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Who am I? : Mothers' shifting identities, loss and sensemaking after workplace exit

Shireen Kanji and Emma Cahusac

Abstract

We analyse mothers' retrospective accounts of their transition from professional worker to stay-at-home mother using a framework that integrates sensemaking and border theory. The data come from in-depth interviews with former professional and managerial women in London. Continuing struggles to reconcile professional and maternal identities before and after workplace exit illustrate how identity change is integral to workplace exit. The concept of 'choice', which takes place at one point in time, obfuscates this drawn-out process. Mothers pay a high cost in lost professional identities, especially in the initial stages after workplace exit. They cope with this loss and the disjuncture of leaving employment by moving back and forth across the border between home and work, a classic action of sensemaking. Subsequent communal sensemaking and community action bolster mothers' fragile status at home, eventually leading to reconciliation of their loss and finally enabling them to view their exit 'choice' as right.

Introduction

Research on women's exit from paid work often constructs women as making a binary choice between career and family, fuelling what Williams (2001) terms 'choice rhetoric'. Implicit in these depictions is that women make their choices and happily fit into the career or family camp. Our research on mothers who had previously worked in professional and managerial occupations reveals the on-going struggles of these mothers to redefine who they are. Constructing their 'choice' as the right one did not occur before their exit from work but was a process that extended over time. Analysis of mothers' sensemaking reveals how the choice to exit, channelled as it is through layers of societal and individual pressures, is laden with cost. An evaporating work identity and evolving struggles for self-redefinition following workplace exit highlight the loss women experience.

We build on studies that show that what is on offer is far from what women want (Damaske, 2011; Holmes et al., 2012; Stone, 2007; Stone and Lovejoy, 2004) and that choices are discordant with women's attitudes (Crompton and Lyonette, 2005). Over time, transformations of mothers' identities enable them to reconcile their loss; such transformations often entail fundamental changes in their values, as they reach a 'springboard for action' (Lovejoy and Stone, 2011; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). But the identity work that goes into achieving this acceptance over time demonstrates that it is not the same as exercising free choice. The struggles of both women who leave work and women who stay in work have a common genesis in the difficulty of fulfilling the often-competing identities of mother and professional (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Gatrell, 2013; Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). In part, struggling in work and struggling after leaving work seem to be very different phenomena because mothers'

identity work includes defining themselves in opposition to those who are taking different paths that they themselves could have taken (Sandberg and Scovell, 2013).

Previous studies have examined identity transformations of women who continue working after motherhood (Gatrell, 2013; Haynes, 2008). In contrast, the focus of this article is on the overlooked identity changes of women who leave work when they become mothers (see also Anderson et al., 2010). The research concentrates on professional and managerial mothers for whom identity and role struggles are acute, because they would seem to have had the most 'choices' (Buzzanell et al., 2005). The mothers in this study wanted to work, and many of them could have afforded childcare, but they nonetheless left their workplaces. Their stories do not match popular media portrayals of professional women opting out after realising their true vocation was caring for their children, a portrayal already critiqued in the context of the USA (Damaske, 2011; Percheski, 2008; Stone, 2007; Stone and Lovejoy, 2004). Nor do they match Hakim's (2002) account of UK mothers being inherently home-centred in their preferences.

We make mothers' own stories central to our analysis of their departure from the workplace, based on in-depth interviews with 26 mothers in London who had left professional or managerial positions. We analyse these narratives employing a new theoretical framework which we have developed through integrating sensemaking (Weick, 1995) with theories that demarcate social and physical spaces by borders and boundaries, terms we use interchangeably for the purpose of this article (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Simmel, 1997). There is a consensus that the construction of a narrative requires a sequencing, although this does not have to involve a strict

chronology (Riessman, 2002). Maclean et al. (2012) argue that individuals require 'perceptual staging posts to better understand the flow of everyday experience'. We draw on border theories to construct these staging posts. Borders are particularly illustrative as a concept for making apparent the sequence in women's narratives. Mothers who leave work first cross the social boundary of motherhood and then cross the spatial and social boundary between permanent work and home. The delineation of these social borders highlights how women's stories both flow and are disjunctured (Smith, 2010) in the process of identity transformation.

A key contribution is to reveal how seemingly unique personal journeys reconstitute shared, albeit varied, experiences which result from the societal mechanisms that channel women into unpaid, undervalued and subordinate positions (Connell, 1995). These mechanisms complicate the societal assumption that they have 'chosen' such roles. Our analysis of mothers' narratives yields insight into personal choices in the context of societal scripts about what motherhood should be (Miller, 2007), how ideal workers should behave (Blair-Loy, 2003), what parents should want for their children (Craig et al., 2014) and how men and women in heterosexual couples should organise paid and unpaid work (Kanji, 2013; Stone, 2007).

Applying sensemaking perspectives and border theory to women's exit
Women working within organisations are often reluctant to speak about barriers to their advancement (Lewis and Simpson, 2010). Speaking out would contravene women's invisibility within organisations (Calàs and Smircich, 1992). Mothers who have left work are unconstrained and often want to discuss their experiences. Change, which frequently brings 'ambiguity, confusion and feelings of disorientation',

provides a catalyst for sensemaking (Maitlis and Sonensheim, 2010). Although this sensemaking is off the organisational radar, it is highly relevant to the feminist project of making visible the normative and hidden ways of operating (Acker, 1990; 2006). Accounts of mothers' experiences can make visible the institutionalisation of work and home as separate spheres (Kanter, 1993; Walby, 1986). Understood as a way of bridging the gap (Dervin, 1999), sensemaking is apposite in the context of women's identity negotiations across these separate spheres.

