Entrepreneuring mothers motivation and commitment from the perspective of possible selves

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Abstract

Objectives We examine the relationships between how women cope with role conflict and develop self-conceptions during motherhood and whilst managing an entrepreneurial venture.

Prior Work The concept of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), representing individuals’ ideas of who they may become, ought to become and fear becoming, is applied to interpret mothers’ personal entrepreneurial narratives. We draw from contemporary psychological theory, which emphasises the dynamic and socially constituted nature of self-construals that offer explanations for identity-based motivations and commitment to an entrepreneurial career (Dasgupta, 2011, 2013, Oyserman 2015) of entrepreneuring mothers. Whilst we recognise that gender role identities and differential personal values systems have been implicated in women’s (alternative) entrepreneurial aspirations (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009, Zampetakis, et al., 2016; Eddleston and Powell, 2008), the concept of self might be helpful in explaining their pursuit of meaning or social purpose over profit maximization.

Approach Semi-structured interviews with twenty-six entrepreneuring mothers based in the UK between 2012 and 2016 were analysed to explore the extent to which the way they think about the future exerts motivational influence. Mothers’ narratives focussed on the decision to start-up in business, their future aspirations and the nature of rewards they seek and derive from venturing.

Results We find that women readily imagine themselves in the future and that multiple possible selves exert powerful motivational influence but also perpetuate self-dissonance. The pursuit of deeper meaning and purpose in work, combined with a constant striving for social legitimacy of thought, feeling and action – the ought self with respect to both work and home – characterises the lived experience of entrepreneuring mothers.

Contributions: By illuminating the complexity of the identity work that entrepreneuring mothers undertake and the motivational influence of multi-domain possible selves, we extend current conceptualisations of entrepreneurial identity, self-efficacy and work-life balance. Further, we challenge the notion that only positive future selves, specific to the work domain motivate pro-active career behaviours (Strauss, Griffin and Parker, 2012). Mothers can be driven forward toward an entrepreneurial future because they fear returning to a past-work self that is irreconcilable with ought and hoped-for selves in the family domain.

Value: Acute sensitivity to social expectations of role achievement in both work and home domains mitigates the motivational power of personal hopes and fears for entrepreneuring mothers and may underpin women’s willingness to sacrifice their own wellbeing in the attempt to ‘do it all’. We propose that highly individualised subjective value/s underpin the meaning of work for women that is critical for understanding i) how mothers may best be supported to start-up and sustain commitment to an entrepreneurial path or ii) how organisational cultures, policies and practices need to change to protect women’s positive future work selves from terminal ‘loss of hope’ post-partum.
**Key Words:** possible selves, motivation, entrepreneur, woman, future work self, gender, mumpreneur

**Introduction**

The construct of self-concept, that may be broadly understood as a set of ideas or beliefs an individual holds about themselves, plays an important role in motivation; influencing the careers we choose to pursue (Ireland and Webb, 2007, Lent and Brown, 2013) and the rewards we seek and derive from work (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009, Strauss, Griffin and Parker, 2012). In turn, our professional identities and achievements distinguish us from our peers (Lewis et al, 2015) and provide self-fulfilment and meaning in our lives (Ros, Schwarz and Surkiss, 1999, Yeoman, 2014). Research on gender and entrepreneurship has underscored the extent to which women’s self-construals influence entrepreneurial intentions and aspirations for growth (Noguera et al 2013; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). However, femininity in the context of entrepreneurship is most typically associated with a discourse of ‘otherness’ e.g. differential goals and values (Eddleston & Powell, 2008) or limitation e.g. low growth aspirations (Gupta et al, 2009, Jennings and Brush, 2013, Zampetakis et al, 2016).

Mueller and Conway-Dato-on (2013) note that a persistent gender gap exists in entrepreneurial orientation. Noguera et al (2013) argue women’s fear of failure is a significant barrier whilst other authors point to a lack of perceived capabilities (knowledge, experiences or relationships) that discourage women from pursuing an entrepreneurial path (Kickul et al, 2008, Wilson et al, 2007). Even as teenagers, there is evidence that entrepreneurial self-efficacy – the feeling that one is likely to succeed in entrepreneurship – appears to matter more to girls than boys (Kickul et al 2008). Role models may be particularly influential in girls’ development of entrepreneurial intentions, perhaps because boys career imaginations have already been primed by the plethora of potential male entrepreneurial role models that surround them. Some research suggests boys more readily draw confidence from their own work experiences (Kickul et al 2008) providing further support for the relatively greater significance of socialization processes in women’s development of entrepreneurial aspirations (Verheul et al, 2005).

Women face challenges too in negotiating entrepreneurial identity. Ahl and Marlow (2012) note how women must strike a delicate balance between adopting a credible entrepreneurial identity that reflects masculinized norms and denying ascribed femininity. But whilst self-concept and identity are consistently implicated in entrepreneurial motivation, much less is known about the underpinning socio-psychological processes. Hence in this article we explore: How do women upon entering motherhood imagine themselves as successful business owners? Do hopes or fears for the future exert the greatest motivational power? What strategies do women employ to resolve work-family role conflict?

