Coaching through maternity transitions: through the prism of coaching, how can women going through the maternity transitions in the private equity industry be better supported?

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of ever-increasing pressure for more diversity in senior roles in financial services, organisations are putting time and resource into creating the conditions for all employees to thrive and have equitable opportunities. It has been identified that maternity is a point of inflexion in the careers of women, with those not returning or changing roles impacting the pipeline of women into senior roles. One of the solutions to this problem is to offer women maternity coaching with an external coach, to support them through the maternity leave transitions out of and back into work.

This thesis explores the lives of women who become mothers working in the Private Equity (PE) industry, an area of financial services with specific cultural nuances that make it systematically challenging for women to take maternity leave and return to work as mothers. The study is carried out through the prism of coaching, by a practicing maternity coach, in two large international PE firms. There is an ample body of literature that explores maternal workers - including the maternity transitions - though not relating to the financial services industry. Maternity coaching literature is limited, with much of the existing knowledge landscape published in consultant or marketing reports.

In this inquiry, the rich data set is drawn from a total of 27 recorded interviews with maternity returners, 38 maternity coaching sessions (including line managers as well as those taking maternity leave), and the coach's reflective journal. Given the practitioner-researcher nature of this inquiry, the findings have implications for a variety of stakeholders: PE firms, the academic community, the coaching community of practice, and also the researcher's own approach to coaching. This writing acknowledges the different 'knowledge cultures' inherent in these different communities, and intentionally presents each with the findings relevant to their domains.

A FOREWORD: how to read this.

I have undertaken this inquiry in order to further my professional practice and how I engage with what I do, how I do it and who I am in it. My coaching practice is in service of the women I want to support through my work, and this study is fuelled by my desire to create positive change for them in their working environments. This is my priority and source of energy and inspiration. As a coach carrying out professional research, I am ‘the learner’, reflexively pursuing my academic and professional ambitions. I am also ‘the educator’, taking what I learn back into my environment, reflecting on it, sharing it with others, working with it and bringing something new back to those it effects.

I seek, ultimately, to work with and change culture, which cannot change overnight, over months or over the years of this study. My work intervenes at the level of the micro-movements that individuals make within their system, as well as aiming to influence formalised policy and practice. Whilst it may not be possible to demonstrate embedded cultural change, I hope, however, that this inquiry will support a dissemination of my ideas, iteratively modifying professional practice, effecting the actions that individuals take forward from coaching into their lives and supporting HR and business leaders to implement changes to policy and practice. This is not just about working with those who support change, but also a wider dissemination to convince the more sceptical – or less proactive – firms of the benefits of supporting women through their maternity transitions. In doing this, the iterative changes – drops in the ocean - can accumulate to form a body of water that contributes to meaningful change through time.

It is important to have front of mind throughout that I am, first and foremost, generating professional work. I am taken where the work is; typically, where there is energy and commitment from ‘the buyers’ of coaching, there is an opportunity to effect change and have an impact. I have realised over the years that the seeds of best practice have to be planted in fertile soil if they are to grow. As a result of this, many of the decisions I have made whilst writing have been based on where opportunity and serendipity have taken my work – who would participate, who was open-minded about trying new things, who was open to hearing my findings as they emerged. This is not to say that there is not a structure to my study or a proactive and robust methodological approach behind it, but rather a recognition that the nature of my practitioner research relies entirely on the flow of practice. Without practice, this inquiry does not exist.

It has been challenging, at times, to capture the lifeblood of practice-in-motion in writing; it does not stand still, and it lives beyond my inquiry. This writing, therefore, represents the best of my thinking and practice at a point in time. However, this fixed moment of inquiry passes, and I continue to evolve as a practitioner, intervening in the very same environment in which I conducted my inquiry. Being a research-practitioner often feels like a way of being rather than a thing I am doing.

Finally, I explicitly acknowledge throughout that I am unavoidably and inextricably at the centre of this inquiry. Any learning that comes from it passes through the prism of my experiences and understanding, which dictates how it is refracted out and lives in the world. As Heron and Reason articulate, *because we accept that our knowing is from a perspective and that we are aware of that perspective - of its authentic value and of its restricting bias - we articulate this awareness in our communications. Critical subjectivity involves a self-reflexive attention to the ground on which one is standing* (Reason and Heron, 2007, p.282). Ethically, I must, therefore, share who I am, how I make judgements, and what brought me to this work; I do this in the chapter ‘Introduction’. My inquiry can only be validated and judged from the base of understanding my values, my principles, and in the context of the story of my life.

I recognise that this inquiry is complex and, at times, messy. The writing of this thesis reflects the complexity – and mess – that is borne from the environment in which I practice as a coach. A reader, therefore, needs to be willing to enter my space and understand why I am doing this, in order to appreciate how this piece of work unfolds.

In reviewing this inquiry, listed below are my criteria for success. I recognise that 'success' is a highly contested term. For example, in financial services, it is most often linked to increasing the 'dollar value' of something – whether that is an asset, a trade or an individual's growing career. For my professional doctorate, in validating and judging my work, I define success as:

- Having a positive impact on working mothers in private equity, at an individual and community level.
- Making the working mothers I engage with feel heard and part of a community, through inquiry stories shared and hidden experiences made visible.
- Having applicable findings for the environments I work in (and possible applicability to similar environments through future inquiry) - the seeds of cultural change planted in the firms I work with through institutional-level interventions.
- Making trustworthy my work and practice through open engagement with my own positionality and how this determines how this inquiry in conducted.
- Broadening the impact of this inquiry beyond me, conceptualising, disseminating and exploring my ideas with my community of practice, my senior leadership team, HR professionals and senior leaders.
- Contributing to academic thinking in the work-family field relating to financial services, particularly areas that impact policy and practice.

1. INTRODUCTION: the 'I' in this inquiry

The focus of your work is you, and you are your main source of data. (McNiff, 2016, p.124).

This inquiry has its roots in the lived experiences, the stories and the re-storying of this researcher, coach, mother, former banker, life-long learner. As Marshall highlights, *much research is partly personal process*, *for example, that we draw on our lives and their themes in the topics we choose to study* (Marshall, 1999, p.157). I have come to research through my journey as a coach and a chance encounter with maternity coaching, just as I came to coaching through becoming a mother whilst working in banking, and I came to banking through my desire for challenge and learning. The pattern goes on: tightening concentric circles with who I am at the core; the circles drawn through a series of choices, chance events and intuition that have shaped the experiences that represent the key markers in my life.

Understanding this inquiry in context first involves an understanding of who I am, what brought me to this work and why I see the world the way I do. Marshall adopts a clear position that connects the realms of personal and political through research, with first-person work a key feature of her work (Marshall and Gearty, 2021). From a transdisciplinary perspective, the 'I' in this inquiry is important – in contrast to the transdisciplinary Swiss school approach of focusing on group dynamics - because of how subjective experience interacts with the transdisciplinary Object; I subscribe to Nicolescu's privileging of interior experiences as a source of validating the collective, an interaction between self and others (Augsburg, 2014, p.237). The role of the researcher as an inextricable part of a transdisciplinary inquiry is discussed by Montuori who asserts that *for many of us our passion for transdisciplinarity emerges out of a felt need to go beyond some of the limitations of more traditional disciplinary academic approaches, and certain established ways of thinking* (Montuori, 2012). I am, thus, participating wholly in the inquiry, connecting my experiences with my context as an ontological and epistemological approach.

I share facets of my story here with the ethical intention of making myself as transparent as possible, whilst recognising the infinite opacity of an individual's life. I bring to the fore what has shaped my journey to inquiry, as I see it today, and acknowledge that this is a mutable and partial sharing of my experiences. This very appreciation of a life story in motion, impossible to capture in words as a static truth, speaks to how I present myself and how I interact with those lives I encounter in my work and inquiry.

When I look back over my life to today, there is a strong connecting mortar of a love of stories, learning about stories and the people that tell them. As a child, I was an early and avid reader, regularly caught late at night under my covers with a torch and a book. I noticed the blurred lines between fiction and reality – such as my physical longing for some treacle tarts in a favourite Enid Blyton short story, or feeling tense with fear of Lord Voldermort in Harry Potter -, aware of the power of imagination to change our sensory experience of the present. As I entered my angsty teenage years, I took to writing stories and poetry, to express and reflect my way to understanding myself in my world. I have no doubt the quality of my writing was abysmal, but the process of writing served a purpose in and of itself - something I reflect further on in this inquiry.

At Oxford, I read French and Italian literature and revelled in not just the stories but also the connecting of stories, the critical literature, the context of their creation, and weaving my own narrative of experiencing those stories. I learnt to appreciate the value in the process of 'zooming in' – feeling and sensing my way through a story – and also 'zooming out', noticing how the story sits in its wider universe and changes it, and changes me. This approach, and the skills that I developed during my years doing this, are still with me today and a strong part of how I work. I notice how I live in the detail of an encounter yet can still stand back to see the 'bigger picture'; in connecting the dots between stories, ways of thinking, different experiences, I see how the irregularities of our lives become the regularity.

When I entered the world of work, I joined an investment banking graduate programme, ultimately ending up working on the trading floor. I was surrounded by high-achieving, driven individuals in an environment that in many ways felt like an extension of university: I formed friendships and acquaintances and experienced the buzz of the heady and fast-paced working culture; I embraced the social scene of late nights drinking with clients and colleagues; and the sense of having 'made it' into this career was part of my identity. But I had no doubt I was working in a 'man's world'. As the only female on my team, I observed macho donut-eating competitions for new graduates, press-up contests and countless stories shared of conquests on nights out. It was a frenzied, high-commitment career where much informal conversation with my female colleagues was spent convincing ourselves why it made sense to keep going. I cannot speak for my former colleagues, but I know with hindsight that I mistook an over-full life for a fulfilling life; financially rewarding work for rewarding work. It was a game, of sorts, and I played a part in it for nearly ten years, but they were hard years.

As is so often the case at times of transition, my realisation that I needed to make a change of career came when I had my first son. The vantage point of motherhood gave me a new perspective on my time and how I valued it. I did not make the decision to 'step away' from my career simply because I wanted to spend more time with my son; on the contrary, I knew that work was an integral part of my identity. I half-heartedly explored the possibility of job-sharing or flexible working, knowing that these efforts would be blocked. I realised that I no longer had the inclination to be part of the game I had been playing. I was exhausted.

Through a series of unexpected events, the concentric circles of my story tightened and I found my way into becoming an executive coach in financial services. I had my second son whilst retraining and building my reputation in this space. I loved the work I was doing with clients – broadly, helping people on their journey to success, however they defined it – and I was building a strong portfolio of female clients, for coaching and for workshops. This soon also included coaching women about to go on maternity leave and through their return to work. As I too was experiencing these maternity transitions, this work was meaningful to me in many ways. My coaching work remained closely aligned to financial services, which allowed me to stay connected to the challenging work and high calibre people the industry attracts. However, I was also able to step outside the culture that I had found toxic, and do work that I found fulfilling.

As Covid and the first lockdown hit the UK in 2020, I was heavily pregnant with my third child. My ways of working changed, and my coaching was sandwiched between looking after my two young sons and negotiations with my husband about work and family priorities. Like many women in dual career couples, this was a challenging time, working intensely and raising a young family with no help or support. My frustrations were alleviated, in part, by turning to my teenage tonic of writing to think. I began my reflective journal again and being creative; I came to realise I wanted to learn again but also tighten the circles in on what Simon Sinek (Sinek, 2009) calls my 'why'.

At this point in time, the challenge for working mums was front of mind – not just for me personally, but also across the UK society (and beyond) - having experienced and witnessed friends and colleagues struggle through the pandemic lockdowns as mothers, particularly in financial services. I implicitly believed in the value of coaching - the power of a conversation, of silence being held, of being heard deeply by another. I had been on both sides of the coaching table, and my experience had given me an appreciation of the special quality coaching skills bring to an encounter that can change not just what we think in the moment, but how we take that forward into our actions in the world.

Alongside this, my work in maternity coaching was growing and I felt that it could have greater impact. In financial services, I observed ambitious women returning to work, struggling to conform to the structures and assumptions of their workplaces, with choice and power systematically limited. Rather than simply supporting working mothers, I questioned whether maternity coaching could have a broader remit – a braver approach.

And so I arrived at the (Zoom room) door of Middlesex University to embark upon this inquiry, with an ambition to ask more questions and contribute to thinking – and action – in this field. I knew that a Doctor of Professional Studies would allow me the freedom to combine professional practice and research, with one feeding the other in a symbiotic and iterative process. I welcomed the freedom to engage with academia with a story still in the telling, not a static download.

During the course of my study, I moved to a coaching firm that specialises in working with women, and a large part of the work is with working mothers, and increasingly we also work with fathers taking leave. It is important that I declare my intentions upfront to separate the experiences of mothers and fathers who become parents and take an extended leave of absence from their work. This is for two primary reasons: firstly, men undoubtedly experience challenges and face cultural taboos when taking parental leave, but these are different to those that women face- society broadly, and financial services specifically, do not give men and women the same 'ride' through parenthood, in policy or practice; secondly, my own experience and the energy in my work gravitates me to the experiences of likeminded – and different minded - women.

I share this information about myself to demonstrate how much of the impetus behind my work comes from my own life. I research alongside others as a way to think and process my own story, and theirs. The process is intensely personal (Marshall, 1999), with the trunk of inquiry representing the concentric circles of my own life (Figure 1: Concentric circles of my life). The organic growth of the branches, leaves and fruit of inquiry relies on me and the strength of my roots, but it is simultaneously entirely dependent on the surrounding environment if it is to flourish.

Figure 1: Concentric circles of my life

I acknowledge here that I have not always brought my full self to my inquiry, or provided the perfect conditions for it to flourish. I had another son during the summer preceding the writing of my thesis (making me a mother of four boys aged 6 and under); I work full-time as a coach and consultant; I swim and I socialise and I do yoga. Like many women, I lead an intensely busy, rich and often over-full life, but a life that I love and where my choices are intuition-led and circumstantial. My reading and writing has, at times, been squeezed into a corner of a café, on a packed commuter train, or in the small hours of the morning when the children are asleep. My story is the golden thread in this inquiry; so if at times it feels knotted or thin, I ask the reader to hold it lightly, as I have the lives of the participants in this inquiry. This inquiry does not search for linear truths or logical choices, but evocative story fragments that give insight into the depth and irregularity of the lives of working mothers, including my own. Only from this point of care and attention - where we share and live alongside each other's stories - can we begin to notice points of leverage, those 'aha' moments of learning, that affect who we are and our actions.

Purpose, aims and objectives

Purpose

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore, through the prism of coaching, the stories of working mothers and how they can be better supported returning to work after maternity leave in financial services (private equity).

Aims and objectives

1st person: More than just an academic pursuit of understanding, the purpose of this inquiry is closely intertwined with my own life and professional experiences – an enormously personal endeavour, sprung from the challenges I faced, and I see colleagues, friends and clients face. The intertwining of work and motherhood brings complexity, linked to notions of identity and how we exist within, and interact with, embedded structures and cultural norms (Reynolds, 2022). Through this inquiry, I want to critically engage with my own coaching practice, who I am in this work, and how this is changed by – and changes - my encounters in coaching conversations; a grey space where two stories meet and neither leave unchanged (Reynolds, 2022). In particular, I want to:

- Intentionally and systematically record my reflections related to my professional experiences– practical, bodily, sensory, emotional – and notice what emerges that is shaping the direction of inquiry and practice (Reynolds, 2022).
- Based on my reflections, proactively test different approaches/behaviours/tools/ways of being in coaching conversations, in cycles of action and reflection (Reynolds, 2022).
- Maintain a high level of critical reflexivity around my own positionality and living stories, and how they are intersecting with those of clients.

Coach practitioner: This inquiry is also a professional mission, to support women when they become mothers in financial services, an industry with legacy entrenched cultural and structural frameworks that make lived experiences of working mothers difficult. I am building a growing business in this field, with osmosis between my inquiry and where commercial needs take my professional life. My ambition is to begin the work of cultural change in the institutions I work with, to make them places where mothers can work sustainably. As a coach with experience working in this industry, I recognise that policy and strategy alone are not sufficient to make change; this inquiry therefore aims to work with the micro-movements that individuals make within the system, using the creative potential of stories to open up the exploratory spaces between individuals and workplace structures. I want this inquiry to further my professional practice and disseminate learnings for practice amongst my community of coach practitioners. To do this, I will need to:

- Recruit and interview women working in financial services to understand their lived experiences of maternity leave.
- Listen to the stories working mothers are telling about their lives in coaching sessions, with an awareness of their positionality and how this affects their reality (Reynolds, 2022).

- Work with a group of women to co-create the shape of the interventions in their environment, and how their story data is shared as part of this.
- Explore coaching interventions beyond coaching working mothers, such as their line managers and teams.
- Conceptualise my learning for other coach practitioners to use and take forward into practice

Academic: Maternity coaching – or parental transition coaching – has been a growing practice in the UK in the last two decades, but there is little existing literature that critically engages with the model and the impact it has, and none within financial services. Through this inquiry, I want to understand what impact maternity coaching can have, and how and where to intervene at other structural levels to create change. Although the lives of working women and mothers in adjacent industries, such as accounting and law, have been the subject of much high-quality research (see Literature Review), there is scant literature in the field of women in financial services. I anticipate that there will be learnings from this inquiry that contribute to the academic literature in this area and therefore want to:

- Critically engage with existing literature in this field
- Ensure methodological rigour so that this work may contribute to both thinking and practice in coaching, and women working in financial services.

2. CONTEXT

Having shared facets of my story and context, I broaden out now to the wider context and the complexity into which I enter. This inquiry does not take place in a container of my design but is influenced heavily by the surrounding elements that frame it and shape it. I explore here the most notable contextual features of both the environment I work in, and the related broader context:

- Maternity policy and practice (UK and financial services)
- The Covid-19 pandemic and motherhood (Implications for pregnant women and mothers; implications for this inquiry and coaching practice)
- Women in private equity
- Maternity coaching

2.1 Maternity policy and practice in the UK

To understand the framework in which this inquiry sits, it is necessary to understand the macro-level context for maternity policy and legislation, and how that filters down into the meso-level of employer organisations in financial services. This inquiry is carried out in the UK, which is where I live and practice professionally, so I focus here on the UK policy and practice.

Women in the UK are substantially protected in both policy and legislation to take maternity leave (of up to 52 weeks, with no qualifying period), and to receive up to 39 weeks Statutory Maternity Pay ('SMP') and other benefits, such as accruing holiday whilst on leave. Women are also protected against maternity discrimination and have the legal right to return to work (Employment Rights Act 1996, the Employment Relations Act 1999, the Employment Act 2002, the Work and Families Act 2006 and the Children and Families Act 2014). Whilst women in this inquiry are usually able to avail of these protections (see also Section 2.3), it is worth noting that not all women have equal access to these benefits for a variety of reasons. For example, women from lower socio-economic groups may only be able to afford a short period of leave, particularly where they do not qualify for organisational maternity leave due to atypical employment.

It is also important to acknowledge that this field of UK legislation is not static, and, during this inquiry, flexible working legislation has been reformed. As stated on the CIPD website: *Following its consultations in 2019 and 2021 on reforms to flexible working, the UK Government has announced the removal of the 26-week qualifying period, making it a day-one right to request* (Suff, 2023). In addition, The Protection from Redundancy (Pregnancy and Family Leave) Act 2023 was passed in May 2023, which extends the period of redundancy protection from protection during leave to an additional 6 months after leave.

The different forces acting on the societal and political environment surrounding this inquiry, therefore, need to be taken into consideration. This is particularly true given that the flexible working legislation received considerable public pressure and lobbying from a 'grassroots coalition', stemming from social media influencers such as Pregnant Then Screwed, Mother Pukka, the Fawcett Society and The Fatherhood Institute following Covid-19. These changes affecting working parents in the UK not only have a bearing on those taking maternity leave in this inquiry, but also speak to the current of political change in which this inquiry sits.

In the UK, although the protections for working parents are in legislation and government-formed, the responsibility for the implementation and funding of these policies in practice is in the hands of the employer, including when it comes to benefits such as SMP. This places the UK in contrast to

European countries such as Sweden, where the government plays a significant role in financially upholding these policies (Atsumi, 2007, p.44) Instead, like the US, policies are interpreted through *meso-level regulatory and other institutional systems that mediate gender and employment relations, and are specific to the practice relations at work in any maternity event* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.17). This brings to the fore the importance of this inquiry taking place within financial institutions and the specific policy environment the industry has created.

2 The Covid-19 pandemic and motherhood

It would be negligent to discuss the societal context surrounding this inquiry without discussing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent 'lockdowns' (stay-at-home orders from the government). Lockdown measures first legally came into force in the UK on 26th March 2020, with all but essential service workers forced to work-from-home and schools shut. This was enforced until mid-May, when some workers were permitted to return to the office, followed by a phased reopening of schools in June. In the months between March 2020 and December 2021 , the UK experienced a range of further lockdown restrictions, including workplace and school closures, the 'rule of 6' (banning gatherings of more than 6 people), 10pm curfews for the hospitality sector, face masks and geographical tiering systems (Institute for Government, 2022). Clearly the impact of such restrictions was seismic on the UK economy and society. In this discussion, I focus on how these restrictions overlapped with and impacted this inquiry, specifically the implications for: working mothers and those experiencing pregnancy and birth during this timeframe; methodological choices in this inquiry; and my own coaching practice.

Implications for pregnant women and mothers

With such rapid changes made to the living and working circumstances of the UK population, there were numerous impacts on pregnant women and working mothers. With schools and childcare closed across the UK for all but the children of 'essential workers' (e.g. NHS staff, or education and childcare workers), dual-career parents had to decide how to manage home-schooling their children whilst working. Some became 'furloughed' workers (under The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme) to allow them to care for their children, whilst others negotiated ways to work and parent. For pregnant women, there were variable changes to hospital rules, which resulted in some women having to attend appointments, scans and even give birth alone. In short, the landscape for working mothers and mothers-to-be was dramatically altered compared to any point in recent history in the UK.

The context of the pandemic specifically for working mothers is noteworthy in this inquiry because of the distinctly gendered impact of the pandemic's childcare closures; this, in turn, had an effect on women's careers. This was a central consideration for the women I was coaching who already had children or who were returning to work after maternity leave during the pandemic period, as it was for me as a pregnant working mother. One of the principal reasons women experienced more impact than men to their careers during the pandemic was that working mothers increased the number of hours they spent doing childcare by more than men (Adams-Prassl *et al.,* 2020a). Working mothers were also 10 percentage points more likely than working fathers to request to be furloughed, compared to no gender gap between those without children (Adams-Prassl *et al.,* 2020b) .

Furthermore, as the Women and Equalities Committee highlighted, the schemes put in place by the government exacerbated and overlooked *the specific and well-understood labour market and caring inequalities faced by women* (Women and Equalities Committee, House of Commons, 2021, p.10). A report published during the pandemic by the Fawcett Society[1] claimed : *46% of mothers who have been made redundant blame a lack of childcare during the pandemic and Fawcett's new polling has found over a third (35%) of working mothers say they have lost work or hours due to a lack of childcare during the pandemic* (Fawcett Society, 2020)*.*

There was also a significant impact on pregnant women and new mothers, in terms of their experience of pregnancy healthcare and maternal mental health. One study highlighted the *increase in distress and psychological problems experienced by pregnant women and postpartum women during the pandemic* (Rougeaux *et al.,* 2020, p.408)*.* How pregnant and newly returning mothers experienced the changes to the workplace was also the subject of much focus during the pandemic and in the years after. In addition to formal literature, such as advice and guidance for employers (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2021), there were also social movements for change, most notably beginning on social media.

The charity 'Pregnant Then Screwed', and its founder Joeli Brearley, rose to public attention during the pandemic for its campaigns and marches on Westminster to support pregnant women and working mothers from discrimination. They successfully campaigned for changes such as partners being allowed access to pregnancy scans and labour wards, and pregnant women being prioritised for the Covid vaccination. The charity also carries out extensive research into pregnancy and maternity discrimination in employment, which has informed government reports and policy recommendations, after they were invited to sit on the government's pregnancy and maternity discrimination working group (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2021). This example demonstrates how the societal impact of the pandemic was enormous, motivating – or circumstantially forcing - women to actively engage with this issue at a political level; over a million people engaged with Pregnant Then Screwed's social media posts in 2021 (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2021).

Finally, an effect of the pandemic, specifically as it relates to financial services, is that some mothers returned to work remotely after maternity leave, whilst offices were still closed. This meant that many new mothers adjusted to working motherhood during 'work-from-home' conditions, without the pressures of presenteeim cultures. In addition, the long tail of a continued option to work-from-home has given many women in financial services an opportunity to continue working whilst spending more time with their baby or children than if they were working in the office. In fact, research (Goldin, 2022) suggests that well-qualified, university graduates with babies and young children were the only group of mothers who were more likely to work for pay than before the pandemic, most likely due to work-location flexibility.

This option still exists for many women in financial services at the time of writing, but firms typically offer a boundaried version, such as a certain number of days in the office, or specific prescribed days in the office. However, there continues to be a tension between employers and employees as to whether the possibility of working from home will continue. In August 2023, Goldman Sachs publicly announced it was reinforcing its requirement for employees to be in the office 5 days a week, demonstrating that the flexibility offered in the wake of the pandemic is still a point of discussion, variation and often tension.

Implications for this inquiry and coaching practice

It is important to recognise, therefore, that many of the women who participated in this inquiry – either as direct participants or as coachees in my professional practice – will have experienced an

[1] A membership charity campaigning for gender equality and women's rights at work, at home and in public life. https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/

impact of the pandemic environment on their motherhood journey. This could have been as a working mother, or as a pregnant woman. Regardless of the stage at which a woman experienced the pandemic, it will have shaped their story and the decisions they made (or could not make) as they were systematically disempowered by a larger force in society that overshadowed any previous macro or meso policy considerations. This inquiry is not focused on the effect of the pandemic, and I do not seek to share stories relating to this experience; however, it is important that this inquiry is understood in the context of the changes that such a seismic event has had on the UK population.

For the methodological decisions made in this inquiry and the way I operate professionally, the increased – and at times exclusive – use of remote platforms, such as Zoom, for meetings meant that this became the default medium for many of the calls and coaching conversations that form part of this inquiry. On one hand, this may have impacted the quality of the conversations and the ability to build personal rapport with someone over Zoom, which was a significant concern in the early days of the pandemic. However, my experience suggests that there was a professional and personal 'maturation' on the part of most coaches and coachees to adapt to this environment, particularly in the absence of other forms of connection during the pandemic.

Personally, I experienced coaching sessions as having an additional personal edge, with the home lives of coachees more visible and somehow more permissible to share than when together in an office environment, introducing a different plane to the coaching relationship. Even at the time of writing, the majority of my coaching sessions take place on Zoom because of the flexibility of time and space – such as between meetings, or across different geographies - that the remote platforms provide.

2.3 Financial services and maternity

The financial services industry offers employees attractive benefits packages, including relating to maternity leave and related family-friendly benefits and policies. Most financial institutions offer significant enhancements on the statutory minimums, such as Enhanced Maternity Pay (EMP). Increasingly, other benefits are also offered, including emergency childcare, maternity coaching and funding family-forming benefits such as IVF, adoption and egg freezing. There are increasingly more examples of women being encouraged *to fit their biology around workplace requirements* (Stumbitz, 2016). For example, Goldman Sachs offers Pathways to Parenthood Stipends to assist with the expenses associated with alternative routes to parenthood (Goldman Sachs, 2022, p.37). In larger institutions, there are also usually family networks, which provide informative content via mediums such as webinars, as well as networking events.

However, whilst the provisions in policy are often significantly more expansive than the legal requirements, there is a well-documented conflict between policy and practice. How women experience the culture and structures of the financial services industry when they become parents is not straightforward. There are deep-rooted structures that dictate ways of working and what is culturally acceptable, with the sector characterised by its male domination (Hearit, 2017) and gendered social and structural norms. For example, the hours on the trading floor are rigid, responding to fixed market opening hours; this impacts the ability of returning mothers to work flexibly. Furthermore, the concept of 'covering clients' involves building relationships with clients where there is the expectation that you are always available; this can often conflict with care responsibilities outside of work. As Brown highlights, even where organisations have a wide range of benefits and policies in place to support working mothers, *gender bias persists as organizations continue to reward the number of hours worked rather than the actual performance. [..] This lack of support by organizational management perpetuates both subtle and overt discrimination towards* *working mothers* (Brown, L., 2010, p.278). This disconnect between what is available and what can be availed of in practice is discussed more fully in LITERATURE – Maternal workers and Maternity coaching.

2.3.1 The Private Equity ("PE") success paradigm

Whilst many high-performance environments, such as other areas of financial services, reflect some of the long-hours and intense work conditions of private equity, there are unique cultural and structural nuances that characterise how success is defined. Fundamentally, the strongest underlying factor is that everything is about the long-term picture.

For investment professionals, their world is structured around doing deals. In practice, this means, firstly, being present, meeting advisors and understanding what deals are coming to market in a given field; this relies on time spent in meetings, and the relationship that is nurtured with key advisors and ultimately management teams. There is competition for deals from other PE firms, but also often from colleagues within the same firm. If a deal is successfully sourced and the stars align to do a career-defining deal, there is an extended period of extremely intense work to execute on the deal.

Following this, investment professionals occupy a board seat – or for more junior employees, a portfolio role – in order to make changes to a business over a period of several years. This ends at a point in time when the business has grown sufficiently to generate the return the PE firm wants and a sale process begins. Individuals' careers are tracked and rewarded based on the numbers of deals they have done; indeed, to be promoted into a senior role, particularly partner, an end-to-end deal typically needs to have been completed. This means that time in the market is absolutely critical to success, as well as a focus on current investments.

There is also a further structural consideration, which is that financial reward structures are typically based on KPIs (key performance indicators), such as number of advisor meetings, as well as structured around the completion of deals. It is not uncommon for carry– that is, the percentage of a fund's profits that are allocated as financial compensation – to be directly correlated to whether an individual has worked on the deals. Additionally, there is a further option – which culturally becomes a requirement - for employees to 'coinvest' in the deals the fund does; this enables them to share in the profits when the businesses are sold at a later date, but also financially entwines individuals with their specific firm and place of work.

2.3.2 Women in PE

Diversity is(Lordan and Nikita, 2023)front and centre of many PE firms' strategic initiatives. This is partly due to the economic imperative of the benefits of diversity of thought, but also due to the pressure from investors to demonstrate they are 'moving the needle' when it comes to the composition of investing teams and committees, particularly gender. McKinsey's most recent report into diversity in the PE industry (McKinsey & Company, 2022) highlighted the significant range in gender diversity statistics across the industry, with women in the most gender diverse firms holding 32% of leadership roles, compared to no women at all amongst the laggards. Often, firmwide diversity statistics mask the lower number of women that sit in investing roles compared to non-investing roles. Such 'vanity metrics' are no longer tolerated by investors, with calls for greater transparency and granularity about a firm's composition. In fact, the report suggests that investors would allocate *twice as much capital to the more gender diverse PE firm if choosing between two otherwise comparable firms* (McKinsey & Company, 2022, p.9), providing clear evidence that they have an active role to play in directing the diversity agenda in PE.

For women working in the industry, there are complex cultural barriers to achieving parity. Even when women reach the same seniority in terms of titles, research has shown that this has not necessarily always afforded women the same access to decision-making conversations: *The fact that women's representation on investment committees (ICs) is lower than their presence in these senior ranks may reveal an unspoken cultural dynamic in which women are still not in the same positions of power as 91 percent of their male counterparts* (McKinsey & Company, 2022, p.18).

In exploring women's experiences of maternity transitions, this research does not seek to address the full spectrum of barriers women face for progression in the industry. However, the experience of maternity is an overlay on women's broader experiences and is central to their stories; you cannot look through the maternity lens without seeing the cultural and systemic issues related to women in private equity more generally. Given the nature of the career progression in the industry, taking a period of extended leave can have a damaging impact on an individual's deal pipeline and retention of portfolio responsibilities. At a junior level, as in many similar environments such as banking or law, much of the role is linked to execution and output. However, as individuals advance in their careers, they begin to have origination responsibilities, akin to those seen in industries such as professional and legal services. This involves building long-term relationships with advisors and tracking and monitoring businesses and their management teams over a period of time.

In addition, once a business is invested in by the firm, those in more senior roles will typically have a board seat within their portfolio companies, with the responsibility to direct and influence growth of the business. Success, as described above, is being able to nurture a deal from origination, through to its 'exit' sale some years later; many promotion and reward metrics in the industry rely on this end-to-end view of skills application, in what has been viewed as an apprenticeship career structure (Lordan and Nikita, 2023). This external and internal competition also creates a culture of 'every [wo]man for [her]self'; when it comes to taking a period of maternity leave, this has a significant impact on these women. Even when returning to work, the playing field is not level with male colleagues, as Level 20 and The Inclusion Initiative confirm: *Mid-level women face many complex challenges alongside those posed by their work. Women have an unequal share of caregiving roles as well as domestic burdens* (Lordan and Nikita, 2023, p.3).

The picture, however, is not entirely hopeless. Whilst the industry has systemic and cultural barriers to retaining women, particularly those who become mothers, there is in recent years a heightened awareness of the benefits - and the imperatives - of acting to change this; the business case, which is so critical to change in this industry, is becoming increasingy clear. This inquiry, therefore, is contributing to the currents of change that are slowly flowing into the industry, and being carried out at a time when the industry needs to raise awareness and understanding, as well as develop strategies for change.

2.5 Maternity coaching (aka Parental Transition Coaching)

Writing in 2012, Filsinger described maternity coaching as a *fairly new coaching genre* (Filsinger, C., 2012, p.46) that had only been in existence in the UK since about 2005. Nearly 20 years later, maternity coaching – now more commonly referred to as parental transition coaching ("PTC"), to also incorporate fathers taking shared parental leave – is a recognised approach to supporting parents as they leave work to have a baby, and return again to their previous place of work. However, in financial services, this coaching support is not systematically offered to all employees, neither is it part of the family benefits offered by every institution. I discuss the existing maternity coaching literature and its limited scope fully in LITERATURE – Maternal workers and Maternity

coaching. However, in viewing the landscape of this inquiry, it is necessary to understand how I define the coaching in my professional practice in PE.

Underlying how I practice is the foundational belief that PTC is not about fixing women and coaching them to remould to fit back into their environment after having a baby. I strongly believe that, if I am coaching a woman returning to the workplace, there is also a requirement to work with the system around her; for example, working with her manager or her team to make the surrounding environment as conducive as possible to a successful return. This practice is not entirely unique to my firm, but it is in the way we systematically incorporate it into every PTC engagement. At the time of writing, I do not work with any clients where I am only asked to work with the returning mother.

This graphic demonstrates the touch points at which I engage with women and their managers on their parental journey, as well as some topics that are often brought to the coaching arena.

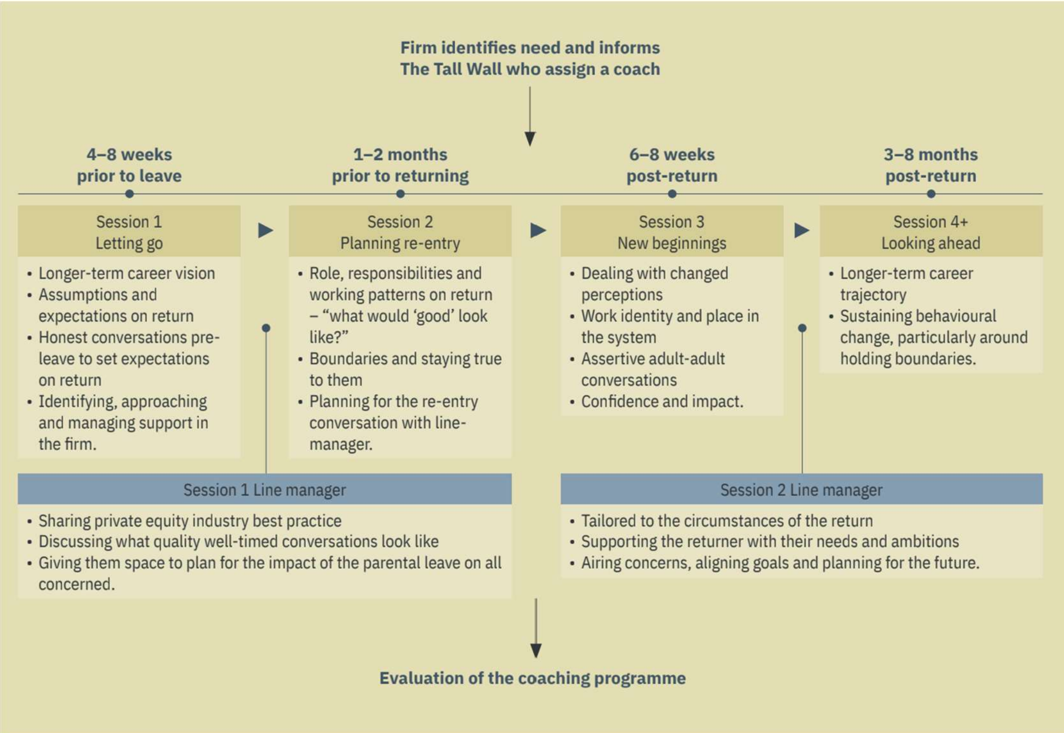


Figure 2: 'A typical parental coaching journey' from marketing document

It is also relevant to this inquiry that I operate on a business-to-business basis and there is, at all times, the employing firm who sits above the coaching engagement. Once a woman informs her employing firm about her pregnancy, the HR team usually offer the coaching service and then share the relevant details with my firm, in order for us to match the best coach to the coachee's needs. With firms where there is already a strong relationship and the coaches are well known to them, the HR team also carry out the matching process. It is rare that there is a 'chemistry process' for PTC – i.e. where the coachee gets to meet a couple of different coaches to assess their own best fit -, which is a clear distinguisher from executive coaching. The ethical nuances of this triad structure (firm-coach-coachee) are explored further through the course of this inquiry.

There is also often an evaluation of the coaching programme built into the way we work with firms, typically assessing the coachee's responses to their experience of being coached and the impact it has made. Whilst few firms are currently systematic about the implication of this, we are increasingly building this into how we work as a way to demonstrate a 'return on investment' and to begin to bring professional data to the problem that Filsinger described: *It is not yet understood how it impacts long-term and specifically on women's re-engagement with their career development* (Filsinger, C., 2012, p.46).

2.6 Knowledge cultures

In defining the context for this inquiry, it is important to acknowledge there are different knowledge domains that exist and interact, with differing, conflicting and overlapping influences. Brown's depiction of the *knowledge cultures of Western decision-making* (Brown, V., 2008) provides a clear way to categorise the vast spectrum of stakeholders and discourses that exist with relation to women returning to work after maternity leave. It also provides a lens through which to see the multiple knowledge cultures as a means to think collectively and collaborate:

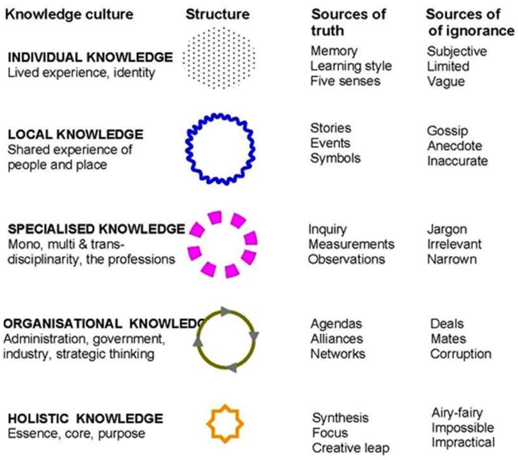


Figure 3: The knowledge cultures of Western decision-making (Brown, 2008)

In this inquiry, Individual Knowledge pertains to the knowledge of both the coach and the coachee substantiated through coaching; Local Knowledge is represented in the coaching community of practice, and practitioner knowledge of the financial services environment; Specialised Knowledge refers to the profession of coaching and the related research, as well as academic knowledge relating to working mothers in the workplace; Organisational Knowledge resides with the processes and policies of the meso-level financial institutions that are part of this inquiry, and the administrative and government level regulation that sits at the macro level; and holistic knowledge is the way these might be integrated into a shared interpretation of reality, as a way to move though complexity.

All of these epistemic cultures – with their distinct version of reality - influence the systems that are structured around women who take maternity leave; such systems generate patterns of experience which change through time and context, and can be disrupted through trigger events (e.g. Covid 19). However, in solving problems, these cultures are siloed and can become echo chambers, with self-referential processes informing decisions that get ultimately get stuck.

A key finding of Brown's study is that holistic and individual knowledge rarely play a significant role in management decisions, with the other three cultures systematically favoured. However, *the constructions of reality held by key individuals, and presence of the creative leaps of holistic thinkers, were the variables that allowed connections to be forged among the other three; bookends to the more visible knowledge cultures* (Brown, V., 2008, p.5). In this inquiry, individual knowledge is prioritised, not least because individuals are also simultaneously part of different domains. For example, through the lens of my individual knowledge, I am an individual working mother, part of a coaching community of practice and coaching firm, making recommendations about policy and practices to client organisations, and engaging with the academic community on the subject of maternity returners. Through this inquiry, the silos are intentionally merged into a messy and unattractive whole; but it is in this mess that synthesis, collaboration, and holistic knowledge may emerge, co-created with other individuals.

