



## Becoming an employed mother: Conceptualising adult identity development through semiotic cultural lens



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### ABSTRACT

This paper makes a contribution to theories of adult identity development by considering how transitional experiences that characterise identity development are experienced. To achieve this, the paper draws upon a qualitative study with employed mothers in Australia. The conceptual lens of semiotic cultural psychology used in the paper focuses on the complexity and ambivalence that is characteristic of the transitional experience of becoming an employed mother and reveals how women's multiple possible developmental trajectories – dominant and dormant – emerge from this ambivalence, creating links with the past and keeping the possibility of becoming otherwise available in the future. The paper links sociological and psychological theory and research about employed mothers' experiences by emphasizing the significance of the socio-cultural context in which identity development occurs. It highlights the importance of developing cultural resources that support women as they psychologically and physically navigate their family, work and care responsibilities and related transitions.

### Introduction

Over the past decades a significant amount of critical literature in psychology and social sciences has criticised the normative crises (see for example Erikson, 1968; Levinson, 1986) and timing of event theories (see for example Neugarten, 1979) in developmental psychology and highlighted the need for novel conceptual frameworks that more adequately capture the developmental processes in adulthood in contemporary complex societies. Zittoun et al. (2013), for example, criticise theories that describe normative developmental transitions in adulthood and conceptualise development as unfolding through a linear sequence of stages, each characterised by its unique developmental crisis and each focused on solving its unique developmental task. Instead they suggest that we need theories that take seriously the socio-cultural influences on development and focus on examining the unique developmental trajectories of individuals in their messiness and complexity, in order to reveal similarities and commonalities in the basic underlying developmental processes. Together with other developmental scientists (see for example Belsky, 2012), they call for the in-depth engagement with the idiosyncratic developmental trajectories that emerge as unique configurations shaped by specific socio-cultural conditions, and suggest that developmental theories should focus on identifying and revealing general developmental processes that underlie this uniqueness and idiosyncrasy.

This paper aims to make a contribution to the theories of adult development by focusing specifically on identity development in adulthood and by considering how adults experience and make sense of transitional experiences that are characteristic of identity development. In developing these analytic generalizations the paper builds on a qualitative study that explored the experiences of a group of Australian employed mothers as they navigated their competing family, work and care responsibilities. The experience of becoming a mother has received extensive research attention in psychology and social sciences, and it is well established that employed mothers in particular find this developmental transition challenging (Duarte & Gonçalves, 2012; Feldman, Sussman, & Zigler, 2004; Wiese & Ritter, 2012). This body of research suggests that transition into motherhood and then into employed motherhood can have a profound impact on women's sense of self and identity (Christopher, 2012; Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Johnston & Swanson, 2006, 2007; Kanji & Cahusac, 2015; Mannay, 2015; Miller, 2007). Laney, Hall, Anderson, and Willingham (2015), for example, describe how the experience of becoming a mother 'fractures' or 'compresses' women's identities, causing them to initially lose their sense of self and identity to make space for the new relationship with their child, and it is only after some time and some negotiations that a connection between the previously held views about self in relation to others become recreated and a renewed sense of identity, that incorporates employed mother identity, becomes constructed. While

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some theoretically oriented work is thus starting to emerge, it seems that it is still the case that little of the extensive empirical work about this important life-course transition has fed into developmental psychology theories that aim to conceptualise women's identity development in adulthood. This paper aims to address this gap in the literature.

To provide some background to the study discussed in this paper, first a brief overview of ideological and social policy context in which Australian women make their transitions into employed motherhood will be provided. Then, the main tenets of the semiotic cultural perspective on identity development are described, followed by the description of the study and its main results. The discussion summarises the key findings of this study that add to the growing body of research exploring the struggles of employed mothers, and highlights how the case of employed mothers discussed in this paper allowed exemplifying the utility of semiotic cultural perspective on adult identity development.

### Becoming employed mother in Australia

Women's lives have changed dramatically in the last half a century with their participation in education and paid workforce increasing worldwide. In Australia the adult female workforce participation rates have almost doubled in the last 50 years, increasing from 34% in 1961 to 65% in 2015 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011a, 2016). It has been suggested that this dramatic growth in female workforce participation is largely due to increases in paid employment of married women with children (Johnstone, Lucke, & Lee, 2011). While women's experiences of balancing family and work have undergone these drastic changes, the cultural scripts and ideologies that dictate how Australian women as mothers and workers could and should act, feel and think have changed very little (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Hays's (1996) ideas about a "good mother" as a woman who takes the primary responsibility for the nurturance, care, education and the physical and emotional sustenance of her children, seem to be still prevalent in this cultural context. As Lupton's (2011) interviews with Australian mothers indicate, their felt responsibility to promote and protect the health, wellbeing and development of their children begins before the children are even born and continues throughout their lives. In this "intensive mothering" ideology, the mother's primary role is to be always present and available for her children and to put the children's needs above those of her own (Read, Crockett, & Mason, 2012). For it is the mother's omnipresence together with her natural maternal instinct that, according to this ideology, equips her with the essential skills of successfully decoding, predicting and responding to her children's needs and thus ensuring that they are provided with ample stimulation and cultural opportunities to learn, develop and grow into successful individuals (Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001; Johnston & Swanson, 2006; Wall, 2013).