The impetus for sensemaking is experiencing a challenge to one's identity (Buzzanell et al., 2005). Identity challenges relate to mothers' conflicting understandings of themselves as mothers and professionals across the bounded spaces (Simmel, 1997) of what is constructed as possible in the workplace and the home. Haynes (2008) describes how the identities of mother and accountant are entwined for female accountants. Applying this idea to women who leave work, the strands of mother and professional identity start to unravel at work. Having a child constitutes a potentially problematic identity change at work, because mothers patently cease to fit the group identity of devoted and unencumbered employees (Blair-Loy, 2003). Thus women experience an immediate disjuncture between who they are and who they are meant to be at work, which is partly brought to fruition through their downgraded treatment (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007; Gatrell, 2013; Lovejoy and Stone, 2011). Following this disjuncture, women apply sensemaking, as Weick (1995: 23) describes, 'to maintain a consistent and positive self-conception in the face of a failure to confirm themselves; in their particular case, it is the failure to confirm themselves as professionals or managers. Moreover, mothers who leave work use this sensemaking to cope with

their loss, which is revealed in the processes of making meanings after the event of leaving has occurred (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005).

Part of the effort to maintain a positive self-identity may involve people looking first to reasons that will enable them to resume the interrupted activity and stay in action as a way of making sense of the disruption (Weick et al., 2005). Although women's departure from work has been seen as a binary choice between working and not working, many women try to continue working in some form as a means of reconfirming their lost identity. Women who self-define themselves as not working paradoxically integrate forms of paid work into the unpaid realm of their home lives to keep their professional identity alive and to continue earning.

Sensemaking is usually applied to understanding the social and communicative processes that occur within groups of employees in organisations to deal with specific situations. Mothers who leave work differ from employees in an organisation in that they are less obviously organising for a common goal, but their social organising and sensemaking are collective. Mothers' sensemaking is retrospectively enacted in communities, based on shared experiences of professional work, journeys out of the workplace and created lives based around their homes. In this sense, women's experience corresponds to Weick's (1995) definition of enactment as taking place in the community and making overt what is sensed (Grisoni and Beeby, 2007).

Within new communities, mothers reveal common objectives by confirming each other's decisions about leaving work, and they join forces to search for new meanings in the world after leaving professional and managerial work. Weick (1995) signifies

that in organisations leaders are sensegivers, because they construct reality through authoritative acts. While mothers' roles as leaders are undervalued, many professional mothers enact leadership roles and act as sensegivers within their communities. The creation of new identities after leaving the workplace is fundamentally social, where mothers act as sensegivers for each other.

Integrating work–family border theory

Sensemaking takes place along a timeline, where a mother repeatedly reinterprets previous events and her own identity. Weick (1995) describes the reference points spread over this time path as 'extracted cues' of sensemaking. We introduce Simmel's (1997) conception of 'social boundaries' to subdivide the sensemaking timeline and make visible the nature of women's identity changes over time. The social boundary is 'not a spatial fact with sociological consequences, but a sociological fact that is formed spatially' (Simmel, 1997: 143); boundaries enclose particular sets of experience. Identity changes are crucial to understanding women's experiences, because different ways of being, language and conduct are associated with the different social spaces of work and family (Simmel, 1997). Much of the tension for professional mothers can be understood in terms of their having to negotiate the border between these public and private realms (Gatrell, 2013). Reinforcing this separate-spheres ideology is the idea that there are fixed work and family roles which somehow need to be brought into balance, whereas it may be the very construction of incompatible roles that prevents women from achieving their desired ways of being.

Boundaries can be symbolic, with changing circumstances accounting for boundary shifts (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). After having a child, the nature of social spaces at

both home and work changes substantially, with home becoming much more present in the work domain. Cahusac and Kanji (2014) describe how women's way of working in the same job in the same organisation is restricted after becoming a mother, for example, by having to leave work to pick up children at a defined time. Home enters much more into many women's work lives after having children, although work circumstances have otherwise not changed. This not only creates time conflicts but also loosens the bonds and sense of belonging.

The contemporary boundary theories of Ashforth et al. (2000) and Clark (2000) explain how workers manage their daily transitions between work and family life, and how ways of managing differ according to the type of work undertaken. Analysing daily transitions, Clark (2000) considers that when work and family domains are very different, border crossers will engage in less across-the-border communication than will border crossers with similar domains. Ashforth et al. (2000) propose that the greater the role segmentation between work and home, the less difficult it is to create and maintain role boundaries. We take Ashforth et al.'s (2000) idea relating to daily micro-transitions from work to home and apply it to the macro-transition from being a professional worker to not working, differentiating transitions by occupation. When role segmentation is high, that is when work and home life are highly separate, for example for women in law or in senior management positions, we might expect it to be more difficult to cope with the exit from work. Part of the reason for this greater difficulty is that these women are less able to cross back over the boundary to recreate their work. These border-crossing activities after exiting work are key mechanisms for maintaining consistency (Weick, 1995) and for accommodating the boundary that they had put in place (Nippert-Eng, 1996).