This supports the transdisciplinary view on the need for collaboration, where *participants from different disciplines and societal sectors are working from different assumptions, levels of expertise, types of knowledge, methodologies, and perspectives* (Augsburg, 2014, p.236). The process is far from straightforward and is characterised by *complexity, hybridity, non-linearity, reflexivity, social accountability, mutual learning, heterogeneity, and, of course, transdisciplinarity* (Augsburg, 2014, p.235). In this inquiry, there are clear distinctions between the approaches to knowledge creation – and related outputs and measures of success - of different stakeholders. For example, institutions are seeking data, recommendations and tangible outcomes from this inquiry that can help inform policy and make practical changes to the infrastructure that surrounds working mothers; coaches in my community of practice are interested in best practice, as a means to create commercial value but also for their coachee; and I share all of these, as well as a political participation in the purpose of this inquiry. As Brown alludes to, different knowledge cultures have different modes of learning and, with that, different 'burdens of proof', which will effect how findings are presented.

3. LITERATURE – Maternal workers and Maternity coaching

When it comes to reviewing the literature, there are two principal areas of thinking that I wish to review that will influence how I explore this phenomenon: Maternal workers and the workplace, and Maternity coaching.

Firstly, I want to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for the research that has already been carried out relating to women, and mothers, in the workplace. There is a rich body of literature in this area that will contribute to my understanding of the experiences of maternal workers, including around the maternity transitions. This will influence how I understand the findings from my own inquiry in the context of the existing research landscape.

Secondly, I also want to widen my lens on the maternity coaching market and previous studies. Although there is little previous research in this field, one of this inquiry's aims is to conceptualise my learning for other coach practitioners to use and take forward into practice. It is critical, therefore, that I have an understanding of the existing coaching practitioner literature and the progress that has already been made in this space.

(Schon, 1994, p.56)(Heron and Reason, 1997, p.287)

3.1. Maternal workers and the workplace

3.1.1 Gendered workplaces and power

When reviewing literature in the field of women in the workplace, it is important to take into account seminal work by Moss Kanter (originally published 1977) and Acker (1990) on gendered organisations. For both researchers, it is not simply that men dominate many organisations – particularly in senior roles – that creates inequality in the workplace, but rather that organisations have embedded structures that are distinctly gendered.

As Bailyn points out, such structures and working practices originated when the workforce was more homogenous (men), which has led to an environment that is still challenging for the diverse workforce of today (including women) who did not participate in its creation (Bailyn, 2011, p.98)In deliberately and organically constructing the workplace through time, men have transferred power into the structures that exist, which prioritise those who created them and their ways of working and living. The workplace environment is not, however, static and has a self-generating, evolutionary *'inner essence' that is only accessible to our knowing by participation in it* (Reynolds, 2022), and also only manifested and 'made real' through workers' embodiment of its norms and ideals. Moss Kanter argues that it is not the individual characteristics of men and women that drive organisational behaviour, but that *organizational structure forms people's sense of themselves and of their possibilities* (Kanter, 2008, p.3). The power to change underlying workplace structures no longer resides with a group of individuals, such as men, because they do not own it; it is felt and lived in daily work activities by those who participate in it, thus disempowering the individual.

This dialectical relationship between an organisation and the individuals that work within it is explored by Acker, who examines how engrained workplace habits reinforce gendered components of individual identity, such as *choice of appropriate work, language use, clothing and presentation of self as a gendered member of an organization* (Acker, 1990, p.147). Acker looks at the processes through which gendered structures are produced and perpetuated in organisations, including the types of work men and women do within organisations (divisions between paid and unpaid work, with the latter ascribed to women), and inequalities in pay and power.

Through this lens of gendered structures and processes compounding gender inequalities in society, there is a circuitous relationship identified: an organisation reflects gendered components of society in how they are created and operate, just as individuals then adopt and embody these same structures and ways of working from an organisation, which then perpetuate gendered identities back into society at large. Moss Kanter argues that the potential influence of large, gendered organisations on society is thus significant, neatly depicting them as *large giants that populate the earth but can only be seen through their shadows* (Kanter, 2008, p.4). This metaphor introduces the nature of this influence or power as being 'dark', or intentionally subversive, which is supported in Acker's description of gendered hierarchies as being upheld through *often-tacit controls […], helping to legitimate the organizational structures created through abstract, intellectualized techniques* (Acker, 1990, p.152). Later research also supports this, describing the workplace *unrecognized assumptions and habits of mind that disadvantage women without conscious intent* (Sturm, 2001, p.458).

More recent literature explores different facets of these foundational works, looking at gendered dominant discourses and cultures in organisations, gendered careers and how women's lives interact with these structures. In the field of the professions, it is well-established that employees dedicate a significant portion of their time and intellectual energy to building their careers, which are a formative part of individuals' identity. An example of these cultures is cited by Bailyn, with the management consultants at BCG in her study experiencing the type of *long hours, always accessible, client-comes-first workplace* (Bailyn, 2011, p.104), which is prevalent across professional, legal and financial services. This has taken on further resonance with the challenges and opportunities provided by Covid's full-time work-from-home policies; the once blurred boundaries between home and work were fully removed, setting an expectation of constant availability, even in the home sphere.

Within this demanding environment, the dialectical relationship between an individual's identity and the organisation for which they work is strongly supported by the literature. Haynes's research into women in the accounting profession brings to the fore how *individual practitioners learn acceptable appropriate behaviour and appearance by mimicking the behaviour of others […] Cultural codes in firms are disseminated through informal discourse and networks of common understanding that act to reinforce informal rules and norms* (Haynes, 2012, p.496).

In the professions of law and accounting, the dominant discourses within these organisations have a significant amount of influence and power in shaping individual identity (Anderson-Gough, Grey and Robson, 1998). This is also true in investment banking, where *the setting itself has a pervasive influence on how men and women perceive their identities and interests and the inevitable conflicts that they give rise to* (Sheerin and Garavan, 2021, p.4). Against this backdrop of one's professional environment – and the related substructures, processes and discourses that are disseminated through 'culture' – being definitive in forming individual identity, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is much literature that explores the impact of this on women's identities.

3.1.2 The maternal worker vs the ideal worker

Within gendered workplace structures, the conceptualised ideal worker is one who is always available, working long hours and very visible. With recent technology, this also means that the ideal worker is 'always on' and contactable, which has added further complexity to this model worker. Even with significant changes to the composition of the modern workforce and the flexible ways in which many can work, *basic practices [are] still anchored to traditional assumptions, especially the assumption of an ideal worker who had no responsibilities or interests outside his occupational* *career* (Bailyn, 2011, p.100). According to Acker's exploration of this (1990), jobs are created for the abstract, disembodied worker and only made concrete when filled by an individual. Processes of job performance evaluation then reinforce the abstract job description and its place in the hierarchy, without taking into account the different skills, circumstances and motivations of an individual.

For Acker, *the closest the disembodied worker doing the abstract job comes to a real worker is a male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children* (Acker, 1990, p.149). Such typecasts do not take into account gender differences such as the physical rhythms of menstruation or time away from work to have children yet, as Stumbitz et al. state, *maternity is the single most important event in the gendering of careers* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.500). This supports Acker's argument that gendered workplaces do not reflect different individuals' life experiences outside the narrowly defined role they fulfil; as a result, *the ranking of women's jobs is often justified on the basis of women's identification with childbearing and domestic life* (Acker, 1990, p.152).

Extant literature expands on the impact of the physical disconnect between the ideal worker and the pregnant and post-partum worker, substantiated through the *abyss between the promises of protection espoused in policy and [women's] everyday experience* (Gatrell, 2011b, p.159). As a result of this disconnect, research shows women being systematically disempowered through pregnancy, removed from key decision-making roles and processes and transferring their previous responsibilities to colleagues (Buzzanell and Liu 2007, Millward 2006). This can trigger emotions of guilt amongst women, as they are acutely aware they no longer fit the mould, and their inconvenient period of absence from the workplace is a temporal and spatial disconnect from the structures of success created for the ideal worker.

For many women going through the maternity phases, assumptions around what good performance looks like are embedded in their working identity to reflect the gendered structures of their workplace, so much so that they are not always aware that they have internalised this dominant way of working against which they judge themselves. It is therefore critical that examinations of the choices available to women when they become mothers are done so within the context of *embedding individual agency and choice in specific institutional and cultural settings* (Herman and Lewis, 2012, p.768). Haynes expands on this with the example of a working mother from her study, suggesting that it is unclear *whether she is complicit in societal oppression of women's opportunities, or whether she is actually exercising agency and freedom in choosing to live her life the way she wants to* (Haynes, 2008, p.343). Stumbitz et al. also draw attention to this dichotomy of dominant discourses and individual agency; *women can internalize these narratives, feeling guilty about 'burdening' colleagues with extra work* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.506).

It is well-established that the decisions professional women make with regards to how they integrate work and motherhood are not done so amidst unconstrained options; choices are made within the confines of the structures of the organisation and policy environment in which women live and work (Lewis and Simpson, 2010). However, neither are professional women entirely passive participants and research suggests that professional women are keenly aware of this formative influence of the gendered structures in which they work, and also consciously participate in them. The female accounts in Haynes' study, *rather than naively accepting the professional embodied identities imposed in their profession, showed a clear reflexive awareness of the 'illusio' (belief in the game) (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 54), playing the game in order to succeed, which meant that they sometimes had to endorse the very masculine norms and values that they might otherwise wish to reject* (Haynes, 2012, p.503). Stumbitz also brings to light this awareness, where *mothers who reduce their working hours, absenting the maternal body from the masculine workplace to perform* *mothering, often stoically accept sidelining as a response to transgressing pro-masculine working patterns* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.508). Organisations are perhaps not absolved of responsibility for how they manage the careers of mothers – there is an acute awareness on the part of women of the role organisational structures play -, but neither are they necessarily 'punished', as professional women often continue to feel *loyalty and affection* for an organisation, even when making the decision to leave (Lewis and Simpson, 2010, p.167).

Whilst there is undoubtedly a circuitous relationship between gendered organisations and how they shape individuals' behaviour and choices around maternity - and how they live that forward into broader society - these findings about professional women making a conscious decision to adopt gendered professional identities in order to succeed is important for this study; t*here is an explicit cognitive awareness that the workplace is not gender neutral and is not designed for women, even less so mothers* (Reynolds, 2021).

3.1.3 Changes in Work-life Balance Policies

Organisations have assumed much responsibility for the policy aspects of creating better work-life balance for employees, ostensibly through the lens of family-friendly policies. Having gone through a significant evolution to better support women taking time out for maternity leave, the language used and the policies in place in recent years have seen a shift. Family-friendly policies are now redesigned to encompass a wider range of gender-neutral work-life balance policies, but this is not without cost to women (Lewis et al., 2014). For example, maternity leave is often now referred to as parental leave or family leave in large organisations, even though the vast majority of those who take leave are women.

The introduction of Shared Parental Leave (which allows mothers to end maternity leave early so that another parent can take a period of leave separately or together) also introduces benefits to parents of any gender, representing an important policy shift for parents and opening the way for more men to share this experience; nevertheless, such policies fail to account for the significant differences in uptake and the broader related systemic experiences of women. Also, even with the gender-neutral changes to policy terminology and application, family-friendly policies are still viewed as concessions put in place for women and stigmatised (Daverth *et al.,* 2015), prompting many women to accept career progression trade-offs as a 'biproduct' of having deviated from *normative (male) working patterns and career outcomes* (Herman and Lewis, 2012, p.768).

3.1.4 Maternity transitions

i. Pregnancy

It is impossible to talk about pregnant workers without taking into account the unconcealable and unruly changes a woman's body goes through during pregnancy and early motherhood; such changes cannot be controlled by the individual or their workplace structures, processes or culture (Gatrell, 2011b). Acker's view is that women's bodies are thus *ruled out of order,* subsequently devaluing women as they are *unable to conform to the demands of the abstract job* (Acker, 1990, p.152). Haynes' research (2008) supports this view that the professional embodiment of the ideal worker clashes with the physical form of pregnancy and the maternal post-partum body, when *a woman has little jurisdiction over her body* (Haynes, 2008, p.337). As Stumbitz *et al.* (2018) highlight in their review of research on the maternal body, the physical changes that the female body goes through during pregnancy are associated with not just short-term difference, but long-term reduced commitment and a negative impact to performance (Gatrell, 2007; Gatrell, 2011a; Haynes, 2008; Buzzanell and Liu, 2007).

The maternal body in the gendered workplace is incongruent and dislocated from the tessellation of ideal workers who neatly fit into their roles. The gendered systems that exist in organisations *make women's bodies generally suspicious* (Buzzanell and Liu 2007, p. 324). The differences between a pregnant worker and an ideal worker are, of course, physically very evident; the pregnant body defies the norms of acceptable appearance and how a professional should dress and present themselves. Pregnant women also have to contend with the invisible changes they experience, such as the dramatically altered hormones in their bodies, which can lead to a multitude of other challenges, such as being viewed as more emotional and less productive. Critically, the 'symptoms' of pregnancy are typically taboo in the workplace and other workers' assumptions shape the experience of the pregnant worker, resulting in exclusion, disempowerment and a discounting of their abilities (Gatrell, 2011a; Buzzanell and Liu, 2007).

It is well-documented (Gatrell, 2007; Gatrell, 2011a; Gatrell, 2011b; Millward, 2006) that women often perform 'maternal body work' to make invisible the physical changes of pregnancy and the effects that pregnancy has on their health and wellbeing. This also extends into early motherhood, with breastfeeding and its physical connection between a mother and her infant. Gatrell (2011b) explores the complex strategies that pregnant women employ in order to fit into their workplace, both socially and to protect their jobs.

One widely employed strategy is secrecy and silence, particularly around hiding the pregnancy announcement; indeed, the 'expert advice' available online for women often advocates delaying the announcement of pregnancy for as long as possible, anticipating – and further reinforcing – pregnancy-related discrimination and biases (Gatrell, 2011b). The other strategy Gatrell brings to the fore is how pregnant women outperform (a strategy of 'supra-performance'), working harder and to a higher standard than before pregnancy, in order to demonstrate their commitment and prove their performance abilities. By participating in these strategies, women are absenting their pregnant body and health-related issues, silencing the experiences of pregnancy in the workplace.

Through the lens of the accounting profession, Haynes looks at how *the ways in which women's and men's bodies are perceived, categorized and valued are undoubtedly important in legitimizing and reproducing social inequalities in the profession* (Haynes, 2008, p.345). Again, there is osmosis between how gender is experienced in organisations and in broader society, with organisations not just reflecting back but also legitimising and perpetuating inequalities. This emphasises the importance of how power is experienced in the structures of organisations, with those who participate in its dysfunctional evolution being systematically disempowered. For Gatrell, the influence of the employer, or manager's, assumptions in determining the experience of the pregnant women comes back to policy and its limited reference to the responsibility of the employer to accommodate the pregnant body, introducing subjectivity; this has *unintentionally facilitated the emergence of a set of unwritten rules that disadvantage some pregnant employees in their workplaces* (Gatrell, 2011b, p.178).

ii. Maternity leave

In many sectors, the regulatory context of maternity leave – alongside the overlay of the specific organisational context of leave and cash benefits - shapes the way that maternity leaves are structured (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.506). In financial services, however, the regulatory context is heavily overshadowed by the specific cultural nuances of firms and accepted norms. When exploring maternity leave in financial services, and specifically in private equity, there is an absence of literature that speaks directly to this experience, particularly when it comes to those in investing or revenue-generating 'front office' roles.

Stumbitz et al.'s review of maternity management in SMEs, however, highlights some relevant points with relation to these roles in financial services, as teams are usually small and often have their own micro cultures, which brings to the fore some interesting alignments between SMEs and financial services teams. Firstly, there is a benefit to the small team culture driving maternity leave structures, rather than disconnected, untouchable 'red tape'; individual managers and the relationships within the specific team environment have more power in determining the shape of leave. As Stumbitz et al. highlight, *close interpersonal relations in small businesses make women feel more able to discuss leave arrangements with managers* (2017, p.508). However, a big differentiator is that, in financial services, these negotiations are not founded on *shared perceptions of what is affordable for the firm* (2017, p.508) as in SMEs, but rather on what is culturally acceptable and what the dominant norms are around taking maternity leave.

Secondly, the double-edged sword of a small team environment is that attitudes to maternity leave management in financial services are *exacerbated by limited resources and competitive environments* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.507). In front office roles, such as private equity investment roles, women are not provided with a maternity cover whilst they are out on leave. Whilst certain day-to-day tasks are taken on by colleagues, it is important to recognise that their role is highly relationship and trust based – whether with advisors or with portfolio businesses – and they are not perceived as being replaceable, even for a short period of time. It is highly unlikely, for example, that a colleague would nurture a potential relationship whilst someone was on maternity leave due to the competition within teams to 'own' relationships and deals.

Finally, existing maternity leave literature (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007; Millward, 2006) suggests that the design of maternity leave conditions is a negotiated process, based on power. This is true within a financial services front office context, where seniority and time-served all influence the way a woman structures her maternity leave with her employer. For example, when it comes to keeping in touch, where women are well-established in their field, with strong relationships, and not immediately involved in a deal process, they are able to step away from work from a maternity leave period; as a typical example, women often leave a non-work email address where they may be contacted in case of significant news or questions, but do not check their work email. At the other end of the spectrum, more junior women, women who are at a career transition point (e.g. hoping for a near-term promotion), or those who are involved in a deal rarely disconnect; they continue to check their work emails and respond where needed. Anecdotally, the amount a woman disconnects from work is correlated to their feeling of security within their team; it is important to remember that at most firms, colleagues are competing for deals and relationships, which drives a very specific maternity leave dynamic.

iii. Returning to work

The transition back to work after maternity leave for women is complex, with practical, psychological, emotional and systemic issues converging at a very defined temporal and spatial point.

a) Identity transitions and career choices

One of the most influential theories in presenting the decisions women make about their career after motherhood is Hakim's preference theory (2000). According to Hakim, *there is a conflict between production and reproduction as a central life activity and principle source of identity and achievement* (Hakim, 2000, p.4). The preference theory model (see Figure 4: A classification of women's work-lifestyle preferences in the 21st century (Hakim, 2000, p.6)) is based on the idea that women fundamentally have choice in how they blend work and family, placing women into one of three ideal-typical groups. Hakim argues that women are less homogenous than men in their preferences and choices, which creates conflicting interests between groups of women and a subsequently challenging environment for policy creation; the model is designed to also allow a better predictability of women's employment patterns and inform policy decisions. Hakim acknowledges that the lines are not clear cut between the groups in the model, reinforcing the view that women's priorities are heterogeneous (Hakim, 2000, p.8).

Home-centred	Adaptive	Work-centred
20% of women varies 10%–30%	60% of women varies 40%–80%	20% of women varies 10%–30%
Family life and children are the main priorities throughout life.	This group is most diverse and includes women who want to combine work and family, plus drifters and unplanned careers	Childless women are concentrated here. Main priority in life is employment or equivalent activities in the public arena: politics, sport, art, etc.
Prefer *not* to work.	Want to work, but *not* totally committed to work career.	Committed to work or equivalent activities.
Qualifications obtained for intellectual dowry	Qualifications obtained with the intention of working.	Large investment in qualifications/training for employment or other activities.
Responsive to social and family policy.	*Very responsive* to all policies	Responsive to employment policies.

Figure 4: A classification of women's work-lifestyle preferences in the 21st century (Hakim, 2000, p.6)

Although an important theory in framing the decisions women make about their career and motherhood, or 'work-lifestyle choices', Hakim's discourse of 'choice' is problematic for many other scholars in this field. As Kumra states, *criticism has been drawn from a range of sources and covers almost every aspect of the theory* (Kumra, 2010, p.230). The primary source of challenge is that preference theory relies on the concept that individual women have unbounded power and agency to make choices, absolving organisations of responsibility and ignoring *the structural and systemic elements inherent to women's continued disadvantage* (Lewis and Simpson, 2010, p.167).

Kumra shows through her research with management consultants (2010) within a global professional services firm that 'work-centred' women perceive career opportunity difference as being related to structural factors based on the model of success - such as the need for sponsorship and the importance of networking - which is less accessible to women. Lewis and Simpson (2010, p.167) highlight that the discourse of choice implies that professional women are *choosing* not to reach the upper echelons of their organisations, choosing to downscale their career ambitions and sometimes choosing to leave their profession:

For those women who do move into senior positions within organizations, the stresses, strains and guilt attached to this, can at worst lead to the "choice" being made to leave that role because of family circumstances, at best to constant examination of the "choices" they have made and the cost of these "choices" to them and their family (Lewis and Simpson, 2010, p.167).

At the heart of any choices that women make about returning to work, therefore, is the important 'contextual sieve' of the organisation they work for and the related policy environment through which all choices pass. Cabrera discusses this choice, indicating that the pressures women experience combined with the demands of motherhood *force* them to make a choice (Cabrera, 2009). The decisions women make are rarely binary and involve creating a complex negotiated scheme that works for them as an individual. As Lewis and Simpson observe, *"choice" within the context of work and home responsibilities is not just an "either/or" situation, i.e. either home or work, rather what women wrestle with is the struggle to construct a satisfactory "both/and" set of circumstances* (Lewis and Simpson, 2010, p.168).

As much extant literature makes clear, working mothers' careers are marked and altered by any period(s) of maternity leave and onward working motherhood, resulting in shifting priorities over time; Mainiero and Sullivan's Kaleidoscope career model represents a way of viewing women's non-linear career paths (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2008). Noon and Van Nieuwerburgh (2020) give form to the link between a professional woman and her career as a 'career self', which delivers psychological benefits, such as self-belief, and pride and enjoyment in work. Such benefits stem from the high levels of commitment and contribution required to have a successful career, normally achieved through *singular focus and years of working long hours* (Noon and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2020, p.89). The disruptions to this facet of self during maternity transitions, therefore, is shown to give *a conflicted sense of psychological disorientation* (Noon and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2020, p.89), triggering a loss of confidence and a reassessment of a woman's relationship with her career and her 'career self'. Millward describes this process as a desire to reestablish a *viable employer identity* (Millward, 2006, p.324).

Against this backdrop of 'choice', it is well-documented that women returning from maternity leave often experience a negative impact to their career trajectory and success. Citing large bodies of existing literature, Gatrell summarises that *women's career progress may stall once they become mothers, especially if they are working in managerial or professional roles* (Gatrell, 2011a, p.104). This has a direct impact on their earnings potential when compared to women without children, who continue to be on a par with their male colleagues, and also on performance reviews following maternity leave (Lewis and Simpson, 2010; Brown, 2010). Those who are most present and who look and act like the ideal worker are those who are most rewarded: *face time and sacrifice continue to be used to judge an employee's performance and commitment. Many organizational cultures value the number of hours spent at the office, the ability to attend early and late meetings, travel and the ability to be instantly responsive to e-mails. The focus is not solely on results* (Cabrera, 2009, p.41).

As well as being linked to the complex identity shifts women experience at this time, the impact on professional opportunities available to women when returning from work is also systemic, as the maternity transitions disrupt *'normal' linear notions of work and career* (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007, p.465). Mainiero and Sullivan (2005, 2008) debunk the notion that all careers should be based on the linear male model, as it does not serve the needs of the modern workforce, particularly women: *Most firms lack an understanding of the culture and HRD programs necessary for working* *women to effectively balance work, family, and personal demands* (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2008, p.34). They developed the Kaleidoscope Career Model, which shifts different aspects of their lives to create different career patterns at different points of time, with authenticity, balance and challenge assuming different levels of importance at different points in time. This model is proposed as a framework for better understanding women's careers, but also for developing the systems that are needed for success.

For women as individuals as they return from work, there are many conflicting pressures colliding, which can trigger fundamental questions about identity. In trying to reconcile their previous professional identity with their new identity as a working mother, women question who they are, how they have changed, and the impact that has on how they work and live (Millward, 2006; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Haynes, 2008). These identities after maternity leave are described as *juxtaposing a new identity as mother with [a] previous identity as 'high-flying' professional* (Haynes, 2008, p.345) and *stressful and conflictual* (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007, p.465), highlighting the often conflicting and unsatisfactory choices women must make.

The structural and social conditions are important in determining how women experience this identity shift. In society broadly, it is no longer expected that the woman is confined to the home after becoming a mother, and women have the possibility of combing work and motherhood. However, *women are still strongly connected to the domestic realm through their continued entanglement in the traditional roles of mother and homemaker* (Lewis and Simpson, 2010, p.165) and *women still identify much more with their family role than do men* (Brown, L., 2010, p.471). This is relevant to how women experience their identities within organisations, as the ideal worker and the ideal mother are antithetical in how they are socially constructed and embodied (Herman and Lewis, 2012, p.769). Women are grappling with not only their own inner conflicts, but also those present within the structures of their organisation.

As such, women returning from maternity leave are particularly vulnerable to an organisation's cultural expectations, structures and standards (Ladge and Greenberg, 2015, p.978), as they make critical decisions about how to construct their work and life within these confines. Women are viewed and judged as both mothers and workers, which shapes their sense of entitlement and feelings of power in negotiating their new identities (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007). Haynes' exploration of how women are judged on both their performance as good accountants, but also as good mothers - with diverging and often conflicting qualities required to 'perform' well as a working mother - supports this view (Haynes, 2006).

Historically, women had to renunciate marriage and children to remain within professions such as accounting, which shapes the underlying notions of maternal embodiment in these environments (Haynes, 2008). As such, many women feel pressure to return to work looking like their 'pre-pregnancy self', in terms of body shape and weight, as they seek to embody a professional identity that conforms with the norms of their organisation (Haynes, 2008, p.342). This is also related to increased workloads and a feeling of obligation to repeat the 'supra-performance' phenomena from pregnancy, in an attempt to counteract feelings of being sidelined and discounted (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007; Millward, 2006).

b) Flexible working

One of the most negotiated and debated topics within financial services is the flexible working opportunities of employees, and how that translates to policy. During Covid, almost all roles were performed remotely, including fee-earning, client-facing roles; this represented a significant paradigm shift in terms of the previous inflexibility of these roles. However, as discussed in Context, this tide is already turning and firms have begun to exercise their control over employees by requiring them to return to the office. For front office roles in financial services, most employees often have to work at least 4 days in the office a week.

However, whilst the formal policy environment has begun to return to pre-Covid ways of working, there is nevertheless a clear lasting impact on individuals' (and firms') belief in the possibility of working flexibly, which is then negotiated on a case-by-case basis. In-line with Stumbitz et al.'s pre-Covid findings, *there is some evidence that family-friendly flexible working practices […] tend to be developed informally via mutual adjustment* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.512) ; this is akin to what Petriglieri describes as *marginal flexibility* (Petriglieri, 2019). It is important to note that flexibility is not just about place, but also about time. For example, some women returning from maternity leave chose to leave the office in time to pick their child up from nursery and log back on remotely later; this is culturally acceptable, particularly as some fathers are also availing of this flexibility too. For those who seek more flexibility – such as part-time or a higher proportion of remote work – some women move away from the demands of a deal environment into a supporting role. Whilst this is not phenomenon unique to in financial services – indeed Stumbitz et al. describe in SMEs how *women may agree to work below their potential in exchange for flexible working* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.503) – the systematic disempowerment and removal of choice around working flexibly is distinguished in this environment.

c) Breastfeeding

Extant literature explores breastfeeding after returning to work from maternity leave and the impact this has on the decisions mothers are forced to make about how they continue to feed their infant. Most often, employers do not accommodate breastfeeding itself within the workplace and there are taboos regarding the female breastfeeding body, which can lead to new mothers performing 'maternal body work' and being devalued (Buzzanell and Liu 2007; Gatrell 2007). There is almost an unspoken expectation that breastfeeding as the primary source of an infant's nourishment stops when a woman chooses to return to work; the two rarely co-exist.

Many women in professional careers do not take the full year available to them (in the UK), returning to work after a shorter time frame that is often correlated to career motivations or the cessation of financial compensation, rather than decisions about how they wish to feed their infant. This creates an environment where the organisational culture and attitude to breastfeeding override decisions regarding what is best for the mother and infant: *Mothers indicated that organisational aversion towards breastfeeding obliged them either to breastfeed and express milk in secret, or to disregard health guidance and their own wishes and stop breastfeeding* (Gatrell, 2007, p.398). Indeed, the return-to-work after maternity leave is the key reason for breastfeeding cessation.

Given the lack of accommodation for physically breastfeeding an infant within most organisations, any policy provisions focus on the facilities for expressing breastmilk. In Gatrell's detailed exploration of breastfeeding and paid work (Gatrell, 2007), expressing is also the source of subjugation, carried out secretly in the lavatories. Stumbitz et al. (2017) also discuss how, for the majority of small and medium-sized businesses, women are required to express breastmilk in suboptimal, repurposed rooms, which is partly due to lack of space (particularly in very small organisations) but also perhaps reflects the lack of importance attached to expressing for an infant. They do, however, also point out that some larger organisations have reported benefits of making provisions for women to express– in terms of both time and a private space –*including reduced maternal absenteeism and improved morale, retention and recruitment* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.510). Research suggest that there is, therefore, a significant range in the provision of facilities for expressing, and also in how acceptable the practice is within an organisation's culture. In all cases, it remains a source of negotiation, relying on the attitudes and assumptions of managers and teams to respect the boundaries of time and space (Brown, L., 2010). (Gatrell, 2011a, p.104)(Cabrera, 2009, p.41)(Buzzanell and Liu, 2007, p.465)(Mainiero and Sullivan, 2008, p.34)(Herman and Lewis, 2012, p.768)(Herman and Lewis, 2012, p.768)

d) Employer/manager

In most modern workplaces, organisations talk about their workplace culture, which refers to the dominant discourses and how they shape the behaviour in an organisation. The culture of an organisation is therefore influential in how the maternal body and working mothers more broadly are accepted into the workplace. In gendered organisations, pregnancy and early motherhood are commonly stereotyped as disruptive (Halpert, Wilson and Hickman, 1993). Stubmitz emphasises the importance of the role of the employer and their *capacity and willingness to tolerate their changing body or adjust work practices* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.502). This is not just at the level of policy and the provision of family-forming benefits, but at the level of dominant discourses in an organisation about pregnancy and motherhood, particularly amongst managers and those who influence the everyday experiences of the workplace: *Direct and indirect messages from managers and colleagues also communicate the inconvenience of pregnancy* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.506).

Cabrera expands on the role that managers can play in maintaining a culture that is accepting of working mothers, through leading by example in taking up policies such as flexible working and also having a clearer understanding of the benefits of retaining working mothers (Cabrera, 2009, p.45). Buzzanell and Liu's study (2007) also clearly brings to the fore the role of the manager in creating an environment of working with a returning mother (rather than against), particularly when it comes to managing her onward career trajectory (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007, p.480). However, there also is a widespread lack of awareness among managers with respect to family-related support options.

It is clear that the power of individual returning mothers is limited, where the system itself and those who work within it determine much of the maternity experience. To understand how experience is shaped, therefore, it is necessary to look at an organisation's culture and how it's systems interact with experiences of maternity. This is supported by Bailyn who concludes that *it is clear that significant work-practice change is not something that individuals can do on their own. It clearly depends on the collective action of all the people involved […] accepting the legitimacy of family and personal life for business decisions is also critical* (Bailyn, 2011, p.104).

3.2 Maternity coaching

Although practiced in the UK since around 2005 in legal and financial services (Sparrow, 2008), there is scant literature or empirical research exploring maternity coaching. Existing research focuses heavily on the employer benefits of maternity coaching, particularly through the lens of retention. Moffett (2018) provides perhaps the only study that aims to explore which aspects of coaching bring about results, in terms of supporting individual and organisational goals. Two of the most important contributions to maternity coaching research - published by Filsinger (2012) and Bussell (2008) - were carried out in law firms in the UK, which limits the body of knowledge available by sector and geography. There are also studies carried out by coaching companies – again, heavily focused on law and also professional service firm case studies in the UK - who publish white papers on the impact of maternity coaching (Ernst & Young, 2013; Parke, 2012; *My Family Care.* 2021) for marketing purposes; whilst they provide interesting data points and practitioner insight, such papers are often anecdotal or limited in scope, and are produced to cite success in terms of retention (Moffett, 2018).

As Le Sueur and Boulton bring to the fore in their recent paper in South African organisations, *maternity coaching is an under-researched area in the overall study discipline of coaching* (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021, p.2). Across the literature, there is limited discussion of the experiences of the women going through the maternity transitions and being coached (Millward, 2016, aims to understand experiences of maternity leave *per se*, but not with a coaching lens); *which aspects of the coaching bring about these results* (Moffett, 2018, p.64); or an understanding of maternity coaching within financial services. Additionally, it is noteworthy that much of the research in the field of maternity coaching was carried out before Covid-19 in 2020/2021 dramatically altered the professional landscape (see CONTEXT); this is relevant both in terms of the changed mediums of coaching – notably the increased usage of remote platforms for coaching-, as well as the flexibility of ways of working that has been relevant for many working parents. Finally, there is no literature that considers the success measures, or how to evaluate the success, of maternity coaching, for individuals or for organisations.

Nevertheless, despite the slim field of recent academic research on maternity coaching, the underlying motivations, structure and benefits of using maternity coaching within organisations are elucidated through the available knowledge landscape. There is also a clear and established base upon which much further research can be carried out, to which this inquiry seeks to contribute.

3.2.1 Challenging maternity transitions

For professional women, the period of working through pregnancy, going onto maternity leave and returning back to work ("maternity transitions") is challenging, with significant physical, psychological, social and professional changes (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021). The needs that arise during these transition periods are very specific to this event in a woman's life (Moffett, 2018) and create *profoundly transformative experiences for women* (Millward, 2006, p.317). Bussell suggests that the transition period does not end once a woman returns to work:

The transition from working woman to working mother is complex and longer-lasting than current assumptions acknowledge. This transition does not start with pregnancy and end with a return to work, rather it is a process that continues and evolves with the needs of children, ending when the child becomes independent (Bussell, 2008, p.18).

Maternity coaching literature tends to address the challenges women face during this time through both a personal and professional lens. On the personal and psychological side, maternity transitions cause a period of *psychological turbulence* (Moffett, 2018, p.63), characterised by stress, lack of confidence and emotional turmoil. As discussed in Identity transitions and career choices , the dramatically altered context mothers find themselves in when they reengage with their careers often triggers an identity shift and a subsequent reassessment of values, behaviours, priorities and skills. (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2008)(Noon and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2020, p.89)(Noon and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2020, p.89)(Millward, 2006, p.324)

3.3.2 Maternity coaching purpose and stucture

Maternity coaching is a strategic intervention offered by organisations to women going on maternity leave to offer practical and psychological support through the maternity transitions. It is a subset of what is now widely known as Parental Transition Coaching (Smith, 2020), which in recent years has also included shared parental leave, paternity leave and other forms of family leave, such as adoption leave. According to Filsinger, maternity coaching also sits within the new and growing field of *coaching for diversity,* which tends to focus on protected diversity characteristics as defined by the UK Equality Act 2010 and includes pregnancy and maternity (Filsinger, Claudia, 2021). As highlighted in 3.1.3 Changes in Work-life Balance Policies, whilst there is much positive momentum and awareness about the importance of diversity, one could argue that shifting the focus away from the women-dominated experience of pregnancy, birth, maternity leave and returning to work dilutes an appreciation of, and nuanced response to, the specific challenges women face.

Maternity coaching in the professional, legal and financial services is a benefit that is growing in popularity each year (Working Families, 2017). One contributing factor to this is perhaps that many new mothers now are likely to have already have a well-established career and be in mid to senior positions before they consider having children, often starting in their late 30s or 40s (Sparrow, 2008; Bussell, 2008). Women who go on maternity leave therefore often represent an investment, with skills and experience that employers cannot afford to lose (Sparrow, 2008).

Maternity coaching is structured around coaching sessions at three principal points: during pregnancy, before returning to work whilst on maternity leave, and after returning to work. Depending on what is contracted between the coach and the paying organisation, the coachee typically receives 4-8 sessions, influenced by the seniority and role of the coachee (Freeman, 2008), as well as the budget of the organisation. In some instances, there are also coaching sessions available for the line manager, *to help them prepare and support the women during their maternity transition* (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021, p.8).

As with many areas of coaching in general, the 'success measures' for maternity coaching vary by organisation depending on what they want to achieve through the coaching engagement. However, it has been highlighted that, unlike other forms of coaching where Key Performance Indicators can be tracked more tangibly, *organisations that offer maternity coaching take on a greater risk than would usually be present with the provision of coaching services to employees* (Spence *et al.,* 2016, p.177); in short, the risk is that women do not return to work, despite the investment made by the organisation. Furthermore, due to the strong confluence of personal and professional during maternity transitions and the subsequent career decisions made, the organisation has a finite amount of control over the decisions that women make about whether to return to work and on what terms they wish to reengage with their career. However, the environment that the organisation creates for returners and the amount of support they offer does, of course, influence return decisions.

For individuals to view maternity coaching as a successful intervention, Spence *et al*. bring to the fore the importance of the practical compatibility of fitting in coaching, the comfort needed that the *coaching process will enable them to take ownership over their transition experience* (Spence *et al.,* 2016, p.177) and the coaching as a signal of positive intent on the part of the organisation to align themselves with their individual needs.

3.3.3 Benefits of maternity coaching

Ostensibly, for organisations, the principle aim of offering maternity coaching to employees is to support the retention of women who take time out of their careers for parental leave (Moffett, 2018; Liston-Smith, 2011). Much research is therefore focused on whether maternity coaching achieves this and the impact it has, though this is limited to professional coaching research such as: the Ernst and Young report on their initiatives put in place in 2010 (Ernst & Young, 2013), coaching company marketing reports (including but not limited to: My Family Care, 2016; Talking Talent, 2016) and Deutsche Bank's statement that they had *seen an increased retention rate of women returning from maternity leave* (Working Families, 2017), though no statistics were publicly shared.

Much of the 'evidence' supporting the case that maternity coaching positively impacts retention is qualitative and, at times, anecdotal, particularly in marketing literature; for example, *coaching can play a big part in helping support, engage and retain women in the workplace, keep their careers on track and help them realize their potential* (Parke, 2012). Nevertheless, academic literature also supports that there is a 'loyalty benefit' to organisations following maternity coaching: *Assuming focused support will enhance loyalty and performance in the coachee, clients and coaches regarded the coaching as a necessary (though not sufficient) element in female talent retention* (Liston-Smith, 2011, p.273). This is supported by Spence *et al.,* who assert that coaching *encouraged loyalty by reinforcing the commitment of women to remain with their employer* (Spence *et al.,* 2016, p.173).

On the topic of retention, Bussell's findings are often-cited; her findings indicate that maternity coaching does have a positive benefit on retention after maternity leave, but the 'danger period' for retention is actually after the first year of work *after the coaching support has stopped* (Bussell, 2008, p.18). This is an interesting finding and suggests that further research should be carried out to critically engage with the existing maternity coaching model and the typical points of intervention, potentially expanding the engagement to include support at a later point after returning to work.

Aside from specific commentary around retention, maternity coaching literature supports the case that the intervention does *play a positive role in assisting the professional women and the organisations to progress through the maternity transition journey* (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021, p.5). Whilst metrics around retention remain a primary driver for organisations, as both coaching to support diversity and inclusion (Filsinger, Claudia, 2021) and employee wellbeing in general become central to policy discussions, there is perhaps a wider range of success measures being applied by organisations to coaching interventions, such as maternity coaching.

For individuals, the benefits to maternity coaching are clearer and well-established across the literature and professional practice. One of the most significant benefits of maternity coaching – and indeed any coaching – is often the act of carving out a dedicated moment to reflect on challenges and opportunities in a given situation; it gives individuals permission to engage in reflection, personal discovery and practical actions. As Moffett articulates, *the time, space and focus that was devoted to the women during the coaching sessions resulted in them being able to reflect on themselves and their situations, allowing insights and behavioural change. It also enabled them to explore some of the deep feelings surrounding grief and emotional health* (Moffett, 2018, p.71). There are therefore both emotional and psychological benefits to individuals, such as being supported in articulating their new identity and reassessing priorities, and practical benefits, including the time to think through action plans, options and logistics, and plan for significant conversations.

3.3.4 What individuals value in maternity coaching

There are several factors that emerge from the research as being important to individuals in creating the right conditions for a successful maternity coaching engagement. Firstly, it is viewed as important that the coach has been through maternity transitions in a professional context (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021; Filsinger, Claudia, 2021), so that they can not only empathise but also sympathise with the challenges the coachee might be facing. Filsinger (2021) even adds that the women in her study *experienced having a coach who is a mother and <u>having a similar personality</u> as helpful during the coaching* (Filsinger, Claudia, 2021, p.15), as well as having relevant sector experience. The importance of the lens of the coach is, therefore, a critical part of understanding the ethical considerations of maternity coaching when compared to other forms of coaching. Liston-Simth (2011) also alludes to this in highlighting that maternity coaches also perform the role of mentor, suggesting an element of advice stemming from personal experiences and knowledge as shaping the terms of the relationship. This chimes with Filsinger's findings (2021) that women wanted to hear coaches' stories of how other working mothers had managed their transitions.

Another success factor for maternity coaching for individuals is a clear understanding, and belief in, the coach as an external, objective, and neutral third party (Moffett, 2018; Spence *et al.,* 2016; Millward, 2006). Confidence in this neutrality is necessary in order to create an environment of psychological safety stemming and allow women to explore their relationship with work as a mother without fear of repercussions, or 'organisational echoes' of the coaching conversation.

