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Motherhood as a "Profession": Post-Career Motherhood Experiences of Women from The Upper-Middle Class in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood as a "profession": post-career motherhood experiences of women from the upper-middle class in Turkey

Objective: The aim of this study was to understand the complicated relationship between women's identities as working women and as mothers through the first-hand reflections of mothers who had voluntarily decided to leave work after giving birth.

Method: Narrative analysis, a qualitative design was used. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 women.

Results: Getting used to the dynamics of home after a fast-paced working life, evolution of one's expectations about life, the pursuit of being a "good" mother, child-related ideals, self-esteem, and relationships with family and friends were the primary themes uncovered.

Conclusion: The women's high levels of education and training, in combination with some of their beliefs, may, sometimes paradoxically, prevent them from seeking help when needed. As an extension of their previous identity, these mothers tended to view their babies subconsciously as a "project," and symbolic reflections of this perception were represented in their language. Perfectionist ideals and disposing of comprehensive information about child rearing may alter the natural notion of motherhood in these educated women. Therefore, these cases should be addressed not only from the perspective of women's wellbeing but also from that of their children's mental development, as these women's life decisions significantly affect their performance as mothers.

Keywords: Motherhood, parenting, Turkish working women

ÖZET

"Meslek" gibi annelik: Türkiye'de yaşayan orta-üst sınıftan kadınların kariyer sonrası annelik deneyimleri

Amaç: Bu çalışmanın amacı, doğumla birlikte kariyerlerini (işlerini) gönüllü olarak bırakan kadınların, düşüncelerinde ve günlük pratiklerinde iş hayatı ve annelik arasında kurdukları karmaşık psikolojik bağları, kurdukları paralellikleri, yaşadıkları çatışmaları araştırmaktır.

Yöntem: Niteliksel analiz yapıldı. Çalışmanın amacına uygun nitelikler taşıyan 13 kadınla derinlemesine görüşme gerçekleştirildi.

Bulgular: Derinlemesine görüşmelerin analizi sonucu beliren ana temalar; hızlı bir iş yaşamı sonrası "evde" olmanın psikolojik ve sosyal dinamiklerine alışma süreci, aile ve arkadaşlık ilişkileri, hayata dair beklentilerin değişimi, "iyi anne" olabilme arayışı, çocukla ilgili idealler, kendilik saygısı.

Sonuç: İyi eğitimli ve kariyerli anneler, paradoksal görünse de başka ön kabullerin de varlığıyla, ihtiyaç duymalarına rağmen yardım arayışında olmayabilirler. Yıllar içinde oluşturdukları kimlikleri nedeniyle, çocuk yetiştirmeyi, bilinç dışında, "proje" gibi algılayabilmekteler. Bu algının sembolik yansımaları söylemlerinde ortaya çıkabilir. Çocuk yetiştirme hakkında taşıdıkları idealistik düşünceler ve fazla bilgili olmaları, kadınların doğal annelik güdülerini değiştirebilir. Dolayısıyla, bu olgulara sadece annelerin (kadınların) ruhsal durumu açısından değil, yetiştirmekte oldukları çocuklarının ruhsal gelişimini etkileme potansiyeli açısından da önemle yaklaşmak gerekir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Annelik, ebeveynlik, çalışan Türk kadınları

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INTRODUCTION

The last century has seen a gradually increasing presence of women in the professions and in business (1-3). This development has reshaped the concept of the traditional family (4). Even though the traditional rule that women are to raise their children at home has not been completely overturned, it has become multilayered and flexible. Differentiation between the homemaker and the career woman has lost clarity of meaning as more women participate in the labor force; hence, fewer women can be strictly considered homemakers (5).

