

Executive Women During the Transition to Motherhood

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Many professional women ask me about my Masters project. Given that I wrote about the experience of high achieving women during the transition to motherhood, most women want to know if there are any insights that will help them. The answer is “Yes, tons!” To give you some background, I wrote my thesis on this topic because I wanted to write about something personal and meaningful. Due to my bad planning, I had to write the paper right after my daughter was born, so while breast feeding and adjusting to being a new mom, I was also writing a 100 page paper. I would not recommend this order of events if you can help it. Having said that, writing the paper was one of the most gratifying career experiences I have ever had. It was so validating, interesting, and rewarding to me. Here is a summary of what the research was all about and two of my favorite chapters. I hope they provide you with some insights and glimmers of personal validation, as you try to figure out how to best juggle a meaningful career and motherhood.

Overview of the Research

My overall approach to the project was to first conduct a review of as many studies that I could find on executive women and motherhood. I wanted to see what other researchers have discovered about the topic. I was specifically interested in how values shift after having children and what challenges executive women face as they try to make career decisions after having children. I was interested in executive women specifically because I knew they were like me. They were ambitious people. They got personal satisfaction from their work. It gave them independence, intellectual stimulation, money, and gratification on some level. There would be a feeling of “loss” if the career was totally gone. But, there would also be a struggle once the baby arrived. Let’s face it, being an executive is demanding. When you are one of the top dogs in a corporation it is hard to say “no” to opportunities at work so you can attend playgroup, baby yoga, or whatever other events appeal to you as a mom. I was curious about how other women were dealing with this and what kind of obstacles they were up against.

After I did the research, I put together a “hypothesis” and designed a research method. When creating a research question, I did it based on my own personal experience and I chose to flip the traditional coaching literature on its head. As a coach, I have been taught to help women clarify their values and to use these to guide decision making. Although on the surface this makes sense I was finding that the actual process was quite stressful. Once I knew what my values were, I really wanted to create a life that fit with them, but I was finding that it was way harder

than I anticipated. As I came up against barriers, stress started to bubble. I began to ask myself: “What if I can’t make this happen?” Or worse, yet, “What If I put motherhood as a more central priority in my life and my career tanks. What then?” I worried about disappearing into oblivion and becoming an insignificant blip in the career scene. So after thinking about this, I studied the question: “Does clarifying values during the transition to motherhood actually INCREASE stress for executive women?”

What I learned is that yes, it does typically increase stress. But, the stress is only temporary and it is totally worth it to work your way through it. The key is to be prepared for it and to not rush into any decisions. It is also important to get support. High achieving executive women tend to be quite independent and driven and asking for help isn’t always the first thing they do. In this life stage, support is key! It also helps to educate yourself. By reading about other women’s experience, you will quickly see that some of the barriers you are coming up against are systemic rather than about you. We are at this funny point in history where women are 50% of the workforce, but they have not yet penetrated leadership roles in significant numbers. For those who have, they still have male dominated peer groups and work in organizations that fit with a “male model of success.” Although this is changing, it is still there. It’s like the gray zone between the old and new world. Seeing it for what it is definitely helps.

At the end of the paper, I designed a coaching process for women going through this transition. It is a five phase coaching model which involves: 1) Clarifying Your Values; 2) Uncovering beliefs and attitudes about motherhood and professional success; 3) Creating a personal vision of success for life after baby, 4) Uncovering constraints and obstacles related to achieving your vision; and 5) Making Choices that truly fit with what is important to you. The defining characteristic of the program is that participants get lots of support, validation, and acknowledgement and they get a trusted advisor to help them sort through the interlocking issues that are impacting their career choices.

So, if you want to learn more on this topic, here are two of my favorite chapters. They set the context quite nicely and maybe you will see a little bit of yourself in some of the writing. I hope it helps.

PROJECT SYNOPSIS

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Executives becoming mothers: Phenomenology and Cognitive Dissonance. Unpublished Masters Project Paper. Fielding Graduate University, Masters Program in Organizational Management and Development, Santa Barbara, California. Natalie.michael@gmail.com

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WORKING TITLE: Damned if you do. Damned if you don't. Executives becoming mothers: Phenomenology and Cognitive Dissonance.