The final consistent 'ingredient' for maternity coaching to be a success is that the organisation is simultaneously addressing cultural and structural issues related to supporting working mothers, or parents or women more generally. The importance of the organisation on influencing the maternity transition and experiences of working mother is highlighted in extant literature (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021; Cabrera, 2009; Vitzthum, 2017). It is apparent that where organisational culture is inflexible and deep-rooted in outdated approaches to managing maternity transitions, coaching is limited in how effective it can be; in such cases, maternity coaching becomes a box-ticking exercise rather than a strategic initiative. In such cultures, women do not feel comfortable availing of the benefits offered and policies putting place to support working mothers become futile (Brown, L., 2010; Rouse, Atkinson and Rowe, 2021; Cabrera, 2009; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2008; Vitzthum, 2017).

Vitzthum makes a strong case for a *combination of individual and organisational measures* as a way to move away from *ad hoc interventions to a continuous improvement of good practice to enhance the return situation for mothers and retain female talent* (Vitzthum, 2017, p.50). Bussell (2008) also challenges the disconnect found in some sectors between supportive policy on one hand, and embedded negative working cultures that undermine them on the other. Against this backdrop, she highlights the need for *ongoing coaching support at intervals through their careers can underpin this period of pragmatic endurance and enable women to fulfil their potential as professionals and as mothers* (Bussell, 2008, p.23). This is echoed by Filsinger in her discussion of diversity coaching (2021) where she asserts that structural organisational support needs to go hand-in-hand with interventions such as coaching.

3.3.5 The role of line managers and teams

The levers that organisations can pull when they look at ways to support working mothers at a cultural level are varied and often specific to each organisation. However, one consistent approach highlighted in maternity coaching literature and practice is involving the line manager in the experience of the maternity returner. Managers have been highlighted as playing a particularly important role in upholding the viability and acceptability of organisational policies in practice. Rouse et al. describe the importance of a manager's *values-based commitment to empower or protect the pregnant worker and to achieve fair and productive synchronicity between worker and role,* as well as *continuous awareness of changing circumstances* (Rouse, Atkinson and Rowe, 2021, p.11,18), which chimes with Filsinger's description of the partner relationship in a law firm (Filsinger, 2012). This is also discussed by Le Sueur in terms of how close a manager stayed to the issues surrounding maternity transitions: *The line manager's role and attitude in how close or distant they remained towards the maternity transition journey were critically important to the women participants* (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021, p.6).

An unexplored area of maternity coaching – in both literature and practice – is the impact of colleagues and coaching those who have a role to play in supporting women going on leave. In a workplace environment such as financial services, which is characterised by a competitive and individualistic culture, this is particularly relevant. Currently, the line manager is coached as the vehicle through which the team culture can be influenced; however, there is also scope to expand practice and research here to further shape the return environment.

3.3.6 Maternity coaching models

Alongside the well-established structure of the points of intervention, several practitioner papers have conceptualised different elements of maternity coaching. Bussell provides seven transitional perspectives that women going on maternity leave may have, conceptualising the different stages of maternity transitions to inform a coaching engagement (Bussell, 2008, p.19). These chart a journey from career being the primary focus, through a realisation that things have changed, to disengagement and disenchantment, to a final phase of reflection and reinvention. Moffett focuses more sharply on the 'how of coaching', using Schlossberg's transition theory (1981) as a base, which *identifies four factors that have an impact on how someone perceives and copes with transition; factors concerned with: (i) the* ***situation****; (ii)) the* ***self****; (iii) the* ***support*** *available; and (iv)* ***strategies*** *to help with coping* (my emphases). Based on this, she shares her 4S Returner Model (Moffett, 2018) to shape maternity coaching conversations. Le Sueur and Boulton also use Schlossberg's transition theory as a way to frame the different psychological and practical issues brought to maternity coaching. Interestingly, they also present a visual of their Maternity Transition Coaching Model (*figure 2*) that shows the coaching sessions as taking place within the confines of an organisational culture and system, and the coach sitting on an axis between the organisation and the coachee.

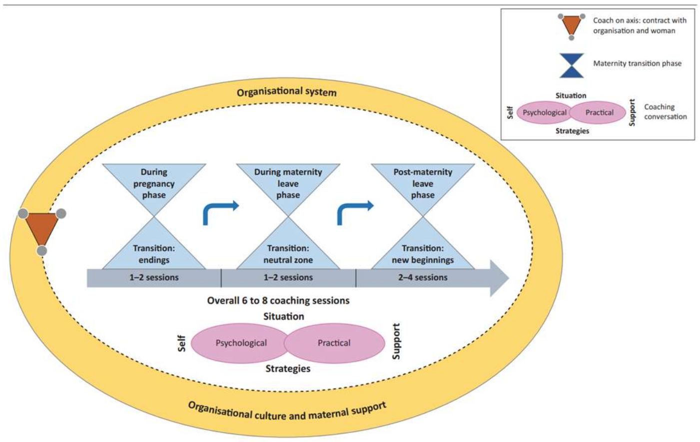


Figure 5: Maternity Transition Coaching Model (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021, p.9)

Such models are helpful to practitioners in considering new approaches and ways to think about their role within the context of both the individual's journey and the organisation's goals. However, none of these models is established as a coaching industry approach to maternity coaching, with much variation across practitioner depending on their background, experience and client industry.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Approach and methodological choices

The importance of positionality and reflective practices

As is typical of practitioner-research, I have been working in my professional context for several years before identifying and pursuing an inquiry within it; indeed, the very trigger for the inquiry is borne from it. This pre-existing professional understanding of my context is like the background wash in a watercolour - with colours blended for richness and depth. The new understanding that I am seeking in my work, and constructing a methodology to capture, is like sharper fragments of detail individually painted on top of it, bringing to the fore what is evocative and generating meaning at a point in time (Figure 6: Story watercolour - background wash vs detail fragments).

Figure 6: Story watercolour - background wash vs detail fragments

The final 'image', or 'inquiry story', looks the way it does because of who I am, my own situatedness, and the specific conditions that frame my inquiry. I carry with me the context for the inquiry story, which lives through it and is altered by it. It goes without saying that a different researcher at a different point of time may hear the same stories and make different meaning from them, presenting an entirely different inquiry story. For this reason, it is ethically paramount that my inquiry is understood within the context outlined in INTRODUCTION: the 'I' in this inquiry.

As a coach-practitioner and working mother, I am embedded in my research at multiple levels, providing a multi-faceted insider-outsider perspective in how I engage with my research. On the simplest professional level, as a coach, I experience being an insider and an outsider with the coachee; we share the confidential coaching space to make meaning from experience, but I am an outsider to their world beyond this space. I am also an insider with the employing organisation – which can be a source of ethical complexity or conflict -, engaged by them to serve a particular agenda; however, I am also an outsider to the organisation as I am not part of the structures or culture that shape its 'lifeblood'. I also have the experience of being an insider in working in the financial services industry, in a highly demanding and intense culture, giving me a rich understanding of the professional context of my clients. However, I also chose to be an outsider, leaving the industry when I became a mother. Finally, I have been on a dialectic journey of working motherhood, as I had two children when beginning this study and have had another two children during this time. This has made me, at times, an insider who is going through the challenges of working motherhood, leaving and returning to work alongside my coachees and experiencing the practical, emotional and sensory complexities it can bring. Haynes also brings this to the fore in her study of accountants, *the fact that I am also an accountant and mother gave me some degree of shared experience with the participants that seemed to facilitate the divulgence of intimate experiences for some and break down the barriers of being researched* (Haynes, 2008, p.332).

However, ethically, it has been a constant source of reflection for me, to make myself an outsider and disentangle my own experiences from those of my coachees.

The complexity of my interconnectedness to this inquiry (and indeed, to my professional activity) places significant importance on the role of reflection. As I have previously discussed, a fundamental element to this is proactively engaging with my own assumptions structure, as a web through which my experiences must pass in the process of interpreting the world: *the structure gives us the means to navigate our context but it also constrains and contains us, unless we are able to critically engage with the different strands that form it. As Mezirow asserts, "because we are all trapped by our Meaning Perspectives, we can never really make interpretations of our experience free of bias"* (Mezirow, 1990, p.4) (Reynolds, 2021).

As a coach, and in this study, the process of reflection is one of both introspection and intersection; there is an ethical responsibility to engage with how I make meaning and come to know the world, to understand my contribution to the meanings I construct alongside my coachees and participants in this inquiry. This process of trying to achieve coherence between my own assumptions web and that of my coachee is akin to what Mezirow describes as a process of communicative learning: *Communicative learning is less a matter of testing hypotheses than of searching, often intuitively, for themes and metaphors by which to fit the unfamiliar into a meaning perspective, so that an interpretation in context becomes possible* (Mezirow, 1990, p.3). Reflecting on this process of how I interpret the unfamiliar against the 'benchmark' data of my own experiences and assumptions is thus a critically important practice in this inquiry.

4.1.1. A narrative way of knowing

In developing my work as a coach and research-practitioner, it has become clear to me that storytelling about one's life is an act of reflection and also an act of election; conscious and unconscious choices are made about comes to the fore in the sharing of what has already been lived. The storyteller's relationship with their own experiences and choices, and who they are sharing their story with, has a bearing on how the stories are told and how the plot is crafted; storytelling is thus a social sense-making and ordering process of lives lived. As Glover describes, *individuals develop a plot by selecting from countless happenings those they believe, in retrospect, contributed directly to the outcome of their stories* (Glover, 2004, p.147).

As I have expressed previously in setting out my ontological and epistemological stance (Reynolds, 2021; Reynolds, 2022), I subscribe to the view of our lives and identities as being narratively constructed and reconstructed; *it is through our very encounter with the world that our different realities are constructed and enacted. These realities are all part of the whole, as their being and existence is co-dependent.* It is, thus, only in a shared meaning-making process that knowledge can emerge, with human experience ultimately a co-created emergent narrative.

Jerome Bruner argues that a narrative way of knowing – as distinguished from a paradigmatic mode of knowing - is intrinsically part of human nature and that we define and make meaning of our lives and others' lives through stories. Bruner brings the role of the narrator's situatedness to the fore and places a narrative way of knowing as a means of linking, past, present and future; this way of knowing carries in it the importance of agency and our abilities to transform the future through imagination (Bruner, 1986). This narrative mode focuses on *the vicissitudes of human actions, it develops practical and situated knowledge; it has a temporal structure and it emphasizes the agentivity of social actors* (González-Monteagudo, 2011, p.297) .

As a coach, to a large degree, my professional life is dictated by shared meaning-making and involves listening to stories. Sometimes, these are stories often-told by the coachee, familiar to them in their expression and cadence, with clear and explicit ties to the identity the coachee has constructed - there is an 'artificiality' to these stories and a sense of them being consciously narrated. Yet sometimes the stories that are unearthed in the coaching space are previously unexplored or untold; they are only articulated to me in part, but the unarticulated may carry meaning and learning for the coachee. Listening to the silences and respecting the unarticulated is where the hard interface of what is already past is able to release new possibilities in the present. Developing Bruner's potential of narratives to imagine other possibilities in the future to come, Petranker's dynamic future encapsulates this concept of a story moving toward the future with a momentum that does not depend on the backward telling of narration (Petranker, 2005, p.246).

With maternity coaching, in particular, I am acutely aware that women are 'in transition' and adapting their lives to the birth of their child; in and out of the workplace, but often also simultaneously moving through value shifts, changing priorities and a reassessment of how they view themselves in the world, how they tell their story. As Bateson brings to the fore in framing her discussion, *women have always lived discontinuous and contingent lives […] The physical rhythms of reproduction and maturation create sharper discontinuities in women's lives than in men's, the shifts of puberty and menopause, of pregnancy, birth, and lactation, the mirroring adaptations to the unfolding lives of children, the ebb and flow of dependency* (Bateson, 1989, p.13).

In this context, the value of coaching is very much about stories moving towards future possibilities, and how women may choose to frame and re-frame their stories in new and evolving contexts. With an ever-changing baby and then child, motherhood often demands a lack of attachment to the concentric circles of events and markers as the definers of life's rhythms, but rather an appreciation of our individually-constructed values web and to the stories that have shaped, and continue to shape it.

(Mezirow, 1990, p.4)The creative potential of stories

In essence, this piece of work is about the creative potential of stories; stories here live and are shared in multiple forms and contexts, influencing each other as they blend into the final inquiry story.

<table>
<tr><td>Stories of inquiry participants

My re-storying of their stories (incl. felt unarticulated)</td><td>Stories of coaching clients

Re-storying process of coaching between coach and coachee</td><td>My stories

My re-storying (as my life intersects with others/moves forward)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Final 'inquiry story'
A fixed version of the continuum of storied lives, representing a point in time, of shared knowledge, between narrators.</td></tr>
</table>

Table 1 : Stories in this inquiry

Stories shared in this inquiry can serve two purposes in this context:

1. Through the very act of restorying – whether in coaching or conversation -, a version of a life is given form by the narrator(s), serving as a departure point for the restorying of their future;
2. As these stories ultimately contribute and form part of an 'inquiry story' artefact, they become available to others as a creative resource.

This second purpose – made possible through this work - extends the creative potential of stories from shaping the lives of the immediate narrators, to shaping the lives of those with whom these stories are shared. For new mothers, at a point of inevitable discontinuity, there is a need for reimagining and redesigning; we are resourced for this creativity through the stories of experience we encounter, piecing together a life from our intuition and from what we learn of others. The approach to sharing stories in this inquiry is in line with Bateson's assertions:

It is a way of making these lives available to others in a form that differs both from the extended narratives of heroic biography or case history on the one hand and the lost individuality of the survey on the other. These are not representative lives. They do not constitute a statistical sample – only, I hope, an interesting one. [….] We need to look at multiple lives to test and shape our own […] Once you begin to see these lives of multiple commitments and multiple beginnings as an emerging pattern rather than an aberration, it takes no more than a second look to discover the models for reinvention on every side, to look for the followers of visions that are not fixed but evolve from day to day (Bateson, 1989, p.16-7).

The stories here are not intended to be stories to live by or re-enact, but rather stories to re-invent and re-imagine against the backdrop of our individual watercolours of experience. Releasing the creative potential of stories in this inquiry is about sharing what is not fixed but fluid, and creating space for the *discontinuous and contingent* (Bateson, 1989, p.13) lives of mothers, to be shared and shaped, for themselves and others:

As rivers running to the sea, we must be flexible, dynamic, creative, improvisational with all our being as we feel our way through the course of our lives and bring the learning from our journey to the shared body of water that is our society (Reynolds, 2021, p.11).

4.1.2. Action research

As a coach carrying out this research into my practice, I am not seeking a theoretical exploration of the issues and questions present in the environment I practice in, though this is part of the process. Integral to my approach to inquiry is the action I am taking, sharing stories with participants and coachees, and intervening in my environment to develop and apply new knowledge, with a view to creating positive change for others. This ethos places this research firmly in the field of action research, with theory emerging from practice and positive change for others at the heart of its generation.

Reflection-in-action

Schön's exploration of reflection-in-action (1994) provides an explicit framework for distinguishing the ways in which practitioners think in action. Schön brings to the fore the type of knowing professionals have that generates spontaneous, skilful practice; that which is not learnt intentionally, or was long ago internalised to become part of the inherent knowing that does not require an intellectual application process. Alongside these 'knowing-in-action' practices are those which are triggered by reflection – thinking in that moment, whilst we are in practice, reflecting on and in action. It is important to note that this reflection-in-action is not always in language, with our full sensory capacities extending our ways of knowing. Schön gives the example of a jazz musician improvising and feeling the music (Schon, 1994, p.56).

The moments of 'reflection-in-action' that Schön discusses, triggered by something being different than expected, are critical moments that underpin this work: *Faced with some phenomenon that he finds unique, the inquirer nevertheless draws on some element of his familiar repertoire which he treats as exemplar or as <u>generative metaphor</u> for the new phenomenon* (Schon, 1994, p.269). In my own coaching practice, I notice how these moments of dislocation heighten the senses, bringing a greater awareness of not just what is said, but what else is being felt and experienced. Such moments may be triggered by a significant learning moment on the part of the coachee that changes the nature and feel of the conversation; by an unexpected revelation that completely diverts the flow of conversation; by a comment or shift in mood that shocks or destabilises how I coach. The list goes on and the possibilities of these moments are endless. However, what is important here is that 'the reflective practitioner' described by Schön is able to draw on previous practice to formulate new hypotheses, testing them in different actions and ways of being, both in-the-moment and subsequently.

The role of reflection in action research is fundamental, with action and reflection feeding each other in continuous cycles, with the research-practitioner's experiential knowing at the heart of the research. As McNiff neatly distinguishes, for a professional carrying out action research, *the focus of your work is you, and you are your main source of data. Your research participants are sources of data that show how you are trying to exercise your educational influence in your own and their thinking.* (McNiff, 2016, p.124). In this inquiry, therefore, the learning occurs for me through narrative cycles of reflection and action, but also for the participants in this inquiry and the coachees in my practice, as I intervene in my environment and seek to trigger positive change.

Action research cycles

In the cycles Heron and Reason (1997) describe, based on their four ways of knowing, the following activities are involved:

- *Propositional knowing:* coresearchers collaborate to define the questions they are asking and how they will conduct their inquiry
- *Practical knowing:* coresearchers apply this knowledge, leading to new experiences
- *Experiential knowing:* new experiences and ways of viewing the world
- *Presentational knowing:* expressing and representing these experiences

These cycles are repeated: *coresearchers engage together in cycling several times through the four forms of knowing to enrich their congruence; that is, to refine the way they elevate and consummate each other, and to deepen the complementary way they are grounded in each other* (Heron and Reason, 1997, p.287). Adams (Adams, 2022) modifies this model in light of Bruner's (1985) two ways of knowing, distinguishing between paradigmatic and narrative ways of knowing as different paths to practical knowing. This adaption resonates in practice with this inquiry, valuing a narrative way of knowing in its own right and also allowing us to better address different audiences.

(McNiff, 2016, p.124)A fundamental tenet of action research centres around the inquirer's purpose of serving those who are systematically disempowered, under-represented or silenced in their environments. Whilst there is not a broad political or social change impetus here, the ethical foundation of this research is about a commitment to positive change for mothers returning to work in a certain professional environment; the findings may ultimately be applicable to other professional settings. This is relevant because it determines how the success, quality and value of this research should be judged.

There is a strong ethical component to how this research should be judged, in terms of the purpose of the research, the impact it has on practice and how it is received in the wider community of practice. In this context, Ponte discusses how *one could state that the quality of action research comes down to a commitment to a set of underlying values, conceptions and methodological principles, and this commitment should come with the moral obligation to justify the why, what and how of the choices that are made (Ponte, 2006, p.451-2).* In this inquiry, this means not only clearly stating my epistemological and ontological stances in my writing, but also living these commitments out in how I interact with my participants and coachees, involving them in the choices that impact them and others in their position. This is also how provisional knowledge becomes validated, through intersubjective agreements and negotiated meanings and understandings.

In my professional practice, 'evidence' for learning is demonstrated in the commitments coachees make, the actions they take forward into their world, that are negotiated in the shared meaning-making conversation of coaching. In the same way, interview-style conversations with participants in the inquiry are dialogic in nature; through intentional conversations, meanings are negotiated to *produce evidence to test the validity of their individual or collective knowledge claims* (McNiff, 2016, p.126).

4.1.3. Reflective thematic analysis

In this work, it is important to keep front-of-mind that there are multiple stakeholders who are interested in drawing learnings from it. One of these is the institutions themselves, who partner with me and represent a context in which cycles of action and reflection can be implemented. The approach and methodological choices, therefore, must also be tailored to incorporate their needs; specifically, institutions want to understand the themes of experience that might inform policy and practice changes.

The ontological and epistemological stances of this researcher previously discussed make clear the positioning of this inquiry, underpinned by a qualitative paradigm, with regards to how knowledge is produced and the role of the researcher. These hold true when conducting thematic analysis, even if the output is different for an institutional audience. As Braun and Clarke describe, this paradigm *rejects notions of objectivity and context-independent or researcher-independent truths, and instead emphasises the contextual or situated nature of meaning, and the inescapable subjectivity of research and the researcher* (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.228). Multiple decisions about research design and data usage are made by the researcher – even if in collaboration with other stakeholders - so The importance of positionality and reflective practices described above also remain at the forefront of thematic analysis.

In terms of methodological choices, at a simple level, thematic analysis is *a method of qualitative analysis, widely used across the social and health sciences, and beyond, for exploring, interpreting and reporting relevant patterns of meaning across a dataset. It utilises codes and coding to develop themes* (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.224). However, there is no single method or approach to 'thematic analysis' but a rich and varied method for conducting analysis: *The various variations of TA often have distinctive techniques for doing TA, reflecting their quite different conceptual foundations* (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.225).

Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis has been used here; its theoretical flexibility in how it is designed, and which datasets could be used, represented a methodology that allowed me to conduct this analysis alongside narrative analysis. I expand fully on this in 'Reflexive thematic analysis' below.

Although different in practical application, this study has found a strong theoretical link between narrative and reflexive thematic analysis in approach: *Instead of conceptualising your analytic task as one of discovering, distilling and revealing the essence of the data, we suggest it's better to imagine you're* telling a story *in a way that aims to* make sense of *what's going on* (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.197). Just as narrative analysis may be used to *make educative meaning of our and others' lives and situations* (Clandinin, 2007, p.78) *,* the stories told from reflexive thematic analysis need *a clear* take-home *message – one that includes an indication of* why they should care *about the story you've just told them* (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.197).(Vaill, 1981, p.18)(Heron and Reason, 1997, p.280)

4.2. Methods: data collection and data analysis

4.2.1 Data collection

i. Gathering storied data (interviewer, coach or narrator?)

In this inquiry, conversations take two principal forms; an interview set-up and a coaching session. The interviews are used in Phase 1 (Scoping) and then at various points in Phase 2 (Developing practice through cycles). Coaching is both an intentional part of this inquiry in Phase 2, with specific institutions, and also an ongoing professional activity which influences how I conduct the inquiry and the decisions I make.

On the surface, these two types of interaction conjure up ideas of two very different modes of conversation. The interview, at one extreme, is conventionally a question-answer dialogue with topics and format determined by the interviewer and the transcripts analysed by them. A coaching session, by contrast, is coachee-led in terms of the topics discussed, the conditions for the conversation are 'contractually' agreed upfront between coach and coachee, and the interpretation of what is shared is continually tested to make meaning from the conversation.

I bring into focus the comparison between the interviews and the coaching sessions here because, in this study, the line between them is very blurred in practice. Beginning with the approach to the interview conversations, it is clear that directing the course of a conversation with pre-set questions or topics – beyond the fact that we are discussing the maternity transitions - risks obscuring potentially more pertinent points of conversations relevant to a particular interviewee. For example, asking an interviewee who has been back at work 6 months to dwell on their experience of pregnancy in the workplace, when experientially they may be struggling to adapt to new work rhythms, removes this story from its context or brings a different time-perspective to it; or to ask a new mother struggling to breastfeed what impact she thinks the team culture has had on her maternity experience may be similarly removed.

Although such questions may be answered and a 'narrative' may be constructed by the interviewer, these are not necessarily the stories that participants have within them to tell. Highlighting the importance of the context and situatedness of a story, Hardin contends that *stories have different functions and outcomes, depending on the purpose of the telling* (Hardin, 2003a, p.536). When a story is removed from its natural context – such as in a phenomenological question/answer interview setting – there is an effect on meaning. For example, participants may not choose to tell their maternity journey in a chronological order and may gravitate to the point of most challenge, or strongest emotion, or clearest memory. For this inquiry, it is these points that represent the stories of lived experience, that are unearthed through an extended epistemology, relying on intuition, emotion and 'gut' to construct the narrative of experience.

The question then becomes how to conduct an interview conversation in a way that does not disempower the interviewee and decontextualise their story, removing or changing meaning through the process. For Mishler, this is achieved by the interviewee being viewed as a research collaborator, where both interviewer and interviewee *through repeated reformulations of questions and responses, strive to arrive together at meanings that both can understand* (Mishler, 1991, p.119). For Hollingsworth, *power tensions are made explicit* and the *direction of narrative shifts between narrators and researchers,* with the narrators involved in *critical whole-text analyses* and giving feedback (Hollingsworth, 2007, p.150). Viewing the interview as a co-created meaning-making space neutralises the power dynamic, as it is through the conversation that the narrative of experience is explored and meaning is realised *in the discourse itself* (Mishler, 1991, p.65).

Viewing the interview through this critical epistemological perspective brings it close to some of the fundamentals of coaching that are employed in maternity coaching, such as those described by the Co-Active Model (Kimsey-House *et al.,* 2018). A cornerstone of this model is that *people are naturally creative, resourceful and whole* (Kimsey-House *et al.,* 2018, p.4), alluding to the trust to be placed in a coachee and encouraging a non-directive approach to coaching conversations. Equally the Co-Active cornerstones of *dance in this moment* (Kimsey-House *et al.,* 2018, p.6), which emphasises the importance and relevance of <u>this</u> temporal moment, and *focus on the whole person* (Kimsey-House *et al.,* 2018, p.4), are aligned with this approach to interview conversations.

Undeniably, there are some fundamental differences between a coaching session and an interview. Most notably, there is an element of context setting necessitated in an interview that would be inappropriate to a coaching session. With this comes the requirement for more proactive attention to, and intentions around, power dynamics, both in the conversation itself and afterwards in the sense-making process. Another key difference is the purpose of the conversation, whereby an interviewer initiates and invites the interviewee to have a conversation, and the coachee typically identifies, or at least triggers, the need for a coaching conversation. These are subtle but important differences.

In this inquiry, however, it is noteworthy that the conversations in both the interview and coaching sessions depart, ultimately, from the same point – a belief in the power of *talking to learn* (Hollingsworth, 2007). Applying coaching conversational disciplines in an interview fundamentally changes the nature of the conversation. The coaching arena is conventionally used as an exploratory and storied space - a space where stories can be told and reimagined - with a view to designing actions that have the capacity to change future stories as they are emerging. In Co-Active terms, it is the final cornerstone of coaching; to *evoke transformation* (Kimsey-House *et al.,* 2018, p.7)through co-designed future actions. The interview through this lens is no longer about 'story extraction' but stories created and lived in the moment, and *through their narratives people may be moved […] to the possibilities of action* (Mishler, 1991, p. 119). Against this backdrop, questions around the reliability of the interviewer become less important than the challenge the interviewee faces in their efforts to *construct coherent and reasonable worlds of meaning and to make sense of their experiences* (Mishler, 1991, p.118).

The disciplines from the coaching arena applied to an interview construct liberate the interviewer from the role of directing the course of the narrative, continually and proactively shifting the power, or voice, back to the interviewee. Glover describes this process as trusting that *research participants, if uninterrupted by standardized questions, would "hold the floor" for lengthy turns and organize their replies into long stories* (Glover, 2004, p.149). For example:

- The 'contracting' process at the beginning of a coaching engagement allows both coach and coachee to design the terms of their relationship, agreeing parameters around confidentiality, timing, use of notes and any other questions that are pertinent to either side; this works equally well in an interview relationship for building trust, establishing ways of working together and agreeing how the 'story data' will be interpreted and shared.
- Whilst the context for an interview conversation is set, the direction of travel of the conversation needs to be interviewee-led, as in coaching, for stories to emerge in their context, imbued with their intended meaning. In practice, this could mean encouraging the interviewee to talk about the points in their maternity journey that are most meaningful to them (rather than directing them to their return-to-work experience, for example).
- Open-ended, indirect questions are used most often in coaching, but also questions that probe for narrative embellishment and in-the-moment interpretation such as 'what does this mean to you?'. This not only provides more detail in the story being told, but also prompts for meaning-making to take place in the conversational space, whether interview or coaching session. This is particularly relevant around points of conversation that represent a challenging or controversial topic.
- A coaching conversation most often results in agreed actions, or learnings, that the coachee can take forward into their daily life. Viewing the narrative interview as a space for learning, and explicitly articulating what that learning has been, elevates the potential of these conversations.
- Coaching is very rarely a standalone session and there is an acknowledgement of the importance of the relationship, built on trust and mutual respect. Applying a longevity to the interview relationship – for example, involving the interviewee in the interpretation of the transcripts and meaning-making processes – permits a version of their story that honours their intentions at that point in time. It also may lead to further sharing and narrative detail.

Stories emerge through conversations, whether in coaching or in interview. The labels of interviewer and interviewee, or coach and coachee, become less relevant in this work in practice. Seeing both participants in the conversation as <u>narrators</u> is a helpful way to reframe the roles in the conversations. What then comes to the forefront is the importance of who the narrators are, and how and why they are having a conversation. These become the considerations that mould the narrative conditions, rather than the labels and their pre-conceived roles in the conversation. As Hollingsworth describes, the narratives result from *a bricolage of the narrators' self-conceptions in the temporal moment, place, or historical context in which the narrative is told, the depth of relationship between the narrators, and the purpose of their conversation* (Hollingsworth, 2007, p.151).

What does the 'narrator' role mean for group conversations?

When it comes to a group conversational dynamic, the first point to note is that the trust and psychological safety that can be built in a bi-lateral conversation is harder to achieve with multiple voices, and not everybody is equally comfortable speaking up in a group; on the contrary, some voices are silenced by being put in a group.

This is a point discussed by Hollingsworth with reference to her colleague, Karen, in the Berkeley Group:

What Karen's honest and vulnerable comment showed is that in every conversational narrative inquiry, there are varied relationships to the act of conversation itself, and those variations should be noted in the analyses. Furthermore, Karen's analysis of the different comfort levels in our conversation gave all of us an opportunity to examine our shifting identities in different conversational settings (Hollingsworth, 2007, p.159).

Hollingsworth (2007) also expands on how some narratives are given more credence or authority in a group, which can also lead to silencing other narratives. This is particularly relevant to the group interventions in this inquiry as the participants are within the same firm; there are varied personal and professional relationships amongst them, from direct colleagues to completely unknown, and also different levels of seniority. Whilst some may feel confident and comfortable sharing their stories in this setting, for others, it may cause barriers to be put up, or trigger fears that there are inevitable echoes of the conversation played out in their ongoing professional lives.

One way that this can be reduced is through an upfront contracting process with the group around confidentiality, as in a bi-literal coaching conversation. Encouraging the group to view themselves as narrators gathered to share their stories, with the shared perspective of belonging to the same firm and experiencing maternity leave within it, may also have a unifying effect. As evidenced in parents' networks, there is a desire on the part of many to tell and hear stories, and learn from their common ground.

Another way is to proactively and intentionally ask for contributions from everyone, rather than letting the more confident voices dominate. Also shifting between whole group discussions and smaller paired discussions may help to facilitate different levels of, and avenues into, conversation. Whilst this, of course, will not necessarily ensure that everyone speaks or equally contributes, the level of comfort with the conversational context is a data point and *should be noted in the analyses* (Hollingsworth, 2007, p.158).

ii. Gathering reflective data

As I outlined above, my first-person reflective cycles are an integral and inextricable strand in this research. Reflection exists at two primary levels: Firstly, there is my reflection-in-action, where I pause in-the-moment to mindfully and intentionally change how I act or what I say; this then informs the second level of reflection, which occurs after a conversation or event, interrogating the 'why' and the meaning of what has occurred before. These trigger ongoing, generative 'micro-cycles' of action and reflection, which overlay - and are in dialogue with - the 'macro-cycles' of the research set out in Research Design.

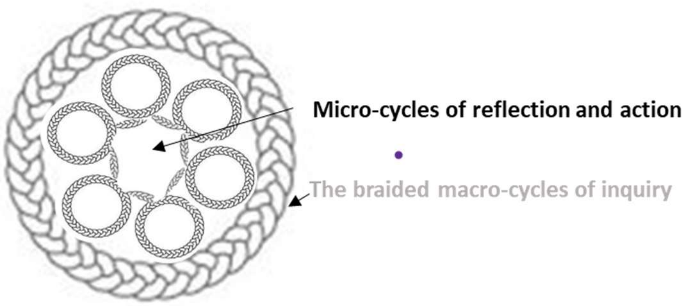


Figure 7: Braided cycles of practice

a) Coaching supervisions

One explicit, intentional way I engage in reflective activity is by having a coach-supervisor. As a certified International Coaching Federation (ICF) coach, I adhere to the ICF code of ethics and conduct and, as part of the credentialisation process, Coaching Supervision is a core competency required. According to the ICF (International Coaching Federation, 2023):

Coaching Supervision is a collaborative learning practice to continually build the capacity of the coach through reflective dialogue for the benefit of both coaches and clients. […] Supervision creates a safe environment for the coach to share their successes and failures in becoming masterful in the way they work with their clients. Coaching Supervision may include:

- *Exploring the coach's internal process through reflective practice*
- *Reviewing the coaching agreement and any other psychological or physical contacts, both implicit and explicit*
- *Uncovering blind spots*
- *Ethical issues*
- *Ensuring the coach is "fit for purpose" and perhaps offering accountability*
- *Looking at all aspects of the coach and client's environment for opportunities for growth in the system*

In practice, I arrange coaching supervisions when there is a specific dilemma or issue I want to discuss, or to have a 'check-in' conversation about a specific area of my professional practice and how I am moving and working in the systems I am part of. These are generative discussions and there is always a strong element of accountability, with onward actions agreed and reviewed at future sessions.

b) Reflective notetaking

One of the cornerstones of my professional practice is my reflective notetaking. I refrain from using the term 'reflective journaling' to draw a clear line of distinction between a diary and the way I record my reflections. My reflective notes do not detail the majority of my professional experiences or activities; the day-to-day that does not trigger a reaction, prompt thought or discussion. I use my writing intentionally as a way of recording that which becomes interesting or disruptive. This shows up in three principal forms:

1. **Spontaneous notetaking.** This can be triggered by ideas or reflections that come to mind when I am doing a completely different activity, very often swimming or driving. It can also be impulse-led, when I want to explore something further and understand what I am feeling and experiencing about it more wholly. Most often this takes the form of writing a stream-of-conscious, but I do also draw diagrams and sketches as part of my reflective and sense-making processes.
2. **Systematic notetaking during coaching sessions**. I take notes during and after coaching sessions as a way of documenting the 'what happened', for use before future sessions. Often, however, these contain in-the-moment thoughts or reflections on what I am noticing, both internally and externally, about an experience. These triggering or evocative moments may be the ground for later reflection and often indicate a point of inflection that shapes how I behave or the nature of the interaction. For example, if a coachee is quiet and reticent, then a particular question causes them to open up and visibly relax, I may note this body language and the question asked. This may later indicate a turning point in our dialogue, or a point of significance for the coachee, or a signal to me to change my style or behaviours with that coachee. Meziro describes this reflection-in-action: *Thoughtful action is*

reflexive but is not the same thing as acting reflectively to critically examine the justification for one's beliefs. Reflection in thoughtful action involves a pause to reassess by asking: What am I doing wrong? *The pause my only be a split second in the decision-making process. Reflection may thus be integral to deciding how best to perform immediately* (Mezirow, 1990, p.2).

3. **Intentional notetaking after coaching sessions.** On some occasions, there are certain emotions triggered or something evocative happens that is worthy of further attention and exploration. In these instances, I return to my original notes and reflect on points of significance, adding to my notes any feelings or observations that I did not get an opportunity to add during the interaction.
    a. I note how I felt and noticed I during this particular interaction or experience.
    b. I question what influenced me in having this reaction. For example: How is my own experience shaping how I had this conversation or interpreted this event? What did I already know and how did this influence me?
    c. I look at for meaning and why this was going on for me at that time, in that context.

It is important to note that the third reflective notetaking process does sometimes happen all at once, particularly if something has produced a strong reaction in me that perhaps has more obvious origins in terms of my own experiences and assumptions. However, more often, this process takes place over a period of time and I revisit my initial thoughts and interpretations to engage in a richer and varied way with my own data. Boud describes this as this return to experience, attending to feelings and, finally, reevaluation of experience:

Reacquaintance with the event and attending to and expressing the thoughts and feelings associated with it can prepare the ground for freer evaluation of experience than is often possible at the time. The process of reevaluation includes relating new information to that which is already known, seeking relationships between new and old ideas, determining the authenticity for ourselves of the ideas and feelings that have resulted, and making the resulting knowledge one's own, that is, a part of one's normal ways of operating (Boud, 2001, p.14).

As coaching engagements ordinarily have several touch points over a period of time, the notetaking process is of paramount importance. It helps me remember where I was – practically and emotionally – at the time of a conversation, but it also provides me with a data point against which I can compare the next point of experience and what I have learned – perhaps an evolution in my practice, or simply a reappreciation the original data of experience with new contextual information or parameters.

These processes held much energy at the time, and during some of them I wrote notes which appeared to arrive at insights, to help me ask myself productive questions, to suggest new strategies and ways of behaving, and to give legitimacy to interventions which had sometimes felt awkward or out of place (Marshall, 1999, p.162).

c) Check-in conversations with other practitioners and my senior leadership team

A final importance source of reflection is in the conversations I have with my coaching peers and senior leadership team, as I develop my coaching and consulting offering within the company and grow and adapt alongside them. These conversations provide a data point of how I am thinking and talking about my practice at a point in time, and they also influence and shape my ongoing practice. For example, we share and notice what is working in how we talk about the work we do to sell it, but also how we do that work and who we are in that work. In each monthly meeting, we are invited to bring a client dilemma or question to the group, for a group supervision discussion. These opportunities to continually reflect on and evolve my own practice, as well as learn from the experiences of others, is invaluable.

On occasions, I also partner with colleagues to deliver certain pieces of work. One example of this is a focus group listening engagement, where an organisation wanted to learn more about the lived experience of women working for them, in order to inform the thinking that went into their revised gender equity plan. I worked alongside a colleague, with us both delivering several focus groups individually, which would inform a joint report I was writing. We agreed how we would take notes and how we would come together to share reflections and learnings from the different groups. We elected to have this discussion once all the focus groups had been carried out, so we did not influence each other's thinking with preconceived ideas. From working so closely alongside another coach, to produce the same piece of work, I learnt some new nuances in how I talked about what I noticed, as well as some practical support in working with large amounts of data. I anticipate that there may be elements of professional collaboration that form part of this inquiry, whether with other coaches, or with related stakeholders such as HR.

4.2.2. Data analysis: dual modes of sense-making

i. Narrative analysis

a) Restorying: the act

In their exploration of narrative inquiry in the psychotherapy professions, Kohler-Riessman and Speedy describe using the therapy space to help clients restory their lives through a deconstruction and reconstruction process. This is achieved through bringing to the fore the different stories that influence a life in a collaborative process with the therapist as narrative co-researcher; *the deconstruction of the multiplicity of stories is shown as a live process that engages clients and therapists alike* (Kohler-Riessman and Speedy, 2006, p.440). This 'narrative analysis-in-the-moment' represents a transferable approach to narrative in coaching, allowing clients to identify the different living stories that are influencing their own assumptions and make conscious decisions about whether to rewrite their story. It is in the act of telling their stories in coaching – and indeed inquiry interview conversations - that individuals can experience an awareness of themselves amidst other influential stories.

The act of restorying becomes an active interplay between the stories that influence the narrators in their organisation and broader society, and personal agency; the narrators, and the conditions that frame the conversation, have the power and the responsibility. From this vantage point of seeing the self as narratively constructed, women can choose to relive these *culturally sacred story lines* (Boje, 1991, p.106) , perpetuating their influence, or reimagine them on their own terms.

b) Restorying: the process

Through my narrative inquiry, I move through listening to stories and participating in restorying in coaching, into restorying as a researcher. As set out above, in conversations, I take on the role of 'narrating alongside'. However, when it comes to capturing a story in writing for this inquiry story (which I will term 'authoring'), the dynamic shifts considerably and carries with it different ethical and power considerations. As author of stories that do not belong to me, there is a responsibility to interpret, honour and respect the stories of inquiry participants. A critical part of the process for my work is, thus, ensuring that the essence and ownership of these stories still belongs to the participants and that this is built into my methodology. Only from this point can the purpose driving this inquiry depart.

Adjacent to this ethical responsibility are the responsibilities, or purpose, I have as researcher to step outside these stories to make sense of, and meaning from, them for others' practical benefit. I am not simply reporting a version of participants' lives. Clandinin alludes to this requirement of respecting participants, whilst also making meaning from the inquiry: *How might we respect voices and silences of participants in interpreting the stories they tell?... How might we engage in conversations* ***and then interpret this talk to make educative meaning of our and others' lives and situations?*** (Clandinin, 2007, p.78) ***.*** This question underpins my methodological approach to inquiry; using a narrative way of knowing to identify points of action and intervene in my environment.

Language: articulated and unarticulated lenses of analysis

In considering how I author the stories and restorying of participants, it is important to emphasise the sense of the unarticulated stories present in conversations. This has a significant baring on the methodological choices I make, particularly around modes of sense-making. We must engage with and express stories in language, yet an experience is held in the body and imagination, not just our cognitive faculties. We share stories through language but, most often, also through our other sensory faculties; for example, we hear inflections and pauses, or we notice a discomfort through body language, such as crossed arms.

Stories in this inquiry, arguably, can become three steps removed from lived experience:

1. Firstly, in telling a story, a participant is sacrificing the wholeness of experience embedded in them – they are not reliving an experience in telling a story, but going through a storytelling process of election, creativity and intuition in that moment.
2. Secondly, as listener (narrator/interviewer/coach), I inevitably interpret stories through the lens of my own experience and assumptions web, as even the deepest, most attentive listening does not permit a 'reliving' of another's experience.
3. Finally, in the process of authoring the inquiry story, I am required to express and distil these stories in language that I choose.

