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How do professional women experience the transition from being a 'stay at home mother' to paid employment?

What are the implications for coaching and therapy?

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Acknowledgements/Dedication

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How do professional women experience the transition from being a 'stay at home mother' to paid employment?

Abstract

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore the lived experience of professional women's transition from being a 'stay at home mother' (SAHM) to paid employment. I expand on findings from a previous study I conducted (ECC 2017) with a view to informing coaching and therapy interventions.

The literature review informing this study focuses on the transition to motherhood within an organisational context, women's experience of being a SAHM and the experience of transitioning from being a SAHM to paid employment. I also consider previous research relating to maternity coaching and returner coaching

The study was carried out with a homogeneous population of seven professional women who had spent a minimum of two years at home before returning to paid employment. At the time of interview, participants had been in paid employment for between six and eighteen months. Participants were interviewed once, face-to-face, for between sixty and ninety minutes.

Four superordinate themes emerged from the analysis: (1) identity loss and transformation, (2) expectations versus reality, (3) ease of transition and (4) loss.

Participants' experience of transitioning to paid employment was significantly influenced by what had happened to them previously – specifically how they came to be a SAHM, and how they experienced their time as a SAHM. The findings suggest that where women had a planned transition to SAHM, they experienced a relatively smooth transition back to paid employment. They also highlight the impact of unmet expectations on partner relationships and women's well-being, suggesting that coaching and therapy interventions that include women's partners would be beneficial. The results also reveal that women strive to minimise the impact of their return to work on their families and, in so doing, either place a significant burden upon themselves or limit their return options. Left unacknowledged, women's experience of loss can negatively impact their partner relationships and lead to feelings of resentment and anger. The findings also point to the value of therapists and coaches working with couples during this significant life transition.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to gain a deep understanding of how professional women experience the transition from being a stay at home-mother (SAHM) to entering paid employment. I begin this chapter by placing myself in relation to the topic and current study. I then offer some background context and definitions of key terms, which I then expand upon in the next section where I present statistical information that illustrates the trends and scale of change relating to the topic. Next I present the need for the current study, followed in the next section with an outline of the study's primary research questions, aims and objectives, together with the research design and chosen theoretical framework. Finally, I present an outline of the study structure with a brief overview of each chapter.

1.1 Personal interest

My research interest in this area stems from personal and professional experiences of the challenges professional women face when seeking to re-engage with their careers. In my late thirties, I was working full-time as a senior executive at a global technology firm, was mother to Kate, my then 15-year-old daughter, wife to my husband Markus, principal provider of the household income, and pregnant with my second child. After the birth of my second child (and a subsequent third) I chose to take a career break to care for my children.

When contemplating a return to work after a three-year break, I was unable to find an opportunity to re-engage with my career that would enable me to retain the level of parental involvement I wanted to have. This prompted me to explore alternative career options, resulting in my retraining as a counsellor and coach. During my transition from full-time mother to part-time therapist and coach I experienced feelings of low self-esteem and isolation that were interwoven with an underlying sense of confusion around my sense of purpose and identity. I had invested significantly in my career as an HR professional, and very much enjoyed working in a challenging and stimulating corporate environment. My female friends described having similar experiences and, later in my practice as a coach and therapist, I encountered clients expressing similar difficulties associated with their transition from being a professional without to a professional with children.

My experience of a full-time motherhood sandwiched between two professional careers has profoundly influenced both my chosen second career and research interests. Today I work in private practice as a counsellor, psychotherapist and coach with a particular interest in working with women transitioning back to work following a break to raise a family.

Prior to embarking on this current project, my research interests led to me undertaking three smaller research projects, all of which have informed my final project. The first was a small IPA study (completed as part of my master's degree) that explored maternity coaching in relation to content and role, the impact of the coach, and the long-term benefits (Cotter, 2014; Cotter, 2015). A key finding from this study was the important role that coaches play in providing a bridge for women transitioning from work to motherhood and then to working motherhood following a period of maternity leave. The next research project I undertook was in part-completion of my doctoral studies and was a mixed method study into the attitudes of coaches, line managers and HR leaders towards maternity coaching (Cotter, 2016). I was particularly interested in understanding how stakeholders perceived the benefits of maternity coaching for recipients and the business. At around this time, I was approached by an executive coaching consultancy and asked to design and implement a piece of research looking at the expectations and experiences of women who were considering a return to work and women who had returned to work following a career break. The purpose of the research was firstly to inform and contribute to the development of coaching practices and secondly to influence and shape employers' strategies relating to the attraction and retention of women returners. Findings from this study (ECC, 2017) highlighted the need for further research to expand our understanding of how professional women experience their transition from an extended career break as a SAHM to paid employment.

1.2 Definitions

As discussed, this study seeks to expand upon previous research related to women returning to work after a period of absence during which they have been at home caring for their children. A growing body of research has centred around women returning to work following maternity leave and the provision of maternity coaching in support of that transition.

In contrast to studies exploring women returning to paid employment following a shorter maternity leave break, this study is specifically concerned with exploring the experience of women returning to paid employment following an extended career break. Having said that, maternity coaching provision and related research provides a relevant and useful context from which to explore the less well understood experiences of women returners.

In this section I offer definitions for: maternity leave, maternity coaching, stay at home mother, extended career break, women returner and returner programmes.

Maternity leave: In the UK all women, regardless of length of service, are entitled to 52 weeks of maternity leave. In 2015 the UK government introduced Shared Parental Leave, allowing up to 50 weeks of maternity leave to be shared with a partner where eligible.

Maternity coaching: Commonly, maternity coaching provision comprises a series of coaching sessions that take place before, during and after maternity leave. The number of coaching sessions is typically between three and six, with one or two sessions held prior to leave, one or two held during leave and another one or two sessions held within three to six months of the return to work.

There are many definitions of coaching (Passmore, 2006; Peltier, 2010). I consider maternity coaching to be aligned to Grant's (2010) definition:

> Developmental coaching also takes a broad strategic approach and deals with the individual's personal and professional development. Developmental coaching refers to coaching aimed at enhancing the individual's ability to meet current and future challenges more effectively via the development of increasingly complex understanding of the self, others and the systems in which the person is involved. This kind of coaching may focus on facilitating perspective taking and meaning making, enhancing emotional competencies and working more effectively with team members. (Grant et al, p.127, 2010)

Grant's definition is reflective of the therapeutic nature of maternity coaching, which I consider to be crucial to my practice with this client group as a coach-therapist. Importantly, research indicates that coachees also place value on the therapeutic aspects of maternity coaching (Brown & Kelan, 2013).

Stay at home mother (SAHM) is a term that came into common usage during the 1990s. It is used to define the role of mothers who are not employed outside the home. Typically, a SAHM devotes her time and attention to caring for her children and, when she is living with a partner, caring for them too. Commonly, SAHMs also have responsibility for managing and looking after the household. It is important to stress that this definition fails to reflect the breadth of responsibilities individual SAHMs are likely to hold. For the purposes of this study, SAHM refers to women who are not in paid employment and whose primary role is to care for their children.

Extended career break in this study refers to a minimum time of two years taken out of paid employment to care for their children.

Women returners in this study refers to women who are actively seeking a return to paid employment or who have returned following a minimum two-year career break during which they have been caring for their children.

Returner Programmes is the generic term given for a range of initiatives aimed at attracting and supporting returning professionals, both men and women. Initiatives often involve group or one-to-one support including coaching, mentoring and training.

1.3 Why this research matters

Over the past twenty years the UK has experienced a steady increase in the employment rates of women, with a substantial increase in the employment rates of mothers. However, there remains a significant gap between the employment rate of mothers and fathers. In the three-month period from April-June 2019, 75% of mothers with dependent children were in work compared with 93% of fathers with dependent children (ONS, 2019). Of those mothers in paid employment, almost half were working part-time, in comparison to less than 10% of fathers (ONS, 2017). According to the ONS (2017), the percentage of mothers identified as staying at home and caring for family has dropped from 26% in 2000 to 10% in 2017. This same survey found that of those mothers currently at home, 1.1 million intend to return to work.

Quantifying the number of professional women in the UK currently at home caring for their children is somewhat more challenging. This, in itself, is indicative and reflective of the invisibility of this population. However, efforts have been made to estimate the numbers of professional women who have left paid employment to take up caring responsibilities. A

study undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers in collaboration with the 30% Club and Women Returners (2016) estimated that 427,000 professional women in the UK who are currently on a care-related career break would like to return to paid employment at a future date. Their figures are an estimate and have been extrapolated from a range of sources including academic studies and employment participation surveys (PwC, 2016). In this study, PwC (2016) state that their figures are conservative and exclude women who have stayed at home but receive a small income.

Much has been written about income penalties and reduced career prospects resulting from career breaks (Hewlett, 2007; PwC, 2016). Research tells us that in the UK, as many as three-fifths of female career returners will work in jobs of a lower skill level, with two-thirds returning to jobs below their potential (PwC, 2016). My study (ECC, 2017) of 203 predominantly female professional career returners, indicated that a full 49% have returned on lower salaries and 39% with reduced levels of responsibilities, which is consistent with other studies (Hewlett, 2002; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). This same study indicated that low levels of confidence remains a significant challenge for career returners – not just prior to, but also in the months following their return. The impact on income and status are well documented but less is known of the psychological impact and the meanings attributed to it that arise from this life transition.

1.4 A changing world

In parallel with the increasing rate of female employment participation, there has been a growing awareness of and interest in the phenomenon of women exiting their careers at the point of having children, and subsequently returning to the workplace in lower-status, lower-paid jobs.

It is encouraging to see that in recent years the increase in media, governmental and employer attention on the impact that the maternity transition has on professional women and their return to work, in particular in terms of their career and pay. However, it has been well documented that returning to work after an extended career break or maternity leave, can be a difficult transition, despite improved legislation and employer policies (Lovejoy & Stone, 2011; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005; Percheski, 2008; Shaw, Taylor & Harris, 1999; Smeaton, 2006).

The phenomenon of women exiting their careers at the point of having children is commonly referred to as 'off-ramping' (Hewlett, 2007) or 'opting out' (Belkin, 2003). Employers and the UK government have responded with various policies and strategies intended to improve the retention rate of new mothers. Over the past ten years there has been a steady increase in the number of UK employers offering women, particularly at more senior levels, maternity coaching, mentoring schemes and flexible working opportunities.

While research indicates that some employer provision of maternity coaching and flexible working has improved retention rates (Sparrow, 2009; Cotter, 2014), there is still limited availability of flexible jobs at senior levels, particularly within male-dominated occupations (Cabrera, 2007; Hakim, 2006; Hewlett, 2002; Stone & Hernandez, 2013).

UK government initiatives aimed at increasing women's employment participation rates have included shared parental leave (SPL), which came into force in 2015. This initiative, while a step in the right direction, has failed to make any significant impact. In fact, a study undertaken by the University of Birmingham Business School (Birkett & Forbes, 2018) found that just over 1% of new parents took shared parental leave in 2017/18. While there is widespread recognition that a key barrier to couples taking up their entitlement to SPL is financial, this study (Birkett & Forbes, 2018) found additional significant barriers including cultural. Specifically, all participants discussed societal expectations around what is considered to be a 'good mother', namely being the primary caregiver; while the 'good father' identity is constructed around being the family provider.

Employer-led initiatives have emerged predominantly in the financial services and legal sectors and are commonly given the term 'returner programme'. In 2019 the UK Government pledged £5m towards funding initiatives aimed at helping people with caring responsibilities who wanted to return to work. Additionally, the government has recently created free online resources aimed at supporting individual returners and employers seeking to attract and support returners (Government Equalities Office, 2019).

Many of these programmes include a level of coaching at both the group and individual level. It is in part my intention that this research will help inform and shape the provision of coaching within the context of returnship programmes, in addition to the wider community of coaches and therapists already working with this population.

Early research into maternity coaching indicates that it is a valuable means of support to women, resulting in improved retention rates (Bussell, 2008). More recent research reveals some of the difficulties that women seek to explore in maternity coaching, including relationships with managers, organisational constraints, work-life integration and psychological difficulties. (Cotter,2014; Filsinger, 2013; Liston-Smith, 2011). My study (Cotter, 2016) of attitudes towards maternity coaching provides some insight into how women experience going back to work following maternity leave. The study used a mixed method approach, with data gathered via an online questionnaire comprising both open and closed questions. There was a high response rate of 49.6%, representing 114 respondents of whom 87% were women who had returned to work following maternity leave (the remaining 13% were line managers who had experience of managing employees around their maternity leave). An outcome of this study was the identification of areas for further research, including exploring the impact of significant relationships, specifically spouse/partner and employee/line-manager on women's experience of returning to work following maternity leave.

While the current research offers some valuable insights into the challenges that women face and the impact maternity coaching may have within the context of paid maternity leave, I believe the experience of professional women returning to work after an extended career break demands special attention.

Within the returner literature, the voices of female returners have received little prominence. I believe the lack of qualitative research exploring the experiences and psychological impact of a career break is reflective of the nature of coaching provision for this population, in which the focus of support is largely around practical issues associated with childcare and managing relationships in the workplace, particularly line manager relationships. Only scant attention has been given to psychological needs – with an emphasis on confidence building and work-based relationships (Bussell, 2008; Cotter, 2014; Filsinger, 2013).

Given the proliferation of returner programmes and the importance given to women returners in the media and among employers and coaching providers, it is important to understand how the transition from being a SAHM to a paid employee is experienced by professional women and to expand on our understanding of the psychological and relational aspects that hinder or support women undergoing this significant life transition.

1.5 Research aims

This study seeks to deepen our understanding of the lived experience of professional women's transition from being a stay at home mother to a paid employee. It also seeks to influence the development of new coaching and counselling interventions for this largely unsupported population.

The primary questions it addresses are, firstly: how do professional women experience the transition from being a 'stay at home mother' to paid employment? And secondly: what are the implications for coaching and therapy provision?

- To explore the experience of transitioning from being a stay at home mother to paid employment.
- To increase understanding of the experiences and meanings for this population.
- To explore convergence and divergence in the detail of the participants' accounts, developing a degree of theoretical generalizability. (Smith et al, 2009)

1.6 Research design

This study takes a qualitative phenomenological approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to provide an in-depth exploration of seven professional women's experiences of transitioning from being a stay at home mother (SAHM) to paid employment.

IPA incorporates an idiographic focus and, as such, this study does not seek to test a hypothesis. However, a central objective of the study is to explore the convergence and divergence in the detail of the participants' accounts, with the expectation that I will be able to develop a degree of theoretical generalisability (Smith et al, 2009).

Recognising that not all professional women's experiences of transitioning from SAHM to paid employment will be similar to those of my seven participants, my aim is to increase our understanding of the phenomenon and shine a light on where further research would be beneficial.

1.7 Outline of the chapters

In chapter two I provide an overview of the extant literature. This chapter highlights the growing body of literature relating to my research topic, while highlighting areas that remain largely unexplored, in particular, the psychological and relational elements. The literature review is structured to include the transition to motherhood within an organisational context; transition to SAHM and factors influencing the decision to take a career break; experiences during the career break and their impact on women's return to work; experience of the transition to work; support of partners; external impact on the experience of returning to work; the role of the employer; maternity coaching; and returner programmes.

In chapter three I explain how I came to choose IPA as my methodology, and give consideration to alternative methodologies, in particular, grounded theory and discourse analysis. I aim to illustrate how my chosen methodology is a good fit for achieving my research aims and a complement to my world view.

Chapter four sets out the overall design of the project and explains the practical steps taken in accordance with an IPA study, including participant recruitment, interviewing, transcribing, analysis and writing up.

Chapter five presents my analysis. It is divided into the four superordinate themes of : (1) 'Is that really me?': Identity loss and transformation; (2) 'If I knew then what I know now': Expectations versus reality; (3) 'You gotta climb this ladder and then leap': Ease of transition; (4) 'He hadn't lost anything': Counting the losses

In chapter six I discuss my findings and present recommendations that might be helpful to therapists and coaches working with this population. I also give consideration to the study's limitations and make suggestions for further research.

In chapter seven I provide my conclusions and personal reflections.

Finally, in chapter eight I outline the professional products arising from and created during my doctoral programme.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

I conducted a systematic literature search to find material that was most relevant to the question 'How do professional women experience the transition from being a stay at home mother to paid employment? What are the implications for coaching and therapy?'

The keywords identified by the search included: transition, motherhood, stay at home mother, experience, employment, women returners, maternity coaching, returner programmes. The keywords were combined to create Boolean phrases, and then entered into EBSCO to access articles from a number of databases including PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Education Research Complete and Search Complete.

Within EBSCO I filtered the results to only show peer-reviewed articles. I then completed a critical appraisal of the resulting titles and abstracts using the exclusion and inclusion criteria outlined in appendix one. Following electronic searches, I used a snowball technique to search for relevant references within article reference lists. When reading the original papers that I had identified through the systematic literature search, any references within the main body of the paper that were of interest and potential relevance were noted and investigated further. The inclusion and exclusion criteria employed in the systematic search (appendix one) were used when deciding which papers to include.

2.1 Introduction to the literature review

According to a study undertaken by PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC, 2016), nearly half a million women in the UK are on a career break and looking after children. Of these, over three quarters would like to return to work at some point. In recent years there has been a significant growth in media, government and employer interest and attention given to this 'army of lost talent' (Burn-Callander, 2019; Miles, 2019; Tew, 2019).

Research in this field tells us that employers are struggling to retain women during and after maternity leave. Maternity coaching emerged in the UK around 2008 (Filsinger, 2013; Sparrow, 2009) as a means to support women through their maternity transition, with the aim of improving female retention rates. In more recent years, employers have widened their attention beyond the challenges of retaining female employees through their maternity transition and focused on attracting and retaining 'women returners'.

While levels of female participation in the labour market is well documented (ONS, 2017; ONS, 2019), there is a limited, though growing, body of academic research being undertaken to understand the phenomenon of 'women returners' and what forces are at play that serve to hinder and support this population.

Maternity coaching and 'Returner Programmes' are increasingly common within the professions as a means to attract and retain women either during their maternity transition (maternity coaching) or following an extended career break (returner programmes). I am interested in exploring what needs this population is considered to have and how those needs are being met through returner programmes. While I am careful to distinguish between the populations of women returning from a relatively short 'maternity leave' and women returning following a career break (women returners), I think it is useful to provide an overview of the existing literature relating to maternity coaching as it is likely that these two populations face similar challenges in their transition back to work..

The first part of this chapter will focus on reviewing literature related to the following:

- The transition to motherhood within an organisational context
- Women's experience of being a SAHM
- Women's experience of transitioning from being a SAHM to a paid employee

The second part of this chapter will seek to review the literature relating to the nature, aims and impact of coaching interventions commonly known as 'maternity coaching' and coaching within 'returner programmes'.

Considerable attention has been given to women's career development within the context of career theories. While acknowledging this body of research and the contribution it makes to our understanding of the experience of women returners, this literature review does not explore career theories in any depth. Usefully, Zimmerman and Clark (2016), undertook a systematic review of research within women's careers literature related to women's experiences of opting-out and opting-in to their careers.

2.2 The transition to motherhood within an organisational context

It is well documented that the transition to motherhood is a major life change that can have a significant impact on the individual and it has been described as a key developmental life stage of a woman (Blum, 2007; Raphael-Leff, 2001; Stern, 1995). In particular, the first year of motherhood is often regarded as a potentially challenging time for new mothers (Cowan & Cowan, 1995).

Research across a range of contexts relating to the transition to motherhood consistently highlights the impact the change has upon women's identity and sense of self (Cowen & Cowen, 1992; Hopkins, Marcus & Campbell, 1984; Stern, 1995; Millward, 2010; Smith, 1999).

Barclay, Everitt, Rogan, Schmied and Wyllie (1997) use grounded theory to investigate the experiences of new mothers. A key finding from their study was that women's experience of 'becoming a mother' resulted in a significant reconstruction of themselves. These findings were echoed in a more recent study of the transition to motherhood by Darvill, Skirton and Farrand (2010) where, central to the experience for women, were 'changes in the woman's self-concept'.

It has been argued that pregnancy and motherhood represent a life event that holds the greatest transformative power (Slade et al, 2009). Furthermore, adult development theory suggests that where the motherhood transition coincides with age-related transition, there is potential for a unique maternal transitional crisis (Levinson, 1996). This is worthy of further exploration given that professional women are delaying motherhood, often experiencing motherhood for the first time when they are at mid-career and mid-life stages. There is a growing body of research exploring the experience of delayed motherhood (Budds, Locke & Burr, 2016; Evertsson, 2012; Shelton & Johnson, 2006) though studies tend to focus on fertility issues. One study by Windridge and Berryman (1999) however found that older mothers exhibit personality traits such as increased autonomy that negatively affect their transition to motherhood.

Research relating specifically to the transition to motherhood within an organisational context has predominantly been in relation to career theories and the economic impact at the individual, organisational and macroeconomic levels (Hewlett, 2007; McGrath et al, 2005).

One of the most notable studies to have explored the psychological impact of the transition to motherhood within an organisational context is Smith's (1999) examination of the phenomenon of identity development that occurs when a working woman experiences the transition to motherhood. This qualitative ideographic study, which uses IPA, highlights the divergent experiences of women undergoing this transition, specifically in relation to their identity. The study was based upon the experiences of four women, with whom Smith conducted four interviews each, with the final one taking place five months after their child's birth. Smith found that three of the participants expressed positive statements about being at home, though one participant described having a very different experience: 'I just feel less confident about who I am and what I have to offer than I did, say, prior to giving up work… It stopped providing that identity, I mean it took an identity away from me.' (Smith 1999, p.293).

Smith (1999) found that during pregnancy women experience a shift of focus away from the public world of work towards a more private world. While noting that the participant who described the loss of identity was something of an exception, Smith argued that the very experience of the transition to motherhood and the accompanying shift in focus away from work and towards others (family, community, etc), may influence and reflect a longer term shift in women's life priorities.

A study by Raphael-Leff (1991) also found that women experience a shift in focus away from the public world of work and towards a more private world during the middle period of pregnancy. She, like Smith, found that not all women show this shift in focus. She described these individuals as 'regulators', stating that they retained a stronger sense of the identity they had held prior to pregnancy. Smith (1999) questions whether his fourth participant might be what Raphael-Leff (1991) termed a 'regulator'.

More recently, an in-depth understanding of the personal experiences of women transitioning to motherhood within an organisational context has been provided by Millward (2010), whose qualitative (IPA) research highlighted the psychological struggle that women experience when attempting to reconcile their professional and motherhood identities. Millward's study was concerned with the experience of women transitioning to motherhood and their return to work following a relatively short period at home. She identified the impact of the partner relationship on the experiences women have of their significant transition as an area for further research.

Research exploring the lived experience of post-natal depression (PND) provides useful insight into the psychological impact of this significant life transition. It suggests that the loss of occupational identity is an aspect of PND and that higher levels of education contribute negatively to maternal adjustment (Nicolson, 1999). Furthermore, concerns about being a 'good' mother were more prevalent among educated women (Leifer, 1980). Feelings of guilt and loss of control have also been cited as significant features of PND (Beck, 1992). Many of the experiences and symptoms associated with PND have been described within the wider body of research into the transition to motherhood. In particular the loss of a sense of self, feelings of guilt, and a loss of control all recur across the literature. However, research suggests that within an organisational context coaching provision surrounding the maternity transition and support for women returners tends to shy away from these complex issues, concentrating instead on the loss of confidence and on overcoming practical rather than emotional barriers (Cotter, 2014; Cotter, 2015; Greer, 2013; Chisholm, 1997; Clayton, 1996;).

What is less understood is how the transition to motherhood impacts a women's sense of self in relation to their professional selves over the longer term when women have taken an extended career break.

2.3 Transitioning to a SAHM: the factors influencing the decision to take a career break.

Much of the literature on women's experiences focuses on their reasons for taking a career break and offers some insight into the psychological challenges they face when returning to work. Women's accounts of their experiences of work and motherhood consistently highlight the 'push' and 'pull' factors that contribute towards their decision to opt out (Cabrera, 2007; Volpe and Murphy, 2011; Hewlett and Buck Luce, 2005; Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005; O'Neil et al., 2007).

Among the 'push' factors (i.e. features of the workplace) are under stimulation in work, a lack of opportunity, inflexible policies and glass ceilings (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Upon revealing their pregnancy, women describe experiencing additional 'push' factors, including being side-lined or overlooked, and a feeling of becoming invisible (Smith, 1999; Hewlett, 2007; Cabrera, 2009). The 'pull' factors generally consist of familial and personal issues, such as caring for family or placing an emphasis on personal wellbeing. It is likely that a combination of 'push' and 'pull' factors contribute towards the decision to leave (Hewlett &

Luce, 2005), although many of these studies place greater emphasis on the workplace constraints (Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Lovejoy & Stone, 2011; Stone, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013).

An extensive study of how women make decisions about work, career and motherhood (Gerson, 1985) highlights the less-than-ideal choices women face. More recent studies indicate that 50% of women hold negative or mixed feelings about giving up work (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008) and that any of those women who do become SAHMs did so unintentionally (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012) as a consequence of the aforementioned push factors (Brown, 2010; Cabrera, 2009; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Smith, 1999).

Research conducted in the US (Hewlett, 2007) involving a survey of over 2,400 professional women provides insight into the extent to which professional women are leaving the corporate world after having children. Similarly, a study by Wallis (2004) looking at the trend of professional women choosing to break away from their career in order to stay at home to look after their children found women felt forced to make a choice between career and motherhood due to the demands of each role.

It seems likely that for, many women, the decision to take a career break is not pre-planned, rather it is one that evolves during maternity leave, although this appears to be an area that would usefully benefit from further exploration.

2.4 Experiences during the career break and their impact on women's return to work

Research into career breaks often focuses on the break's impact on career progression and earnings (Hewlett, 2007; PwC, 2016). Exploration of the psychological implications on career breakers is more limited.

Of particular relevance to the present investigation is a study by Rubin and Wooten (2007) that explored the lived experience of highly-educated stay at home mothers. Based on interviews with ten participants, all of whom were educated to Masters level, the study sought to understand women's experience in relation to three central questions: how they come to decide to stay at home; what are the benefits of staying at home; and what are the challenges of staying at home? Rubin & Wooten's (2007) study found that for six of the women, the transition to becoming a SAHM proved to be a difficult period during which

they described experiencing feelings of isolation and identity loss. By contrast, four of the participants experienced an easy transition and described themselves as 'never looking back'. When describing the benefits of being a SAHM 'for self' and 'for family' emerged as central themes. Women described the benefit to themselves of 'not missing out' on their children's lives. The benefits to the family were described in terms of having additional time: time to devote to children which they believed would be beneficial to that relationship, time for the education and overall development of their children, and more leisure time as a family to spend having fun. The challenges of being a SAHM were grouped into four themes: loss, vulnerability, feelings of guilt, shame and conflict, and self-care. Loss was described specifically in relation to self-esteem, identity, external validation and independence. Vulnerability (and fear) was expressed in terms of financial dependency and concerns around not being able (should they wish) to return to their previous careers, having lost skills and marketability. The feelings of guilt, shame and conflict that emerged as a key theme are congruent with findings from several other studies (Millward 2010; Bean et al, 2016; Blair-Loy, 2003; Hannan, 2015; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015). The final key theme of 'self-care' was experienced in terms of the importance of being socially connected, seeking and getting mental stimulation and enjoying personal growth.

Many of the findings in Rubin and Wooten's (2007) study are echoed elsewhere. Studies refer to women experiencing feelings of isolation, boredom and frustration at the lack of respect shown towards them during their career break (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). The experience of feeling 'culturally devalued' (Kuperberg & Stone) has been found to lead to a lack of self-esteem. As a consequence of this sense of low self-esteem, which is compounded by a culture that increasingly places higher status on working mothers (Smeaton, 2006), women seek out a return to work in order to gain validation. This concurs with a key finding from my recent survey of career returners in which a full 60% of respondents indicated that the primary reason they decided to return to work was 'to gain a greater sense of fulfilment and wellbeing.' (ECC, 2017)

Majid (2017), adopting Hall's (2002) assertion that career identity is central to women's career success, sought to explore women's experience of taking a career break and how that impacted on their career identity. This qualitative study, based on interviews with eleven participants, used dialogic narrative analysis to understand how career identity is affected by relationships, events and experiences during this time. The findings showed that during the pre-school years women wanted to focus on their roles as mothers and

viewed their career break as temporary. The participants had taken a career break with little or no future career planning, and their attention only turned towards reengaging with their careers much later. When considering a return to work, women were found to prioritise the desire to balance family life with their careers, which commonly led to a reassessment of their career identity.

A notable and somewhat controversial study by Lovejoy and Stone (2012), explored the influence that time spent at home has on women's career aspirations and the phenomena of career re-direction. Their study, based on interviews with 54 SAHMs, posited that during their career break women experience a shift in values that results in their seeking to re-direct their careers towards care- and service-oriented roles. Their findings suggest that during their time as SAHMs women become more connected to their families and communities leading to a 'time for exploration of new values, identities and career paths, and, for some, an expanded sense of self' (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012, p.649). Within career theory literature a widely cited model known as 'The Kaleidoscope career model' (Maneiro & Sullivan, 2005) emphasises 'choice' and 'opportunity' in pursuit of flexibility and fulfilment. This model somewhat downplays the organisational 'push' factors in the workplace, arguing that treating 'relational' issues as 'constraints' is too simplistic and fails to address the importance of wellbeing.

Similarly to Lovejoy and Stone (2012), Hakim (2000) states that the phenomenon of women embarking on a new career path following a break results from a shift in values. Hakim's study concluded that for the majority of women who experienced a significant change in career path this was a positive choice. Furthermore, aligning with the findings from Lovejoy and Stone's study (2012), Hakim argued that this choice was a consequence of women experiencing a high level of fulfilment and satisfaction with their roles as carers, and the associated additional time spent within their local community in schools, local playgroups and other such places. A qualitative study into the experiences of 26 women who had constructed their careers around their families by the career counsellors Jackson and Scharman (2002) echoed some of Hakim's findings, specifically the sense of satisfaction and fulfilment that women derived from having a strong sense of self-efficacy.

Furthermore, Jackson and Scharman (2002) assert that there is little evidence women have a desire to return to roles at the same level they had previously been, preferring to shape their working existence around their private lives (Sheridan, Panteli & Pen; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Shaw & Taylor, 2005). Greer (2013) stated that the prevalence of women returning to

work part-time and with accompanying lower-status and lower-paid jobs could be viewed in a positive light as women successfully balancing their professional and private lives rather than as women being punished for having taken a career break.

Other studies suggest that women are drawn to these types of roles not as a result of a fundamental shift in career identity, but rather due to a lack of flexible options. Care and service-oriented roles are dominated by female workers and therefore accommodate flexible working practices (McRae, 2003; McGrath, 2005). Expanding on Belkin's (2003) study that explored the issue of women opting out of their careers (and which is now coined the 'opt-out revolution') Biese and Choroszewicz (2019) sought to gain an understanding of the process and experience of women developing agency by opting-out and opting-in (return to work) through the lens of Hoggett's (2001) model of individual agency. Biese's study layered Hoggett's model over women's experiences of leaving their careers, their time spent out of their careers and the process of returning to work. Hoggett's (2001) model comprises four quadrants: reflexive agency, non-reflexive agency, self as non-reflexive object and self as reflexive object. Biese and Choroszewicz's (2019) study echoes many other studies that emphasise the organisational constraints that women encounter and that leave them feeling defeated and without agency, regardless of their status (i.e. senior professionals). This opting-out decision relates to Hoggett's (2001) first stage 'self as reflexive object'. The decision to return to work was found in Biese's study to arise from a crisis or 'tipping point(s)', whereby women feel they can no longer continue as they have been doing. In Biese's study participants report specific incidents that trigger a strong sense that they need to search for 'balance and authenticity', leading towards their exploration of options for returning to work. This process is aligned to Hoggett's model whereby a crisis serves as a catalyst for change, prompting women to develop agency and move from 'self as reflexive object' towards 'reflexive agency'. During this final (third) stage, Biese and Choroszewicz (2019) found women sought to adopt strategies that enabled them to accommodate their professional and motherhood identities.

2.5 The experience of the transition to work

A transnational study of five EU member states' (Germany, Ireland, Spain, France and the UK) vocational guidance for women returners (Chisholm, 1997) found that, while female participation rates in the labour market and the level of infrastructure support for them varied widely across Europe, every country exhibited a polarisation between well-educated,

highly qualified women who leave work for however short a period and often return at a lower level and women with few qualifications who primarily operate on the periphery of the labour market.