ABSTRACT: Using phenomenology as the research method, this paper explores my experience as a high achieving executive woman during the transition to motherhood. It specifically asks the research question: "What was it like to use values to guide return to work choices during the transition to motherhood?" It explores this question from the lens of cognitive dissonance theory and highlights the sources of dissonance, what impacted the magnitude of dissonance, and how this dissonance impacted decisions about return to work options. Following this, is a discussion of the limitations of the research method, alternative interpretations of the data, and recommendations for implementing a suite of coaching tools that help women realize their personal vision, overcome emotional and systemic barriers and contradictions, and find ways to be both achievement oriented *and* a mother if this is what they desire. By doing so, executive women will continue to shift beliefs about the norms of success within their profession and they will become role models for future generations of women.

KEYWORDS: High Achieving Women, Motherhood, Cognitive Dissonance, Achievement

KEY REFERENCES:

Citrin, J., & Smith, R., (2003). *The Five Patterns of Extraordinary Careers: The Guide for Achieving Success and Satisfaction*. New York: Random House.

Eagly, Alice & Carli, Linda (2007). *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders*. Harvard Business School Press: Boston, Massachusetts.

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Chapter Two: High Achieving Women

There is a growing body of literature regarding high achieving women and numerous theories about women's career paths, how motherhood shapes women's careers and how a woman's career path can differ from a man's. This first part of this chapter defines the concept of a "high achieving woman" and some of the forces that shape these women's careers. This is followed by a discussion of the historical context of women at work and an overview of common career models for women. The historical context is a frame for why high achieving women today face unique challenges compared to prior generations when reconciling their ambition, careers and motherhood.

What is a High Achieving Woman?

High achieving women have a unique story to tell given the historical context of the advancement of women in the workplace, career models related to women, and the reality that many of them work in male dominated environments (Ruderman et al., 2002; Hewlett, 2007). Although many of the principles in this paper may apply to a cross section of women, discussing the experience of all women is beyond the scope of what can be covered here.

Given that I am the case study used in this paper, the definition of "high achieving woman" fits with my background and the literature on female executives. Specifically the definition is a female executive in Canada who is between 35 and 42 years old – the "childbearing years"- and is a first time mother.

I am specifically interested in new mothers because they are grappling with cataclysmic changes to their body, life, and relationships for the first time. There is a voluminous body of research that supports the unique challenges new mothers face (Abram, 2005).

The Experience of High Achieving Women at Work

Based on a review of the literature, I have concluded that there are six common characteristics that define executive life for women: 1) hard work; 2) impact on relationships; 3) social rewards; 4) a male dominated peer group; 5) visibility of choice and style and 6) domestic responsibilities.

Hard Work

Many high achieving executive women have “extreme jobs” which are similar to extreme sports (Hewlett, 2007). These are jobs that require endurance, have performance stressors, aggressive timelines, and they can provide an adrenalin rush. A factor of extreme jobs is also long hours. It is not uncommon for executives to work long hours, feel stressed, and feel more pressure to perform each year.

Although both male and female executives may have extreme jobs, many high achieving women perceive that they have more pressures at work than their male counterparts. In a study of high achieving women with an average age of 40, Ruderman et al., (2002) report that the study participants felt as though they were held to a higher bar compared to their male peers and they had to demonstrate heroic results to obtain similar levels of recognition. They were often catapulted into the executive ranks by achievements undertaken in highly challenging or difficult circumstances.

The Winds of Change Foundation is a research institute whose mission is to advance women in leadership. They conducted a study and found similar findings. The foundation interviewed 60 high-powered women in a range of disciplines ranging from 32-70 years old. One reported theme was that these women work harder than men. One interviewee commented: “We need to take the power. It won’t be handed to us” (Silverstein et al., 2001, p 3). In addition, White (1995) reported that high achieving women display high levels of career centrality, working continuously and full time, and they fit domestic responsibilities around their work.