Again, it is important to distinguish here that I am not listening as a reporter, but as a practitioner-researcher with a purpose of making meaning from the stories told. How, then, to mitigate against or account for the 'three steps removed' and ensure participants' intentions are honoured? As with coaching, there is a significant part of 'conversation' that takes place in what is unsaid. In her analysis of the self in language – and the impossibility of containing all of the self within language – Rogers encourages narrative researchers to listen for what is not said and what lies within and beyond language in so-called story threads:

Listening for story threads is a little like listening for the melody of a song, rather than following the story's content and becoming attached to it as a narrative (Rogers , p.110).

This analytical metaphor resonated deeply with me as a coach (and amateur musician), providing a lens of analysis open to intuition and sensory understanding of a conversation. This mode of analysis also creates a defined space for authoring the inquiry story; it contains the articulated story **and** the felt interpretation of the unarticulated, in that moment of the shared interface. This data is drawn not simply from transcripts, but also from in-the-moment observations and reflections, as well as through other methods of reflective practice. To extend the musical metaphor, the transcript might represent a single stark note of a chord, but the other notes are needed to hear its full expression and appreciate the melody through the story.

c) Restorying: the method

Below I set out a way to make meaning from conversation in this study, that seeks to create space for the felt interpretation of the unarticulated and involve the participants in how their story is told.

Engage in conversation	• 'Contract' with participants, as in a coaching engagement, about terms of our conversation, particularly around confidentiality and drawing out any other matters that are important to individuals • No pre-prepared questions or need for chronological representation of maternity story; rather whatever is most influential or front-of-mind that they want to share about their maternity experience • Important to note that that for some, they are still living the maternity transition phases 'live' (e.g. pregnant or recently returned to work), whereas for others it was several years ago. • Conversations recorded via Zoom (and automatically transcribed)
'Live' note taking	• Whilst in conversation, take note of particular comments or words or points that strike a chord with me • I will also note any particular shifts I observe in body language, comfort in conversation, pauses or inflections that feel part of the "unarticulated story"/non-verbal. • No explicit intention behind what I write down; what feels evocative or most resonant during any given conversation
Post-conversation reflections	• Read through my notes and add any reflective commentary about my own experience of the conversation e.g. anything I felt particularly keenly in having the conversation • Also add any commentary that is relevant about my state of mind during/before/after and other narrative conditions e.g. some interviews are scheduled between other coaching sessions, whereas others follow a period of downtime where I may be able to go for a walk or engage in another quiet or mindful activity
Intentional reflexive review	• Within a couple of days, return to my notes and add any additional details to the notes e.g. highlighting something that feels important in hindsight, or writing side notes about any subsequent thoughts or feelings about this story. • Also reflect upon why I had noticed what I noticed (in my own notes) during initial conversation • Option to return to recording/transcript to clarify any unclear notes or commentary
Reauthor the story	• For inquiry conversations, write-up my interpretation of the conversation, recognising that this is no longer simply the participant's story, but has passed through the filter of my experiences and our shared conversation
Share	• To honour the participant's original intentions and context, share my version of the story with the participant for their alternations and comments • Amend according to their wishes and agree final representation
Author 'final inquiry story'	• Weave individual stories together into a broader understanding of the context I am operating in • Use this inquiry story to share my emergent understanding with participants and stakeholders

Table 2: Restorying phases

ii. Reflexive thematic analysis

a) Research in practice

For the professional side of this engagement, I agreed to create a report for Partner Firms on the 'state of play', as a departure point for designing interventions with them. As part of a partnership, firms wanted to know the themes that were coming out of the conversations I had, as well as recommended actions. As such, I decided to incorporate a version of a reflexive thematic analysis, exploring themes in an inductive manner from the interviews (rather than pre-set themes) to provide the basis of my professional report.

One of the principal reasons for using reflexive thematic analysis was the flexibility of the theoretical framework behind it and the rich variety of decisions it allowed in terms of the research design. For example, when it comes to collecting data, *a very wide variety of data collection methods – such as focus groups, or story completions – and data types – such as interview transcripts, diary entries, or social media postings – are amenable for analysis with reflexive TA* (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.61). This was important in this study because data was taken from a variety of sources; recorded Zoom interviews and a workshop, as well as a face-to-face workshop.

Given the parallel narrative analysis in this study, rather than looking at the interview transcripts as the primary source of data, I decided to use my own interview and focus group notes as the first source, which focused on evocative storied data. In the case of the focus group, these notes were annotations of group discussions. In interview notes, I habitually recorded non-verbal data, such as: how the participant seemed (e.g. hurried and stressed); the setting of the conversation (e.g. on Zoom with a sick child in the background); where there were pauses and inflections; and how I felt in that conversation. These notes reflected the experience of the conversations and the extended epistemology in this inquiry. The recorded video of the interview then acted as a secondary source of data for details, verification, and 'missed moments', with the transcript as a final source. Coding focused on meaning at a latent level in what Braun and Clarke describe as *an organic and evolving process of noticing potentially relevant meaning in the dataset, tagging it with a code, and ultimately building a set of codes from which themes are developed* (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.236). I include here an example page of the coding process (blue annotations).

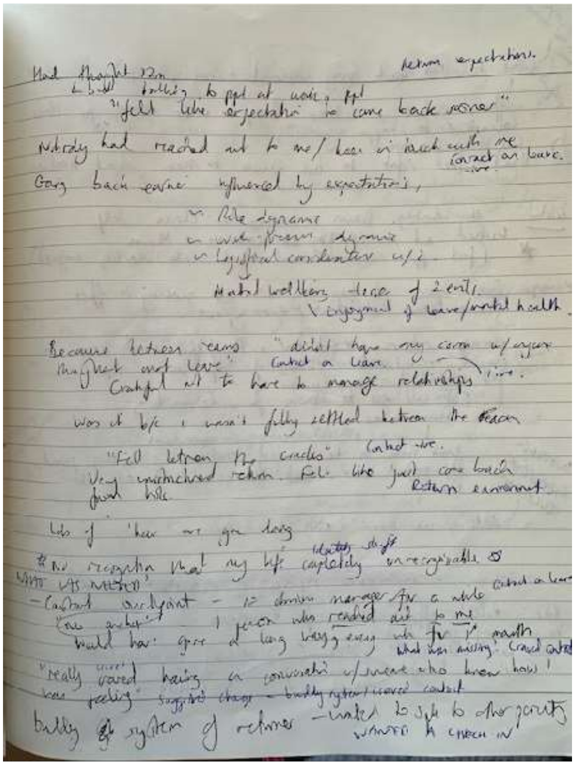


Figure 8 : Example of coding notes

In terms of deciding what constituted a theme, Richard Boyatzis's definition is a helpful base: *a theme is a pattern […] that at the minimum describes and organises possible observations or at the maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon* (Boyatzis, 1998, p.vii). In their review of the literature defining themes in thematic analysis, DeSantis and Ugarriza also emphasise some interesting definitions of a theme: Firstly, *whereas the majority of the literature states that themes emerge from the data, the term* emerge *does not mean they spontaneously fall out or suddenly appear* (DeSantis and Ugarriza, 2000, p.355)*;* rather, there is a thorough and rigorous process behind theme extraction. Additionally, they found agreement that *themes(a) unite a large body of data that may otherwise appear disparate and unrelated, (b) capture the essence of the meaning or experience, and (c) direct behavior across multiple situations* (DeSantis and Ugarriza, 2000, p.355). These overarching definitions form the basis of generating themes described in the method below.

This approach to thematic analysis allowed me to focus heavily on the data at a latent, interpretative level. In this analysis, the underlying ideas and unarticulated feelings and concepts that shaped a conversation were as important as what was verbally shared, as so much is about feeling, gut and intuition in a conversation. This approach also allowed me to honour my epistemological approach, as set out above, even if the final output was cast in a professional consulting mould.

b) Reflexive thematic analysis: the method

The method I intend to use to analyse the conversations for the professional report involves six key phases. These phases represent the phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke, 2023), adapted to their place in this research-practitioner setting:

Familiarisation and immersion	• Detailed notes in each interview and focus group – intentionally review these

	• Reflect on my own conduct in each conversation: What did I already know? How did I show up? How did my experience influence my conduct, and also my analysis today? • Re-watch the video recording of interviews and add to notes and reflections (note how I change through interviews) • Refer back to transcript where relevant
Add codes	• Code the data based on emerging trends – can be altered, divided and contracted through the process
Generate themes	• Where are the shared ideas, experiences and concepts that cut across? • Put codes under bigger heading as themes
Review and refine themes	• Aim for no more than 6 themes (and minimise sub-themes)
Reflect on themes	• What is *the story* of each theme? What are the assumptions underpinning it? What are the implications of it? • Why are people talking about this particular thing in this way? • Where does this intersect with my own professional practice as a coach? How are these themes relevant to PE1 in terms of the story they are telling about experience in their firm?
Producing the report	• Describing the themes within the context of a consultancy document for partner firms, using direct examples and quotes as evidence of experience

Table 3 : Reflexive thematic analysis phases

The reflexive element is critical as it enables me to consciously and intentionally reflect on my positionality in this process and how it effects how I have the conversations, as well as how I interpret what is said and which themes I identify.

As Braun and Clarke (2023) suggest, *although these phases are sequential, and each phase builds on the previous, analysis is typically a recursive process, with movement back and forth between different phases.*

iii. The intersection of narrative and thematic analysis in practice

What is set out in 'Dual modes of sense-making' - the narrative inquiry tools (restorying) and the reflexive thematic analysis tools (narrative themes) - are two very different approaches to working with the 'data'. One is borne from the researcher's epistemological and ontological stance, and the other is borne from the commercial and consulting-style output sought by the research partners. However, the means of gathering data – through coaching sessions, group workshops and interviews – is consistent. The same data is being cut and securitized in two quite different ways, for two quite different outputs, but one practical application.

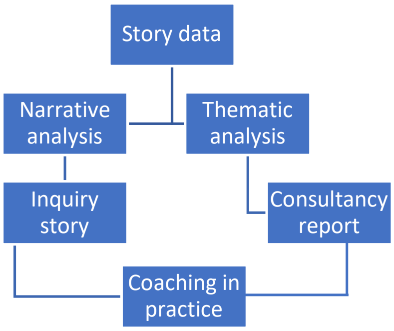


Figure 9 : The merging of narrative and reflexive thematic analysis

This inquiry is not unique in grappling with the influence of the context in which it operates: *In studies that seek to influence policy, narrative researchers tend to use more traditionally structured techniques that appeal to policy makers. […] Researchers wanting to use narrative inquiries for policy studies have to cast them in semi-post-positivist methods to be funded* (Hollingsworth, 2007, p.161). This inquiry is borne from a specific professional context, which then continues to exert an influence on it and affects its design. With practitioner research, there are requirements from the professional field that need to be satisfied alongside the requirements from the academic field; this distinction is important in both theory and practice. It also requires the researcher to be continually attentive to this dynamic, reflecting on how the different routes are feeding each other, where certain modes of thinking are more dominant and what is learnt from different routes in.

The nature of this practitioner inquiry dictates a responsiveness of methods to the context in which they are designed and used. This brought to the fore the importance of reflection-in-action, as theoretical approaches became practice and necessitated a flexibility, or agility, of methodological application.

There were some interesting learnings that emerged from conducting the thematic analysis alongside the narrative. With thematic, there was a feeling of stepping back from the individuals behind the stories and looking holistically at the collective experiences of this population. It provided a process to provide a clear description of the maternity leave phenomenon in this firm, and an opportunity to be thoughtful and intentional in viewing the participants as a group. It also represented a format and language of interpretation that was familiar to the HR stakeholder population. This is an important lens as, ultimately, the coaching interventions and solutions designed, from a 'top down' perspective, are not able to cater to individual requirements in isolation; they need to be viewed from a distance and designed to respond to commonality of experience, rather than difference, as well as be practically actionable.

However, the process of 'zooming out' removed the stories from their natural context, most notably the context in and purpose for which their story was being shared. As the analysis was conducted, the more challenging it was to recall where 'in a story' examples were sourced from and what they were intended to mean. Stories shared have a sequence to them, that imbues them with meaning; when removed from their place in the story, examples of phrases, words or behaviours are arguably stripped of some of that meaning and can even be given another meaning placed in a different context. Hardin examines the process of interview analysis with story data and concludes:

Although there were similarities across accounts, so too were their noticeable and significant differences. Attempting to compress the data into thematic categories would have reduced the complexity of analysis, notably erasing the social aspects of how the data were constructed: what was being produced, for whom, and in what social context (Hardin, 2003b, p.537).

The restorying method set out above in Methodology provided what proved to be a complimentary way to experience the data shared; a 'zooming in', living in the context of the moment of the sharing of the story. For example, there were some areas that were clearly more important to a participant, where they dwelled in the telling, where they were perhaps emotional or paused for reflection, or where they were prompted for further description. These evocative fragments piece together to tell a collective story, an inquiry story shared between narrators, which is not entirely consistent with the themes derived from thematic analysis because it is designed with a different purpose in mind, and for a different audience. As Riessman describes, in narrative, *events are selected, organized, connected, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience* (Riessman, p430). The 'why' and the 'how' of the story are as important as the 'what'.

However, it is important to highlight here that these modes of sense-making were carried out with the same original data and by the same researcher, in concurrent and overlapping processes. Sense-making was ongoing, informing other cycles of activity iteratively. The two modes of analysis are distinguished clearly in theory and in process, but in practice, they contribute to the same current of thinking and approach to professional practice.

'Themes' is perhaps a dirty word in narrative academic circles, but there is value as a coach-practitioner in a system of being able to step back and focus on what is thematically common and shared. Instead of viewing thematic analysis as a separate theoretical methodology, in this case, it has formed part of an interesting narrative exercise and method of analysis. Indeed, Grover (2004) distinguishes between *explanatory narrative inquiry (used to find out how and why events came about) and descriptive narrative inquiries (the expressions of self, other, and collective identity through stories*). In these terms, through 'zooming out', the thematic approach allowed a means to talk about the 'how' and 'why' of events in a way that could meaningfully impact policy and practice. Instead of living in the extended accounts of individual stories, it forced a removal of individual context and a reminder of the importance to this inquiry of group context, of the firm and industry narrative.

In my Researcher Development proposal, I described a process of thinking narratively about a phenomenon as 'shifting the bar' on the conditions that frame a story: *Using Clandinin's three commonplaces of narrative inquiry (2007) as a basis, the framework I will use for analysis and interpretation assumes a shifting bar along three axes:* Temporality *situates stories and events at a point of time, but recognises they are* temporal*, with a past, present and future;* sociality *draws on the personal conditions of a story and also the social environment, the* surrounding factors and forces *(Clandinin, Pushor and Murray Orr, 2007, p.23) that create context, including the relationship between participant and inquirer; and* place *refers to the concrete, physical location of inquiry* (Reynolds, 2022, p.23).

By 'shifting the bar' on these conditions, the analysis lens is able to zoom in and out, providing a multiplicity of perspectives. The thematic analysis lens creates an opportunity to draw on the events and setting, viewing the story alongside others in a way that focuses on their commonalities. The narrative analysis lens permits a zooming in on the story in its own context, and the role of the *inquirer* in the process of restorying together.

A single methodology in practice

Grafanaki & McLeod (2002) also combined thematic and narrative modes of data analysis, using them as a means to explore the concept of congruence in client-centred therapy. Their methodology consisted of recorded interviews with both the clients and the counsellors after sessions, asking them to share their experiences and also report on their feelings, other non-verbal experiences and *things left unexpressed* (Grafanaki and McLeod, 2002, p.21). This was performed in an open-ended way: *The interview encouraged participants to tell their story of what had happened during these events in their own words* (Grafanaki and McLeod, 2002, p.22). The following method – developed for this study - was then used to analyse the data (p.23):

1. **Immersion in the data –** reading the transcribed interviews.
2. **Identification of congruence/incongruence** - phrases were extracted from the transcripts and clustered into categories that related to this concept.
3. **Identification of other processes and qualities** – exploration of other themes or *qualities*.
4. **Compiling individual case reports** – a summary of the main findings for each case was written into a case study, which was then shared with both the counsellor and the client for comments and changes.
5. **Cross-case analysis** – a set of categories compiled across cases.

This echoes some of the ways thematic and narrative modes are combined in this inquiry. In brief, the following methods were used:

1. **Gathering storied data through interviews, workshops and coaching** – carried out in a way consistent with the researcher's epistemological stance around the narrative way of knowing. These included live note taking, including reflections in-the-moment and immediately after.
2. **Intentional reflexive review** - of notes, video recording and transcript
3. **Codes and themes** - generated, reflected upon and altered
4. **Thematic report** - produced for consulting output
5. **Review and reauthor of individual stories** – evocative case studies reauthored by researcher and shared with participants for their comments and amendments.
6. **Inquiry story produced, an organisational story** – across the different cases, a collection of selected lived experiences of women who take maternity leave in these firms, as a collective narrative of their firm.

As detailed here, there was an output from each of the different analysis strands – narrative and thematic – but, in practice, these came together in me, as a practitioner engaging with this community.

4.3. Research design: cycles of action and reflection

The going-forward-toward is a good deal more general that you would have me have it. It is the nonexplorer who rather naively assumes that he can trust a clear sharp picture in his mind of where he is going. To be an explorer is to not know where, concretely, one is going. (Vaill, 1981, p.18)

It is only in beginning my inquiry that I fully understand the necessity - and inevitability - of an emergent design process. Whilst certain parameters are clear and direct the course of inquiry, the paths it takes are not by my design alone. For example, I cannot plan what coaching interventions and approaches will make sense until I have had conversations with the communities I am partnering with, to understand what is appropriate; I also cannot anticipate the breadth of their experiences and how they choose to share them. The inquiry will be constructed in dialogue with the context in which it evolves – *a multidimensioned, ever changing life space* (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 481) - *which dictates the form of inquiry and is, inevitably, altered by the inquiry* (Reynolds, 2022).

As discussed with reference to an action research approach to this study, cycles of action and reflection contribute to the emergent design process. There are three key phases, which allow the decisions and shape of the study to be designed and altered as it progresses.

This is set out below in 'Design schema':

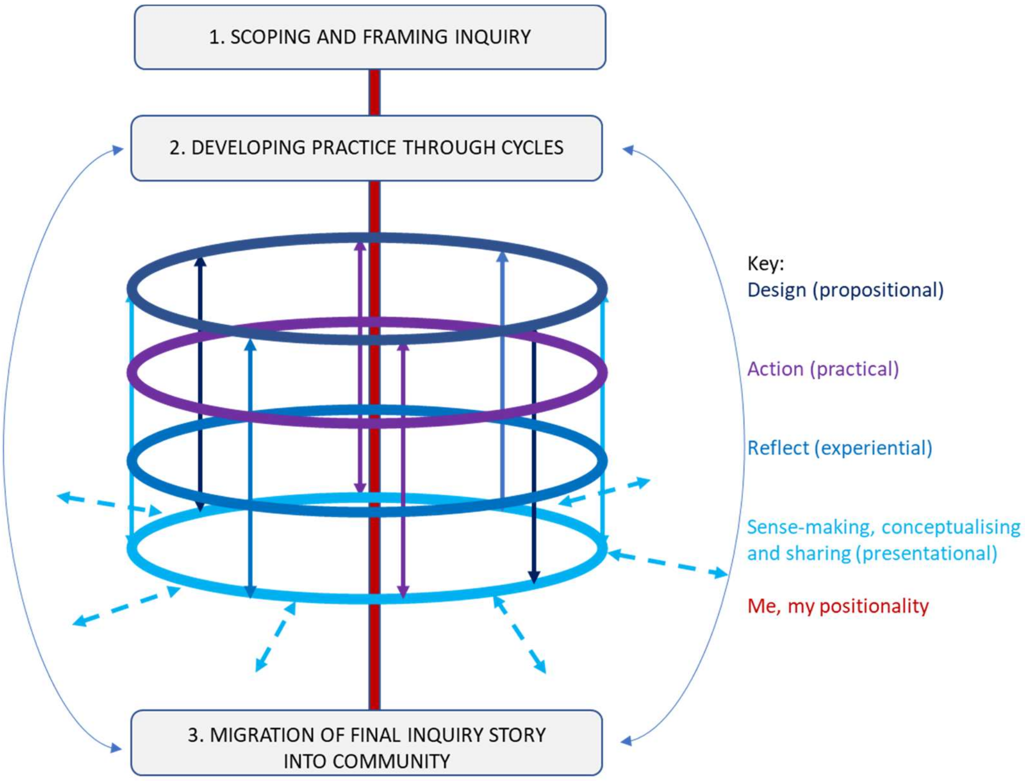


Figure 10: Design schema

Phase 1: Scoping and framing inquiry

Prior to this inquiry, all my reflexive practices and professional development were about my own practice, my own experience of becoming a mother in this environment and how I experienced my coachees. For these reasons, I decided to first build a Scoping and Framing Phase into my inquiry, which served four principal purposes:

- to 'add colour' to the background wash of my own experience of this phenomenon;
- to pinpoint area and routes of intervention (biggest impact, access to participants etc.);
- to pilot ways of interacting with my participants – practically and intellectually;
- to pilot my own reflective practices – ways of working and recording.

It is necessary to recognise that the decisions I took in designing the inquiry were both elective and serendipitous, further reinforcing the requirement for an emergent design process in this inquiry.

In order to more accurately frame my inquiry, I wanted to closely examine my ongoing professional activities and learnings, to see where the direction of my practice was taking it. Alongside this, I also wanted to speak to mothers working in financial services, to get an appreciation of where the 'energy' was to direct decisions around where to focus the study.

i. Conversations about lived experiences:

I identified 11 women who work, or worked, in a financial institution during the maternity transition phases, with children under 5, in order to ensure recent relevance to the study. The other criterion for inclusion was that they were in a 'fee-earning' (e.g. investment banker) or corporate function role (e.g. human resources), as this is the area where my professional work – and inquiry - takes place and could have an impact. I contacted my broader network of friends and colleagues, sharing the criteria for inclusion, and asking them to share into their network. The women who participated were those who voluntarily came forward and contacted me, wanting to share their story as part of this inquiry. It was important to me that those who participated were interested in the underlying purpose of the inquiry and were keen to make their story known as part of this; this aligned with one of my inquiry objectives of making stories heard and visible.

Due to practical considerations, such as very restrictive time constraints stemming from demanding work environments, and constructing a space for conversation that feels safe and intimate, I elected to conduct these conversations individually. The interviews were set-up as a conversation in line with the methodology set out above, with no pre-prepared interview questions, simply a starting point: can you tell me about your maternity journey working in financial services? The conversation was then taken to whichever part of the maternity journey the participant deemed most relevant to their story. I conducted these interviews on Zoom, with video recording and auto-transcript.

As previously described, many coaching skills and disciplines applied to this type of interview and how I am as a researcher; in particular, participant-led open questions and deep listening to what is said and unsaid. I also highly value the practice of 'contracting' from the coaching profession (i.e. agreeing ways of working together around subjects such as confidentiality, timing, future contact) and chose to build this into how I structured interview conversations. In my work, agreeing with the participant how their story is shared is both ethically important - to ensure the participant co-creates the conditions of the conversation – and psychologically important - to establish trust and a safe space.

Name (pseudonym)	Role	Financial sector	Children	Length of mat leave
Eva	Portfolio manager	Investment management	2yo; pregnant	9m
Clare	Deal team	Private equity	4yo; 2yo; 7m	6m; 4m; 4m
Joanna	Treasury team	Fintech	3yo; pregnant	6m
Katherine	Credit sales	Investment bank and fintech		11m; 9m; 6m
Annabelle	Equities analyst	Investment management	6yo; 5yo; 2yo	6m; 5m; 5m
Syeda	Sales strategy	Investment bank	4yo; 2yo	11m; 9m
Natalja	Investment team	Private equity	2yo; pregnant	5m
Anjali	Sales	Investment bank	3yo	15m
Naaz	Investor relations	Private equity	2yo; pregnant	10m
Laura	HR	Investment bank	5yo; 3yo	6m
Claudia	Investment team	Private equity	9m	2 weeks

Table 4: Scoping phase participants

ii. Ongoing professional activities:

It is important to note that, alongside developing my research, I was also building a business, which had implications for shaping my emergent methodology. My reflexive practices built into my day-to-day coaching activities inevitably formed a part of this Phase, as there was almost constant osmosis between my professional and research strands. There were also wider elements of my professional activities that were not a pre-designed part of my research methodology but became formative in how I shaped my work and merit inclusion in describing its development. For example, I occasionally speak at events to different groups, such as HR or women's network groups. Such events are important because they represent a snapshot of the evolution of my thought at that point in time. They also enable me to get collective input from the communities I engage with, further shaping my inquiry story in transition and allowing me to disseminate the ongoing, evolving implications and conceptualisation of my practitioner research.

Whether through intentional conversations with women to understand their stories, or stories that emerge through my coaching practices, I wanted to develop my reflective practices to build a robust approach to carry forward into my inquiry. This involved noting observations in-the-moment, reflective journalling 'after-the-moment', or a conscious combination of both. I also needed to make decisions about how I involve participants in the inquiry design and how that looks in practice.

The intended outcomes of 'Phase 1: Scoping and framing inquiry' were:

- understand and transparently articulate who I am engaging with, and how and why;
- consider and test approaches to critical reflection in practice;
- establish both principles and practices for involving participants in the inquiry;
- have a clear rationale for the choices I am making, at that moment in time, in that particular setting and with the opportunities available;
- develop an appreciation of the impact of this inquiry in the environment I intervene in;
- understand the potential for inquiry to shape my own and others' practice.

Phase 2: Developing practice through cycles

As previously discussed, with an action research approach to inquiry, engagement with, and intervention in, the communities I work with is best represented as a series of cycles (Figure 11: The braided cycles of practice). The activities in each cycle do not happen in sequence, but rather happen in multiple directions, often retracting back or jumping forward depending on the flow of practice and opportunity. The distinctions between cycles is, in many ways, 'academic'; the process is messy and intertwined when captured in description, but paradoxically intuitive and imaginative in practice. The cycles themselves are also intertwined: just as a braided rope twists strands to keep them together, strengthen them and distribute tension equally amongst them, so the cycles in my practitioner-research benefit from their interconnectedness.

Figure 11: The braided cycles of practice

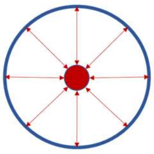
Some activities are explicitly designed as part of the study, working alongside institutions and participants, whereas others are adjacent professional activities; the distinction is grey and becomes hazier as the inquiry progresses and the relationship between 'inquiry' and 'practice' tightens. As the recipients of coaching and the associated stakeholder community (e.g. line managers, HR, broader private equity community) are the same in both inquiry and coaching practice, the strands of practice and inquiry are synergistically and symbiotically linked and brought to life together through me and how I operate.

The below table indicates some of the activities that may take place in each cycle in . These activities are in no particular order, which is why the cycles are depicted without directional arrows and as a constant band. They also intentionally and inextricably reference other cycles as part of their cyclicality. The cycles of cooperative inquiry set out in Heron's *participative worldview* (Heron and Reason, 1997) act as a basis for this inquiry, involving an extended epistemology and, with that, the inherent challenge of *critical subjectivity* (Heron and Reason, 1997, p.280). As I have previously highlighted, *this has an evident link with Kolb's experiential learning cycle (2008), which also forms part of coaching training curriculums* (Reynolds, 2022). The principles behind the activities in the cycles below take inspiration from both sources, adapting them for the nuances of this inquiry.

Design cycle (propositional)	Action cycle (practical)	Reflection cycle (experiential)	Sharing cycle (presentational)
Engage with Community to understand experiences and opportunities for change – defining focus	Implement interventions from design phase next steps	Assessing impact of different interventions with Community - observing, noticing, sensing, feeling – and also my own reflections	Expression of experiential, conceptualising practice to distil into theory and action - articulating the significance of personal actions and learning
Define priorities for action and proposed initial data collection and interventions– knowledge by description	Ongoing professional activities – knowledge in action- and inquiry activities	Articulate learnings from reflexive practices, including conversations with coach supervisor	Engaging with community to get feedback on presentational outputs
Share proposed interventions back with Community for feedback and amendments	Gathering storied data - applying, testing, feeling, noticing – from interviews, coaching, conversations	Active engagement with my own positionality and how this interacts with my inquiry – multi-perspective	Speaking at events, sharing with other coaches to capture thinking (at a point in time) and getting feedback. Contribute

			to critical professional debates
Get buy-in/agreement from key stakeholders about data collection and interventions	Test different points of flex in my coaching style- how I am when I coach, different ways of interacting.	Sense-making and interpreting the data for evocative story fragments	Modify thinking and proposed changes to practice based on learnings and interactions
Interaction with other Phase 2 cycles	Interaction with other Phase 2 cycles	Interaction with other Phase 2 cycles	Interaction with other Phase 2 cycles

Table 5: Example activities in each cycle



I sit at the core of these cycles, with the constant interaction with my own positionality forming radial lines out to each activity. Like spokes in a bike wheel, this interaction with my own positionality transfers energy out into the cycles and serves to strengthen their shape. As such, when it comes to laying out my research activities and my ongoing sense-making processes, the narrative way of knowing cuts through the distinction of the cycles. **The story of how I conducted myself through my research and what I did bonds the cycles together.**

How these activities came to life in practice was designed alongside the participants and institutions I partnered with for this inquiry. There were ultimately three fundamental methods of data collection in this inquiry:

1. 1:1 interviews with women who have taken maternity leave (within particular Partner Firms): the exact profiles of the participants was dependent on how participants are recruited (profiles in Project Activity).
2. Group workshops with the communities to gather stories and co-design what actions I would take and how we would review these.
3. Ongoing coaching activities and reflective practices.

It is important to note that the participants in this study were all intellectual professionals capable of participating in co-inquiry with a high level of engagement (practical, political and intellectual). It is also relevant that participation was elective, meaning that those who came to interviews and groups were at least curious about the topic, if not deeply reflective and motivated by it and true co-creators.

The intended outcomes from 'Phase 2: Developing practice through cycles' were:

- To take action and intervene in my environment, gathering storied data and also acknowledging data from different sources.
- Use modes of sense-making to interpret and present the data.
- Judge the quality of my professional activities and my inquiry: *one could state that the quality of action research comes down to a commitment to a set of underlying values, conceptions and methodological principles, and this commitment should come with the moral obligation to justify the why, what and how of the choices that are made (Ponte, 2006: 451-2).*
- Share learnings with those involved in the inquiry, as well as other coaching professionals (recognising the modes of sense-making and presentation will likely differ)

Phase 3: Migration of 'final inquiry story' into community

The final part of my inquiry refers back to the original aims and intentions of my work: to intervene and make a difference to both those directly participating in the inquiry and the wider communities I am working within. This broader dissemination is achieved partly through ongoing professional activities, such as speaking at events, and through conversations with coachees. Such events are a reflective and reflexive process, further informing me about my context and how I move within it. They also enable me to capture differences in how I talk about the problem and solution through time and changing context, and continue my Phase 2 cycles beyond the time frame of this doctorate.

Although my cycles of professional activity continue, there is an end point to this inquiry, whereby I need to present my thinking at a point in time – my final inquiry story – to share with relevant professional and academic communities. This requires me to conceptualise my practice, identifying areas for action and points of leverage for other coach practitioners or influential stakeholders such as HR. This is communicated with my direct leadership team, and our group practice and discussions, as well as writing blogs and other means of disseminating practice into the community. It also necessitates a sharing of the contributions of professional practice, particularly to the extent that they contribute to new thinking and practices in this field of inquiry.

The intended outcomes 'Phase 3: Migration of 'final inquiry story' into community' are:

- Demonstrate my professional and personal learnings, and the significance of who I am and my actions as part of these learnings.
- Final inquiry story to contribute to critical professional debates.
- Modification of my own practice, that of my colleagues, and of the wider coaching community I might influence, based on conceptualising my practice.
- Findings to influence the private equity communities I work with, contributing to the work of cultural change and making private equity an industry where women who become mothers can work sustainably.
- Findings to contribute to existing academic research with working mothers' experiences in the private equity industry and coaching practices.
- A recognition of the insubstantial and provisional nature of the findings, and commitments as a practitioner to further my aims through my ongoing professional practice.
- Identification of further areas of inquiry.

4.4 Obstacles and solutions

4.4.1 Agreeing ways of working with HR 'gatekeepers'

Whilst having initial conversations to design the partnerships, I was aware of the 'double-edged sword' of the 'gatekeeper' phenomena with Partner Firms. As I have already set out, there were some considerable benefits brought to the engagement through the HR professionals' knowledge of their firms and cultural environment. However, they also had a responsibility to protect the reputation of their firms (indeed, I had to sign NDAs) and therefore had the power to control which participants they selected as stories they were able to share. I reflected upon this risk of 'sanitising' the participants with each firm and how to deal with it in the inquiry.

- With one of the firms, I sensed that the HR professional leading the project was consciously and personally motivated by the aims of the inquiry; not only was she a mother herself, but I was aware of her desire to have an impact on others, and how it could live through this partnership. I was conscious of the lens she applied, having had direct experience of maternity leave in the firm and also indirect, as the 'in house' port of call for women who had questions or concerns around the maternity management process. However, she was also a long serving, committed professional, used to nimbly navigating the infrastructure of the firm. This provided an additional facet to her role as gatekeeper because there was an element of having the firm's interest at the core of her decisions. I was alert to this through the course of the inquiry and noted where this influence was experienced.

- The HR contact at the other firm was also an accredited coach, who had a positive bias towards coaching and its value in this context. She had worked across different industries and her experience and intentions behind the project were heavily influenced by her genuine interest in our shared aim, of improving the maternity experience of women in the firm through coaching.

With both firms, as in any relationship, I also believed in the power of establishing trust as a means of creating a safe space to share and disclose information. This was relevant both in terms of establishing trust with the gatekeepers, and also with participants themselves. There were moments where some of the challenges were brought to the fore explicitly by the gatekeepers themselves, such as sharing that they would like to engage in certain activities but that they would not work in their firm.

It was impossible to remove the risks of the sanitising or obstructive gatekeeper, but an aligned ethos and a relationship built on trust were important fundamentals in mitigating some of this. Even with the different nuances brought to the inquiry with the gatekeeper structure, the benefits of engaging with participants at an institutional level, rather than solely individual, outweighed the challenges. In the very act of engaging with this project and prioritising action in this space, I was comfortable that the gatekeepers intended to bring to the fore the full range of experiences of their maternity returner populations.

Finally, due to the nature of this inquiry, there was an inevitability that participants would not simply be sharing their own lived experiences, but rather their story of being a mother in their firm, influenced by others' stories.

4.4.2 Losing HR stakeholder relationships

The two HR partners outlined above both left their respective institutions at different points during the inquiry. With PE2, the HR partner left relatively quickly after I had begun work with the firm. This meant a period of slowed momentum and little opportunity to move forward with any of the pre-agreed initiatives. However, once the new HR head started, the inquiry – and professional – work took on a new energy because she had more internal backing to make changes. For example, she was able to get approval for the maternity returner allyship coaching, which felt a distant possibility with the previous contact.

The other HR head left at the very end of the inquiry, once the report and been agreed and shared with internal stakeholders. Whilst there are still contacts who were involved in this inquiry project, there is less focus on the agreed initiatives since her departure.

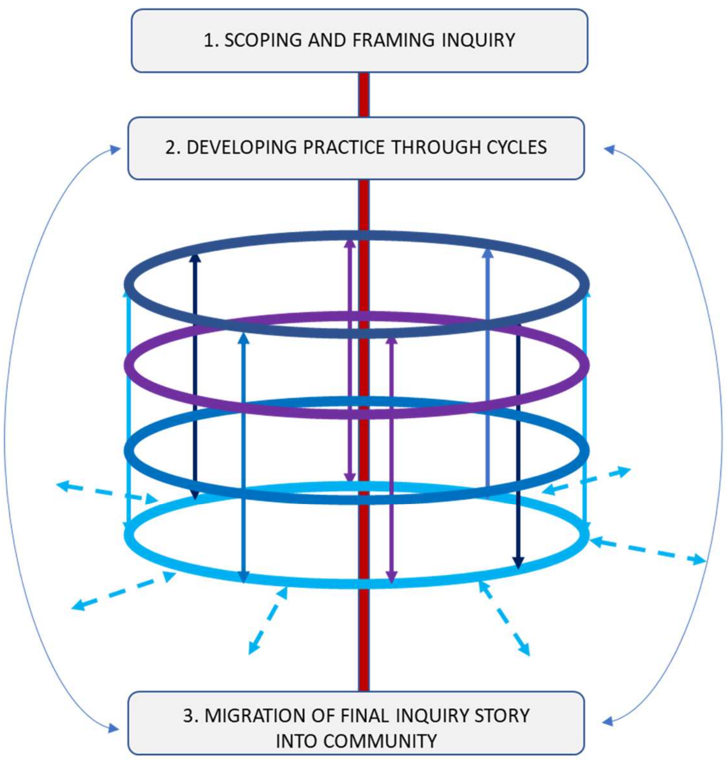
The changes to HR stakeholder contacts during the inquiry demonstrated clearly how important those relationships were to the success of the inquiry. Due to serendipity and timing, neither had a significant impact on the progress of the inquiry and access to participants. However, I recognise that this was a bigger risk than I anticipated as so much of the decision-making sits with a single empowered individual.

4.4.3 The views of those who did not return

One limitation of the participant group from this inquiry was that I did not get the opportunity to speak to any women who elected not to return from maternity leave, only maternity returners. This clearly impacted the range of experiences gathered, because only those who felt they were able to return to the PE environment shared their story through interview.

However, in my professional activities as a coach, there were two examples of women who did not return from leave; I coached them before they went on leave, but they told me during their pre-return session that they were unable to return. The essence of their experience is, therefore, captured in my first-person work, if not in the interviews.

5. PROJECT ACTIVITY AND EMBEDDED SENSE-MAKING



1. Research activities

1
1. Conversations about lived experiences
2. Business Brain
3. Selecting a focus area
4. Accessing participants and agreeing ways of working

2. **Gathering storied and reflective data**

'Macro' institutional intervention cycles
1. 1:1 interviews
2. Group workshop PE2
3. Group workshop PE1
4. Individual coaching
5. Report production/RTA
6. Sharing findings

   ~ *Cycle 2*

7. Group coaching: resilience in working motherhood
8. Line managers: more sessions and group work
9. Coaching returner allies
10. Improving resources and collateral

'Micro' coaching practice cycles
1. How much of my story to bring in?
2. Line manager sessions: best practice toolkit?
3. Who is the client? And how directive should the coach be?

3
1. Business Brain
2. Women in PE, guest speaker
3. PE/Level 20 HRD breakfasts
4. Blog publications
5. Senior leadership team meetings and group coaching supervisions

Figure 12: Project activities schema

In setting out my research activity, I have approached it by describing the activities alongside the design schema flow. Distilling down the evolution of my coaching in practice, my learnings as a practitioner and academic, and my reflections into writing has been a challenging process. In discussing my research activity, it became clear to me that the very act of 'writing-up' is itself a sense-making process; writing causes me to continually challenge my presentation of my story. This sense-making also happens through my research activities as an integral part of the cyclical processes I have previously laid out in my design schema.

In above, I have set out a table of the research activities that I carried out under each phase. These have been set out chronologically to evidence a generative impetus to the activities, and also as a means to talk about the inquiry in a linear way. However, the nature of the activities, particularly in Phase 3, are cyclical and dialogic; design, action, reflection and sense-making do not happen necessarily in that order, with the environment dictating the nature of the requirement of the moment.

I have split the activities in Phase 2 into two columns to distinguish two parallel channels:

1. **The 'macro' institutional intervention cycles**: These are the cycles of inquiry, representing the 'big' institutional-level activities, events and decisions that are made with the Partner Firms. The first five activities listed are all part of one cycle, which culminates with the recommendations (informed by these communities) for the Partner Firms, leading into another cycle of interventions and workshops with the community. Activities 7 onwards,

therefore, represent a second cycle, implementing some of the recommendations and developing new tools for practice and approaches to practice.

2. **The 'micro' coaching practice cycles**: These are the first-person cycles of practice, that are happening in parallel to the 'macro' activities. These are largely based on my reflective practices and represent marginal, but continual, alterations to how I practice and who I am in my practice. As such, there are multiple cycles happening within the bigger cycles of inquiry. I have dealt with them separately in order to draw out the importance of reflection to my sense-making processes in this inquiry; however, in practice, these are not separate activities and are entangled in the cycles of inquiry.

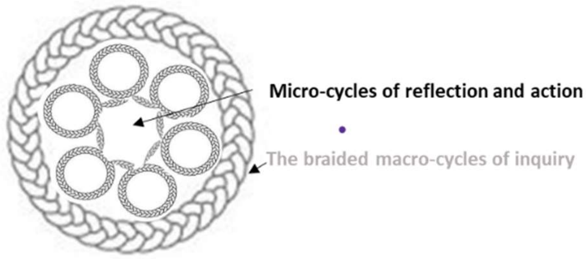


Figure 13: Entangled cycles of inquiry

The activities in Phase 2 represent a 'snapshot' of my coaching practice and relationship with my Partner Firms; this work continues beyond the life of the inquiry. In the same way, the channels through which I migrate my ideas into the communities I work with do not end with this inquiry and form part of a long-term professional journey.

