and helpful. He gave me a document with all my rights and all the policies they have in place for people who have other commitments and need extra flexibility. It has been a great relief that I did not have to ask for those kinds of things. I now know I can easily come in very early and leave fairly early too so I can pick the baby up from day care.

Part-time norm

I never felt it before I felt pregnant, I truly thought that most women worked part-time because it was the most convenient option for them. I only start seeing now that it is the general expectation, that you have to continue your career as you're otherwise perceived as empty and boring, but that being too much into your career makes you a bad mother. I don't know yet what's the right choice for me, depends on how child care works out probably, but I do feel the pressure to work part-time.

It seems that if you can afford to work part-time, this is what you should do.

Norms regarding the maternal body

I felt like a stranger, out of place as if my huge body did not fit here. Pregnancy is a natural process, but it seems unnatural in a work environment where your body is not supposed to change.

While I felt perfectly comfortable being pregnant, I realised that especially men didn't feel comfortable in my presence. I've also felt like one of the guys as there aren't a lot of women, but now I felt different, I was being treated different, giving me a different status, a different position.