Impact on Relationships

One potential cost associated with spending so much time on work is under-developed personal relationships. According to Hewlett's research (2007), at the end of a twelve hour work day, nearly half (45%) of the women in her study were too tired to engage in meaningful dialogue with their spouse or partner. In her book *The Time Bind*, sociology professor Arlie Hochschild describes how home life can become depleted when the wife and husband work long hours (2007, p 15). She also shows how this experience is cumulative. As the household becomes starved of time, it becomes less appealing. As a result, the home can be a source of stress and work becomes a haven. In the study by Ruderman et al., (2002), high achieving women reported a lack of time to nurture personal relationships and some women felt regret about it.

Social Rewards

Although there may be some costs associated with a high volume of work under demanding conditions, there also may be some benefits. These may include a high degree of engagement, independence, status, power and financial rewards (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Feldman, 1996; Gottfredson, 1996). High achieving women often have positional power in their leadership roles, which provides them with authority and status. They are also some of the top wage earners in Canada, which gives them more choices than less affluent women. Also, if they enjoy their work and it closely aligns with their personal goals, it can have a positive impact on their state of mind and overall career satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Feldman, 1996).

Male Dominated Peer Group

One reality of being a high achieving executive is that there is a high probability of having a male dominated peer group. Women still represent the minority of executives in Canada and represent less than 13% of board seats on the 500 largest corporations in

Canada (Jenner et al., 2008). This means that in order to fit in, these women likely have to adapt their leadership style to align more closely with their male peers.

For example, in the book *Feminine Leadership: on how to succeed in business without being one of the boys*, Loden (1985) claims that there is a masculine style of management that is characterized by competition, hierarchical authority, high control, and analytical and unemotional problem solving. She argues that women prefer a leadership style characterized by collaboration, intuition, empathy and rationality. Eagly and Johnson (1990) conducted a meta-analysis of research related to male and female leadership styles and found that women have a more democratic and participative leadership style compared to men.

Further support for this comes from Silverstein (2001) who conducted in depth interviews with 15 women from Fortune 500 to 1000 companies in a variety of sectors. She found that although the women in her study worked hard and their results were valued, how they did the work was not. They worked mostly through collaboration, team work and mutual empowerment, which was not as highly valued as a more individualistic and competitive style.

One implication of a male dominated peer group is that women may feel that they have to cover up their natural style to fit in (Silverstein, 2001; Ruderman et al., 2002). Although they do this, they don't necessarily want to. Doing so, can lead to feelings of alienation and the sense that they are "adapting" beyond what is reasonable. They adapt because they see it as a way to get ahead but when probed, they prefer to feel more authentic, integrated and whole, and like different dimensions of their life integrate (Ruderman et al., 2002).

Visibility of Choice & Style

Given that women are typically in the minority in the executive ranks, their choices and style become highly visible. They are often scrutinized by men and women alike. Men

may look to them to see if the “measure up” and are “deserving of their status” and women may project their feelings of anxiety about their own career projection (or lack thereof) onto them. Or other women may look to them to help pave the way for their own success. This can pose challenges for high achieving women in that it can be difficult to satisfy the competing demands of their male colleagues, other women, and their own personal needs (Ruderman et al., 2002). In addition, their personal choices like how they juggle work and motherhood are magnified in an organization.

Domestic Responsibilities

In addition to working long hours and having to put in more effort than their male peers, high achieving executive women also do more housework than their male counterparts at work. Although statistics show that men are taking on more housework each year (Lindsay, 2008), the reality is that women still do most of it. In 1986 in Canada, women averaged 4.2 hours more of domestic work per day compared to men (Lindsay, 2008). Hewlett (2007) also found that although men conceptually agree to do more housework, their behaviour hasn't necessarily caught up. Her research found that men were generally more satisfied with women doing most of the domestic work. Some executive women have worked around this by having their husbands stay home. However, according to Hewlett's research (2007), only 20% of the high achieving women in her study have stay-at-home husbands.

The Historical Context of Women and Work

The achievements of high achieving women and the realities they face around juggling work and family can better be understood from a historical view of women in the workplace. Although it is a popular practice to clarify values and to try and define work and family life accordingly, this has not always been the case. In fact, for women in the 1950's and 1960's, it was a far cry from their reality. For them, they were fighting for the right to vote and to be considered "persons" from a legal perspective. They were looking for basic things like equality provisions in the charter of rights and freedoms (Status of Women Canada, December 2005).