Phase 1: Scoping and framing inquiry

i. Conversations about lived experiences (March/April/May 2022)

As I have previously alluded to, my contextual understanding – and subsequent professional decisions as a coach about why and how I offer maternity coaching services – had been built on my own experiences, and my interpretation of my clients' experiences in my capacity as a coach. The objective of these initial interviews was to **intentionally** have a conversation outside the coaching arena, explicitly asking women to share their experiences of the maternity transitions. The profile of these participants is shared in Methodology *Table 4:* alongside details of recruitment criteria.

These interviews were spread across a period of two months, alongside my regular coaching activities. As a result of this, there was an iterative reflexivity between what I was learning in these interviews that influenced my coaching, and how my regular coaching influenced the way I conducted interviews. As well as reflecting on the content itself, I also reviewed my notes and watched the interviews back to look at how I managed the process; when and how did I interject and when was I silent? What effect did this have? How did I influence or create an open state? I used each conversation as a means of learning how to do them better. I took these learnings into my ongoing research activity, through reflective notetaking and changes to my practice.

ii. 'Business Brain' roundtable event with HR heads (March 2022)

Alongside dedicated inquiry activities such as the interviews above, 'live' professional experiences also directed the entry points into my field of inquiry. One such event (March 2022) was a 'Business Brain' roundtable I organised with 15 Heads of HR from large, well-known investment banks and private equity firms to discuss 'Maternity Returners: How to retain more women in financial services'. The invitees were from a very targeted list of HR professionals who have experience and knowledge of this topic. The group size was structured around maximising the breadth of views, but ensuring that all group members could easily contribute. This was particularly relevant as, due to ongoing concerns around Covid and differing work patterns at the time, the event was run on Zoom. To open the event, I spoke about my experiences of maternity coaching in the industry and why I perceived there is a need for change. I hosted the event with a senior HR professional, who co-led a discussion with the group following my keynote.

Professionally, the aim of this event was to raise awareness about the work I was doing in this space and to gain a greater understanding of the views of key stakeholders who might 'buy' maternity coaching and who drive many of the decisions around what the Maternity Returners' experience looks like. For my inquiry, this event gave me the opportunity to pilot how I interact with this group and gave me an understanding of the institutional lens, the decision-making power sitting within this community, and how it cascades into the lived experience of the participants I am having conversations with. It also provided me with a 'snapshot' of how I was talking about my inquiry and conceptualising my practice at this point in time; this was my entry point into inquiry framing.

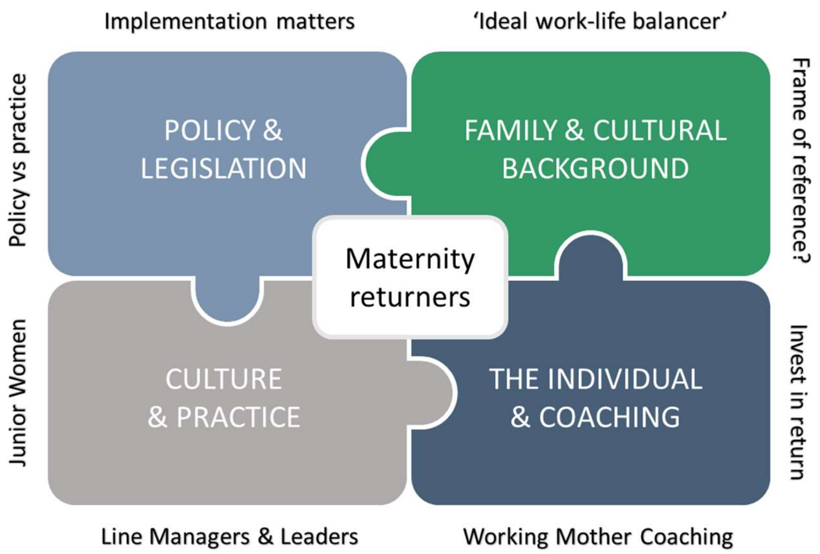


Figure 14: Maternity returners jigsaw, March 2022

The event was not recorded, as the participants judged they would be more open and honest 'off the record'. This contributed very positively to the depth of the discussion and the collaborative nature of the conversation. This meant that I elected to write brief notes through the discussion, noting phrases or behaviours that I noticed.

iii. Selecting a focus area for inquiry: Why the Private Equity (PE) industry?

Through the course of my interview conversations, alongside my ongoing professional practice, the private equity industry very clearly emerged as an area where my inquiry would have the most impact. Through the interview conversations, the maternity journey of those in PE was more nuanced, less supported and also a more significant problem for firms themselves to manage. The choice to focus on PE was also due to an awareness raised through the course of my normal professional activities, as an increasing number of my conversations were with HR professionals looking for solutions to improve the gender diversity profiles of their PE firms. The regulatory pressure on PE firms to achieve gender diversity targets – and their portfolio companies –had been increasing, alongside intensifying investor pressure.

This environment was also influenced by Level 20[2], a not-for-profit organisation founded with the aim of improving gender diversity in the private equity industry. Their two-fold mission – *to inspire women to join and succeed in private equity and to work with industry leaders to make the changes necessary for diversity and inclusion to flourish* - had been well 'broadcast' across the industry and awareness of the need to change was, and remains, high. My firm connected with Level 20 and co-created resourced relating to parental leave in PE. In short, the flow of business opportunity- and with it, the engagement and 'buy in' from HR and business stakeholders within firms – was well-timed. I was well-placed to use the opportunity to introduce a research partnership to firms.

One of the five areas highlighted by Level 20 research as a key driver of retention was 'family life support': *The strongest theme was the need for accessible, sophisticated, and nuanced family life support. […] 88% of participants named specific challenges around having children as a barrier to progression* (YSC Consulting and Level, 2021, p.25). Coaching was also explicitly named as one of the recommended *Actions to move the needle.*

For these reasons, the work I was carrying out, and the institutional-level inquiry I was proposing, resonated with firms and spoke contextually to the challenges they were facing.

iv. *Accessing participants and agreeing ways of working*

One of the unknown elements of my project was how I would access participants; whether I would recruit individual participants from a wide range of firms or whether I would get access to a specific firm 'in house'. This 'Business Brain' event had highlighted to me that HR professionals in the private equity industry had more autonomy and decision-making power than typically found in large investment banks, where there is often more 'red tape' and larger administrative and financial structures to navigate. It also highlighted just how important the institutional lens is in determining the experience a woman has of maternity leave.

Fortuitously, my doctoral project aims resonated with one of the attendees from the 'Business Brain' event and I was provided with the opportunity to partner with one of the largest international private equity firms (PE1), going 'in house' to understand the lived experiences of maternity transitions through both individual and the institutional lens. I was also subsequently introduced to another firm (PE2) who were keen to partner with me on the project.

Through partnering with firms, one benefit was easier access to participants, as well as the opportunity to have a far greater impact through my inquiry, influencing 'top-down' conversations and beginning to work with the culture of the firm in co-developing interventions. Context – in this case, firm culture – is of considerable influence in shaping a woman's experience of maternity, so the chance to go deeper with a firm rather than scattered across many, presented a significant opportunity. I felt very strongly that simply coaching the individual women going through maternity transitions would have a limited scope of influence; being able to have conversations with key stakeholders in the environment was critical to widening this scope.

In order to agree the terms of the partnerships, I shared my *Invitation Letter for Banks and PE firms* (Appendix A) with the firms, which laid out the research project aims, the benefits to them of participating and the commitment required for the project. The first point of engagement was with a team of senior HR professionals, who effectively acted as 'gatekeepers' to the participants and had an influence on the nature of my access. This group also had an understanding of the maternity context within their firms and, in several cases, also a personal experience of this. They also had a

[2] https://www.level20.org/who-we-are/why-we-exist/

unique insight into how interventions could be structured, where the cultural/firm 'boundaries' were and a view on how to navigate the environment.

We set up an initial 'Project Scoping Meeting', where we shared objectives, agreed ways of working together and articulated what outcomes we were seeking. I was then able to determine what the academic and professional activities would look like in the first cycle:

Activity	Objectives/outcomes
Academic	
1:1 interviews with 10+ women at Partner Firms to engage with lived experiences of maternity leave in the last 5 years ("Maternity Returners")	- Engage with evocative fragments that tell a story of how specific phenomena look in this specific context - Narrative 'evidence' of the priorities for action and points of leverage for intervention
Group workshop(s) in Partner Firm(s) with women who are experiencing maternity transitions, or have in the last 5 years	- Discuss opportunities for change - Identify specific points of action/recommendations to co-create pilot interventions
Define, design and recommend	- Recommend explicit areas for change and ways of impacting this environment 'top down' and 'bottom up'
Ongoing professional	
Maternity coaching with women and their line managers in partner firms	- Continue to grow my business in this field - Reflexively and symbiotically inform my academic activities
1st person reflective and reflexive practices, including with coach supervisor	- Be intentionally mindful of how I work, who I am in my work and what I am noticing - Identify points of flex/challenge/traction for ongoing micro cycles developing practice, 'reflection in action'
Conversations with key stakeholders, such as HR professionals, and report writing	- Understand needs and priorities at an institutional level - Create thematic report to summarise findings from interviews
Ongoing dissemination of ideas at events	- Conceptualise my practice at different points of time to 'rehearse' my thinking - Relationship building - Get feedback from the communities I am engaging with

Table 6: First cycle of activities

Although the overarching aims and objectives were aligned between my inquiry project and this professional project, it is worth noting that the outcomes the firms were seeking were more aligned with a consulting project. As I began designing my methodology 'in action', this context was critically important and also challenging – combining my research ethos and approach with the more traditional positivist outcomes sought in a consulting project.

Phase 2: Developing practice through cycles

Before setting out my research activities for this Phase, it is helpful to reiterate the nature of the activities in the cycle and the way they interact; in short, the cycles in practice. As laid out in , Phase 2 consists of a series of inter-related cycles. They do not occur in sequence, but often occur simultaneously, or involve going back and forth between cycles before moving forward. As described in the Design Schema, I have split the project activities into the macro institutional cycles, and the micro reflective cycles as a way of separating out these activities.

a. 'Macro' institutional intervention cycles

i. Individual 1-to-1 interviews (June/July/August 2022)

In order to build a picture of the firm-specific contexts in which I was operating and the individual experiences and stories of women who have experienced maternity at the Partner Firms, I first conducted a series of interviews. The criteria for selection were relatively broad, including any woman who had taken maternity leave whilst being an employee at a Partner Firm in the last 5 years, regardless of the division they work in.

It is worth noting that the participants I had access to were the ones who had returned to work and were selected by the HR contacts to encompass a range of divisions and roles. It is also important to recognise that the Maternity Returner community represent a group of highly educated women, who were not only participants in the 'data collection' but also able to intellectually engage with the purpose of the inquiry, participate meaningfully in the co-creation of interventions and provide input on the final inquiry story.

Interview #	Name (pseudonym)	Role	# of yrs at firm	Length of maternity leaves	Coaching?	PE1or PE2
1	Roisin	HR	4	11m	No	PE1
2	Rachel	Public affairs	6	12m; 9m	Yes	PE1
3	Sally-Anne	Marketing	20	7m; 13m	No	PE1
4	Nadine	Investment team	12	4m; 6m	Yes	PE1
5	Jasmine	Corporate affairs	3	9m	No	PE1
6	Flora	Investment team	12	5m; 5m	Yes	PE1
7	Clara	ICG	9	4m; 5m	Yes	PE1
8	Joy	Asset management	7	5m; 6m; pregnant	Yes	PE1
9	Mariella	Investment team	8	5m; 5m	Yes	PE1
10	Amandine	Investment team	6	6m	Yes	PE1
11	Mary	HR	2	12m	Yes	PE2
12	Gabriella	Investment team	7	7m; 6m	Yes	PE2
13	Catherine	IR	10	8m; 14m	No	PE2
14	Elizabeth	ICG	4	12m	Yes	PE2
15	Vinaya	Investment team	9	Pregnant	Yes	PE2
16	Jessie	EA	3	12m	No	PE2

Table 7: Interview participants from Partner Firms

As with the Scoping Phase interviews, these interviews were conducted on Zoom. This had multiple benefits, including ease of recording and transcribing, and also ease of scheduling for the participants, which was critical given that they all work in a high-pressured, time-poor environment.

Using learnings from the conversations in my Scoping Phase, I kept these interviews open-ended and let the participant take me to the most relevant part of their maternity journey story. This was consistent with Glover's approach to his interviews with community gardeners, where *each interview began with the simple request, "Tell me the story of your community garden," and the remainder of the interview flowed according to the research participant's direction* (Glover, 2004, p.149). I noted that several interviewees had a conscious reflexive awareness of their participation in a storytelling process. For example, *It's a long story but…* and *I'll tell you the whole story because it'll make me feel better.*

When conducting these interviews, I noticed how each interview influenced the next, as did my adjacent coaching activities. For example, I found myself increasingly drawn to listening intently to their experience of their line manager because it was emerging through these conversations that this relationship was of critical importance to a successful return to the workplace.

I was aware that my contextual appreciation of the individual stories was growing, creating a deeper understanding of their context and points of leverage, as I deepened my interactions with different women across the firms; however, this was also alongside an awareness that the stories remained individual, women conducted themselves very differently in the interviews and that there was a continuum of individual experience that was impossible to 'capture'. Haynes also highlighted this in her study with accounts: *To some extent, they had experiences that were potentially similar and it is these experiences that I intended to explore. How they dealt with them and felt about them may be different* (Haynes, 2008, p.332). For this reason, my reflective and reflexive practices were important to record experience beyond what was said, to understand my own influence and conduct and how that changed, and to appreciate the interaction of each story with the environment.

ii. Group workshop at PE2 (July 2022)

The HR stakeholders at PE2 were keen that momentum was kept up for contributing to this inquiry by conducted the follow-on workshop as a group. This was decided in order to build trust amongst the group and also allow them to collaborate with the researcher meaningfully over time in co-creating the firm-specific solutions. Their own maternity stories represented a breadth of lived experiences that contributed to a much richer view than mine alone, both as a mother and as a coach. Ethically, it is also right that those impacted by the inquiry are involved in the design of interventions in their environment. This echoes Heron and Reason's cooperative inquiry paradigm: *Research subjects have a basic human right to participate fully in designing the research that intends to gather knowledge about them […] The research is done by people with each other, not by researchers on other people or about them* (Heron and Reason, 1997, p.284).

The first group interaction was designed to understand this group's lived experiences of maternity within the context of their firm culture, and provide early insights into the opportunities for change and possible solutions. I prepared 4 questions for this workshop:

1. What, or who, has been influential in your experience of pregnancy, maternity transitions and working motherhood at PE2?
2. Pregnancy at PE2: where are the opportunities for change? What could be done to improve real day-to-day experiences?
3. Returning to work at PE2 (0-12m back): where are the opportunities for change? What could be done to improve real day-to-day experiences?
4. Working motherhood at PE2 (0-12m back): where are the opportunities for change? What could be done to improve real day-to-day experiences?

For each question, the group were split into sub-groups in order to maximise the amount of time participants got to speak. Each sub-group was asked to respect the components of Nancy Kline's *thinking environment,* most notably that each person gets to speak in turn, uninterrupted, and with the attention of their listeners. A 'scribe' was nominated in each group to record key points of conversation through notes, doodles, key words or other methods that worked for them. The groups were mixed for each question to change the interpersonal dynamics. At the end of each question, the groups came together to connect perspectives, compare the records of conversation, and share themes, patterns and collective discoveries.

The participants for this group were the same as those listed for PE2 in Table 7: Interview participants from Partner Firms.

iii. Group workshop with PE1 (January 2023)

Having spoken to women with a broad range of maternity experiences in PE1 on an individual basis, I wanted to conduct a group coaching workshop to co-create the pilot interventions from the 'bottom up', using their experiences to shape the possibilities in the present. As previously highlighted for the workshop for PE2, I viewed the participation of this group of women in the design phase as a critical point of influence. (Heron and Reason, 1997, p.284)

As with the 1-to-1 interviews, I specified to the HR team the profile of the attendees for the workshop and they selected the invitees; most of these were women who had taken part in the 1-to-1 interviews and who had taken a maternity leave in the firm in the last 5 years, but there were also 3 pregnant women who were yet to take a maternity leave who came to share their experiences of pregnancy. This meant there was an interesting blend of those who were retrospectively sharing their stories and those who were commenting on 'live', current experiences. Again, noticing the differences in how women conducted themselves and contributed in the workshop emphasised the necessity for an integral layer of observation and reflection.

Given the changed conditions in working environment post-Covid restrictions, most employees at PE1 were working in the office full-time. For this reason, I chose to conduct this workshop in person in the office over a lunchtime slot to maximise attendance. HR were not present as gatekeepers or observers, but one lady who worked in HR did attend as a participant. Upon arrival, there was an opportunity to have lunch and informal conversation, which contributed to a relaxed atmosphere and a feeling of open and informal sharing.

For the workshop, I had chosen three specific questions that I wanted to get collective input on. These questions were selected based on my learnings from my inquiry-to-date and professional experience in this Partner Firm that spoke to their challenges:

i. In a fast-paced, high-performance culture, what constitutes good line manager support during maternity transitions?
ii. What does an inclusive work environment look like for Maternity Returners? How can it practically be achieved?
iii. What else would be helpful to ensure a smooth transition back into your career?

In choosing how to structure the workshop, I first split the group into three smaller groups, giving them fifteen minutes to share their thoughts on the first question, with a nominated scribe. As set out in my methodology, I was aware of the potential of a group dynamic to silence some voices, as well as the fact that there were varying levels of both maternity experience and professional experience, that could risk giving greater credence and space to certain stories. By creating smaller groups, my intention was thus to minimise some of this impact and set up a smaller discussion, encouraging participants to rotate speakers and ensure a contribution was invited from each.

We then came back together as a larger group and each group shared what they had discussed and any insights or ideas. I recorded this discussion on a large flip chart and invited comments on the flip chart before we moved onto the next question.

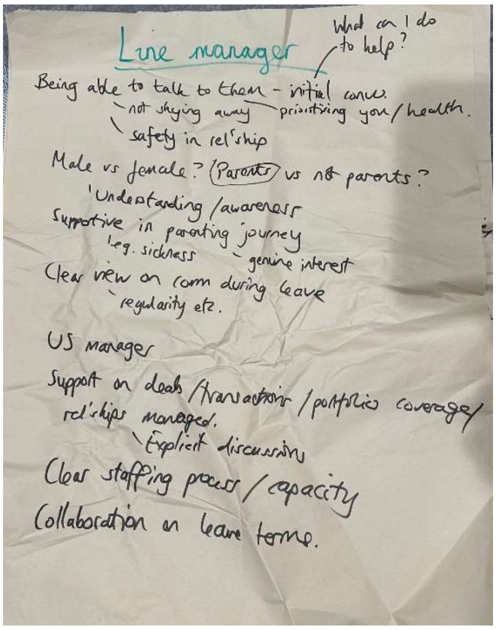


Figure 15: Example of flip chart notes

Whilst having the wider group discussion, I sensed that there was more energy in the wider group conversation and that stories were fuelling stories. This wider breadth of sharing seemed to widen the scope of what was 'permissible', arguably creating a safer space in the bigger group in practice.

I therefore decided to pivot mid-workshop and offered the group the option to recontract and discuss the subsequent questions together. With a renewed sense of energy and purpose in the group, my role as facilitator became less active and I was able to allow the conversation to flow, making notes on the flip chart and also actively inviting quieter voices into the discussion where appropriate. The feeling of the group was of a group coaching conversation rather than a structured workshop, which, in hindsight, was appropriate to this group.

I was struck by how keen the group were to share their experiences with each other; this correlated with my emerging findings from the interview conversations about the desire to speak to others, share experiences and learn from those who had 'been there'. As well serving as an opportunity for me to learn explicitly about their experiences and their ideas for future change, I also noticed the value of the group dynamic and the importance placed on others' experiences as a means to learn. Alongside the intentional recommendations from the group, this learning resonated after the event and was an ongoing source of reflection as I grappled with the next steps in how I worked with the firm.

iv. Ongoing professional activities: individual coaching within firms (total 38)

A latent but critical source of 'data' and learning in my inquiry was my ongoing professional activities within the Partner Firms. When I began my inquiry, I had 6 'live' maternity coachees and their 6 line managers at PE1, as well as 1 coachee and her manager at PE2; this represented a total of 14 individuals across these two firms. Of course, I also had a wide range of other maternity coaching clients at other PE firms, financial services firms and some professional services firms, which influenced my broader work.

Although the coachees that formed part of my 'business as usual' activities did not explicitly share their views for this inquiry, they form the basis of my first-person inquiry. These coachees provided me with an ongoing arena to intentionally practice and explore different ways of coaching and different ways of being in the coaching space. They also were the source of the majority my reflective notetakings, which form a critical part of my inquiry findings.

For the first-person strand to this inquiry, I focused only on my professional and reflective practices that related to PE1 and PE2 (rather than my broader coaching business). My criteria for inclusion were that the coachees needed to still be experiencing their maternity journey, between pregnancy and having already returned to work. Most of the coachees were at the first stage of their maternity transition (i.e. pregnant and not yet on leave), though two of these women were already on leave when I began my inquiry. I elected to include them in my inquiry as they were current coachees and contributed to my own learning as a coach. As I set out in my PAP submission (Reynolds, 2022), capturing the 'perfect journey' (i.e. from pregnancy to returning to work) was less important than capturing a breadth and depth and experience of maternity returners. As my inquiry progressed, the number of coachees and line managers I was coaching at these firms also increased, giving me a total of 38 ongoing coaching relationships (December 2023).

I also expanded my practice to include those going on other forms of parental leave, as PE2 presented a female coachee who was going through the adoption process. This made me very conscious of the different routes to motherhood (and parenthood), including those going through fertility treatment, surrogacy, and adoption; the pre-leave coaching sessions with both a coachee and a line manager should be inclusive in both language and behaviour when it comes to these differing experiences. Additionally, although there are some supportive processes and policies in place for these alternative routes, my experience suggests that both HR and the business have a limited understanding of the inherent, differing challenges.

Given that these 'live' coachees represented my ongoing professional practice, rather than being arranged to suit my inquiry, the coaching sessions themselves were not recorded and their explicit commentary or stories are not part of the inquiry, though some of these women did also form part of the 1-to-1 interviews participants group. What is important about my 'business as usual' activities is how they interact with my inquiry and provide a live arena to experiment with how I coach; I seek insight into my practice as well as from it. From these coaching sessions, I was able to reflect upon who I was in the coaching, where my points of flex and traction were, and intentionally, explicitly test different ways of showing up in the conversations ('micro' coaching practice cycles). As well as using my individual reflective practices to monitor these micro cycle activities and their impact, I also used my coach-supervisor to develop and expand my thinking.

These coaching relationships formed an ongoing backdrop to my explicit inquiry interviews and conversations. From my professional practice, I gained insight into the individual experiences of women (and their managers) going through the maternity transitions and receiving my coaching. These sessions informed my inquiry and were also informed by my inquiry, in a continual dialogic state. In contrast to my interview conversations with women about their experiences (drawing more from the past), the stories told in coaching sessions often moved through past and current into future. This reflects Petranker's dynamic future, as *a story moving toward the future with a* *momentum that does not depend on the backward telling of narration* (Petranker, 2005, p.246). It is also neatly articulated by Huber et al.: *human beings have and continue to draw on stories as a way to share, and to understand, who we are, who we have been, and who we are becoming* (Huber *et al.,* 2013, p.213).

v. Thematic analysis and report production for PE1 (March 2023)

Based on the actions that emerged from the group workshops, the experiences shared in interviews and my day-to-day coaching experiences, I produced a report for PE1. This was one of the outcomes that had been agreed in Phase 1, providing the firm with a document they could share internally that drew out themes from the interviews and provided recommendations about a course of action. [see Appendix B]

I wanted to ensure I brought the thematic analysis the academic rigour required for a report for the firm, whilst still honouring the stories of the participants and also my ethical and epistemological stance as a researcher. The way I conducted the activities aligned with this, so the ‘raw data’ I was working with could then be analysed in line with the principals of thematic analysis. This balancing act present in my approach to analysis is set out in more detail below in *The intersection of narrative and thematic analysis.*

Following my analysis, I produced a typical consultancy-style report, with findings shared thematically and recommendations made following these. The themes were arrived at using the reflexive thematic analysis methodology outlined in Methodology and consistent with the discussions with PE1 to agree the data they wished to review.

We then scheduled a review of this document with the HR stakeholders to discuss next steps and which of the recommended interventions they wished to pilot. The HR stakeholders appreciated, recognised and took on board the full context shared in the report. However, they noted that they did not feel able to share the full picture with other Key Stakeholders, notably leaders of the firm, as they were too disruptive, so they produced a ‘lite version’. Unfortunately a copy of this was nor directly shared with me, but I understand that more sensitive elements about women’s experiences of firm culture were removed. Ethically, this was a stumbling block because women who had shared their experiences had done so on the understanding that this information would be shared with all stakeholders.

This was an interesting learning on my part, as it demonstrated that, whilst these Partner Firms were open to making changes, they were sensitive to how this work was received internally and the culture in which it landed, beyond even what I had anticipated in writing the initial report. There remains a tendency to work with simple surface level solutions that trigger small disturbances rather than address the underlying complexity of what is resistant to change; this resonates with what Senge et al. describe as *shifting the burden* (Senge *et al.,* 2005, p.15).

vi. Sharing findings with participants and Key Stakeholders in PE1 (Q124)

The process described above emphasised to me the embedded cultural norms in the industry and how easily voices are silenced. I raised this with the HR stakeholders and, whilst the senior Key Stakeholders received a ‘firm ready’ version of the findings, we elected to run an open workshop with all the participants and Stakeholders, where the findings were **verbally** fully shared with those who contributed, also providing an opportunity to further develop or comment on them. This is being scheduled at the time of writing (December 2023), which also demonstrates that the pace of change is not always fast, even in seemingly flexible and open environments.

vii. Group coaching: Resilience in working motherhood (design session December 2023, Q1/Q2 24)

Having sent my report and had debriefing calls with the key stakeholders at PE1, the firm carried out internal conversations about how they wanted to proceed. Based on the findings, one of the interventions they wanted to pilot in the next cycle was a 'resilience in working motherhood' workshop. The firm had heard from the participants where they wanted more support, but also that they liked the feel of a community amongst them. The workshop, therefore, was designed to bring together parents within the firm to share best practices, tips and tools, within a facilitated group coaching space. They decided to run this as a workshop rather than, for example, a networking session, because of the benefit of contracting and psychological safety when facilitated by a third party coach.

viii. Additional line manager sessions at PE1 and PE2 (Q2 24)

The most immediate recommendation that PE1 took on board was to increase the number of coaching sessions that line managers received, adding in a session before the coachee returns to work. The professional discussions that I was having around my inquiry and emerging findings meant that this was also adopted in PE2, as well as other PE firms; it became a part of how I 'sold' the parental transition coaching service, as standard.

ix. Coaching returner allies (December 2023)

Although PE2 did not request a full report following the work with them, as part of the course of my usual professional activities, I sent clients an annual summary of coaching themes and observations. Given the research carried out in PE2, this was a detailed and nuanced report, which incorporated my inquiry observations. The new HR lead at PE2 was keen to pilot coaching allies of returners i.e. not just the coachees line managers, but also those who work within their teams who have influence on the return conditions. This went well and will be incorporated into coaching engagements at PE2 where there are influential team members who have the opportunity to advocate for and support returners; for example, ensuring that pipeline and portfolio companies are returned fully to the coachee, or involving returners actively in live deals upon their return.

x. Improved resources and collateral (Q124)

At both PE1 and PE2, there were gaps identified by participants in the inquiry in terms of the resources and collateral at their disposition that might have better supported them through their maternity transitions. For example, one coachee had a US line manager who would have benefited from a short document outlining the policy environment and cultural norms for a UK maternity leave.

b. 'Micro' coaching cycles: 1st person narrative sense-making processes

During the course of this inquiry, there were three principal points of focus that were the source of reflection and often subsequent adaptations to my practice. They intersect and overlap with the institutional cycles above. It is worth noting that none of these points are now 'resolved', but rather ongoing points of reflection that alter, and come in and out of focus, as my practice matures and takes different paths. I deal with these in no particular order, given their relevance varies by client type.

1. How much of my story to bring in

As discussed elsewhere, the way my own story interacts with my inquiry and professional activity determines how I approach both the inquiry and my coachees. It inevitably and invariably shapes the decisions I make - both intentional, thoughtful decisions and those made in-the-moment in a conversation with a coachee -, forming a filter through which all my interactions pass. More than simply a subjective filter of assumptions, my embeddedness extends to living parallel moments in my life to my coachees, of feeling their challenges keenly and of experiencing the same sensation of hitting a wall, where biology, psychology, finances, emotions, and systemic and societal norms can all act as a counter force to autonomy and agency when it comes to being a mother.

As a coach, we are taught to remove ourselves from interactions with our coachees and their agenda, allowing them to fill the coaching space. This is also an important element of deep listening, ensuring that you do not interject with your own similar experiences. As Celeste Headlee neatly summarises in her 2016 TED talk, '10 ways to have a better conversation': *Don't equate your experience with theirs […] it's not the same. It's never the same. All experiences are individual. And, more importantly, it is not about you.* This fundamentally holds true in all coaching interactions when it comes to explicit and intentional commentary. However, in all cases, it is impossible to remove the filter of personal experience and how that shapes the way we interact in any given moment. For example, if there were a moment that was particularly triggering in terms of one coach's own personal experience and irrelevant to another's, the onward questions they pose to the coachee and the direction of the session would most likely differ.

As a working mother, with professional experience in financial services, a husband who works in PE, and experience of two previous maternity leaves and two maternity leaves during the course of my inquiry, there are frequent moments where a personal, related experience comes to mind. More often than not, it is a passing thought and is not shared; however, I believe it nevertheless influences my reaction and actions as a coach. There are also times when a maternity coachee asks explicitly for advice, or about personal experiences; I notice I historically shared these reluctantly, or in a hasty and caveated manner.

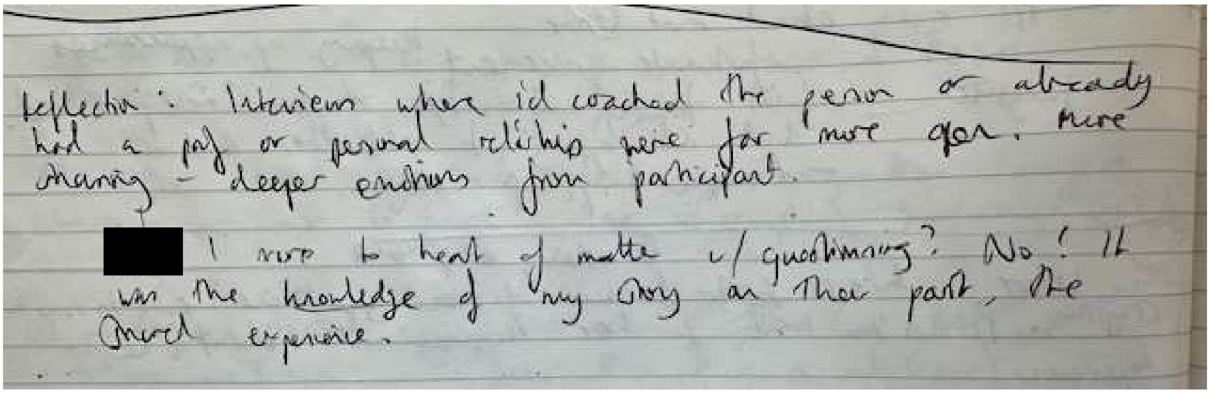

Reflection: Interviews where I'd coached the person or already had a prof or personal rel'ship were far more open. More sharing - deeper emotions from participant.
[redacted] I went to heart of matter w/ questioning? No! It was the knowledge of my story on their part, the shared experience.

Figure 16: Personal reflective journal entry dated 13th July 2023

Thus far, I have presented my embeddedness as a 'dirty truth' to be hidden and evade, yet the reality is, most coaching assignments are given to coaches based on their past experiences. For those wanting to become a partner in a law firm, they would likely expect their coach to have a previous career in legal services or partnership cultures. In the same way, when interviewing to be on coaching panels as a parental transition coach, it is often expected that the coach is themself a parent. There is a latent awareness of the additional richness a coaching relationship acquires through the prism of shared experiences.

Also, with maternity coaching in particular, many of the coachees are experiencing a sense of loneliness, often as 'trailblazers' in their teams or firms when taking parental leave, and they view the opportunity to talk to a coach as a place to share experiences; I intend this to mean sharing, in the sense of a mutual exchange, as well as using a coach as a sounding board. I have previously discussed my view of coaching as a grey space where the coach and coachees assumptions webs become intertwined, in a mutual meaning-making process. I find that this is never more relevant than in the maternity coaching space, where many coachees choose to leverage the shared space to explicitly map a forward path.

> *Reflecting on what energised me so much, it was the sense of connection & having helped move N towards a different mindset and action points. They weren't ground-breaking or rocket science, but very much created that shared interface of understanding/meaning-making.*
>
> *With most coaching, best practice assumes a setting aside of oneself. Certainly, a coach's agenda, priorities & opinions still do not have a place in mat coaching. But I feel a difference in terms of what works. I think who I am as a coach is as important as how I coach. My FS industry experience, my own experiences of motherhood inevitably projects into the space I build with my coachee.* (Text extracted from [Figure 17: Personal reflective journal entry dated 26th April 2023)]

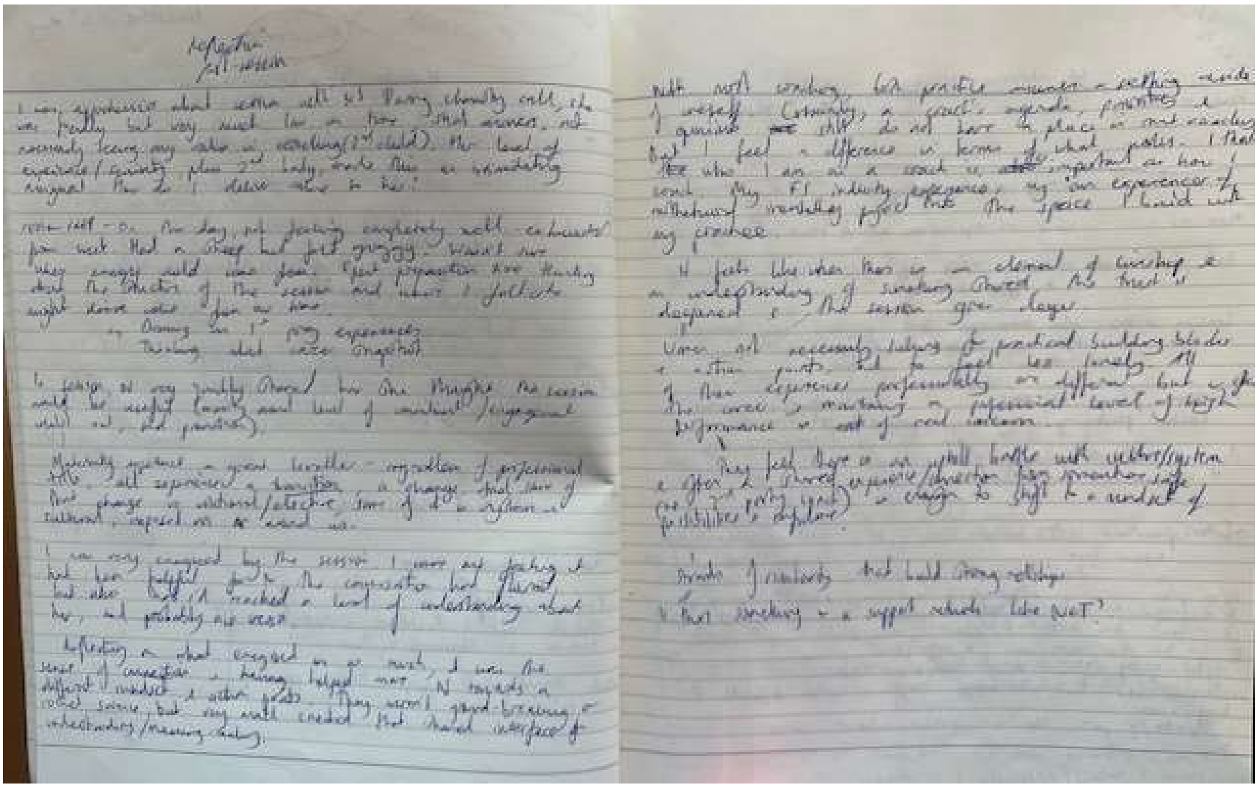


Figure 17: Personal reflective journal entry dated 26th April 2023

In executive coaching, forward actions are, of course, typically agreed, along with accountability mechanisms. However, in maternity coaching, there is an acute awareness of the time-bound nature of the relationship; the arrival of the baby or the return to work as 'one time' opportunities to be intentional around behaviours and actions. These fixed time markers create a sense of directed, but calm, urgency to the actions agreed in a coaching engagement.

How, then, to approach the question around my own personal story and its overlap with the stories of coachees? Based on my learnings from the interviews, my coaching conversations and my reflections about the value coachees assign to creating connections - with a view to these informing their own choices as well as having conversations with people who understood their experiences - I wanted to more clearly define the role of my story in my coaching relationships. Fundamentally, I still view the coaching session as a space for the coachee to narrate and take forward their own story; this will not change. However, as in any relationship, I wanted common ground and shared experience to support the basis of trust, rather than create a barrier:

> *It feels like when there is an element of kinship & an understanding of something shared, the trust is deepened & the sessions goes deeper.*
>
> *Women not necessarily looking for practical building blocks & action points but to feel less lonely. All of their experiences professional are different but v often the career & maintaining a professional level of high performance is a real concern. They feel there is an uphill battle with culture/system & often a shared experience/connection from somewhere safe (re a 3rd party coach) is enough to shift to a mindset of possibilities & confidence.* (Figure 17: Personal reflective journal entry dated 26th April 2023)

I decided to pilot explicitly introducing the subject of my own story into my contracting practices at the beginning of a session. In sharing a brief outline of my story (e.g. mother of 4 children, financial services background, recently back from maternity leave), I frame these as possible grounds of shared experience that influence and inform how I coach. I explain that this is not to suggest that my story reflects best practice, but rather that I may be able to relate at a deeper, non-verbal level, and also any explicit advice I am asked to share may depart from this point.

Through the course of several coaching sessions with new coachees, I refined how I introduced this subject into my contracting process. I noticed that explicitly declaring my positionality upfront had two primary effects. The first of these was to build my credibility, not just as a coach, but as a thinking partner who understands the environment they are operating in and the systemic challenges it brings. In most cases, it also created a more relaxed conversational tone between us, short-circuiting some of the relationship and trust-building that can take time. I reflected upon why this was so successful and, in essence, I believe it is because in showing a level of openness and vulnerability, it created a space for give and take – of sharing – that was conducive to building the level of trust needed to make the most of maternity coaching sessions. It is relevant here to emphasise that, in a usual maternity coaching engagement structure, many months lapse between coaching sessions; this irregular cadence can make forming strong foundations harder to achieve. I found that this effect was, in practice, altered by sharing my position as a coach and being open about my story's presence in the coaching conversation.

2. Line manager sessions – best practice toolkit needed?

In the maternity coaching model I use, I always meet with the coachee's line manager. This is not standardised or widespread in the coaching industry though, anecdotally, my clients are increasingly recognising that the environment the returner leaves and comes back to is going to be a determining feature of retention. A key part of the initial pitch conversation I have with a firm is to prompt a discussion around the importance of the environment and broader culture.

In both PE1 and PE2, there is a session with the line manager built into the engagement. However, I noticed that how these sessions run in practice differs wildly – from a more directive, advisory conversation, to a deep coaching conversation. I also recognised that, with only one coaching session, I felt a reticence in myself to challenge to the extent I usually would, or 'rock the boat' without having the time to steady it. I also was aware that, on occasion, the HR introducer had set up the coaching in a way that either made the coachee feel that the line manager was involved from a performance perspective, or the line manager did not buy into the reasons for coaching.

These points of reflection came to the fore when I was introducing a German-speaking coach colleague for a maternity and line manager coaching engagement in Germany. She had no experience running either of these sessions, so understandably had questions about the running of them and what to expect. With the line manager session in particular, she had some curiosity – and also anxiety – about 'what good looked like'.

As is often the case in professional practice, it is only when one is forced to conceptualise practice in-the-moment that one becomes aware of habits, behaviours and latent uncertainties. I decided to be thoughtful about these areas, to support my colleague for this engagement, for future similar scenarios, and also for my own practice. I also took these points to my coaching supervision, which was a rich discussion for learning, particularly for unearthing where I was holding myself back in these coaching sessions.

I. Approach and style

In terms of the breadth of styles and topics covered in a line manager session, my first step was to look back at my reflective notes from sessions within these firms; what had I noted and noticed? I also then became more intentionally reflexive about how I was conducting my future line manager sessions. If sessions were more directive, what were the conditions that triggered this? How did the line manager's story come into the conversational narrative? What felt like a good session versus a tough session? These types of questions fuelled a period of examination and reflection of these sessions, with a view to providing a reasonable framework and guidance for myself, and other coaching colleagues, as line manager sessions become more prevalent. As part of this, I also started to note the questions they asked, how they showed up in the sessions and what they thought they were there for.