One context that permits exploration of both the dynamic and socially constructed nature of self-construals and their potential role in entrepreneurial motivation is the case of mothers who deliberately configure businesses around child rearing responsibilities, some of whom identify as ‘mumpreneurs’. According to Eckinsmyth (2010, p104), mumpreneurs are “driven largely by the desire for work-life harmony through an identity orientation that blurs the boundary between the roles of mother and businesswoman”. The impact of key life-stage transitions on career decision making has been underscored in recent work by Lewis et al (2015) who notes the distinct ways in which entrepreneurial mothers reconcile roles, relationships and domain participation that have a critical influence on their career patterns.
Contemporary psychological theory emphasises the dynamic and socially constituted nature of self-construals and may offer considerable explanatory power with respect to understanding mothers’ identity-based motivations and commitment to an entrepreneurial career (Dasgupta, 2011, 2013, Oyserman 2015). Markus and Nurius (1986) originally proposed that an individual’s thoughts about the future are represented in a range of possible selves that reflect both personal hopes and fears and the expectations and evaluations of others (ought selves) and might thus be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of an individual’s enduring goals and motivations (both positive and negative). Importantly, Dasgupta (2013) stresses that the range of possible selves that we are capable of imagining is the direct result of our local environment, including exposure to media representations and involvement in social interactions that enable our own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviours to be compared with others.

In this article we draw on the concept of possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986) to explore links between mothers’ self-construals and entrepreneurial motivations. By directly addressing the liminality of motherhood and investigating how mothers who are entrepreneurs manage role-conflict we offer novel contributions to both the gender and entrepreneurship literature through a deeper understanding of the social-psychological processes of self-adaptation that may be critical in the development of entrepreneurial intentions and sustaining commitment to an entrepreneurial career, despite its difficulties.

In the next section, we expand on key theoretical perspectives in more detail and present a review of the literature on the motherhood and entrepreneurship nexus and the pursuit of work-life balance. Subsequently we present our methodology and report on findings from 26 semi-structured interviews in which mothers reflect on their experience of entrepreneurship. Finally, we discuss findings in relation to contemporary literature and present conclusions and implications.

**Gendered self-perceptions of entrepreneurial potential**

A substantial body of research suggests that the decision to start a business is highly correlated with entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Arenius and Minniti, 2005; Koelinger et al, 2007; Camelo-Ordaz et al, 2016). Whilst research has so far failed to prove women and men differ in terms of entrepreneurial self-efficacy per se (e.g. Mueller and Conway Dato-On, 2008), belief in one’s entrepreneurial potential seems to matter more to women and there may be differences in how women develop a belief in their entrepreneurial potential. The knowledge, experiences and relationships accumulated by women during their lives may be considered as crucial mechanisms in the development of a self-perception of fit in the domain of entrepreneurship. There may be greater barriers to belonging for women, as the prevailing societal projection of entrepreneurship is eminently masculine (De Tienne and Chandler, 2007; Camelo-Ordaz et al, 2016). Moreover, if women perceive they lack certain key abilities (Camelo-Ordaz et al, 2016, Kickul et al, 2008 Maes et al, 2014 Wilson et al, 2007) they may underestimate their potential to succeed. Thus, women may be less likely to develop entrepreneurial self-efficacy, because they are less likely to be socialized in business roles and are less frequently confronted with social expectations of starting a successful business (Verheul et al, 2005).

Gender role identities and differential personal values systems have also been implicated in women’s (alternative) entrepreneurial aspirations (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). For example, Zampetakis et al (2016) argue that female entrepreneurs tend to pursue non-economic goals such as balancing work and family roles and may prioritise social concerns in managing employee relationships that distract them from economic performance or growth. Eddleston and Powell (2008) conclude that women’s differential values versus inputs (time, effort, investment) best explains the ‘paradox of the contented
female business-owner”; suggesting a more complex relationship between business performance and satisfaction for women who may resist the ‘logic’ of capitalism and prioritise pursuit of meaning or social purpose over profit maximization.

**Possible selves**

Markus and Nurius’s (1986) concept of “possible selves” provides one explanation of the motivational power of an individual’s thoughts about the future and their potential. Possible self-construals (specifically hoped, feared and ought selves) are at the same time highly individualized and distinctly social, as it is ‘impossible to conceive of a self-arising outside of social experience’ (Mead, 1934, p. 140). Many of the possible selves a woman may imagine are the direct result of previous social interactions and comparisons in which her own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviours have been contrasted to those of others. ‘Possible selves’ thus reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self but they also reflect the extent to which the self is socially determined and constrained as we compare who we are, with who we could be and the role expectations imposed by society (Elder, 1980, Meyer 1985, Stryker, 1984).

An individual’s repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of an individual’s enduring goals, drivers and barriers, and provides an important link between the way women see themselves as mothers and their entrepreneurial motivations. The categories of “hoped”, “ought” and “feared” selves are particularly useful in understanding the challenges of self-adaptation during the transition to motherhood as women attempt to reconcile professional aspirations with expectations of intensive mothering (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006) – the ‘ought’ self in relation to motherhood. Past selves may also define an individual again in the future, and hence can also form part of possible self-construals. This is particularly relevant to women who have experienced prior success in their professional career that is interrupted during the transition to motherhood (Kendall, Lerner and Craighead, 1984). Some empirical support is provided by Farmer et al. (2009) who found entrepreneurial intentions are strongly associated with an individual’s perceived self-fit with the entrepreneurial role, and that this relationship is moderated by past start-up experience.

