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TITLE:

Reflections of career, perceptions of maternity leave: a pilot study

using narrative analysis.

AUTHOR:

Basia McDougall*
Aberdeen Business School
Robert Gordon University
Garthdee Road
Aberdeen AB10 7QE

Email: b.h.mcdougall@rgu.ac.uk

*Address for correspondence

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ABSTRACT

Maternity leave is linked to role-conflict and gender discrimination in the workplace. Decisions on working life at this time are unavoidable; it is a natural time for self reflection. It is a time when work and career are perceived to be suspended. A pilot study using narrative analysis, adopting an inductive approach, privileged women's voices and uncovered a common theme of 'conflict', reinforcing findings of previous research. However, in contrast to the negative interpretations presented in the literature, women also told stories of positive skills development during their maternity leave. Secondly, women did not adhere to the strict organisational and legal parameters of maternity leave. The conclusion considers the incongruence of 'career breaks' and the positive development showcased by these women during their maternity leave. The value of narrative analysis lies in its ability to explore the juxtaposition between the notion of 'career' from an employer's perspective and the value of maternity leave from a woman's perspective.

INTRODUCTION

Women's rights to equal opportunities have been politically acknowledged, yet discrimination still exists (Labour Market Review, 2009). The central topic of this study, maternity leave, is an area closely allied to gender discrimination in the UK. Against this backdrop, this paper begins by considering how women are portrayed within career theory frameworks, acknowledging the research input on associated topics such as maternal role, work role conflicts and boundaryless careers. Maternity leave is considered from legal and cultural perspectives, as well as its current place within organisational theory literature.

This article describes women's perceptions of their maternity leave by listening to their experiences of maternity leave within the context of their working lives. It demonstrates the value of narrative analysis and specifically, an autobiographical interview technique (Wengraf, 2001). Using Reissman's simple definition of a narrative: a response to the question, "and then what happened?" (Reissman, 1993) narrative analysis permits the systematic un-packaging of a told story. The methodology has the potential to connect diverse topics including identity, social welfare and organisational strategy as it embraces legal, cultural and personal frameworks and contexts. The autobiographic narrative method is offered as a means by which to hold back the effect of existing theoretical frameworks during data collection and analysis, thereby giving women a voice. Existing frameworks may not accurately represent lived life experiences, values and expectations

of all women, especially when faced with decisions about balancing work and family. The method led the researcher to recognize feminist epistemology and this sits comfortably with the analysis of this pilot, which uses an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The pilot centres on the experiences of two Scottish women during their second or subsequent maternity leave periods, focussing on their perceptions and expectations of their working life as uncovered by narrative analysis. The section ends with the suggestion that narrative analysis offers an insight into how the juxtaposition between maternity leave as an absence of career or 'un-career' and the women's understanding of their own career paths, can be further explored.

Background to Research

Maternity leave: legislation and discrimination

The majority of literature considering maternity leave or 'career break' highlights the negative impact bearing children has on both the mother and her career path. For example, one definition of maternity leave is a *break* from work to *recover* [emphasis added] from childbirth/adoption (Hyde et al, 1995). Inequality in the workplace is well reported (e.g.: Miller et al, 1996). In the UK, women are faced with a complicated set of rules (over 20 statutes and regulations), which, in essence offer 26 weeks 'Ordinary Maternity Leave' and 39 weeks state benefit if certain criteria are met (CIPD, 2008). Organisations offer additional leave on top of this (paid or unpaid) depending on length of service and contractual frameworks in place. Not surprisingly, Kodz et al (2002) report that often women were neither aware of their rights,

nor employers forthcoming with creative solutions to an alternative to full-time job roles to reduce the perceived, negative perceptions of maternity leave. There is legislation in place to minimise discrimination, offering women the right to challenge their employer on grounds of sexual discrimination should they be treated less favourably due to their pregnancy. In fact, over half of those who do return to work part-time, often take jobs for which they require lower qualifications or skills or were associated with fewer management positions (Darton & Hurrell, 2005). So from an unequal start, maternity leave often offers either a return to the UK's long hours culture, with a drop in promotion or a drop in wages for part-time work, which is rarely of equivalent status (McRae, 1991). Certainly, there is no shortage of research reinforcing the message that if women take time off work, this time is correlated with fewer promotions, smaller pay increases over time and associated with subsequent 'dropping out' from expected career paths (e.g.: Judiesch & Lyness, 1999). Research into why women drop out is sparse to date. It appears to be totally expected then, that from a career perspective, the blunt question: "are families damaging to careers?" has led to an equally direct answer: 'yes' for women and 'no' for men (Burke, 1997). Most research is quantitative and so questions asked are firmly grounded in existing theory and are unable to address the critical question, of why.