Women have clearly achieved enormous progress in achieving equality as a basic human right and there is no doubt that many women and men continue to strive for this goal. As they have made strides in this area, they have also made progress in the work place and devoted more time to paid work. According to a report by Colin Lindsay for *Statistics Canada* (2008), one of the most profound social changes in Canada is women entering the workforce. Today, women outnumber men in education enrollment, millions of women have become entrepreneurs, and approximately 15% of executive roles in Canada are held by women (Status of Women Canada, December 2005, p 16).

Women are no longer blocked by "The Concrete Wall" and "The Glass Ceiling" – popular metaphors from the 1960's and 1970's highlighting career limitations for women (Eagli and Carli, 2007; Hewlett, 2007). In the 1960's, social barriers that were viewed as the natural order of things blocked women's careers. "Although some women fought against it [the concrete wall], most people simply accepted the absolute barriers it implied" (Eagli and Carli, 2007, p 4). During this time, women were expected to be in the labour force only until they marry. This reflected the idealized notion of a society where the male was the breadwinner and the woman was the homemaker.

In the 1970's and 1980's and with women's increased participation in the labour force and the acceptance of birth control, the Glass Ceiling emerged. Here, women were given

access to all but the top jobs in corporations. The glass ceiling exemplified an invisible barrier that women could not break through (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Hewlett, 2007). In reality however, during this time and even today, many women in the labour force were isolated into “female” occupations - jobs that were extensions of their work in the home. This work was not as valued as “men’s work” and women earned less than men.

According to the *Canadian Encyclopedia* (2008), women earned 52.8% of what men earned in 1911, 58% in 1971 and 66% in 1996, and 70% in 2007

(<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1SEC823040>).

In the late 1980’s and 1990’s as women were moving up the ranks, it was taboo to acknowledge differences in men and women other than the most obvious biological ones. Equality between the sexes was grounded in the simple belief that equity was sameness. In society, people were starting to challenge stereotypical views of men and women but the male model of life prevailed and it was “sold as women’s salvation from their second class life” (Gallos, 1989, p. 111). Particularly in the 1990’s, the popular notion was that women could “have it all” - a high powered career and a family – if they worked hard enough. However, this reality was difficult for women (and still is) particularly because having it all meant ascribing to a male definition of success and still doing the majority of the domestic work (Lindsay, 2008).

In the 2000’s, many women – especially college-educated women – recognize that women of the baby boom generation had difficulties attaining their goal of “having it all” (Vere, 2007). They have started to shift their work and family values and many women today. Particularly, Generation X women want a life, not just a job (Vere, 2007). A few research studies provide data to support this. Feyerheim and Vick (2005) found that Generation X women connect professional success with personal fulfillment, including families and relationships. Vere (2007) did demographic research in the United States and found Generation X women were having more children than their baby boom cohorts and they were supplying less hours to the labour market.

According to Shapiro et al., (2008), in addition to shifting work and family values, there are three other societal forces impacting women's careers. These are organizational upheaval, changing demographics, and technology.

Organizations are downsizing, globalizing, off shoring, merging, and declaring bankruptcy at record rates (Shapiro et al., 2008). Long-term lock step careers no longer apply. Today, the typical worker holds nearly 10 different jobs from 18 to 38 alone (Shapiro et al., 2008, p 318). Women entrepreneurs are one of the fastest growing segments of the Canadian economy and represent a growing economic force.

According to a speech published online by the honourable Josée Verner on the economic security of women published by the Canadian Government on November 01, 2007, the participation rate of women in the labour force has increased, going from 57% in 1996 to 62% in 2006 (Status of Women Canada, 2007, <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/med/spe-dis/2007/1101-2-eng.html>). The Canadian population is aging and the population pyramid will flip over. Just as the huge cohort of the Baby Boom generation defined Canadian life for several decades, this new trend in population aging will affect the future of Canada. As Canada's population grows older, women will play an even more important role in contributing to the economy and society. This phenomenon is impacting the world. Many countries have recognized that their well-being and future financial viability will depend on women's increasing participation in the workforce over the next forty years. For example, between 2003 and 2050, the employment rate for women is expected to rise, on average, by 10% in the European Union and by more than 15% in Spain, Malta and Poland.