Building on the theory of possible selves, Strauss, Griffin and Parker (2012) propose the concept of future work selves, defined as “future focused, positive, and specific to work” (Strauss, Griffin and Parker, 2012, p581). Strauss, Griffin and Parker (2012) argue that positive future work selves are more prevalent and more motivationally important than feared or negative future selves, because of the individual’s desire to create and maintain positive identities at work. According to Strauss, Griffin and Parker, feared future selves are inherently unstable, relatively rare, and less likely to keep the individual focused on a goal (Ashforth, 2001; Elliott et al, 1997). If however, we accept women’s ‘fear of failure’ is greater (Noguera et al, 2013), we might also expect feared future selves to play a more central role in entreprenuer mothers’ motivation.

Previous research has underscored the importance of socialisation in the development of entrepreneurial intentions and the influence of family and accessible role models. Social networks and peer groups also influence the decision to pursue an entrepreneurial path (Vershinina and Phillips, 2016). It appears that role models who are similar in terms of characteristics of gender and nationality are particularly important, though entrepreneurs may also be inspired by someone different and powerful, for a more ambitious venture (Bosma et al, 2012). Dasgupta’s extensive work (2011, 2013) on implicit (subconscious) attitudes may also help explain the importance of accessible role models for women and why more women than men eschew particular high achievement academic and professional paths, including entrepreneurship (Ferriman, Lubinski and Benbow, 2009; McArdle,
Dasgupta argues that women’s apparent free choice is in fact “constrained by subtle cues in the environment that signal who naturally belongs in a particular achievement domain and who does not” (Dasgupta, 2011, p231). Certain domains of endeavour may feel incongruent if the individual perceives too great a distance from in-group stereotypes; for example the risk-taking, aggressive masculine entrepreneur. These are the circumstances in which women are most likely to exhibit signs of ‘imposter syndrome’ (Cozzarelli & Majpor, 1990 cited in Dasgupta 2011 p 232). Despite performing as well, or better than peers on objective measures, they may develop subjective lack of confidence in their abilities.

**Life stage and the meaning of mothers’ venturing**

The personal context within which a career is embedded may have particular salience for women. Lewis et al (2015) note how demands associated with the new role of motherhood created tensions for women with existing salaried positions, leading to emotional ‘turmoil’ and a loss of subjective attachment to work. Women did not feel the same passion for their previous employment and entrepreneurship’s allure centred on the opportunity to define the nature of their career journey on their own terms. Lewis et al. (2015, p.28) describe women preparing for entrepreneurship by identifying and “exploring their skills and capabilities in terms of being an entrepreneur”. Women are driven to alleviate role tension (feeling torn) and balance competing demands (juggling), while often feeling guilty. Lewis et al (2015) conclude that any attempt to meld identities requires the construction of practical boundaries to enable efficient performance of both roles. As businesses matured however, owning and running a business became an important source of self-fulfilment and a key component of personal identity that distinguished the women from their peers. By contrast the women interviewed saw motherhood as more of a societal norm than a distinct identity worth celebrating (p32).

The concept of work-family or work-home balance is central in research on the motherhood-entrepreneurship nexus. For Greenhaus and Allen (2006) work-family balance is a psychological construct, the authors emphasising individual’s satisfaction with their performance in work and family roles. Grzywacz and Carlson’s (2007, p466) definition moves the construct of work-life balance into the social domain with a focus on the “accomplishment of role-related expectations that are negotiated and shared between an individual and his or her role-related partners in the work and family domains.” However, “individuals also play a role in shaping their work-family balance because they participate (actively or passively) in the social negotiation of role-related expectations” (Grzywacz and Carlson 2007 p465). Drawing on Frone (2003), Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) further advocate the deconstruction of work-life balance into two key components of work-family enrichment and work-family conflict for the purposes of measurement. Grzywacz & Carlson (2007) explain that work-family conflict captures the degree to which the responsibilities of work are incompatible with family life (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), whereas enrichment refers to the extent to which individual’s involvement in one domain benefits their participation in another life domain (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006). Grzywacz and Carlsson (2007, p 460) argue that enrichment and conflict are not just observable consequences of work-family balance but that “they give meaning and form to individuals’ evaluations of how well they are meeting shared and negotiated role-related responsibilities” (p460).

Perhaps because of this explicit pursuit of a work-life harmony, entrepreneuring mothers’ businesses may assume particular meaning and significance in an individual’s narrative of self: a form of work that exemplifies Wolf’s (2010) notion of a ‘ground project’ that helps us to answer fundamental questions about what our reasons for living are. Yeoman (2014) has written persuasively on the
importance of meaningful work as a fundamental human need following Wolf’s ‘bipartite’ value of meaningfulness in life (Wolf, 2010). From this perspective, Wolf (2010) proposes that both personal satisfaction (subjective attractiveness) and being able to judge our lives as good and valuable against externally derived standards (objective value) is essential for work to provide meaning and a source of pride. Yeoman (2014) expands on Wolf’s (2010) suggestion that the value of meaningfulness addresses several important human interests including an aspiration to objectivity and a need for self-esteem and affiliation. Thus, we might anticipate mothers to derive more self-fulfilment from work that connects them to a cause or something larger than themselves, particularly objects and activities to which others ascribe value whilst simultaneously relieving social isolation and creating a sense of belonging (Wolf 2010). Kaupinenen (2008, p 2) also notes that in order for an activity to contribute to meaningfulness in life it needs to further an individual’s life-story. We might envisage therefore that the strategies entrepeneuring mothers employ to maintain coherence in their own self narratives will play an important role in sustaining commitment to their chosen path even when work-life balance remains elusive (Eddleston and Powell, 2012).