The building of new identities at home necessitates the erection of new boundaries based on the identification with a new "ingroup" and "outgroup" (Lamont and Molnar, 2002), which in part explains the function of the tension between working and non-working mothers.

Method

The study draws on qualitative interviews with 26 mothers who had left professional or managerial occupations. Our initial motivation for the study was to understand why mothers with young children had left paid work, or to use the popular term, 'opted out'. In other work, we have addressed the impact of organisational culture and interactions with male partners in mothers' workplace exit (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014). Our motivation for this article was to address two research questions. First we asked, 'How do mothers retrospectively make sense of leaving professional and managerial occupations?' Second, we examined whether borders help explain how mothers experience changes. It is no longer normative for mothers to exit work and the meaning of choosing to stay at home has reconfigured (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), particularly for mothers in professional and managerial occupations whose participation is the highest of all occupational groups (Kanji, 2011; Percheski, 2008). In this article, we were not seeking to uncover the objective reasons for women's exit but rather to understand how mothers discursively construct their departure and whether and how they describe identity change.

The mothers were all located in Islington or Camden, which are inner London boroughs. We focused on a particular area because geographical location strongly influences whether mothers' participate and the form of that participation (Yeandle,

2009). We wanted to understand the interplay of factors and to explore narratives at a local level, limiting the variation that comes from comparing diverse localities. Initially we approached all the mothers of the children in one reception class (age four or five) at an Islington school, asking if we could interview them if they were not working at the time but had previously worked. Further respondents were identified by placing a flier in a children's nursery and through snowballing using the criteria that at least one child was of reception age or younger, the mother lived in Islington or Camden and had previously worked. In our final sample, only two of the mothers had given up paid work on the birth of their first child; the rest had returned to work for varying periods of time and had left subsequently for a mixture of cited reasons, often relating to what happened when they returned to work (Cahusac and Kanji, 2014) or as an outcome of decision-making with a male partner about both careers. Mothers often discussed their exit as having presented an opportunity to provide better care than they could have if they had stayed at work, but they rarely cited having another child as the reason for their leaving, in line with the findings of Lovejoy and Stone (2011).

Respondents were largely socio-economically privileged, and most had a male partner. Several mothers had held highly paid jobs and had been in senior positions, such as being a partner in a City law firm or the head of treasury in a bank, reflecting Islington and Camden's proximity to the City of London. Another feature of this location was the social polarisation: about 40 percent of children in the original school were eligible for free school meals, which is an indicator of low income, as eligibility is assessed by being in receipt of a range of means-tested benefits. We had interviewed an additional four women without qualifications, whose experiences were

far apart from the more similar experiences of women who had worked in professional and managerial jobs. We decided to concentrate on the latter, in part because a very high proportion of women working in the area were in these types of jobs, as is further evidenced by Yeandle's (2009) data, which shows 65 percent of women who were employed, working in professional, managerial and associate professional jobs in one ward in Camden. Table 1 shows the distribution of our respondents' occupations.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Five of the women were migrants to the UK (all with qualifications), and three came from 'minority ethnic backgrounds'. Respondents ranged in age from 36 to 47 at the time of the interview. They had become first-time mothers at various ages: four in their mid to late twenties, seventeen when they were 32-38 years old and five when they were 39-42 years old. Three respondents had one child, 11 had two children and the remaining 12 had three children. Most mothers left work after the birth of their first or second child, although two mothers continued working after they had had their third child. None of the respondents cited wanting to have a second or third child as the reason for leaving work, consistent with the women in our study rarely citing having a child as the reason for leaving work. Although the connection between fertility intentions, outcomes and work form an important topic, we did not explicitly set about investigating it for this article, choosing to focus on women's accounts of their departure from work. We transcribed verbatim the interviews, which had lasted

between 35 and 70 minutes. Most interviews were held at the respondent's home, and a few were held in the interviewer's home or in a café, according to the respondent's choice. The interviews were semi-structured, with questions covering the woman's education, employment history, recollection of what happened in the workplace when she announced her pregnancy, subsequent discussions about returning to work and experiences at work after having a child if relevant and what her intentions about returning to work had been when she left and what they now were at the time of the interview.

We used a thematic form of content analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Rubin and Rubin, 2005) to analyse the interviews, first working on each individual interview to identify experiences and themes relating to identity change and then working across all the interviews, noting similarities and differences in the themes, which allowed us to further develop our analysis. Our approach involved a combination of theoretically driven and inductive analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We had not started out the larger project with the intention of studying women's sensemaking, but were led to this theme when analysing the interviews for a previous article. At this point, we drew on theory to examine how mothers discussed choice in relation to their departure from work and analysed the scripts for cases that could be categorised as boundary or border crossing. Codes related to examples of women's failure to confirm themselves in the face of change, collective sensemaking and transition work (see Table 2). Inductive data-driven analysis first consisted of a fine-grained analysis and after consultation between the authors led to the identification of stages, types of identity change, fluidity of identities and loss. The interview questions had not explicitly asked about identity changes, but many mothers offered accounts of how they had

adapted, how they felt when they left work and how others now viewed them. We constructed our own theory that mothers' identity change was a process, showing fluidity over time but with four points of disjuncture, similar to a journey. Our demarcation of these stages does not imply that all mothers followed the same path; rather, the stages convey how different individual experiences fit within broader conceptual pathways. Similarities and differences in women's accounts provided an opportunity to explore how different occupations affected mothers' journeys.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Four stages in the journey across the corporate frontier