In my study (ECC, 2017), I found that 60% of returners had changed sector and that of these, 80% had also changed function. However the findings did not suggest a shift away from the corporate and towards the social service sector, as found in other studies (Shaw & Taylor, 1999; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Lovejoy and Stone, 2012), but rather a shift from corporation to corporation, with only a limited number of women moving from the corporate to social service sectors (in this case, education). This concurs with the Women and Employment Survey of 1980, which found that 40% of working mothers in the UK were employed in a different occupational category after the birth of their first child. The occupational category was almost always lower than it had been in their previous job(s). Furthermore, a US study (McGrath, Driscoll, and Gross, 2005) also found that women switch industries and functional roles upon re-entering the paid labour force, with 83% of the respondents reporting that they returned to a job position that was comparable to or at a lower level than the position that they had held before their career break.

The phenomenon of women returning to lower-status, lower-paid roles is indisputable; however, as highlighted above, there is a significant divergence among the studies exploring the driving force(s) that lie behind it. There is therefore significant potential value in exploring this phenomenon in greater depth.

Central to professional women's transition to motherhood is the controversial yet often-cited notion of decreased levels of subjective work commitment. Evertsson's (2012) study sought to explore this, drawing upon data from a longitudinal Swedish study of new mothers. Data from a sample of childless women was compared with women who had had a child in 1999 and women who had given birth in 2003. In the 1999 sample, no difference was found between the mothers and non-mothers. However, the 2003 data indicated that there had been a small decline in the level of work commitment among women who had given birth, suggesting that the transition to motherhood – and all of the changes it brings – may have led to a redistribution of priorities and a slightly lower commitment to work among new mothers. However, the study also found that this decline in work commitment was temporary and that when their children reached four years of age, the participants were no less committed to their work than the non-mothers. The researchers attributed this temporary decrease in commitment to work to the difficulties of adjusting to the

competing demands of work and family during the early pre-school years. Significantly, they also concluded that role strain is reduced in countries where culture and policies favour working mothers.

Contrary to Hakim's (2000) study, McRae's (2003) longitudinal study of first-time mothers found that women do not have a genuine choice about their careers. Instead, they face constraints that influence their career choices. McGrath et al.'s (2005) non-academic study into (predominantly) professional women's experiences of returning to work asserts that returners experience negative emotional states but that there is limited exploration of what those are and how they impact individuals:

> When women in our survey described their experiences of discussing full-time work with potential employers, 50% told us they were frustrated and 18% felt the experience was depressing. While some of them felt challenged, which, debatably, could be considered a positive emotion, most felt negative emotions. Negative emotions can be correlated with many physical and psychological problems, and we think these negative emotions will burden women step-outs as they return to work. (McGrath et al. p.9).

McGrath et al's study found that 'updated skills' was the biggest challenge career returners faced. Contrary to those findings, my study (ECC, 2017) found that 'out of date skills' was cited last in a list of 13 challenges, with the greatest challenge cited as being 'achieving a satisfactory work-life balance'. It seems likely that the degree to which returners are challenged by the need to 'update skills' varies depending upon their profession and industry. This is addressed later in this chapter, when I review literature exploring the impact of returner programmes.

My study (ECC, 2017) sought to identify where there may be a gap between the expectations and experiences of career returners, in terms of perceived and actual challenges. Both of my studies (Cotter, 2016 and ECC, 2017) have provided a rich foundation from which to conduct further in-depth qualitative research. For example, one study (ECC, 2017) suggested that a very high number of career returners experienced difficulty integrating their personal and professional identities; indeed, 28% of returners cited this as being highly or very highly challenging. 42% of respondents reported that feelings of guilt associated with their return to work were highly or very highly challenging,

and over 20% of respondents described the lack of support they received from their partner or spouse as being highly or very highly challenging.

Much has been written in relation to the phenomenon known as 'the second shift', a phrase coined by Hochschild and Machung's (2012) seminal study of dual-income families in which working mothers carry the majority of the domestic workload. As previously stated, the results of my study into career returners (ECC, 2017) revealed the significance of the partner/spouse relationship, with over 20% of participants indicating that they experienced a lack of support from their partner/spouse as being highly challenging. Given the known structural inequalities in the homes of dual-professional households (including women consistently doing the bulk of domestic labour, having less leisure time, suffering from reduced sleep, etc.) (Sullivan, 2016; Hochschild and Machung, 2012), it seems likely that coaching and therapeutic interventions that seek to embrace the clients' experience of home and family relationships, would be of value to this group. I have been struck by what seems to me to be a glaring omission in studies relating to maternity coaching and returner programmes – namely the impact of the partner/spouse relationship on the experience of returning to work. Millward (2010) highlighted this gap as a useful area for future research and I believe that it remains underexplored.

2.6 Support of partners

Brockel's (2016) study exploring the impact that partner support has for women returners sought to measure two discrete aspects of partner support: the instrumental and the emotional. The study, undertaken in Germany, examined data by means of discrete-time-event history analysis using the German Socio-Economic Panel data for the period 1984-2013, which looked at the level and impact of a partner's support while taking into account the level of resources (income and status) of the partner and returner. The study offers limited insight into the emotional impact of partners, with data taken from a specific set of interviews on family and social networks conducted between 2006 and 2011 (Diewald, Lüdicke, Lang and Schupp, 2006). Respondents were asked to name up to three people in 2006 (up to five people in 2011) who provided them with support. High emotional support was assumed to be present if the partner was named for at least three of the following indicators: talking about personal thoughts and feelings, receiving support for career advancement, the absence of serious conflicts with partner and being able to also tell the partner unpleasant truths.

The study concluded that both partners' instrumental and partners' emotional support play a major role in women's return to employment. Particularly with a more egalitarian division of domestic labour and childcare, women have a higher likelihood of returning to the labour market. The study offers useful insights particularly in relation to balance of economic influence and how that impacts the likelihood and timing of women's return.

2.7 External impact on the experience of returning to work

As previously stated, research exploring the motivations behind returners' career choices highlights the complexity inherent within the back to work transition. One key consideration that women face when returning to work is the limited availability of flexible working opportunities, which is amplified at senior levels across industries (Hirsh and Jackson, 1996; Davey and Davidson, 1994). In recent years the UK government has responded to pressure calling for employers to provide flexible working options for parents with policies such as shared parental leave and the right of return to part time work. In parallel, employers are increasingly seeking to meet employees' demands for flexible working options including part-time working, condensed hours, working from home and sabbaticals. It is well documented that the provision of flexible working hours is a significant consideration for women seeking a return to work following a career break (Hirsh and Jackson, 1996; Davey and Davidson, 1994). The experience of those who have returned to their previous careers with flexible working arrangements does not always match with their expectations. My study of attitudes towards maternity coaching (Cotter, 2016) found that, while returners expressed a sense of gratitude at being able to return on flexible terms, in reality they felt that working flexibly resulted in them being side-lined, and seen as being less committed. Furthermore, several women said that they put in additional hours after the children had gone to bed, effectively working a double shift.

In the UK, the number of women employed in part-time positions is one of the highest in Europe (Work, Employment and Society, 2019). Running contrary to the assertion that women's transition to motherhood brings with it a lasting shift in priorities and values that results in a preference for working in 'caring' professions, studies indicate that women are in fact conceding their acceptance of the part-time jobs to which they return, rather than holding an active preference for non-full-time work (McRae, 1996; McGrath et al, 2005; Macran et al, 1996; Rose, 2001; Tomlinson, Olsen and Purdam, 2008).

Rose (2001) found that 45% of women working full-time would prefer to be working fewer hours and 25% of women working part-time (defined as fewer than 16 hours per week), would prefer to be working additional hours. This phenomenon has been explored in greater detail in Tomlinson, Olsen and Purdam's quantitative study (2008), which drew on data from three UK sources: the British Household Panel Survey (2007) for work-life histories, the Labour Force Survey (2001) for accurate coverage of small occupational sub-groupings, and the Employers Skills Survey (2001) for information about the level of formal education and skills perceived to be required for particular jobs in well-defined sub-groups. Data from over 10,000 participants indicated that inflexibility in the design of both part-time and full-time jobs is leading to women re-entering the workforce on a part-time basis in jobs for which they are overqualified. (Tomlinson, Olsen and Purdam, 2008).

2.8 The role of the employer

2.8.1 Maternity coaching

Current research relating specifically to coaching career returners is limited to practitioner studies. The growing body of academic research exploring the objectives, key focuses, and outcomes of the related field of maternity coaching provides us with useful insights that are relevant to this study.

Bussell (2008) and Freeman (2008) explored how organisations adopt maternity coaching as a retention tool. Harrison's (2008) study sought to identify how employees benefited from maternity coaching. Findings included increased confidence, a feeling of being supported, better-managed expectations, and an easier transition back to the workplace. My study (Cotter, 2014) looked at what maternity coaching is, how the coach-coachee relationship impacts the outcome of the coaching and what is known and understood of the longer-term impact of maternity coaching. Brown and Kelan's (2013) qualitative study offers a critical perspective on the rise of maternity coaching provision. They state that maternity coaching is indicative of an increased culture of individualism, where responsibility for career development, progression and work-life balance etc., sits squarely in the lap of the employee, thus failing to acknowledge the impact of structural inequalities. Furthermore, they note that much of the published research in the field of maternity coaching has been conducted by maternity coaches, suggesting that there is an inherent favourable bias toward maternity coaching. Their study, which is based on interviews with ten women who had received maternity coaching, provides insight into the perceived value – in particular

the therapeutic value – that individuals place on maternity coaching (Brown and Kelan, 2013).

Brown and Kelans' (2013) concerns can be situated within the broader context of post-liberal feminism and the potential and/or actual role of coach-therapists encouraging women to look internally for solutions to the challenge of succeeding as a mother and career woman. The international bestseller by Sheryl Sandberg (2013), *Lean-In,* exemplifies a culture that emphasises the role of the individual in creating their own destiny and, specifically, the premise that women can find the necessary tools to succeed as a working mother within themselves. I share Brown and Kelan's (2013) concern that maternity and returner coaching risks placing an undue emphasis on the individual, obviating the responsibility of the employing organisation and ignoring gender inequalities at home and within the workplace.

This view is echoed by Orgad (2017) in her study of media constructions of working mothers. She highlights an '… emphasis on women's professional performance and satisfaction as depending largely on their individual self-confidence and ability to lean-in (Sandberg, 2013), while marginalizing the impact of structural issues on women's success and workplace equality.' (Orgad, 2017, p 165)

Orgad's (2016) study of whether and how media representations of women either correspond or fail to correspond with, shape and influence women's experiences of motherhood and work is particularly relevant to this study as it offers useful insights into the confluence of factors that may generate psychological and relational difficulties. Orgad concludes that media constructs of working mothers are fantasies that bear little or no resemblance to women's lived experience. 'This fantasy of the good mother on the energizing treadmill creates a relation of "cruel optimism" (Berland 2011): it ignites a sense of possibility and continues to attract women to desire it while in fact impeding them from tackling the structural inequalities in their homes, workplaces and society, that are obstructing realization of their desire.' (Orgad, 2016, p.28)

2.8.2 Returner programmes

Increasing numbers of employers are now providing 'returner programmes'. Panteli and Pen (2010) evaluated a number of such programmes with the aim of measuring the perceived usefulness and their impact on beneficiaries. The research context was specific to

the ITEC (Information, Technology, Engineering and Communication sectors), where there has historically been considerable challenges in attracting and retaining women; an issue that has been compounded by the sectors' long-hours-all-consuming culture. The return to work programmes they evaluated included mentoring circles, career advice workshops, access to higher education and training and development (skills update) opportunities. Evaluation was undertaken using a range of data collection and analysis methods including feedback questionnaires, reflective diaries and information interviews

In summary, Panteli and Pen (2010) found that the most frequently cited impact of returner programmes was a sense of renewed motivation, increased confidence and greater support, which participants related to the information they had received in addition to the interaction they had with other participants and workshop leaders.

A study by Shaw, Taylor and Harris (1999) sought to examine critically women's experiences of returning to work following their participation in a European funded returner programme, described as an 'updating course'. The updating course was provided by an educational charity, Women's Returners Network. Launched in 1988 at Hatfield Polytechnic, the course consisted of three elements: individual professional updating (skills and knowledge), work experience and a university-taught element that included confidence building, job search skills and IT skills among other things. The course was specifically aimed at professional women seeking a return to their original career following a break to look after children or other family members. The qualitative study incorporated data from a postal survey that focused on women's career patterns up until the point of re-entry, as well as in-depth interviews that explored women's perceptions of their careers and their own experience of returning to work (Shaw et al, 1999). Findings from their study aligned with those from previous studies (ECC, 2017; McGrath et al, 2005) and showed that while the majority of women returned to work after attendance at the programme, they often did so at a level below that which was commensurate with their skills and experience, which was not necessarily seen as a negative outcome by all stakeholders. The majority of women considered their successful return to work to be largely attributable to their participation in the updating programme (Shaw, Taylor and Harris, 1999). The study, which was in part concerned with exploring career continuity, found the greatest continuity was experienced by those women who were employed in teaching, nursing and social work. The most significant career shift was found among those women who had been working in the legal and IT sectors.

Herman (2011) undertook a case study of an innovative UKRC funded initiative made available to women seeking a return to a career in SET (Science, Engineering and Technology) in the UK and Ireland between 2005 and 2011. The participant group consisted of professional women who had taken a minimum of a two-year career break, with a minimum of a university graduate level-education and who were working in the science and technology professions. His study (which focused on ICT) highlighted the importance of including 'soft' outcomes in the programme's outcome measurements. By measuring the social return on investment (SROI), outcomes were not limited to actual employment or further training, but included 'soft' outcomes such as increased self-esteem and confidence, an increased sense of being well informed and a reduction in feelings of isolation. The study highlighted women's belief that the acquisition of these soft outcomes is a key first step in a successful return to a career in ICT. Women's own accounts of the benefit of the programme echo those from other studies (Shaw, Taylor and Harris, 1999; Panteli and Pen, 2010).

Herman (2011) highlights the impact the UKRC returner programme had not only in terms of practical support but, equally importantly, by enabling women to connect with other women experiencing similar challenges in their return to work. A reduced sense of isolation and an increase in confidence were described by the participants as being among the significant positive outcomes of the programme. Furthermore, Herman (2011) stresses the importance of the UKRC's remit extending to influencing organisational changes in culture, policy and practice: 'women can only progress in organisations that address their culture and implement policies and practices that support their progression and organisations can only increase their female workforce if women are empowered and enabled – similar to supply and demand.' (Rehman, 2010, p.7)

Herman (2015) later expanded on his case study (Herman, 2011) by conducting a qualitative longitudinal study drawing upon the experiences of 23 women. The study focused primarily on women's career choices following their participation in the UKRC-funded 'Return to SET' programme, but also incorporated their reflections on their previous career histories leading up to their career break, as well as their future career plans and ambitions.

Data was gathered by means of semi-structured telephone interviews, and then analysed using thematic analysis. Herman found that women's narratives could be grouped into those who had 'rebooted' their careers, i.e. returned to their pre-career break careers;

those who had 're-routed' their careers, i.e., changed career course, and those who had 'retreated' from their careers and were unemployed. Women's narratives were seen as reflecting the varying degrees to which women experience a shift in career identity during their break and the factors that come in to play in influencing those shifts. The narratives of participants who 're-routed' and 'retreated' echo the findings of other studies (McGrath et al, 2005) in which women encounter barriers in attempting to return to their careers at positions that accurately reflect their level of skill and experience. This leads them to either 'retreat' or embark on another career path, albeit often one that is related to their previous SET career.

While increasing numbers of employers are actively seeking to recruit women returners and putting in place policies and practices to encourage women returners (Government Equalities Office, 2019; ECC, 2017; Greer, 2013; Freeman, 2008) the experience of this has not been universally positive. Studies indicate that women returners have experienced age discrimination, which may in part be attributable to employers seeking to keep wage costs low by hiring younger people (Bennetts, 2007; Sommerlad and Sanderson, 1997).

In contrast, some employers, particularly UK law firms, are specifically targeting women returners for the soft skills these women are likely to have acquired as a result of their career break. (Sommerlad and Sanderson, 1997). However, Sommerlad and Sanderson (1997) also found that these same law firms tend to view women returners as being somewhat less committed to their profession as they divide their attention between family and work. A study by McGrath et al, (2005) found that many of the skills that women gain during a period as a SAHM were not valued by most employing firms. Furthermore, McGrath et al. (2005) reported that a sample of professional women found their re-entry experiences to be negative and depressing because potential employers were less than enthusiastic about hiring women who had previously left their careers.

2.9 Summary

This literature review highlights the present gap in the body of knowledge relating to the experience of professional women returning to paid employment. Furthermore, much of the literature derives from researchers who are looking through the lens of career, organisation and gender rather than approaching the subject from a coaching or therapy perspective. The questions researchers are positing are therefore unlikely to reveal the full lived experience of professional women transitioning from SAHM to paid employment.

In particular, the literature review highlights that, while some qualitative research has been undertaken, research that adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach would provide a unique insight and deeper understanding of the lived experience of professional female returners. I would argue that in doing so, this study will be of value to practitioners in this field working to address issues that have previously been overlooked or oversimplified.

Exploring the impact of partners, children and other family relationships on women's experience of transitioning from SAHM to paid employment is notably absent in the literature.

In addition, there is an oversimplification or, indeed, an absence of literature exploring the actual experience of women seeking and transitioning back to work following a career break in depth. Yet I know anecdotally and from my own experience, that the transition is often a messy one that can entail several 'failed' attempts and multiple other challenges.

Thus there is a space and, indeed, a requirement for an idiographic, phenomenological study, which will provide an in-depth qualitative exploration from the perspective of a therapeutic coach of the experiences of professional women as they transition from being stay at home mother to re-entering paid employment. The aim of this research is thus to inform and shape coaching and therapy interventions to better serve this significant, often overlooked and unheard population.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter firstly outlines the purpose and aim of this project, then details the research design. I justify my decision to use interpretative phenomenological analysis and review alternative methodologies. Issues of validity relevant to the methodology and data analysis are discussed, followed by an overview of ethical considerations.

3.2 Research aims and purpose

As described in the introduction chapter, the purpose and aim of this study is to gain an in-depth insight into the lived experience of professional women's transition from being a stay at home mother (SAHM) to a paid employee. It is hoped that this research will contribute to a greater understanding of this complex and under-researched life transition that will be of benefit to women and the coaches and therapists who support them through this significant process.

3.3 Research design

In deciding upon my methodology, I found Willig's (2008) epistemological questions helpful, namely:

- What kind of knowledge does the methodology aim to produce?
- What kind of assumptions does the methodology make about the world?
- How does the methodology conceptualise the position of the researcher in the research process?

This study sought, in part, to test and expand upon findings from a (non-academic) mixed method survey-based study (ECC, 2017) I was commissioned to undertake that captured the expectations and experiences of individuals returning to work following an extended career break. The study involved a total of 203 professional women participants who were either aspiring to return to work (48%) or had returned to work (52%) following a career break. Findings from the research led me to seek a deeper understanding of how and why women feel the way they do about their experiences of return.

The study first aims to offer a deep insight into the lived experience of professional women returning to work following a career break to raise a family, and then explores the implications of this insight for coaching and psychotherapy.

Given the purpose and aims of this study, I gave consideration to mixed method and qualitative research methods. Purely quantitative research methods were not considered as, in their simplest forms, they are primarily concerned with measurement and numerical data theory testing (Creswell, 2003), whereas my concern was the exploration of the lived experiences of participants. Qualitative research is concerned with seeking to 'understand and represent the experiences and actions of people as they encounter, engage, and live through situations' (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999, p.216) and places epistemology at the forefront of the researcher's mind (Coyle, 2007).

Qualitative research can be considered to cover a range of methods with a variety of epistemologies (Coyle, 2007; Madill, Jordan and Shirley, 2000), 'and involves alternative conceptions of social knowledge, of meaning, reality and truth' (Kvale, 1996, p.11).

Qualitative research is founded on a variety of epistemological positions ranging from 'naïve realism' (unexamined positivism – there is 'one truth' and it can be uncovered – more usually a quantitative principle) to radical relativism (no 'reality' can be trusted). The phenomenological methods generally lie somewhere between these two, taking the view that while there is a concrete world out there, it is experienced idiosyncratically and contextually. Qualitative research focuses on eliciting reflections on subjective experiences from participants who seek to make sense of their situation. As Willig emphasised, qualitative researchers seek to understand the meanings people give to experiences and, as such, they are interested in the quality and depth of those experiences (Willig, 2008). Researchers strive to generate data that is rich in content, and which can then be analysed by a variety of methods.

Some of the most prominent approaches available to the qualitative researcher are: grounded theory, discourse analysis and the phenomenological approaches.

Consideration was given to each these approaches, all of which I will discuss before turning my attention to my chosen methodology: interpretative phenomenological analysis.

3.4 Alternatives methods considered

My principal interest with this study is to uncover what lies beneath the findings from my mixed method study of women's expectations and experiences transitioning from SAHM to paid employment. I wanted to explore the feelings, thoughts and perceptions that women have about their experiences and I felt that my research question required a qualitative research methodology in which participants would be free to explore their own responses to their unique experiences. My mixed method study provided a solid platform from which to dive deeper into the lived experiences of women's transition from SAHM to paid employment.

In addition to IPA, consideration was given to two alternative methods of qualitative analysis: grounded theory and discourse analysis. It seems that most of the qualitative methods contain common elements in their analytical approaches (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009; Wertz, et al, 2011). However, what differentiates them is their choice of philosophy or paradigm, their goals and the final product of their investigation.

3.4.1. Grounded theory

Grounded theory (GT) can be described as a sociological approach that looks for convergences within a larger sample group with the aim of supporting wider conceptual explanations (Willig, 2008). GT is rooted in identifying social processes in order to 'develop a theoretical analysis of the data that fits the data and has relevance to the area of study.' (Charmaz, 2003 p.109). In contrast, IPA's idiographic nature is concerned with eliciting a deep and detailed personal account of an individual's experience with an emphasis on the felt nature of that experience. Unlike grounded theory, which seeks to express an explanatory theory, IPA aims to cautiously arrive at what may be generalisable claims but only after a careful and detailed analysis of individual cases. Smith (2004) cites Warnock (1987), making the point that 'delving deeper into the particular also takes us closer to the universal' (Smith, 2004, p.42).

3.4.2. Discourse analysis

While I have an open curiosity towards discourse analysis and considered the possibility of combining aspects of discourse analysis (DA) with IPA, I felt unable to reconcile the 'doing to' of discourse analysis with the 'being with' of phenomenological analysis (Finlay, 2006).

Discourse analysis seeks to examine how understanding is produced through a close examination of the words (whether written or spoken) that the participants use. The focus is on how the story is told and what identities, activities, relationships and shared meanings are created through language. While IPA is concerned with cognitions and sense making, DA is sceptical on the accessibility of cognitions, focusing more on language's function in constructing social reality (Smith, Flowers & Osborn 1997; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

3.4.3 Interpretative phenomenological analysis

Developed as a research method by Jonathan Smith in the 1990s, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a relatively recent method of analysis, though it is increasingly used in the fields of psychology and social sciences. Smith states that IPA is particularly useful when exploring areas of 'hot cognition' (Smith, 2004) – that is, gaining an understanding about an experience or situation. As such, it has been widely used in health psychology to explore how people make sense of personal changes or transitions, including becoming a mother (Smith, 1999).

IPA is idiographic in that it seeks to unearth first-person accounts of thoughts, feelings and experiences. Data is usually collected through semi-structured interviews, though other means of data collection such as participants' photographs and diaries are also used. Participant numbers are generally small, with purposive sampling used in order to achieve a level of homogeneity across the sample group. Data analysis is inductive, it arises from the data, with the researcher moving between the *emic* and *etic* perspectives (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). The *etic* perspective is adopted with a high degree of reflexivity, with the researcher attuned to their own biases, assumptions and the cultural lens through which they make sense of participants' own making sense of their feelings, thoughts and experiences. The analysis of data consists of transparent descriptions of the data alongside a narrative expounding the interpretations of the findings.

I chose IPA as it fits most closely with my research aims because it is focused on the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al, 2009). I am concerned not with generalisations about larger groups or populations, but rather with the specific individual. IPA's epistemological position is also a close fit to my own, which I would describe as somewhere between critical realist and social constructionist. IPA is both phenomenological and social constructionist as it is concerned with individuals' experience but is also interpretative, it therefore acknowledges and gives consideration to context.

3.8 Choosing interpretative phenomenological analysis

Firstly, my main research objective was to gain a deep level understanding of how women experienced and made sense of their transition to paid employment, following a minimum period of two years at home working as a SAHM. I wanted to know how they felt, and why. My purpose in seeking this deeper understanding is to be able to better support women in this situation, and the coaches and therapists working with this population.

In seeking to expand on findings from my mixed method study, I wanted to look beyond a description of facts and brief statements and gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences. This research seeks to elicit women's views in relation to their sense of who they are and how they see themselves now and in the future as they transition from being full-time stay at home mothers to paid employment. I am looking for women's sense-making and perception of how they see their world and specifically themselves in their world, and what they believe to be the forces that come into play that support or hinder their transition to working motherhood. I am not seeking to generalise findings in a significant way, though I expect that similarities will emerge through the analysis process. My interest is not to identify a truth, but rather to understand participants' perception of their truth – how they make sense of their reality.

Participants should be at a point of transition and I felt that to gain a deep understanding of their experience I would need to involve myself in their process – to explore their world with them and to facilitate them in interpreting the world in their own way. While IPA allows me the freedom to interpret my participants' expression of their sense making – any interpretation needs to be truly inductive (arising from the data) and not imported or theorised (taken from existing theory). This process of double hermeneutics (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012) calls upon a great degree of reflexivity and transparency on my part (Etherington, 2004; Biggerstaff & Thompson 2008; Yardley, 2000).

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of how women feel about their experience of transitioning from SAHM to paid employment, I believed there is a need to meet and speak to them and ask them how they view their situation. Undertaking research specific to this important life transition is timely, given the increased government and employer focus on implementing returner programmes in the past two years. Expanding on my mixed method study and other related research, I am eager to elicit women's undirected opinions and observations.

A further central tenet of qualitative research methodologies is the importance given to the impact of the researcher on the research findings. I acknowledge the impact I have had throughout the research process, from the conception of the research questions to the interpretation of data and the findings and implications arising from it. My personal reflexivity and how I make sense of my participants' meaning making will be considered and presented with transparency.

While I shall endeavour to limit the impact of my biases and assumptions, I acknowledge there will be some slippage. By keeping a reflective journal and engaging with a small peer group of critical friends I shall seek to maintain a commitment to grounding my interpretation in the participants' views (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

3.5 Validity and transparency

A useful framework for evaluating the validity of an IPA study is offered by Yardley (2000), who sets out four guiding principles: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. I endeavoured to embed these principles throughout the research project while also giving consideration to Willig's definition of validity in which she states: 'Validity can be defined as the extent to which our research describes, measures or explains what we set out to describe, measure or explain.' (Willig, p.16, 2008)

As stated, transparency is important in order to provide assurances relating to the quality and validity of interpretation. Transparency in qualitative research refers to the way in which data is presented so as not to obscure, misrepresent or deny participants' discourses (Yardley, 2000). One way of doing this is to include entire transcripts of the verbatim data gathered from participant interviews. To aid transparency within this piece of research, I present large passages of text within their context in order to allow the reader to make connections themselves. The inclusion of the passages in context rather than in isolation serves to show how I arrived at my interpretations.

The acknowledgement of my personal influence on the data and analysis through the demonstration of reflexivity constitute aspects of the transparency of the research and are outlined later in this chapter.

3.6 Reflexivity

It seems to me that reflexivity is an ethical issue. It is important for me to acknowledge the contribution I have made in affecting the data and the findings. My contribution is not limited to my interpretation of the data generated by participants, but includes the effect of the methodology on the participants and their expectations. Willig (2008) classes personal and epistemological reflexivity among the requirements of good qualitative research, stating:

> Personal reflexivity involves reflecting upon ways in which our own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life and social identities have shaped the research. It involves thinking about how the research process may have affected and possibly changed us, as people and as researchers. (Willig, 2008, pg.10)

As stated previously, epistemological reflexivity leads us as researchers to question not only our contribution in terms of analysing the data and formulating our findings, but also to ask ourselves questions such as how our research question defines and limits potential findings, where the potential lies for researcher projection, given the similar experiences of participants, and how might a different understanding of the research topic have arisen had another method of analysis been chosen?

3.7 Ethical considerations

I have made every effort to fully adhere to the ethical guidelines of The Metanoia Institute, Middlesex University and my accrediting professional body, the BACP.

3.7.1 Communication with potential and actual participants

Drawing upon Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), I will now outline four key ethical considerations; informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of the researcher.

My initial invitation to participate in this research project (see appendix 2) outlined the purpose and aim of the study. Additionally, recipients of the email were provided with a brief explanation of what participation in the study would involve.

Women who made initial contact following receipt of the invitation were then sent an information sheet together with a consent form (see appendix 3).

3.7.2 Informed consent

The information sheet described the purpose and aim of the study, together with details on how the interview would be conducted, confidentiality, the participant's right to withdraw and what will happen with findings of the study.

Upon meeting participants and before the interview began, I would invite them to ask any questions they might have about the study and their participation in it. I also repeated key elements of the information sheet, specifically around confidentiality and the participant's right to withdraw; in line with guidance from Smith et al (2009), participants were permitted to withdraw at any time up to one month after the interview. I felt this gave participants time to withdraw if, following their interview, they felt that, on reflection, they were no longer willing to participate in the study. Thankfully, none of the participants withdrew following the interview.

3.7.3 Confidentiality

Of primary concern was the avoidance of harm. Ensuring the participants' identities were anonymised, as well as the names of their family members and employer organisations was paramount throughout the research project. Confidentiality was achieved by coding participants' identity from the outset, placing any written documentation and electronic data into safe, password-protected storage, stored in adherence with UK data protection laws.

In addition, participant contact details were stored separately from their interview audio files and written transcripts.

3.7.4 The role of the researcher and consequences

As a therapist I am aware that my presence has the potential to impact participants. During the interviews I needed to be careful not to inadvertently stray into the realm of a therapeutic interaction while still seeking to elicit participants' deeply personal narratives around experiences and associated feelings. Kvale and Brinkmann address this specific difficulty, in which a therapist-researcher must tread carefully so as not to 'get through a participant's defences [...] to get inside areas of a person's life where they were not invited.

This use of such indirect techniques, which are ethically legitimate with the mutual interest of therapeutic relations, become ethically questionable when applied to research.' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.75)

I am unsure how successful I was at treading this fine line, but at the end of each interview I sought feedback from each participant in an effort to establish how they experienced me, themselves and the overall process. Some expressed surprise at their own emotional response, having been unaware of the depth of the psychological impact that their experience transitioning from SAHM to paid employment had had on them. Others expressed gratitude at being given an opportunity to talk about their experiences, and they all seemed keen to hear the stories of other participants and, as such, expressed an eagerness that I share the findings of the study with them in the future.

A further ethical consideration arises from the chosen methodology, specifically the double hermeneutic process. Like my participants, I am a mother who has experienced the transition from SAHM to paid employment. IPA requires me to consider the impact my presence, knowledge, experiences, biases and assumptions have on the research project from the earliest stages of conceiving of the research topic to the final stages of generating products from my research findings.

In an effort to minimise the impact of my biases and assumptions I maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process. I also engaged with an IPA researcher support group which was originally set up at Birkbeck (University of London) by Jonathan Smith and which is now a global network of online and local IPA support groups. I sought the feedback and engagement of a small peer group of fellow DPscyh candidates, therapists and coaches, who acted as my critical friends. Additionally, I sought feedback from both my Academic Consultant and my Academic Advisor.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHOD

4.1 Design

This study is based upon data gathered through face-to-face interviews with seven women who have transitioned from being a SAHM to a paid employee. Each participant was interviewed once at a location they chose from a list of options I provided that included their home, my home, or my practice room, which is located in a central city location.

4.2 Data collection

Smith (2010) proposes that the most effective way to collect qualitative data for an IPA study is through semi-structured interviews. In choosing this approach I felt I would be able to offer a great degree of flexibility and participants would be free to explore their experiences through their understanding of the phenomenon. This method of data collection helps reduce the risk of tailoring the interview schedule to the researchers' assumptions (Smith et al, 2009). Consistent with a phenomenological perspective, the purpose of the interview design is to elicit participants' experiences, feelings and thoughts, while setting aside the researchers' knowledge and assumptions. I held an expectation that while I sought to 'bracket' my own knowledge and personal experiences, there would inevitably be some slippage.

Semi-structured interviews allow for a collaborative approach in which the researcher and participant are able to explore and develop phenomena together. The researcher is able both to pursue their area of interest and respond to the participant, probing and gently exploring often unexpected territory. The interview schedule is intended as a guide for the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2003) and, as such, it offers flexibility, free from the constraints of a more structured method of data collection such as a questionnaire. Additionally, semi-structured interviews lend themselves to a more informal, conversational style of interaction, which is likely to feel more comfortable to the participant and, consequently, contribute to the rapport between researcher and participant.