Carrying the burden of these significant responsibilities and living up to these unrealistic expectations is undoubtedly challenging for any mother. Yet as Chesterman and Ross-Smith (2010) suggest these challenges are even greater for employed mothers, who in addition to having to negotiate the 'good mother' mandate, have to also position themselves in relation to the 'good worker' ideology. According to this ideology employers are entitled to have workers who have limited (if any) responsibility in the domestic sphere and who are willing to prioritise their work commitments over and above all other responsibilities in their lives. Considering these competing demands for mothers' time and other resources, Johnston and Swanson (2007) suggest to view these two ideologies as being in a dialectic relationship pulling women in mutually exclusive directions, creating unsolvable tensions and dilemmas. Their research (see also Johnston & Swanson, 2006) suggests that in an attempt to resolve these dilemmas employed mothers not only change their work status (from full-time to part-time or stay-at-home), but they also utilize several discursive and cognitive strategies to reconstruct the intensive mothering mandate to make it fit

with their work-related identities and responsibilities. Women's efforts to picture their work as a break from maternal responsibilities that makes them better mothers, or their attempts to reframe the mandate of maternal physical presence and accessibility as a periodic quality interaction with children that is beneficial for them, are just some examples of these strategies.

While it is important to understand the content and prevalence of cultural norms and ideological expectations that are placed upon employed mothers, it is also important to remember that the ways in which women experience the tensions and dilemmas created by these norms and expectations is largely dependent on the social policy contexts and available support systems that either support or hinder women as they navigate their competing demands and responsibilities in the areas of work, family and care. In Australia, the first fully government-funded paid parental leave scheme was introduced as late as in 2011. It provides up to 18 weeks of financial support (at the rate of the national minimum wage) to the primary carer of newborn or recently adopted children and is mostly taken up by mothers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b). Additionally, fathers or partners can access two weeks of government-funded pay after the birth of their child or adoption of a child. Presently these payments are made on top of any payments made by the parents' employers – the so-called 'double-dipping' practice that the current conservative government is trying to stop by introducing amendments to the existing legislation. While a clear move towards supporting employed parents and their transitions between work and family, this scheme nevertheless does not seem to meet the needs of Australian working parents, who tend to extend their paid leave with unpaid leave arrangements. For example in 2011, the mean number of weeks taken for leave for a child's birth by Australian women was 32.4, with only 16.7 weeks of this being covered by some form of paid leave, such as employer funded maternity leave, paid holiday leave or long service leave (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011b). Most Australian women seek to resolve the financial pressures created by this system by returning to workforce after maternity leave in part-time capacity, having to use formal and informal child care for the time they are away from their children. Recent statistics show that Australian working parents rely heavily on informal child care provided mainly by grandparents for their young children (under the age 2), while using formal child care, mainly long day care for their older children (Baxter, 2015). This practice may be partly driven by social and cultural views about the best care for young children, but partly also by the high costs and lack of availability of high quality formal child care, especially long day care in Australia (see for example Tayler, Ishimine, Cloney, Cleveland, & Thorpe, 2013).

While there have been some important developments in social policies and practices that assist Australian women's transitions into workforce after the birth of their children, there is still ample room for developing a system where women feel supported and protected when making this transition. While the policies and systems surrounding parenthood, child care and employment, can be rather supportive of mothers' transitions into employment in some countries (e.g., Scandinavia or Canada), and thus enable women to successfully navigate the dilemmas posed by the ideological and cultural pressures, it seems that in Australia it is rather the case that these pressures become amplified by the shortcomings in the social policy context.

### Identity development in semiotic cultural perspective

Semiotic cultural perspective to development focuses on understanding and explaining how people experience and make sense of the change and development in their lives. It also seeks to understand how people draw upon various cultural and semiotic resources in this process, for persons and their environments are seen as inseparable and mutually constitutive (Valsiner, 2014). In studying change and development, semiotic cultural psychology therefore focuses on experiences that are challenging people's existing ways of making sense of their lives

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