The fluidity and disjuncture (Smith, 2000) that characterise the sensemaking journey were revealed by examining the sequence of women's narratives. Borders act as devices which bring out the sequencing of changes that many women encounter, although the form of the changes differs among women. In the first stage, before they have even left work, women experience changes to their work identity some of which are imposed and some of which come from themselves. In this sense they are crossing a social border. The second stage encompasses the period immediately after crossing the border out of the work organisation, at which time mothers wrestle with finding a new identity; in the third stage, there is a detectable transition to creating a new identity at home. Finally, in the fourth stage mothers are at Taylor and Van Every's (2000) springboard for action in relation to future employment or their own feelings about the future.

Stage 1: Work identity under threat while at work

Only two interviewees had anticipated during pregnancy that they would experience a clash of cultures between being a professional worker and a good mother. The potential for this clash was made real to Miriam (not her real name, all names are pseudonyms to protect the respondents' identity) from observing a more senior female former colleague in the prestigious City law firm where she had worked.

> There was a partner whose office was next to mine. Every night I heard her saying good night to her kids and she would work evenings, weekends, whatever. She said she had to do that. She was lucky that her husband was an academic and could see the kids, and she had a nanny, but she hardly ever saw her kids. I just did not want to do that.

Miriam did not want to replicate the mothering of this senior woman, whom others had suggested was a role model of how to be a successful female professional and have children. On the contrary, the suggested female role model only underlined that she, Miriam, wanted to be a different kind of mother. The theme of negative role models recurred in several interviewees' accounts.

Even before having her first child, Miriam anticipated that the importance of work would diminish for her after becoming a mother, which contributed to her crossing the border out of work, even before she left. Other women experienced this kind of

change in their feelings about work only after they returned to work. Sara, a television producer, experienced a new divide between herself and her colleagues.

And when I started to have to leave work for the sake of the kids, when I went back to work, I kind of thought, 'Yes, I don't care what you think, any of you!' I went back with a completely changed attitude, which was that work is just work now. I'll never get het up about work in the way I did before, because home life is so involving now.

It was not just that her more-involving home life was pulling her across the border, but this new home life was changing her identity at work. She was drawing firmer boundaries around the work and distancing herself from her colleagues.

Forms of identity change varied among mothers. Kate, who had worked in finance, did not feel the antagonism that Sara reported but felt a new separateness from her colleagues, brought about by feeling she was letting them down.

I did feel bad. Everyone was sitting there, and I knew they would still be there for another few hours. That's what separates you; it separates you from the other workers. Before I went and had kids, I was part of the gang. So that in itself separates you, and people don't ask you out for drinks and all that kind of thing.

She marked her separateness by taking responsibility for breaking up the gang because she 'went and had kids'. Her discomfort came from not matching the hours of her colleagues even though she was working full-time.

In trying to set a tighter boundary around work, many women tried to negotiate a reduction in their hours, although those in senior roles often were turned down. An inability to work desired hours is reflected in Holmes et al.'s (2012) finding that about 70 percent of working mothers in the USA were unable to get the hours that they would prefer. Moreover, Yeandle (2009) shows that a much lower proportion of women work part-time in Camden than in other parts of the country. Organisations often tried to promote flexibility for individual women, although for these women the changes were not radical enough, as Laura's comments below indicate. Her case stood out because she had been promoted to partner in a law firm during the time in which she had had three children, which is unusual, according to research on women in the legal profession (Gorman and Kmec, 2009). The inability to keep the reduced hours she had negotiated within their boundary ultimately led to her passage across the border from work to home.

> By the end I didn't feel I could deliver what I wanted to deliver, and I wasn't prepared to – that was the other thing – I wasn't prepared to put in the hours. Even though I was working more than my part-time hours, but not as much as full-time, I wasn't prepared to go over and above it. I think one of the failings of the organisation was this expectation that, particularly as a partner, you had to be doing everything, you know. You had to be doing your marketing, you had to be doing your management, you had to be doing your caseload.

Whereas I think it is not just about being flexible in terms of your hours, is it? Flexible in terms of working towards people strengths, rather than expecting them to be doing everything.

Her organisation was willing to accept flexibility by formally agreeing for her to work part-time. As with full-time work, she could not keep her part-time work within the negotiated boundary. She provided an insight into the rigidity of the structure by pointing out that law firms are not evaluating what people can contribute, only how they fall short of the existing corporate model. She joins Bailyn (2006) in calling for a fundamental reorganisation of work, in particular through exploring how to play to people's strengths. This ties in with Putnam et al.'s (2014) idea of 'third' spaces that bypass the current double bind between full commitment or inferior work status.

For a minority of the interviewees, discouragement occurred during pregnancy, echoing Liu and Buzzanell's (2004) finding that pregnant women were discouraged by their interactions with bosses. For some mothers, supposed role models only served to illustrate the incongruity of being a working mother (Volpe and Murphy, 2011). Other mothers experienced feelings of discouragement only after they had tried to keep working. Reappraisals of the relative value of work made mothers enforce stricter boundaries which led to a lessened sense of belonging.