4.3 Participants

Based on the recommendations of Smith et al (2009) and after critically reviewing papers that have been cited as good quality IPA studies (Smith, 2010; Hefferon & Gil-Rodriquez,

2011), I aimed to find between six and eight participants. Smith et al (2009, p.52) suggest that for a professional doctoral study between four and ten interviews is sufficient, and that a larger number would make it difficult for the researcher to dedicate the level of time needed to reflect on and interpret the data at the depth required from an IPA study.

Smith and Osborn (2003) state that a degree of homogeneity is required:

> The basic logic is that if one is interviewing, for example, six participants it is not very helpful to think in terms of random or representative sampling. IPA therefore goes in the opposite direction and through purposive sampling finds a more closely defined group for whom the research question will be significant. (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p.54).

I was keen to cast the net a little further than in my previous mixed method study (Cotter, 2016) in which all the participants were selected from legal firms based in the City of London. While being consistent with the IPA paradigm that requires participants to be selected purposively in order to find as homogenous a sample as possible, I sought to recruit from a more diverse population of professional women returners than I had previously studied. In an earlier study (Cotter, 2016) I elicited the help of established coaching consultancies who were able to grant me access to some of their large corporate client HR departments. While this proved to be a very successful means of recruiting participants, I felt somewhat disconnected from the individuals, which I attribute to a sense of distance between myself and my participants that derived from two aspects of the research method. Firstly, the method of recruitment meant I was effectively 'twice removed' from participants as they were recruited first via coaching consultancies and then through their HR departments. While I held several face to face meetings with the coaching consultancy and their HR leads, I had no direct contact with participants. Secondly, the method of data gathering kept me at a distance as I used an online questionnaire, which did not require me to interact directly with the participants.

For this study I wanted to be free of interested third party involvement and therefore looked to recruit participants by more direct means. I decided to approach the headteachers of two local primary schools and seek their cooperation in sending out an invitation to parents on my behalf (see appendix 2).

None of the participants were known to me prior to the study. Eight of them were recruited on a first-come first-served basis, however one participant chose to withdraw just before the interview took place.

My selection criteria were similar to what I had employed for my mixed method study (ECC 2017) and comprised professional women who:

- Had returned to work within the past two years
- Were contracted to work a minimum of 30 hours per week
- Had had a career break of a minimum two years
- Were with a partner/spouse at the time of their return to work
- Had one or more dependent children
- Were living and working in the UK

In total there were seven participants, all of whom were females aged between 31-49. They had all taken a career break of at least two years and had returned to work sometime between six and twenty months before their interview with me.

Profiles of the participants are provided in the next chapter, but the table below provides a brief summary of their demographic details:

Participant name & age	**Length of career break**	**Ethnicity**	**Profession***	**No of children (& ages)**	**Living with partner**
Anna 42yrs	2.5yrs	White British	Sales & marketing technology	One (4)	No
Rose 49yrs	14yrs	White British	Human resources (pre-career break)	Two (12 & 14)	Yes
Emma 32yrs	6yrs	White British	Executive PA	Two (6 & 9)	Yes
Irene 41yrs	4yrs	White Irish	Teacher & executive recruiter	Two (5 & 7)	Yes
Libby 48yrs	12yrs	White British	Finance director	Two (15 & 17)	Yes

Debbie 31yrs	5yrs	White British	Army (pre-career break) Teacher (pre- & post-career break)	Two (8 & 10)	Yes
Kate 33yrs	4yrs + 2yrs	White British	Specialist nurse (pre-career break)	Three (3, 5 & 15)	Yes

* Profession listed refers to the profession for which they are qualified and in which they had worked, not necessarily how they were employed at the time of the interview.

** Living with partner at time of interview. Note, as per the selection criteria, all participants were living with their partner at the time of their return to work.

4.4 Data capture

All the participants were interviewed face-to-face, at a location of their choice from the three options I offered: their home, my home, and my place of work. Five participants chose to have their interviews held in their homes, one opted to be interviewed in my home and one chose to meet at my place of work.

While no fixed duration was proscribed for the interviews, I gave participants a guide time of between sixty and ninety minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and participants were fully aware of and consented to this.

Consistent with seeking to 'obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena' (Kvale, 1996, p.5), I designed an interview schedule (see appendix 4) that had the potential to elicit 'unexpected turns' (Kvale, 1996,p7). The interview began with the very broad question: 'Can you tell me about your experience of returning to work?' Remaining questions on the interview schedule guided participants towards a range of topic areas that I considered to be important and wanted to cover in the interview. Care was taken in crafting those questions so as to avoid inadvertently leading the participants (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriquez, 2011).

4.5 Transcription

The interviews were all transcribed verbatim. I considered the question of whether to have the interviews transcribed professionally or to undertake the task myself. In a previous qualitative study I conducted in part completion of a master's degree, I outsourced the

transcription of three participant interviews. I therefore had an understanding of the care with which I would need to listen and transcribe the interviews. My decision to undertake the transcription myself was driven by two key factors: financial constraints and an expectation that by transcribing the interviews myself, I would get closer to the data.

While it was a slow process and one that absorbed considerably more time than I had anticipated, after some experimentation with techniques and technology I found a method of transcribing that required me to listen to the recordings while almost simultaneously using my own voice to transcribe via 'Google Transcribe'. This offered me an opportunity to 'relive' the interview process and to note down some of the feelings and thoughts that arose at the interview as they manifested again during transcription. I found this method to be an interesting experience and one which I believe brought me closer to the data than if I had not spoken the participants' words. Smith and Dunworth (2003) state that 'mentally hearing the voice of the participant during subsequent readings of the transcript assists with more complete analysis' (p.609). I believe that hearing *and* speaking further assisted in my analysis.

4.6 Idiographic approach

Given the idiographic nature of IPA, each transcript should be treated on its own terms in order to 'do justice to its individuality' (Smith et al. 2009, p.100). I transcribed each interview and undertook analysis of each interview before moving on to transcribing and analysing the next one. I was aware that it would be impossible for me to avoid beginning the analysis process while transcribing the data. I believe that a further advantage of transcribing the interview recordings myself was that, as I moved from one participant's analysis to the next participant's interview recording, I was able to fully immerse myself in the next case study. Had I not undertaken the transcription, I would have most likely found it more difficult to manage the already-difficult task of bracketing participants' data in order to approach each case study without influence or, rather, with fresh eyes.

4.7 Analytic Process

I am not a complete newcomer to IPA as I used the methodology for a small study in part-fulfilment of my master's degree. As such I felt able to approach the analytic process with

some prior knowledge. Smith et al. (2009) outline a detailed description of the IPA analytic process, in which they 'advise the novice embarking on an IPA study for the first time to begin by working closely with the suggested set of steps, and then adapt them when and where they feel comfortable to do so.' (Smith et al. 2009, p. 81). It has, however, been argued that following a prescriptive process can lead to a researcher being somewhat constrained or 'immobilised' (Coyle, 2007, p.169), with a potentially limited analysis that lacks creativity and, importantly, depth. Eatough and Smith (2006) argue that IPA 'provides a set of flexible guidelines, which can be adapted by researchers in light of their research aims' (Eatough & Smith, 2006, p. 487). The analytic process I ultimately adopted employed ideas from Smith et al (2009), Smith and Eatough (2007) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012).

In brief, the analytic process moved through the following stages for each participant:

1. Transcription
2. Listen to audio (several times)
3. Read transcript (several times)
4. Note first impressions; recall my observations and reflections of the interview; note any thoughts or comments that focus on either content, language use, or the emotional response of the participant; note reflexivity such as my own emotional responses and thoughts of how I might affect the participant.
5. Note emergent themes
6. Cluster themes into subordinate themes

4.7.1 Transcription

While not identified in the literature as a stage of analysis, I believe that the analytic process began when I started transcribing. Listening, sometimes repeatedly, to the parts of the interview recording, while almost simultaneously speaking aloud what I was hearing, was an immersive experience. I noticed that I was speaking the words of my participants with the same emphasis, pauses, inflections and emotions that they had used. I was struck by the depth with which this process was connecting me to my participant.

Finlay (2006) describes the 'research encounter' as requiring dancelike qualities from the researcher and the participant as they move in and out of experiencing and reflecting, and goes on to say 'The embodied intersubjective space between them [participant and

researcher] no longer involves division but connection. So, researcher and participant engage in the dance, moving in and out of experiencing and reflection.' (Finlay, 2006, p.1).

I believe the level of engagement I experienced as a consequence of speaking my participants' narrative provided the research process with an additional layer of complexity and depth.

4.7.2 Listening

Smith et al. (2009) argue that listening to recordings several times enables the researcher to imagine the voice of the participant when reading and re-reading the transcripts, thus aiding the analysis. I believe that transcribing using the method I adopted and not only listening repeatedly to the recordings but also re-recording using my voice, further aided my ability to relive the interviews when I came to read and re-read the transcripts.

As I transcribed, I put aside my transcription, and listened to the recording several times, increasing my awareness of grammatical meaning and nuance, and thereby bringing myself closer to my participant.

4.7.3 Reading, re-reading and initial notes

In line with the suggestions of Smith et al (2009), I left wide margins on either side of the transcript page in which to write initial comments. At this stage I had set aside the recordings and was gaining some distance from the spoken words, and I found that the process of reading and re-reading offered me creative space in which to consider, reflect, query and interpret. In these initial readings I was free to allow myself to get it wrong. At this stage I allowed myself the freedom to highlight and annotate text that struck me in some way. Larkin and Thompson (2012) encourage researchers to be open to what feels intuitive at this initial stage:

> It can be helpful to start by working with a licence to be wrong, presumptive, wayward, biased, creative, self-absorbed and unsystematic. Take a clean copy of the transcript, read through it a couple of times and write all over it. You can write anything: your own emotional reactions to the participant and their story, as you now recall the interview; initial ideas about potential themes; metaphors and imagery that strike you as particularly powerful; psychological concepts that seem

> to leap out at you from the data, as though calling directly on your theoretical knowledge. (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 106)

Given my previous experience of undertaking a small IPA study, I was very aware of the need to approach the next stages of analysis with a thorough system of noting comments in order to manage such a large amount of data. At the earliest stages of analysis, I adopted a simple colour coding system and used coloured highlighter pens to distinguish between comments that related to my initial notes, descriptive comments, linguistic comments and conceptual or psychological comments. My initial notes were made by directly highlighting the relevant text. I then made comments in the right-hand column, leaving the left-hand column as a space to note emergent themes at a later stages of analysis (see appendix 6 for example).

Libby: Well I think because I've been at home that's made that a bit easier because I can still take parcels, you know, have an Ocado delivery, put the washing, on, you know… If I'd had to go straight from being at home to [...] smash into an office all day [...] that would have been a much harder experience.	Libby imagines returning to work outside of home would be a dramatic and therefore a tough transition in comparison to what? 'Easier' - for whom? 'Smash' - like a car crash? (conceptual/psychological)

Above is an extract from Libby's transcript alongside my initial notes, corresponding to descriptive comments which have then been further developed with an additional layer of linguistic comment. Libby's use of the word 'smash' indicates how tough and potentially fateful she feels a return to work that would require her to leave the household might be.

Smith et al (2009) emphasise the need for IPA researchers to avoid being too cautious and limit their interpretation to a largely descriptive analysis. Later in the analysis I was able to return to these comments and see a more holistic meaning emerge. Working at home has made Libby's transition to work easier in the short-term by giving her confidence. However, one of Libby's central foci was to minimise disruption to other family members as a consequence of her return to work, and in so doing, fulfil the cultural/class expectations that her primary role is that of housewife and mother. Failure to successfully retain her SAHM roles and responsibilities while in paid employment could result in a breakdown – a 'smash' – in her marriage and family unit.

While the above may appear to stray some way from the data, I arrived at this interpretation following a rigorous inductive process that entailed disciplined use of layered

stages which gave rise to Smith's 'double hermeneutic' or 'two-stage interpretation process' (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

4.7.4 Developing emergent themes

In this stage of analysis I took sections of the transcript and gathered the components into either a single word or short phrase that reflected the deep level description of the data. As such I sought to follow Smith et al's (2009) explanation that: 'Themes are usually expressed as phrases which speak to the psychological essence of the piece and contain enough particularity to be grounded and enough abstraction to be conceptual.' (Smith et al, 2009, p. 92). It was at this stage that I stepped into the ring and looked to deepen and broaden the analysis, moving it away from a phenomenological account and towards interpretation. Smith et al (2009) warn researchers that this stage may feel somewhat uncomfortable (even though it is a central tenet of IPA) as it is at this stage that the researcher becomes integral to the analysis: 'However, "the you" is closely involved with the lived experience of the participant – and the resulting analysis will be a product of both of your collaborative efforts.' (Smith et al., 2009, p.91-92). With that in mind, expanding on the extract from Libby's transcript, I have illustrated below how I created my emergent theme titles:

Daunting prospect of returning to work. Doing it all.	Libby: Well I think because I've been at home that's made that a bit easier because I can still take parcels, you know, have an Ocado delivery, put the washing, on, you know... If I'd had to go straight from being at home to [...] smash into an office all day [...] that would have been a much harder experience.	Libby imagines returning to work outside of home would be a dramatic and therefore a tough transition in comparison to what? 'Easier' – for whom? 'Smash' – like a car crash? (conceptual/psychological)

This stage is where the hermeneutic circle came into play. As the emerging themes developed, I read and re-read the transcript to ensure they were reflective of the participant's experience – that they were grounded in the data. As the above example illustrates, emergent themes were noted in the left-hand column. Throughout, I was aware that as the analysis continued the themes could change.

These themes recurred throughout each transcript, and often totalled more than 50 or 60. I did not move on to transcribing and analysing my next participant's interview until I was satisfied that I had reached a 'measure of gestalt' (Smith & Eatough, 2006, p.48).

4.7.5 Connecting emergent themes to create subordinate themes

The next stage of analysis was a painstaking process involving me copying the themes onto post-it notes that I stuck randomly to a wall. Looking over the post-it notes I began to organise them into groups or clusters. Once I had completed this stage of grouping themes, I then transferred the transcript onto a spreadsheet with themes noted in a column referring to the original transcript. This was another opportunity for me to re-read the transcript, and while completing this stage I also noted any reflections of my own in a separate column on the spreadsheet. Such reflections might be a note of my response to a participant's comment or, as in the example from Irene's interview below, any initial connections to other participant's transcripts that might emerge.

172	... and so then I thought, well since I've been in a few houses I'm like 'This is what my husband is looking for. This is what he expects when he comes home. This is the standard and I'm falling below the standard and it's because I'm not organised enough.' That's the rhetoric and that is probably the biggest bone of contention between us.	Failing to meet partner's expectations of what it is to be a good housewife. Biggest source of conflict between them.	EXPECTATIONS OF PARTNER NOT GOOD ENOUGH HOUSEWIFE. CONFLICT	Echo of Anna.

The next stage of analysis involved clustering emergent themes into subthemes. At this stage I began looking for connections and patterns between the emergent themes and then tentatively labelling those as subthemes. For example, for Anna there appeared to be a number of themes that emerged around the emotional impact of leaving her daughter. I colour-coded each theme that I felt held some connection to this tentatively labelled subtheme of 'attachment'. This process continued until I had clustered emergent themes into subthemes, each identifiable by colour and then tentatively given a subtheme title that sought to capture the essence of the emergent themes.

Once this process was completed, I then moved on to transcribe and analyse the next transcript following the process described above. I used the same colour-coding for each subsequent participant, adding colours to new themes as they emerged. Once all transcripts had been individually transcribed and analysed, I moved on to the cross-analysis stage.

4.8 Cross-analysis

Before beginning to look for patterns across the seven participants' analysis, all the subthemes, together with their corresponding text extracts and line numbers, were transferred to a new spreadsheet and grouped by colour code with their subthemes ordered in alphabetical order. Each text extract was colour coded in order to identify the participants. This provided me with a visual impression, and allowed a level of insight into the commonalities and divergences between the experience of the participants. Additionally, using an Excel spreadsheet allowed me to easily duplicate, cut, paste and regroup themes. By collating subthemes together with transcript extracts and the corresponding line numbers, I was easily able to revisit participant transcripts and refine my interpretations.

The process of cross-analysing all seven transcripts entailed looking for patterns across the seven cases with the purpose of creating superordinate or master themes that captured 'the quality of the participants' shared experience of the phenomenon under investigation' (Willig, 2008, pp.61-62). This stage required me to begin a process of reducing and prioritising the data. My focus was not so much related to the frequency with which themes presented, but rather reflected the richness of particular passages that served to highlight the themes. I highlighted these passages in bold, copied them into a further spreadsheet and labelled them 'hot quotes' for ease of reference when it came to the writing up stage of analysis.

This process continued until I felt I had reached a point at which I was satisfied that the patterns and connections I had made were grounded in the text. I had initially believed this stage of the analysis would be completed once I had arrived at three or four discreet superordinate themes. In fact, what I found was that one of my superordinate themes, 'Counting the Losses', was integral to the other superordinate themes.

4.9 Writing up

Just as I experienced the transcription stage as the beginning of my analysis, the writing up stage proved to be yet another unexpected stage of analysis. Moving between themes and individual transcripts, this final stage saw a significant expansion of my analysis as I sought to explain and illustrate my interpretation of the participants' narratives.

CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction to the participants

Before delving into the detail of the analysis I will provide a very brief introduction to each of the participants in the study. For ease and speed of reference, I would also direct the reader to the participant summary box in chapter four.

Libby

Libby, 48, is married to Simon and is the mother two children aged 15 and 17, both of whom have attended one of the UK's most prestigious boarding schools since the age of eight. Libby has held executive-level roles in the City and overseas, is a chartered accountant and, following a 12-year career break, returned to work 18 months ago.

Libby now works full-time and is based at home with occasional days in the office.

Libby's husband Simon is currently out of work and has been for several months.

Irene

Irene, 41, is married to Steve and has two children aged 7 and 5, both of whom attend a local state primary school. Irene is a primary teacher who, prior to having children, worked as a teacher and a recruiter in London. Irene was born and grew up in Ireland. After the birth of their first child, she and her husband decided to return to Ireland to live closer to family and set up their own business. Three years later (and a year after the arrival of their second child), their business failed, and they returned to the UK in order to find employment. Much of Irene's story revolves around this experience.

Irene is currently working full-time as a teaching assistant in a local primary school.

Irene's husband works full-time in a corporate career with a two-hour daily commute each way.

Anna

Anna is 42 and single, with one child aged 4. Anna experienced two job losses and the breakdown of her marriage during the 18 months following her initial return to work.

Both prior to and after her career break, Anna held senior technical sales roles within large IT corporations. Anna works condensed hours over four days per week and plans to increase that to five days when her daughter starts school.

Debbie

Debbie, 31, is married to Mark, and has two children aged 8 and 10. Debbie began her career in the army, which she joined straight after school. She later pursued a career in teaching but decided to make a change prior to becoming pregnant, even though her qualifying years ran in parallel with the arrival and early years of her two children.

Debbie works full-time as a primary school teacher, and her husband is a professional soldier.

Kate

Kate, 33 is a single mum to three children aged 15, 5 and 3. Kate's marriage broke down when she first attempted to return to work, shortly after the birth of her youngest child.

In the period before her eldest daughter completed primary school Kate worked in a variety of part-time jobs. She then decided to pursue a career in nursing and began a nursing degree when her daughter was in her final year of primary school. During her third year of study she had her second child, and in her fourth and final year of study she gave birth to her third child.

Kate qualified as a nurse specialist a few months after the birth of her third child. She applied for one nursing job some weeks after qualifying, was unsuccessful at the interview, and consequently decided to remain at home looking after her children for the next two years.

Kate now works full-time as a delivery driver for a major supermarket.

Emma

Emma, 32, is married to Scot and has two children aged 9 and 6. Before her career break Emma worked as executive assistant to CEOs in the telecoms industry. Following a six-year career break she returned to work as a personal assistant. She works from home full-time.

Her husband works full-time for a local employer.

Rose

Rose, 49, is married to Paul. She has four children, two of whom are from a previous marriage and are now grown up, and two younger children aged 14 and 12. Rose also has a four-year-old grandchild whom she looks after one day per week. Paul holds a senior role in the military.

Rose has had a career break of 14 years, having previously worked as an HR professional. She currently works four days per week in an administrative role for a local small business.

5.2 Introduction to the analysis

The four superordinate themes presented below were constructed during the IPA process that I described in chapter four. Interwoven throughout the first three superordinate themes is a fourth superordinate theme of loss. Together, these four superordinate themes aim to provide a clear representation of the patterns and connections between the emergent subthemes, and the common experience of the women transitioning back to work following a career break.

A visual representation of the themes is presented below (Fig.1). Each theme is then discussed in an interpretative narrative, using extracts from the participant interviews as supportive evidence.

Figure 1: Superordinate themes and sub themes

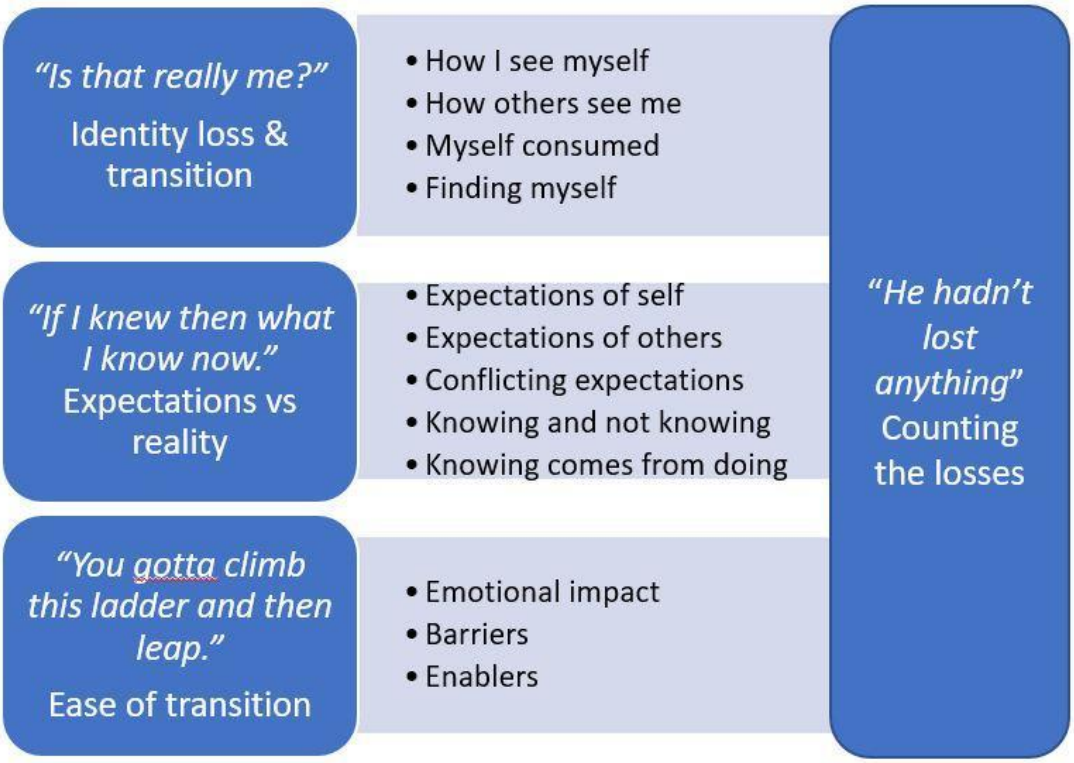


Fig. 1

5.3 'Is that really me?' – Identity loss and transformation

Central to each of the participant's experiences of the transition from being a stay at home mother (SAHM) to paid employee was identity loss, recovery and transformation, encapsulated in this extract from Libby's interview.

> So I read my CV and I used to have a really high-powered job. And I used to live in Bermuda [pause]. And it's like an out of body experience, you just don't feel you're that person anymore. (Libby)

While this study set out to explore the transition from being a stay at home mother to paid employee, participants also spoke at length about their experience of transitioning from full-time paid employment to motherhood and the impact that had upon their sense of self. Anna emphasised how:

> To be honest, it was about the transition between me and how I was before becoming a mother. I felt 'how can I let go of everything that was me?' (Anna)

While women's loss of identity and their recovery and transformation was central to the experience of the transition from being a SAHM to a paid employee, what emerged from the data was the complexity of the emotional impact; specifically in relation to a sense of self.

5.3.1 How I see myself

Although Libby struggled to recognise her past professional self when re-reading her CV, she did not experience any sense of sadness. In fact, she repeatedly described herself as 'lucky'. In relation to her professional identity, this manifested itself in the fact that she (unlike some of her friends) had a profession that she was able to return to after her career break:

> And I'm lucky that I'm a professional because I think my father always said to me, 'You know it's important to get a profession'. And I sort of thought, you know... but actually just so many friends of mine would like to do something but don't really know what they can do and also, many of them don't get paid much for it. But... whereas I pretty quickly am bringing in quite a good income. (Libby)

Libby thereby contrasts herself with her friends who struggle to know what they can do. The recurring experience and impact of 'knowing' and 'not knowing' emerged throughout the data and crosses over all the superordinate themes to varying degrees.

Kate, having been knocked back from her first post-qualifying interview for a job as a specialist nurse, retreated to the home. She seemed to have lost sight of her chosen professional identity to such a degree that she could not even consider applying for another nursing job. As a consequence, she was left feeling bereft and with little sense of direction or purpose.

> I don't know. I feel very lost. I don't know what to do with my life [crying]. [pause] I feel like I'm just bumbling through life. I'm just getting through to the next bit... get the girls through to the next bit. So that there's no real me anymore, just that care person. (Kate)

Central to the participants' experiences of transitioning between full time motherhood and paid employment were the ways in which they saw their fulfilment of the role of mother in relation to their professional identity. Kate's being 'just that care person' conveys a real sense of a loss of professional identity and with it, a loss of purpose. Prior to having her daughter, Anna had considered herself to be entirely defined by her career and when she stepped out of that career she experienced an unveiling of her true self.

> So my career defined me and made me feel proud about who I was. So to think that I wasn't going to have that... I suppose ultimately it's unveiling you isn't it, and what you're.. [pause]. Looking back, perhaps I just wasn't that comfortable in my own skin, so I felt like this career needed to define me. (Anna)

While some of the women described feeling conflicted between their professional and maternal selves, others experienced a greater degree of ease with both of their identities. It seems that the degree to which women have a pre-conceptualisation of motherhood and its relationship to their professional identity has a direct impact on the extent to which they experience role conflict. For instance, while Debbie acknowledged how her transition to full-time employment brought difficult emotional and relationship issues (including guilt, role conflict and loss) she did not express any sense of identity loss or conflict, in contrast to the other participants. I wonder if this might be attributable to the strong sense of professional identity that Debbie formed while she was pregnant and that she lived through the early years of her children's lives.

> Because I'm already a mum, and I've had a career before, like I knew how important it was to find somewhere that suited me and my family. (Debbie)

5.3.2 How others see me: Being judged

All of the participants discussed their experience of being seen by others. Being judged – as a mum, as a working mum, as a wife – were all common experiences. For some, avoiding being negatively judged led to their hiding their motherhood, and others found safety in hiding at home through homeworking.

Both Irene and Debbie spoke of the experience of feeling judged by colleagues.

> Like when I got a phone call about my child, like in the first month of being here. And I'm like 'Oh no, I've got a phone call from the school' and you can see the non-parent teachers rolling their eyes like 'Eugh'. (Debbie).

This sense of being judged seems inexorably connected to a need to prove oneself. Libby expressed little confidence that an employer would '[take] that risk at that level' and employ her in a role commensurate with her experience and qualifications. As a result, she lowered her aim, in the expectation that she would need time to prove herself:

> ... so I think you've got to accept... I mean I'm talking about probably 30-40% less than I previously would have earned. And I'm not saying that after a year or two I couldn't get back there, but I think it would be really tough. So, I think that is a realistic thing. That you've probably got to go in and prove yourself a bit and then get back up rather than expect to go straight back in at the same level. (Libby)

This was echoed by Anna who felt that 'because you've been out for a while, you're back in that mode of trying to prove yourself rather than just do your job.' For Anna, proving herself meant hiding her motherhood as a way to protect against being judged as anything less than 100% committed to her job.

> I think I didn't want them to think that I'm not going to be able to give them my all because I wasn't hiding the fact, but I was hiding the fact that I had a young baby and was breast-feeding. And you know, I was worried I was going to be perceived as a weak person because I wasn't full-time and giving 100% plus. (Anna)

Working from home seemed to offer some protection from the gaze of others. Libby described her relief at being able to hide from her colleagues' view by working from home, enabling her to feel able to take things at her own pace and thus, to an extent, alleviating the need to prove herself:

> In fact, as things eventually turned out it was... this was really perfect for me because I was working at home, so if something took me a bit longer no one really knew which was really nice for my comfort levels. (Libby)

In contrast to the desire to hide from bosses and peers, women commonly expressed a desire to be seen by others, particularly their children. Specifically, they wanted to be seen as more than a mother/facilitator/carer; they wanted to be seen as working outside of the home. Women frequently described their wish to be a good role model to their children and wider family members. The desire to be seen as a role model to their children arose from a range of motivations – to challenge stereotype beliefs around parental roles, to instil values around work ethics, to generate a sense of pride and self-worth for themselves and children, and to be the role model they didn't themselves have.

Kate described how going back to work was one of the best decisions she had ever made, recognising that housework and domesticity had become all-consuming and that getting out of the home to paid employment set an example to her daughters.

> ... and I didn't want to continue to be on benefits. I wanted to show the girls there's more to life, that you don't just get handed money. You have to work; you have to be seen to be working. (Kate)

And although Emma retains day-to-day parenting responsibility for her two children while her husband works full-time, she still expressed a desire for her two children to see her as not just a mum, but as a mum who works.

> I also like to think I'm being a good role model for them. I want them to realise mums do go out to work. I mean we've had comments in the past that all ladies don't do this or do that and I just think 'how can I have these stereotypes when they're so tiny?' So for me I want to show them that Daddy works hard and Daddy goes to work all day and Mummy does as well, and I think that's quite important for them to see as they're growing up. (Emma)

Similarly, Libby expressed a wish to be seen by her children not simply as someone who 'once worked' but to be seen as a professional, 'especially for my daughter, you know, that I'm back at work and do these things... I just think that's really important.'

For Irene and Kate, being a role model seems to be important not purely to show their children that mums work but also to step into a mentoring role so their daughters have what had eluded them:

> Uhm, I want the girls to have a nice career. I want them to know what they want to do and go on to do something of worth, what's important, you know... being happy ...what's important to them. I guess that's important. I want to show them – to be a role model. (Kate)

> ... so I feel like my daughter, I'm hoping that I can give her more guidance much earlier. And also I'm thinking, do I need to set up a little pocket of money for her... that extra so that I can kind of say to her when she has her kids 'Keep your career if that's what you want…' But just to get some childcare if there is just a little pocket that you could be building up. (Irene)

Rose's decision to return to work was significantly influenced by a need to seek external validation:

> ... I think it was more the validation... uhm... yeah, the need to be seen as an individual and... and a kind of professional validation or external validation. I think within the home if you are a stay at home mum and you have a child with special needs as well you're seen as a facilitator and then you become invisible. (Rose)

Rose expressed frustration that others did not see the impact she made in her role as a SAHM. This is echoed in what many of the other women expressed when they described a wish to be seen as more than 'just' a mother, because 'just' being a mother is not [good] enough.

5.3.3 Myself consumed

It seems that the transition to paid employment is experienced by some as an emergence from a temporary state of being in which one is fully consumed by motherhood and domesticity. Therefore, a return to work is, in part, a process of regaining a sense of self and returning to reality or normality. Emma expressed this feeling by saying:

> Uhm... I also felt that by that point that you've been in this crazy baby bubble all this time and there is this real world out there. (Emma)

As described earlier, Kate felt a need to demonstrate to her children that there was more to life than being a SAHM. Additionally, it seemed that she needed to experience for herself that there was more to her than motherhood and domestic labour:

> I just knew I needed to do something. I think the house, yeah, everything consumes your life...the cleaning, your normal routine... I had to have something to break that. Yeah, eventually I had to work. (Kate).

Similarly, Emma described how before returning to work:

> ... the kids they'd be my whole life. You don't focus on anything else. The cleaning became almost too important. I would probably overclean the house and over concentrating on everything to do with the kids. My whole world was just the children. (Emma)

For some, the transition into their career break was planned and desired, but other participants had never intended to stay home over an extended period. It seems that the ways in which women came to their career breaks influenced how they experienced their transition into being a SAHM and the period they spent on their career break.