Maternity leave: expectations

Decisions regarding maternity leave will be guided to a greater or lesser extent by cultural expectations as well as organisational policy and legislative

frameworks. With regard to cultural expectations of mother and motherhood, there are three archetypes that have survived the passage of time: 1. 'Good Mother' who is powerless, giving & nurturing; 2. 'Terrible Mother': aggressive & devouring. 3. 'Great Mother': both of the above (Neumann, 1955). Neumann discusses how our current culture expects women to be 'Good Mother'. 'Good Mother' is further reinforced by the traditional family ideal but inevitably conflicts with the ever increasing need to return to work (Smeaton, 2006). Perhaps this goes some way to explain why the common reaction to motherhood is that of being disenchanted (Caplan, 1987). Further research found that if any mother is asked to list positives and negatives of motherhood, negatives outweigh positives (Matlin, 1996). Matlin goes on to explain that the positives do not sit comfortably with values and skills recognised readily by our culture, thus allowing society to diminish them further. Again, the time during maternity leave is negatively linked to work and career.

Maternity leave and career theory

Sullivan (1999) lists four well supported reasons why existing career development theories are not truly applicable to women: work place discrimination; pay and promotion inequalities; greater family demands and sexual harassment issues. Where *does* maternity leave sit with regards to career theory? Generally, it is a 'career break' or time of transition, which until it ends, is not regarded as relevant to career theory. Maternity leave has been explored as a time of gendered conflict management (Buzzanell &

Liu, 2007); arguably falls into the stage of 'endurance' following idealism (O'Neil & Bilimoria, 2005) and a time of re-negotiating psychological contracts with employers (Borrill & Kidd, 1994). A literature review by O'Neil et al, (2008) identifies four patterns and paradoxes of women's career; all four highlight the holistic nature of the view required by researchers to understand the nature of 'work' for women. Balancing work 'and life' is discussed in a well-researched book aimed at an American audience: The Opt-out Revolt (Mainero and Sullivan, 2006). The message is similar: for women, work is *not* necessarily a one-way, upward-only career ladder, which must be separated from family and follow organisations' expectations and frameworks and legislative mind sets. Academically, then, the following captures the theme: "o*ur overall conclusion is that male-defined constructions of work and career success continue to dominate organizational research and practice*" (O'Neil, Hopkins & Bilimoria, 2008 pg 727).

Feminism

The feminist perspective has a history of promoting women's voices in the political arena*.* All feminist approaches have in common a reaction to a male-dominated society; one difference is that they place their emphasis on different levels of analysis. The liberal feminist theory looks to organisations and how they might/should change. Radical feminism focuses at a societal level and extends its philosophy to consider legislation. In contrast, post-modern approaches question the very essence of our knowledge. The section on discrimination and legislation offers strong evidence that a voice

demanding equality is still necessary, yet some of the older forms of feminism such as liberal feminism are too simplistic. For example, Levinson (1986) argued that if you could take away the barriers, men and women would share a common career path. More recently postmodernists argue that there are as many different "women's experiences" as there are types of women (Harding, 1986). Conflict also exists within the feminist perspectives: Lorde (2004) suggests oppression comes from within women; Martin (2001) says it is men that are perceived as oppressive. Either way, there is a strong case to continue the move away from career theory from a male perspective; feminism is full of critique of male perspectives but appears to lack robustly supported solutions.