II. One off sessions

For me personally, the most challenging part of the line manager coaching session is that it is a one-off. This brings with it certain conditions that dictate a different way of interacting with each other, as both sides are aware that there is little time or space for relationship building. This can sometimes result in a line manger assigning little value to the coaching session or being sceptical about what they are going to get out of it: Is this remedial? Is this below my pay grade, as I already know how to manage? Do I really need to spend time talking about this? And for me as a coach, I also bring concerns around how much progress and impact I can make in a single session, how to make sure I am using their time well, and how to 'show up' in terms of my own coaching style.

In order to ensure the engagement of the line manager, I decided to explicitly 'call out' the brevity of the relationship and interaction, highlighting the benefits of this around it being a safe space to confidentially explore concerns and assumptions in an open way. Through a series of different line manager sessions, I observed that, once line managers feel assured that they were not being judged or lectured to, there was a shift in the tone of dialogue. Of course, not every line manager comes to a coaching session with scepticism; some come with humility and a request for support. However, across all different approaches, the clear contracting process around these points has neutralised the ground for discussion. As I learn iteratively through these sessions, I build a 'bank' of understanding around the little-understood and rarely-explored line manager experience.

A greater source of reflection has been how to manage myself in these sessions. Whilst I am very comfortable working with experienced, senior coachees, I notice that I can sometimes feel out of my comfort zone with managers in this setting. I have worked on this topic with my coach supervisor and identified that I put a lot of pressure on myself for these sessions. As they are often the only explicit touchpoint I have with the environment that a parent returns to, I want to make sure that I am doing my utmost to set the parent up for success. Additionally, I am reticent to be overly challenging of a line manager, in case it has a knock-on effect for the coachee. Sometimes I avoid areas that might create conflict, even if some of the assumptions a line manager has can be difficult for the coachee to navigate. I continue to work with my supervisor on these points and how to go in with the right mindset.

The question that I continue to grapple with is, what is the best potential outcome of a line manager session? On a simplistic level, it is to ensure that the line manager is set up to have supportive conversations with the coachee about going on leave, what communication she might want and what her coverage plan looks like. For the line manager, I also want them to feel they have been able to air their concerns about losing a team member for a period of time, and the business and personal implications of this time out. However, beyond the logistics and 'best practice communication', a fundamental part of these sessions is to create space for the line manager to reflect on what assumptions they are bringing to the conversation. For example, a father of three with a working wife may say that he has seen it from the other side, he knows what it is like to take time out when you have a big career, and understands first-hand the challenges of returning. Whilst this rhetoric is well-intended, it can be very limiting, because it assumes that the experiences of his family are transferable to any given parent he manages. This often also extends to assumptions about childcare and decisions made on this topic.

With one PE client, a line manager raised with me that the culture of the firm was challenging for returning parents because of the messaging from 'the top'. Leaders were quick to advise that a nanny was the right solution, but this line manager was aware that this does not suit everyone. Of course, the ability to have a nanny implies certain financial conditions, but, more importantly, it also implies a comfort with this form of childcare. As this line manager flagged, there are some parents who do not want their child cared for exclusively by another adult, and would rather a family member or nursery set-up. This example demonstrates how toxic assumptions can be and how intertwined they can become in company culture. It also demonstrates that, even in a one-off coaching session, there is the potential to get to the heart of the matter and have a meaningful dialogue about the conditions created.

3. Who is the 'client'? And how directive should the coach be?

In a typical maternity coaching engagement, there are the coachee, the line manager and the 'sponsor' (typically HR). This can throw up questions about whose needs are being served, first and foremost, and how this is managed ethically by the coach.

Without a doubt, having a coaching session with the line manager built into the engagement structure has a profound impact on the messaging and the potential of the coaching engagement. I have noticed that the women going on leave are less sceptical about 'the point' of coaching, if they see that there is a firm commitment to making change. They have the opportunity to share with me the relationship they have with their line manager, including raising any concerns. It has been very important to share immediately with the coachee that there is a clear line of confidentiality with the line manager session, and that the purpose of the line manager session is to discuss their concerns and questions. Most often, this dynamic works well and there is no tension between the two sessions; on the contrary, there are lots of synergies because both sides are moving towards the shared goal of creating the conditions for a successful leave and a sustainable return to work.

On the other hand, in engagements where the relationship with the line manager or the context are challenging, I have been aware that the coachee is sometimes trying to use me a conduit for getting information or views across to their line manager or HR. In the same way, line managers occasionally try to position the conversation with me as a way to instil in the coachees certain approaches or views.

Finally, I also am occasionally asked by HR for a view on certain relationship dynamics. An often-explored ethical point in coaching is 'who is the client?' when it comes to a coaching relationship with a 3rd party sponsor paying for the engagement and the voice of the manager also involved. However, in the case of maternity coaching, the question is more complex because the line manager is also a coachee. I set out below my reflections on each of the three relationships: line manager, maternity coachee, and HR/business stakeholder.

I. The line manager

The objective of the line manager session is not simply to understand their views on the woman going on leave, or agree 'goals', but rather for them to bring questions and concerns, with the coach as a thinking partner. It is important for the coach to create an environment where the line manager can openly share their views around the leave, as they are going to heavily influence the leave experience of the coachee.

The complexity arises because, in addition to acting as a sounding board for the line manager, there is also the overarching objective on the part of the firm – and my approach to practice as a coach – that the time spent with the line manager also serves the leave experience of the maternity coachee. This brings a directional, if not directive, shape to the conversation that I have felt is sometimes in conflict with the coach:coachee relationship with the line manager:

Is it possible to be a coach and have 'objectives', albeit soft and open-ended objectives? Do I need a consistent approach to these sessions to share with other practitioners and, if so, what could that look like? What is the potential – and what are the limitations – of a one-off coaching session?

I was aware these questions were coming up regularly in my reflective notetaking and causing some discomfort. I decided to first try noticing what 'felt good' from a line manager session and whether there were certain styles or approaches that seemed to work well. I observed that most line managers were looking for an element of direction, even if the conversation did then expand into other areas. The conversations that felt 'successful' from my perspective were those where the conversation shifted into the layer where the line manager openly shared their experiences, and we were able to challenge some of the assumptions they held around points such as experiences of working parenthood, childcare and career aspirations. The conversations that left me feeling like the time had not been well spent were those where the conversation remained at a superficial level.

I dedicated a session with my coach-supervisor to these questions I held around the line manager experience. From this session, I clarified that I wanted to be intentional about how the session ran and less open-ended than an executive coaching session; this is not to say that I wanted to run it as a training session but rather that I wanted to try to create the conditions where both the line manager and the maternity coachee could benefit from the time spent together and the forward-actions agreed.

I decided to begin line manager sessions with an agenda, setting out that we would be covering 'best practice' conversations and support, then moving onto questions or concerns they had about managing the maternity leave coachee and any thoughts or reflections they wanted to share. In essence, I split the session into a short directive open (that ensured I laid the groundwork for the maternity coachee to have the conversations and support they needed to have), a coachee-led main body (that allowed the line manager to explore their concerns and assumptions) and finally an action-oriented close (that prompted commitment to certain actions or conversations). I continued to reflect on the onward sessions, making tweaks to how I was in these sessions. Without a doubt, the attitude of the line manager and how they showed up to the session was a huge determining factor, with only one hour together. Whilst this is still a 'work in progress', for my practice, I feel comfortable with this approach as a means to provide the best opportunity for the multi-faceted nature of this conversation to be as beneficial as possible for all parties.

II. The maternity coachee

Without doubt, ethically, my ultimate client is my coachee. This is both at the level of this inquiry – where my purpose is to support the experience of women going on maternity leave – and also at the level of coaching ethics and adhering to the ICF Code of Conduct. As a result of this, the trust that I build in this relationship and the confidentiality I contract around with a coachee is of paramount importance to me; I am there for the needs of the coachee.

However, as with the line manager session, there is also a lingering question about how directive to be in maternity coaching sessions. As the construct of a typical series of executive coaching sessions is to work dynamically through pre-agreed coaching goals, this represents a significant variant in how maternity coaching sessions are structured. With maternity coaching structures, the sessions are irregular in cadence, so there is not the natural build on goals across sessions, as in executive coaching. Furthermore, the coaching objectives of the coachee during their pre-leave session can be totally different once they have a baby and are returning to work. The question then becomes what do coachees want to get out of these sessions and how directive to be?

Through the course of this work, I have noticed that my coachees are on a journey; a journey into motherhood, then working motherhood, with shifts in values, priorities and even identity along the way. At the beginning of the journey, whilst pregnant and still working, I have noticed that many women are optimistic about their ability to return to work. They view the first maternity coaching session as a place to ask questions about conversations they should have and what others have done before them; there is often a strong directive element to these first sessions. I find myself covering similar ground across sessions, such as discussing contact preferences whilst out, how work is being handed over (and returned) and taking a 'career snapshot' of ambitions, priorities and contacts at a moment in time. Occasionally these discussions are at a deeper level, where there are particular concerns or worries about taking time away from their role and, in these situations the sessions are more reflective of a coachee-led executive coaching session. However, a first session primarily serves to establish a relationship between the coach and coachee, and can be relatively directive in style, sharing best practices and ideas.

The sessions before a woman returns to work, and once back at work, often represent a shift, in terms of what is required from me as a coach by the coachee. Whereas the first session tends to follow a pattern of revisited themes, coachees show up in very different ways to the subsequent sessions. I observe that one of the main values of the maternity coaching engagement from the point of the return is being listened to, and being heard. The 'sounding board' benefit of coaching weighs very heavily in how I show up in these sessions. Fundamentally, many coachees want to explore where they are, how they are feeling, revisit their priorities and values, and how these impact on their return to work. For some, this can be a very emotionally charged discussion, with deep questioning around the possibility – and sustainability – of a return. Many also want to look outward and understand their experience in a context: what have other women done at this firm, or in this role? How do others make this work?

I notice that, in my experience, the nature of the second session onwards becomes coachee-led, with very different focuses and needs brought to coaching. Although there is often an advisory element requested by the coachee, particularly with reference to the experience of others, these sessions are variable in style and content. My reflections on 'best practice' for a coach in a maternity coaching relationship is to be as flexible and dynamic as possible; there is no single model or 'toolkit' that serves all coachees. Some coachees may lean heavily on a coach for direction, advice and contextual learnings, whereas others may have clear goals and needs they want to discuss.

Regarding the coachee as my ultimate client, I often reflect back on the question of how to still hold the needs of the firm/the team in the frame. My overarching feeling is that, by serving the coachee, I am serving the needs of the firm, namely to support women through the maternity transitions. Where there are particular needs or requests made by the line manager or HR, I do sometimes incorporate these into my coaching discussions, if there is a clear overlap with best practice – for example, the need to clearly communicate a handover plan and timeline. However, for other nuanced requests – for example, warning a coachee that they are not on track to get promoted -, I encourage a conversation between the coachee and their manager, occasionally needing to reiterate my ethical requirements as a coach and how I work with the triangle relationship of coachee:HR:manager.

III. HR as voice of the firm

In discussing 'who is the client?', it is important that I also reflect on the role of HR, as the voice of the firm, the buyer of coaching, and as a client. With both PE1 and PE2– and with the large majority of my broader client base – my relationship is with the HR 'buyer' of coaching. They are my client, in the sense that they employ me and decide which coaching engagements I am put forward for. They also often have a certain level of accountability for how well the coaching is received by the coachees, and therefore are engaged in its success. I noticed I was holding ongoing questions of 'what does success look like for HR?' and 'is the firm happy with the coaching I am doing?'.

I am currently building into my practice conversations about how firms wish to measure success and evaluate coaching. This is partly as a mechanism for me to get feedback to continually develop my practice, but also as a means of the firm tracking the impact coaching is having on data points such as retention, employee engagement or ability to continue on career trajectories after leave. I have also begun to share thematic insights with firms where there are enough coachees to provide anonymity of reporting.

With certain coachees where there is a challenge, for example, they have been 'layered' whilst on leave or sidelined in their role, they sometimes request that I raise the issue with HR for them. In these instances, I act as a facilitator for a future conversation; the interests of both the coachee and the firm are aligned in these instances, as the conversation serves the coachee and also raises awareness with the firm. However, as with the line manager, it is important that I hold my ethical commitments to my coachee and, where necessary, highlight how I work with the triangle relationship.

c. Narrative sense-making activities: gathering storied and reflective data

Gathering storied and reflective data is depicted in Figure 12: Project activities schema as a 'wrapper' around the cycles in this inquiry; it represents how interpreting and making meaning from my stories and those of others is the epistemological and ontological underpinning to this work, embedded in the 'how' of all these activities. Stories were gathered - from coaching, from interviews, from my conversations with stakeholders and with my communities of practice, from my own life. In a shared space, restorying was the sense-making lens through which these stories were deconstructed by the narrators and retold to transform future stories, as they moved forward.

Through my own reflective practices, I noted and documented evocative stories and returned to 'reauthor' these stories for this inquiry. In reauthoring these stories, I was aware of the ethical responsibility of honouring the original feel, essence and intentions of the narrators. Very often, this sat alongside a strong feeling of a connection with the coachee, formed through the act of restorying together and intertwining our lives at a point in time. In replaying the plot and describing the protagonists, I was acutely aware that a story is not a life; it is a facet of a life, shared in a way that is always insubstantial and incomplete. From the stories shared in this research, my own life story, both consciously and unconsciously, filled in 'the blanks' in plots and characters to make a narrative.

This inquiry represents, thus, a multiplicity of stories shared – the way we organise the experiences of our lives – woven together with the threads of my experience, to form a collective, coherent narrative of the experiences of women who take maternity leave in these firms.

Phase 3: Migration of 'final' inquiry story into community

My inquiry sits within my ongoing professional practice, with no specific output or end point. The implications of my inquiry shape my practice and are shared with the communities with which I work, including maternity returners, their managers and HR professionals. These individuals in turn influence their environment. As the reach of my professional practice expands, and with in the number of people with whom I am having conversations, the greater the opportunity to create a body of influence to start changing culture.

As I have set out, the cycles in this inquiry do not happen in sequence but concurrently, with a flow-between almost always happening. Through my professional life, I am required to conceptualise my practice, my thinking, at different points in time in order to sell my coaching services and also to support and educate communities of women and HR professionals. This is a generative process, in conversations weekly with my team of coaches, daily with HR heads and leaders, and in coaching sessions.

The clearest way to share this in writing is through setting out the moments of practice where there is an explicit intention for me to share my thinking and ideas into the community, thus 'bottling my thinking' at that moment in time. I have already shared the details of the 'Business Brain' roundtable event with HR heads (March 2022). Below I describe a further three examples, recognising these are evolutionary in context and catering for different audiences.

i. Women in PE, guest speaker (October 2022)

In October 2022, I was invited by a law firm to be a speaker at their Women in Private Equity and Venture Capital breakfast, on the topic of maternity transitions in the private equity industry. As with the Business Brain event in March, this event represented an opportunity to extend the reach of my professional practice and 'rehearse' elements of my thinking with a very different audience. This 'knowledge in action' activity is a good example of the lack of a linear flow to my inquiry cycles, as I had to 'skip ahead' to conceptualise my thinking at that point in time and present it in a way that engaged this community (Sharing: Presentational cycle).

The invitee list was broad - women in the industry at a mid-level in their career – and ~50 women attended. Some of these women were mothers, some were mangers of other women who had taken leave, some were pregnant and some were simply interested in the topic. This event was an interesting space for experimentation and imagination, forcing me to distil my tentative insights into a digestible and useful talk for this group, which was a vey different audience than HR professionals.

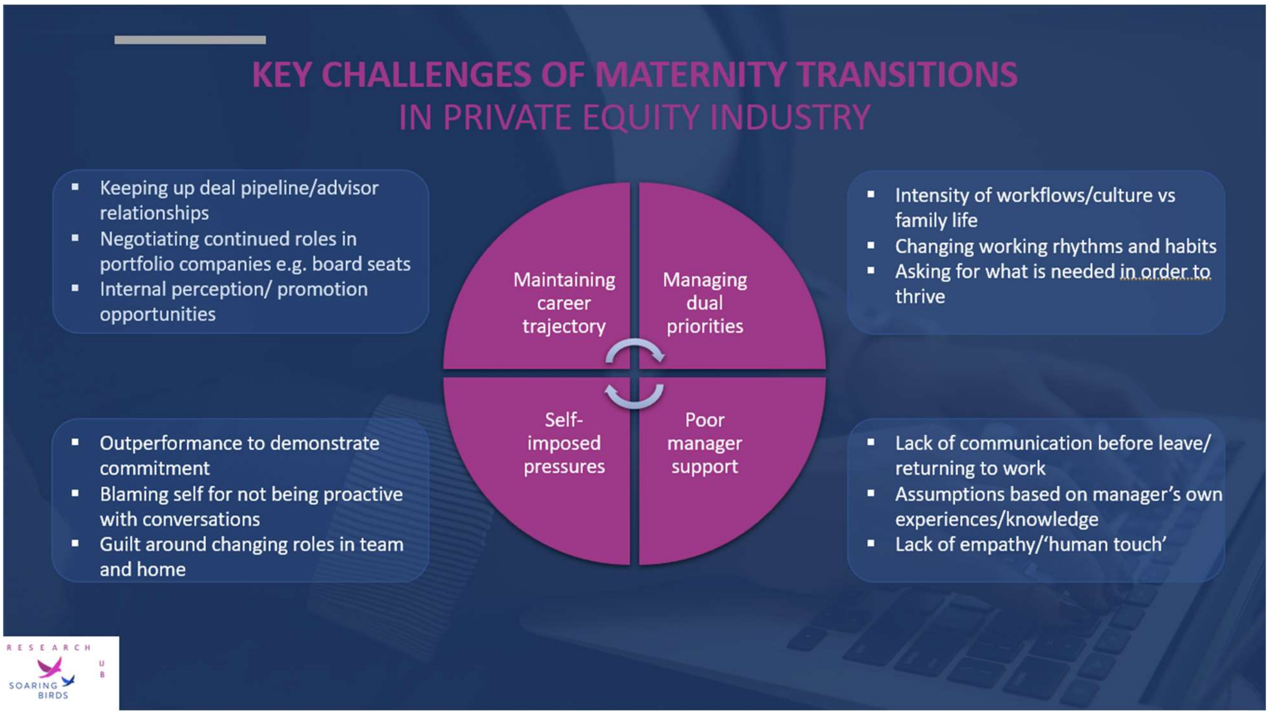


Figure 18 : Example slide from Women in PE event

As I had already conducted many interviews at this stage alongside my professional practice, my thinking had evolved considerably from the Business Brain event, both in terms of refining my area of intervention and also having more narrative evidence of the phenomena I discussed. I shared the key challenges of maternity transitions in the private equity industry, some individual action points and recommendations for women going on leave, and finally provided a systemic view on 'creating the conditions for successful transitions'.

It is also relevant that I was on maternity leave at this point in time, with a 5-week old baby, which brought to the forefront the weight of my own positionality in my reflective practices.

ii. Level 20: successful maternity transitions (November 2023)

Having established a broad base of private equity clients for specialist maternity coaching, I had raised my profile significantly in this industry through the course of my inquiry. Alongside this, I had also been able to nurture a strong relationship with Level 20, the not-for-profit organisation aiming to improve gender diversity within the private equity industry. I was given the opportunity to run 3 roundtable events, where I delivered a key note and then facilitated a group coaching session. The events were split by type of firm (mega-cap, small and mid-cap, non-UK based), to allow for the messaging to be nuanced and the group discussions to be as relevant as possible.

Figure 19 : Example slide from Level 20 mega-cap event

iii. Record video on coaching in PE (January 2024)

I have been asked by my colleagues in the leadership team to record a video for our team of c.40 coaches to explain the nuances of parental transition coaching in the private equity industry and the impact of a deal environment on women's experiences of leave. This was an opportunity to expand the reach of the implications for coaching practice from this inquiry to begin to inform and influence how others in this field coach; I hope this may ultimately improve coaching experiences for more women who take leave in this industry and receive our coaching.

6. FINDINGS

Writing this paper has become a minicycle of inquiry in itself, and this has shaped its form, the tones of its different sections, and the coherence (or not) of its storyline (Marshall, 1999, p.156).

Reflecting Marshall's comment in her influential *Living Life as Inquiry* (1999)*,* the process of writing is *per se* a way to reach understanding, seek coherence and reflexively consider the way findings are presented and to whom. This inquiry – based on an emergent methodology and cycles of action and reflection – was inexorably a process of noticing 'micro-findings' that altered how I move within my system, changed who I am in my coaching interactions and how I coach, and shaped how I talk about what I do with my community of practice and PE firms. These findings were constantly shifting, reflected on, and shared back through conversation and practice with different communities for validation and alteration; sense-making was therefore ongoing and embedded in all the project activity.

Choosing the 'how' and the 'what' for presenting Findings in this writing has involved discipline; it has been an act of division and conscious selection. In reflecting on the *minicycle of inquiry* of writing, I am brought back to the broad-based and complex knowledge landscape that exists for this inquiry; this changes the way findings are presented, who they speak to and how and, from that point, consciously and reflexively altering their presentation to allow different stakeholders to make sense of the findings within their domain. This inquiry has had to take place in the messy complexity of merged *knowledge cultures* (Brown, V., 2008) in order to make-meaning – with multiple and at times conflicting ways of understanding knowledge and viewing reality. However, I also now recognise and acknowledge that there is a need to attempt to unwind the disruptive merging process to separate and distil findings back into their own epistemic cultures- with their different modes of learning and language – in order for meaning to be translated and disseminated into practice. In this way, I am not just dealing with the knowledge 'borderlands' that by nature recognise their neighbouring domains, but also their 'hinterlands', where ways of approaching this issue are perhaps more entrenched. The findings have therefore been presented in this way, as means to distil in writing what is complex and merged in practice.

6.1 Implications for private equity firms, and related research field

6.1.1 What are women's lived experiences of maternity?

The lives of working mothers in industries such as law and accounting have been the subject of several high-quality research studies, but very little exists in the field of financial services beyond consultant industry publications, including in the very structurally and nuanced industry of private equity (see LITERATURE – Maternal workers and Maternity coaching for full discussion).

In an industry that is, by nature, focused on data tracking and commercial outcomes, this inquiry instead sought to work with the stories 'behind the data'. A summary of the women whose stories are included in this study is shared in Individual 1-to-1 interviews (June/July/August 2022) and copied below for ease of reader reference:

Interview #	Name (pseudonym)	Role	# of yrs at firm	Length of maternity leaves	Coaching?	PE1or PE2
1	Roisin	HR	4	11m	No	PE1
2	Rachel	Public affairs	6	12m; 9m	Yes	PE1
3	Sally-Anne	Marketing	20	7m; 13m	No	PE1

4	Nadine	Investment team	12	4m; 6m	Yes	PE1
5	Jasmine	Corporate affairs	3	9m	No	PE1
6	Flora	Investment team	12	5m; 5m	Yes	PE1
7	Clara	ICG	9	4m; 5m	Yes	PE1
8	Joy	Asset management	7	5m; 6m; pregnant	Yes	PE1
9	Mariella	Investment team	8	5m; 5m	Yes	PE1
10	Amandine	Investment team	6	6m	Yes	PE1
11	Mary	HR	2	12m	Yes	PE2
12	Gabriella	Investment team	7	7m; 6m	Yes	PE2
13	Catherine	IR	10	8m; 14m	No	PE2
14	Elizabeth	ICG	4	12m	Yes	PE2
15	Vinaya	Investment team	9	Pregnant	Yes	PE2
16	Jessie	EA	3	12m	No	PE2

Table 7 [copied]: Interview participants from Partner Firms

Whilst the narrative approach underpins this inquiry, it is important to understand these findings in the unique context of the emergent methodology that shaped them. As part of the partnership with the firms involved in this study, I agreed to produce a consultancy report (see Appendix B). The themes included in the consultancy report were derived from a highly structured approach, following the reflexive thematic analysis methodology set out in Reflexive thematic analysis.

The consultancy report was written with short passages of direct quotation and a high sensitivity to any identifying information. The aim of the report was to give a high-level overview, supported by quoted participant evidence. The themes derived from this process also informed the headings of these Findings (6.1.1 and 6.1.2). However, there is a marked difference in tone, with the narrative embellishment adding richness to the thematic skeleton. I wanted to ensure that I also honoured the voices of the participants and the fact that these themes were explored through a narrative mode of engagement. As Joy (PE1, Interview 8) put it, *I'll give you the whole story because it'll make me feel better.*

Epistemologically, it is also important to recognise that the patterns of story fragments presented through the themes below are representative of the particular stories shared in this inquiry at a particular point in time and space; they are not intended to be a generalised representation of a group. These patterns are kaleidoscopic and when these parameters change, so too may the way we talk about these themes. However, they do provide insight into the experiences of women who become mothers in PE, from which we are able to draw implications for the broader industry.

Finally, as the findings are part of a practitioner inquiry, the findings relevant to Partner Firms and the broader industry are being tested, challenged, reformed and validated on an ongoing basis. The implications for firms are also shared 'real time' through blogs I have published on this topic and industry events I have spoken at. The market is moving faster than this doctorate!

i. Line manager is critical to maternity experiences

Importance of line manager relationship: The single biggest driver of women's maternity leave experience was their line manager; their behaviour, the conversations they had and the underlying relationship. Existing literature (Stumbitz et al., 2017; Cabrera, 2009; Buzzanell and Liu, 2007) discusses the influence of a manager in determining the level of comfort a woman feels during pregnancy and motherhood, as well as their impact on the woman's career when returning from maternity leave. However, such discussions are relatively limited when compared to the importance that the participants in this inquiry attributed to their experiences of their managers.

As Rachel (PE1, Interview 2), who worked in the portfolio public affairs team, neatly summarised, *the line manager is the person day-to-day who orders and shapes things.* She had taken two maternity leaves and had vastly different experiences, due to very different managers. When returning from her first leave, Rachel reflected *I had the most difficult boss and he did not get it, despite having children. There was no flex around hours, he was unsupportive when my child was sick and he wasn't interested in hearing 'I can't do then because of bathtime'.* This was in contrast to her second maternity leave when she felt she had *air cover* from her manager during her leave; he *took the initiative* with keeping in touch, setting up calls and organising a catch-up lunch shortly before Rachel's return. Once she returned, she shared that *he was trustworthy and had better EQ* [emotional intelligence] *than the other guy.* There is, therefore, an intensely personal – or personality-led – nuance to consider when exploring the impact of line managers on women's experiences.

Acceptability of maternity transitions and working motherhood: Line managers in this study emerged as representing more than a single influential relationship; they also embody – and often permeate through a team- the cultural acceptability of pregnancy and working motherhood. Those who felt supported by their manager in turn felt supported to return to work confidently and have the conversations they needed to make the maternity transitions possible in the context of their firm. It is in these very conversations that those who discussed line managers felt a sense of their acceptance, or lack of acceptance, which was then supported by their behaviours.

In my own experience, as the only woman in my team, discussions about my pregnancy were linked only to the practical aspects, such as midwife appointments and when I planned to take leave; I remember feeling that it would not be appropriate to share times when I felt exhausted, or sick. On reflection, this was not because my manager had reacted badly or might not have understood (he had two children), but rather that he had not willingly 'opened the door' for those discussions and they felt taboo. As extant literature highlights, it is about a manager's *capacity and willingness* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.502) on one hand, but also the onward acceptance of *the legitimacy of family and personal life* (Bailyn, 2011, p.104).

As a positive example of acceptability, Clara (PE1, Interview 7) thought her manager responded thoughtfully when she needed to bring her leave dates forward due to challenges in her mobility during pregnancy; *my manager said 'don't worry, we want you comfortable'. And it just made a massive difference to be able to have that open conversation about my pregnancy challenges and know it was ok, I didn't feel judged.* There was, in this instance, both a *capacity* and a *willingness* to have a conversation that allowed Clara to feel that there was a space for this discussion within her professional context. During this interview, I was alert to the simplicity of this comment made by Clara's manager, and the seismic impact it had on how she felt.

Gabriella (PE2, Interview 12) was also extremely positive about her line manager when it came to her feelings around pregnancy and going on leave - *I just can't complain, they were 'top notch'.* However, Gabriella raised an interesting nuance that should, arguably, form a greater part of maternity management conversations at an insitutional level; *managers and generally the firm need to be more careful around fears during pregnancy and before pregnancy. Fears around miscarriage, or the process of IVF. Personally I worked crazy hours during my 1st and 3rd trimesters on a crazy live deal. I was 8m pregnant and working until 2am most nights. People don't realise this can trigger worries and fears.*

By contrast, for Sally-Anne (PE1, Interview 3), she felt let down by her own manager who *seemed to ignore the fact that I was pregnant and about to have a baby,* but she noticed that, in the subsequent years after she returned from leave, she had become a source of legitimising the maternal experience for others: *I noticed I'd become that someone to talk to about stuff. I'm a mother who has become a mentor type person and I have people reach out to me from different parts of the business.* Sally-Anne described how she was happy to fulfil that role, but also felt frustrated that managers are not doing a *better job* of making women feel able to be mothers alongside work; she was visibly frustrated – suddenly sitting more upright and gesticulating more with her hands - when talking about this subject and was impassioned by the topic of the role of managers in supporting women as mothers.

Sally-Anne was not alone in voicing her frustration on this topic, with several other women also highlighting that more should be done to equip managers to better support those who become mothers in PE. For example, Rachel (PE1, Interview 2) neatly summarised about her manager: *I want managers to be aware of the realities of working parents, the mental load, but I don't want to be the one to educate them.* This was echoed by Gabriella (PE2, Interview 12) who suggested that *for managers, it is all about facilitating good open conversations, building psychological safety and making sure managers also feel comfortable about what they can and cannot ask. They need to be empowered to filtrate this awareness into the full team with empathy and understanding.* On reflection, in a context where seniority is linked to 'deal doing' rather than good management, this is perhaps unsurprising; however, it highlights a gap in maternity management as a symptom of a gap in good line management.

The onward acceptance and belief in the ability to combine work and family was also important to several other women in this inquiry through the lens of the most senior managers, typically Managing Partners. For example, Vinaya (PE2, Interview 15) highlighted that, in her experience, most Partners were male and had wives who did not work: *I look up and I see a lack of diversity, nobody that resembles me or cares about family*. My observation from discussions about line managers – and senior managers in general - creating a sense of acceptability was that it is not just about saying the right thing but also doing the right thing. Although conversations were the underpinning to women feeling accepted during their maternity transitions, words only resonated where there was a sense that these were genuine and supported by actions and behaviour– the old adage 'actions speak louder than words' rang true in several interviews.

Positive experiences: The women in these interviews reported mixed experiences of interactions with their managers. There were several cases where the impact of the line manager was very positive, including Rachel's second manager. One area where certain line managers were particularly impactful was where they respected stated preferences around contact whilst on leave. For several women, this meant allowing them to completely disconnect from work and spend uninterrupted time on maternity leave with their babies. For example, Clara (PE1, Interview 7) found her manager to be *super respectful of maternity leave time* and allowed her to dictate the terms of her contact and engagement with work. In the contrasting example of Joy (PE1, Interview 8), 'good line management' meant proactively supporting a desire to participate in certain conversations whilst on leave. She shared: *my boss at the time was an anomaly. He was family-oriented and flexible; he helped me plan and he initiated discussions; he also copied me into the emails I wanted because I didn't want to be totally detached when I was coming up for a big promotion.* What was important was not how much contact women received whilst they were on maternity leave, but rather that their preferences were acknowledged and actioned; these preferences varied enormously depending on the individual and were a significant factor in determining whether a woman told a positive story about her maternity leave experience.

All women interviewed linked a positive experience of their line managers to having a fluid and open dialogue with them. It was very well-received when a line manager asked preferences at different decision points- allowing the woman to feel included and that things were her choice. As an example, Mariella (PE1, Interview 9) described, *I was very keen to disconnect completely – I'm not a person who does things halfway! But it felt a bit weird and I started to get afraid of coming back, it gave me anxiety. So I spoke to my manager and we started to catch-up a bit more regularly than planned as my return date got closer, which made me feel much better.* As with other examples, it is the flexibility, the availability of a conversation and the openess to change that made Mariella feel better about her return.

Negative experiences: At the other end of the spectrum, there were also examples of line managers whose behaviour negatively impacted a woman's experience of maternity leave. These stories are, in effect, the negative reflection of those shared above. Where boundaries around communication were not respected, this caused significant stress and concern for the women effected. For example, Flora (PE1, Interview 6) was 'over-contacted', proactively and publicly copied into emails two months before she was due to return and asked to pick up some work using Keep In Touch days: *Emails would say 'copying in Flora' to make sure it was clear the accountability was with me*. She tried to explain that she was still breastfeeding but she felt that *this message didn't land.* Flora then shared, in a tight voice and with tears in her eyes: *I spent a stressful weekend forcing my baby to take the bottle because I needed to go in early to do a handover day, then I was newly pumping when I went in. It was literally awful.* By contrast, Roisin (PE1, Interview 1) felt entirely sidelined during her maternity leave and *didn't have any communication with anyone throughout mat leave,* causing concern about the role she would return to. This made her feel vulnerable about her return and ultimately reduce the length of her maternity leave: *I had thought 12m but talking to people at work before I went, I felt like the expectation was to come back sooner.* Again, the flash point is not around the frequency or medium of contact, but rather whether preferences were respected.

Those with a negative experience of their managers also explained that they did not have any support with handovers, being left to manage the process alone and with last minute decisions being made around coverage, which created a stressful situation. Catherine (PE2, Interview 13), an experienced professional in Investor Relations, felt very conscious of burdening others with the handover process and would have welcomed her manager taking an active role, rather than a backseat: *I only know of one other woman who had taken leave before me, and she took longer and was not in a client-facing function like me. There wasn't a blueprint for the best way to manage this process and my manager was happy to leave me to it, but I would have welcomed the guidance.* Amandine (PE1, Interview 10), an investment professional still at the mid-point in her career, also felt she wanted more support from her manager because she was worried about colleagues taking deals and portfolio responsibilities from her and not returning them when she came back from maternity leave.

Around half of the women interviewed also described managers badly managing both the return environment and the ongoing environment for working parents, such as not providing any flexibility around hours (e.g. being home for bath time and logging back in later) or when children were unwell. These managers were also not proactive in initiating conversations, both formal or informal, that allowed women to feel like they were part of the team and that they had a role to return to.

US managers: It is worthy of mention that many of the larger PE firms in the UK are headquartered in the US, including the firms in this inquiry. The U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act only protects up to 12 weeks of unpaid maternity leave; the firms in this study both offer 16 weeks of paid leave but there is still a significant gap from what is offered in the UK. Women reported that those with line managers in the US experienced a very different style of maternity management, stemming from this very different policy environment. This was based on both direct personal experience of those interviewed, and also anecdotal stories they told of colleagues in other teams; there was a strong sense that a US firm culture, and inter-related maternity management, was a point of contention. Rachel (PE1, Interview 2) even said of her US line manager: *he thought I was joking when I said I was going to take a year of maternity leave.* In these interviews, the US line managers did not intentionally mismanage the maternity transitions, but they were often ill-equipped to have the right conversations in a different policy environment, with different cultural overlays.

(Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.502)(Bailyn, 2011, p.104)**Managers' experiences:** Managers themselves also presented the subject of maternity management in a variety of ways. Noting that all the managers in this inquiry were senior professionals with experience of people management, there was a general feeling of confidence around their ability to successfully support the women going on leave: one manager explained how his wife had recently had a baby, so he was well-placed to understand the challenges the woman was facing; another manager expressed that he encouraged a woman to take a full year of maternity leave as he strongly believes in the importance of family; another referenced how he had encouraged a woman to 'throw money' at the problem and have a good nanny, as a way to make working motherhood sustainable; another said he had told the woman going on leave to just do whatever she needed to. In short, managers brought good intentions and confidence to maternity management, but these intentions were most often based on their own personal stories of family, thus laden with their own assumptions and values.

The behaviours of line managers around leave coverage – particularly when they backed up the intentions of convesations – were another nuance to how women experienced their line managers. Clara's experience (PE1, Interview 7) of the conversation with her manager about shifting her departure date earlier was positive, not just because her manager was understanding, but also because she was *very elegant* in her how she handled the situation, even though it meant she was ultimately taking on more work. Across all coverage conversations, managers were generally relaxed and unphased by temporarily taking on work and sharing it out amongst their team, though my sense is that this is often derived from the fact that women are very rarely taking more than 6 months of leave, particularly in investment teams. I reflect that some of line managers attitudes to maternity management feel relaxed and 'laissez-faire' because they view the period of maternity leave as a short-term absence that does not cause major business disruption, rather than focusing on the meaning of this period for the woman taking leave.

Amongst line managers, there was a noteworthy lack of consideration around what support might be needed, which conversations might be important, and the influence of their own story in determining how they managed someone going on maternity leave. In coaching conversations with managers, simply sharing best practices around communication and gently challenging their assumptions were well-received by managers and brought about new perspectives on maternity management. This is an important consideration in understanding how women experience their managers - as the vehicle through which they experience the cultural norms and accepted behaviours of their firm – and how formative managers' stories are on how women construct their identities as working mothers.

ii. Maternity transitions as a lonely experience

Loneliness during maternity transitions: Across interviews, one of the strongest themes was the feeling of loneliness that women felt at different points during their maternity transitions. Some women, particularly in the investment functions, reported that they were the first to go on maternity leave in their team – sometimes the first in Europe - or that they were the only parent of young children. Gabriella (PE2, Interview 12), who had been with the same team for 3 years before she became pregnant, found that her pregnancy was smooth and she was able to work as normal. However, when she came to consider her maternity leave, she realised there was no precedent and she would have to forge her own path: *I felt like I was going it alone in terms of figuring out the best structure. I was worried about the impact of being out and became really paranoid, without any real comfort around my role being the same when I came back. Because I didn't have anyone to talk about it with, my mind went to the worst outcome all the time.* Mariella (PE1, Interview 9), also in an investment team but with the additional nuance of taking her first maternity leave during Covid, echoed these sentiments of loneliness: *I was really anxious when I took my first maternity leave. I felt super isolated and had literally nobody to ask about how to manage my leave. I was used to working 'on the buzz' and nobody else in my team had ever taken maternity leave – in fact, the only person who had had left.* This 'trailblazer' phenomena significantly shaped women's experiences, with no role models or members of their teams to ask how long to take, what the expectations were or how to manage their career through leave.

It is also noteworthy that, even in more women (and parent)-heavy teams outside of the deal environment, women still felt lonely and paranoid about their future role. Rachel (PE1, Interview 2) in Public Affairs described how she *fell between the cracks* during her maternity leave, and Roisin (PE1, Interview 1) in HR felt she had *no anchor* (Roisin, PE1, Interview 1) in the workplace. The fact that the women in this study experienced loneliness regardless of their team suggests that this is not simply to do with representation of women or parents, but rather a question of good management and high quality internal networks to create better contact structures for women to feel connected.

Desire for informal contact: This need for better connections is emphasised by the fact that, across all functions, women simply wanted more informal contact – *the human touch* (PE1, Interview 8). Part of this contact was linked to more regular conversations with managers, outside of the annual review process or set, formal updates. For example, Sally-Anne (PE1, Interview 3) regretted not pushing for monthly check-ins with her manager to keep up-to-date on what was going on and to provide a forum for informal conversation. Flora (PE1, Interview 6) reported that she sent messages, such as photos of the baby and friendly questions about how the team were, to her manager and often got no or limited response; she described that this made the relationship feel cold and distanced her from the good team environment she thought she had left.

The other area of informal contact that women were missing was with other parents or people who understood their (informal) challenges; *I really craved having a conversation with someone who knew how I was feeling* (Amandine, PE1, Interview 10). Mariella (PE1, Interview 9) also described feeling like she would be wasting someone's time scheduling 30 minutes to talk about topics that were not directly related to work – not wanting to come across as *having a moan about how tired [she] was* - yet this was exactly the sort of conversation she needed.

When it came to internal networks as a point of connection, a Women's Initiative event was described where a senior woman shared how she balanced her professional and family life, but there was reportedly *a big disconnect* (Jasmine, PE1, Interview 5) flagged between her experience (with employed home help) and the reality for many more junior members. Vinaya (PE2, Interview

15) also discussed a similar event in her firm and flagged a danger with *bringing in token women as role models who talk about the way they chose to do it. Because they should still acknowledge that there is space for different types of working mothers.*

As well as being trailblazers within the firm, many also reported how they struggled to find other women outside of the firm who understood the demanding nature of the firm culture and its impact on parenthood; as Gabriella (PE2, Interview 12) described when talking to her friends in her NCT group and from home, *their reality is a bit different*. In short, women wanted someone to talk to about their maternity experiences in an informal, human way, that did not involve them finding a scheduled time slot in a diary with an agenda.

Maternity transitions are a deeply transformative experience and this is already well-established in the literature (Le Sueur and Boulton, 2021; Millward, 2006; Moffett, 2018), as are the related shifts to identity and the impact to a woman's career (Noon and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2020; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005, 2008). However, the phenomenon of loneliness during these transitions and the profound impact this has on women working in the private equity industry is a distinct finding of this inquiry. Borne from the structures of firms and their ways of working, and perpetuated by the subsequent lack of mothers in senior roles, women who become mothers in the private equity industry find themselves ill-resourced and isolated in the decisions they make. This has important considerations for the level of support that firms offer women, particularly related to coaching as a 'human' touch point and means to learn from others.

iii. Strong influence of firm and industry culture

The firm culture, and the broader private equity industry culture, played an important role in how maternity transitions were experienced. The most significant way in which this showed up in conversations was in how expectations were embedded in how women interacted with their environment, and how colleagues and managers interacted with them; I had a strong feeling that the firm culture dictated behaviour.