Irene 'never intended to stay at home', and, consequently, described her career break as being consumed by her 'battle' to return to her career. Unlike Kate, Rose, Emma, Anna and Libby, all of whom describe a period of being fully consumed in their role as a mother, Irene appears to have been consumed by her desire to continue on her career path while simultaneously being responsible for the primary care of her children:

> I'm like then... I'm... I'm concerned about being left as a financial dependant to him later. Because I want to... although... because I want to be the carer and around the house, I also want to make sure that whatever like I'm doing it's going to grow in some way. (Irene)

Ultimately this is a battle in which Irene was defeated.

> I'm not going to go into anything now that I'm going to make money at. It's just not possible. And if I want to be an HR director now I don't know how I could possibly do it. (Irene)

Anna expressed having conflicted feelings around her fear of losing her professional self. This conflict is reflected in her sentiments use of present and past tenses in the quote below:

> I felt 'Gosh, I've had children now, therefore this must be my focus now – my child.' It's... 'What do I do?' The job that defines me and... and gave me independence and makes me who I am first... and now this is the most important thing in my world. And so I've got to be honest. I felt conflicted. (Anna)

Following this period of conflict, which Anna described earlier as arising from a fear of letting go of her professional (all-consuming) self, comes an acceptance of being subsumed within the baby bubble. Anna later tells me 'my life is my child.'

5.3.4 Finding myself (Transformation)

Participants were at different stages of their transitions, which was reflected in how they expressed their sense of self as a working mum.

It seemed that for Debbie, who had studied, trained and qualified as a teacher during her pregnancies and in the first few years after the birth of her two children, the transition felt like a coming home to herself.

> I just feel, as the advert says 'Some people are born to teach'... if you are born to teach... I just think that is so right. (Debbie).

For many women, the return to work brought with it a sense of freedom from the confines of motherhood and domesticity. Many described feelings of guilt associated with acknowledging the 'freeing' nature of returning to work. This is illustrated in the following dialogue with Kate.

> Kate: It really kinda helped me and gave me some space... you know my time I've got the children… [pause]. I suppose it made me a better parent when I went home because I've had my little break.
>
> Researcher: In what ways do you think it made you a better parent?
>
> Kate: I don't know – it's just being able to socialise with adults, or, uhm... it just gave me a break from the children. That sounds awful.

Rose echoed Kate's experience and described going back to work as providing her with a sense of returning to her past while retaining her present self:

> It was exciting initially… you know getting away from the home. There were a couple of long days we were going to the pub after work and I wasn't Rose – I was Rose…. not mum or… (Rose)

Emma seemed to feel an increased sense of pride around her working mum identity: 'I love being able to say I've got a job and that... and that I'm a PA rather than just saying I'm a mum.' As mentioned previously, there is a suggestion in Emma's use of language that she feels 'just' being a mum is not enough for her. In a similar manner to Rose, returning to work seemed to provide a means of regaining a sense of 'the me beforehand'.

Of course, returning to the 'me beforehand' was never going to be fully possible for the participants and age came up several times in our discussions. Both Libby and Irene described an element of surprise or shock at 'suddenly and really weird[ly]... being one of the older ones…' upon finding themselves returning to a workplace where their colleagues were considerably younger than themselves. It was as if they imagined themselves fitting in at work just as they had before their career break.

> I went into the office and they're all like 22 and you feel like you've come into the company and you feel like Angela Merkel that's gone onto The Only Way is Essex [laughing]. I was like 'Oh I'd better up my game here – I'm not fitting in at all.' (Irene)

> I'm also aware that because suddenly, and really weird[ly]... being one of the older ones in the workplace, you know from always being in... that now I'm older than almost everybody in the company and that's a sort of weird thing to get used to because you think you're one of the… [tapers off into silence]. (Libby)

The process of 'finding myself' is ongoing for the majority of the participants. Taking part in the research gave them a heightened awareness of how much their sense of self had changed over the course of their transition. Perhaps the most notable example of this relates to Kate, who, having failed to secure a job in her chosen career as a nurse specialist after a single job interview believed '... it wasn't meant to be' and 'I've never thought about it since.' Kate came to conclude that if she were to pursue her nursing career in the future it would:

> ...give me more of a sense of identity [crying]... uhm... a sense of worth [long pause]... it's really triggered something… [continued crying]. I didn't realise it would have such an impact on me – talking about this. (Kate).

While Anna's early experience of her transition aroused feelings of fear and anxiety related to the sudden loss of her professional identity, she later articulated a gentler movement towards 'finding myself'.

> I'm slowly getting to the point of finding the old me again. That… that person that did have independence. That person that could put her mind to something... I did lose her for a while. (Anna)

5.4 'If I knew then what I know now': Expectations versus reality

The participants talked extensively about their expectations or lack thereof regarding themselves, their partners, their children and other family members as they went through the various stages of their transition. Some also discussed their expectations of their employers and how they impacted upon their decisions around role and career decisions. They also talked about others' expectations of them, in particular their partners' and other family members.

Feelings around the experience and consequences of having unmet expectations, conflicted expectations, low and/or high expectations in relation to themselves and others were expressed once again.

5.4.1 Expectations of self

The participants discussed their expectations of themselves, whether or not they were met and the ways in which that coloured their experiences and influenced their decisions at all stages of their transition from and to paid employment. Deeply connected to their expectations of themselves was their sense of knowing themselves, particularly knowing what they wanted and how they would feel in the future.

Irene described the experience of her transition to motherhood and subsequent efforts to re-engage with her career(s) – as a teacher and recruiter as a series of battles and defeats. It seemed that Irene either expected an enormous amount of herself in terms of energy

and stamina, or she utterly underestimated how challenging she would find returning to teaching and recruitment with two young children and a husband who was fully focused on his career to the exclusion of everything else. Prior to having children her friends warned her against leaving the teaching profession in favour of pursuing a career in recruitment, foreseeing the benefits of having a teaching career at the same time as having children.

> I didn't plan a family. I left teaching to go into recruitment and a lot of my friends were like 'You're crazy – what if you have a family?'… And I was like 'Well if that happens – but that's not my goal actually, career is my goal'. (Irene)

More than twelve years after leaving her teaching role in Ireland in favour of a career in recruitment in London, Irene is now employed as a teaching assistant and is planning on (re)qualifying as a teacher in the UK, with her hopes and expectations of becoming an HR professional abandoned.

> I'm not going to go into anything now that I'm going to make money at. It's just not possible and if I want to be an HR director now, I don't know how I could possibly do it. (Irene)

For some, becoming a mother was, in itself, unexpected. Debbie and Irene described feeling an element of (largely welcome) surprise at finding themselves pregnant. Anna was considering having a family but becoming pregnant seemed to come faster than she anticipated, and without much forethought '... started to think about having a family. And that all happened very quickly without thinking about it much.' Anna considers herself to be someone who doesn't really plan. I wonder to what extent this contributed to her painful experience of her loss of self.

Rose, whose career break, at 14 years, was the longest of any of the participants, described her expectations of returning to work a year after the birth of her youngest. However, those plans were discarded when her child was diagnosed with autism at less than a year old.

> And it was because of the cards we were dealt in conjunction with his career choice that I chose to support us in that role. Because at the time it was financially the best way to go ahead but people had assumed… make huge assumptions to the contrary which is frustrating. (Rose)

While Rose didn't state what those assumptions are, it seems likely that these comments relate to the notion of 'choice' i.e. that she freely chose to stay at home, and that the 'people' she refers to include her husband.

> It wasn't me saying 'I don't want to go back to work'. I never really made that choice. For the two years I did – but… but not after. (Rose)

Later, Rose described her desire to protect her husband from knowing that the decision for her to stay at home impacted negatively on her while benefiting him and other members of the family. Her husband continues to live under the assumption that Rose freely chose to stay at home.

> But it's... but it's that the family have benefited from her having that career break… [pause]. First of all I think there's a reluctance to acknowledge that fully because I think that in my situation… I think my husband would feel terribly guilty because he almost doesn't want to acknowledge what an impact that's had. He'd have to acknowledge... you know, the facilitation of his career as well. And I don't think that's an easy thing for men to do – not in my situation anyway. And also he needs to acknowledge the fact of his absence – because he likes to think of himself as, and he is, a very good Dad – but he's had the luxury of being able to concentrate on his career and I've concentrated fully on the family. And that is the rub. (Rose)

Anna often commented on her inability to know how she would feel at a future point and the frustration she felt at being expected to do so by her employer.

> I didn't know what I was going to want to do until I got to that point. So it was like an open book. It wasn't like 'I must go back, and I must fulfil my career', and 'I must go back to work.' I was like, 'How am I going to feel?' I don't know. It was really take each step as it comes. (Anna)

Echoing Anna, Emma described the impossibility of being able to predict how she would feel about her return to work after becoming a mum.

> You just don't know how you gonna feel about a baby until you have a baby. You've got no idea what it feels like to be a mum just to have that connection… (Emma)

In recognition of her own uncertainty around how she would feel when her maternity leave came to an end, Emma put her maternity pay into a separate account so that should she decide not to return to work, she would be able to repay her employer.

> I was on maternity leave, and I put all the money into a bank account, because obviously I was not 100% sure of what I wanted to do. So I had all the extra money put away as it was a case of if you don't go back you have to hand back the money. (Emma)

The participants seemed to accept their inability to foresee how they would feel at certain stages of their 'planned' transition, while others – particularly employers – appeared to expect that the women would know in advance.

I found that participants split into four groups when relating to the theme of 'expectations of themselves'.

Kate, Rose and Irene had fully expected to return to work after their career break. Rose's expectations were thwarted when it became clear that her youngest child was autistic. Irene's expectations were thwarted when her husband's business failed as she had anticipated being able to work from home part-time while caring for her children. Kate's expectations were thwarted when she was knocked back from her first job interview.

Debbie had planned and worked towards her career change and return to full-time employment throughout two pregnancies and the six years following the birth of her eldest child. She had a clear vision and expectation in terms of her return to work.

While Emma and Anna both shared an expectation that they would return to work, they also expressed an openness and awareness that they could not know whether they would actually follow through with their plans. Both articulated the view that becoming a mother is fully consuming and that any expectations around the future self are therefore impossible to conceive.

Libby, encouraged by her father, set out to gain a profession and pursued a very successful and lucrative career as an accountant. However, her upper-middle class family expected that once she was married, and certainly once she had had children, she would no longer work. Libby initially returned to work after maternity leave, and chose to leave work when

her children started school. In our conversations, Libby experienced some difficulty in reconciling expectations of herself with the expectations others hold of her (see page 78).

Some women came to recognise after their return to work, that they had mistakenly expected to be content in a job that was at a lower level than previous roles they held. Rose described how:

> I have actually underestimated... but I thought I would be comfortable with... I thought I'd be happy with less responsibility because it wouldn't take so much from my family but actually it's just making me frustrated. (Rose)

Anna, by contrast, described how she had initially sought to return to work at the same level she had held before her break and her anger when her manager offered her a role with less responsibility. Some two years later, Anna feels quite differently, stating:

> And looking back I regret that, because if I knew what I know now I would've carved out a lesser role. (Anna)

Kate is somewhat inconsistent in that while she would not return to nursing at a lower level than she is qualified to because '... then I'd be going back into a low grade, and that would frustrate me…' she has settled for working as a driver, which she acknowledges as being well below her capabilities.

As previously mentioned, Libby's expectations around the type of role she would seek was less to do with her expectations of herself but rather her expectations of her employers, namely that they would not risk taking her on at the same level she had previously occupied, and that she would need to prove herself before being able to seek a role commensurate with her experience, skills and qualifications.

I was struck by the amount of pressure women put themselves under as they described their experiences of returning to work while maintaining their SAHM responsibilities. This phenomenon is closely connected with the superordinate theme 'ease of transition', specifically with regard to women's experiences of flexible working. Libby seemed very pleased to be able to tell me how, as a result of her working from home, she had largely been able to carry on as before.

> Well I think because I've been at home that's made that a bit easier because I can still take parcels, you know, have an Ocado delivery, put the washing, on, you know… (Libby)

While Libby expected to be able to continue with much of her SAHM responsibilities, she did describe how, from time to time, she needs to 'lose it' with her husband (who is not working) as a response to his failure to help out with some of the domestic chores.

Debbie described holding onto unrealistic expectations of success in her professional role as a teacher while simultaneously meeting her high standards as a mother.

> I'm trying to sort it out with... like all the different jigsaw pieces so that they don't clash. They've somehow got to fit so that you can succeed at everything. But it's almost impossible. It's like there's always something that's got to give. It's like you can't quite click all the pieces together at the same time. You push them all in and something pops out… [pause], and then I guess I'm just gonna have to deal with that. (Debbie)

5.4.2 Expectations held by others

All the participants' discussed the expectations that others held of them. These expectations varied along with their many roles, including wife/partner, mother of their [partners'] children, daughter and employee, that the participants embodied.

Despite Libby's statements that she feels 'really lucky that I'm a professional' and always enjoyed being 'good at my job', there still appears to be some inconsistency in her motivations for returning to work. Early on in her interview, Libby explained that her return to work was prompted by a lack of purpose: *'*I was conscious that I needed something because the children are getting older and I was sort of here doing nothing.*'* However, she later goes on to describe the financial imperative driving her return. This stemmed from her husband being without work for nearly two years, during which time they were 'living off capital', which 'couldn't go on forever as it would eventually run out'. Libby explained that both her and her husband's family held no expectation that she should be working, and this manifested itself in her husband's family appearing not to recognise that she was working.

> I would say and then Stephen's family I think I really don't... they don't… they just don't seem to really take it onboard that I am working so they expect you to do this or that and I say 'Well actually no I can't 'cause I'm working.' (Libby)

Lowering her voice to a whisper to ensure her husband couldn't hear, Libby went on to describe her mother's expectations and her subsequent disappointment or embarrassment at her daughter's situation.

> My mother really never understood why I worked in the first place and I think she… she feels very [lowered voice] that I do too much and she feels probably if she was really honest… upset that I'm now having to work and have to carry the whole thing. I probably... I think she worries about that. (Libby)

By contrast, Libby herself seems very content with having a fulfilling job that enables her to continue doing domestic duties. It appears that, in seeking to downplay her successful career return, Libby is also trying to avoid drawing attention to her (and her husband's) failure to meet the expectations of others, while she, at the same time, is exceeding her own expectations for her career.

> But I have to be very unassuming about it [laughs] because that's an insult to Steve. So if he was working as well things will be very different, but because he's not really that's quite a tricky sort of then dynamic. (Libby)

Or perhaps Libby is seeking to protect her husband in a similar manner to Rose, who protected her husband by keeping her silence regarding the extent to which she facilitated the family's growth and his career success at her own expense.

Rose described how, after she made the decision to stay at home for longer than she had originally expected, that decision was never up for review. An expectation had been formed that she would continue as a SAHM indefinitely.

> But once it became very comfortable for everybody else it never became a topic. It's never been up for re-discussion. (Rose)

When Rose eventually began seeking paid employment, her husband appeared supportive while continuing to expect that her return to work would not impact him or their children.

> In fact he said all the right things… vocalised all the right things but the reality is ... reality was different in a way he just uhh... and I don't even think… I just think it was the actual physical results that he... I don't think he'd even considered. (Rose)

Irene also described her husband's expectation that she would carry all the responsibility for their children and homelife in order to enable him to fully focus on his job.

> But his... his rhetoric was... even though... is like 'I cannot have any distractions from work. I have a high paid job. They need me 100%. If I give less than 100% and if I don't get this much money we're done for.' (Irene)

As the children became a little older and therefore less demanding, Irene described how her husband's expectations shifted and he began to want her to return to her previous career in recruitment. In this he was seemingly oblivious to the gruelling experiences that Irene had had when she tried to combine working in recruitment with looking after two young children.

> So... so his answer would be: 'Can I not just stay at home? Do everything, stay within my budget – my minimal budget – because that would just make life easier if I could do that, and so and then just get a job between 10 and 2?'. (Irene)

5.4.3 Conflicting expectations

Conflicting expectations between the participants and their partners of how (or if) their roles and responsibilities would change after they returned to work was present in all the interviews.

Irene described how it was not until after they had children that she became aware of how she and her husband held different values and attitudes relating to family roles and responsibilities.

> Well my friends would say that my husband is very much of a traditionalist, but that only becomes apparent as you've had the kids. I couldn't… I couldn't predict that when we were in London. We were kind of free spirited. After I finished work at 8 o'clock... so you know drinking cocktails in the hotel 'This is great I love this

> life'… you know. And so that was it – so it was easy to think we were aligned with our values but actually when it came to starting a family we were completely different here, and then you don't have equality at home. (Irene)

Kate spoke about how her partner and his family considered his work to be of greater importance than her nursing career. This clearly grated with her as she felt his work:

> ... wasn't really a career. I mean he worked in the financial industry, contractor, uhh... and obviously his pay was more, but to me it was never about pay it was about career and what I loved doing. [pause] But that was... yeah. And it's difficult to put that into words as it was such a long time ago. But it happened. (Kate)

As described above, Kate, similarly to Libby, felt the need to downplay her career at home in order to protect her husband and prevent bad feelings from arising.

Debbie conveyed a clear sense that she now wanted to pursue her own career and she expected her husband to step back from his to facilitate that.

> So I rely on him a lot but that's affected our marriage as well. Like the last month has been really bad for us, because he's taking on a lot more responsibility in that he gets the kids up and gets them out every morning. Because where he is in his career, he can now take that time. And so I say 'Well you wouldn't be here if it weren't for my support during those first six-seven years. You wouldn't be where you are now. I think it's only fair that you take the hit now.' (Debbie)

Irene also described her husband's expectations as being at odds with her own and explored the conflict that created.

> ... and so then I thought well since I've been in a few houses I'm like this is what my husband is looking for. This is what he expects when he comes home. This is the standard and I'm falling below the standard and it's because I'm not organised enough. That's the rhetoric, and that is probably the biggest bone of contention between us. (Irene)

Irene's story was peppered with combative metaphors, reflecting the degree to which she felt she was in battle with her husband, her employers and a culture that conspired to throw obstacles in the way of the balance she sought to achieve between her career and motherhood goals.

Anna reflected on how her partner's expectations that she continue in her domestic role after returning to work became a significant source of conflict in their relationship:

> I suppose the other point that I haven't even touched on is that you go back to work... and then you're still expected to perform all the other roles that you were doing. Uhm... so really... and actually one of our arguments that we never recovered from was a time when there was no food in the fridge. And I know that was probably one of those situations where that wasn't the problem... but because my two days off were precious to me because I was working – I wanted to spend that time with Elizabeth. And for me I wasn't thinking about the house and putting the dinner on the table. I started to think more and more just about Elizabeth because I didn't have the bandwidth with working. (Anna)

There is a risk that because the phenomenon of couples' conflict around childcare, household chores and other domestic issues is the stuff of everyday life, the impact this has on mental health is somehow minimised and dismissed. Kate and Anna both cite it as a significant factor behind their relationship breakdown, while Debbie saw it as the greatest challenge of her transition to paid employment.

> ... and then they [husbands] come back and they try to fit into your routines and they come in but you feel like they've taken over... and that's how it is for us at home because I would look after the children for so long and I did everything my way. And if we don't get that sorted... it's like... the most difficult part of all this... we'll end up splitting up. (Debbie)

While Debbie sought ways to resolving the conflict that arose from her reduced availability, Rose described stepping back and deliberately not taking responsibility for resolving the conflict that arose following her return to work. Instead, she sought to take a collaborative approach with her husband:

> ...along the lines of 'Look we are really going to have to review this' and 'We're going to have to sort this out because this can't go on'. And you know I'm trying

> to pin down what can't go on. If it's my absence you know, I can do nothing about that... you know that's not my responsibility. We can talk about that but if you're not going to engage with me we can't fill that void. (Rose)

5.4.4 Knowing and not knowing

There is considerable overlap between the themes of 'expectations' and 'knowing'. The themes of 'knowing' and 'not knowing' emerged throughout my interviews with the participants. The women felt that the experience of both knowing and not knowing themselves, particularly in relation to motherhood and the subsequent return to work, had a significant impact on their self-confidence and decision making.

Several of the women discussed the reduction in confidence they experienced as a result of stepping away from their careers. Those same women also described how they came to know that they were capable of returning, how they knew they could 'do it'. Here Libby graphically describes how losing her confidence affected her:

> Well, I mean, for example the first time I went for an interview I applied for a job at B&Q in Southampton and I was sick in the car park beforehand I was so terrified. I was just absolutely terrified to go into the interview. (Libby)

And how quickly she regained her confidence:

> ...but once I'd spent the two days with her [predecessor], I knew I was alright. I knew I could do it. So that was fine. (Libby)

In addition to the confidence boost that the participants gained from knowing they could do their job, they saw how important it was to have knowledge of what they wanted and the confidence to seek it. Both Debbie and Emma described how their past experiences gave them the confidence to seek what suited them in their return to paid employment. Here Emma describes how knowing that her family had survived on one salary for several years gave her the knowledge that they would be OK should they ever need to do so again and the confidence to assert herself at work.

> But again, I went into it feeling like if this doesn't work out it's not the end of the world. We can survive off my husband's salary. And we know we can do that. Before I got work we were all a bit worried how that would all work. We lived within our means. We did it and had a small

> holiday. And so when I did go back to work I wasn't... I wasn't scared of saying 'I need to be able to look after the kids if they need me'. *(*Emma)

For others, it was only through having difficult experiences after they returned that they became aware of what they really wanted and gained the confidence to pursue it. Many of the participants talked about how, with hindsight, they wished they had made different decisions. Anna described the trial and error involved in the process:

> And looking back I regret that, because if I knew what I know now I would've carved out a lesser role. (Anna)

> ... and I quickly said 'James…'– and it was great to finally realise what I could do – 'I can't come back and be full-time for you, I need my two days off. At 5 o'clock I want to be able to switch off and not worry about work. So if you can carve me out a role that utilises my experience but without the pressure of travelling and something I can switch off from then I'm interested.' (Anna)

For some women, the period of 'not knowing' seemed to correspond with the 'baby bubble' experience. This is a dream-like state in which you are not thinking or planning anything outside of yourself and your baby. Irene recounted how, when she was asked about her plans for returning to work, she could only reply 'I don't know'.

> I've just had this baby. We are in London. Everyone else is in Ireland... I want to go home now; this might be nice. And so the career was the last thing on my mind... But you're trying to keep the family together and you just don't know, you don't have a road map. (Irene)

For some of the women their immersion into their mother role – and into the baby bubble – meant the complete avoidance of contemplating their future self.

> And so looking back it felt like a void then. I don't know what [pause] and now where I am, now I get it – it makes sense to me. I know who I am, what I can or can't do. But at the time I didn't know. (Anna)

For several women, the time they spent on their career break appears to have been a step away from reality and their transition into paid employment has, as a result, been a transition into reality. While Debbie described a great sense of clarity around her future self prior to her return to work, she also conveyed a sense of emerging from a dreamlike state, or 'baby bubble' when re-entering the workforce.

> ...now it's a struggle, because now it's... this is it, this is life. This is forever. (Debbie)

So there is both knowing 'I can do this' and there is knowing 'I want to do this'. Emma put aside her maternity pay as she didn't know whether she would be ready to return to work at the end of her maternity leave. Anna also described how her lack of knowledge impacted on her decision making, which was itself rooted in her not knowing herself as she is now: a mother.

> That's very much me. Very much me since having a child. I don't know how I'm going to feel, what I'm going to want until I get there. I haven't had this plan. So maybe that… I just haven't been able to… I'm sure I'll get to the stage where I'll be able to have a plan. (Emma)

Debbie, in contrast to Anna, planned her return with a clear sense of self knowledge having initially 'tried taking on little jobs to see what suited me'. After deciding upon a career path, Debbie had clarity around what she wanted not only in terms of her career choice, but also the type of school she wanted to teach in.

> So like when I came in for interview... I only applied to two places, and I only got one interview and I got it. And I think that's because of my life experience. But I chose it. And I looked around, and I looked for pictures of kids in the headteacher's office and I looked for the staff... um... I didn't want a big place; I wanted a family kinda ethos... (Debbie)

Debbie's 'knowing' contrasts with the other participants' experiences. Irene, in comparing her experience to that of a close friend, reflects on how knowing what you want at the outset [of becoming a mother] enables women to successfully pursue their career.

> ... but she was very focused on getting back to work. She had a nanny sorted out after three months, she had her gym instructor coming out to the house at six weeks to get her back in shape and so when she went back into work at six months she was ready to go. But I think she had that in mind all the time. (Irene)

I had a sense that Irene felt badly let down by those who were in a position of knowing, but who failed to impart their knowledge to her. She felt this particularly acutely with regard to her mother. Irene's experience has been one of battles and endurance and she lamented that she didn't have the knowledge she gained through her experience when she was a young woman. Moreover, Irene wanted to ensure that her own daughters would be better prepared.

> Well now I'm a lot more cynical than I was. I'm... I feel a massive sense of injustice. I think that... I think women... I don't know how you do it... but I think women need a lot more education earlier. Like my daughter, I'm hoping that I can give her more guidance much earlier. (Irene)

For many women, 'knowing' was strongly connected to a desire to avoid wasting time (and money). This arose from a feeling that a lot of time had already passed, and that they could not afford to lose any more. This lent a sense of great importance to self-knowledge about what one is capable of and what one wants.

> I tried working in nurseries and that, because I didn't want to do a degree and waste all that time and money and then not be able to use it. *(*Debbie)

> ... and I don't want to waste my time. And I'm very conscious of that and like you know... if I'm thinking about going back into education and I'm thinking about September and it's like is it already too late you know? So I'm starting to think. (Rose)

Alongside a sense of urgency, Rose felt a desire to go out into the world and get to know herself and what she is capable of.

> I don't feel I know what I can do. I've never got to the point where I feel like I can't do that. I'd like to know what I can do… I'd like to know my limits. (Rose)

5.4.5 Knowing comes from doing

> That's what I need to re-evaluate because I don't think you really know... I don't think you understand the process you've been through as an individual and the additional skillset you have had so you must go back into work and it's like 'Oh, I can do that!', and it's 'I remember!' and it's 'Yes! yes!!' (Rose)

Rose quickly came to realise that she had underestimated herself, her capabilities, and that it wasn't until she 'dipped my toe in', that she was able to get a more realistic feel for her capabilities.

Anna echoes Rose's experience of coming to know herself through action. In the quote below her sense of relief and joy at achieving this knowledge is palpable.

> And so looking back it felt like a void then. I don't know what... and now where I am, now I get it – it makes sense to me, I know who I am. What I can or can't do. But at the time I didn't know. (Anna)

And while, like all the participants, Debbie felt a temporary loss of confidence when she had her children, she connects this to the overwhelming sense of responsibility she felt on becoming a parent rather than a drop in confidence in her professional abilities.

Debbie attributes her greater knowledge of her professional self to having had a previous career. As a result she was very clear about what she was looking for in her first teaching job:

> Because I'm already a mum, and I've had a career before. Like, I knew how important it was to find somewhere that suited me and my family. (Debbie)

Like Debbie, Kate had a very strong sense of knowing what she wanted to do, and put herself through university, qualifying in her chosen profession while raising a young

family. Similar to Debbie, Kate attributes her sense of knowing in relation to her professional self, to experience of getting out there and doing.

> Even before that, I worked for a nursing agent before I went into nursing, and I knew I loved it. That's why I took it to the next level. So I knew what I was getting myself into. I wasn't like some of the other girls who were leaving college and they didn't have a clue. A lot of them dropped out. So I kind of had a taster. Well, I worked in the care agency and I got to work in a lot of different care homes where I'd work with the family, support worker... and it was quite good for me. Got to try lots of different places of work. It was ideal, and led me to go to university. (Kate)

5.5. 'You gotta climb this ladder and then leap': The ease of transition

The participants discussed a range of internal and external factors that served to support or hinder their return to work. While there were significant variations in the levels of support the women received and, consequently, greater or lesser degrees of challenge in returning to work, there was also considerable commonality around the emotional impact, the barriers and the enablers that emerged throughout the process.

5.5.1 Enablers

There were some universal experiences. With the exception of Debbie, all of the participants found their jobs through personal and professional networks. Flexible working, personal and professional networks, supportive family – particularly in relation to grandparents' willingness to provide childcare – and keeping a hand in or dipping a toe in were all commonly cited as significant enablers.

5.5.1.1 Flexible working

All of the participants cited the importance of flexible working in enabling their return to work. Five of the seven participants were or had experience of working from home. The experience of flexible working was predominantly expressed in positive terms, particularly in contrast to the prospect of the alternative of returning to a full-time and office-based position. Working flexibly was also seen as a means by which the participants could hold onto their role as a SAHM. While this was often expressed in positive terms by participants,

it also appeared to be a source of tension. For many, the utopia of flexible working was less of a 'having it all' and more of a 'doing it all' experience.

> So I was coming in at eight thirty [pm], charging up the phone and the computer. Like... my daughter is already in bed and my son is hanging around waiting for me to do the story and everything, but he's supposed to be in bed because he's under four. And so I'm pretty much... and so I'm pretty much like... the days that I'm working from home I'm not available to them because I'm needing to log on and I'm trying to do all of that but I don't want to do a full day because I've already been away for three days. It kinda seems like this isn't working either way. (Irene)

Rose also spoke of the difficulties she encountered establishing boundaries when working from home.

> I think it would have been different because I think it would have been more defined boundaries and there wouldn't be 'Well, you're here – couldn't you just...?' Whereas if you're out of the house they just have to deal with it, but if you're here and somebody says 'Well just…' and 'Well actually no, I'm... uhm... I've got to answer these emails', or do something else work-related. *(*Rose)

In addition, Rose and Emma described the loneliness they experienced working from home. While Emma's return to work brought with it a relief from the all-consuming domestic world of being a SAHM, she described missing the social aspect of working in an office.

> Being a virtual PA has been quite lonely sometimes. I've got the dog, Nanny, and she comes up and lays by my feet, but I do kind of miss that going into the office and seeing other people, having a little chat and stuff. (Emma)

While flexible working from home was not a universally positive experience, being able to work reduced hours was. The prospect of returning full-time to an office-based job seemed overwhelmingly challenging for some.

> And so I think, again, I feel incredibly lucky cause it's quite a transition, so if I'd had to go straight from being at home to smash [spoken with emphasis]... into an office all day, that would have been a much harder experience. (Libby)

The decision to seek flexible work is not simply derived from a desire to seek a gentle re-engagement with one's careers, but also to gently transition away from their child(ren).

5.5.1.2 Network

Irene and Anna actively used their networks to seek out opportunities. Irene, who struck me as remarkably tenacious in her efforts to return to work, described how she '... soldiered on for a few more months and then in the summer I got in touch with some recruitment people that I used to work with.'

For others, such as Libby and Emma, opportunities seemed to arise serendipitously.

> A lady I had worked for as a PA for before – she was having lunch with a friend who had been through three PAs in a row who had either walked out or been sacked, and she just wanted somebody part time and working from home with the odd trip to London. And so, out of the blue I was asked if I'd be interested. (Emma)

> And then amazingly a friend phoned up and asked me [pause]. He said he was an investor in this software company. They needed an accountant and would I like to do it? So I started… (Libby)

5.5.1.3 Family

When asked directly 'What has supported you in your return to work?' the participants seemed to struggle to respond. The two single mums, Kate and Anna, cited grandparents as a source of crucial practical childcare support. Initially, Kate responded to my question by answering 'None. I just do the best I can'. But after some probing, she went on to acknowledge the support she had received from her parents.

> I guess if I didn't have the support of my parents I would have struggled emotionally and financially. They've been amazing. But yeah they're probably my only support. (Kate)

Exploring this theme further, Kate described the kind of support she would find helpful. It seemed that she thought of 'support' in very practical terms, as relating specifically to career guidance and training opportunities. This was echoed by Rose, Libby and Irene who all voiced suggestions and ideas on the type of practical guidance and support they considered would be of value to women returners (see page 91).

5.5.1.4 Internal resources: Endurance, tenacity, resilience, courage

In the absence of external support, the women described drawing upon their internal resources to support them in their transition to work. I was struck by the tenacity and endurance they displayed.

Kate described how difficult she found returning to work:

> It was very tough. But it was a case of 'I'll just get through it, and just keep going one day at a time'. But that's difficult sometimes. (Kate)

> And then I get strength and, well, I'll tell myself 'I've just got to carry on and not be seen to lose face in front of the children'. I've got to be seen to be strong. (Kate)

Irene often used battleground metaphors to describe her experience:

> And then I thought 'I don't care. I'll stick at it and break through this for a few months and get my QTS [qualified teacher status] and then I can get a full teaching post.' I just had the attitude that I had to push through it. Just put my helmet on and keep going. (Irene)

Later Irene told me about her experience of commuting to London for a recruitment job and how she 'soldiered on for another few months' of what was an extremely gruelling period during which she endured seventeen-hour days.

This absence of support proved a stark contrast with the expectations the women had had about the type of support they believed would be of value.