Being pulled toward the home sphere undermines efforts to display that one is an ambitious worker, presumably because the ambitious worker is driven by only one interest (Benschop et al., 2013). Effective managers are supposed to show a capacity to set aside personal and emotional considerations in order to get the job done

(Kanter, 1993), which contributes to women feeling bad when they leave and colleagues are still working (Ford and Collinson, 2011; Haynes, 2008). Cutting back hours fails as a strategy because it contravenes displaying the masculine traits associated with success (Kelly et al., 2008). The long-hours requirement varies by type of occupation, but is salient in City law firms (see also Anderson et al., 2010). The women lawyers in our study, however, were calling for tighter boundaries, rather than simply accepting existing work conditions. Laura's stated unwillingness to transgress her delimited hours is also reflected in Walsh's (2012) study in which, even before having any children, women lawyers expressed limits to the amount of time they were willing to give.

Stage 2: Making sense of the identity change at home

Women took different routes to becoming what they defined as not working but most expressed regret and loss. Geraldine had held a senior management position in a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Her manager had reluctantly agreed for her to return to work three-and-a-half days per week instead of full time, on the condition that she would complete her previous full-time workload and be on call when not at work. She tried this arrangement and then left. Her statement reveals the limits to choice when she discussed her feelings about what she was about to embark on.

> When I made the decision, it was a very, very hard decision, because I was thinking, 'Goodness me, I've spent all these years building myself up to get to this place and now I am going to chuck it all in to be a mother pushing a buggy', and we all know how mothers pushing buggies are treated.

Part of her loss emanates from the low value she perceives is accorded to mothers. Giving up professional work is described as almost foolhardy, that is to 'chuck it all in' and only to look after children. In contrast to this perceived societal lack of value of raising children, most mothers expressed growing personal satisfaction with being home with their children, a sense that they were fulfilling an important need and contributing to society. At the same time, mothers also recounted continuing struggles, particularly related to how they had coped when they first left work.

All the mothers described themselves as not working, although in the course of the interviews some revealed that they were sometimes working. They did not evaluate these new forms of work as being situated in the 'worker' category. For example, Sara, the former television producer, called herself a stay-at-home mother even though she was occasionally still working in television for short periods of time. When she did work, she became aware of what she had lost and the fact that she had largely chosen home life over work. Her description poignantly expresses how many mothers are happy with both work and caregiving and actually want both. Her feeling of disjuncture when she returned home was an outcome of the separateness of these worlds and ways of being in them.

> We are used to a sense of, you know, a job well done, of being applauded, congratulated, just the sheer dynamism of working and when I do occasionally work out of the office, out of the home, I feel so dynamic, you know, even just walking down to get the Tube. I think 'look at me out there, part of the big, big world and everything', and it's funny coming home. I get a really – it's funny actually – a funny feeling when I come home and see the kids and I think,

actually the thing I think most often when I come home and see the kids are there, is I think 'Bloody hell, you two are not the whole world. When I am with you I think you are the whole world and I am so happy to be with you'.

Other mothers recreated work at home to keep alive a sense of being a successful worker, while still stating that they were no longer working. Intermittent paid work and voluntary work disrupt the tidy classification of mothers as working or not working. Transcending or redrawing the conventional boundaries between paid and unpaid work helps women to create a new identity at home.

Ines had worked in a medium-sized company as a political analyst, advising companies about how political developments could affect them. She took on an occasional consultancy for the same firm from home: In this kind of work the borders between home and work are relatively permeable. She was unusual among our interviewees in hoping for a future return to 'employee status' in her previous type of work. Interestingly, she identified the risks of her intermittent current employment, not wanting to continue bearing this risk in the future. Even at this stage of sensemaking her experience draws attention to its collective nature, in that mothers who are at home are constantly discussing what their work future will be.

Interviewer: What are you thinking for yourself for the future?

Ines: It is a constant preoccupation with, and a constant topic of conversation with the other mothers. My objective is to have one solid line on my CV every year until I decide to return to employee status. I want one solid line every

year. It doesn't matter if that project is two weeks or six months long. For me right now it is the quality of work and not the quantity that is my strategy. In my nature I am not so much of a risk-taker that I feel comfortable running my own business or being self-employed in perpetuity. . . . I hope this is sufficient to say that I haven't left working.

When the boundary between work and home was ambiguous, women suffered less conflict. Selina, a former teacher, explained that she could either practise her profession in a school or with her own children at home. Although she missed her workplace, her identity was less challenged, and she felt that she would not be penalised for taking time out of work. Although she identified herself as a mother who was at home with her children, she also had actually intermittently worked as a supply teacher, someone who fills in on an occasional basis. The two teachers' experiences contrast with those of other women, illustrating how the strength of the borders that surround work affects women's ability to cope with disruptions in their work lives. Being a teacher offered a perceived consistency with being a mother who was looking after children.

Those who had worked in occupations such as law and television experienced much less identity consistency. These women acutely felt that they were confronted with the 'choice' to continue working long hours on-site in their previous jobs or to leave. After 'choosing' to leave, they suffered the greatest disjuncture in their identities. They could not easily smooth the transition by continuing the work activity: being a corporate treasurer, a mergers and acquisitions lawyer or a television producer was something that required an office and colleagues; it could not be re-enacted at home.