This conceptual change was probably necessary for the continuation of the present socioeconomic order. Young women were beginning careers only to leave them upon getting married, on account of centuries-old, traditional social codes. One example for these changes that may be seen substantially important in terms of women's work life history occurred in Turkey, where the present study was carried out. In accordance with the modernization ideology dominant throughout the 20th century, women's liberation has been seen as a significant basis of the social transformation processes. As a result, women's availability in the workplace was taken for granted (6). In developed or developing societies, the legal foundations permitting women to work after marriage have been firmly established. To gain this right to work, women had to put up a long and arduous struggle, and in some cases, they are still doing so. Among the most important battles were those to protect women's work opportunities during pregnancy and after giving birth. Currently, many countries have legal provisions covering pregnancy, postnatal, and breastfeeding periods.

Due to economic pressures, most women around the world return to work after giving birth when their legally guaranteed period of leave ends (7). For these women, there is no choice to make between working and not working; they need to work. Fifty four percent of pregnant women who were still in work were found to prefer spending their whole time with their babies, if possible, while 42% of them would like to be in part-time work and only 4% in a full-time occupation after giving a birth (8). If work were valued for economic reasons only, it could be assumed that most women, especially those not needing the income, would prefer not to work after giving birth. However, work, especially in a career that requires professional qualifications, is a social, psychological, and cultural phenomenon with benefits that go beyond economic gains (9). It appears that the positive attitudes of mothers toward their work (and their commitment to it) increased in correlation with their family income and education level (10). The vast majority of mothers expressed their preference to care for their babies. However, for the group of mothers with low income and education level, the traditional approach (11) may be the determining factor, while for those with higher income and education level, the secure mother-infant relationship (12), which has gained prominence during the last years, may be an important factor in determining of their attitudes.

There is an extensive body of literature on motherhood and mothering. Most of the writing underlined that primacy must be given to mothers' subjectivity and their own discourses on experiences in altering the myths about motherhood and changing social reality (13). Sarah Ruddick (14) analyses motherhood by resorting to natural and biological explanations. She constructs mothering as a "work" or "practice". She says, "although mothers are, culturally and individually, radically different from each other, there is a sufficient commonality among women to define a 'maternal' work in terms of responses to children's demands". According to Arendell (15), cultural and economic contexts variously shape mothers' activities and understandings. Mothering takes place within specific historical contexts framed by interlocking structures of race, class and gender. Woollet and Phoenix (16) state that mothers respond to expectations that they should be 'good' mothers and thus maximize their children's development. Thus, they carry out the tasks of mothering with a high degree of professionalism. The sense of motherhood in women varies between generations. For the mothers from previous generations, for

instance, motherhood was a way of self-realization (of bringing themselves into existence), while for modern (contemporary) women it may mean to become detached or held back from life, although it is accepted to be an event that gives happiness (6).

In search of the traces of this complicated phenomenon, we decided to conduct interviews with mothers who had quit their jobs after having children. What substitutes psychologically for professional work after mothers have given birth? What factors cause them to make radical adjustments in their lifestyle in order to raise children? What projections had formed in their minds with regard to child-rearing? Becoming parents is a decisive moment in the life of both partners because it has the potential effect of changing the relationship between the mother and father, as well as with their respective parents, and can greatly impact their social and working lives, too (17). Motherhood, in addition to being an experience unique to each individual woman, is quite rich in presenting the symbols of the cultural environment in which women live, also having a traditional yet evolving structure of great significance to those of us who specialize in supporting human psychological wellbeing (18). Women's professional character of work is an important determinant in their way of mothering; their experiences of motherhood cannot be fully understood without mentioning their position in the labor market and their combination of mothering with paid work (13). In this qualitative study, we have endeavored to understand the complicated relationship between women's identities as working women and as mothers through the first-hand reflections of mothers who had decided to leave work after giving birth.

METHOD

Qualitative research collects data through observation, interviews, and investigating documents, capturing a realistic presentation of events and perceptions in their entirety and in a natural setting. The findings of qualitative research cannot be generalized to society as a whole, but they give a multi-layered view of a phenomenon under a kind of magnifying lens, whereby refined findings are obtained in a narrow field setting (19).

Thirteen women, all university graduates (one architect, three bank employees, one textile designer, one lawyer, one pharmacy company manager, one accountant, one teacher, one catering manager, one real estate agent, one executive of an oil company, one tourism agent) with at least five years of work experience before giving birth, all of whom had voluntarily left work permanently with the intention of raising children, participated in this study.