Having experienced her return to work as an extended battle, Irene described how a military style boot camp could help women build the stamina and strength they needed when returning to work.

> … and I thought actually, you know if for six weeks a military person comes in and puts you through your paces to get physically fit you… have to team-build on things where they push you to your limits so you've done that – so when you go back to work you're like 'Actually this is easy compared to what I've been doing for the last six weeks' [laughs] and you also have to get a childminder for those six weeks and manage your childcare. [pause] Because it's the first six weeks back into a job that are the most important, but it's actually the part that you're most likely to fail at because you're like 'Oh my suits are out of date… no one wears a suit anymore... no one eats lunch... and I definitely have to do my nails…' [laughter]. (Irene)

Rose suggested something along the lines of a work experience scheme that could negate the need for having to blindly 'Climb this ladder and leap'.

> I've got it! I think you just need an immersion program. Some sort of… there needs to be something almost like an internship. (Rose)

5.5.1.5 Dipping a toe in

While none of the women directly attributed their finding their current jobs to 'keeping a hand in' or 'dipping a toe in', there was a belief that doing so had helped them in their transition, particularly with regards to retaining or boosting their self-confidence.

> So, looking back now I think... all those little jobs I'd done... you know...just small things like organising a fundraiser for the church repairs [pause] or doing the books for my brother... I think just keeping my hand in like that definitely made it easier. (Libby)

Many of the participants diminished their own and other women's' efforts to maintain an element of their working selves. This was conveyed in comments such as 'Noddy jobs' (Libby) and 'not what I call a proper job' (Irene). Rose, however, placed a degree of value on the non-domestic/childcare roles she had had during her career break, although she was frustrated by the challenges of translating those experiences into something that could be seen as of value by recruiters and potential employers.

> I think… like I said, having been a recruiter I know that employers are looking for certain skills and competencies. And I know that over the years spent at home I've gained some great skills but it's how do I put that down in writing? I feel that the world – having come from the world of recruitment – the whole process of recruitment has changed and you know a lot of it they feed CVs in... into a computer and they're looking for certain qualifications. Your CV is not even read, or you know, you're just put into a big machine. Then unless it, like, picks up keywords and unless you've got those you won't be selected. (Rose)

Unfortunately, Irene's experience of investing time and money (through paying for childcare) into working on a voluntary basis with the expectation that it would lead to paid employment was not a positive one, as it ended in frustration and disappointment.

> I was told that if you can get two to three months volunteering somewhere you get to know people and something comes up you know. So I was a trustee with them - that was on the advice of my career coach to do that. And actually I had been to two interviews and came close to getting the role but the reason why I didn't I was told was the lack of charity experience. So I did that and then an administrator jobs come up for £8 an hour and so I submitted an application for that and I had a lot of the necessary skills and stuff… good quality background and then they kind of…I didn't even get to interview. So then I thought this…. they said that I wasn't …that it was a military area, and that I wasn't a good fit for the military background etc so I just thought 'whatever', and so I then resigned from that I didn't give them any reason. I just thought 'I'm not investing anymore time with that charity '.

> And it was really difficult to get childcare for the kids and it cost me a lot of money, uh…and time.

5.5.2 Timing and pace

In addition and related to the desire to seek a gentle transition were concerns around the timing and pace of the return. Anna came to the conclusion that, for the foreseeable future, she would step back from her career and look to re-engage with it fully at a later stage.

> My life is my child. I earn a living and I want to pick the career up slowly. [pause] Uhm... and now I'm trying to hold myself back from thinking 'I can just go back out and carry on doing what I did before', but thinking, 'No, no, no, I can't quite do that yet'. I have to take things a bit slowly still. (Anna)

Kate described how her (failed) attempt to embark on a nursing career less than three months after the birth of her youngest child was, in hindsight premature. At the time Kate felt a sense of urgency around securing a nursing job as she feared leaving it too late.

> I did think it was too soon. It was probably too soon, but it was something obviously that I felt I had to do, that I had to get back into nursing. Yeah. (Kate)

Kate's failed attempt to return to work carried a heavy penalty: a total loss of belief in her future self as a specialist nurse.

The decisions that the participants faced over when they would return to work, how many hours they would work and the level of seniority they would return to seemed to be fraught with difficulties. Attempts to re-engage at a level commensurate with their experience, skills and qualifications carried a risk of burnout and, ultimately failure. For Anna and Irene, this translated to aborted attempts to return.

The tension between knowing when was the right time to leave their child(ren) and when would be too late to return to work was evidenced in the ways in which the women agonised over these decisions. Many of the women experienced a sense of urgency at the point they decided to return to work. Kate's urgency was fuelled by concerns that her peers

were progressing with their careers and she would be left behind. Anna was concerned about leaving it too late, in part out of a fear that she would be unable to catch up with the technological changes:

> I felt anxiety about being out for too long and them not wanting me. Or getting behind because the technology world moves so fast. (Anna)

Rose, whose 14-year career break was the longest of all the participants, captured the tension she felt between the desire to gently manage her children's – and husband's – experience of losing her and the urgency with which she wanted to return, stating 'I don't have time to therapy them'.

> But I do feel that now it's becoming almost limiting for him to have me around all the time. My role now has to be to disengage and take care of myself so it's not even just for me it's... it's for the family. [pause] And I don't want to… want to waste my time. And I'm very conscious of that, and like you know... if I'm thinking about going back into education and I'm thinking about September and it's like 'Is it already too late?' you know. So I'm starting to think. (Rose)

It was with a real sense of outrage and horror that Irene reported her husband's suggestion that she should consider going back into recruitment several years after she had made two attempts to do so.

> But I'm still able to bring up the kids because you know my husband is like all of a sudden saying well maybe I should go back into recruitment and you know, I was like... 'Too late. Like, it's too late! You can't throw me back into the corporate world now! I'd be like a donkey working for nothing!' (Irene)

Listening to Irene, thoughts of being 'thrown to the lions' came to mind. And Irene was not alone in her use of evocative language. As mentioned previously, Libby talked of her horror at the prospect of going 'straight from being at home to smash, into an office all day'. Rose spoke of 'extracting' herself from her family, which I instantly associated with a painful tooth extraction:

> It's ironic. You've done the job well, you've invested your time and energy – and so the separation is almost more painful for everybody. That process of extraction is difficult… (Rose)

Later in her interview, Rose also described the guilt, difficulty and pain she experienced as a result of extracting herself from her role as SAHM.

> Yes I think it's very difficult in the modern day as a woman if you want – if you're the sort of person that likes to do whatever you do well. It's really difficult if you're a good mum to extract yourself from that. You know, you have all the guilt with that as well. (Rose)

Rose described her desire to carefully manage her withdrawal so as to limit any damage that might occur during the process.

> You know, I don't want to sabotage one thing to get another and then be... and then be regretting it. So I would like to have it all [laughing]. (Rose)

After many attempts to return to her past careers as a teacher and a recruiter, Irene appeared to adjust to the idea that her transition would entail a slowing down and she reoriented herself towards a longer term perspective as she contemplated requalifying as a teacher.

> I only work as a teaching assistant. The money is not great but I'm thinking maybe I'll get my QTS and slowly start to build up. My ideal now is not to... actually I kind of thought now I'm going to look more towards the long term, and as the children are getting older I'm getting that sense of them moving a little bit. And so it... and so the penny is beginning to drop a little bit. That this isn't forever. (Irene)

This was echoed by Anna, who like Irene, had experienced some failed attempts to re-engage in her career and decided to take a lesser role and slow things down for the foreseeable future.

Deciding when to return to work seemed highly problematic due to how difficult it was for the women to imagine how they would feel when the opportunity arose. As mentioned above, Emma set aside her maternity pay because she was unsure how she would feel

about returning to work at the end of her maternity leave. When her maternity leave came to an end Emma felt conflicted.

> But I enjoyed the work that I was doing before, so equally going back full-time – and there wasn't a part-time option there – and well, they wanted me to go back and that was a really hard decision to make which is why it took me until the last minute to make it. You just don't know how you gonna feel about a baby until you have a baby. You've got no idea what it feels like to be a mum. Just to have that connection, and to have that responsibility as well. And all of a sudden... well how could I just leave my little baby and… and work five days a week? (Emma)

In this excerpt there are parallels with other participants' experiences such as Anna's sense that she would not know how she would feel until she got there, Irene's plea that 'you can't throw me back into…' and Kate's misjudging the timing of her attempted return to nursing.

The participants often expressed a sense that they knew when the 'time was right' to return to work. This corresponded with an absence – or at least diminished presence – of conflicting feelings. After Kate's failed attempt to return to her nursing career she retreated to the home for nearly two years, until she came to a point at which 'I just knew I needed to do something…' Similarly, Libby described arriving at a point at which she knew that by the end of the summer she had to get a job.

5.5.3 Easing the transition for others

Rose likened her transition to paid employment to withdrawing the breast. 'So you're trying to factor in other things to help support them through their withdrawal as well. It's like a weaning process. Well, it is a weaning process.' Rose was mindful of how she 'extracted' herself so as not to undo any of the good work she had done in bringing her children up thus far.

> You know I don't want to just extract myself. You know I would be… in a position where I think I've done the very best I can from their position and been able to develop myself without being… what's the word… unnecessarily clumsy… and bullish… and selfish about it. (Rose).

Kate was also concerned about the timing of any potential return to her nursing career. She questioned whether the years she had spent studying had negatively impacted her oldest child, who had behavioural issues.

> I guess it's [pause]… you know if I want to retrain, when do I retrain – what's the best time? I don't want to effect – you know if Elsie [youngest daughter] is at school – I don't want to affect anything to do with her school. You know it takes a lot of time if I decide to do any retraining, the time to study and put in for these exams that you have to... [pause]. So I just don't want to have any negative effect on the younger girls. So I worry that I had an effect on Charlie [eldest daughter] 'cause of the behaviour, struggles... as a result of me having spent so much time studying. And when she was very young, I don't know whether that... that might repeat with the others if I'm not around or available to them after school. So I worried that, you know, if I was to retrain, just that study time away from the children – whether that would have a negative effect on them. (Kate)

5.5.4 Impact of partner: 'You're either with me or against me'

The women expressed disappointment and frustration at their partners' failure to provide the support they needed. While some of the women described how their husbands and partners 'allowed' them to decide when they would return to work, none of them said that their partners had actively supported them in their return.

In an effort to make sense of this, the women seemed to perceive their partners' lack of support as a benign manifestation of an ignorance underpinned by cultural norms and values.

While Irene stated that for her husband 'The job would come first', she stopped short of expressing a belief that he is culpable.

> Actually I don't think men set out to be difficult. I just think they're not aware of it. They don't get it. And so you kind of have to fight – and so that's what I was wanting. I just wanted somebody else to say... like to make the social norm that women go back to work and the men are supposed to support them in making that transition back, and that they should support them and it benefits everyone… (Irene)

Irene seemed to express a desire to have her battle taken out of her hands – out of her home – and into the public arena so she would not be left to fight alone. She later expanded on this, suggesting that one possible means of influencing a cultural shift in attitudes might be through involving men in support groups that are presently the preserve of mums and babies such as local groups of the National Childbirth Trust. In this way, men could become exposed to the experiences of other women. Irene also reflected upon what would have been helpful to her.

> ... a lot more support from my husband so to have that conversation beforehand... and so it's to be a bit more prepared if you can. (Irene)

Like Irene, Kate attributed ignorance to her partner's inability to support her, which had dire consequences for their relationship.

> Our relationship broke down quite early on after Elsie. He had no experience of babies, and I guess he didn't know what to do to help. And he just didn't support me, which created a lot of tension between us. (Kate)

Anna spoke of her disappointment at the lack of emotional support she received from her partner. She was critical and even contemptuous of his failure to recognise the magnitude of the experience of becoming a mother.

> I'm sure he felt he was [supportive]. You know everyone's got different ways of doing it. You know he was very practical, and I remember him saying 'There are different ways of showing it'. (Anna)

Rose described how she found that the absence of any active support from her husband when she voiced her wish to return to work led her to feel:

> ... it's almost easier for you to say 'Oh I'll just give it another year' or 'I'll just take that little job' or, you know… but there's [pause]... that can build contempt almost. (Rose)

5.5.5 Barriers

The participants encountered several barriers, which I have clustered into two sub-themes the first being internal and the second external barriers. Internal barriers, many of which I have already mentioned included feelings of conflict, guilt, low self-confidence and self-doubt.

The external barriers women principally related to recruitment and included age discrimination, childcare costs and the lack of flexible working.

5.5.5.1 Internal barriers

Rose and Anna described the forces that either hindered or helped their transition away from being a SAHM and towards a re-engagement with their professional lives. Rose described how her family's resistance to letting her go was mirrored by her own fear of letting go and that this resulted in the maintenance of the status quo.

> And I know that they're capable of freeing me from my role in the family but I... but I think they're all a bit selfish. They actually enjoy it and there's a safety around being needed and so you just start sabotaging yourself and making up excuses. (Rose)

Anna felt her job needed to be sufficiently attractive in order to pull her away from her role as a SAHM.

> I did feel really conflicted, and I had to do that really slowly... uhm [crying]... I felt like it was my job to be a mum. I felt really conflicted about 'This is my baby so why would I leave her in a nursery?' And I remember what it was then, it was – I don't really want to leave my daughter, but I kinda want to go back to work, so the lure for work means it has to be exciting enough for me to leave my daughter. (Anna)

5.5.5.1.1 Feelings of guilt

While many of the women touched on the feelings of guilt they had in relation to their children, Rose was the only participant who described guilt as arising directly from her decision to return to work. She expressed a belief that when women have a child with special needs, their feelings of guilt around returning to work are amplified.

> I'm going through the process again with x and y but the complications for me is... you know, if you have a child with any additional needs it's the guilt definitely, it's a big factor and the tangible physical results. (Rose)

And while Rose described feeling guilty, she also expressed her belief that it would be detrimental to her children for her not to 'extract' herself from the home (see pg. 94).

More commonly, feelings of guilt arose after the return to work and related to their being less available for their children, especially when they were ill.

> ... and then I feel awful really, because I'm having to decide between looking after my child or going to work and having my mum come over, when I've always been there for him before. That's the hardest thing really, when they're sick and they really need me. (Kate)

5.5.5.1.2 Recruitment being '...like having a disability'

Many of the participants believed that recruiters, and the widespread use of technology for selecting candidates, were key barriers to their finding work. Irene felt that her career break had put her at a disadvantage.

> ... so it feels like you now have to be overqualified to get an underqualified job because you can't compete at the level that you should be competing at now because you've got some sort of… [pause] This is like having a disability. (Irene)

Several of the women felt the depersonalised nature of the selection process conspired against them as they struggled to put the skills and experiences they had gained during their career break into words.

> Yeah, I think the whole recruitment… because I think... well you… you used to be able to write to a company and the process was completely different. It's almost dehumanized now that you have online recruitment, and the process that's digitised and... and you know you got the algorithms picking up certain things and so the opportunity to do that has gone. And so I think they're

> missing a huge section of society you know because you don't have those words and can't be presented in that way. (Rose)

> I've even seen it [pause] I mean I've got various nephews and nieces who've left university and trying to find jobs and the whole process just seems very difficult these days. It's supposed to be easier because it's all online, but somehow taking the people out of it... And well surely, we all know that when you go for an interview your gut feeling about… your rapport with someone is probably the most important thing. (Libby)

In addition to the barriers presented by the use of technology in the selection process, the participants were aware that the very nature of the language used to describe roles and responsibilities created another barrier. Rose described the negative impact that the language used in the recruitment process had had upon her and she identified it as a potential deterrent, not only for her but also for others too

> So, you know when you get a list of things in an ad in recruitment it can be quite daunting, and you have to interpret the word. Actually that means that and that means that. Just thinking that can be really scary. So women again get put off the thing 'Oh well I must be a bit out of it….' Actually it's exactly the same, it's just about different language. (Rose)

Irene also expressed an awareness of the importance and impact of the language used in recruitment.

> ... so these jobs now I don't even recognise. And I think that is... the language is changed a lot more than you might think… [pause] It is important. (Irene)

In addition, Libby felt that recruiters lacked the experience and maturity necessary to recognise the value that returning mothers might bring to an employer.

> A lot of people that are in recruitment will be between 25 and 40 – no 25 and 35 – the people that are interviewing. They just don't have the life experience. They can't you know... they don't have the training there's no... they're salespeople they're not able to… to do that. (Libby)

Several women espoused a belief that both employers and 'the country' as a whole are losing out as a result of the barriers that women encounter in the recruitment

process. Rose, who placed a high value on the experiences and skills that she gained during her career break, expressed frustration at being unable to translate her abilities into appropriate language that might attract recruiters to her. She went on to lament the waste of talent that results from the struggle that women like herself must go through to find employment. Furthermore, she felt extremely unsupported as she leapt into the unknown.

> You know, I think the country is just losing out so much. I mean there's a shortage of skills and yet there are so many barriers to... to kind of get back into work. There is a whole plethora of people... untapped resource. You know there's nothing like that at the moment you know you go from... you're here... and there's the ladder... and it's not like there's some peeping over the wall. No no no!! There's like, they say 'No no no! you're not allowed to peek over the wall…. you gotta climb this ladder and then leap…' (Rose)

5.6 Loss

The overarching theme of loss was woven throughout all of the participants' stories, and present in all of the superordinate themes. While it is true that with any transition comes loss, I have been particularly struck by the breadth and depth of loss experienced by my participants. Their stories of loss resonated and echoed with my own experience of losses.

So much of the loss the women described may well be part of the transition to motherhood, but their stories highlighted how, by taking an extended career break, those loss(es) seemed to have been amplified and, possibly, multiplied.

When speaking of their professional selves, the women described their loss of confidence, ambition, direction, sense of purpose, career, future professional self, visibility, freedom, capability and validation. They also lamented their loss of financial independence and the corresponding upsetting of the balance of power in their partner relationship.

The participants differed in their apparent willingness to forego or lose their financial independence, sense of purpose and direction, and the visibility and validation they derived from their professional roles, which for many led to a subsequent loss of equality in the home. Irene's experience was characterised by relentless battles to hold on to her career, income and power within the family. Libby, on the other hand, willingly entered

motherhood and did not mention feeling a sense loss during her career break. It was only when she returned to work that she began to feel loss.

The losses that the participants experienced derived from the transition from paid employment to motherhood and with the subsequent career break. In describing their return to paid employment, the women spoke less of their own losses during the transition and tended to focus more on their family's loss of themselves.

They all described how their return to work impacted their partners, children and other family members. The care taken to manage their transition was not simply a reflection of their wish to protect themselves, but, importantly, a desire to protect their loved ones and reduce the impact of any loss that they might feel.

It seemed that, just as the women described losing their sense of identity when they transitioned from their professional lives to stay at home motherhood, they also felt the loss of their SAHM identity when they returned to work. Most notably, Debbie described the difficulty she experienced relinquishing some of the decision making to her husband. While she tried to hold on to that power, she was very aware of the need to relinquish total control to ensure the survival of her marriage.

> Home related decisions have become trickier since I've… Once back to work, because my husband seems to think he has a big say. He hasn't [laughs], but he believes he has… [pause] But you're in a partnership and I think if I'm taking him on and not working with him we will end up splitting up. Because I still want to be in control like I was all those years... for all those years... but I'm not the one doing the footwork so why should I get such a big say? (Debbie)

I wonder if a significant factor underlying much of the relationship conflict that the participants experienced derived from their sense of injustice at the losses they had incurred. This was expressed extremely poignantly by Anna who, when, talking about her partner exclaimed:

> He had lost nothing! (Anna)

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

It is my intention that this study exploring the experiences of professional women's transition from being stay at home mothers (SAHM) to paid employees will inform coaching and counselling practice, particularly for practitioners and employers seeking to support women returners. Expanding on the existing literature relating to the transition to motherhood and subsequent return to work, this study contributes to our understanding of the challenges that women face when returning to work after spending a minimum of two years at home. It should be noted that these challenges are different from those encountered by women who return to work after a relatively short period of time at home. I will outline the key findings from the study below.

When a woman's transition to being a SAHM was unplanned, they experienced significantly greater challenges in their return to paid employment than those who had planned the change. All of the participants contextualised their experience of transitioning from being a SAHM to a paid employee within the broader backdrop of their transition to motherhood and, importantly, their experience of their transition into being a SAHM. Of particular importance were their experiences of undergoing multiple losses during their transition. This may in part have contributed to the majority of participants seeking a return to paid employment that allowed them to retain many, if not all, of their responsibilities as a SAHM, thus minimising any further experiences of painful loss.

Most of the participants described seeking a return to work that would minimise disruption to their partners' and children's lives. Conspicuous by their absence, partners were not cited as providing a source of support to the participants. In fact, the participants described their partners as being, at best, benign, passive bystanders to their transition to paid employment. Partner conflict was cited by many of the women as being a key challenge, and two of the participants experienced a breakdown in their marriages that they attributed to the irreconcilable challenges they faced during their return to paid employment.

While the level of support the participants received in returning to work was minimal, they were all able to describe the type of support they would have liked. A particular emphasis was laid on the importance and utility of careers advice and counselling. The participants

valued having the support of their parents where they could help out with childcare and they also described the importance of their female friendships in providing emotional support. Indeed, personal networks were of crucial importance to the participants, six of whom found work as a direct result of personal networking.

6.2. Key finding one: Multiple transitions

This key finding is the understanding that women's experience of transitioning to motherhood and being a SAHM, as well as their experience of being a SAHM, has a significant impact on the experiences of returning to paid employment.

This has implications for the existing returner coaching interventions that are provided to individuals via employer organisations. It is also significant for coaches and counsellors working with women who are seeking or embarking on a return to work.

The transition to motherhood is well documented, and findings from this study concur with those of others (Stern, 1995; Smith, 1999; Barclay et al, 1997; Moffatt 2018; Raphael-Leff, 1991), in particular the challenges and joys that women experience during their transition to motherhood. Stern and Bruschweiler-Stern (1998) assert that becoming a mother is a time of 'psychological turbulence', which they describe as having three stages: being pregnant, adjusting to motherhood and returning to work. They identify that final stage as being a period during which women seek to integrate their previous pre-pregnancy 'mindset' with their 'new psychological mindset'.

This three-stage transition is mirrored by maternity coaching interventions, which typically occur at three points – prior to maternity leave; during maternity leave and shortly after the return from maternity leave (Liston-Smith, 2011; Cotter, 2015). This typical model of maternity coaching has been found to be of value to women because it offers a space to explore their values, priorities, assumptions and options and gain new perspectives. Studies show that the focus of maternity coaching is principally on the career (Moffett, 2018; Filsinger, 2013; Liston-Smith, 2011). This is unsurprising given the key driver behind the provision of maternity coaching is employee retention.

By contrast, returner coaching provision is commonly offered at the point at which women are actively seeking a return to work. The delivery of coaching and counselling interventions at an earlier stage of the transition from SAHM to paid employee could be highly beneficial. Returner coaching interventions typically focus on concerns such as updating skills,

practicalities around childcare and working arrangements and confidence building (Greer, 2013; Herman, 2015; Rehman, 2010; Clayton, 1996; Swarbrick, 1986).

There are many challenges common to women undergoing the transition back to work following maternity leave and those returning to paid employment following an extended career break. However, the present study's first principal contribution to the literature is encapsulated by the finding that there are key aspects to the experience of re-entering paid employment after a career break that amplify and add to the challenges identified by the maternity coaching literature and that this has implications for the coaching and counselling of returning mothers.

This study seeks to offer some insight into what those difficulties are and draws the conclusion that coaching and counselling interventions would help the management of such difficulties. It has been asserted that the motherhood identity grows stronger as a woman spends more time as a SAHM and she may, therefore, be more vulnerable to difficulties arising from transitional periods (Bean et al, 2016).

Most of the participants' transition to becoming a SAHM was unplanned and unintended. This concurs with studies that indicate that as many as 50% of the women who become SAHMs did so without intending to (Lovejoy & Stone, 2011). Each of the participant's decision to stay at home was made in response to a range of unanticipated constraints, or as a consequence of push factors, as has been found in other studies (Cabrera, 2007; Hewlett & Luce, 2005; Smith, 1999).

Where women had planned their transition to becoming a SAHM, they experienced reduced levels of psychological turbulence such as internal conflict or feelings of loss, guilt and shame. It therefore appears that this planned transition gives women time to begin the process of integrating their new motherhood and SAHM identities. Importantly, it also enables them to plan or at least envision their future selves at a point after their period as a SAHM.

Many returners found the period of 'adjustment' (Stern & Bruswhweiler-Stern, 1998) to be particularly challenging due to their having little or no sense of 'what comes next' (Van Gennep, 1960). This proved to be a marked contrast to the experience of women returning to work following maternity leave. For the latter group, the period of adjustment is experienced with some security of knowing what lies ahead. Consequently, it is essential to

support women during this extended period of ‘not knowing’, to help them to navigate their way through the ‘neutral phase’ (Bridges, 1986) and ‘blurriness’ (Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018) and explore possibilities for their future selves.

While there is a general acceptance across the literature that the transition to motherhood, like all transitions, brings loss (Greenberg et al, 2016; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Medina & Magnuson, 2009; Blum, 2007; Smith, 1999; Millward, 2010), the present study offers an insight into some of the factors that influence the breadth and depth of that loss. It does so by paying close regard to two factors: one, whether the transition to SAHM was planned or intended, and two, the importance of actively acknowledging the sense of loss.

It is a definite possibility that the most profound loss that women experience is that of their professional identity, which, in turn, brings several related losses. Many of the losses the participants described concur with the findings of other studies (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Bean et al, 2016, Vejar et al, 2006). These include the loss of financial independence, direction and purpose, confidence, career, professional relationships, visibility and validation. When a woman’s transition to SAHM is unplanned, they experienced amplified feelings of loss, as described by Anna.

> So my career defined me and made me feel proud about who I was. So to think that I wasn't going to have that... I literally started to think ‘Oh my God, how... what am I going to talk about if I don't have this job and this career and these problems at work and all these things to talk about?’ Even though I wasn't one of these persons that talks about their job all the time. It was like this thing I did. I wasn't sort of ‘Look at me"’ like I was never like that, but ultimately it was still ninety percent of my life.

Additionally, when women have had an extended period of time as a SAHM, they are faced with the prospect of re-experiencing the painful process of ‘identity disintegration’ (Bridges,1986) as they contemplate their return to work. It is understandable that women seek to avoid a repetition of such painful losses by constructing a means of holding on to their ‘at home’ roles and responsibilities while returning to paid employment. In doing, so they retain their SAHM identities while regaining their professional selves.

The participants also described how, having lost so much in their transition to being a SAHM, they sought to recreate some of what they had lost in their new role within the

home. They achieved this by, for example, asserting power and control in relation to childcare and running the household. Their work became the successful raising of their children and, naturally, they expressed anxiety at the prospect of some of that good work being undone when they returned to paid employment. This was a particular concern for women whose children had special needs. It is understandable that the process of letting go and transitioning to paid employment provokes considerable anxiety. By recognising and working with this anxiety, coaches and therapists can help women avoid making decisions that arise from it and that may bring problems for them further down the line.

There are many factors that cause such high numbers of female returners to accept lower-status, lower-paid and often part-time jobs that negatively impact their career trajectories and contribute to a widening pay gap (ONS, 2019). Some of the participants in the study appeared to accept lower status roles because they believed they needed to prove themselves capable and worthy before seeking more senior roles. However, others saw this 'choice' more as a forced acceptance of the insurmountable barriers they faced. This experience was described by Irene, who, having made several attempts at resuming her career, became resigned to working in a lower paid, lower status job.

> ... I'm not going to go into anything now that I'm going to make money at. It's just not possible. And if I want to be an HR director now, I don't know how I could possibly do it. And so I've kind of made peace with it all, and kinda thought 'Right, this is just the way it's happened. There are certain things I should have done, there are certain things my husband should have done...' You know, in hindsight. (Irene)

This 'acceptance' left some women feeling resentment, frustration, anger and led to them experiencing low moods and reduced self-esteem, all of which concurs with findings from other studies (Rubin & Wooten, 2007; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; McGrath et al, 2005). These findings expand on an earlier study by Vejar et al (2006) that explored the experience of four women's transition from career to full time motherhood. Vejar et al (2006) developed a model to understand the experience of the SAHM empirically. It comprises three stages; pre-SAHM, SAHM and post-SAHM. The post-SAHM element of their model was constructed based on future predictions as, at the time of the interviews, all of the participants were fulltime SAHMs. The present study builds upon their findings, confirming their predictions that as women transition from SAHM to post-SAHM status their position on a contentment continuum that ranges between 'positive', 'neutral' and 'negative' (Vejar et al, 2006) is influenced by their experience of being a SAHM.

Furthermore, the present study highlights how women's return to paid employment is inherently connected to their initial experience of transitioning to being a SAHM and all that entails in terms of identity transition: separation, liminality and integration (Van Gennep, 1960). Coaches and therapists can thus explore how women's experience of their transition to SAHM affects their return to employment.

For example, when a woman experiences an unplanned and unexpected transition to being a SAHM, she experiences a profound sense of loss and identity disintegration (Bridges,1986). That experience is highly likely to shape her expectations and beliefs as she returns to paid employment. Coaches and therapists should thus explore how women's expectations, assumptions and beliefs can influence their decisions and ultimate outcomes. Especially as they relate to different types of identity relationship possibilities that include conflict and integration as well as complementary or 'enhanced' identity relationships (Ramarajan, 2014).

While most of the participants described the difficulty they had with making sense of how they might integrate their professional and SAHM identities, those whose SAHM experience had been planned retained a greater sense of professional identity and a 'knowledge' of what lay ahead. This appears to have made the transition back to work and the successful integration of their working mother identity comparatively easy. Conversely, those women whose career break was unplanned and unintended appeared to lose sight of their professional identity almost entirely, experiencing an identity 'disintegration' (Bridges, p.26, 1986). This phenomenon was poignantly put into words by Anna, who said 'And I unravelled in that sense as well – a massive unravelling professionally and personally, to the point where I thought 'Who am I if… my career completely defined me?' (Anna).

Once the participants' careers, which had been so instrumental in defining their identities, were gone, they were left with a void. In an effort to fill the void and live up to their expectations of being a good mother, the women sought to devote themselves to the lives of their children.

Kate's apparent total abandonment of her professional identity when she resumed her SAHM role and responsibilities, never giving her nursing career 'another thought', illustrates the degree to which some women struggle to reconcile their past (professional) selves – 'the me beforehand' as Emma described it – with their SAHM identities. It also

demonstrates the great difficulty that many women (in this study and others) have imagining their future professional selves (Majid, 2017; Hannon, 2015).

The present study has made several findings that suggest the SAHM period of transition is a liminal stage. This concurs with Ibarra's work (Ibarra, 2003) in the field of career transitions and identity. Ibarra (2003) describes two types of career transition: (1) plan and implement when the destination is known, and (2) test and learn when the destination is unknown and concludes that when a career transition falls into the 'plan and implement category' individuals experience a relatively easy transition. It seems to me that, of the participants in the present study, Debbie and Emma, both of whom had a clear sense of their future professional selves, fall into the 'plan and implement' category. Furthermore, I believe women returning to work following maternity leave also fall into this category. This has implications for counselling and coaching interventions whose focus is likely to be on strategies for implementation of the known goal or 'destination'.

However, the majority of the participants fell into the 'test and learn' category: their future was unknown. It is clear that, of the participants in this study, those women who had no future plans had a sense of urgency and a desire to go out into the world and, as Ibarra (2003) describes, 'test and learn' in order to find out what they were capable of. Rose expressed this phenomenon by saying 'I don't feel I know what I can do. I've never got to the point where I feel like I can't do that. I'd like to know what I can do… I'd like to know my limits…' Rose.