The concept of 'career', boundaryless, protean or otherwise (Arthur & Rosseau, 1996; McDonald, Brown & Bradley, 2005), which largely sees maternity leave as 'uncareer' time appears to theoretically clash with feminist perspectives. The end result is a clear direction for further research privileging the womens' voices. The pilot study described here therefore aims to uncover what the traditional maternity leave concept means to women in a world of work where an increasingly boundaryless, flexible career is acceptable and apparently sought after by working mothers, perhaps in terms different from those previously described as women's 'careers'. Narrative analysis offers a powerful means by which to explore women's subjective experience – in context and in through their own words describing their as such represents an effective method to tap into real working lives. This offers an opportunity to redress the balance and re-examine the issue

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from another perspective since the views of women actually on maternity leave are simply not considered, even in feminist theories of career.

Narrative Analysis

The following offers some background to the method chosen for this pilot. In this case, the study took an inductive approach and the nature of the topic draws the discussion across feminist epistemologies.

Narrative research is rising in popularity (Lieblich et al, 1998) and covers an array of possible research material and media (diaries, newspapers, interviews etc). Of interest here, are oral life stories obtained through a combination of semi- structured and unstructured interviews. Narrative analysis has been used now for many years within the social sciences (Labov & Waletzky, 2003; Mishler, 1986; Sarbin, 1986; Bruner, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1995; Reissman, 1993). Whilst there is no room here to review all classic studies in detail, they include differing numerous interpretations of what a narrative is, and whether the focus of analysis should be on the structure or form of a narrative, or data (Boje, 2001). Inevitably, each researcher modifies method and analysis according to need, supporting Miles & Huberman's (1994) shifting boundaries idea and indeed those of an inductive approach. Wengraf's (2001) Biographic Narrative Interpretive Method – BNIM offers a complete set of definitions, methodology and analysis drawn from academic writing and research experience. Assuming that an extreme version of positivism neglects the 'told story' and what the postmodernists consider the 'lived life' story, BNIM data collection and analysis could be argued to be

half-way between these two. A positivist approach will not dig deep enough. Importantly, narrative research is based on the idea that telling stories helps individuals make sense of both their surroundings and the actions of those around them. For example, biographic narrative analysis has been used to explore individuals' career transition from traditional to 'portfolio careers' (Motulsky, 2005) This work is the exception rather than the rule and typically narrative research focuses on gaining rich case study histories, where generalisation to theory is arguably difficult but not impossible (Reissman 1993; Lieblich et al 1998). Evidence gathered does, however, undoubtedly open up new avenues of research and can offer guidance towards alternative frameworks and models.

The approach taken in this pilot similarly does not intend to seek universal patterns from which to create new theories. Rather, the form of analysis chosen encourages a delay in the moment of cross case generalisation; the method aims to hold onto the richness of each individual case history learnt through the individuals' stories and in doing so reduces the risk of introducing boundaries to interpretation. An insight into how women perceive their working life emerges using their words to highlight their perceptions of values, evaluations and parameters of expectations.

As discussed above, career theory was originally grounded in masculine perceptions of work and career (for example Levinson, 1978; Super, 1978) and although much progress has been made, evidence of masculine interpretations of 'career success' (for example the concept of a 'career

ladder') still dominates both media and academic writing (O'Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria, 2008). The work of Belenky et al (1986) and Reissmann (1993) demonstrate through their research that a feminist paradigm can be effectively used and the balance of power does not need to rest with the researcher. Feminist approaches thus sit comfortably with narrative analysis. This approach has provided evidence that gender differences in story telling show women emphasise "continuity with others' goals, not opposition to them" (Gergen & Davis, 1997 page 213). Perceptions of what success at work is i.e.: climbing career ladders; seeking promotion and status is incongruent with Gergen's finding. Does this difference in narratising reflect deeper differences in perceptions of work? Since maternity leave is a time when decisions concerning career paths are unavoidable, stories capture a time of natural self-reflection, planning and evaluation. Narrative analysis, as defined by social constructionists, offers a means by which to access the individual's understanding of their world as *they* experience it (Gergen, Chisler & LoCicero, 1999), hence offering an invaluable insight into the career expectations and perceptions of maternity leave specifically and career leave more generally. Narrative analysis as described is therefore ideally placed to embrace and further explore what might be argued to be this masculine interpretation of career, work and expectations. Furthermore, narrative analysis might shed light on how to offer a coherent non-paradoxical career theory by listening to women's voices at the very time when the difference between men and women cannot be ignored: the time of motherhood.