NS-SEC is an occupation-based classification that includes rules to cover the whole adult population. It assigns people to social classes based on their occupational title and responsibilities for the workforce. It distinguishes between employers, employees, and the unemployed. The classification uses eight main categories (20). Using NS-SEC, seven of our participants were categorized as being in "lower managerial, administrative and professional occupations", four of them in "higher managerial, administrative and professional occupations", one in "routine occupations", and one being among "small employers and own account workers".

All of the participants had children age five years or younger at the time of the study. Participants were identified through a method known as snowball or chain sampling, which begins by identifying individuals who will be rich sources of information on a given subject (21). These individuals are approached and invited to take part. After being informed about the study, they are encouraged to recommend other potential participants. This initial phase is very significant as the additional experimental subjects are reached through the orientation given to the first participants by the individual(s) structuring the study (22).

The researcher group, which consisted of one child and adolescent psychiatrist and two adult psychiatrists, jointly evaluated a focus group (23) in order to outline the framework of headings for the intended research. The three main headings selected, namely "motherhood," "self-perception/womanhood (working

woman/housewife)," and "past relationships as a child with her own mother," were believed to provide the study with a cross-sectional framework that would span the three generations of people directly involved in most cases.

The research protocol was approved by the ethics committee of Yeditepe University Faculty of Medicine. All participants were asked to sign a consent form. One of the mothers later refrained from participating, and one did not attend her scheduled interview appointment.

The median age of the participants was 32.3 years. In-depth, individual interviews were conducted with each participating woman in a quiet room at the clinic. To eliminate dissimilarities in the themes covered and discussion styles, the same member of the research team conducted all interviews. Before doing so, this researcher attended a comprehensive training program on qualitative discussion techniques and obtained an interviewer's certificate. The interviews were recorded and each session lasted for 60 minutes. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect the participants' identities.

In-Depth Interview

In this interview technique, there are defined themes but no previously prepared questions. Participants learn about these themes when they are informed as to the purpose of the research. This is a semi-structured technique of interviewing in which the interviewer remains in "an active state of passivity." Unless it becomes necessary, the interviewee's discourse is not interfered with. If the topic of conversation digresses from the purpose of the interview, open-ended questions on the previously defined themes can be asked without interrupting the flow of the conversation (19).

Data Analysis

The recorded sessions were transcribed word by word. Initially, recurring expressions with similar context were given codes; these coded parts were then grouped for analysis. Analytical categories were formed on the basis of the initially defined themes. In order to reach an agreement when allocating the material into categories, the transcripts were analyzed in detail by three reviewers. When repeated themes arose in multiple interviews, these themes received additional review to establish whether they had the potential to be generalized.

RESULTS

Themes That Surfaced During The Interviews

The lifestyle decisions of all the participating mothers were in accord with the main motivation for their undertaking, which was to be "a good mother." The most striking example of a frequently heard expression was "Sometimes I cannot be sure if I am giving him adequate love" (architect, age 28). This feeling of being sure (or unsure) was sometimes implied and in other instances stated more directly. "Everybody was saying something different, such as 'wash her this way,' 'hold her that way,' or 'feed her these,' so I was confused about what to believe" (bank employee, age 32). The desire for these uncertainties to be clarified by an authority (e.g., by one's own mother or physician, or from books) was distinctly apparent. Perfectionism, along with a related sense of uncertainty, found expression in comments on "doing correctly" or "doing wrongly": "During the day small things happen. Let's say, for example, that he does something he should not have. You get confused as to what to do. I refrain from showing the wrong reaction" (textile designer, age 33). "I want everything to be perfect. I am continually learning about motherhood and child rearing because I want to raise my baby correctly" (accountant, age 37).