Methodological approach

This research takes a qualitative approach. We conducted 26 interviews with female entrepreneurs based in the UK between 2012 and 2016 who have young children from a variety of business sectors (see Table 1 for profiles). The interviews examine the rationales of entrepeneuring mothers who operate their businesses alongside their family and child rearing commitments. We sought to understand the way women articulate their hopes and fears, as well as their reflections on societal expectations. The interviews lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours, during which women reflected on transitioning to entrepeneurship or self-employment, building their business and juggling demands of work and home. These semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewees to reflect on issues that they perceived as important (Kvale, 1996; Mishler, 1986) at length.

When using an interpretivist methodology (Saunders, et al., 2010) we understand that our respondents socially construct the reality within which their businesses operations and their home and work life intersects. This presents the potential for an element of post-rationalisation and selective self-presentation, since our respondents often expressed strong attachment to and defensiveness of their businesses. We did not ask people directly to imagine or articulate possible selves. Instead we used a narrative approach to interviews to examine “the complexity of multiple self-experiences and social presentations” (Horowitz, 2012 p.1) through stories that entrepeneuring mothers shared with us. As a result we were able to explore how women talk about and reflect on business goals, hopes, fears and threats in the context of their own personal entrepreneurial journeys and how specific events and experiences are integrated into a coherent and ongoing ‘story of self’ (Giddens, 1991).Through this process we sought to illuminate the link between entrepeneuring mothers’ self-construals and entrepreneurial motivations.

Data Analysis

The 26 interviews were audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim. We have analysed our transcripts using stages of thematic analysis for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Even though we were looking for a coherent narrative from our respondents, “we [did] not subscribe to a naive realist view of qualitative research, where the researcher can simply ‘give voice’ to their participants” (see Fine, 2002, p.80). We also agree with Braun and Clarke (2006, p.80) that “there is not one ideal framework for conducting qualitative research, or indeed one ideal method.” We summarise the analytical process through stages of thematic analysis in Table 2, where
we include illustrative quotes of first and second order themes that emerged from our data through an iterative comparative process (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2003). In the next section, we report our findings.

Findings

Hoped selves

Although for every participant the transition to motherhood has been pivotal in the decision to start-up in business, we found little evidence of a desire to merge home and work spheres. More typically, the decision to start up in business came from a pragmatic reconfiguration of work around childrearing responsibilities. As can be seen from Table 2, women hope to be present and participate actively in their children’s lives. So entrepreneurship is seen as a means to an end, with the hoped-for self ‘in charge of when and where I work’ emerging as a powerful motivational goal. For example, when asked why she started a business, Mary replied ‘because I wanted to stay at home when they were at home — to start up my own business, just something I could do around the children’. Similarly, Stef commented ‘I can only work 9 till 3 and I need 14 weeks a year off and I don’t see a job that works like that’.

For the majority of women interviewed, maternity leave also provided an opportunity for critical reflection and reprioritisation of work and life goals and values. There was a clear sense from many participants of the fulfilment they derived or hoped to gain from accomplishment in both domains and an unwillingness to sacrifice one for the other. Several study participants reported seeking greater meaning from work. Even in some cases where ventures were still being established women’s narratives suggest a renewed sense of purpose. Women seem to structure their personal and business stories in such a way that congruence between business goals and personal values systems is emphasised. It is notable that the majority of the women we interviewed referred most frequently to the non-financial rewards they sought or derived from entrepreneuring. Wanda offered this perspective: ‘I don’t want to put out a service that just earns me money and I can sit back... I want a legacy’.

Some women report having considered entrepreneurship in the past, or “toying with the idea” of setting up a business in the background for a while. There was less evidence that others had been able to readily imagine a hoped-for entrepreneurial-self in the early stages of business development. Even owners of established and successful businesses found it difficult to identify with a label that felt masculine, arrogant and hence inauthentic suggesting an entrepreneurial possible self is less motivationally significant in this context.

As other researchers have described (Lewis et al, 2015), some mothers reported a loss of subjective attachment to their previous career, that appears associated with a less salient or possible hoped-for work-self (in the context of professional employment). Some women felt overlooked for promotion or in some cases directly sabotaged after returning to their previous positions with reduced hours.