METHOD

For the purposes of this pilot, two women, "Tina" and "Martha" (not their real names) were interviewed. Both women respondents were self selected, and they were recruited through word of mouth, informal advertisement via a local primary school. They met the study criteria namely they were on a second or subsequent maternity leave and had previously been in paid full-time employment. Both women agreed to take part in an 'extended interview' about their 'work experiences' and chose their home environment in which to be interviewed. The interviews conducted with each woman on two separate days were recorded and transcribed. Detail of analysis of the told stories in this article is limited to an extraction of chronological lived life history and thematic analysis with simple cross case comparison, rather than a full BNIM analysis (Wengraf, 2001). The analysis and interpretations in this article therefore form a subset of the full pilot study. The women discussed here represent different forms of, and attitudes to, career breaks, and because they demonstrate the salient elements of narrative method.

Since narrative analysis aims to elicit stories, the opening question is of particular importance. Careful consideration is given to avoid: value laden terms; interviewer determined time frames or expectations of types of information sought. The interviewees were told the research was interested in 'women's working lives'. The opening question of the interview was thus phrased as follows:

> "*Can you please tell me all the experiences and all events which are personally important to you up to now? Start wherever you want, I won't interrupt you. I'll listen first and take notes for later. Please begin and tell me your personal story of how your working life has developed*".

As suggested, the interviewees were allowed to narrate their stories uninterrupted, with long pauses unhindered, giving time for reflection. Once finished, new questions were devised for a follow up interview so as to expand/clarify, thus closer to a semi-structured interview design format. Specifically, the second interview used probing sentences to elicit the telling of more particular instance narratives (Wengraf, 2001). The first 'unstructured' interview thus provided the material from which to devise the second semi-structured interview questions. These questions encouraged further information about aspects of the narrative with questions such as:

> "*Can you tell me how ……all happened?; Can you remember a particular occasion/time/moment when you felt ……? Or "Can you remember a particular situation/incident/example of …..?*"

Importantly, the same order of events is followed as in the original story and questions used the interviewee's own words. Again, interruptions were kept to a minimum. If the interviewee moved onto a later part of the interview, the researcher did not backtrack, respecting the same story line to be followed. When the interview was finished, the interviewees were given a chance to comment on the how they felt the interview went. Notes were

made soon after the interview to capture on paper emotions, feelings and general impressions after the interview, of both interviewee and interviewer, which were added to the transcript and referred to during analysis. The full interview was transcribed and a chronological life story extracted for each. A thematic analysis was also conducted and this was compared to the pattern of the 'told story'. The cases were analysed soon after the interviews so as to capture the individual richness of the stories. Further analysis, not detailed here, was based on segmenting speech revealed differences in story telling style (see Wengraf, 2001). Cross case analysis was conducted after both interviews were completely analysed and focussed on the thematic similarities. Full BNIM analysis includes further analysis including the use of a panel of individuals to stimulate analysis thus ensuring validity and reliability of interpretation (Wengraf, 2001). The pilot study streamlined the analysis and focussed on a thematic analysis and extraction of the chronological sequence of events as its purpose was to determine whether narrative analysis had the potential to uncover an alternative view of 'career'. This approach is inductive in its approach and thus reinforcing the aim of privileging women's voices, without being constrained by a pre-determined framework for analysis.

FINDINGS

In both cases, the second part of the interview elicited much more in terms of 'stories' or 'particular incident narratives' which are of particular interest here. A shortened chronological summary of both stories follows:

Tina's story

Tina is 34 years old, married and has lived in Scotland all her life. She had three children: a five year old boy (at school) and toddler twins who were present at the interview, although very much content to keep each other entertained.

Tina completed her primary school teacher training at university straight after school and her work experience prior to teaching consisted of being a waitress, which appears to have helped form her strong feelings on 'work ethic', class distinction and social scripts.

She married whilst still training and immediately after qualifying started work in the private sector as a nursery teacher.