These mothers did not engage in spells of paid work related to their previous position, nor did they try to create replacement activities; they seemed to go through a period of not knowing what to do.

A coping strategy practised by three interviewees is illustrated by Geraldine's (the former manager in an NGO) throwing herself into setting up a new business as a way of justifying herself. Even though she stated 'you can just be a mother', she immediately counteracted her position by justifying herself through her involvement in the parent-teacher association (PTA). In this second stage, she was torn.

> When I made the decision, it completely freaked me and I set up two businesses. You know, 'Oh my god I can't just be a mother; that's ridiculous, that's just not me'. So I set up two knitting labels. I got my mother and my mother-in-law and me and we all knitted hats, scarves and booties, and we packaged them all, sold them in Primrose Hill, various shops. Oh yes, I'll give myself some more work because I can't 'just' be a mother. Actually you can just be a mother. But now I have taken on the PTA at the school.

Mothers' discomfort during this second stage in the journey shows through their clinging to their former work identity and fear of taking on the low status of caring work. Setting up a knitting business fits the stereotypical depiction of women entrepreneurs, but from another viewpoint illustrates 'the cleavages of identity' that mothers face (Bruni et al., 2005: 21). Mothers intermittently worked and set up new businesses to ensure what Weick (1995) describes as continuity and consistency in who they felt they were. Women whose previous work permitted it crossed back and

forth over the boundary with their former occupation to accommodate this barrier (Nippert-Eng, 1996). But women in occupations with strong borders, such as former lawyers or senior managers, could not employ these adaptation strategies and therefore faced the greatest disjuncture.

Stage 3: Creating a new identity at home

Many interviewees, particularly those in law and banking, experienced a profound disappointment with the loss of colleagues who had once been so important. Collective sensemaking was made possible through new groupings of mothers who replaced the former colleagues. Group identity was fostered partly by opposing themselves to still-working mothers. Alex had been a radio producer with a successful fast-track career. For her, motherhood is a site of contestation in which mothers justify their own 'decision' by diminishing the alternative paths taken by other women. The contestation sometimes reflect a woman's own competing desires for herself.

> I think women are always trying to justify the decisions they've made, in fact mainly to themselves. . . . Often they are pretty down on women that don't work, and women who don't work are down on women who do work. . . . They don't know what they're missing. And I see it everywhere. I see it in my friends and I saw it in myself, definitely. When I worked I was quite dismissive of women who didn't work.

Companionship with other women, mainly from a similar social background, provided support. Women were able to choose their friends and the narratives that

worked for them at that time. Other mothers, who were also looking after their children full time, could collectively confirm the interviewee's fragile new sense of self. Humour was often used to mark the mothers, often to themselves, as being better than the low status associated with unpaid work. Humour and 'clubbing together' bolster mothers' identities, reflecting the collective nature of sensemaking. So Susan, a former investment banker, related,

> I really enjoyed becoming part of the [Xtown] Mums' Set, if you like. What was really great to me is the sense of everybody clubbing together. A lot of the mums are very funny, self-deprecating. Everybody jokes about how awful the husbands are – it's just people like me – very good sense of humour.

In this third stage of the journey, many mothers had reached a more comfortable stage of adjustment than the second stage, but they still had not worked out what their new identity should be. Many were actively helping at their children's school. Although they enjoyed this activity, they confessed that it was a child status-enhancement activity, separate from real 'giving'. Discomfort is clear in the use of humour, almost self-mocking, to explain their current position.

Jane, the former recruitment consultant, said:

> I'm this kind of parody that I'm on committees. So you don't work and you spend all your time kind of like running things, without being paid at all.

> Interviewer: For the school?

Yes, I'm on the – yes, I have just become a governor of the school, and I'm the chair of the playgroup and I'm a chair of my middle son's football club. So I do all these kind of, like, you know – they're not even worthy. They're not worthy, in that they're like charity or charity in the sense you're doing them for the church. I enjoy it and it does keep me busy and it's something. So I don't really spend my time cleaning or anything like that. I sort of don't see myself as a particularly, you know, housewife, in the kind of, you know, apron and rubber gloves who's always kind of cooking and cleaning. I feel it's quite important to live in a community where people are giving.

Jane was also careful to distinguish her school involvement from cooking and cleaning. Part of claiming her new identity was to distance herself from these activities. We infer that acting as a traditional mother is not enough in societal terms for a professional or managerial stay-at-home mother. She is in search of personal fulfilment, perhaps even glory, from being part of a community in which people are giving. But here Jane was not sure if she was giving or not; she questioned whether her activities were giving but then said that she felt it was important for people to be giving, but not to be cleaning. Her comments provide further insight into how mothers' view work. She clearly stated 'you don't work' but she did engage in running many activities for which she did not receive payment. Her classification of activities reflects the unrecognised value of work that is unpaid (Bourne and Calàs, 2013).

Stage 4: Springboard for action

A qualitatively different stage in the journey occurs when mothers cease dealing with the past and struggling with their changed identity, but are looking positively to the future. Many women experienced profound changes in their outlook from the time they had spent caring for their children. Some envisaged taking on roles in which they would focus on giving to the community. Diana provides an interesting case in point, discussing how her motivation was now related to the community. Interestingly, she previously worked for an NGO, where she was contributing to the community, but somehow in this stage she viewed it differently. She seemed to take comfort and to need the endorsement from her partner. His emphasised happiness provided justification.