Whilst some entrepreneuring mothers choose to integrate aspects of family and business, such as breastfeeding whilst working at home, others impose boundaries, for example assigning working and non-working days or dropping off and collecting children from school and returning to work after bedtime. Despite such attempts to reduce conflict in role performance, it is notable that perceptions of identity dissonance persist; mothers describe engaging in a form of internal dialogue in which they constantly question the legitimacy of their actions and decisions. Several women noted how their
initial visions of future work-life harmony seem hopelessly naive in retrospect. For example Val commented: “I got to what I’m doing now because I couldn’t envisage going back to work with my young child…. when Amy was little and I used to drop her off at school in the morning and then go to work and then pick her up at night time; but then having had a second child, I couldn’t see how I was going to be able to cope”.

Others describe having reached a state of acceptance, recognising ‘juggling’ and ‘justifying’ as a more permanent mode of operation. Women also explain success in non-financial, subjective terms. For many, the fact they have found a way of doing work and motherhood on their own terms (even if it means working harder for less financial return) becomes a rightful source of pride in itself (Wolf, 2010).

Feared selves

As might be anticipated, women’s fear of failure is woven throughout the data. What is surprising is the extent to which feared selves intersect the domains of work and home and relate back to the need for flexibility rather than a fear of failure of the venture. In situations where mothers imagined (or had experienced) their previous employment to be incompatible with achievement in the family domain, the fear of being ‘forced’ to return was very genuine and frequently expressed. The feared self is associated with being disconnected from the family, being absent when it matters most to children; for example, when they are sick or waiting anxiously for their (late) mother at the school gates. As Nell describes: “...it’s just the comfort. They get so much comfort when you’re there, especially in Reception. They’re let out one by one, those little anxious faces that come out, and as soon as they see you, there’s a big smile and it’s quite moving...”.

Whilst some women did report a fear of losing their professional status, especially those who had previously enjoyed a high level of success in ‘high powered’ roles, this seemed to affect their motivation through a loss of hope for the future vs. fear of failure. It is notable that in our sample, the majority of women were financially secure and money worries were rarely front of mind. Nevertheless, several participants expressed their concern to provide a good or better quality of life for their children. Thus, even though work might be considered a choice for such women they were committed rather than dabbling in entrepreneurship, and a strong sense of social expectation associated with professional achievement (see ought selves below) is evident in their narratives.

Ought selves

As mothers reflect on their personal and business journeys and articulate hopes and fears for the future, their sensitivity to the expectations and judgements of others is palpable. Women report their disappointment when husbands/partners who initially expressed support, continue to expect the ‘usual service’ at home and in some cases become resentful when domestic duties are neglected. References to neighbours or friends who “think I don’t ‘do’ anything” [when women are running their businesses from home] reveal a frustration at anticipations that they should visibly conform to expectations associated with achievement in the domain of work. We can infer from the narratives of entrepreneuring mothers that a powerfully motivational ought self at work underpins concerns to demonstrate productivity, but with a shift in emphasis.

The ought-selves associated with gender roles of mother, wife and homemaker remain motivational for many women, demonstrated by the way study participants describe their attempts to orchestrate day to day activities. Women might have to find time at the beginning or end of the working day once the demands of both business and children have been taken care of. Super-human feats of domesticity
accomplished before breakfast are recounted with obvious pride in stark contrast to the description of ‘dithering’ spouse. As can be seen from Val’s quote in Table 2, early starts are common – sometimes as early as 3am. Others retain a more executive role function as, outsourcing and supervising some domestic and caring responsibilities whilst writing lists, drawing up rota’s or batch freezing home-cooked family meals. Frequent reference to feelings of guilt when key tasks of cooking, cleaning and caring are undertaken by anyone else (even if these feelings abated over time) and the efforts taken to stress the quality of the services provided at nursery indicate that gendered role responsibilities are not readily relinquished by many entrepreneuring mothers.

Ought-selves also appear to influence who or what should come first when compromise is called for. There is a clear sense that mothers ‘know’ children ought to be a mother’s priority, but this is not always possible or practical when the demands of a growing business are more than equal to those of a teething toddler. Women feel torn at times as they try to please everyone – the Jaqueline of all trades (Tegtmeier, et al., 2016) who is master of none. Descriptions of TV or junk food employed as distraction techniques feel like confessions. One woman vividly recalled chastising herself, when she was breastfeeding her infant son at home and found herself willing him to hurry up and finish so that she could get back to business... ‘I would be sitting there thinking “You need to finish. You need to finish because I need to get back and I felt guilty then because I thought “This isn’t how it should be”‘ (Sandra)

Powerful evidence that women are sensitive to social expectations of where and when a mother ought to be present emerged in interviews. Specifically, the ought-self at home, on holiday, at the school gates or sports day and with a sick child exert significant motivational influence. From table 3 it is possible to see that many of the respondents were influenced by potential judgements that others (neighbours, partners, other mothers at the school gates) would make of them.

Taken together across hoped for, feared for and ought possible selves, our findings illuminate the complexity and the motivational significance of the identity work that entrepreneuring mothers undertake. Women are initially attracted to an entrepreneurial career because it offers greater flexibility and control over where and when they’ll work, and hope this will reduce role conflict. The data shows how multiple possible selves, representing personal hopes and fears and social expectations exert powerful motivational influence but also perpetuate self-dissonance. Mothers’ narratives are indicative of a prevailing motivation to avoid returning to previous employment where work structures, cultures and practices are incompatible with personal hopes and social expectations of motherhood. The feared self that fails at motherhood exerts equal if not greater motivational influence than any hoped-for entrepreneurial self, one that seems to be less readily held in mind by many mothers, especially in the early stages of venture development. The pursuit of more meaning and purpose in work combined with a constant striving for social legitimacy of thought, feeling and action – the ought self with respect to both work and motherhood – characterises the lived experience of the entrepreneuring mothers we interviewed.