The family lives on a working farm they own, which is managed by her husband. He also manages a farm in Eastern Europe. The family has spent time living abroad and during this time and her mother's terminal illness – as with both her pregnancies – her employer leaves her position open for her return. Tina has therefore remained in the same organisation receiving

promotion and recognition; her role and levels of responsibility have changed over the years. She has no intention to leave.

Tina is still officially on maternity leave but describes her new role as a 'Quality Assurance Manager', across the organisation's three establishments, which involves going in as and when necessary as a 'fire-fighter' . She clearly loves her work.

Tina's story is one of a fairly stable, unchanging working life – apart from 'career breaks', she has remained with the same employer since graduation. This fits in with a traditional notion of a career, (McDonald, Brown and Bradley, 2005). Martha's story is very different - a distinct lack of planning is evident throughout her story in terms of both starting and expanding her family and before this, her education and working life.

Martha's story

Martha is 33 years old, married and was born in Scotland where she still lives with her husband and three children. She is currently pregnant with her fourth child.

Her story began with unhappy recollections of her early education. Her education ends in a half finished college course where she met her husband. Her employment, although described as largely temporary, is made up of IT orientated posts, each of which were kept for approximately 2 years before moving on.

Her last paid employment in the oil sector coincided with marriage and her first pregnancy. She feels this was the first 'proper' job where the role matched her abilities and was reflected in her salary.

Her employer's reaction to her unexpected first pregnancy was covertly discriminatory and although she managed eventually to negotiate a 3 day week, she was delighted to discover she was pregnant with her second child after only five months back at work. Her employer made maintaining both a mother role and work role unmanageable.

She did not return to work after her second child, predicting a similarly unhelpful reaction should she try to accommodate parenthood whilst working for the same organisation.

Her efforts turned instead to voluntary work, such as school committees. During this time she had a third child and also started a child minding business.

The interview took place whilst she is pregnant with her fourth (and last) child.

Martha admits to now beginning to plan ahead in terms of her future work – for the first time - having now reduced the childminding to a minimum. Her reasons for this decision are financially driven and a belief that she is, and will be, in control of her future.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Both interviews were conducted following the same process described above and with the same opening question. The two women responded with very different story telling styles. After Tina's interview, the interviewer was left with the impression of successful professional, who had 'the usual struggle' managing work and home life. It was felt that Tina was trying to offer explanations for working experiences, highlighting, and being proud, of the successes:

> "*I went straight to the private sector, which everyone thought was a bit crazy to be honest.....I'm totally reaping the benefit now.*"

In contrast, Martha offered a descriptive, self depreciating story of her working life emphasising her poor work choice decisions and planning. About her early career choices:

> "*It was pretty dark days because I couldn't see any way out; I couldn't see a career path...*"

And later, with reference to her decision to work rather than continue further study:

> "*That was a stupid decision; a short sighted decision to get the money and the overtime.... as was my pattern by that stage. But of course that boxed me in, yet more, so I still didn't have any choices.*"

In fact, when the transcript was analysed for content type, Martha's story contained a similar number of evaluative comments in relation to the number of descriptive comments. The difference was in fact the pattern of description to evaluation and the use of pauses, speed of speech and non verbal utterances. Tina spoke quickly, eloquently and rarely paused or back-tracked. Nonetheless, the different stories did in fact, contain very three similar themes: a). boundaries of maternity leave which links to their reported b). on-going skills development and c). role conflict/resolution.

Boundaries of Maternity Leave

Both stories are told in ways which differ from each other in both continuity of employment, apparent control and employer's support of their pregnancies. Tina's mutually agreed and flexible maternity leave is at the opposite end of the spectrum to Martha's experiences. Martha explains:

> "*any training that I been received up to that point sort of stopped dead and they were very good in that they covered themselves they made sure I had risk assessments at my work at my desk and things like that and errm.. and it meant they checked you out, they gave me a medical check but a lot was to cover themselves because they were most keen that I came back full time err, I'm not knowing any better I'd sort of made plans to that effect".*