> Luckily [my partner] is very, very happy for me not to be working, and I'm going to see. I'd quite like to be a home-school co-ordinator, working with children who are from troubled backgrounds and not going to school for various reasons, I think. It's nice because I am thinking, 'Right, where is the need?' It's not about money. To me working is not going to be about money. It's going to be, 'Where does society need me?' . . . I couldn't go to a pen-pushing, paper-pushing, watching the clock kind of job. That would just drive me insane.

Others stated how transformative their time at home had been, as Felicity, who had previously worked in product development research, mentioned. She looked forward

to her future and wanted an outlet for self-realisation, but only after others' needs were met.

> I think definitely my whole perspective of the world of work has changed since I've been out of it. But I do want to go back because I think, you know, having something outside of the kids and something for yourself and something challenging, whatever, it's got for me, I feel it's got to work around the family.

Taking responsibility for the home had also brought changes to women's ways of operating and had changed their feelings of autonomy and power, as reflect in Jane's comments below.

> I would have to work somewhere where I had autonomy. That is the thing. That here, you know, there is – in this house, I make the majority of the rules. Kind of Mummy's in charge and what I say goes, and I think I would find that really hard to leave that behind and just have to do what someone else told me to do.

Almost all of the interviewees in this study continued to be preoccupied with work throughout their journeys out of their previous work, underlining how self-defining paid work continued to be to them. Jane was able at this last stage to look forward to the future. For most mothers, it was rarely to the same kind of work that they had previously undertaken, as Lovejoy and Stone (2011) also found. Envisaging the future, they wanted to contain their work by having a boundary that would enable them to continue being active parents. They also sought consistency in their newly

formed identity (Clark, 2000). The collective nature of sensemaking had played a critical role in mothers' eventually reaching this position in which they experienced less conflict. Replacement professional work and community engagement helped the process of being ready to move on.

Discussion and conclusion

In this article we analysed the dynamic processes of mothers' identity changes after they had left professional work. We integrated border theory with sensemaking, constructing a new theoretical framework to analyse the sequencing of sensemaking narratives. Narrative is central to sensemaking (Brown et al., 2008; Ibarra, 1999) and sequencing is inherent to narrative (Riessman, 2002). While temporality is a foundation of the narrative sequence (Ricoeur, 1983), it does not necessarily imply a linear progression in time from a working to a not working identity. As an illustration, through the lens of border theory, we could explain why some mothers who had recently left their work were pulled back in time during the second stage of adjustment we described. These mothers were trying to cross back in time over the border to hold on to their former identity by engaging in border-crossing activities such as consultancy work in their former firm (Nippert Eng, 1996). The border provides Maclean et al.'s (2012) 'perceptual staging post' from which to understand how identity changes in stages although it is not a linear progression.

Our research makes several contributions to the existing literature. First, while previous researchers have used border and boundary theories to help explain the daily transitions workers make between the separate worlds of work and home (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000), we extend these theories to explain the macro transition out of

work. Although perhaps not constituting a rupture as in Weick's use of sensemaking, mothers experience their departure from work as a disjuncture which necessitates collective sensemaking, all the more so because at a societal level it is normative and hence hardly visible. Further suppressing women's visibility is that after leaving an organisation they are off its radar. Similarly, others who leave paid work because they are on fixed-term contracts or are made redundant become invisible to organisations. Yet, the experiences of those on either side of the work divide illuminate issues from their various vantage points. So, the struggles of mothers who continue in work affirm that it is not only mothers who give up work who face identity and practical barriers in the workplace (Gatrell, 2013; Haynes, 2008). The high and increasing frequency of labour-market transitions and their consequences lead us to the view that our framework, which integrates sensemaking and border theory, could also help explain the identity changes of people undergoing the macro transitions set in train by job loss during recession or company restructuring. Furthermore our framework could help to shed light on the neglected issue of how those on temporary or fixed-term contracts make sense of their frequent transitions from working to not working.

A second contribution, also theoretical, relates to the boundary between paid and unpaid work. Mothers' accounts construct a rift between being in paid and unpaid work. Paid work means having a professional or managerial career, while being in the category of unpaid work can also subsume temporary work, consultancy work or setting up a small business. Thus, mothers uphold a worker-caregiver dichotomy in their subjective classifications (Bourne and Calàs, 2013), even as they are actually engaging in paid or voluntary work. Engaging in intermittent paid work is a way of seeking to maintain a consistent identity (Weick, 1995), rather than creating a

boundaryless career (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996) or 'opting in-between' (Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2011). The only exception from our interviewees was a mother who was working a few weeks a year as a deliberate strategy to permit her to return to employment in political research at a later date.

Thirdly, our study provides new insights into the process of women's occupational downgrading, which is a key labour market issue in the UK (see for example, Connolly and Gregory, 2008). In this sense, downgrading is in terms of conventional measures of success and accompanies a traditional gender division of labour. As they reach a springboard for action (Taylor and Van Every, 2000), women's thoughts about future careers portray them as following a different career than their former one, because they are seeking to express who they are, in their new identities formed after crossing the boundary of the former career. They placed value on the jobs they envisaged and assessed them to be of societal value (see also Damaske, 2011; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005), but recognised that they carried less prestige and lower rewards than their previous jobs.