Discussion

Women can and do clearly imagine possible future selves but a positive future entrepreneurial self seems harder to conjure for mothers. It could be because women lack entrepreneurial orientation (Mueller and Conway-Dato-on, 2013) and find the entrepreneurial role identity incompatible with other identities (Grenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Swann, Johnson and Bosson, 2009). However, becoming an entrepreneur may not necessarily be the driving force for mothers, which the literature on entrepreneurial orientation underscores (Lumpkin and Dess, 1996). Instead their individual pursuit of
personal hopes and fears seem to be mitigated by societal expectations in both domains of work and home.

Our analysis suggests that the overarching imperative for mothers who run businesses is the freedom to decide for themselves how, when and where they work. Flexibility and control is important to entrepreneuring mothers because it enables them to do both business and motherhood and because being independent is an important component of self-concept for the majority of the women interviewed. Taken together, this is suggestive of a strong internal locus of control as might be anticipated in an entrepreneurial context (Rotter, 1954). The transition to motherhood appears to heighten the salience of a mother’s need for independence. Motherhood may act as a catalyst for entrepreneurial endeavour in part because women not only want but now also feel they ought to be there for others whose wellbeing depends on them. We are not implying that personal achievement isn’t important anymore. These are women for whom personal professional achievements are a source of pride and previous career identities may be highly salient. At the same time, our findings have illuminated women remain sensitive to expectations that suggest a modern woman should achieve in both work and family domains. Successfully striking a balance is rarely, in reality, a case of work and family roles enriching each other. Nevertheless, the entrepreneurs we spoke to seem to derive considerable satisfaction from their efforts to creatively and strategically manage multi-domain role performances. For example, being present in critical scenes like a sports day or taking a decision to deliberately constrain business growth or employ staff on term-time only contracts can all be a source of pride because they relieve self-dissonance. Even if genuine work-life harmony remains elusive, when women feel they are pursuing more self-congruent goals they are able to sustain an extremely high level of commitment.

When reflecting on the transition to entrepreneurship and as they articulate entrepreneurial aspirations, women appear to interpret traditional paid employment as practically and psychologically incongruent with motherhood. This resonates most with women who have experienced prior success in a previous professional career that the transition to motherhood has interrupted (Kendall, Lerner and Craighead, 1984). This incongruence is felt as a result of different points of tension, with those entrepreneuring mothers, who tried to return to their professional career, and felt the loss of status, being side-lined and sometimes sabotaged; whilst some women fear being ‘forced’ to return and often report having lost their passion or interest in their old role (Lewis et al, 2015). However, naively, women imagine that entrepreneurship will alleviate the role conflict and enhance the role enrichment. We do find some evidence for both but in practice, however, the hoped-for ‘balance’ is not easily achieved, and many entrepreneurs fear that they are perpetually chasing an unattainable fantasy. More importantly, they fear the “loss of self” more, than the ‘fear of failure’, which literature presents as a significant barrier to the development of entrepreneurial intentions amongst women (Noguera et al, 2013).

Furthermore, our analysis questions the pertinence of the positive “future work selves” concept (Strauss, Griffin and Parker, 2012) for entrepreneuring mothers. A future self does not need to be positive or work-related to motivate pro-active career behaviours in this context. Mothers may find it particularly challenging to conjure future entrepreneurial selves as a result of difficulty reconciling normative entrepreneurial identity with the ideals of attachment parenting. We posit instead that mothers are driven forward toward an entrepreneurial future because they want to avoid returning to a past-work self that is irreconcilable with ought and hoped-for selves in the family domain.

The motherhood identity is essentialised in studies that focus on mumpreneurs, however our analysis offers an alternative interpretation of the process, which Ekinsmyth (2010) calls “identity blurring”.

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Our participants, in pursuit of balance across both domains of work and home, find themselves in a constant state of flux, where such balance is a moving target, ever elusive, and clearly unachievable. Mothers construct coherent narratives through telling and retelling their stories, and thus continually justifying for themselves and others what they do and who they are. Even though finding a coherent narrative might be a goal for entrepreneuring mothers (Giddens, 1991), these key performances are part of the more complex ongoing identity projects, resulting in different stories being told to us as researchers, than might be told to friends or indeed others at the school gates. As researchers we must acknowledge, that we have interpreted one ‘telling’ of each mothers’ story, but these stories of self are constantly changing.

By analysing our data through the “hoped”, “ought” and “feared” selves lens, we are able to further explore the challenges of self-adaptation during the transition to motherhood as women attempt to reconcile professional aspirations with expectations of intensive mothering (Carrigan and Szmigin, 2006), and the ‘ought’ self in relation to motherhood comes across as a primary motivation force. “Ought selves” seem to be more powerful and influential, as women feel constrained in terms of being in control, and find themselves in a state of transition or limbo when they juggle different roles. Yet some seem to find fulfilment in their ability to perfect the juggling, by “doing it all” and pushing through the more difficult periods, or feeling that they “ought” to do it all, but choosing what and when to do strategically. In this context, feared future selves and highly salient present ought selves are equally, if not more potent, in terms of behaviour regulation and motivation, than hoped for future work selves.