Also, due to the rise of blackberries, cell phones and the Internet, people no longer need to be in the office. 40% of Canadians let their employees telecommute (Samson, 2008). As a result, virtual teams, flexible work structures and working from home are the norm (Shapiro et al, 2008).

This historical and sociological context is important because it demonstrates that high achieving women face unique circumstances when juggling work and family compared to previous generations. Although they may have less barriers and more perceived choice, they still face systemic barriers within organizations, and their peer groups. They may also come up against outdated beliefs within society, organizations and within themselves about motherhood, success and being an ambitious and professional executive. This is despite modern technologies and demographic realities that should make it easier to juggle work and family.

Career Models Explaining Women's Careers

The Male Model of Careers

The male model of careers is based on the notion that work is central for identity formation and that personal empowerment requires individuation and separation from others (Gallos, 1989; Erickson, 1968; Levinson, 1978). The “work is central” phenomenon comes from the 1960's and 1970's when the industrial revolution and capitalism was taking hold and men went to work and women stayed home (Gallos, 1989). The woman's role during this time was to support her husband to make the money. If she did work, her work was secondary.

Hewlett, (2007) referred to this model as the “white male career model” and said it has these additional features:

- 1) A strong preference for cumulative, lock-step careers and a continuous linear employment path. With each step came higher status and money and “management” was typically seen as the ultimate career path.
- 2) An emphasis on face time and full time employment and often being physically present in the office for more than 10 hours per day.
- 3) An expectation that the steepest career trajectory will be in the thirties.
- 4) An assumption that professionals are primarily motivated by money.

Gloria Miller (2005), a faculty member at the University of Regina in Canada, in an article about organizational change and gender equity, also refers to the white male model but in this case, it is in reference to organizational culture. She quotes Scott (1986) as saying: “It is a constructivist element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (p 1067). She then explains that an organization could be considered “male” because of the values, assumptions, standards and rules that have become embedded in the culture. This creates overt and covert barriers for women’s advancement and inhibits upward mobility because women do not fundamentally “fit.”

Although today there is greater acknowledgement of diversity, different career tracks exist (for example, in the technology sector, career models often demonstrate a “technical path” or “management path”), and there is greater emphasis on lateral moves in succession programs, the attitudes associated with this male model still exist (Miller, 2005). For example, in *The Five Patterns of Extraordinary Careers* (Citrin & Smith, 2003), a popular book highlighting the career trajectory of top performing executives in the United States, it clearly states that for the largely male executive subjects in their study, the peak of their career was typically in their late thirties and forties. At this point, they have the greatest career momentum, get the most calls from headhunters and they are viewed as having the right combination of experience and potential. It advises aspiring executives to leverage this inflection point if they want to catapult their careers to the next level (p 30-45).

As you can imagine this career advice is problematic for women who want to have children. Although a high achieving woman may have amassed similar experience to her male counterpart by the time she is between 35 and 42, taking time out for children could mean losing momentum and being surpassed by her male peer group. This could create a conflict for woman thinking about return to work choices after having a child because there are some real consequences like loss of income and career opportunity.

Alternative Career Models for Women

Many new career models have emerged in the last decade that attempt to understand the shape of women's careers. In contrast to the lock step model of the past, women's careers often take on a more varied path. One popular metaphor refers to women's career as a labyrinth and another refers to "on ramps" and "off ramps" which represent detours women take when they have a family (Hewlett, 2007; Eagly and Carli, 2007).

Alice Eagly and Linda Carli (2007) in their book *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth About How Women Become Leaders* use the metaphor of the labyrinth to describe women's careers and ascension to leadership roles in corporations. In the book forward they describe the labyrinth as:

“a contemporary symbol, it [the labyrinth] conveys the idea of a complex journey that entails challenges and offers a goal worth striving for. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one's progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead. Travelling through a labyrinth is more than demanding than traveling a straight path” (p ix-x).