Fourthly, we offer an alternative to the work-life balance framework. Viewing the mothers in this study in a work-life balance framework would lead to very different conclusions from the ones we have reached. In the work-life balance framework, mothers who leave their work have experienced conflict and resolved the conflict, thus achieving balance. Balance is conceptualised as being able to fulfil the roles demanded at home and work (Voydanoff, 2004). But this does not address how motherhood alters the content of mothers' home and work roles and how they feel about these roles. Ideas of work-family conflict suggest a seesaw, so that achieving

balance is about changing the weight attached to either work or family. Concepts such as spillover and compensation (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000) do relate to mothers' experiences but they avoid the more structural questions relating to roles. Work-life balance may be out of kilter, but the drivers of the imbalance are organisational, societal and personal power structures.

Furthermore, work-life balance provides no space to factor the loss inherent in resolving conflict and achieving balance, nor the more fundamental identity problem of achieving consistency in being a mother and a professional worker. Our research shows that not being able to achieve consistency in 'who you are', or who you are beginning to perceive yourself to be, is the start of a process of leaving which culminates in actually leaving. As Thompson and Bunderson (2001: 35) elaborate, 'if the work and non-work domains share intrinsic motivations then temporal conflicts need not destroy one's sense of balance'. The different motivations, identities and values associated with work and home are overlooked in the work-life balance literature.

In a similar vein our final contribution is a critique of choice. Implying a transition at one moment in time from one state to another, choice cannot capture the adjustment and loss that came with leaving. We propose that the costs of choices also need explicit recognition. The idea of choice as binary (Williams, 2001) legitimises and renders invisible the costs and difficulties of professional and managerial mothers exiting their work. That they face such difficulties is an outcome of a 'double-bind' in which women feel that there are 'non-existent alternatives' (Putnam et al., 2014: 5). Choice fast-forwards us to the outcome, like work-life balance it deprives us of the

possibility to reflect on the processes, or costs involved. Over time, most women became reconciled to their loss, in part by changing their own priorities, and through this process they made their 'choice' the right one. But accepting or being content with the final outcome, which may have taken years to achieve, is not the same as mothers choosing what they had wanted.

Many of the mothers in our study would have chosen a different path if other choices had been on offer. Constructing a narrative around their leaving, several recounted how they had ceased to be 'part of the gang' at work when they became mothers (see Cahusac and Kanji (2014) in which we elaborated on organisational culture and mothers' exit). Even though the length of maternal leave in the UK provided considerable flexibility regarding the return to work, practices such as socialising after hours excluded mothers when they returned. Current hegemonic masculine practices although naturalised, are socially constructed, meaning that other ways of organising are possible (Acker, 2006; Calàs et al., 2009). Sandberg and Scovell (2013) cite an example in which a senior manager simply declared that mentoring meetings would not take place after hours because this practice disadvantaged women. The professional and managerial mothers in this study had not benefited from such support and might have stayed at work if they had received it. They were calling for more creative solutions that would enable workers to contribute their skills and experience, while also caring for children. Increasingly the question for organisations is whether they are willing to take on this challenge. The questions at a societal level are whether and how organisations should be required to meet this challenge.

Funding

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Table 1. Respondents' occupations

Occupation	Number of respondents
Law	5
Banking	4
Film and television	4
Teaching	2
NGO management	2
Advertising	1
Theatrical production	1
Radio	1
Dance	1
Fashion industry	1
Economics	1
Private-sector research	2
Graphic design	1

Table 2 Final themes and examples of codes for each theme

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Work identity under threat while at work	**Making sense of the identity change while at home**	**Creating a new identity while at home**	**Springboard for action**
Negative role models when pregnant *Example: Partner in law firm saying goodnight to children on the phone*	Regret and loss *Example: Television producer feeling dynamic during temporary project work*	Defending new position *Example: Saying that you can actually be a stay-at-home mother*	Positive feelings about the future *Example: Looking forward to the future*
Identity change as a worker after becoming a mother *Example: Feeling of letting down by colleagues*	Lack of value for mothers *Example: We all know how mothers with buggies are treated*	Helping in school or helping in the community *Example: Being a governor at the school*	Transformative time at home *Example: Wanting to make a difference*
Not fitting in *Example: No longer feeling like you are part of the gang, feelings of guilt at not working like others*	Satisfaction with looking after children *Example: Mentioning how children have benefited*	Humour *Example: Mothers laughing at how awful their husbands are*	Impact of care on autonomy and power *Example: Not wanting to go back to working for someone else*
Inability to keep to agreed hours *Example: Lawyer who had negotiated part-time work but still had to complete assignments*	Recreating work at home *Example: Mother setting up a knitting business at home*	Not a housewife *Example: Former recruitment consultant saying she does not do cleaning*	Importance of paid work *Example: Mothers still wanting to engage in paid work*
Home is calling mothers across the boundary *Example: Home life is making work seem less important*	Border crossing activities, such as consultancy work *Example: Political analyst who engaged in occasional consultancy work*	Collective sensemaking helps to ease discomfort *Example: Mothers are all clubbing together*	Insistence of boundary around work *Example: Confidence in asserting limits to future participation*

	Engagement in collective sensemaking *Example: Employment is a constant topic of conversation between mothers*		Contribution of collective sense-making *Example: Coming to the same types of career vision through collective discussion*

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