This multiple identity perspective on entrepreneuring women through hopes, fears and oughts enabled us to develop the following three conjectures that emerged from our data:

| **Conjecture 1:** Entrepreneuring mothers’ strive for control leads to them feeling fulfilled across the domains of work and home, even if this does not reduce the role conflict and tensions. |
| **Conjecture 2:** Loss of control for entrepreneuring mothers may lead to lack of fulfilment across domains of home and work, where they feel they are not “the author of their own story”. |
| **Conjecture 3:** The societal expectations of entrepreneuring mothers as “ought to be good at everything” constrains their ability to feel fulfilled across domains of home and work |

Hence the main contributions this paper makes are firstly, on the surface Mumpreneurship appears to be a version of entrepreneurship that makes ought and hoped selves of being a mother and an entrepreneur more compatible. Mumpreneurship offers a minimal risk of failure either by women pursuing baby related businesses, having limiting aspirations, or using motherhood as an exit escape strategy as in the case of middle class mothers for whom work is a choice. However, we offer an alternative and more nuanced explanation from the possible selves perspective, as we find that women’s pursuit of control for the sake of finding fulfilment at all costs appears to suggest that fear of a “loss of self” or ability to fulfil social expectations play a particularly important role. If they return to their old job, they cannot be the mother they want to be. The liminal period of motherhood offers women a time to reflect and gain new understandings post childbirth of what really matters. This reflection prevents them from returning to previously unfulfilling work, especially when it involves sacrificing time with their children.
Secondly, we have shown how multiple possible selves, representing personal hopes and fears and social expectations appear to exert powerful motivational influence but also perpetuate self-dissonance. We find that amongst entrepreneuring mothers identity dissonance persists as a result of multiple possible selves across domains exerting significant influence. In dealing with this identity dissonance, many entrepreneuring mothers will work much harder than they ever imagined possible without regretting their decision. We posit that the dual effect of a highly motivational “idealised hoped-for self-in-balance” and engagement in activity that is perceived as more identity congruent is what makes them feel that that have achieved the hoped-for ‘balance’, even if in reality it is a moving target, and may be never achieved.

Thirdly, even those women who on the surface are closer to the traditional entrepreneurship stereotype, are working to protect themselves against loss of self after childbirth – protect or rediscover who they were and can still be. Women’s hoped for entrepreneurial selves appear driven by “fears and ought selves”, rather than desire or hope. We find that women are driven primarily by the desire to protect against self-erosion and “loss of self” and ensure their ability to fulfil social expectations, but all in the search for balance across the domains of work and family at all costs, and remain committed to the chosen path.

Finally, theoretically through “possible selves” perspective we offer a more nuanced understanding of what in practice self-efficacy means for our entrepreneuring mothers. Studies to date have shown evidence that women lack self-efficacy, but what emerged from our study, is that self-efficacy is not a homogeneous concept. We found that it rather involves women’s potential (skills, knowledge and experience), and this was abundant. All our women had education and work experience and indeed took a leap of faith when setting up their business. But what is problematic, is their belief in possibility, shaped by their hopes, fears and societal expectations; this may stand in the way of those whose feared and ought selves are more influential. Hence it may be that it’s the ability to find the belief in the possibility through constant perpetual negotiation and reconciliation between these factors that might enable women to engage in entrepreneurship as a whole.

Implications

This paper presents a number of implications specific to the development of the theory of entrepreneurship. “Possible selves” with its multiplicity of possibilities helps to challenge the negative judgements of women’s entrepreneurial endeavour currently inherent in the extant literature. We show how the fulfilment from entrepreneurial endeavour for women can lead to satisfaction, which is achieved through counteracting the self-dissonance that stems from societal expectations of how mothers should behave, and “ought” self, allowing the balance of parenthood and business. Finally, we underline the importance of the form and function of entrepreneurial narratives and other interaction in the development of self-efficacy of women in their pursuit of meaningful work.