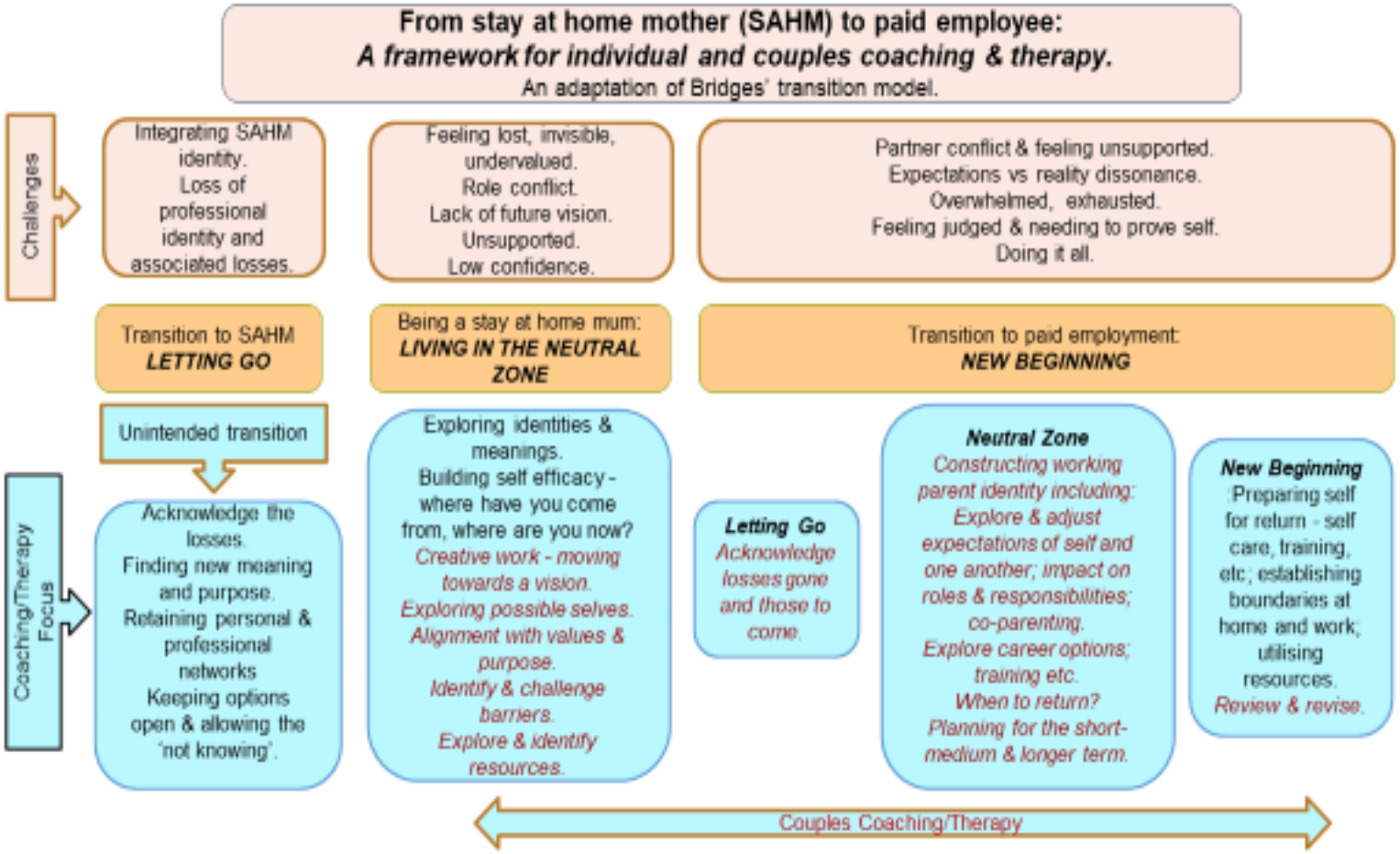
In my view coaches and therapists can usefully support women in generating a 'vision' or 'new beginning' during this liminal phase by helping them to co-construct their new working motherhood identity. To best support women through their transition to paid employment, coaches and therapists working with SAHM clients should seek to explore the experience of transitioning to and living as a SAHM in order to create an awareness of how those experiences influence current expectations of a future return. The work is likely to entail exploring losses, relationship challenges, future aspirations, confidence and self-esteem and feelings of guilt and shame. It should also focus on identifying resources, enabling women to ask for help, exploring the timing of any return to work, considering the impact of the return on others and any associated feelings arising as a result of it, and on identifying and meeting the returner's own needs.

The participants in the study frequently described experiencing a significant discrepancy between their expectations and lived experiences of motherhood and working motherhood. This led to them feeling incapable of meeting the expectations of themselves and others. By exploring the origins and influence of these expectations women might be able to recognise how they contribute to their own internal constraints and to the difficulty of integrating what may appear to be conflicting identities. Furthermore, coaches and therapists can help their clients to gain clarity of the extent to which their assumptions and beliefs around working motherhood are aligned to their core values. Indeed, this is a key piece of work that will aid women in the creation of their 'vision'.

Looking now towards transition theories, Bridges (1986) offers a useful model that is relevant to the context of coaching individuals through organisational change. Bridges identifies the tendency for people (here he refers to 'Americans' but his findings are equally applicable to many other cultures, including British) to rush towards a new beginning without acknowledging the ending, stating that 'Americans often fail to understand that their main difficulties with making new beginnings come not from a difficulty with beginnings per se, but from a difficulty with endings and neutral zones' (Bridges,1986, p.30).

Bridges suggests several useful interventions that organisation transition managers might use when dealing with the typical losses that individuals they are working with are likely to encounter. Significantly, Bridges emphasises the importance of acknowledging and working with loss, rather than rushing towards focusing on new beginnings.

It might be helpful to adapt Bridges' (1986) transition model in order to provide some clarity for women and their therapists or coaches as they seek to identify potential interventions to support women at different stages in their transition. Below is my adaptation of Bridges' (1986) transition model that maps the findings from this study onto the transition framework together with corresponding interventions which therapists and coaches could usefully draw upon to support clients at different stages of their transition.


From stay at home mother (SAHM) to paid employee:
A framework for individual and couples coaching & therapy.
An adaptation of Bridges' transition model.
Challenges
Integrating SAHM identity.
Loss of professional identity and associated losses.
Feeling lost, invisible, undervalued.
Role conflict.
Lack of future vision.
Unsupported.
Low confidence.
Partner conflict & feeling unsupported.
Expectations vs reality dissonance.
Overwhelmed, exhausted.
Feeling judged & needing to prove self.
Doing it all.
Transition to SAHM
LETTING GO
Being a stay at home mum:
LIVING IN THE NEUTRAL ZONE
Transition to paid employment:
NEW BEGINNING
Unintended transition
Coaching/Therapy Focus
Acknowledge the losses.
Finding new meaning and purpose.
Retaining personal & professional networks
Keeping options open & allowing the 'not knowing'.
Exploring identities & meanings.
Building self efficacy - where have you come from, where are you now?
Creative work - moving towards a vision.
Exploring possible selves.
Alignment with values & purpose.
Identify & challenge barriers.
Explore & identify resources.
Letting Go
Acknowledge losses gone and those to come.
Neutral Zone
Constructing working parent identity including:
Explore & adjust expectations of self and one another; impact on roles & responsibilities; co-parenting.
Explore career options; training etc.
When to return?
Planning for the short-medium & longer term.
New Beginning
:Preparing self for return - self care, training, etc; establishing boundaries at home and work; utilising resources.
Review & revise.
Couples Coaching/Therapy

As previously stated, the transition from SAHM to paid employee is experienced within the context of the broader transition from working woman to working mother. I suggest that this broader transition can be understood in terms whereby the transition to motherhood represents a 'letting go' or 'ending phase' of the 'working woman' identity. The period as a SAHM represents the 'neutral zone phase' and, finally, the transition from being a SAHM to a paid employee represents the 'vision' or 'new beginning'. This overarching transition encompasses three transitions, each with its own ending, neutral and new beginning phase.

The emergence from the neutral zone or liminal phase brings with it specific challenges. The timing of women's transition is of particular concern. In line with other studies (Majid, 2017; Biese and Choroszewicz, 2019) several of the participants in the present study described 'not knowing' when the time to return would be right. This made future goal setting and planning impossible as the participants believed they would only know how they would feel in the future when they got there. Furthermore, some women failed in their attempts to return, which they partly attributed to getting the timing wrong.

The participants described arriving at a point at which they knew they needed to return to work. Commonly cited reasons included no longer needing to be fully available to their children, wanting to be a 'good' role model for their children and seeking external validation and a sense of purpose. This finding concurs with Biese and Choroszewicz's (2019) study, which found that women reached a 'tipping point' after which they felt they could no longer continue as they had been.

Women experienced a range of emotions as they approached and entered the final phase: their transition to paid employment. While the transition was always fraught with difficulties, it was also experienced as a profound time in which the participants could '[find] themselves' after a period of being immersed in a 'bubble' and feeling 'lost'. The participants experienced a sense of pride as they transitioned from being 'not just a mum' to being a mum who works. This reflects the low self-esteem the women felt as SAHMs, where they found little validation from either their partners or society as a whole. This experience seems to concur with recent work-family research that suggests that identity conflict and identity enhancement are not inversely correlated but are in fact orthogonal (Ramarajan, 2014).

Looking beyond the work of identity integration, coaches and therapists can explore the barriers, dilemmas and difficulties women experience as they seek to return to paid

employment by supporting them in their decision-making process and generating solutions and strategies to overcome such difficulties. Providing this support will strengthen women's sense of self efficacy and thereby set the groundwork for them to gain a clear vision of where they want to go and, crucially, how they want to get there.

6.3 Key finding two: Present yet absent – the role of the partner

Conspicuous by their absence, none of the participants in the study described their partner as a source of support. However, the importance of the partner relationship in supporting SAHMs in their return to employment is recognised in other studies (Bean et al 2016; Bröckel, 2018). By examining this in greater detail, this study contributes to the limited literature exploring the impact of the partner relationship on women's experience of transitioning from being a SAHM to a paid employee.

Partner conflict represented a key challenge for women as they transitioned to paid employment and in some cases this even resulted in a relationship breakdown. This echoes research that has found that over 25% of women experience their partner as a challenging or very challenging barrier to their transition to paid employment (ECC, 2017). The participants stated that gendered role expectations contributed to their relationship conflict. In cases when a woman's class and culture had a social expectation that mothers remain at home, there were particular difficulties with partner and familial relationships. This phenomenon was common to several different backgrounds, including the upper-middle class Libby, Irene who was born and brought up in Ireland and Kate, whose family considered her career to be secondary to her husband's and that she should focus on her role as mother and homemaker. Coaches and therapists need to be sensitive to cultural factors that may influence and impact upon women's experience of motherhood and working motherhood.

All of these participants (i.e. Libby, Irene and Kate) experienced their return to work as a deviance from the accepted and expected norm. Retaining all of the childcare and household responsibilities contributed to the stress they experienced as they sought to live up to cultural expectations while also trying to expand and reform those cultural norms (Blair-Loy, 2003). For Kate and Irene this stress resulted in the abandonment of their career aspirations and a retreat to the home. This experience aligns with a phenomenon

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) describe as taking place when individuals struggle to exercise practical-evaluative skills and resort instead to drawing upon their '... heavily scripted (or iteration) patterns of interaction in which conventional roles... (e.g., mother, seductress, maiden aunt in the case of women in business careers [Kanter, 1977]) are transposed into the new contexts.' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p.1009). It may be that Libby, (who experienced considerably less turbulence in her transition to paid employment than either Irene or Kate) was better able to utilise what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) call 'practical-evaluative' skills in creating and constructing her 'new beginning' and this resulted in her experiencing less turbulence.

When women's careers were viewed as secondary to their partners', expectations were held that the domestic work and childcare responsibilities would fall largely on the women so that the men could be free to devote their energies to their careers. Thus, as the role of SAHM does require women to take responsibility for almost all of these childcare and household duties, re-negotiating those responsibilities was particularly problematic. Other studies support these findings, showing that despite an increase in male partner involvement in household and childcare tasks, employed women still assume the primary responsibility for these activities (Hochschild, 1997; Medina & Magnuson, 2009).

As found in other studies (Bean et al 2016; Mahoney & Knudson-Martin, 2009), women expressed their need for their partner to make them feel valued and respected in their roles as SAHM. However, many participants described feeling invisible, undervalued and lacking in validation all of which contributed to feelings of low-self-esteem, anger and resentment towards their partners.

Regardless of these feelings, the participants described how they adopted strategies to minimise conflict and potential pain for their partners, including shielding them from the painful truth of the lack of validation and support and the loss they experienced.

Furthermore, the participants sought to minimise any disruption to their partners' and children's lives as they transitioned to paid employment, placing their children's and their partner's needs above their own. This concurs with the findings of Bean et al (2016) and Zimmerman (2000). Many women held high expectations of themselves and their ability to combine paid work with their SAHM responsibilities with little or no support from their partner. Studies have found that some mothers struggle to ask for and accept help, particularly from their partners (Barclay et al,1997), and that this is increasingly problematic

for older mothers (Hannon, 2015) and mothers who held senior professional roles prior to becoming a mother. Asking for help can feel difficult for some women, as doing so brings feelings of guilt, failure or inadequacy in the face of unrealistic expectations of oneself as the idealised working mother (Barclay et al, 1997; Hannon, 2015).

All of the women in this study took responsibility not only for bringing up their children, but also for maintaining and managing the household during their period as a SAHM. At the time of returning to work, participants who had agreed with their partner that they would continue to retain their SAHM role and responsibilities experienced an easier transition to paid employment. However, the majority of the participants found that retaining their SAHM role and responsibilities while attempting to return to paid employment placed a significant strain on themselves and their relationships. Ultimately, as women sought to achieve a return to work that minimised disruption to their partner's and children's lives, such constraints limited their return options. The consequences of these constraints on the participants' return to work (which are also explored in other studies (ECC, 2017; McRae, 2003; McGrath, 2005) included entering work at lower levels, reduced hours and limiting their search to jobs that would be closer to home and that, resultantly, paid lower salaries.

Working with couples could be a useful way to support women (and their partners) during their transition to paid employment, specifically in relation to the following:

1. Providing a safe holding space in which women and their partners can articulate and acknowledge the losses they have experienced as a consequence of the transitions already experienced and the potential losses that the transition to paid employment presents to them individually, as a couple and as a family unit.
2. Assisting couples in exploring their expectations of themselves and one another in their roles as partner, parent, professional, and extended family carer (e.g. grandparents). Where expectations are unrealistic, the coach/therapist can support the couple in working on alternative, realistic expectations.
3. Assisting couples in exploring how they may have internalised historical and contemporary socially constructed messages around intensive mothering and the roles and responsibilities of a SAHM and a partner. Help the couple to see ways in which their roles and responsibilities can be adjusted to balance the needs of all the family members and enable an egalitarian co-parenting dynamic to emerge. This

will increase women's sense of being supported by their partner and is therefore likely to strengthen the couple's relationship.

In conclusion, couple's coaching and therapeutic interventions could be of significant benefit to both women and their partners. Currently, returner and maternity coaching provision is offered to individual women and groups of women, and paternity coaching is also increasing. I have yet to find returner coaching interventions that work with the couple together, though we know from literature related to couples coaching and therapy that this period of transition is often a time of significant relationship turbulence (Bean et al, 2016).

6.4 Key finding three: Suggested coaching interventions that will support women as they transition to their 'New Beginning'

In contrast to studies that assert that women's career ambitions reduce (Jackson & Scharman, 2002; Greer, 2013; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Hakim, 2006) after a career break, the participants in the present study described feeling a real sense of urgency, energy and motivation to challenge themselves after having spent years in the service of others.

> I think actually and I've got these additional skill sets now, actually I don't… I think you see yourself… I see myself now in more of an impact role. I'm not content to be facilitating, you know. I feel like now I want to see… I don't feel I know what I can do. I've never got to the point where I feel like I can't do that I'd like to know what I can do… I'd like to know my limits... at home you are a facilitator and you do have an impact but you have nobody validating that. (Rose)

However, some women, in contrast to Rose, struggled to recognise their past selves as they sought to return to work. They minimised the value of the skills and experience they had gained prior to becoming SAHMs and, furthermore, they diminished or failed to recognise the skills and valuable experiences they had gained during their career break. This seems to reflect society's lack of appreciation and regard for the contribution that SAHMs make, both within the home and their communities (Medina & Magnuson, 2009; Zimmerman, 2000). It is thus little wonder that so many women express feelings of reduced confidence and self-esteem as they transition to paid employment.

Coaches and therapists can help women to reframe their diminished self-perceptions, characterized by Libby's description of the type of positions she felt she was qualified for as

'Noddy jobs', and identify the skills and competencies that they used or acquired during their time as a SAHM. Furthermore, coaches and therapists can help women to re-acquaint themselves with their past professional selves and explore how they might use their skills and experiences to find a role that might not necessarily be in the same industry or function that they had worked in previously. Taken together, these interventions would help to build self-efficacy and have the potential to reduce the pressure that women put themselves under in an effort to 'prove themselves' upon their return to work. Additionally, such interventions could help women prepare their CVs and finesse how they present themselves to recruiters.

Studies have shown that low self-confidence and self-esteem act to hold women back, causing them to seek work that is often lower-status and lower-paid than that which they had previously undertaken (ECC 2017; PwC, 2016; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008). While several studies cite the impact of this low-self-confidence, the present study highlights a further constraint: women's low levels of confidence that either recruiters or employers will appropriately value their pre-career break skills and experience. Given their experiences, and hearing about those of other women seeking a return to paid employment, the participants expressed a strong belief that it would be unrealistic for them to seek a role commensurate with their pre-career break employment. Instead, they believed that they needed to prove themselves worthy before seeking a role matching the complexity and level of seniority of the position they had held before their break.

While I acknowledge the significant barrier that recruiter and employer prejudice and bias presents to women returners, I would also argue there is much work to be done around revealing and challenging women's self-limiting assumptions and beliefs.

6.4.1 Support of friends

Feelings of isolation and loneliness were expressed by five of the seven participants, signifying the importance of encouraging women to seek and forge supportive relationships outside of the home. In a stark contrast with the lack of support provided by the participants' partners, the participants described the importance of having friends they could turn to for support and understanding.

The participants' personal networks not only provide a useful source of emotional support, they proved instrumental in offering a route to paid employment. Six of the seven

participants found work through their personal networks. Again, coaches and therapists can usefully encourage women to connect and nurture their personal and professional networks as a potential route to employment, not only at the point at which they are actively seeking a return, but as an ongoing activity.

6.4.2 Support of coach and therapist

In summary, the participants' experience of stepping back into work fell into three categories:

1. Planned, and returned as planned (Emma and Debbie)
2. Unplanned and turbulent, trial and error return attempts resulting in significant adjustment and plans for a more modest return (Irene, Kate, Anna)
3. A 'dip the toe in' approach, setting the bar low with a view to ramping up later (Libby, Rose)

While the degree of turbulence women experienced during their return to work was significantly greater in group two than in group three, all of the women in the latter two groups returned to jobs of lower pay and status than those in group one. This, as previously noted, reflects findings from other studies (ECC, 2017; PwC, 2016; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008), but an additional insight found in this study is that when women had a planned and intended career break, they returned to paid employment at a level commensurate with their skills and experience.

The participants often spoke of how 'if I knew then what I know now' they might have made different choices. In cases when women have failed to return, or experienced unsatisfactory return attempts, it would be beneficial to explore what knowledge from their experiences they can draw on to shape their vision and strategy.

In contemplating their return to paid employment, the participants sought to resolve several critical questions, largely doing so alone or with the support of their friends. I believe that it would be of immense benefit if women could access professional support from coaches, therapists, couples counsellors, careers counsellors or mentors instead of

working through these problems on their own. Typically, the participants struggled to address questions such as:

- When is the right time to return for me and for my family?
- How capable am I? What kind of job can I expect to get?
- How will I juggle home and work life?
- What are my career options?
- What training do I need? What training is available?

Some women considered the option of combining their SAHM role and responsibilities with working from home as 'ideal', thus confirming the widely held view that the availability of flexible working is an important consideration for women seeking a return to work following a career break (PwC, 2016; Greer, 2013; Jackson & Sharman, 2002; Hirsh & Jackson, 1996; Davey & Davidson, 1994). Given that a key concern for women is the impact of their return to work on their children and partners, working from home was described as a useful strategy for minimising disruption by maintaining a high level of availability.

However, some women found working from home presented significant challenges. The very aspects of working from home that some women found appealing (such as the continued availability to their children) were experienced by others as problematic. In particular, women struggled with establishing and maintaining boundaries and, as a consequence, they experienced role strain due to the conflicting expectations and demands of needing to be available to both work and family.

As discussed above, women commonly spoke of their need to 'prove themselves'. An interesting finding has been that working from home provided a means to tentatively venture into working motherhood, while staying away from the immediate and sometimes critical and judgemental gaze of colleagues and managers. These findings concur with a study exploring the experience of women general practitioners returning into higher education by Edwards et al (2007). They found returners' low self-esteem contributed to an anxiety that they might be discovered for falling short of expectations 'The feeling of being an inadequate fraud who will sooner or later have their real, pathetically inadequate identities revealed is well reported. Called the "imposter syndrome" by Brookfield (1991) it is very common amongst adults returning to education.' (Edwards et al, 2007, p.362)

The confidence and self-esteem of the vast majority of participants very quickly improved following their return to work. Coaches and counsellors should thus identify cases where women seek to work from home or in a lower-status job as a strategy to reduce their anxiety, even though this may limit their career options over the long term.

Findings from this study indicate that for many women, the decision to work reduced hours or in a lesser role is made in the face of what feels like insurmountable barriers to an alternative return choice. Coaches and therapists can assist women – together with their partners – in exploring what those barriers are. They are in a position to identify and challenge potentially false assumptions and beliefs and offer alternative perspectives. As previously discussed, this work is likely to extend to exploring how barriers can be reduced through redefining the roles and responsibilities of the partner.

Given women typically place the needs of their partners and children before their own, it is important to encourage women to identify means of establishing and sustaining self-care strategies. The participants in the study consistently described placing the needs of others before themselves, feeling the need to prove themselves at work and striving to combine work and SAHM responsibilities. Consequently, some of the participants endured periods of total exhaustion, overwhelm and stress. Reflecting on their experience of returning to work, women cited the importance of being physically prepared for a return, emphasising the benefits of building up physical and mental stamina in order to be able to endure the demands of working motherhood. Two participants suggested a 'boot camp' approach to pre-return preparations, which reflected their characterisation of the return to work as 'going into battle'.

Coaches and therapists can help women to think about how they might prepare themselves both physically and mentally for their return to work, putting in place self-care strategies that will support them not only at the point of return, but, importantly, also over the longer-term. Women need to be encouraged to consider their needs to be at least equal to those of their partners and children in order to sustain self-care strategies.

Drawing on agency theory, I would suggest that an important contribution therapists and coaches can offer is to help women and their partners develop practical-evaluative and/or projective agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), whereby they are able to influence, shape and extend the social structures of family and work. Exploring how external constraints and culture shapes female identity is central to this work. I agree with Blair-Loy's argument that,

in the absence of such exploration, there is a likelihood that women will 'practice habitual agency and thereby more or less unreflectively reproduce social structures' (Blair-Loy, 2003 p.182). This research enquiry has been undertaken with an awareness of the important role that employers have in addressing their own bias and culture and the ways in which that acts to limit women's career opportunities. A particular result of this is the limited number of senior and executive level roles available on a part-time basis (Berg et al, 2003; McDonald et al, 2009). Perhaps in some small way, therapists and coaches working with women and their partners through their transition from being a SAHM to paid employee, can help them accelerate the painfully slow cultural shift away from gender-defined family and work cultures towards a new egalitarian cultural model that supports and enables women and men to combine work and family. However, therapists and coaches are not immune from the influence of culture and social systems and it is therefore important for them to reflect on their own assumptions and perceptions of SAHMs and working mothers in order to surface and challenge any negative stereotypes they may hold.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Introduction

This was a study exploring the experience of women's transition from being a stay at home mother to paid employment. This study's key contributions are as follows:

Women's experience of transitioning from stay at home mother (SAHM) to paid employment was described within the broader context of how they came to be a SAHM. Where women had a planned career break they retained a greater sense of professional identity and experienced a comparatively easier integration of their newly formed working mother identity. Where women had an unplanned career break they experienced amplified feelings of loss and described experiencing great difficulty in visioning their future professional selves.

Partners were not cited as a source of support, but rather commonly described as a source of conflict, which was experienced as a significant challenge by many during their transition to work. In an effort to reduce conflict and minimise disruption to their partners' and children's lives, women limited their career choices. Strategies women employed to minimise disruption within the family included the retention of childcare and household responsibilities, which then compounded the stress women experienced during their return as they sought to live up to expectations of working motherhood.

Additional findings which support, expand or deviate from other related studies include the following:

- Women experienced profound and multiple losses.
- Women consistently put the needs of children and partners above their own.
- Women's motivation for returning to work was predominantly related to a need for greater fulfilment, external validation and a desire to gain economic parity at home.
- Women did not express a lack of career aspiration - in fact they were eager to explore their potential.

- Women rarely cited low self-confidence as a barrier to their return, though frequently articulated low confidence in recruiters and employers to view their application favourably.

7.2 Limitations of the current study

An inherent aspect of the methodology I chose for this study is the small, homogeneous, purposively-selected sample size. I am aware that questions are likely to arise as a consequence of the homogeneity of participants and I would assert that future research could usefully capture a broader cultural and socio-economic population.

This study sought to expand upon findings from a much larger study (ECC, 2017) with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the phenomena it investigated. For the purposes of meeting this study's aims, I concur with Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez's declaration that, '... fewer participants examined at a greater depth is always preferable to a broader, shallow and simply descriptive analysis of many individuals' (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriquez, 2011, p.756).

Thus, having adopted IPA as the study's methodology, I am cautious about making any general claims. The idiographic nature of IPA has enabled me to present each person's unique experience of their transition from being a SAHM to a paid employee while simultaneously representing common experiences across the themes presented. In doing so I hope I have captured the nomothetic nature of the experiences shared by all the participants while at the same time acknowledging and highlighting individual participant's experiences and, consequently, revealing any commonalities and divergences. For example, rather than expressing the sense of loss of professional identity experienced by all the other participants, Debbie, having spent much of her career break retraining and carving out her future career path as a teacher, spoke of her strong sense of her professional identity and future self. Such a divergence illustrates the impact that context has on the experience of transitioning back to work. In the preceding example, Debbie's outlying experience can be explained by the context in which she experienced her time as a SAHM. In a marked contrast to the other participants, she held a clear sense of her future self.

My objective in choosing IPA was not to uncover what experiences are like in all settings, but rather the perceptions and understandings of a particular group within their setting. Smith and Osborn (2003) argue that IPA should be thought of in terms of theoretical

generalisability rather than empirical evidence. I have, however, made general claims when it has been possible to draw links between the findings of this IPA study, the extant literature, and my own personal and professional experiences.

7.3 Suggestions for future research

This study sought to explore professional women's lived experience of their transition from being a SAHM to a paid employee. As previously stated, the aim was to gain an in-depth understanding of what it felt like to experience this significant transition, with a view to informing counselling and coaching interventions. While the study has, I believe, revealed aspects of the transition that might be generalisable, there is considerable scope for further research into this topic that could usefully inform the development of future support interventions across the helping professions including coaching, counselling and mentoring.

One contribution this study has made to the literature is to highlight the importance of women's partner relationships on their experience of being a SAHM and their transition to paid employment. Future research could valuably explore the many aspects of this partner relationship in greater depth and explore how couples coaching or therapy might influence women's experiences and expectations of their transition. Given that one of my suggestions arising from this study is to include partners in the coaching and therapy work, a study that explored men's experience of their partners' transition from SAHM to paid employment would be valuable.

A further finding from my study relates to the method I adopted to transcribe the participants' interview recordings. The use of Google Transcribe benefited the research process in two ways; firstly, by deepening my sense of immersion in the data, and secondly, by enhancing my ability to bracket my participants' experiences as I moved from one audio recording to another. I would encourage other researchers to experiment with this approach. Furthermore, I believe it would be useful to pursue research that explores this method of transcribing within the context of conducting qualitative research.

The findings from this study also support the extant literature that suggests older mothers may experience amplified psychological difficulties attributable to the coinciding of a major life stage with a significant life transition. It would be useful to understand where there might be convergence and divergence between older and younger women's experiences of the transition from being a SAHM to a paid employee.

While limited, the provision of returner programmes embracing coaching interventions is growing. Further research into their effectiveness would be beneficial to the future development of coaching, counselling and mentoring interventions.

An important finding from this study has been the extent to which women's experience of their transition from SAHM to paid employment is shaped and influenced by how they came to be a SAHM and their experience of their years spent as a SAHM. A longitudinal study would usefully expand on our understanding of this phenomenon and inform how coaching and therapy interventions might best support women throughout these key transitions.

This study sample was white, broadly middle class and professional. Even within this small homogeneous sample, there was a degree of cultural and socio-economic diversity, which emerged as a significant influencing factor in terms of how women experienced this transition. This specific aspect of women's lived experience could usefully be expanded further by making modifications to the sample profile and exploring where there may be diversity and commonality.

7.4 Summary

This study has found that the experience of transitioning from being a SAHM to a paid employee can be complex, messy and often challenging for women and even strain their partner relationships. With over 230,000 professional women currently on a career break and increasing government and employer interest in improving the return rates of professional women through the provision of returner programmes, this study contributes to our understanding of these phenomena and offers suggestions for coaching and therapy interventions aimed at supporting this population.

Expanding on my previous mixed method study (ECC, 2017), the present study explored the lived experience of seven women who had transitioned to paid employment following a minimum of two years at home caring for their children. The aim was twofold; to gain an in-depth understanding of this real-life phenomena and to explore what the implications of such a new understanding might be for coaching and therapy interventions.

The literature review in chapter two illustrates how little current research relating to professional women returning to paid employment following a career break exists. In particular, relatively little is known of the psychological impact on women, and there is an

absence of literature exploring the actual experience of transitioning back to work following a career break. A notable such absence is research into the impact of the partner relationship on women's experiences of transitioning from being a SAHM to paid employee.

The maternity coaching literature demonstrates how there are parallels between the experiences of women returning to work following a relatively short maternity leave and women returners who've had a longer break from employment, and offers useful pointers for how coaching or therapeutic interventions might be beneficial. The motherhood and maternity coaching literature also illustrates the usefulness of qualitative research methods in exploring women's transition to working motherhood.

I adopted IPA as the chosen method due to its philosophical underpinnings and focus on participants' lived experience. Participants were asked to talk about their experiences as professionals returning to paid employment following their time as SAHMs in semi-structured interviews which were conducted face to face.

Four superordinate themes emerged from the analytic process: (1) 'Is that really me?': Identity loss and transition, (2) 'If I knew then what I know now': Expectations versus reality, (3) 'You gotta climb this ladder and then leap': Ease of transition, and (4) 'He hadn't lost anything': Counting the losses.

This study highlights the ways in which SAHMs found their transition to paid employment challenging. It suggests that when women do not plan for or initially intend to take a break from their careers, they may experience greater levels of difficulty in their transition. The ways in which women come to be on a career break impacts how they see their past, present and future selves. Where women have had a planned and intended career break, they seem to experience a relatively smooth transition to paid employment, which I believe is attributable to their having retained a sense of their professional identity and a vision of their future selves throughout their time spent at home.

This study found that the majority of the participants did not have a planned or intended career break and, consequently, they experienced amplified feelings of identity loss and difficulty imagining a future professional self, capable of successfully combining a fulfilling career with their motherhood identity. Coaching and therapy interventions that recognise and address the divergent experiences of women returners in this regard is therefore important. When women have a clear vision of their future professional selves, the focus of

coaching and therapy work should be based on identifying strategies to achieve that goal. When there is no such clear vision, the work will be quite different, focusing on helping women to create their vision before moving on to identifying strategies to achieve that vision.

This study contributes to our knowledge by highlighting the potential benefits of including women's partners in the provision of coaching and therapy. To my knowledge, partners are not currently involved in any returner coaching provision or returnship programmes. However, as identified in this study, the nature of women's experience of their transition from being a SAHM to a paid employee is inextricably connected to their partner relationships. Unmet expectations of themselves and others, when combined with the losses that remain unacknowledged by themselves, their partners and society, lead to difficult feelings which women often hide from their partners, generating negative consequences for both parties.

7.5 Reflections on the project

It has been nearly fifteen years since I had my youngest child and ten years since I first contemplated how, as a therapist and coach, I might best support women returning to work after a break to care for children. During those past ten years the landscape has changed in many ways: employers are increasingly offering some form of support for women (and, more recently, men) during their transition to parenthood, government and corporate initiatives have emerged to encourage professional women who have taken a career break to return to work and the availability of flexible working has slowly increased at senior levels. However, as I listened to the stories I heard from the seven participants I saw how, in many ways, the landscape appears to remain unchanged. I was reminded of my own difficult experiences when I sought to fulfil my professional ambitions as a young mother more than thirty years ago. I also reflected on my more recent experiences of reconciling choices I had made with regards to my career and parenting goals.

I had not anticipated that I would interview so many women whose time as a stay at home mother was unplanned and unintended. Nor had I anticipated that so many women's experiences of returning to work would be fraught with the depth and breadth of emotional challenges they described. I often found myself deeply moved and surprised by the stories women shared with me. Shaw states that 'Through making ourselves aware of our own feelings about and expectations of the research, we can begin to fully appreciate

the nature of our investigation, its relationship to us personally and professionally, and our relationship as a researcher and experiencer in the world.' (Shaw, 2010, p.235) Just as Moustakas (1990) refers to a 'growing self-awareness' that researchers experience when undertaking qualitative research, looking back I realise that I was also somewhat relieved to find some parallels with my own experiences. Moreover, it struck me during the write up stage that this project has been a vehicle to not only broadcast the voices of others, but also my own.