However different these two stories are, in fact, neither follows the prescribed pattern of 'maternity leave' in terms of clear ending and re-starting employment after an agreed period of time. Tina, it transpires, changed both the length of her maternity leave, return date and pattern of work before her due return date. She even returns to work for a day or more, when problems arise at her place of work. Whether this is paid or not is not made clear. Either way, this is a transgression of the usual maternity leave boundaries albeit agreed with her organisation. Tina, therefore stretches the boundaries of maternity leave so far that legally, she is no longer on leave. Martha's first pregnancy on the other hand moved her from what could be considered an organisation-led agreement on her maternity leave into a 'career break' she had not originally planned for, changing the path of her work rather dramatically, despite a recognised financial need to remain employed (a key factor highlighted by Smeaton (2006)). This was led by the organisation's perceived need for full time employees:

> *"But the way they approached it was, when I came back for a meeting, [after her maternity leave], they had all they had produced graph things that proved how they needed in full time - so instead of seeing how if it could work, someone you know working three days, or working from home, they were more interested in proving the case that you had to you had to be there full time. I'm not entirely sure why..... So really … they could have done the same work with two folk in the office not four as it was".*

There was an obvious ignorance regarding return to work options, supporting Kodz et al (2002). Arguably, had Martha been more aware of her options regarding negotiating flexible working patterns and her employers more willing to consider alternatives, the outcome of this meeting may have been very different. Instead, her working life comes then to an end when she tried to fall into line with organisational expectations of maternity leave. She found the conflicting needs of motherhood and work untenable. Listening to her story gives an insight into one woman's reason for 'dropping out'. Another source of conflict is caused by the impact of maternity leave, as discussed by Judiesch and Lyness et al (1999).: taking time out does affect future promotion and salary increases.

Notably, references to 'career success' associated with status, promotion or negative consequences of 'career break' due to pregnancy are simply not reflected in these stories of these women's 'working life'. Indeed, there is no indication that either of these women aspire to 'climb the career ladder'. Even Tina's obvious career rise is described in terms of 'different roles'. This then, supports O'Neil, Hopkins and Bilimoria's (2008) criticism of much current, male dominated career theory; these women place value in ways other than money, power and status. Interestingly Martha inferred this to be common knowledge amongst mothers:

> *"I'll be that ex smoker type that's holier than thou and people can assume I knew it all along but I didn't. I had to learn it like all the other mums."*

Through listening to the women's stories, the question that must be asked is then, whether organisational and indeed cultural expectations of strict maternity leave parameters are realistic and useful? The analysis of both stories suggests that women face incongruence between the expectation of flexible working patterns to encompass maternity leave and the actual strict parameters of maternity leave. Tina negotiates this with her employer; Martha fails, despite every intention to return to work. This pilot study then, points to the suggestion that maternity leave boundaries *cause* potential conflict situations since the concept of maternity leave within tight boundaries is out of line with organisational and legislative drives towards flexibility in the workplace, and women's needs.

Role and Conflict Resolution

Conflict was a strong, common theme in both stories and thus supports previous research findings. The conflict, however, was evident in different forms: Tina's story revolved around conflict themes in two areas, post graduation. Firstly, conflict at work. Tina's role revolves around conflict management and she mentioned many stories of successful conflict resolution. It might be argued that this developed skill helps her avoid a potentially conflicting situation with her organisation. However, the story which she tells suggests the flexibility she is offered is instead a reflection of the owner's belief in her value to the successful running of the three establishments. Tina is proud of her success in managing conflict and supports this interpretation by acknowledging that this is a skill her

organisation values. She describes her role as that of a conductor of an orchestra and fire-fighter, notably making no distinction between her time on maternity leave and her time as a part-time employee. The imagery is strong and a contrasting feature between the two interviewees' stories. One conflict remains for Tina, which is only mentioned once as a final comment or 'exit talk'. This makes it particularly poignant, serving as a reminder that in fact maternity leave is not just about managing motherhood and work but also maintaining a relationship.