Since "good mother" is an abstract term, it was frequently difficult for the women to regard themselves as worthy of the description. It was primarily their own conscience, rather than the various external criticisms that they received, that created this difficulty. For example, routine and small instances such as the collision between a spoonful of food and a

tightly closed mouth could momentarily demolish the mental construct of the women as a "good mother." At times, the inability to use the advantages of being educated or knowledgeable caused great disappointment. "When he sometimes pushes away the food I have prepared with my own hands, I run to the balcony and light a cigarette. I ask what I have done wrong, what I did not know well. The woman who is the caretaker of the building is only a primary school graduate. She has a son whom one should see. He quietly eats everything put before him. I am sometimes envious, to tell the truth!" (textile designer, age 33). Another expression of the expectation that professional skills would make the duties of motherhood easier came from this 37-year-old lawyer: "Motherhood is more difficult than being a lawyer. There, at least talking was useful. But you cannot convince [the child] to do something that he refuses. I sometimes think I cannot cope."

These women were doing their best, yet some complained about not receiving the appreciation that they felt they deserved from their husband or even the child. This situation evoked a feeling of helplessness in some of them: "I take care of everything concerning him for 24 hours a day, yet I am the bad one. ...Especially when it is mealtime, if his father is there, he runs away from me and hides behind him. ...There are times when I nearly go insane and I inevitably raise my voice. But then I am asked why I am making the child cry" (real-estate agent, age 32).

Of the 13 mothers whom we interviewed, all but four had sent their child to a day nursery or playgroup. One of these four mothers said, "I left work so as to take care of my child personally. Therefore, I did not think of sending him to a day-care center" (accountant, age 37). Another said that her four-year-old daughter had become bored after attending a playgroup for one week and had not desired to continue. Expressions of her desire to meet all her child's needs were manifest when she said, "But we play with her continually at home ...she never gets bored! ...Ours is a very sensitive girl, taking after her father. She stands there waiting to be called to play. If I stand near her, she is more at ease" (bank employee, age 32). One mother, quite

emotional over her worries, said, "I want her to be a very relaxed child," and added, "I have obsessions, like organizing everything perfectly, that did not disturb me much when I was at work, or even felt good. It did not become a problem at home. But now that I do not go to the office, I have started to try to organize everything at home. I wouldn't like her to have this habit, because it is difficult to live like this" (lawyer, age 37). This mother, whom we suspected to have an obsessive personality, was anxious that the same behavioral traits might appear in her baby.

Six participants shared childhood anecdotes with the interviewer, while four of them gave examples of the attitudes of different generations in their family. Almost all these women still lived very close to their mothers, if not in the same house. Several mentioned, along with the support received, inevitable incidences of defiance and challenge between the young mother and grandmother: "Being with my mother has comforted me incredibly. But she never heeds me, goes her own way, and interferes with everything, such that I suspect she doesn't trust me. Sometimes I wanted to yell at her that I am not a child!" (catering manager, age 30). Another mother recalled, "When little, I was very keen on my mother. She used to work. My aunt used to be at home when I arrived from school. I used to miss mum much. I used to keep waiting for her to come home" (teacher, age 34).

One of the participants, who had become a mother on her fourth attempt with IVF, stated, "After all that waiting I did not want to be separated from the baby. My husband and I had decided that I would leave work for two years, but it has been five years now and I still think he needs me much. He is a sensitive child. If he is not with you, you tend to worry about what he is doing" (accountant, age 37). Another participant had become a mother at a relatively advanced age due to her heavy workload and her attachment to the work itself. "I had never said that I did not want a child, but somehow I kept delaying it," she explained. "Whenever the subject came up, I kept making worries about work an excuse, because I loved my work. But the situation changed when the child arrived. Now, when asked if I am going back to work, I remark about what may

happen to the child" (pharmacy company manager, age 38). She thus underscored the change that she had gone through, although the stability of her judgment was noticeable in her choice of words.

Feelings of happiness mixed with regret about leaving a professional position sometimes emerged, as in this example: "What I felt when I heard that I was pregnant was strange. Yes, for a year my husband and I had been wanting a child. I felt very happy and excited at first. I remember looking differently at the files on my desk when I went to work that day. I was a little hurt too, as I was to leave work soon. Very little time was left to implement this decision, which I had made previously. I had waited so many months to sit at that desk, to hold that [management] position" (catering manager, age 30).