When experiencing extensive periods of inertia during which I struggled to drag out my papers and laptop I found it helpful to remind myself of my academic supervisor's retelling of Lamott's 'bird by bird' tale (Lamott, 1995). What I found even more helpful at such times was revisiting the transcripts and recordings of my participants. These artefacts served to remind me of why I embarked on what has become a longer-than-anticipated research project!

During the early and middle stages of my writing up, I felt a growing fear (which, at times, became quite overwhelming) that upon completion of this project I would come to find I had little or no contribution of worth to make. Perhaps this is a common experience but I wonder if perhaps these fears have some parallels with both my own and the participants' experiences of their time spent as a SAHM: was it all worthwhile, the choices and sacrifices made? That is rich fodder for future research!

Now, as I enter the final stages of completing this project, I feel it has been a worthwhile endeavour. In some small but meaningful way I believe this study does make a useful contribution to my own and my profession's understanding of how women experience this significant life transition and, importantly, how and when coaching and therapy interventions might be of benefit to this population. A final unexpected outcome has been that by researching others' stories I have come to know my own.

CHAPTER EIGHT: PROFESSIONAL PRODUCTS

This chapter provides an outline of the products arising from and created during my doctoral programme. One product in particular – a commercial research project I was commissioned to design and implement (ECC, 2017) – has contributed significantly to my final project and I would therefore like to offer a detailed outline of it.

8.1 Journal article – *Coaching Today*

The linked article appeared as the main feature in the January 2015 edition of *Coaching Today*. As a result, I received a number of responses from readers, including requests to present the findings to employers and coaching consultancies.

https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/coaching-today/january-2015/

8.2 'Technology Needs Women' conference: Southampton University

Dr Ghaithaa Mania invited me to speak at the 'Technology Needs Women' conference held at Southampton University on 13th March, 2015. The conference was open to the public and streamed live. There was a question and answer session after my presentation, during which I received positive feedback and considerable interest in what I shared, as evidenced by the large number of questions.

8.3 Presentation to the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis Regional Support Group – Portsmouth University, July 2018

Having become a member, and after attending meetings of the then newly-established regional Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis support group at Portsmouth University (part of a global network originating at Birkbeck College, University of London), I was invited to present to this peer group of researchers. I presented and led a discussion on my experience analysing the data from my final doctoral project. It was beneficial to both my peers and myself as I received challenging questions and we enjoyed a lively discussion. Furthermore, I was able to present my research to a broad audience, including peers from a range of professions, which was a great experience and very rewarding.

8.4 What are the attitudes of coachees, line managers and HR leaders towards maternity coaching? Summary report and blog

Upon completion of a mixed methods study (in part completion of this DPsych) exploring the attitudes of coachees, line managers and HR leaders towards maternity coaching, I prepared a summary report of my findings that I disseminated to coaching consultancies and employers within my network. I also wrote and published a blog featuring key findings from the study.

Both employers and coaching consultancies expressed interest in the findings, with one consultancy requesting that I design and implement an independent piece of research for them.

Both the summary report and blog are available here:
www.optimisecoaching.co.uk/freeresourcelibrary/

8.5 Bringing Talent Back to the Workforce: Independent research project

Following the dissemination of my academic research project exploring the attitudes of coachees, line managers and HR leaders towards maternity coaching (Cotter, 2016), I was approached by The Executive Coaching Consultancy to design and implement an additional research project into the expectations and experiences of women returning to work after an extended career break. The consultancy was keen to have me apply rigorous research methods in order to publish the research findings under the banner of 'independent' research.

My final doctoral study was significantly influenced and informed by my experience of designing and implementing this independent research project and the findings that came out of it.

Importantly, this independent research project (ECC, 2017), based on data gathered through an online survey, highlighted areas where more in-depth studies of women's experiences of returning to work could add to our understanding of this significant life transition. Given how integral this independent research project (ECC, 2017) has been to my final doctoral study, I will provide a summary below.

8.5.1 Aims and purpose

This study sought to capture the experiences of aspiring returners (referred to as 'non-returners') and those who had already returned to the workplace (referred to as 'returners'). An increased understanding of these populations can help shape and further develop strategies and interventions to support employers and returners in areas identified as being most in need of attention.

8.5.2 Study design

In order to capture a significant number of participants' experiences, I designed and implemented an online survey, consisting of both quantitative and qualitative questions.

Participants were recruited from public organisations via membership lists. Mumsnet and LinkedIn groups were also used when members had attended employer branded career returner conferences.

The questionnaire consisted of 26 questions, most of which were closed. An 'other' option was offered as an answer to questions relating to the respondents' reasons for leaving/returning to employment and the industrial sector they worked in.

I conducted a descriptive analysis of the quantitative data and a thematic analysis of the qualitative data.

8.5.3 Demographics

Response: A total of 203 respondents completed the survey. With 48% non-returners and 52% returners, the sample was almost evenly divided between participants who had already returned and those who hadn't.

Due to the method of recruiting participants (via social media, websites and direct email invitations), it was not possible to calculate a response rate.

Gender and age split: Over 96% were female and over 70% were aged between 35-48.

Location: Over 90% of the participants were located in the UK, 5% were based in France and a scattering of other participants were located in other European countries and the US.

Education: Just over 50% of the participants' highest level of education/professional qualification was post-graduate level and above. 82% had reached qualifications of graduate level and above.

Industry sector: The participants came from over 15 industry sectors. The highest numbers came from banking (23%) and technology (10%), while 10% came from media, advertising and marketing.

Caring responsibilities: 92% of respondents indicated that they had childcare responsibilities, and 13% said they were responsible for caring for their parent(s). Respondents having caring responsibilities for their partner numbered just over 4%, and 5% had caring responsibilities for 'other'.

Non-returners' stage of return: The great majority of respondents in this cohort were actively seeking employment (64%). 21% of the respondents indicated they were contemplating a return to work, with the remaining 15% having decided to return but not yet applying for work.

Returners' length of career break: There was a good representation across the categories here, with 45% of the respondents indicating that they had had a career break of up to three years, 22% saying they had been out for between three and five years and the remaining 33% having taken a break for over five years.

Length of time back at work: Of the 104 respondents who had returned to work, just over 47% had been working for two or more years. 27% of respondents had been back at work for up to six months with the remaining 26% having been back at work for between one and two years. In hindsight, it would have been interesting to further divide the categories in order to capture data specific to those who had been back at work for 5 or more years.

Change of sector: 37% of the respondents who had returned to work had changed sector following their career break.

Change of function: 60% of respondents who had returned to work were working in a different function from the one they worked in prior to their career break.

8.5.4 Primary reason for leaving employment

The great majority of respondents cited 'care for my children' as the primary reason for leaving employment (73%), with 5% citing 'care for parents' and 7% 'redundancy/job loss'.

Only very small numbers of the participants cited 'personal illness' (2%), 'pursuing personal interests' (3%) and or 'furthering my education' (0.5%) as their primary reason for leaving employment.

Over 9% cited 'other' reasons, which fell into the following themes:

Family related reasons: sometimes precipitated by redundancy or intolerable levels of stress brought on by work-family responsibilities.

Relocation: partner's job change resulting in a family relocation.

Redundancy: just prior to or during maternity leave.

Organisational constraints: unsupportive managers and lack of flexible working opportunities (Part-time working specifically).

8.5.5 Reason for returning to work

The two most commonly cited reasons for returning to work were 'In order to gain a greater sense of fulfilment and wellbeing' (60%) and to 'Fulfil my career ambitions' (53%).

Finance-related reasons were the next most frequently cited, with 'Increase household income' mentioned in 44% of cases and 'Financial necessity' by 39% of respondents.

A significant number of respondents (37%) cited 'Reduced need for me to be at home caring for child(ren)/others' as a reason for returning to work.

Reasons related to a change in the role of spouse/partner were rarely cited, with 'Spouse/Partner reducing working hours to take over some responsibility of caring for child(ren)/others' at 4% and 'Spouse/partner is no longer working due to illness or job loss' at 0.5%.

Respondents citing 'other' reasons for their return to work accounted for 6% of the total. These reasons clustered around two themes:

Independence: financial; and providing a role model to others (colleagues/children).

Psychological benefits: increased confidence; personal and professional growth; and improved home-work balance.

8.5.6 Challenges

8.5.6.1 Perceptions of challenges arising from home/personal constrains for non-returners

Finding alternative care arrangements and overcoming feelings of guilt were the two challenges cited most frequently by respondents (non-returners).

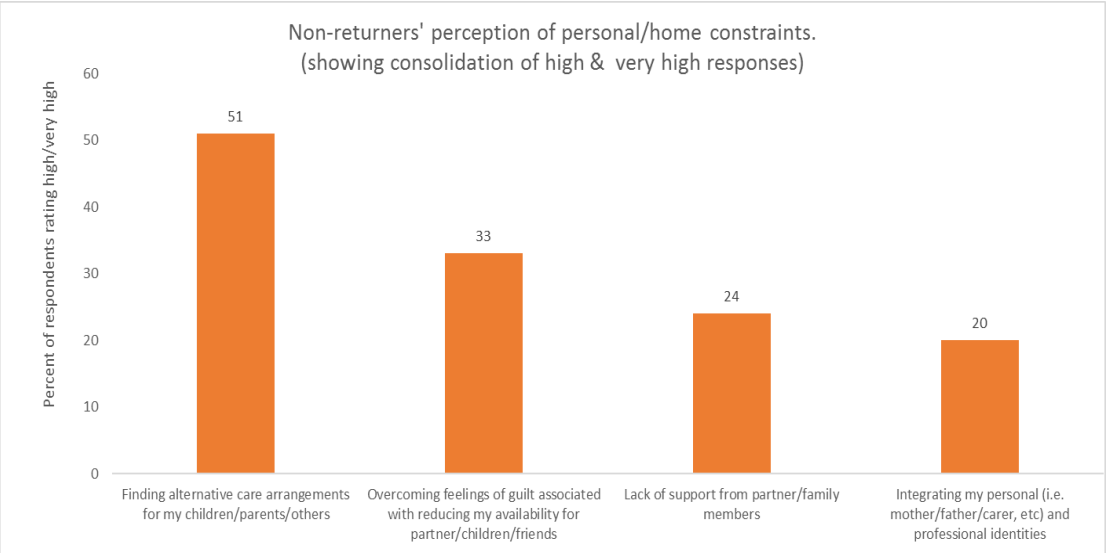


Chart 1.1

Note: *the data shown here is a consolidated extract of responses rated as 'high' and 'very high'.*

8.5.6.2 Perceptions of professional/work related challenges for non-returners

Concerns around a lack of flexible working opportunities and achieving a sustainable work-life balance were the top two challenges to returning cited by non-returns, rated as high/very high by 76% and 66% of the respondents respectively. Networking and deciding on what role and career to pursue were also considered to be highly/very highly challenging by over 60% of respondents.

Over 60% of the respondents who had not yet returned to work described deciding on type of role and career as being highly/very highly challenging. A figure that is perhaps unsurprising when we consider that 60% of the respondents who returned to work returned to a different function from the one they had worked in prior to their career break.

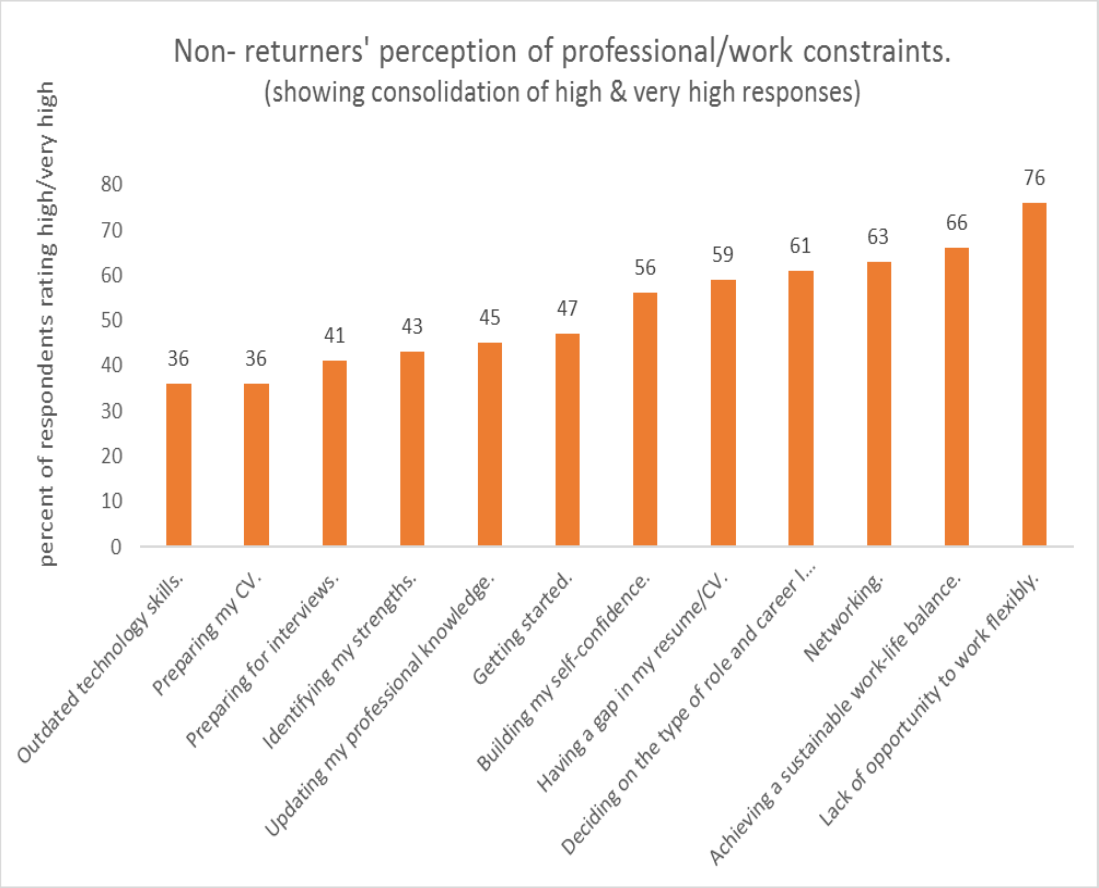


Chart 1.2

Note: *data shown here is a consolidated extract of responses that were rated as 'high' and 'very high'.*

8.5.6.3 Returners' experience of professional/work-related constraints as challenging

The two charts below (1.3 and 1.4) indicate that returners considered achieving a good work-life balance to be the most challenging constraint on their returning to work, with 54% of respondents giving this factor a high/very high challenge rating. Availability to

participate in networking came closely behind with 51% of respondents rating that as being highly or very highly challenging.

At the other end of the spectrum, returners experienced the challenges presented by technological changes, levels of autonomy and being understood and introduced as a returner as relatively low, with 18-22% of respondents rating the degree of challenge as 'not at all/low'.

Chart 1.3

Note: *data shown here is a consolidated extract of responses rated as 'high' and 'very high'.*

Technological changes were experienced as the least challenging constraint by returners, which corresponds with the low level of importance that they attributed to IT/IS support in the success of their return (see chart 1.3 above). Being 'introduced as a returner' and 'insufficient understanding…' were considered by well over 50% of returners to pose a 'not at all' or 'low' level of challenge. (chart 1.4 below)

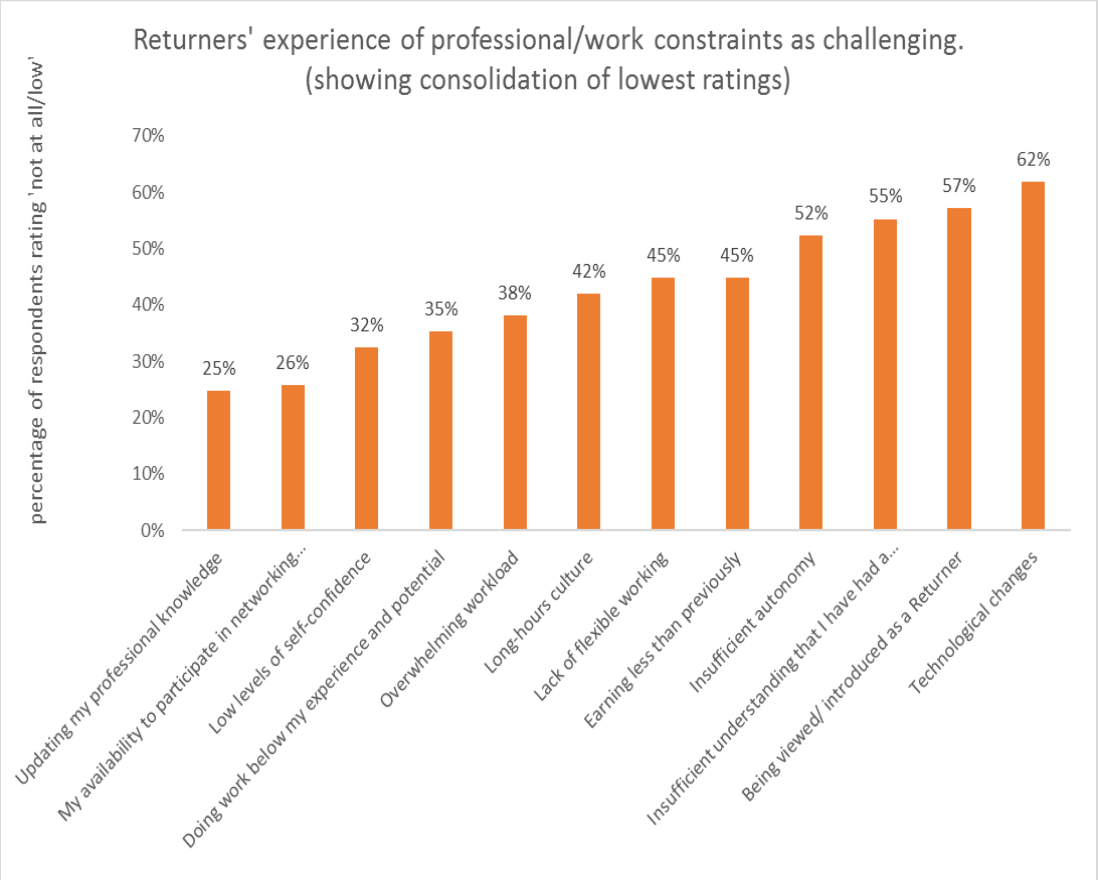


Chart 1.4

Note: *data shown here is a consolidated extract of responses that were rated as 'not at all' and 'low'.*

8.5.6.4 Returners' experience of personal/home constraints as challenging

Low levels of self-confidence was the most commonly-cited challenge, rated as high/very high by 50% of returners. Continuing caring responsibilities, coupled with ongoing feelings of guilt associated with being less available to care for children/family, were also experienced as significant challenges, with over 42% of respondents rating them as 'high/very high'. Finding care arrangements for children/family members continues to be a significant challenge for returners, with 46% of respondents rating that as 'high/very high'.

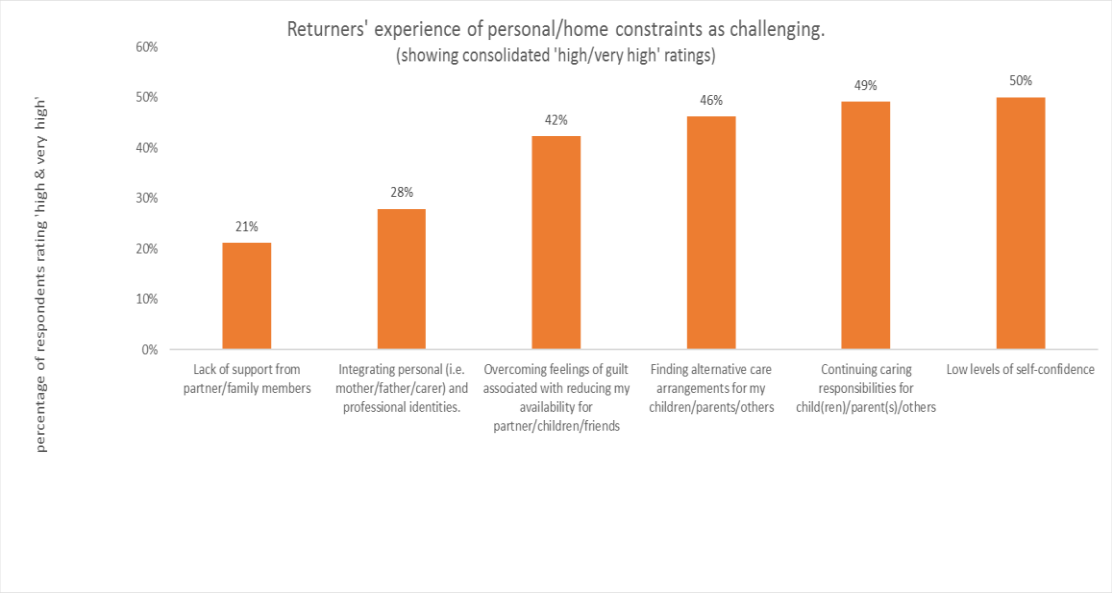


Chart 1.5

Note: *data shown here is a consolidated extract of responses that were rated as 'high' and 'very high'.*

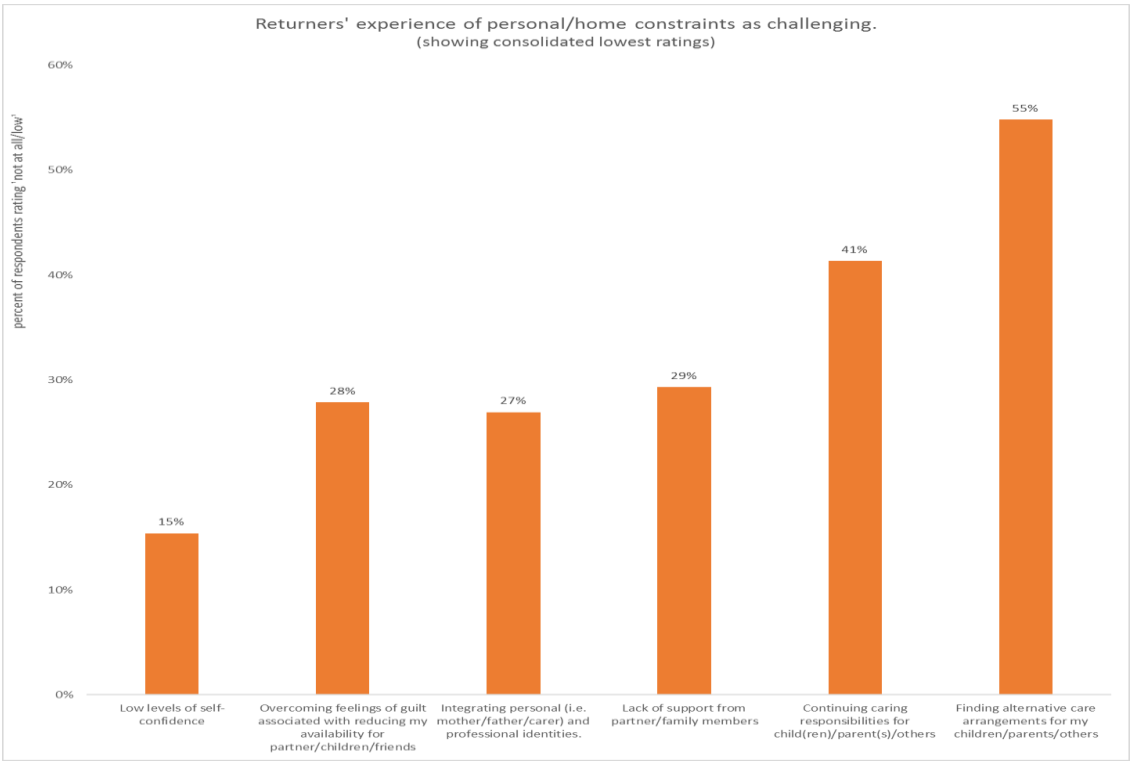


Chart 1.6

Note: *data shown here is a consolidated extract of responses that were rated as 'not at all' and 'low'.*

8.5.7 Comparison of non-returners' expectations and returners' experiences

Overall, it can be argued that returners' experiences of professional/work constraints was more positive than non-returners' expectations. Nevertheless, the challenges were significant, with the top three cited by both cohorts being the lack of flexible working opportunities, achieving work-life balance and networking. Non-returners' perceptions of the lack of opportunity to work flexibly was markedly greater than the returners' experience. This may simply be reflective of the fact the returners had secured employment that offered them a degree of flexibility. Non-returners are perhaps overly concerned by their sense of being out of date with technology, as fewer than 20% of returners experienced this as highly/very highly challenging.

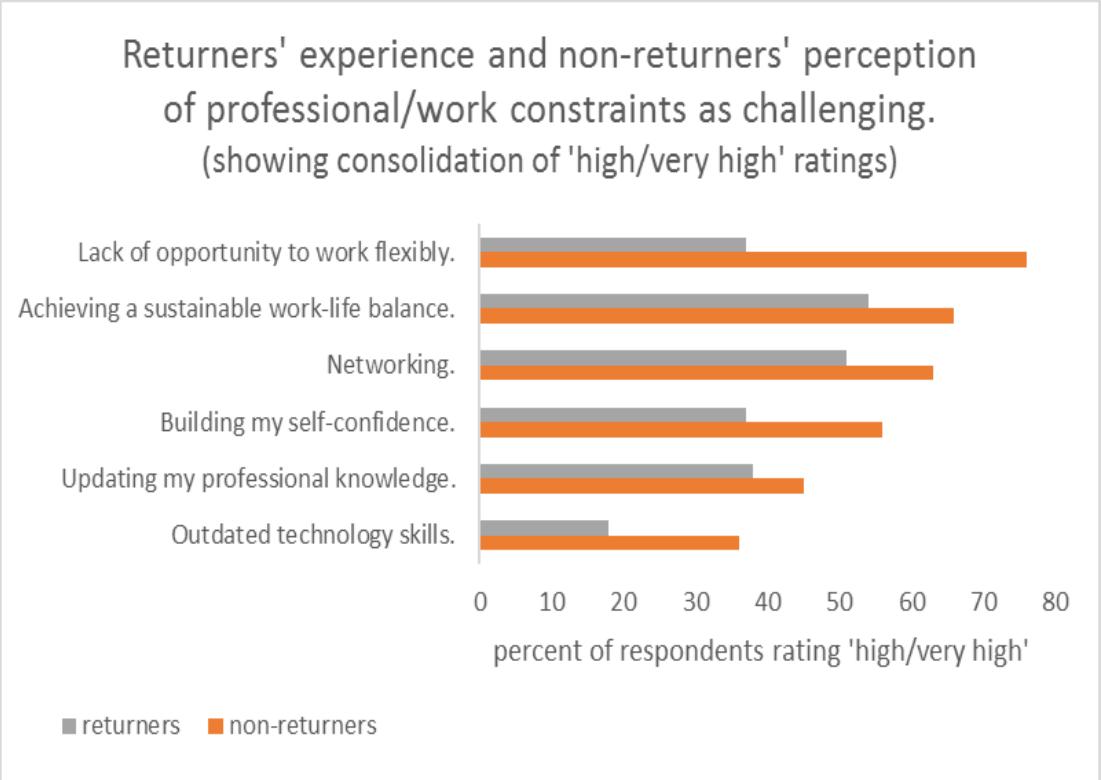


Chart 2.1

The chart below (2.2) provides a comparison of four personal/home constraints rated by both cohorts. It's important to note here that returners were asked to rate two additional constraints: 'low levels of self-confidence' and 'continuing caring responsibilities', both of which were rated as high/very high by 49% of respondents (see above).

Unlike the professional/work related challenges, where returners had experiences that, overall, were more positive than non-returners' expectations, here we see that in two

aspects of the return, the experience was less positive than the expectation, namely 'integrating my personal and professional identities' and 'overcoming feelings of guilt associated with reducing my availability for partner/children/friends'.

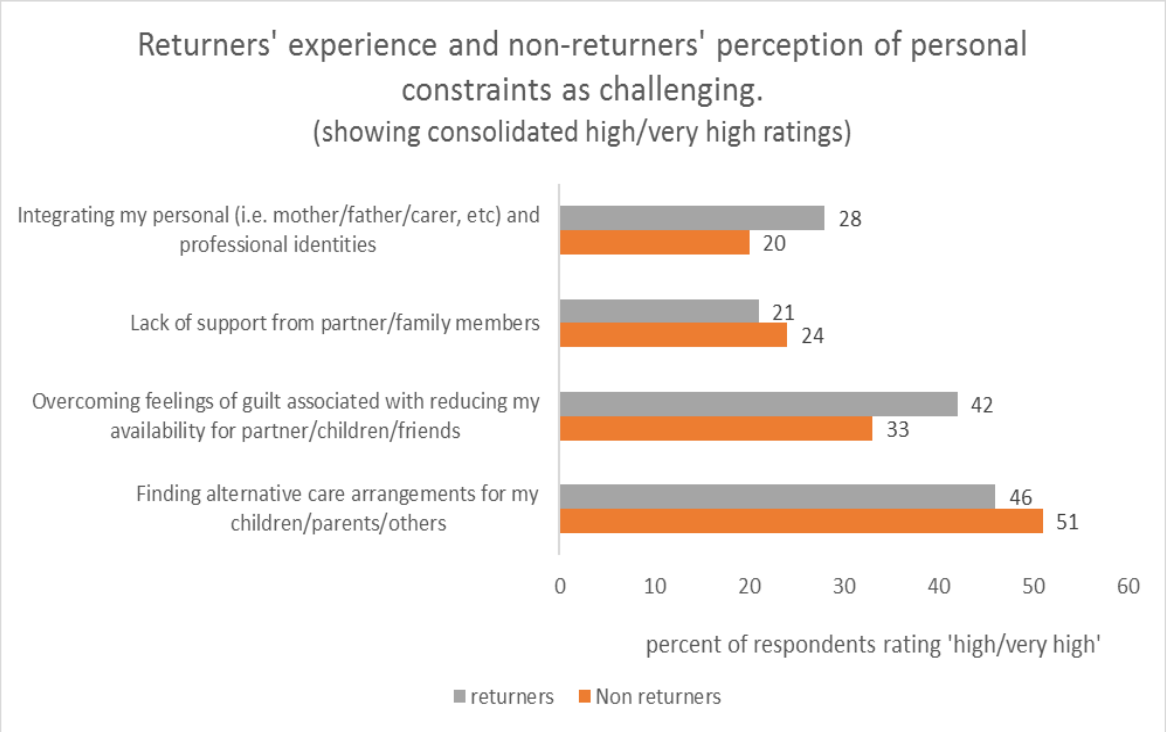


Chart 2.2

8.5.8 Respondents' 'other' comments

Participants were invited to describe any other challenges they experience(d) in addition to the statements outlined in the questionnaire. Responses fell into two categories: personal and home-related challenges, and professional and work-related challenges.

Over 90% of the respondents commented on the challenges they experienced relating to both home and work, which provided a considerable amount of data. Analysis of the data resulted in challenges relating to the home and personal life clustering around the following themes.

Self-confidence

Participants exhibited a sense of needing to prove oneself as a returner. This echoes the quantitative data, which clearly indicates low confidence as a key challenge experienced by both non-returners and returners.

> '… self-confidence was undoubtedly the biggest issue, and the feeling that I needed to prove to all that such a long career break could be overcome.'

> 'The lack of self-confidence is a major factor.'

Managing the unpredictable

Having to respond to unexpected demands both at home and at work is a common challenge. These included the need to take time off when young children are ill, managing spikes in workload and the impact on caring responsibilities and ongoing sporadic caring demands as children grow into teenager/young adults.

> '… care more sporadic, although crucial/critical when it is required.'

> 'Predictability of work requirements – coping with last minute demands is the most difficult thing because childcare is so rigid.'

Wellbeing

Respondents described feeling exhausted. Sources of this exhaustion included working in an environment where a long-hours culture is the 'reality', combining caring responsibilities with their career, and the strain of commuting time.

> 'Fatigue. Brain too full of home/childcare matters at work. Colleagues working very long hours, and being rewarded for this.'

Themes relating to professional/work challenges clustered in the following themes for both non-returners and returners.

Impact of the line manager

Where respondents experienced a supportive line manager they recognised how important that support was in their successful return to work.

> ‘I’ve now been back for a few years so have resettled into my job again, but the first few months would have been really hard if I hadn’t had such a supportive team and amazing line manager.’

Conversely, some respondents’ comments pointed to a lack of management awareness or appreciation of the challenges that returners experience, including psychological difficulties, negotiating flexible working arrangements, and the pressure to perform immediately.

> ‘… the fact that they take you on a returners scheme and then expect you to perform at the previous level instantaneously is erroneous and naïve.’