> *"I am a working parent. I know you try, you try to do your best in both worlds you try to be this stunning wife and mother and you try to be really good at your job and everybody says best really work part time, "oh the best of both worlds", it's like, no it's not the best of both worlds: I do half the mum job, half the housework job and half the actual job so… no, it's not the best of best of both worlds at all [laughs] .... because one person suffers and it's me…"*

Attempting to separate the two forces a lack of generalisability and ecological validity and at worst misunderstanding of results gained in using a less holistic methodology. Tina's story therefore again, robustly supports the 'multiple role conflict' research (e.g.: Miller et al 1996). Listening to her story, it becomes apparent that despite a flexible work arrangement, role conflict still exists and the link between motherhood and negatives are clear, supporting Caplan's (1987) findings. Links might be then instead drawn to cultural expectations of the 'good mother' ideal clashing with the desire to

work. Alternatively, in this instance the oppression may well come from *within*, as suggested by Lorde (2004). Importantly, however, Tina's perception of her *work* experiences and subsequent maternity leave is nonetheless overwhelmingly positive and any conflict is the due to the nature of her work. The negativity is centred on issues beyond her work and she does not expand on them, suggesting perhaps.

Martha also tells many stories with a common theme of conflict. In contrast, it was her first pregnancy that led to an insurmountable work/mother role conflict, or put simply 'greater family demands'. This latter factor was offered by Sullivan (1999) in her criticism of 'one size fits all' career development theory and supports Mainerio and Sullivan's foundations for a 'kaleidoscope careers'. However interpreted, Martha reflects on this as a difficult time and one which led to a 'career break'. After multiple, unplanned pregnancies, she is set to re-enter the workplace. This time however, Martha gives the impression that she feels she is in control in her final 'exit talk':

> *"So, I'll be this wise old bird eventually after four kids [laugh] I suppose, I suppose I should be otherwise as I say I must be quite stupid but that's, that's…at the end of the day I'll have learnt all this stuff"*.

The ability for Martha to reflect on her experiences freely and the analysis of the both stories has offered the ability to bring theories together. Both 'dropping out' and conflict resolution within leave are accepted concepts and as such the stories told offer rich insights which support existing research

findings. Narrative analysis adds insights, allowing research findings to be interwoven – and thus give further validity to previous findings. Further case studies using narrative analysis need to be conducted to confirm this framework is robust.

Allowing the women to reflect on their experiences freely and the subsequent analysis of the both stories opened up the concepts of maternity leave and career and offered the possibility to interweave previous findings further adding validity to the approach. In answering the interview question about their perception of their working life both women moved seamlessly through from education, maternity leave through to their current positions. This contradicts an assumption that maternity leave is 'non-career time'. This pilot's findings therefore may be viewed as incongruent with current frameworks of career theory which offer male gendered frameworks or omit reference to maternity leave.

On-going work related skills development

Perhaps linked to the above is what both women reflect in terms of useful 'skills development' during maternity leave. Literature tends to infer maternity leave as a 'dead space' in terms of a career, yet the following suggests quite the opposite:

> *"So I decided to help out with the committees and things I did enjoy*
> *and that it was interesting, I would say if I ever did it again I'd been*
> *10 million times better at it. Because….. I had the theory but I didn't*

have the skills, well I thought I did, but you need to keep people, you know, if you're the chairperson managing people and things …..same old pitfalls… where you're the only one that does it cause you don't want to let people down and you don't want to ask people to do things. Well, the usual the usual mistakes that I think everybody makes when they go onto committees. But I won't complain because it's… actually if you open your eyes there's loads you can actually learn from it. If I ever go to work again, you know, by jove I'll be a much better people manager, much better at organising my time and much more realistic of goals and things like that. Even though it was a success and erm, and you know, I did what I wanted to do and got all the fund raising done and all the rest of it. It was all done. I probably made much more of a hash of it than I needed to do but you know….. I'm glad I did it. So, I wouldn't do it the same way ever again. But I'm glad I did it…"

Martha highlights transferable skills, as does Tina, skills both women position firmly as being developed during her time 'off'. Tina says with conviction:

"*I can breast feed two babies, while playing fuzzy felt*" and later in relation to work: "*I get quite a buzz from multi-tasking*".