Among some participants, feelings of inadequacy and negative physical perceptions had mingled together: "I used to handle and manage so many things in one day, but now I cannot do anything. I had many friends, whereas now I am all alone. Sometimes I cannot tell the difference between myself and a milk-giving cow" (teacher, age 34). Or, as in the following expression, there were worries of losing sexual attractiveness: "My husband keeps pulling my leg that I still have not lost the weight that I gained in pregnancy. I do not resent it, but when it keeps getting repeated one can get worked up a little" (bank employee, age 31).

The ties formed with family traditions and the increased self-esteem that came with giving birth were expressed in this way: "To be able to carry the baby all that time and to deliver it, to achieve all this, made me feel like a strong woman. For the first time I felt close to the women in my family, my mother, my aunts. It feels funny, but it is as if I have become one of them" (architect, age 28).

DISCUSSION

Motherhood and Perfectionism

Women derive significantly more satisfaction from the duties of parenthood than men do (24). However, this situation also increases their level of worry. When compared with fathers, mothers have been found to experience twice the level of concern about their offspring (25). Because the mothers in our research group had worked in professional jobs, they seemed more likely to perceive motherhood as a performance and to keep analyzing their daily activities associated with the child (15). In a woman's mind, the skill most easily equated with good motherhood is feeding the baby well. Hence, breastfeeding activity is not just meeting the baby's nutritional requirements, but the mother's psychological needs too. At the same time, motherhood carries emotional, sexual, social, and cultural significance in close family circles as well as in the general society (26,27). The perception of a baby being healthy and happy gives women confidence that they are doing their job well (1). Sensitivities about feeding and about the problems experienced in this respect were quite noteworthy among the women interviewed.

Also, a modern myth that being educated or knowledgeable would enable someone to surmount any difficulty was an important factor. It was obvious that the inability to push a spoon into a closed mouth, despite the woman's professional knowledge, was regarded as a distinct failure. These personalities, who had achieved success in their business lives and were accustomed to problem solving, expressed in their conversations that they felt as if they had failed an examination when something went wrong, for example, if their baby was not eating the right amount or not sleeping at the time planned.

These negative feelings sometimes induced anger or worry. Were the mothers regarding feeding as a "job" to be performed? Especially in Western societies, the conception of good motherhood can sometimes introduce unattainable standards (28). Myths of proper motherhood can lead at times to unrealistic expectations, and more importantly, they seem to increase mothers' level of stress and anxiety (29).

Feelings of adequacy or inadequacy were the most common theme in the interviews. Members of modern societies in the information age are viewed as adapted, good, strong, or adequate only when they overcome

or achieve something (30). At the beginning, this mechanism is set up in an individual's self-perception. This internalized feeling of worthiness means that a mother feels acceptable only if she rears her child perfectly in all respects. The unclosable gap between expectations and reality is supposed to be bridged through knowledge, the most important tool of the information age. Gaining or obtaining information can become so powerfully attractive that worry, hope, unhappiness, disappointment, anxiety, and similar affective experiences can be ignored.

Some of the mothers interviewed were inclined to be the "perfectionist mother" rather than the "good-enough mother," even though the latter would be beneficial for the child's psychological wellbeing. As Winnicott (31,32) stated, "The good enough mother starts off with an almost complete adaptation to her infant's needs, and as time proceeds she adapts less and less completely, gradually, according to the infant's growing ability to deal with her failure. Her failure to adapt to every need of the child helps them adapt to external realities." It has been noted that college-educated mothers devote more time to child-rearing than less educated mothers (33). This is, no doubt, a desirable condition, but what if a mother is obsessed with taking "perfect" care of her baby?