References


Table 1: Demographic information about participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Business</th>
<th>Entrepreneur/copreneur</th>
<th>Kids</th>
<th>Work from home?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>Make-up artist</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>E/C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Internet directory</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celia</td>
<td>Children’s fashion</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Business development</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Security</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>Corporate therapist</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>Industrial window cleaning</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katy</td>
<td>Ladies underwear sales</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Surveyor</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>Industrial cleaner</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Website, manufacturer of bags</td>
<td>E/C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nell</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicky</td>
<td>HR consultant</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>Life coach</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Sales of promotional items</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheena</td>
<td>Travel advisor</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stacey</td>
<td>Accessory sales</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>HR consultant</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadie</td>
<td>Garden design</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>Home furnishings sales</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nessa</td>
<td>Designer handbags manufacturer</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Gifts online</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Business Support</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eliana</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>IT business</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>Childcare</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Coding procedure and illustrative quotes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustrative Quotes</th>
<th>First order themes: Hopes</th>
<th>Cross Domain Home and Work</th>
<th>Conjectures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mary: because I wanted to stay at home when they were at home – to start up my own business, just something I could do around the children.</td>
<td>Time at home</td>
<td></td>
<td>Conjecture 1: Entrepreneuring mothers strive for control leads to them feeling fulfilled across the domains of work and home, even if this does not reduce the role conflict and tensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary: be flexible in time and everything so I could be at home and then do work in the evenings or when they’re asleep when they’re babies I could pick it up and put it down.</td>
<td>Flexibility / working</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nell: And it’s just the comfort. They get so much comfort when you’re there, especially in Reception. They’re let out one by one, those little anxious faces that come out, and as soon as they see you, there’s a big smile and it’s quite moving. and I’ve really enjoyed my relationship with the other mothers as well. I’ve made some great friends, which I didn’t kind of expect to.</td>
<td>Participating in active mothering</td>
<td>Meaningful work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella: I do enjoy it and, as I say, the clients, I’ve know them for years. A lot of the ladies I still see now, I used to do their hair when I first started as apprenticeship, so I suppose you could say it is a bit [xxxx]. It’s nice. I enjoy it.</td>
<td>Enjoyable work</td>
<td>Value /Fulfilment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda: I don’t want to put out a service that just earns me money and I can sit back, that’s not good enough for me. I want a legacy, I want to know that when I move away from this that somebody else can pick it up and run with it and make it better.</td>
<td>Work with purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea: …you do lose your status. Even though you’re still on the same management grade and your salary’s still just pro rata, your status goes, the perception is now that you’re not an accountant, you’re just pin money coming to work and, you know, one thing and another and it’s all just so not true because you’re still the same person, but just don’t happen to turn up on a Monday and a Friday.</td>
<td>Loss of professional status</td>
<td>Fear of Failure</td>
<td>Conjecture 2: Loss of control for entrepreneuring mothers may leads to lack of fulfilment across domains of home and work, where they feel they are not the author of their own story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nell: I then went on to have 2 children and had two periods of maternity leave and continued to work 4 days a week and working 4 days a week didn’t put you in a great position in an organisation like Deloittes….Yes, you don’t have to work on a Friday,” and then they arrange [xxxx] days on Friday, everything was on a Friday.</td>
<td>Fear of returning back to inflexible work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadie: I had a week where I didn’t see my daughter for over a week because I was coming in after she’d gone to bed and leaving before she got up and I just thought “I don’t want to do this;”</td>
<td>Failing at motherhood, not being there</td>
<td>Loss of Control</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Shelley:** You know, I say to them “You’ve got two choices. I will try what I can to get the work done so that we can like a couple of days in that week or what have, that we do something for a couple of hours,”

Struggling with organizing own life and life of dependents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustrative Quotes</th>
<th>First order themes: Ought Selves</th>
<th>Cross Domain Home and Work</th>
<th>Conjectures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jane:</strong> If you asked my neighbours, particularly the men who go out to work, they would say I do nothing all day</td>
<td>Judgements of others - “ought to be working”</td>
<td>Constraints on Control</td>
<td>Conjecture 3: The societal expectations of entrepreneuring mothers as “ought to be good at everything” constrain their ability to feel fulfilled across domains of home and work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sadie:</strong> I said to my husband the other day “Do you think I work any less?” He said “No, I think you work more.” Because I work at weekends – I do my books at weekends – but it feels different.</td>
<td>Work ethic – “hard work”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sheena:</strong> between 9 and 3 I’m a Travel Counsellor, between 3 and 7 I’m mum. At some point about… you know, 10 minutes before Sky goes to bed Jason’ll come in and do his parenting for 10 minutes [laughter and cross talking]. I then have to make the transition between, you know, mother and then be a wife and then somewhere in the day you’ve got to fit in Mrs Mop, you know.</td>
<td>“Some people do it all” “Manager” - Executive role - no longer feel guilty</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lydia:</strong> I get up, have a shower, feed the dog his breakfast, wake Lucy up, get Lucy’s lunch ready, make the beds, get Tom up, say goodbye to Lucy. In the meantime, Ian’s [dithering] about asking where his toast is. [laughter]. Then I would either vacuum or do some chore. I would make sure before I go to work I do something. Take Tom off to school, come back, usually have a tidy up, bleach the toilets, do another little chore that takes about 10 minutes and then I’d go to work.</td>
<td>Pride in doing domestic duties</td>
<td>Value / Fulfillment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jane:</strong> I long ago lost any guilt about… [cross talking about feeling guilty]…… I used to, but now what I say to people is “There aren’t a right number of hours to work.” You know, one size doesn’t fit all. You have to sort it out. So if I bugger off for the afternoon and play with [Owen], I might decide to work on paperwork that evening.</td>
<td>Guilt and gendered expectations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Val:</strong> If there’s anything urgent I get up early and do it before everybody’s up in the morning…It can be anything from about 3 o’clock……Yeah, but then I won’t sleep anyway. If I’ve got a lot on work-wise, I generally can’t sleep, but I get loads done from 3 o’clock in a morning.</td>
<td>Not giving up lightly Complex managing domestic responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>