In her book *Off Ramps and On Ramps: Keeping Talented Women on the Road to Success* Sylvia Hewlett (2007) found that women's career trajectory did not fit with the male model. Instead, 37% take an off ramp (a temporary departure from the career track), voluntarily quitting their jobs for some point. The vast majority views of women who do this, view it as temporary. They do it to reduce their personal load and to better balance their home and family responsibilities. They spend on average 2.2 years out and despite media attention to the contrary, they are not “opting out” of their career all together. Shortly after their career interruption, they look for an “on ramp” – a means to get their career back on track (p 40-43).

Pamela Stone (2008) in her book *Opting Out: Why Women Really Quit Their Careers and Head Home* presents similar data. In a national survey of “highly qualified women” defined as those with advanced degrees, 43% of participants who had children left the workforce at some point in their careers and they cited care-giving responsibilities as the

number one reason for their decision. The same study asked men the same question and found only 24% took time out. For men, they were usually quitting to get more training or start their own business (Hewlett, 2007).

Although these career models are important in that they acknowledge women's realities, there still may be some professional consequences for taking a more varied path. Sometimes it can be difficult to find an "on ramp" after taking time out of the workplace and other research shows that when women have a more ordered career path (linear, sequential, or ladder like) they are more satisfied with their career compared to women who have a more emergent path with unexpected twists, turns and interruptions for non-career related activity (Hewlett, 2007; O'Neil et al., 2003; Dann, 1995). As a high achieving woman making a choice at the juncture of having children, it can be challenging to take time out, watch peers progress, and to see a decline in the status, income and momentum that has defined them so far. All of this sets the stage for cognitive dissonance.

Chapter Four: Work & Motherhood, Values and Dissonance

This chapter defines a value and then explores why it is helpful for high achieving women to clarify values during the transition to motherhood and how using values to guide decision-making can lead to cognitive dissonance. Although this chapter provides evidence that dissonance will likely occur, it is important to clarify that identifying values and using them to guide decision-making is viewed as a valuable exercise despite negative emotions.

The challenge for women is to understand potential sources of dissonance, the magnitude of dissonance, and to create support and develop coping skills throughout the process. Instead of judging women (or women judging themselves) for feeling dissonant about what they value in relation to work and family, we need to create social structures, organizational cultures, and support systems to help women navigate the dissonance and ultimately create the life they want. We also need to build women's awareness of sources of dissonance and help them to recognize that the internal conflicts they experience are normal and can be a catalyst for positive changes in their personal lives, society, and organizations.

Values Defined

It would take another paper to give appropriate service to the topic of values. So to make things simple, an overall definition that applies here is the one offered by Hultman and Gellerman (2002) in the book *Balancing Individual and Organizational Values: Walking the tightrope to success*:

“understanding values requires us to understand needs. Animals act on instinct, preprogrammed how to respond by nature; people act on free will, choosing for themselves how to respond. Our choices are based on values, which are beliefs

about what is important in life.” “Attempting to meet needs brings us face to face with the dilemma of choice. This requires us to step into the future where risk is an element of everything we do” (p 4). “Once we embrace needs, our values become a standard or importance. They also serve as criteria for making decisions and setting priorities and lie behind the explanations and justifications we give for our actions” (p 4). Values perform three essential functions: defending against threat, adjusting to society and fostering growth (p 5).

This definition was selected because it reminds us that values are important because of their implications for choice. When a woman knows what is important to her, there is a pull and a drive to define her life accordingly. When she does not, there is a yearning or a feeling that something is not quite right. Yet creating a life based on values is not as simple as it sounds. In the book, *Coactive Coaching: New Skills for Coaching People Towards Success in Work and Life*, the authors state: “Creating a life based on values is a radical act” (Whitworth et al., 1998, p 5). This statement implies that defining a life based on values is easier said than done; yet it is a key to a successful and meaningful life.

Why is it Helpful to Clarify Values?

One reason that it can be useful to clarify values during the transition to motherhood is that they likely change. Because of the experience of birth, the emotional upheaval, the bonding process with a child, and the mothering role a woman takes on, there is a high probability that what a woman considers to be important will shift in some way (Abram, 2008; Dobson, 2008; Bowlby, 1969). She may take on new values, re-define the relative importance of values, and / or new values may conflict with or cancel out old ones. With this, it is beneficial for a woman to redefine what is important to her and how she can use her shifting values to shape her life.