Indeed, this was supported by her ability to take trifle out of the fridge in response to a request for food from one toddler while wiping down the other who had found an illicit biscuit to 'eat'; simultaneously scan the room for further hidden snacks and continuing the interview without more than a momentary pause.

The development of skills and confidence during Martha's career break seems to have allowed her to gain a sense of control of her life and take a planned approach to her re-entry to the workplace:

> *"I don't like not to be earning particularly, I'd rather be earning money. But it's what I'm going to do [laugh] where am I going to earn it, I don't know... . You need to be ahead of the game, possibly for the first time… properly in a long time …..and that would be good."*

This supports the choice of maternity leave as a time for reflection and 'career decision time'. It might also be argued that this might corroborate the idea of O'Neil and Bilimoria's (2005) third phase of careers– reinvention, although to say Martha's maternity leave leading to this was a time of 'endurance' is incongruent with the positive story she tells of this time. Rather her early career before motherhood would sit more comfortably with the description of 'endurance' –a stage which Tina seems to have omitted altogether. Further narratives would need to be considered before a universal stage approach to career could be questioned. However, the paths of these two women are so different, and it seems unlikely that one universal path, especially those with children, could fit, perhaps supporting with post modernists. More specifically, the theme of on-going work related skills development, gained from listening to lived life experiences, offers a different, *positive* perspective to maternity leave in the context of working lives. This is particularly notable in Martha's case; she reflects her career break as a positive contribution to her work related experience despite an

unsupportive employer. Maternity leave, in the stories told, are a time of conscious skills development (Martha's people management skills) or on-going skill development (Tina's multi-tasking). Further research is required to consider whether this finding should be framed as a reflection of postmodernist thinking that every woman will have, or has, an individual (local) narrative and there is no one common 'story' - or whether there is indeed a common pattern to emerge. This relates to Lyotard's notion of a 'grand narrative', (1979) which, it is hypothesised, has been replaced by 'local narratives'. Whether a local narrative is indeed present, with respect to the notion of what constitutes a 'career' requires further consideration, too. If adopted, this postmodern approach may then also, be used to analyse arguably hegemonic discourse used in the interviews (e.g.: 'management' and 'flexibility'). A critical postmodern theory and or further discourse analysis would appear to lend itself well. Further consideration of this is required in the post pilot planning.

Both case studies showcase stories in which increasingly boundaryless, flexible working patterns – as found in previous research – are valued, perhaps required, by working mothers. The difference here is that maternity leave is not, on the whole, reflected as a different part of their working lives; it is a continuous part of their perception of their working lives and arguably also, then 'their career', reinforcing O'Neil et al's (2004) argument that researchers need to consider the nature and meaning of work for women separately, as well as the structure. Again, links could be drawn here to

whether flexibility is an advantage or a negative erosion of boundaries between paid work and private life.

CONCLUSION

Discrimination due to pregnancy undoubtedly still exists (Martha's oil sector job experiences) and role conflict does exist. Importantly, this pilot, using narrative analysis, captured lived experience in context and illustrated existential choice for mothers taking maternity leave. This led to critiques of male gendered concepts of career. Furthermore, the narrative analysis provides a means by which to explore these issues further.

Secondly, listening to the women's voices allows their perceptions of their working lives - the women's lived life experiences - which are so often portrayed as negative and 'un-career' time – to be reflected as quite the opposite. Yet, women's perspectives of maternity leave within their working lives have been silent until now.

Finally, paradoxes between legislation, organisational expectations and motherhood were clearly demonstrated through listening to women's voices and narrative analysis offers a methodology to capture and analyse the told stories. These paradoxes need to be further explored and this research is on-going, for example decisions need to be made with regards the adoption of a postmodern stance. Also a full evaluation of methodological approaches, including the level and type of discourse analysis is needed. Cross cultural

studies are needed to compare perceptions and experiences of women outside of the UK and lessons learnt where possible. If women are indeed able to develop transferable skills during periods previously considered 'un-career' time, how can organisations be encouraged to acknowledge this? For in doing so, the walls between maternity leave and work may be softened and there may be less reason for discrimination against women on maternity leave. The paper suggests there is a call for creative solutions from the government and organisations. It is time to respond differently to women returning from maternity leave.

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