Negative consequences of flexible working

Several respondents who had returned to work on a flexible basis commented on some of the negative consequences of their not being fully available. Meetings scheduled outside of core hours were frequently mentioned as problematic.

> ‘Even though they know I am not in on a Thursday, my bosses still schedule important meetings then.’

> ‘Not being able to attend company social and networking events in the evenings because I need to be home with my family.’

8.5.9 Back to work

8.5.9.1 Which route back to work is best for career returners?

Over 73% of returners indicated that they believe permanent direct hire to be the best route back, with 14% indicating a preference for a formal internship for a defined period of time (returnship), leaving a remaining 13%, who cited the temporary direct hire route as being best.

8.5.9.2 Which route did you take?

The high proportion of respondents who believed that permanent direct hire was the best route back may be reflective of the experience of the cohort of participants, 86% of whom returned to work via direct hire. Permanent direct hire was the most frequently-cited route

back to work with 64% of respondents falling into this category. A direct fixed term contractor role was taken by 22% of respondents with a remaining 13% returning back to work through a returnship.

8.5.9.3 How does the current job compare to the pre-career break job?

Over 50% of the returners indicated that their current role had more flexibility than they had had previously and that they were working fewer hours. It is thus perhaps unsurprising that nearly 50% of returners were earning less than they had in their former roles. It's reasonable to assume that earnings were further repressed when one considers that roughly 40% of respondents were currently in jobs of a lower seniority and lower responsibility than that which they held before their career break.

While 50% of returners indicated that their training and development opportunities remained about the same, a large percentage (34%) stated that fewer opportunities existed. It would seem that a significant proportion of returners go into roles with less responsibility and seniority and fewer training and development opportunities than roles they had previously held.

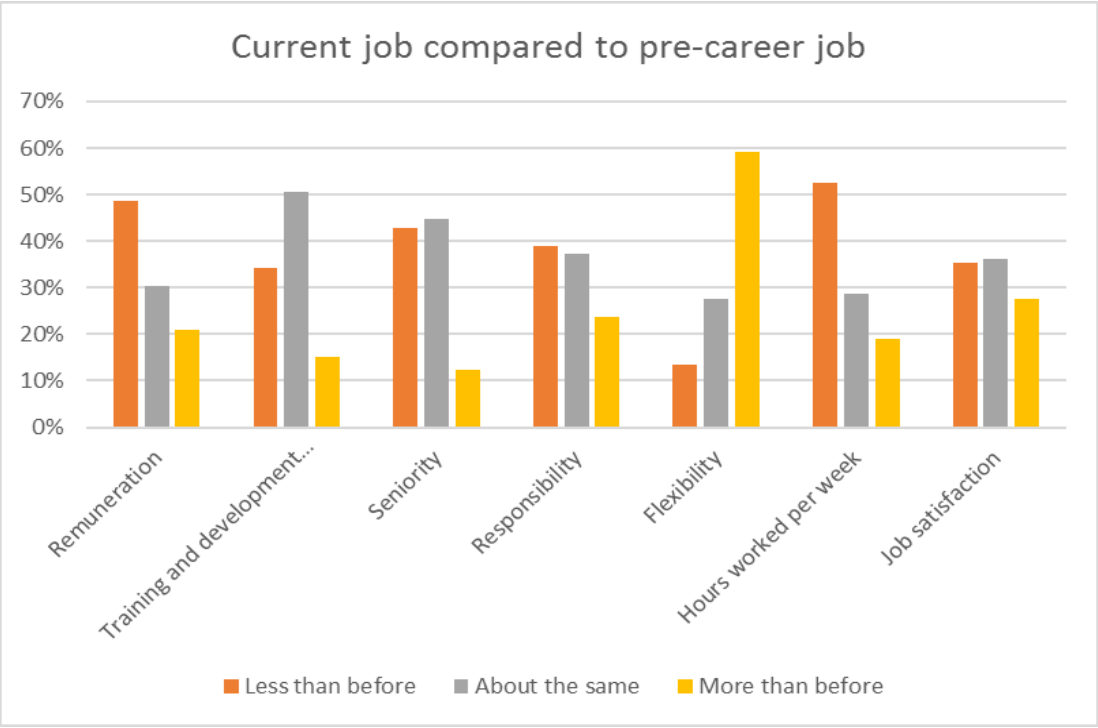


Chart 3.1

8.5.10 Support

8.5.10.1 How effective are returners' events and coaching interventions in supporting returners

Returners clearly rated coaching on a one-to-one basis and coaching within a group as the most successful interventions, with public returner events trailing far behind. One-to-one coaching was given the highest effectiveness rating by 73% of respondents. Looking more closely at the data, onboarding programmes and inductions were rated 'very high' by 22.5% of respondents, with a total of 53% rating them as high/very high. Public career returners' events were rated the lowest in terms of effectiveness, though over 30% of respondents gave employer-branded career events a rating of high/very high.

Qualitative data captured under the 'other' responses to this question emphasised the importance of mentoring, peer support, and the benefit of one-to-one support, as illustrated by comments such as:

> 'Mentoring is immensely helpful…one tends to lose confidence and need a bit of one-to-one support to build that back up…'

> 'Having a buddy to support you and introduce you to relevant people within the company.'

Flexible working emerged again as a dominant theme, closely connected to management awareness and behaviour.

> 'Flexible working hours and working arrangements are of paramount importance to many mothers. I would like to see this directly addressed at more City firms.'

> 'Raising awareness with those employing returners e.g. around flexibility and job design.'

> 'The organisation has to be ready to 'receive' the returners… In my experience, the corporate talk is very different from the actual reality. The local partners/directors are not interested in giving you flexibility at all, nor even want to talk about it!'

Respondents emphasised the effectiveness of networking as a means of supporting their return to work. The research project also revealed that returners found participating in networking particularly challenging (see chart 1.3).

> ‘Networking while on career break, involvement in your industry events/updates while on career break.’

> ‘Networking with people in similar circumstances/needs to share ideas.’

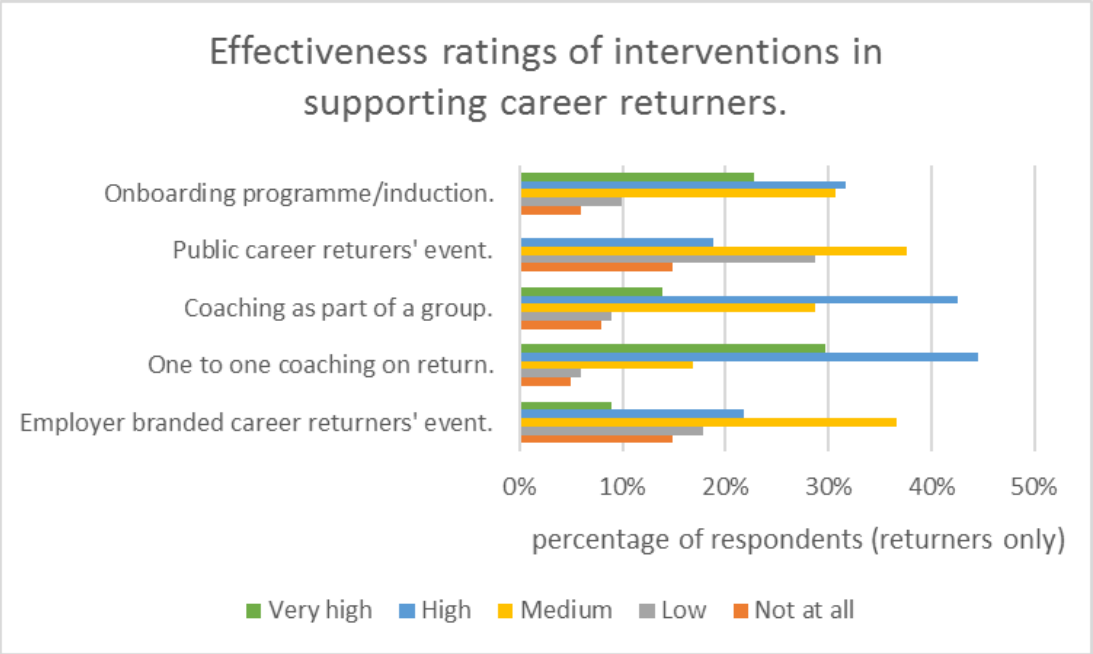


Chart 4.1

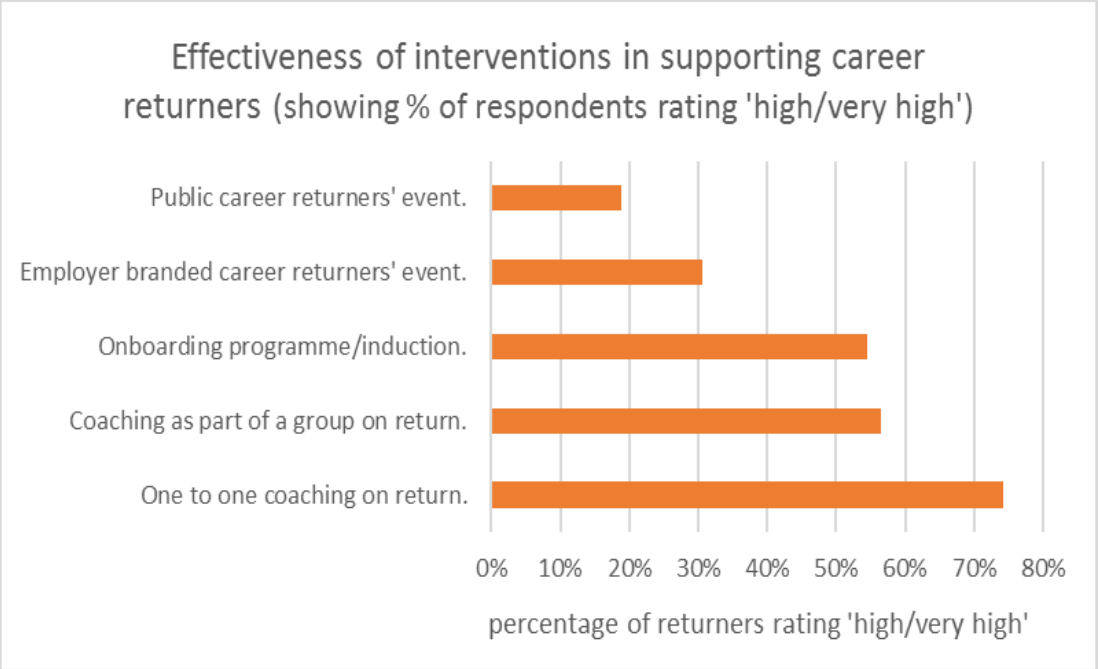


Chart 4.2

Note: *data shown here is a consolidated extract of responses that were rated as 'high' and 'very high'.*

8.5.10.2 How do returners' rate the importance of external factors in terms of the success of their return to work?

Over 51% of respondents considered the support of their line manager to be of 'very high' importance with a further 36% rating the importance of their line manager's support as being of 'high' importance, giving a combined total of 88%. This aligns with my previous research related to maternity coaching (Cotter, 2016), in which over 93% of respondents who had received maternity coaching believed that managers should be coached on managing maternity returners. Again, looking at earlier research on attitudes to maternity coaching, while the majority of maternity returners believed their line managers were supportive, there were a significant number (nearly 30%) who were unsure of how much support they received from their line managers – indicating this is an area worthy of further investigation.

The support of partner/spouse/family was also rated to be of 'high/very high' importance by 85% of respondents. This research indicates that returners generally feel supported by

their partner/spouse, with 33% of respondents stating that 'lack of support from partner/family' presented no challenge to them and a further 21% stating it presented only a 'low' degree of challenge. Of the remaining respondents, 25% stated that they experienced a lack of partner-spouse/family support as a 'medium' challenge and 21% experienced it as high/very high. It seems reasonable to cite the challenge of 'ongoing caring responsibilities' (rated by 49% of respondents as a 'high/very high' challenge) as a contributing factor to the challenge of having a 'lack of support from partner/family members'.

It would seem from these findings that returners cite the support of those nearest to them (line managers, partners, family, immediate team) and the availability of flexible working as being of the highest importance.

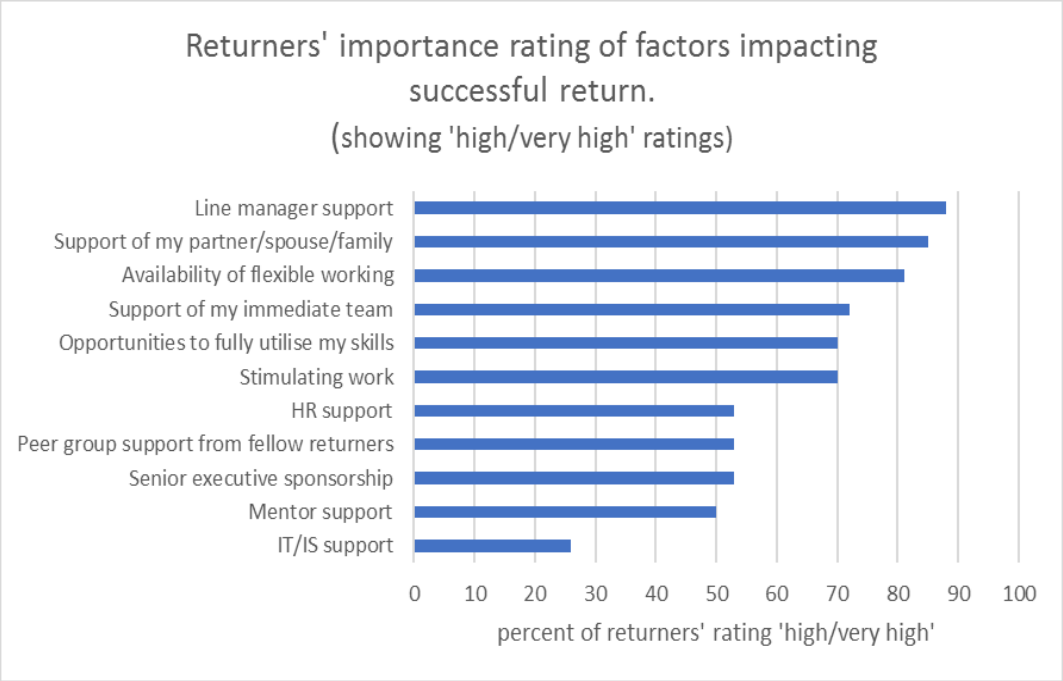


Chart 4.3

Note: *data shown here is a consolidated extract of responses that were rated as 'high' and 'very high'.*

An area for further research might be to see how this view alters over time. It would be particularly interesting to see at what point career returners shift their opinion of what is important to them away from the initial support they receive and towards other areas of support such as mentoring?

8.5.11 Summary of the research project

This research provides insight into the key challenges career returners experience during their transition back to work and after their return. They can be summarised as:

- achieving work-life balance
- availability of flexible working opportunities
- opportunity to participate in networking opportunities
- ongoing caring responsibilities
- low levels of self-confidence

Additionally, this research provides clear pointers towards the support that career returners consider to be of greatest value during their transition back to work. Those who have returned to work stressed the importance of having:

- a supportive partner
- a supportive line manager
- one-to-one & group coaching
- mentoring and peer support

With over 90% of respondents indicating that they have childcare responsibilities, and some having additional caring responsibilities for parents (13%) or others (5%), it is unsurprising that continuing caring responsibilities and finding alternative care arrangements feature in the top three personal/home related challenges returners experienced. They were topped only by low levels of confidence.

An overwhelming majority of returners (73%) consider the best route back to employment to be direct hire. Only 14% of returners cited a 'formal internship for a defined period of time' as the best route back. While returnships were rarely considered the best route back, returners place a high value on returner-specific support, particularly one-to-one coaching (believed to be the most effective means of support by 73% of respondents), with group coaching and onboarding/induction programmes both considered highly effective by well over 50% of returners.

In line with previous research (Cotter, 2016), line managers play a crucial role in the success of the return to work and 87% of respondents stated that the impact of line managers was either 'high' or 'very high'. Further research exploring the specific behaviours that line managers demonstrate or need to demonstrate in order to support career returners would thus be useful.

A supportive spouse/partner, together with the support of a participants' immediate team, was also considered to be highly important factors by over 80% and 70% of the respondents respectively. While there appears to be little appetite among coaching consultancies and employers for exploring the personal world of women returners and, specifically, the ways in which returners experience their partner relationships during their return, this study indicates that more in-depth research into this important element of the return would be valuable.

Given that 60% of the respondents were working in a different function from the one they worked in prior to their career break, and that nearly 40% were working in an entirely different sector, it seems likely that these factors play a significant part in the level of challenge experienced by the returner. It might be useful to undertake further research looking specifically at how challenging the change of function and/or sector is for returners.

The availability of flexible working is key to attracting and retaining returning women and goes some way towards alleviating the pressures arising from meeting caring responsibilities and work commitments. This research demonstrates that non-returners see a lack of opportunity to work flexibly as their greatest challenge (76%) while returners stated that achieving a good work-life balance proved to be their greatest challenge (54%).

The number one reason returners cited for going back to work was 'In order to gain a greater sense of fulfilment and wellbeing' (60%). 'Fulfil my career ambitions' (53%) was the second most-cited reason. Employers will need to pay attention to how well these two needs are being met if they are to retain returning talent over the longer term. Many returners are opting to return to roles of lower seniority (43%) and remuneration (49%) and that involve fewer hours (52%). The longer-term implications of returners' experiences in relation to having fewer training and development opportunities (34%), lower job satisfaction (36%) and less responsibility (39%) may be also significant and worthy of exploration.

A full copy of the study is available here: https://executive-coaching.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Bringing-Talent-Back-to-the-Workforce-The-Executive-Coaching-Consultancy.pdf and can also be found in appendix 7.

8.6 'Bringing Talent Back to the Workforce' employer roundtable

Upon publication of the report 'Bringing Talent Back to the Workforce' (ECC, 2017), I was invited to present the findings of my research and participate in a roundtable discussion at an employers' event held on 14th June 2017. The event was hosted at the London HQ of a large law firm and was attended by HR leaders from over thirty global technology, financial services and legal firms.

The attendees' feedback was positive and I received numerous questions during the Q&A session, including two requests for me to undertake the further pieces of research that I have outlined below. For commercial confidentiality reasons I cannot identify the employers.

8.7 Telecommunications corporation: Returner programme evaluation

In 2016 the company announced the launch of a worldwide returner programme that set out a goal to recruit 1000 women returners into permanent positions over a three-year period.

The purpose of study was to gain an understanding of managers' experiences and perspectives of managing returners hired through the company's women returner programme.

8.7.1 Design and method

There were 18 participants, all of whom were line managers of two or more women who had been hired through the company's women returners programme. Collectively the participants held line management responsibility for a total of 68 women returners.

I designed an interview schedule comprising a mixture of closed questions relating to demographics, open questions and rating questions. In total the interview schedule comprised 15 questions. All interviews were conducted over the telephone and they typically lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. I analysed the data myself and presented it in a summary report. The key findings from the study are outlined below.

Almost two thirds of the managers rated their returners as being 'completely ready' to return to work at the time of their hire, and none of them rated their returners as 'not at all

ready'. The most common challenges impacting the readiness to return were logistics relating to childcare and adjusting to a corporate environment.

Managers believed that hiring a returner into a role below their capabilities contributed to their success. However, managers expressed concern over the potential for reduced job satisfaction over the longer-term.

The success factors that managers cited most commonly included good local HR support, a supportive team, regular one-to-one time with their returner and additional manager and employee coaching.

The majority of managers (12) rated their returners' performance as 'highly satisfactory' with an overwhelming number of managers (16) reporting that their returners had exceeded their expectations.

Overall, most managers felt that their returner had integrated well with their team and cited the returner programme as being a factor in this, specifically as a means of introducing the company's culture and values. Additional factors included the returner's personal energy, emotional maturity, relationship skills and flexibility.

Barriers to successful integration centred on problems arising when returners were perceived by others as having more favourable working patterns such as flexible working, particularly short working hours and the option to work from home.

The majority of managers thought it 'highly likely' that their returner would progress within the company. However, managers also believed that when returners work reduced hours, progression will be less forthcoming.

When managers were asked to describe anything about their experience of hiring and managing returners that surprised them, the most common responses included their employees' high levels of motivation, energy and positive attitude; the depth and breadth of their previous experience; the speed at which they became productive in their role; and the higher-than-expected productivity rates of part-time returners.

Two of the more senior managers who held leadership roles with responsibility for implementing and managing the returner programme stated that the biggest challenge they faced in achieving the returner programme goal of hiring 1000 returners worldwide over a three-year period was persuading line managers to hire returners. This struggle is

reflected in the fact that most managers had inaccurately low expectations of what returners were capable of.

8.8 Coaching consultancy: Parental transition coaching – a longitudinal evaluation study

I was asked to design a 'dashboard' that could provide a snapshot view of employees' experiences during their transition to parenthood at work as well as their line managers' perspectives of the transition.

The study aimed to provide the employer (client) and coaching provider (supplier) with insight into factors beyond the scope of coaching provision that might still impact upon individuals' experience of the parental transition within the workplace.

By tracking how employees experience these factors through the parental transition, the purpose is to support employers in identifying aspects of their organisation's culture that may help or hinder efforts to retain and develop employees.

A quantitative method was adopted, with an online questionnaire comprising five rating statements for employees and three rating statements for line managers.

Employees who were receiving one-to-one parental transition coaching were asked to provide responses in relation to the four key factors being measured: quality of work assigned, line manager relationship, career progression and visibility of role models. In order to identify any subtle shifts occurring across stages of the transition, data was gathered at the beginning, middle and end of the five coaching sessions. Where individuals attended three sessions, the data was captured after the first and third coaching sessions.

After employees had received their parental transition coaching sessions, their line managers were asked to respond to three statements that sought to illicit their perspectives on the impact that transitioning to parenthood can have on employees' career progression prospects, the extent to which flexible working increased employee commitment, and the degree of importance they placed on their own role in actively supporting working parents in their team.

This evaluation study is currently underway, with data due to be ready for analysis sometime in the first quarter of 2021.

8.9 Further publications

8.9.1 Journals

The editor of *Coaching Today*, Diane Parker, has expressed a keen interest in an article I proposed to report the findings of my final doctoral project. The article will focus on my key finding that the way in which women come to be stay at home mothers has a significant impact on their subsequent experiences of motherhood and their transition to paid employee.

The article is due for publication in the February 2021 edition of *Coaching Today*.

I also intend to approach peer-reviewed academic journals and professional journals within the field of organisational and human resource management with article proposals based on findings from my final doctoral project.

8.9.2 Book proposal: 'Working parenthood: Navigating a successful return to work'

Following initial interest from an editor of the *Dummies Guide* series (published by John Wiley & Sons), I wrote a formal book proposal for a self-help guide aimed at women returners and focusing on the psychological and relational aspects of this life transition (see appendix 8). The book's target audience is primarily working mothers and fathers, as well as mothers and fathers seeking a return to work following a career break to care for children. The content aims to provide the reader with a set of tools that can support them in achieving a smooth and sustainable return to work. Coaches and therapists working with this population may also find the book of use in providing a framework for supporting clients as they navigate their transition to working parenthood.

Despite the editor's interest in the proposal, it was not accepted due to the publisher's decision to reduce the number of titles in the *Dummies Guide* series and its shift in focus towards technical self-help guides. I intend to approach other publishers and, if I am unsuccessful in gaining their interest, I will adapt the content to be included in a free online resource on my website.

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Appendix 1: Literature search exclusion and inclusion.

Inclusion

- The transition to motherhood within an organisational context
- Women's experience of being a SAHM
- Women's experience of transitioning from being a SAHM to a paid employee
- Women's experience of maternity coaching.
- Women's experience of returner coaching
- Women's experience of participating in returner programmes

Exclusion

Considerable attention has been given to women's career development within the context of career theories. While acknowledging this body of research and the contribution it makes to our understanding of the experience of women returners, this literature review does not explore career theories in any depth.

Appendix 2: Email request to schools for participant recruitment

From: **kathy cotter** <kathymcotter@gmail.com>
Date: Mon, 5 Feb 2018 at 15:37
Subject: Re: enquiry
To: [School headteachers, Admin]

Dear [Head/Admin],

Thank you very much indeed. I'm attaching the participant information sheet and consent form that I will present to individuals who have agreed to participate in the study. The attached document is a rather formal document that accompanied my research proposal which was approved by the universities' academic and ethics committees. The initial communication I would like help with distributing is less formal - I propose the following:

Have you returned to paid employment sometime during the past 18-24 months following a career break of 2+ years to look after your children?

I'm a researcher, coach and psychotherapist, currently completing a professional doctorate in psychotherapy. My study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of women's experience of returning to work following a career break with the aim of informing and shaping support provided to this population by employers, recruiters and coaches.

I am now looking for research participants who would be willing to share their experience of returning to work with me during an interview of around 60-90

minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed, with participant identity fully anonymised and safeguarded.

In the first instance, if you feel willing to participate in this research, please drop me an email at kathymcotter@gmail.com or call me on 07881 954463 and I will then provide you with additional information relating to the study and seek to arrange a mutually convenient time to meet and conduct the research interview.

==========

I hope the above seems ok.

Attachments area

Appendix 3: Participant Information Sheet & Consent Form

Doctorate in Psychotherapy by Professional Studies, Metanoia Institute and Middlesex University, London, UK.

Candidate Name: Katharine Cotter

1. Study Title

How do professional women experience the transition from 'stay-at-home-mother' to paid employment? What are the implications for

2. Invitation

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

3. The Purpose of the Study

The purpose is to learn more about what it is like for professional women to transition back into paid employment following an extended career break to raise a family and to consider the implications for coaching and counselling.

You have been invited because you have transitioned within the last two years from being a 'stay-at-home-mother' to paid employment. You have also been invited because your career break was for a minimum period of two years.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw up until one month after the interview without giving a reason.

4. What will happen?

I would like to record a conversation with you (an "interview") lasting approximately one hour to one-and-a-half hours, about your experiences of returning to work. I hope to answer my research questions:

Primary Question: How do professional women experience the transition from 'stay- at-home-mother' to paid employment?

Secondary Question: What are the implications for Coaching and Psychotherapy?

5. What do I have to do?

I will seek to arrange a mutually convenient time and place to meet where we will not be disturbed. I will invite you to talk about your experiences of returning to work and the effects those experiences may have had on you.

The interview will be digitally recorded and later transcribed.

After the interview, you will have time to talk about any reactions that may have come up during the interview.

6. Side effects or disadvantages

There are no side effects involved in participating in this research. If you feel the need to talk to someone about your reactions to being interviewed and the topics you touched upon, details about where you can find support will be provided.

7. Benefits

I hope that participating in the study will be of some benefit. However, this cannot be guaranteed. The information I get from this study will be used to inform and develop coaching and counselling provision for individuals returning to work following an extended career break.

8. Confidentiality

All information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Any information about you that is used will have your name removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. Anonymity will be safeguarded at all times. All data will be stored, analysed and reported in compliance with the data protection legislation of the UK. Data will not be stored longer than 12 months after the end of the research.

9. What will happen to the findings of the research?

The research will be published as part of a Doctorate dissertation at The Metanoia Institute, London, expected to be around 2019. A copy of the published findings will be available for you on request. I also aim to communicate the findings to the wider professional

community of coaches and therapists, in addition to parents seeking a return to work. This is likely to be done by means of publications available both in and outside of the UK. You will not be identified in any report or publication that may be generated as a result of the research and codes will be used in place of people's names and organisations.

10. Who has reviewed the study?

The Metanoia Research Ethics Committee has reviewed this research in advance.

11. Contact for further information:

My contact details:

Katharine Cotter

Coach, Counsellor & Psychotherapist

www.optimisecoaching.co.uk

email: Kathy@optimisecoaching.co.uk

mobile: 07881 954463

Academic Adviser's contact details:

Dr Marie Adams

DPsych Academic Adviser

Metanoia Institute

13 North Common Road Ealing, London W5 2QB

T: (0)20 8579 2505 Fax: (0)20 8832 3070

Thank you for taking part in this project.

CONSENT FORM

Participant identification number:

Title of Project: *How do professional women experience the transition from 'stay-at-home-mother' to paid employment?*

Name of Researcher: Katharine Cotter

==========

*Please **initial** box*

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [DATE] for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. If I choose to withdraw, I can decide what happens to any data I have provided. ☐

I understand that my interview will be taped and subsequently transcribed. ☐

I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

I agree that this form that bears my name and signature may be seen by a designated auditor. ☐

……	…….	…….
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
……	……	…….
Name of researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 4: Draft Interview Schedule

- Can you tell me about your experience of returning to work?
- How did your return to work affect you?
- Can you describe how your return to work has affected your relationships at home?
- How would you describe yourself now?
- How would you describe your ideal self?
- What do you think would have helped you most during the challenging times?
- What do you think would help you most now?
- What has helped you?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix 5: Purposive Sampling Inclusion Criteria

- Professional women who have returned to work within the past two years.
- Contracted to work a minimum 30 hours per week.
- Have had a career break of a minimum two years.
- Living with a partner/spouse at the time of their return to work.
- Have dependent child (ren).
- Living and working in the UK.

Appendix 6: Emergent Themes Sample Table

EXCERPT FROM KATE'S TRANSCRIPT

(black = descriptive, green = linguistic, orange = conceptual & psychological)

EMERGENT THEMES	Verbatim Transcript of Interview (with line numbers)	Initial comments
FREEDOM FEELINGS OF GUILT IMPORTANCE OF EXTERNAL WORLD WORRY OVER GETTING TIMING RIGHT DIMINISHING JOB FEELING CONFLICTED FAILING TO MEET POTENTIAL KNOWING:TIMING	171. Oh it's quite nice actually. I can kinda manage my time when I'm in the van and get your stuff sorted and you're out on the road on my… on your own...so it's a nice little escape. 172. And then obviously you go back at the lunch time and you know you mix with people and it's nice to have a little chat you know. (K) **173. Right so you get the chance to socialise over the lunch times but actually also have quite a lot of autonomy. (R)** . 174. Yeah to a point. (K) 175. **So looking forwards now, do you think about what's next for you? (R)** 176. I do all the time. I think about when's right to make the next step. 177. I mean, I've been offered a little job this morning actually...Elsie's nursery asked me to see if I'd like to help out in the mornings. 178. I don't know you know it's a case of well do I give up	Pronoun switch – distancing. Switch from your-my-your…guilty of enjoying being away 'escaped' from all consuming children/domesticity? Enjoys social aspect of work. Worried about when to seek new job. Diminishing job 'little' and 'just'. Choices - time vs income? Just a temporary contract…little job – feeling small not meeting potential?

FEAR OF GETTING IT WRONG	Tesco's and then just do that? Or… or you know, it's just a temporary contract so… so you know…	Lack of confidence in ability to make the best decision (for who?) Getting it right.
KNOWING: THE FUTURE	179. It's knowing when to make the right decision and I haven't made great decisions in the past .	
ALONE IN EXPLORING OPTIONS	**180. So your confidence in making the right decision is causing you some difficulty- what would help you with that? (R)**	Laughter -indicating the impossibility of visioning or creating her future? Difficult to prgress without future vision
	181. [laughing] I guess knowing in the future.	Alone. Long silence as I waited to see if anything else was coming emphasising her sense of aloneness.
TIMING OF RETURN	**182.Who do you have to talk to about these sorts of things? (R)**	
	183. Nobody.	Worried about getting the timing right. Protecting children,
BEING AVAILABLE	184. [**Pause] So you're thinking about your future, and what sort of thoughts do you have? (R)**	putting herself second.
PROTECTING CHILDREN		Giving time to self means taking time away from children.
IMPACT OF PAST ON FUTURE	185. I guess it's you know if I want to retrain, when do I retrain what's the best time...I don't want to affect…You know if Elsie is at school I don't want to affect anything to do with her school.	Retraining is costly in terms of time.
IMPACT OF RETURN ON CHILDREN	186. You know it takes a lot of time if I decide to do any retraining the time to study and put in for these exams that you have to...so I just don't want to have any negative affect on the younger girls.	Blames her reduced availability for challenging behaviour in eldest daughter. Connects with *'I haven't made great decisions in the past'* ?
TOUGH CHOICES		
KNOWING – VALUES	187. So I worry that I had an affect on Charlie cause of the behaviour, struggles, as a result of me having spent so much time studying when she was very young. I don't know whether that that might repeat with the others	What's the laughter about?

	188**. So you've been offered job? (R)** 189. (Laughing) Yeah I'm not sure whether to take it. It could mean that I wouldn't have to work weekends which could be a good thing but it's less pay... so is just weighing up the pros and cons what's more important? 190. Time with the children is more important to me.	Knows that time is more important to her than money = helps with decision making.

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Appendix seven and eight redacted