The importance of acceptability: When it came to planning and communicating what length of maternity leave was anticipated, women strongly felt that they needed to be very vocal about their return. Jasmine (PE1, Interview 5) felt that she needed to *advertise* her return timeline in order to override a wave of scepticism that she felt from others about her chances of returning to work. She also described her return plans in similar terms: *When I was thinking about returning, I wanted to come back gradually, and do 3 days a week for 2 months using my holiday. So I made sure that I planted that seed in plenty of time and was clear that this was part of my return-to-work plan.* Ensuring that her messaging landed correctly and did not negatively impact her team's perception of her felt very important in our conversation and the way she communicated these points.

In a similar vein, Vinaya (PE2, Interview 15) talked about acceptability and norms: *How much time you take off and what is deemed acceptable in a team that is struggling with resource varies – it's the unwritten rules rather than the policies that really are what you're playing with in deciding things about your leave.* In line with Haynes' findings in accountancy (2012), where individuals mimicked the behaviours of others, disseminating cultural codes informally and reinforcing embedded norms and ways of being in the workplace, my own reflections on these conversations brought to the fore how such behaviours evidenced the perpetuation of these norms over time, driven by the desire for acceptability.

The silencing of the maternal experience in firm culture: Women taking leave are an incongruent feature of the cultural norms in the PE industry and thus feel propelled to behave in a way that mimics the type of *ideal worker* (Acker, 1990) norms that have evolved in the 'always on' PE culture. Nearly half of the women in this inquiry reported how they felt pressured to make certain decisions, such as around length of leave or working during their leave, that were driven by the firm's cultural expectations: *I felt I needed to perform in a certain way. My US colleague had done two leaves and kept in touch* (Sally-Anne, PE1, Interview 3).

Whilst there was the suggestion that personality also played a part in women moulding themselves to fit into the environment, the culture was still highlighted as being the driver of these behaviours. Flora (PE1, Interview 6) explicitly shared grappling with this interplay of personality and culture: *A few weeks into my maternity leave, I was asked to search for an email for someone, so I did that, but I didn't get any recognition or thanks. I don't actually know if he even replied now I think about it! But I do this sort of thing – it's my personality, but I think it's made worse by the culture here. I don't complain, I get on with it, I'm a low drama person. And that really suits how we're expected to just do anything and get on with it. Nobody really cares about what else is going on for you with your baby and generally being a mum.*

Gabriella (PE2, Interview 12) shared how the private equity industry is known for fast-moving decisions – *if you're not on, you're off.* She was really keen to make sure that her team saw that she was still working at her usual capacity and with the same fervour and ambition they had hired her for. However, this fast-paced environment contributed to her feeling of displacement when going through the maternity transitions and reenforced the idea that you have to be 'all in' to be successful. There is not a space for the maternal experience, practically or conceptually. Nadine (PE1, Interview 4) also shared that there is an underlying assumption that you should be able to handle anything, professionally or personally, in the private equity culture of success; *you just need to be quiet and get on with things, work them out yourself*. She felt that this placed a lot of additional pressure and responsibility on her, to conceal the difficulties she experienced during her maternity transitions. Their experiences echo Gatrell's extensive discussion (2011b) about the strategies of secrecy and supra-performance that women employ to continue to fit in at work. This finding suggests that maternity management is not just a consideration for firms, in terms of process and policy, but also that women themselves still fear the impact of maternity on perceptions of them in their professional environment and their ability to manage their leave in a way that honours the embedded interpretation of success.

iv. Return harder than expected

Fear about returning: For many women, concerns about the return context loomed large, long before they even began their maternity leave, particularly around their role being there, relationships being maintained and their career development. This is highly indicative of the culture and success paradigm within the private equity industry. Once on leave, these concerns lingered for many women and some described experiencing feelings of anxiety and fear about returning to work. This was exacerbated in cases where there had been a shift in the work environment or team dynamic, such as a new manager, a larger team, a promotion or a change to the scope of a role. Mary (Mary, PE2, Interview 11) had not long been with her firm when she became pregnant and, shortly before her leave, had begun internal discussions about moving team to another part of HR. This uncertainty led her to feel *afraid of coming back* and caused feelings of dread.

Even where there was no change to the work set-up, several women described the prospect of the return as daunting. Nadine (PE1, Interview 4) had been with her team for twelve years and was very comfortable and confident about her place in it. However, she said she experienced a significant *self-confidence knock* as she began to think about her return. This was grounded in her sense that her internal and external relationships felt diluted by her absence and she felt distant, despite maintaining a relatively high level of contact during her leave: *It really is out of sight, out of mind. I know my team and my manager rate me, but that doesn't mean they were going to massively go out of their way or think about me whilst I wasn't there contributing and doing stuff. It's exactly the same with deal opportunities – why would they have bothered when I wasn't there?*

Lack of support: Most women felt their return was *a shock to the system* (Elizabeth, PE2, Interview 14) and that their *brain [was] mushed* (Catherine, PE2, Interview 13). In this context, they felt a distinct lack of support in their return process, and that there was a lack of guidance around how to return well. In some cases, there was the feeling that nobody explicitly did anything wrong, but they just no longer felt part of the business anymore having taken the time out. Others felt that there was a *'right, you're back, get on with it' mentality* (Nadine, PE1, Interview 4)) amongst managers and teams, as if they had just returned from holiday. Joy (PE1, Interview 8), who was pregnant with her third child when we spoke, said that her overarching feeling was that there was *no recognition that life was completely unrecognisable* after maternity leave.

In other cases, by contrast, women's returns were evidently managed badly, which had a profound impact on the feelings related to return; however, they chose to deal with these feelings alone and not speak to their manager, team or HR. One example of this is where the contract for Roisin's (PE1, Interview 1) maternity cover ended a few weeks before she returned, so there was a build-up of work to return to on the first day, which was highly stressful for her; it is worth noting that this was cover for an HR role. Roisin was tearful when describing this, even though this had happened two years ago, which indicates the depth and intensity of this feeling.

Women in investing roles shared how they were often asked explicitly or on several occasions about when they were coming back, sometimes being asked to use their Keep-In-Touch days to support workload in the team or certain initiatives, and immediately in 'at the deep end' when they returned. In all cases, the stress caused by such behaviours was not communicated by these women and they kept up the pretence that everything was ok. Even in cases where women felt uncomfortable or unhappy about the terms of their return, they opted for secrecy and silence, choosing to prioritise 'fitting back in' to the workplace culture. When it came to writing up these stories, this was the most heavily edited section where women removed quotes and details that they thought might identify them; a sign of the importance of keeping their struggles and 'complaints' concealed.

On the related note of 'keeping up appearances', women also identified with the 'surpra-performance' phenomenon (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007; Gatrell, 2011b), to demonstrate to their teams that they were back and still capable of fulfilling the same role. However, a long road to adjusting back was described by several women; for example, Sally-Anne (PE1, Interview 3) described that it took several years to feel like she was professionally able to add value again and *shake off the shackles of having taken two maternity leaves*. It is important to recognise that this underperformance, and lack of contribution, identified upon returning to work was the returner's perception - there was no suggestion that this was ever corroborated by managers or firms in terms of performance. The ideals that women reported holding themselves to upon returning to work, therefore, are reflective of the dominant norms in terms of ways of working. When women return to work after leave and are not able to work in the same way as they might have previously, this can lead to feelings of low self-worth and self-confidence, even if these feelings are not necessarily externally imposed.

Challenges with breastfeeding and pumping milk: One specific area where women struggled with the return was around the ability to pump breastmilk during the working day, which effected 1/3 of the women interviewed. This high proportion of women effected may be due to the fact that those in investing roles often return to work after a relatively short maternity leave; only one woman in an investment team in this inquiry took more than 6 months. The most consistent challenge for women wishing to pump milk during the working day was that the blocked time in the diary was not always respected, making it very difficult for women to make time to go to the family room to pump. In more than one instance, this meant that a woman's milk dried up because she was not able to make the time to pump during the day, ending her breastfeeding journey prematurely.

In Nadine's (PE1, Interview 4) case, who took four months of maternity leave for her first baby, she needed to pump in her office so she could continue working whilst pumping milk; she described with an amused tone that her office had glass walls and she had had to request a special frosted screening to be stuck to her walls. Although I felt personally a negative gut reaction to Nadine having to pump in her office and work whilst pumping, Nadine was positive about the experience and the quick reaction of the firm to her request to work as she wanted.

Flora (PE1, Interview 6), who had taken two maternity leaves of five months each, used the family room in the office but found the facilities to not be fit-for-purpose as there was no sink in the room to wash equipment. This resulted in her carrying around pumping equipment hidden in a bag, washing it in the toilets and leaving it to dry in an office cupboard to maintain a level of privacy and discretion around the activity. This need for pumping subterfuge eventually resulted in her quitting pumping before she wanted to; even sharing this story was an emotional experience. The lack of desk in the family room was also mentioned as a challenge, because some women, like Nadine, wished to continue working whilst pumping milk in order to stay on top of their workload.

Amandine (PE1, Interview 10) engaged consciously with the difference she felt between herself, as an embodied breastfeeding and pumping woman, and the rest of her male colleagues. *I felt that I wanted to shed as much of that physicality of my gender as I could at work. I didn't want to stop breastfeeding my child but all that leaking and challenge with pumping, it's counter to the persona I want to project at work.* She explained that this was about wanting to fit in and not be different, as well as not wanting to interrupt her working rhythm.

This reflects the findings from Gattrell's study into breastfeeding in the workplace (2007) and the maternal body work that women undergo in order to absent breastfeeding from the workplace, as well as Haynes papers in the accounting sector (2008, 2012) . Breastfeeding, and the related activity of pumping breastmilk, remains a maternal task that does not have a place in the workplace and is ruled *out of order* (Acker, 1990, p.152); even when there is a physical space allocated for pumping, boundaries around allocating time to pumping are not respected and women do not feel able to voice their needs.

Lack of flexible working options: Finally, when considering the return to work, there was also a clear theme of the industry norms around (lack of) flexibility– both in terms of hours and location – representing a barrier to work feeling sustainable for the long-term, even amongst some of the most ambitious and senior women interviewed. As Nadine (PE1, Interview 4) put it, *am I killing myself for something that is not worth it?* It was also suggested that junior team members 'look up' at more senior colleagues trying to balance professional and family lives and they say it does not seem sustainable with the lack of flexibility, or something that they want to experience within the firm - a warning flag as these women rise up the ranks.

Amongst the 16 women interviewed, only Mariella (PE1, Interview 9) described a positive return from maternity leave where she was able to phase back into the office from a work-from-home model, allowing her time and space to adjust to her new rhythms of working motherhood. However, she acknowledged this was because she returned as Covid restrictions were easing and she was able to mirror the return-to-office patterns of her colleagues and the firm. Rather than seeing this as a challenge, however, Mariella reflected that this was the easiest of her two maternity leaves as she was able to see much more of her daughter than she would ordinarily have been able to, had she had to travel to and from the office each day.

The presenteeism built into policy and culture, with the majority of people working long hours in the office, means that flexible working, particularly in the sense of part-time work, is structurally impossible for women. Arguably, this represents an example of working mothers being silenced; the success paradigm of the industry dictates that workers are full-time, but this does not mean that the emotional turmoil and guilt that many women described might be different in a different pattern of working. Nobody in this inquiry identified with wanting to work part-time because this choice does not exist and full-time commitment is a non-negotiable aspect of the working patterns of the industry. However, it is important to acknowledge that working full-time was important to many women in this inquiry. Amandine (PE1, Interview 10) explained: *I don't want to be seen as taking a different route. I don't want to be the odd one out. It's just another matter of difference.*

Indeed, even when it comes to flexibility of location and the ability to work-from-home, many private equity firms, including those in this inquiry, stipulate that investment professionals must work at least 4 days in the office. This is despite an ever-improving policy environment that seeks to support the rights to flexible working; in 2023, it became a day-one right in the UK for employees to request flexible working. However, Gatrell's comment still rings true, 13 years later, in the context of flexible working in the private equity industry: there is an *abyss between the promises of protection espoused in policy and [women's] everyday experience* (Gatrell, 2011b, p.159).

The presenteeism culture also has a significant impact on those seeking daily flexibility, such as leaving on time for nursery pick-ups and logging back in later, because they miss out on conversations that happen 'after hours'. This led one woman to feel that she *did not know how to leave early* (Joy, PE1, Interview 8), as she was the only one and she did not want to be excluded from influential, informal conversations. Although marginal flexibility is available – and accepted as a norm for working mothers -, it is not without an exclusion penalty for working in a different way.

The one woman interviewed who was able to work-from-home twice a week stated*, having flexibility where I work is massively helpful* (Mary, PE2, Interview 11) because it practically allows more working hours and more time with her child, but that she is made to feel privileged for it; she is contravening the 'ideal worker' norms and this is apparent in the day-to-day of working differently to the majority who conform. The ways of working in the private equity industry have therefore evolved very little to accommodate the non-linear, kaleidoscopic careers of women (Maniero and Sullivan, 2008). This is despite ways of working during Covid-19 demonstrating an ability for people to work remotely.

v. Negative impact to health and wellbeing

Without exception, the wellbeing of women in these interviews was negatively impacted through their maternity transitions. For five of the women in this study, there were specific mental health challenges that formed a backdrop to how they experienced their maternity leave; for example, one woman suffered with Postnatal Depression, which triggered her returning to work earlier than planned as *the lesser of two evils* (Roisin, PE1, Interview 1) because she no longer wanted to be in her home environment, but she was not necessarily fit to work at full intensity. This was an incredibly challenging time for Roisin and she spoke about it distantly and dismissively, evidently still not ready to fully share the extent of the difficulties she faced during this time. She did not feel she could share her Postnatal Depression with her workplace and therefore returned to work as normal. Flora suffered with maternal separation anxiety when leaving her baby but concealed it from her team who had also had children – *they've done it, so I can* (PE1, Interview 6). She felt that sharing her worries and concerns was *oversharing private life*, even though these feelings lingered for about a year after she returned and made her daily working life a struggle.

The large majority of women felt guilty about leaving their baby but, even in the context of this inquiry, there was a level of tacit acceptance observed in conversations and a sense that this was not a topic worth dwelling on or complaining about. By contrast, the majority of women were relatively vocal about the guilt they felt about burdening their team whilst out; this triggered a behaviour pattern of over-committing to work upon return in order to counterbalance these feelings. In almost all the interviews, the terms 'stress' or 'anxiety' were used when describing the task of balancing home and work commitments, and some interviews were very emotionally charged; this was also true where women had taken leave several years ago, demonstrating the emotional depth and marking of this transitional experience on women.

It was clear in this inquiry that, when it came to managing health and wellbeing, women felt better equipped when they took a second or subsequent maternity leave. This was largely attributed to having more control over their work (usually in a more senior role), having established a 'working motherhood rhythm' that works for them, better self-awareness about their needs and also more confidence about asserting those needs. Rachel (PE1, Interview 2) described being able to enjoy her second transition back to work because her husband was taking Shared Parental Leave, which alleviated much of the guilt felt during the first. The only downside that women going on their second leave reported was that they were, without exception, in a more senior role. As Joy (PE1, Interview 8) set out, for her, being in a senior role carried with it less anxiety around role security and communicating her needs and requirements, but also more stress and involvement during leave as she felt more responsible in her roles and a greater ownership for her work.

vi. Worker-mother Identity shift

Another recurring theme in the interview conversations was the identity shift that women experienced when they became mothers, or working mothers. Mariella (PE1, Interview 9) enthusiastically described how she believes she is now a *better professional* having had a child, with better time management, better boundaries, better perspective (*no-one is going to die)* and better self-confidence from learning to trust her gut. Amandine (PE1, Interview 10) also described: *I never realised that having a baby would actually light a fire under me to do more and be more and go further.* For others, the transition to motherhood required a slow or difficult recalibration of how they worked: *I worked out a new identity at work as a mum [and] feel people need to understand my work identity has changed* (Catherine, PE2, Interview 13).

All of the women interviewed raised the topic of their relationship with their career. Certainly, at a surface level, women wanted to make sure their career stayed on track and felt nervousness around promotions being impacted. However, one woman shared that she wanted to project to her boss and the firm that she still wanted the same career, but that her *brain is not what it was* (Rachel, PE1, Interview 2) and she did not feel the same way about the importance of her career now she had children. Another woman also described experiencing wavering moments where she questioned whether the level of intensity required for her role was worth the time away from her young family.

Although there were various professional impacts described, the prominent discussion point was that much changes for women across all areas of their lives when they come back to work with the additional responsibilities of being a parent, which is contextually important in their experience of their maternity transitions. The period of maternity transitions is well-established in existing research as a conflictual time, triggering a crise d'identité for many women (Millward, 2006; Ladge and Greenberg, 2015; Haynes, 2008; Buzzanell and Lui, 2007). This is further emphasised in this inquiry where, across the board, the intermingling of questions around career and identity occurred at a deep level.

There was a clear dialogic relationship between the culture of a firm and women's identities within it. Most women in this inquiry described a moment, or notable period of time, where they realised they were conflating their new identity as a mother with their previous professional identity. This uncomfortable and often unsatisfactory process triggered an awareness on the part of most women about which parts of their professional identity were values-driven, and which were instead consciously and intentionally reflecting back the embedded cultural norms of their workplace. This supports Haynes' claim (2012) that returning mothers consciously played the game in order to succeed in their masculine workplace. As Amandine (PE1, Interview 10) put it, *maybe I sound indoctrinated when I say this, but I wanted to be able to go back and work the way I was, be the person I was and have the same possibility of making it that I had before.*

Within these confines, returning working mothers in this study appeared to either chose to reject these norms (perhaps trying to negotiate alternative ways of working) or, most often, consciously re-adopt the required behaviours for success; but this was often not without personal cost. Women develop a 'career self' (Noon and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2020) over years of hard work, which gives them a sense of purpose and achievement; this is undoubtedly disrupted when women go through the maternity transitions. Joy (PE1, Interview 8) said in a resigned tone: *I've had two kids. It's not easy and there's no easy way to feel good about work and being a good mum. I'm always asking myself if it's even possible.* The women in this inquiry were all high-achieving, established professionals who have dedicated a large part of their lives to establishing their professional careers; renouncing elements of this identity also thus represented a psychological upheaval. Women were presented with 'Hobson's choice' of conforming to the norms of their workplace and consciously concealing the arrhythmia of working motherhood, or sacrificing the significant part of their identity wrapped up in their career. As Lewis and Simpson discuss, women are forced to make choices that require a complex negotiation with themselves and others, in order to *construct a satisfactory "both/and" set of circumstances* (Lewis and Simpson, 2010, p.168), which is at the heart of the dilemma that Joy set out.

Several of the women interviewed had experienced more than one maternity leave, and their personal learnings were brought up. Some of these learnings were practical, such as having a model for childcare and knowing what length of leave worked for them. However, there was also a strong sense of personal growth through the first maternity experience, increasing self-awareness and self-knowledge about how they like to work, and how values materialise in a professional context, as well as increased self-confidence and less anxiety about taking time out.

vii. Gender roles in policy and practice

Undoubtedly, the focus on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) within private equity in recent years has changed the rhetoric around, and policy provision for, gender diversity in terms of hiring and retention initiatives; with that, younger generations of women feel optimistic about their ability to have the same career opportunities as men. Nadine (PE1, Interview 4) was a strong advocator of this point of view, describing how she does not feel that her gender had held her back until her pregnancy.

Pregnancy and maternity are a protected diversity characteristic in the UK Equality Act (2010) and are thus an area of focus within the DEI space. However, when it comes to the real lived maternity experiences in the industry, this inquiry finds that women still feel that taking leave -and the subsequent interruptions to a linear career - put maternal workers at a disadvantage, including when compared to other parents. Amandine (PE1, Interview 10) passionately shared with me her view: *Because there are these male-heavy deal teams, there's a massive inertia to really make any change to the maternity experience. They've seen their wives and they think they get it, but they've never experienced it so aren't motivated to change it really. And we're still such a minority in terms of the life experience of people in the team, that it's a numbers game when it comes to where they focus.*

Lewis et al. (2014) highlight the double-edged sword of broadening the focus from maternity policies to gender-neutral family-friendly policies. Stumbitz et al. (2017) also identify that the focus has shifted from family friendly policies to work-life balance, to include all workers. In my experience as a coach and in the conversations in this inquiry, I found that once taboo areas, including the experiences of working parents, are now openly 'on the table' as discussion topics and PE firms are alert to the importance of adequately providing for parents; on the other hand, placing women's maternity experiences within the context of family leave arguably fails to duly acknowledge the differences in the lived experiences of women as mothers when compared to other parents, due to the historic systemic factors relating to women in the workplace.

Broadening the focus to include all employees also risks *marginalizing the post-birth maternal body* (Stumbitz, Lewis and Rouse, 2017, p.9). This clearly emerged in this inquiry, where women described that one of their biggest challenges with maternity leave is that they become dispensable, whereas many men often make a point of demonstrating they are indispensable by working during paternity leave, or not taking the leave at all. Indeed, a 'counter-paternity leave' culture was identified where it is a badge of honour for men to work whilst, for example, their wife is in labour, or to be on calls whilst spending the first few days with a new baby. Whilst there are undoubtedly different challenges and taboos for men seeking to take leave, this represents a cultural blocker in achieving equity and, ultimately, a culture where time taken on leave is experienced in a positive way consistently across the industry.

6.1.2 Points of leverage; recommendations from workshops

In-line with a cooperative inquiry paradigm, the workshops with Partner Firms (Group workshop at PE2 (July 2022) and Group workshop with PE1 (January 2023)) in this inquiry brought the participants into the process of designing the interventions in their firms and where the opportunities were for change. As with any group of voluntary participants, it is important to keep in mind that those who attend typically either had a particular view point or experience they were keen to share, or came with the intention of learning from others and being a passive participant. In the two workshops with these Partner Firms, the small number of women taking maternity leave meant that participation was high and broadly representative of all those who had taken leave; there were only a few non-attendees who were on maternity leave or had left the firm. Amongst those who had taken leave in the last 5 years, there was a strong sense of community and wanting to improve circumstances for women taking maternity leave in the future.

The implications for firms at an institutional level that are shared here are indicative of the conversations stemming from this inquiry into my professional practice; these were shared with firms as part of the consultancy report. The ideas sparked by this research are also disseminated in my broader daily work, through conversations with HR professionals and partners in firms, as well as through speaking at events and writing white papers.

i. Encourage leaders to contribute to the experience of maternity returners

Within private equity, employees do not regularly move between firms, with length of service being a distinguishing factor of the industry. This is partly due to the relationship-based nature of the work - with portfolio roles lasting several years and businesses tracked over long periods of times – and partly due to the incentivisation structure, with deal carry and co-invest equity structures 'locking people in' to their firm. Those in senior positions, therefore, have very often risen through the ranks within that firm. Furthermore, in many mid-market and smaller funds, there are still the founders at the head, setting the tone and culture of their firms.

When it comes to managing the maternity transitions, the effects of having a bench of typically long-serving employees were deemed to be two-fold: on one hand, there were clear positive effects for women going on leave, such as a strong sense of belonging, clearly defined ways of working and good cultural and brand affiliation; on the other hand, this was deemed to also create an 'echo chamber' effect, with the reinforcement of behaviours and norms, and entrenched attitudes towards controversial topics, such as flexible working.

Leaders – from the founders or senior equity partners, to the managing partners who influence the day-to-day experience of working in the firm – were identified as a group that could contribute more positively to improving the experience of parents, particularly women, going on leave in their firm. Suggested topics included:

- Raising awareness of the effect of certain behaviours and rhetoric on working parents (e.g. 'always on' culture)
- Discuss different ways of recognising success and reward
- Design positive actions to demonstrate and model the necessary changes
- Build group accountability into their ways of working

ii. Provide better training for teams

In order to reach a broader audience than just managers of women currently on leave, it was suggested that group workshops - designed to support an inclusive environment for all working parents at different ages and stages – would be valuable in raising awareness and disseminating best practice more deeply into teams. Examples of some of the topics potentially covered include:

- • different routes into parenthood (including conception challenges, surrogacy, IVF, adoption, single parents);

- • challenging taboos (leaving early for bath time, blocking out 'pumping time' in diary, managing sickness, attending nursery/school events);
- • the danger of assumptions;
- • promoting an awareness of the realities of working parents within the industry and specific firms;
- • ways to create time and space for informal conversations to happen organically;
- • discussing behaviours to promote an inclusive culture for parents

iii. Create more opportunity for connection

As highlighted, women in this inquiry wanted more informal conversations with other parents and would have valued more guidance around what others had done. This was with a view to:

a) Informing their own path and choices, particularly as many women were trailblazers within their team and;

b) Having conversations with people who understood their experiences.

A buddy or mentor system was suggested by women in this inquiry, where others who have been on leave in the firm act as an informal sounding board, with an insider knowledge of the culture and leave mechanics. One woman described how some junior colleagues had reached out to her about maternity leave asking for, in effect, advice and mentorship, highlighting the potential for a more formal returner mentorship. This was recognised as happening organically to a point, but could be formalised to ensure equal access for all.

Alternatively, in-line with the strong desire for more informal connections amongst parents, a group coaching environment for returners would provide a forum for facilitated informal, confidential discussion. These could be arranged, for example, on a quarterly basis on a series of rotating topics, allowing people to attend on an ad hoc basis. Unlike a training event, group coaching would encourage women to share their learnings and challenges. The commitment and enthusiasm shown by participants in this project suggests that most women are keen to talk about and share experience.

iv. Offer a more structured return

For the firms in this inquiry, a more structured return was suggested by both workshop groups. Participants suggested a 3-way meeting with HR and the line manager before returning (or immediately after returning). This would formalise a space to agree the shape of the return, discussing needs and concerns. Most importantly, in their view, it would also go some way in holding line managers accountable for their management of this phase and create more consistency of experience.

The idea of a structured return is differentiated from a phased return. In a phased return, women return gradually back into full-time work via part-time work. The structured return that was suggested in the workshops, by contrast, referred to increasing the number of formal touch points in order to ensure that a returner's work is brought back at a cadence and intensity that responds to her needs and desires, and also to provide an opportunity to discuss any flexibility required in the presence of HR.

v. Need for more proactive dissemination of policy entitlements

It was consistently highlighted through this inquiry that the quality and availability of the collateral related to maternity management and maternity leave should be improved. At a simple level, it was suggested that relevant policy documents should be proactively shared with both the woman going on leave and their manager. This was particularly relevant given that one firm had an attractive 'phase back programme' that not all participants realised existed. Given the extremely positive experience of those who did avail of this policy, it is suggested that these market-leading initiatives are more explicitly 'advertised' to those who can take them, with line managers and leaders actively encouraging their take-up.

Where there is an international angle to the firm, such as a US headquarters, it is important that managers are made aware of not just differing policy environments, but also culturally what is different. This can be achieved through good quality collateral with example case studies of maternity returners within the firm.

vi. Improved provision of pumping facilities

The provisions for pumping when returning to work were judged as inadequate in the Partner Firms in this inquiry. Although more challenging in smaller firms, it is still important to make provision for the following:

- A lockable door and an 'occupied' sign – potentially a booking system if several users
- A comfortable chair
- A desk for optional work or other usage
- A bin
- A sink for washing equipment and hands nearby, if not in the room
- Access to a nearby fridge for storing milk safely

vii. Embedded 'marginal flexibility' for all

Most returners are not looking for a fully flexible or agile work arrangement. However, marginal flexibility – such as leaving work early to see the children and logging back in later, or going to an afternoon school play – is what most desire and value. These arrangements exist informally for most of the women in this inquiry. However, women do not want to be the only ones seeking this marginal flexibility because of the fear it reflects negatively on their career.

It is necessary to re-set the cultural standards within firms so men can also have access to (and proactively role model) these patterns of working; indeed, elsewhere in my practice, I see that this is also desired by many fathers of young children. Additionally, this sort of flexibility could also be availed of by those who do not have children; for example, leaving early for a social activity or exercise once a week. This is particularly valued by the younger generations of employees.

Alongside the current office-based requirements, employees could all be required to avail of marginal flexibility once a week. Only a disruptive measure that captures all employees will start to truly begin the work of cultural change and remove the 'motherhood penalty' being applied to women.

viii. Reviewing success and reward criteria

It is recommended to review performance metrics and promotion processes to see where there are potentially areas that are penalising parents, particularly mothers, or those who have taken time out of the office. For example, for an investment executive who has not yet done a deal due to two maternity leaves within 3 years, has she fulfilled the component parts of a deal process and demonstrated she has all the necessarily skills? It is well-documented (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; 2008) that women's careers are less likely to follow a typical, linear path than men's, largely due to the interruption of caregiver responsibilities (children, parents), so can there be a broader definition of success?

ix. Review shared parental and paternity leave

In order to achieve equity in the firm, men need to be encouraged to take time out of the office for parental leave. This is partly achieved through policy, including around level of pay during leave, but the 'hard yards' are achieved when these become practice. Leaders and managers need to be talking about leave provisions for men and also taking them, acting as role models for more junior men to do the same in the future.

6.2 Implications for coaching COP

6.2.1 Understanding a coachee's world; nuances and specificities in PE

As set out in my Purpose, this practitioner inquiry has potential implications for the coaching practice of others working in the field of parental transition coaching (PTC), particularly in PE. I set out, as a principle aim of this inquiry, to critically engage with the existing model, how it works and how it could do more to support women (as opposed to parents) going through maternity leave. In order to do this, it is necessary to first set out the specific conditions that I have observed through this inquiry that have given rise to the development of a more nuanced approach to maternity coaching (MC) for women in this industry.

i. A typical coachee

The women that work within PE, particularly on the investment side, are invariably high-performing, career-focused women. They come to coaching – and, indeed, motherhood – having typically worked for several years with a singular focus on their professional development, following on from successful careers in other areas of financial services or industry; very few firms offer graduate entry-level roles. As discussed elsewhere in Findings (Worker-mother Identity shift), the career-self of working mothers is a source of fulfilment and self-validation (Noon and Van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). Furthermore, the high-achieving tendencies of women in this industry means they often come to coaching intellectually engaged with coaching as a means to support their growth, self-awareness and problem-solving. The impact of this on a MC session is that coachees are typically able to engage at a deeper level about the impact of the transitions they are experiencing.

This is not to say that the objective of MC - to equip women with the practical tools to prepare them for the maternity transitions - falls away; indeed, having 90 minutes dedicated to thinking about themselves and their transitions is often a rare and almost indulgent experience, where even sharing simple models or suggestions can be transformative. I have personally found that women sometimes come to coaching still in the midst of their intense and all-consuming professional roles, without having given enough thought to some of the practicalities of their maternity leave. However, more often, the practical 'nuts and bolts' around transitions, such as managing handovers and communicating the news to stakeholders, is well-advanced and well thought-out before coming to coaching.

Coaches working with women in this industry must, therefore, come prepared to engage first and foremost as an executive coach; understand the challenges individual coachees are facing in this context and how coaching can best serve them. As discussed previously, there is an element of directive coaching inherent in MC that changes through the course of the relationship; however, a coach would be ill-served to try to mechanically work through pre-agreed topics. In my professional practice, I share resources around practical considerations in advance of coaching, so that coaching can more quickly move below this surface level of impact.

ii. Success paradigm and maternity leave

As described fully in 2.3.1 The Private Equity ("PE") success paradigm, whilst many high-performance environments, such as other areas of financial services, reflect some of the long-hours and intense work conditions of private equity, there are unique cultural and structural nuances that characterise how success is defined. Fundamentally, the strongest underlying factor is that everything is about the long-term picture.

This context is critical to understanding the attitudes and behaviours that might be observed with coachees in MC. For example, women taking leave are often primarily concerned with how they are going to maintain their pipeline of deals, and also how they are going to manage their board seats, whilst out on maternity leave. This often results in a desire to remain involved to varying degrees whilst on maternity leave, as well as return as quickly as they can from leave. Of course, every individual is different in how they negotiate the specific demands and structures of the PE industry; however, coaches should be alert to the combination of the high-performing, career-oriented women with the structural influences of the industry.

> *Flora was two months away from going on maternity leave and had just found out that a deal she had been tracking for several years was due to come to market. This caused immediate feelings of panic, stress and also self-identified protectionism behaviours. Flora was concerned whether she would lose ownership of this deal, and the impact this would have. The question she brought to coaching was about how to maintain ownership without working through her maternity leave.*
>
> *In Nadine's sector, there had not been a deal across the market for several years, due to economic conditions. A deal had come which sat in her sector but also overlapped into another sector. The other colleague was firmly 'owning' the deal and pushing Nadine out of the process and communication, which was exacerbated by her upcoming maternity leave. She wanted to work out how to manage this dynamic with her colleague, and what she could realistically do about it with her upcoming period of absence.*

This inquiry has shown that women sometimes have a clear reflexive awareness of the impact of their environment on the decisions they make, whereas others have internalised the success paradigm to become their own. Coaches, therefore, need to be ready to see the story within this specific context and alert to its influence on the coachee's thoughts and behaviours.

Contextually, it is also important to note that private equity firms rarely assign a clear 'line manager' to those in the investment teams. In larger firms, teams are often organised by sector or geographical expertise. Individuals then report to the relevant senior partner on a given deal, who may be disconnected from the more pastoral or developmental role of line manager and focused only on the success of the investments; who they are working for can vary depending on which deals they are working on or which investments they have portfolio roles in. In smaller firms, the manager might be a senior partner or the head/founder of the firm.

When it comes to coaching the line manager for maternity management, therefore, it is worth being clear that the coaching should be given to someone who is influencing the daily context at that point in time and has a role in determining their return environment. Vitzthum (2017) has previously highlighted the importance of MC taking place within a structure that is also conducive to a successful return. In this inquiry, coaching the line managers is a fundamental component of the MC structure and they become the vehicle through which MC can begin to work with the system that a maternity returner is in. When this is done well, line managers can also be empowered to filter best practices through their team and begin to lay the groundwork for change. The implications of this are explored fully in Line manager sessions – best practice toolkit needed?.

Another approach is to more broadly consider the returner context, and sensitise all employees in relation to maternity policies and practices. For those who are beyond new parenthood age – typically those in more senior roles – a culture of tolerance and awareness is needed. Amongst existing and prospective parents, the importance of role modelling behaviours that allow for a sustainable way of working as a parent, even if those behaviours potentially transgress embedded ideal worker norms, such as leaving in time for nursery pick-up times. These two areas could be addressed through targeted coaching – individual or group.

6.2.2 Narrative approach to coaching

When examining how I coach and what I might contribute to the community of coaches who practice in the field of parental transition coaching, it is important to reiterate that a narrative approach to knowing underpins not only this inquiry, but also my approach to coaching. Coaching is a process where coach and coachee restory together as narrators (discussed fully in Gathering storied data (interviewer, coach or narrator?)*)*; meaning and onward actions – often practical - emerge from this process, rather than being solely goal-focused. As previously established, the potential benefits of co-creation are well-established in coaching literature as a way to make meaning together (my underscoring):

You are important as an active participant in the dialogue, not just as a blank page or a sounding board for your coachee. Meaning emerges from the dynamics of the joint situation. (Leary-Joyce, 2014, p.10).

The term co-active *refers to the fundamental nature of a coaching relationship in which the coach and the coachee are active collaborators* (Kimsey-House *et al.,* 2018, p.3) .

This approach is not borne simply from an academic engagement with, and commitment to, a narrative epistemology; rather, this approach is firmly rooted in practitioner experience and the storied lives of working mothers illuminated in this inquiry. As stories were brought to workshops and interviews, they were shared, embellished, given new meanings and redefined; the rich process of sharing stories highlighted clearly that the knowledge of working motherhood (specific to the nuances of this industry) is not the domain of policy, recommendations and guides; the knowledge resides in the lived experiences of working mothers - bodily, sensory and emotional experiences that cannot be distilled down to rational resources. A clear finding of this inquiry is that working mothers wanted more connection with other mothers in their firm, and in their industry. Women wanted to identify with others who had similar experiences, to learn from them and to shape their own movements in their context: *I really craved a conversation with someone who knew how I was feeling* (Amandine, PE1, Interview 10).

In this context, it is an important to note that storytelling is, after all, a primitive human tool for knowledge acquisition; we need only look at the evidence of primitive societies sharing stories in images on caves, which pre-dates language as a means to share significant learnings. In a modern positivist society, we are conditioned to view storytelling as a leisure pursuit – perhaps even the domain of children. However, our brains process stories and facts in different parts of our brain - literally a different form of knowing- with stories processed in our primitive brain before being passed to the conscious mind for examination. Stories are, thus, an intuitive way of sharing information, extended the permitted field of knowledge acquisition and interpretation. We seem, perhaps, to instinctively fall back on learning from the stories of others when the 'rational world' fails us, when there are no systems to solve our problems, and the complexities of life's data set are too overwhelming.

It is well-established that becoming a mother, being on maternity leave and then returning to the workforce is a complex and often disarming experience (see 3.2.1 Challenging maternity transitions); this is particularly true in the private equity industry where women are often a 'trailblazer', as the first in their team to go on leave and no clear path to follow. Through the process of listening to and interpreting the stories of others, women are provided with an alternative approach to moving forward, which Baer (Baer, 2016) describes as using *emotions and their somatic markers* as a way to filter the complexity of experience and *feel [their] way – or at least part of their way – there*. This storied approach is in contrast to *the high-reason view*. In this inquiry, women were brought together to co-create the coaching interventions in their institutions, sharing their stories and ideas in a collaborative, vulnerable and intuitive way; the image of women sat round the fire sharing stories came strongly to my mind during these workshops.

In my professional experience, which supports the literature on this subject (Filsinger, Claudia, 2021), maternity returners want to hear coaches' stories of how other similar working mothers have managed their transitions. The stories shared through coaching serve as beacons – stories to live alongside and intersect with the coachee's story-in-the-telling, including the coach's story. As importantly, MC has the potential to allow coachees to examine their own stories. There is a distinction here to be made between a life and a story; a story is not the full picture of a life but the part of a life that a coachee reveals in that moment in space and time. This is often a largely unconscious process, replete with the echoes of other stories' influence, but nevertheless carries in it a process of selecting which parts of a life come together to form the plot of this particular story-in-the-telling; a priori this implies there are other possible versions of their story.

It is in this storied complexity and the opportunity to restory through coaching where MC elevates itself from being tactical and pragmatic, to strategic and transformative. Restorying is a sense-making lens through which stories in coaching can be deconstructed and reconstructed by the narrators, transforming future stories. I have previously described the coaching arena as a 'grey space' of interactions where stories of the past and present infuse each other to move forward to future possibilities. The coach is not there, of course, to explicitly share their story; however, the coach's story inevitably determines who they are in the coaching and what they bring to the conversation. The coaching arena is thus a space where the 'black' and the 'white' stories that coach and coachee bring overlap at a moment in time. Through the coaching, the coachee can critically engage with the other stories that are influencing them, triggering an imaginative process of creating new 'blue' possibilities.

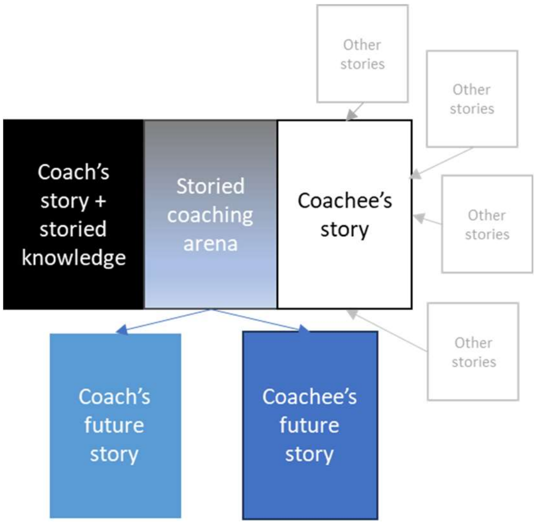


Figure 20 : The storied coaching arena

Through facilitating conversations in the grey spaces where stories intersect, MC becomes a point in time and space to reimagine the future, giving a new version of a story form in living it forward. *Individuals exist through their relationship with others and with their environment. Everything affects, and is affected by, everything else in the coachee's world* (Leary-Joyce, 2014, p.9).

This is not to say that the coachee is engaged in a reflective narrative experience with no action or outcome; on the contrary, often the process of restorying results in tangible, practically applicable actions. However, when we see our coachee's as living storied lives, the actions and commitments from MC come from the coachee's whole self, present behind the provisional story that is told. It allows a coaching conversation to get to the heart of what is sustainable as a way to live forward, borne from guiding principles and values, rather than necessary outcomes or goals. Storytelling is coaching is not, therefore, a light exchange or even make-believe; it permits an extension of what women might believe is possible.

MC should not be approached with the intention of making sense and designing linear paths through complexity. It involves embracing wholeheartedly what Bateson describes as the *sharp discontinuities of women's lives* (Bateson, 1989, p.16) and sitting with those discontinuities as a way forward. As highlighted in the literature and through this inquiry, the complexity itself - of the patterns of motherhood and the subsequent maternity transitions - is the only constant we can rely on. We need to embrace a multiplicity of stories living alongside each other as a way of being and a representation of multiple truths.