Values may change due to physiological changes in a woman’s body. Research shows that oxytocin, a hormone which stimulates the contraction of the womb and milk ducts in the breast after birth, plays a role in social bonding, empathy and feelings of calm (Dobson, 2008). This physiological change and the actual bonding experience with a

child can lead to new values being created around relationships, care giving and providing support to others.

They may also change due to the mother-child attachment process. According to Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969), evolutionary forces predispose infants to form strong emotional bonds with their caregivers. The attachment forms when a caregiver responds to an infant's needs and through physical proximity. During this process, the feelings of comfort and growth can be reciprocal and transform both the mother and child. That is, as the mother provides care to the child, something shifts in the mother (Abram, 2008).

Or they may change because new values are internalized during the transition. Wicklund and Brehm (2004) explain that there are a number of criteria that lead to internalization of values. These include the following:

- First, there is a high degree of activity, full engagement, free will, and no coercion.
- Second, there is stress, frustration and embarrassment associated with engaging in the new activity and the gratification for enduring through this is delayed.
- And lastly, a value is internalized when it serves as a basis for future behaviour (p 357).

Why Does Clarifying Values in the Transition to Motherhood Lead to Dissonance?

Clarifying values in the transition to motherhood leads to dissonance because of the potential for values conflict and the implications for identity, choice, trade offs, and regret.

Values Conflict

Clarifying values may highlight to a woman that there is a conflict between her values related to motherhood and her values related to being an executive. This stems from internalizing new values during the transition to motherhood that conflict with values internalized as an executive. As mentioned, a woman has the opportunity to internalize new values during the transition to motherhood, as she meets the criteria put forward by Wicklund and Brehm (2004). However, these criteria are also met in executive life. For example, as a mother, a woman is actively engaged in the process and “plays the role of mother.” As an executive, presumably, she does the same. With both roles there is stress, frustration and delayed gratification for the effort and in both roles, the internalized values that come from the experience have benefits for future behaviour.

What this implies is that as a woman internalizes values associated with motherhood, there is the potential for these values to directly conflict, over-ride or re-prioritize the values she internalized as an executive. When this happens, she will experience dissonance. However, the dissonance may increase further should she employ one of the dissonance reduction strategies Festinger (1957) outlines. For example, if she goes through the process of trivializing one value over another she may create more dissonance because it becomes clear to her that there are implications for her choices and trade offs. She may find it difficult to decide which value is most important because in reality, both might be. The challenge is that she feels constrained to express them due to social, psychological and organizational barriers.

This conflict is eloquently described in Barack Obama’s biography, *The Audacity of Hope*, where he describes his relationship with his wife Michelle (Obama, 2008). When Barack and Michelle met, she was an ivy-league educated lawyer earning almost \$300,000 per year, which was double her husband’s wage. Today, she sees her role as “mother in chief” and has a priority of providing stability to her daughters during the dramatic transition to the white house. However, Obama offers a glimpse of an earlier more conflicted woman and explains: “Her anger toward me was barely contained” as

she struggled with the conflict of work and family while her husband launched a run for Congress. “No matter how liberated I liked to see myself as ...the fact was that when my children showed up, it was Michelle and not I who was expected to make the necessary adjustments.” “Sure, I helped, but it was always on my own terms, on my schedule. Meanwhile, she was the one who had to put her schedule on hold” (p 37).

When a mother experiences a shift in values, particularly if they are in the direction of care giving and nurturing, there is further potential for dissonance because these values are often not viewed as highly in society as the values associated with work (achievement, growth and self actualization). This is reflected in Abraham Maslow’s theory regarding people’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1954). Maslow (1954) said that people essentially have needs such as physiological, safety, social, esteem and self-actualization. These needs are reflected in values like survival, safety, esteem and personal growth (Hultman & Gellerman, 2002). According to his model, love is placed lower in the hierarchy than self-actualization and self-actualization is often associated with work.