There are also some cases when parents do want to engage personally in all the baby's concerns, perhaps because the baby's presence and health needs create a sensitive situation different from what is customary for these mothers and fathers. Becoming an "ideal mother" in such a circumstance, when one takes responsibility for all the baby's needs, is even more difficult. It was not surprising to find this phenomenon in our group of interviewees, as they came out of professional life, usually at a relatively older age, and had all left their jobs to be able to take care of their babies personally. Therefore, each of the children of the mothers in our study was treated as "special." The well-educated mothers whom we interviewed had directed all their professional skills of observation, information gathering, and interpretation toward caring for their offspring. They were capable of measuring, computing, and analyzing with great

attentiveness and skill. When these assets, which had enhanced their business careers, did not assist them as much in the realm of childcare, the mothers experienced disappointment. It was especially striking to hear these mothers talk as if they regarded their children as a type of project.

The women feel that they should be able to cope with caring for a new baby, but also with domestic tasks and caring for others (34). In addition to that, as our study shows, if they had been career women in the past, these tasks should be done "perfectly". This reflects cultural representations of femininity today as a 'superwoman' able to cope with any number of competing demands (35). The traditional view reflects an ideology of women as natural mothers, immediately able to care for their babies, and ultimately fulfilled in this role of selfless carer and nurturer (16). It sets the standard for what is a 'good' mother (and therefore a good woman) and what is a 'bad' one (34). When a woman has a child, the demands of respectability expand to include 'good' mothering – responsible mothering, providing 'appropriate' forms of care (36). Focusing on constructing developmental and learning opportunities for the child from everyday routines, which is highly dependent on middle-class resources and priorities, has become normalized – what all mothers should do (37,38). This situation created a closed circle in which all mothers from all classes are seeking the ideal way of mothering. Douglas and Michaels call this "the most tyrannical of our cultural icons: perfect mom" (39).

Self-Esteem

None of the mothers interviewed was clinically depressed. However, the challenges that they faced with their babies during the day influenced their self-perception in a negative direction. Daily rituals such as feeding, sleep, and toilet habits (and the problems arising in these areas) were the most frequent causes of feelings of failure among these mothers. One mother, who had tried every venue including consulting experts and reading books to be able to feed her baby a "healthy diet," felt profound guilt when she could

not achieve this goal. The psychological state of this mother seemed to be "If I cannot succeed after putting all I can into it, I must be an inadequate and bad mother."

These mothers had maintained active social lives as part of their professional careers and had previously needed to care about their appearance. Their priorities and expectations had changed when they voluntarily decided on motherhood. The interviewees seemed to have adapted to the latter of these two changes, as personal beauty, sexuality, or being groomed did not occupy a significant place in their conversation. Apart from two mothers who regarded themselves as housewives whose bodies were useless for anything other than giving milk, none made serious comments about their physical perceptions. Also, they rarely related anecdotes about their spouses or married life. It was significant that feelings on these topics did not surface in the course of nondirective interviews. It may be possible to arrive at firmer conclusions in this regard through interviews with a larger number of similarly selected mothers. On the other hand, a yearning for recovering a social life was more apparent.

MacPhee et al. (40) studied some mothers to determine the functions of self-perception in the parental role. These functions are described as mothers' feelings of competence in their role as caregiver, satisfaction gained from parenting,

investment in child rearing, and ability to balance their role as parent with their other social roles (e.g., as spouse, friend, and employee). Self-evaluation of the effects of parenthood shapes and motivates parental self-perception and child-rearing activities. Therefore, self-perception has a direct or indirect role in child development (41,42).

As a conclusion; In this study, we have tried to investigate the psychological status of women who voluntarily left their professional lives after giving birth. The study focused on the changes evoked in the mother by the dynamics of leaving a business life and raising a child. The results cannot be generalized to all mothers. In our study with mothers who had the socioeconomic resources to be able to make such a decision, the most significant outcome of the changes noted through one-hour interviews was the feeling of inadequacy. Additional studies with different designs could enable us to elaborate further on this finding. We have known these mothers only through what they have related in these brief interviews. Meeting mothers at regular intervals and additionally listening to their partners and close family members could provide more detailed useful results. Such studies could further facilitate our understanding of women's psychological positions in relation to motherhood, professional work, career pursuits, and relationships with their partners and children.

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