A *generative metaphor* (Schon, 1994, p.269) I return to repeatedly in this inquiry and in practice is one of the individual lives of working mothers, including my own, as rivers cutting different paths down a mountain. Maternity transitions are distinct and well-defined junctures, rocks that every river must navigate on its course and go around. But how the river encounters those rocks is entirely dependent on its properties and the surrounding context - *the gradient, the flora and fauna, the rock composition at different points provide an infinite range of possibilities* (Reynolds, 2021). The role of a coach is to raise an awareness of what that river and its surrounds are like; the coaching conversation inevitably alters the flow in some way, perhaps temporarily slowing the current, causing a ripple or a diversion. Coachees can also reflect on what other stories are intersecting their river, whether they divert it, widen it, increase the speed of its flow. The influence of these other stories is strong and we need to be thoughtful about this as coaches, bringing an awareness of their presence and impact:

Just as all rivers will eventually meet the sea, so must we always be in dialogue with our context. We retain the knowledge of our path to the sea and have properties unique to the journey we have taken, but we are inexorably part of a body of water and move within it (Reynolds, 2021).

Stories are a model to coach with, live by and share as a creative resource.

6.2.3 Narrative coaching in practice

When it comes to conceptualising the findings of my coaching through this inquiry, it is important to note that the findings are, ultimately, evidenced most clearly in my practice – how I practice and who I am in my practice – rather than how I talk about my practice. My evolution as a practitioner is borne from the many and varied conversations with women in this inquiry. As they have revealed something about themselves, their stories, this has incrementally triggered changes in my practice. Some of these changes were obvious trigger moments, evidenced through particular passages in my reflective journal. The passage below is an example of when I decided to be more intentional about bringing elements of my story to coaching, to build trust and connection:

> *I was coaching an investment executive before her first maternity leave. By a strange coincidence, we had met each other briefly on a couple of occasions in a different professional context previously. After clearly contracting with the coachee that she was happy to proceed despite some shared connections and prior knowledge of each other, we went into a coaching conversation. Very quickly, I was aware of a different energy to the conversation; she was sharing emotional and personal struggles almost straight away, and we got to 'the heart of the matter' immediately. Whilst some conversations pre-leave can feel more practical and transactional, this felt very different. On reflection, I realised that there was already a bond of trust between us, which was partly based on her trust in my ability to support her (i.e. my credentials).*

Most changes to my practice were less obvious – trickles of awareness that at some point tipped into a response in an area of my practice; that realisation 'I need to do this differently'. I notice these changes retrospectively, reflecting on the changes to 'the action' of my coaching. As I make sense of my findings for my community of practice, I have set out what I have described as my narrative approach to coaching in practice. How can we bring a storied lens to how we work in practice? I cite stories and reflections from my coaching journal as a way to shed light on how my coaching experiences have contributed to my evolution as a practitioner.

As a way to approach coaching sessions, it is useful to see the narrative arc of storytelling as a guiding shape; this is not to suggest that we are slavishly looking for dynamic plots with peaks of action at the climax, but rather that there is naturally a shape to stories that can guide how we work with them. In coaching, this links closely with the concept of beginnings, middles and endings as a way to frame the coaching journey.

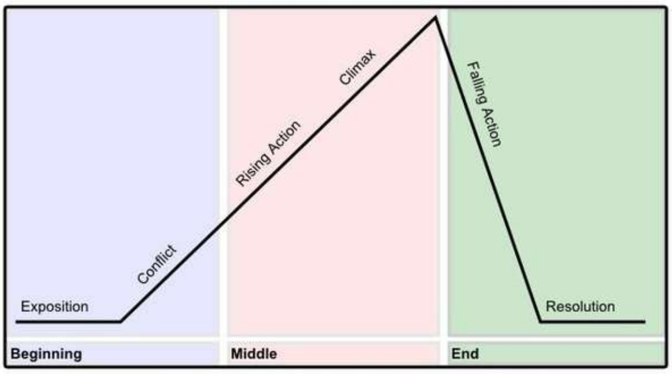


Figure 21 : A narrative arc

Coaching models can feel gimmicky if they are overly structured or complicated; in my experience, they often have a place in theory more than in practice. A narrative approach to coaching seeks to sidestep the rigmarole of a model and share a broad-based approach that can be applied flexibly. Fundamentally, this approach is based on the epistemological and ontological stance set out above. From this point, the narrative approach seeks to encourage creativity, exploration and imagination through exploring the different elements of the stories brought to coaching: for example, questions might focus on the relevance of the setting, the characters, the plot, the conflict and the tone.

What is set out here is derived from my work, a particular coach, with maternity coachees in the private equity industry. The combination of these specific conditions has given rise to a change in an approach to MC practice, how it is conceptualised, and how it is marketed as a service. However, some of these conditions are also reflective of other high-intensity environments within financial, legal and professional services too.

i. Beginnings

At the beginning of a MC relationship, the process of contracting remains important as a means to establish the terms of working together and who the coach and coachee are in the space. Unlike executive coaching structures, maternity coaches rarely have the luxury of chemistry sessions, or multiple sessions before the coachee goes on leave. This means that, even before the formalities of contracting begin, the coach should enter the space curious and use the opening conversation as data in understanding the context for the story that follows; we need to be attentive to the words a client is using, how they are interacting with the coach, if they are light or serious in tone, and what they inadvertently bring our attention to in small talk. The opening dialogue often contains markers of what is to follow, in tone and feeling, if not in content.

> *When I first met Roisin, she was at home as one of her children was unwell. Unsurprisingly, she seemed distracted by the fact that she had a young toddler in the house with her, though he was sleeping during our session. Roisin was clipped and impatient in her opening conversation, giving the sense that she was irritated to be spending the time on the coaching call. Her arms were folded and she was not looking directly at the screen very often. I explored with her whether there would be a better time for us to speak, but she was adamant that the coaching time was important to her. Roisin then became tearful and explained how it was 'typical' that she never gets time to herself to even have a call like this, and revealed how she has had significant struggles with her mental health since her babies were born. By sitting with the feeling of that opening coaching moment, the direction of the conversation was set by Roisin's 'here and now', the needs she felt and had wanted to bring to an independent and confidential coaching conversation. I question whether this level of*

transparency, this moment of vulnerable openness, would have arrived if we had rushed into talking about her return-to-work.

When it comes to contracting, this is usually done in the pre-maternity leave session and there is rarely a separate time allocated to this – time is tight. In practice, this means that contracting needs to be clear and focused, with the coach having perhaps a more rigid approach than they might in an executive coaching structure. Against this backdrop, some of the 'nuts and bolts' of contracting - such as the amount of time together, the structure of the coaching engagement – are perhaps best communicated in advance in an email. This allows the contracting conversation to focus on matters of negotiation and consent. Through this inquiry – made clear through my personal reflective work and in supervision- two elements have stood out as important in encouraging a narrative approach:

a. Who is the coach?

Firstly, (as discussed fully in How much of my story to bring in), it is ethically important that the coach declares their positionality upfront in introducing themselves; this is not because it is a 'dirty truth', but rather because we are positioning ourselves as an active collaborator, a co-narrator.

I have noticed that I have adapted how much I open up. I share my own background working in financial services to give coachee's the knowledge that I have worked in relatable roles, with long hours and high work intensity. I also give information about my related work as a coach and researcher in the PE industry, so that they can better understand how the conversation I am having with them fits into the broader architecture of my experience and knowledge; this often helps to both build trust between us, and also credentialise my work as a coach with them. Finally, I always share that I left financial services when I became a mother, and that I have 4 small boys, to be transparent about the decisions I have made; when I am asked to embellish on this, I am happy to be open and honest about what influenced my decisions.

By sharing facets of our life, story markers, and intentionally allowing these to sit in the storied coaching conversation, the coach displays an open-hearted vulnerability that can build trust and set the tone. In this example, my story is explicitly present in the conversation, not as a reference point to guide the coachee, but as a way to make clear the irremovable presence of the coach's story; we cannot but apply the lens of our experience and assumptions to how we make meaning together with the coachee: *Because we are all trapped by our Meaning Perspectives, we can never really make interpretations of our experience free of bias* (Mezirow, 1990, p.4).

This is particularly important in the context of MC in the private equity industry. This inquiry found that my understanding of the specific dynamics of the coachee's professional environment – structurally, culturally, and 'mechanically', in terms of promotion and reward structures- is of paramount importance to the coachee. Those who reported a negative experience of MC referenced the fact that their coach did not have a realistic view of the demands of their role and what was practically possible for them, particularly when it came to subjects such as work-life balance, which eroded the value of the coaching.

Rachel described how her previous coach, although well-intended, continually challenged her not to work in the evenings on her laptop once she had put her baby to bed. Whilst Rachel recognised that, from a wellbeing perspective, there was good reason for the challenge, it made her think that the coach did not understand the nature of her work because this was the only way she could get to see her baby and not work late in the office. She also reflected *that the coach did not listen to her priorities and how important her career was to her sense of self.*

This supports other literature on this topic, which also brings to the fore the importance of relevant sector experience, a similar personality and motherhood to how the coach is perceived (Filsinger, 2021). In short, maternity coachees want a coach that 'gets it'; someone who sees the system they are in, albeit from a different vantage point, and its implications for working motherhood. By sharing key story markers upfront and framing what we are bringing to the conversation, the coach intentionally steps into a narrative space with the coachee.

Who is the coach in this narrative space? Share intentionally what you are bringing to the conversation that might influence the direction of future stories.

b. Goal-setting vs understanding 'disorienting dilemmas'

It is common that MC is introduced to coachees with guiding topics for each session – sometimes interpreted as embedded goals - for both institutions and coachees to understand and appreciate the range of topics brought to coaching sessions. For example, the session before a coachee goes on maternity leave could cover areas such as 'identifying and managing support in the firm' and 'having honest pre-leave conversations'. These topics can be helpful in advance of coaching, to understand the intentions of MC to consider ways to navigate the maternity transitions. However, it is important that these topics are not given undue weight or focus in the way that the coaching session is introduced by the coach. Such guidance, arguably, encourages a focus on sense-making in the context of a linear career and a system structured around 'ideal' ways of working; these are often the organisational goals. If contracting conversations are structured around these topics, there is a risk that coaching further legitimises prevailing socio-cultural belief systems relating to working motherhood and encourages a conversation that conforms to dominant narratives in the PE industry.

Equally, in understanding what a coachee wants to get out of the coaching session, it is important not to rely too heavily on explicit commitment to practical goals and outcomes. There is a tendency observed across maternity coaching practitioners to focus on practical impact, because it gives an immediate result to the coach and the employing organisation. However, this arguably pitches coaching conversations at a surface level and ignores the very real dilemmas that sit beneath them.

This is not to say that practical outcomes are not part of the MC experience; on the contrary, the coaching needs to be applicable to the real environment in which these women professionally operate, particularly as most of them are highly-motivated, career-oriented women who want tangible outcomes. However, the value of MC comes from working beneath the surface of those goals and understanding what Mezirow describes as the underlying *meaning perspectives* (1990) that inform them. When we too closely set the parameters of the coaching, there is a risk that a coachee dutifully constructs a story around them and the box is ticked. But these may not be the stories that a coachee has in them to tell and the potential longer-term impact of MC to generate transformative insight dissipates.

From the outset, the coaching needs to be guided by the story that the coachee brings to the session, not just the quick fixes they are seeking in the present: *the Gestalt view is about working with an emergent process of change and how your coachee blocks this flow by rushing to objective-*

based outcomes (Leary-Joyce, 2014, p.10). This is highly relevant to MC because the changes women are experiencing in becoming mothers, transitioning out of and into the workplace again, are deeply transformative; they are rarely tangible or measurable.

> *As Gabriella stated at the beginning of her session, 'let me tell you the whole story so you can understand where I'm coming from.' Her story took her back to the beginning of her career at the firm, the relationships she made at that time and how, fifteen years later, one of those relationships proved to be an impactful sponsor through her career. A recent internal role move just before maternity leave meant she no longer had such direct contact with this sponsor, and the 'goal' highlighted in her first session became about building her confidence in her achievements and a new network, without the safety net of this sponsor. This then influenced the conversation we had about her upcoming maternity leave and how she would manage it.*

In discussing the complexity of women's lives, Bateson expresses that *we must invest time and passion in specific goals and yet at the same time acknowledge that these are mutable* (Bateson, 1989, p.9). For me, this beautifully encapsulates the approach to goal-setting required in a narrative approach to MC; goals and outcomes are important as the representation of what is important and front-of-mind at that point of time but, as coaches, we must hold these goals as part of a story in motion and acknowledge that they too are transitory. Our role is not to rush coachees to their solutions, but rather to engage them in 'sitting with' their storytelling process.

> *Whilst Gabriella was on leave, her new role fell away and she had to pivot back to her original role, leveraging that historic relationship to ensure she had a role to return to. Although the 'goal' had changed, Gabriella acknowledged how much she had learnt about herself and others along the way, by having a period of time both in a different team and on maternity leave. The learnings were in the journey rather than at the destination.*

The objective of contracting in MC, therefore, is to centre in on the coachee's story and their conflict in that moment. The maternity transitions are a clear example of what Mezirow describes as a *disorienting dilemma*: *dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense become catalysts or 'trigger events' that precipitate critical reflection and transformations* (Mezirow, 1990, p.5). The opportunity of MC is to use coaching as a permitted, dedicated point in time and space to critically reflect on the 'trigger events' of maternity transitions. Whilst goals and outcomes are perhaps the future-focused articulation of where the coachee practically wants to be, the stories that sit behind the in-the-moment experience are those that will enable transformative restorying in the present, that have the power to change the future.

> Hold goals and outcomes lightly and acknowledge they are transitory. Get to the heart of a coachee's dilemma and what it means to them.

ii. Middles

In a narrative approach to coaching, the middles of coaching sessions - and stories - are when the coach has an opportunity to deepen the learning. To do this, the story the coachee brings is deconstructed to appreciate the multiple, and often conflicting, perspectives that influence the stories we tell ourselves and others. I look to the literature on narrative analysis and use this as a prism through which to explore the multiplicity of perspectives that are often left unexplored in MC.

Based on my 'Shifting the bar' narrative analysis tool (Reynolds, 2022), derived from Clandinin et al.'s three commonplaces of inquiry (1990), it is possible to intentionally move around the conditions that frame a story.

The first narrative commonplace is *temporality,* which both places the stories in a certain temporal context, but also acknowledges that they are mutable and have a past, present and future; *sociality* frames both the social conditions and forces of the surrounding environment, and also the personal conditions of the story; and *place* refers to the physical location of inquiry and the concrete place. I have added a forth axis of 'coaching time' to highlight that there are fixed points of time at which the coach and coachee interact. This is a very time-bound relationship; on one hand, it perhaps limits the depth of the relationship on the other hand, it increases the intensity and provides a window of opportunity to be thoughtful and intentional about the future.

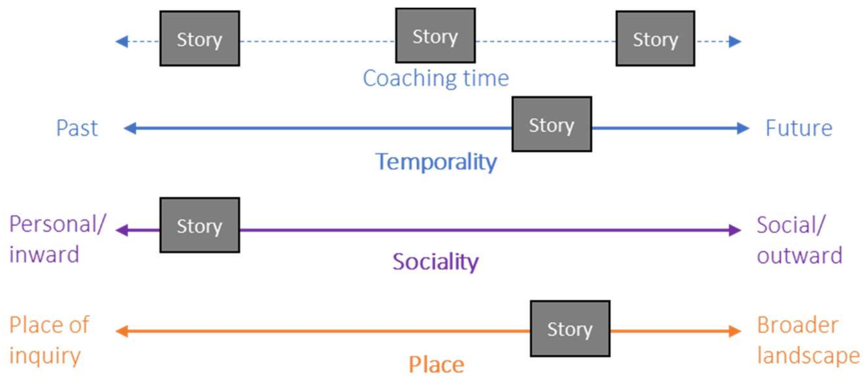


Figure 22 : Shifting the bar

Of course, a coaching conversation would not be systematically pulled through all these different points in space and time – its practical application is not one of analysis. However, the tool can be applied to encourage us as coaches to think about how shifting the bars to different points on the axes might release different perspectives on the conditions that frame a story. By encouraging a multiplicity of perspectives on the same story, it draws coachees to their own knowledge of possible alternative ways of restorying.

> *Roisin was trying to make her boss see that maternity cover was needed as she performed some firm-critical functions that would suffer if only a team of juniors were left to manage them. She was aware that maternity cover was possible in an HR role but she felt her boss was being slow to begin the process. This was a time-sensitive need because she wanted to be able to do handovers thoroughly. The dilemma she brought to coaching was, how could she get her boss to see what was needed and motivate him to arrange a maternity cover? We worked with temporality and sociality in this example:*
>
> Temporality –*What could happen if you do not manage to arrange a cover? What other options do you have at this point in time? Are there any previous times you have successfully motivated him when he felt stuck? How does this continue if you do not intervene?*
>
> Sociality – *What is the effect on others if he does nothing? What is driving his position or perspective on the situation within the workplace? What is causing you concern about his lack of motivation on this point?*

Roisin concluded that she was most worried about how it would reflect on her if the team did not cope in her absence. She was concerned she would come back to an unstable team environment, but she also reflected that 'the jigsaw puzzle pieces would be spread out everywhere anyway'. Her boss was dealing with more pressing business matters and she decided that this was a relatively smaller factor in the big picture, even when she presented him with the business case. She felt she had a heightened awareness about the choices she had, but also a realisation of what she could and could not change. She decided instead to present her boss with the facts but ask him how he viewed the coverage plan as working, and how he saw the business as coping with her absence. She resolved to engage him in the conversation with a view to him designing the outcome with her, both to increase his ownership of the issue, but also to reduce her accountability and pressure. She had an increased sense of agency and awareness of what she felt she could and could not control; in turn, this made her feel more relaxed going into her maternity leave.

This narrative approach encourages a multiplicity of perspectives and, with that, the opportunity to reconstruct proactively and intentionally the stories coachee's tell themselves and others. In line with a Co-Active approach, this allows coachees to create new versions of *who we are being and want to be* (Kimsey-House *et al.,* 2018, p.3) restoring a keen sense of authorship.

As coaches, we walk alongside coachees as they deepen their understanding of the conflicts they bring about their maternity transitions to coaching, and encourage an appreciation of the different perspectives that are shaping the stories they tell. MC thus becomes an opportunity for coachee's to see themselves in their whole space – including the system they are in, the different stories that are shaping theirs and why – and assume a reflexive authorship. As coaches, we need to listen carefully to what is being shared in the present, both the articulated and the unarticulated, rather than only hearing the narrated presentation of events : *Listening for story threads is a little like listening for the melody of a song, rather than following the story's content and becoming attached to it as a narrative (Rogers , p.110)*. In the shared meaning-making space of coaching, it is important that we play back the melody that we hear to the coachee, acknowledging it as our interpretation; the presence of both the articulated and this felt interpretation of the unarticulated are additional data points for the coachee as they move forward to restory.

When it comes to acknowledging the perspective of the coach in the restorying process, I am acutely aware of my own presence in the conversation when I coach women through their maternity transitions. My coachees are making decisions about how they construct their onward lives as working mothers in our grey shared space, in that moment in time. For example, sometimes they ask me explicitly how I have been able to work and study whilst having children; I then share tangible areas of my life, such as childcare arrangements, or how my husband and I ensure we still have time for ourselves to recharge. Often, however, my story only has a subconscious presence – my experiences, assumptions and values – , as the framework through which coachee's stories pass. I can recall moments when I have needed to intentionally and consciously suspend judgement when a coachee's decisions or approach is wildly at odds with my own. As I have previously discussed, I do not believe that we can ever truly suspend who we are as a coach in the conversation, and our story bleeds into the present in how we act and react. The approach of 'shifting the bar' also releases perspectives to me as a coach in our conversations, about the coachee's life, and also about my own.

I left that conversation feeling energised and I think it was partly because we were talking about how boring it is being at home with a little baby. I feel like, the more *conversations I have with women who feel the same, the less alone I feel with the nagging guilt about that. I reflect that this is also partly the value of a coaching conversation for coachees; there is a shared sense of experience, an almost secret alliance that can only exist between mothers.*

> 'Shift the bar' on the stories coachees are telling to encourage a multiplicity of perspectives on the same story. Listen for what is said and unsaid, and share this with the coachee.

iii. Endings

As the narrative arc begins its descent and the coachee has potentially expanded their perspective on their narrative possibilities, it is the moment to encourage an imaginative exploration of the future in designing future actions and outcomes. At times, the take-aways from a coaching session are deeply reflective and have provoked a process of reassessment of context; at other times, there are practical actions that a coachee is taking away, having gone through the process of understanding the 'why'. As with any executive coaching session, coaches should leave sufficient time for coachees to engage with commitments and accountability as a way to close each session.

The session with Nadine had been quite fast-paced; she arrived at the session with what felt like a nervous energy and anxiousness to get results. We had discussed the upset she felt around a colleague who had not returned a portfolio board seat to Nadine in a timely manner when she returned to work, which was making Nadine feel usurped and also undervalued because the head of the team had not stepped in to support her. We paused to reflect on where she wanted to be with this situation when we met six weeks later. She took a breath and described what the ideal at that point in time would look like, visibly energised by this. We then worked backwards through the steps she saw as necessary to get there and how and when she would achieve those. I also invited her, optionally, to email me when she had completed each step in order to enhance her sense of commitment to what was a challenging task. We agreed to review the situation at her next coaching session.

It is also ethically paramount to consider how we end a MC engagement, particularly as the cadence of sessions is structured around very particular points on the maternity journey. As a maternity coach, we often become a welcome sounding board and resource in the months following a woman's return-to-work during coaching sessions; with that, there comes a responsibility to leave the coachee well-resourced for their onward working motherhood, when the coaching ends. As in all coaching, narrative endings also invite a resolution to close off the session or relationship; a commitment to future actions, or ways of being. It is rare that work together continues beyond the remit of a MC structure, so it also becomes valuable to invite coachees to reflect on not only their learning but also where their story 'is at'; we come back to the components of a story such as the plot, the characters and the setting as a way for coachees to complete their picture of onward working motherhood.

Catherine had highly valued her MC sessions. She came to each session motivated to move forward with the challenges she was experiencing, particularly when it came to returning to work and a negative previous experience. She wanted to spend her final session thinking about how she would 'keep herself honest' and not fall into her old habits of letting others ignore her boundaries. I worked with Catherine fluidly through 'shifting the bar' to explore *the different possible stakeholders (which ranged from her husband to a friend at another firm and also herself), when and where was helpful to review her habits, how she would know if she was living in a sustainable way, and what she would do if she was not. Catherine described herself as feeling ready to move forward beyond coaching and into her consciously designed status quo of working motherhood.*

If you could write your story any way you like, what would it sound like? What does sustainable motherhood look like for you? What needs to change in your story to get there? What is the next chapter for you? How are you going to know if these commitments have changed your story?

—

Narrative maternity coaching, in practice, therefore centres on the premise that our stories are not fixed because the conditions around the stories told in coaching are emergent, changeable, and multiple. MC through this lens is not simply a means to solve current problems, but also a means to resource coachees to gain comfort in – or at least awareness of –the conflicts and multiplicities of working motherhood as a dynamic and emergent way of living forward.

It is time to now explore the creative potential of interrupted and conflicted lives. […] These are not lives without commitment, but rather lives in which commitments are continually refocused and redefined. (Bateson, 1989, p.9).

6.3 Implications for my story

In reflecting on my own learnings, my mind is brought back to a constructed dialogue (published over twenty years ago), which I encountered in my introduction to transdisciplinary studies. In this paper, a metaphorical distinction is made between someone moving towards a fixed 'port' – dedicating time, money and energy and expecting a tangible outcome - and someone being an explorer -with a *going-forward-toward* but no fixed port in mind, and uncertainty and obstacles along the way (Vaill, 1981). As I look back on my journey, this resonates loud and clear; where I have arrived today is not where I anticipated, but I have been propelled on by a *going-forward-toward* impetus, derived from my purpose and values.

My start and end point are not the focal points of my findings; rather, it has been the very <u>process</u> of carrying out my inquiry that has produced the learnings. In the same way that meaning has been made in the midst of inquiry, I notice that where I work and how I work is often in the middle, in the process, rather than for a fixed goal or a binary outcome. I expand on these messy middles as a way to bring to light the value I have identified, and then sat with, in the actual process of 'being in the doing'; this is both as a coach and as a researcher, which are, of course, both merged and embodied in my thinking and actions.

6.3.1. Identifying 'the middles'

i. Insider : outsider

In embarking upon this inquiry, I was acutely aware of my positionality and how being an insider and outsider impacted upon the decisions I made; I discussed this transparently in INTRODUCTION: the

‘I’ in this inquiry. As Marshall and Gearty articulate, the focus of my research is *also relevant to some other area of my life, and I will seek to work with, rather than suppress, that realization* (Marshall and Gearty, 2021, p.160). Working with *that realization* of a multi-perspective insider-outsider position in this inquiry has been a source of reflection, and also discomfort, at different stages: I am an insider with coachees as a coach, with organisations in supporting their goals, with inquiry participants as a working mothers; and simultaneously an outsider in the very same contexts, because I only share a storied version of my coachee’s world, I am not part of an organisation’s structures or culture, and I left the financial services industry when I became a mother.

My position is, therefore, not one of either/or but rather *both/and* (Lewis and Simpson, 2010, p.168); it evokes Nicolescu’s ‘Included Middle’, where two apparent contradictions can exist in a third position of complexity, defying the traditional law of logic that *tertium non datur* (Nicolescu, 2008). It is in the Included Middle that I have moved in this inquiry, where the perspectives are multiple and there is a constant interaction between my own story-in-the-telling, and the story of this inquiry. Occupying the messy middle of the binary insider:outsider positions as a legitimate level of reality has opened up imagination, perception and creativity as valid sources of knowledge. As I argued in earlier writing, *I am not doing a research project outside of myself – I am the imagination and the process* (Reynolds, 2022). For Nicolescu, *the logic of the included middle is perhaps the privileged logic of complexity; privileged in the sense that it allows us to cross the different areas of knowledge in a coherent way* (Nicolescu, 2008, p.30).

ii. Coach : coachee

Throughout this inquiry, I have discussed the time and place that a coach and coachee spend together as a ‘grey space’. It is a shared meaning-making space where coachees and coaches bring stories that inevitably must pass through the filter of each other’s’ experiences – their meaning perspectives and assumptions structure (Mezirow, 1990)– as part of a forward-moving conversation; neither leave the space unchanged. I have expanded fully on the creative potential of stories in coaching in 6.2 Implications for coaching COP, but I emphasise here that this creativity is borne from the process of sharing, of softening the hard interface that separates coach from coachee, and allowing the shared perspectives to creatively generate versions of stories that may not otherwise have been possible.

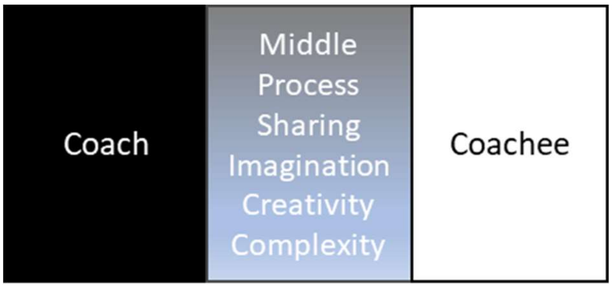


Figure 23 : The messy middle of coaching

Conceptualising how this grey space is created, or ‘accessed’, in coaching is not straightforward. As Sennett describes, for a craftsman, *technique is no longer a mechanical activity; people can feel fully and think deeply what they are doing once they do it well* (Sennett, 2008, p.20). I reflected that much of this is to do with the coaching process; of being asked to articulate a story, and of it being heard deeply and attentively by a coach who is holding the space it. Engaging in MC and conceptualising my practice for others is not done so with the intention of seeking closure or solving a problem *per se*, but rather to open up new possibilities, with an awareness of the value in the process of the conversation (Sennett, 2008, p.26). It is also evolutionary work that does not happen in a silo, but in multi-layered knowledge community whereby skills are refined and changed through a validation process.

iii. Getting it right : getting it done

I have also become aware that, as a coach, I am constantly striving to satisfy two often opposing ideals. On one hand, there is my underlying purpose that motivates me to improve the experience of women going on maternity leave; I would ideally want more points of interaction with the coachee, different touch points with leaders and line managers, an opportunity to work with the broader team to engage with the system around the returner in every coaching engagement. However, there are also the conflicting commercial imperatives of time and money that create the container in which I must operate. For Sennett, this is the craftsman's conflict between *getting something right and getting it done* (Sennett, 2008, p.46). Again, I am acutely aware of the middle reality in which I operate, between the two poles, sacrificing conflicting ideals for progress and forward motion.

iv. Thematic analysis : narrative analysis

As explained fully in *Methodology*, I used a dual-mode of sense-making in this inquiry; paradigmatic reflexive thematic analysis, and narrative analysis. This emerged due to the differing versions of reality and epistemic cultures within the different stakeholder groups. The Partner Firms sought tangible recommendations and practical outcomes, through the lens of understanding the themes that emerged from the interview and coaching conversations; my own sense-making privileged a different voice and was important to the conceptualisation of my coaching practice. I reflect extensively on this in A single methodology in practice, expanding on how the voices co-existed and what this dual-approach gave me. Critically, whilst distinguished clearly in theory, the modes of analysis were with the same data, and carried out by the same researcher. Whilst there were clear differences in practical application of the methods, the generated knowledge was inseparable, embedded in me, my experiences, my processes, and my practice (see Figure 9 : The merging of narrative and reflexive thematic analysis).

In having the courage to grapple with what is important and set aside a more simple approach, responding dynamically and wholly to the real conditions of my professional and academic work, I was able to make connections that I would not otherwise have made. The sense-making happened in the space **between** the two theories, in the messy middle. Such an emergent process was somewhat uncomfortable at times, with the *going-forward-toward* as the inquiry impetus rather than a set finish line (Vaill, 1981, p.18). There were distinct challenges along the way, such as when the key HR contact at one of the Partner Firms resigned; a pause of nearly 6 months followed, but was then picked up with renewed energy, purpose and vision by a new hire. As Vaill describes, *concerns I deal with as best I can, sometimes neatly, but more often with the most precarious feeling of makeshift* (Vaill, 1981, p.19). It has been sitting with this *feeling of makeshift*, getting comfortable with working with a level of discomfort and improvisation, that has allowed me to move this inquiry forward.

7. FINAL THOUGHTS

7.1 Impact

In reviewing the impact of this inquiry, I refer back to the criteria for success set out in A FOREWORD: how to read this. and reflect on the onward implications for professional practice:

- Having a positive impact on working mothers in private equity, at an individual and community level.
- Making the working mothers I engage with feel heard and part of a community, through inquiry stories shared and hidden experiences made visible.
- Having applicable findings for the environments I work in (and possible applicability to similar environments through future inquiry) - the seeds of cultural change planted in the firms I work with through institutional-level interventions.
- Making trustworthy my work and practice through open engagement with my own positionality and how this determines how this inquiry in conducted.
- Broadening the impact of this inquiry beyond me, conceptualising, disseminating and exploring my ideas with my community of practice, my senior leadership team, HR professionals and senior leaders.
- Contributing to academic thinking in the work-family field relating to financial services, particularly areas that impact policy and practice.

Mothers in PE: One of the greatest impacts of this inquiry for me has been the opportunity to work with such a motivated and insightful group of women. Although their backgrounds varied enormously, their engagement with not only their own story but the group narrative provided a fertile ground for exploration. The sense of community felt was evidenced in both the reflective sharing in the group workshops, but also their explicit identification of the value of sharing their stories of working motherhood as a means to make sense of experience.

Applicable findings and broadening impact: The impact on mothers in private equity is also evidenced in the *going-forward-toward* of changes in practice. As observed through this inquiry, PTC – most often MC - occupies an unusual place in the coaching market:

- It is neither executive coaching nor directive training, but usually incorporates elements of both.
- It is fixed in the cadence of sessions, which are closely tied to the specific transitional events of a parent's life and spaced months apart.
- Almost always funded by the firm, the main objective of the coaching is to support the woman going on leave, to enhance retention rates; coachee objectives stem from this organisational objective.
- It typically attracts coaching rates that are lower than executive coaching rates, which suggests a perceived hierarchy in terms of the service delivered or what the organisation gets out of the engagement.

In the financial services environments in which I operate – and particularly within private equity for the purposes of this inquiry - I have observed that my experience of MC challenges some of the assumptions that underpin the positioning of MC as a proposition. Due to the structure around timing and specific organisational objectives, we undersell and underappreciate the value this coaching relationship can deliver to women going through the experience of transitioning out of and back into the workforce again as a mother. We also undersell the value of the coach, given the calibre of professional background required to credibly coach in this industry.

As part of a growing business in the field of PTC, I am changing how I talk about the value proposition in light of this inquiry, branding it as 'executive parental/maternity coaching', to emphasise the potential breadth and impact of the engagement that this inquiry has highlighted. By clearly positioning myself as a coach with an understanding of the industry, through speaking at events and publishing blogs on the subject, I am establishing the contributions to thinking and best practice I bring. Additionally, I continue to work on how to increase the number of touch points with a firm – working with the system, not just the woman -, which is slowly materialising through projects such as working with the senior partners of a firm on rhetoric and actions. However, the question still remains about how to encourage firms to provide a more comprehensive and longer-term support package for women when they return to work; the underlying structure of MC may be the focus of ongoing professional research in this area, as it pertains to PE but also other high-performance industries.

I am also acutely aware that, although the Partner Firms engaged openly with this study with many shared objectives, the pace of change is slow and cultural shifts will take years to ultimately take root. As an example of this, one of the Partner Firms explained that they did not actually send the full consultancy report to their senior partners group; they reproduced an abridged version, which diluted some of the more challenging messages. Unfortunately, I did not get access to this report, but I understand that the 'braver' cultural suggestions were omitted. Whilst this is neither wholly surprising nor catastrophic (as there were so many other recommendations that would change the more immediate context), it indicates the depth of the embedded view on what working in the PE industry looks like, as well as the role of the HR gatekeeper in ultimately censoring the report.

Changes to how I work: I also acknowledge that there have been unique contributions to my professional development that I attribute to my doctoral journey, which have directly impacted the direction of the services I offer. For example, building on the approach to conversation I employed through conversations in this study and my reflective learnings, I have now run similar 'listening' projects within other financial services firms. I am employed as a coach to create a safe space where employees can confidentially share their experiences of topics such as 'how diverse talent progress within organisation *x',* 'are there differences in how women progress in organisation *y*' and 'the experiences of parents in organisation *z*'; I then write a report that informs future conversations about areas ranging from learning and development, to policy changes.

I would not have had the confidence in the value of this process, had I not embarked upon this doctorate. I have fundamentally changed how I work with my clients and my preferred approach is to use 'listening' as a diagnostic tool – alongside the HR objectives and interpretation - to understand what an organisation really needs, from the perspective of those who will be impacted by the changes. A significant part of this is about being transparent about my own positionality and sharing what I am bringing to the conversation and interpretation process, as well as involving as many stakeholders as possible in the design. One could say that my cooperative approach to inquiry has ultimately led to a cooperative approach to professional practice.

Academic contributions: Finally, I also hope that the findings of this inquiry will contribute to the rich array of literature relating to maternal workers and the experience of maternity transitions in a financial services setting. Although the academic context played a subordinate role in design and methodology, I found myself increasingly engaging with the existing field of knowledge as I distilled my own thoughts into writing. The approach to inquiry has not always honoured a classical doctoral approach, but I have sought to maintain methodological rigour throughout, so that the voices from this inquiry may also resonate with other researchers in this field.

7.2 Reflections

I did not understand until I began to write up my findings that my way of viewing the world and how I move within it has evolved through the process of this inquiry. I concur with Marshall about the need to maintain a curiosity *through inner and outer arcs of attention […] It also involves seeking to pay attention to the 'stories' I tell about myself and the world and recognizing that these are all constructions, influenced by my purposes and perspectives and by social discourses which shape meanings and values.* (Marshall, 1999, p.157). With that, I acknowledge that the version of my story presented through this inquiry is mutable, transitory, incomplete, as are the findings presented in this final inquiry story – they are a representation of my thinking at this point in time.

But women continue to go on maternity leave in the PE industry, I continue to coach and evolve my practice, just as I continue to interact with the different stakeholders that influence this phenomenon. The process is iterative and infinite, requiring constant reflexive attention. Part of carrying out this practitioner doctorate for me has been about learning to be humble in the face of this mountain of knowledge complexity, and recognise wholeheartedly that I cannot own the knowledge, or ever locate the 'right path' down the mountain. The mountain's conditions are not fixed – there are different biospheres, different weather systems, and phenomena of nature that cannot be controlled. Having adopted somewhat inadvertently a transdisciplinary mindset in my practice, I believe that, when faced with complex problems, the best we can strive for is resilience to continue when things are not simple, collaboration with others to assess the right path for now, and a willingness to cross borders and explore unfamiliar, potentially uncomfortable, hinterlands, to bring curiosity and creativity to the journey. There is no finish line in this inquiry, but this is not to say that the exploration has not been without discoveries.

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Appendix A: Invitation letter to banks and PE firms

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTNER FIRMS

Thank you for your interest in becoming a Partner Firm for my Doctoral research inquiry: *Maternity coaching in Banking and Private Equity: can it balance the books?*

What are the research aims?

The research aims to better support the complex needs of high-performing women returning from maternity leave [Maternity Returners] in the financial services industry through coaching interventions. In working to change workplace conversations, and ultimately culture, this research aims to positively impact the experiences of Maternity Returners and their ability to return to work sustainably, maintaining their high performance and wellbeing. This is all with a sharp focus on the specific nuances of the Financial Services industry and the structural and systemic challenges this can bring.

This research does not aim to 'fix' women, but rather work deeply with Partner Firms to develop and agree repeatable, effective solutions that will begin the work of cultural change. It seeks to make Partner Firms places where women who become mothers want to work and can build their careers for the long-term.

What are the benefits of participating for Partner Firms?

- You will get insights into retention drivers and obstacles for Maternity Returners, as well as design strategies to retain them
- You will receive guidance and recommendations around effective coaching interventions and the opportunity to co-design and pilot these with an experienced Consultant/Coach
- Your participation may raise your firm's profile and create positive momentum around your commitment to retaining Maternity Returners, as well as having an impact on broader gender diversity initiatives
- You will provide an opportunity to your key stakeholders to share their ideas for best practice within your firm

What is the commitment for Partner Firms?

- There will be 2-3 institutions invited to take part in this research over a 12 – 18m period from the Private Equity and Investment Banking industry.
- The level of collaboration suggested is in attached **Appendix**. This timeline is designed to provide meaningful data for each firm, without being too onerous on any single participant group. It can be flexed by firm.
- The design and intervention stages described in the **Appendix** are intentionally loose at this stage, to provide maximum scope and flexibility for the research to respond to the individual needs of Partner Firms and collect meaningful and insightful data.

Who should I contact for further information?

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact Kirsty Reynolds using the following contact details:

Email: KR604@live.mdx.ac.uk
Phone: 07843300098

APPENDIX: Partner Firms' proposed timeline

Phase 1 (June-July '22): Scoping **Objective:** To work with key stakeholders within your institution to understand the current state of play, identify the challenges and agree objectives of work together. 1. **Identify and meet with Key Stakeholder Group (HR/People Directors and Senior Leaders)** to agree objectives and framework for insights and data sharing. *[1-2hr]* 2. **Group Workshop with Maternity Returners** (~10 women) who are pregnant, have recently returned from maternity leave, or have children under 5. The aim is to understand their experiences of the firm and industry culture, the challenges they identify, and discuss options for stimulating change. The objective is not to achieve consensus of experience, but to agree a forward course of action. *[2-3hr]* *Note:* Where it is not possible to get a group of women together, individual interviews may also be appropriate to understand context.
Phase 2 (Aug – Dec '22): Designing interventions **Objective:** To build on scoping phase data to design and agree coaching interventions and tools appropriate for this firm. 1. **Share insight and data** from scoping conversations (anonymously) with Key Stakeholder Group and Maternity Returners to get all parties part of the same conversation. 2. **Co-design with Key Stakeholder Group and Coachees** bespoke coaching interventions and tools that respond to the needs of both Maternity Returners and Partner Firms.
Phase 3 (Jan '23 – Dec '23): Collecting generative data **Objective:** To pilot and roll-out agreed coaching interventions and tools, gauging their impact with all parties and making any necessary changes. 1. **Identify relevant group(s) of participants** e.g. *a.* Individual Maternity Returners for 1-to-1 coaching (this can be women at any point on their maternity journey, or with children under 5). *Number of sessions and format to be agreed by participant.* b. Line manager group coaching. *Format to be agreed.* c. Action-workshops with leaders. *Format to be agreed.* 2. **Implement coaching interventions** to initiate positive change and design any tools or supporting material in conjunction with HR eg.g. handbooks or self-coach guides **3.** **Carry out 1-to-1 interviews and group workshops** to collect data, then re-design/alter interventions.
Phase 4 (Jan '24 – Mar '24): Sharing final data • Sharing findings with the firm – evocative stories, insights and recommendations. • Sharing findings across firms, where agreed.

Appendix B: Consultancy report for PE firm