The concept of self-actualization happening at work is reflected in literature on “peak performance.” Privette (1981) coined the term “peak performance” to refer to a superior level of functioning that is personally engaging and creative. When people experience it, he says, they often feel unified, open and whole (p 57). Research shows that this feeling is most often experienced at the executive level (Thornton et al., 1999).

What is interesting about this definition is that as a new mother, a woman may also feel unified, open and whole. If this happens, she may conclude that she derives self-actualization from motherhood instead of work. This may be a source of dissonance for a high achieving woman who is encouraged to smash through glass ceilings and concrete walls and likely defined self-actualization in a work context prior to having children. Or, she may feel that she *should* feel self-actualized by motherhood but she doesn’t. She actually may feel more whole at work than at home. This too can lead to dissonance because it goes against idealized images related to motherhood and the joys of parenting.

Identity and Dissonance

Clarifying values may also lead to increased dissonance due to the implications for identity. An identity can be defined as “something at the core of each individual which unifies the fragmentation of experience” (Taylor, 1998, p 355). Brook Shields (2005) in her biography *Down Came the Rain* explains her identity shift as she became a mother and came home with her daughter for the first time.

As I walked barefoot into my apartment, carrying my newborn, I felt disoriented. When I left this space five days ago, I was a totally different person. Now, passing through the same doors, I had become a mother, and the world, as I related to it, had entirely changed. As I held my five-day-old girl in my arms, I looked around the apartment and thought, where am I? Who am I? It was like being in the Twilight Zone, I kept waiting for someone to turn off the TV (p 61).

Patricia Raskin at Columbia University (2006) conducted three studies looking at identity, roles and working mothers. She found that identity conflicts for working mothers were largely impacted by education level and individual differences. The woman who really struggled with questions like: “How do I see myself reflected in my role as a mother and worker?” “What kind of a mother do I want to be?” And, “What kind of a worker do I want to be?” tended to be more highly educated (p 1357). She also found that the greatest conflict tended to come from women with a firstborn child under one years old.

Himmelweit and Sigala (2004) also studied motherhood, identity and work. They conducted semi-structured interviews of 43 working women in the United Kingdom to explore the relationship between their attitude, behavior and identity. They found mother’s identities informed the options they would consider about work and childcare.

“Statements about identity were expressed in terms that ranged from moral imperatives to personal requirements:

If I was going to have a baby then I should be looking after it, rather than having it and having someone else looking after it, because then what's the point really? (Claire, married with two children and staying home full time).

I love her to death but couldn't be with her all the time. (Louise, part time IT Manager with one child in a nursery school" (p 461).

Mother's identities also informed the options they would consider about finances. While some were willing to see a drop in their finances to care for their children, others were not. They concluded that this was due to how they viewed money as being wrapped up in identity. Specifically, the women who would not consider a drop in finances were more concerned about what it would do for their personal earning potential rather than the household income per se.

As part of this research, Himmelwait and Sigala (2004) also did a longitudinal and quantitative study to further explore their interview results. They examined the data of 5,000 randomly selected households in Britain and the attitudes of 1,335 mothers of pre-school children from 1991 to 1999. It showed that 46% of the people who were in the contradictory position of working but believing that their children suffered as a result, changed their attitude within two years. Based on this, they concluded that neither identities or behaviours are fixed, but they adapt to each other at an individual and societal level. The approach the women took to reconcile the differences fits with Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance. That is, they felt a tension between their identity, attitude and behaviour, and as a result, changed either one to reduce the dissonance.

Questions about identity and the resulting dissonance may also arise because high achieving women do not have their own mothers as role models to emulate when making choices about their career and motherhood. Based on a review of related literature, Raskin (2006) puts forward four criteria that are critical for women forming their work / family identity. These are:

- a) an observable set of circumstances that are relevant for the individual,
- b) an observable woman within the family and community who enact the roles within those circumstances,

- c) active role models to emulate and embrace or rebel against in selecting appropriate identity elements,
- d) societal structures that embrace adult identities that combine career and maternal salience” (p 1357).

Given the barriers that their mothers had around work, it is highly unlikely that the mothers of high achieving women had the same kind of earning potential and career potential to “trade off” when deciding their approach to work and motherhood. Because of this, high achieving women will not be able to look to their own mothers as a role model and in some cases, they may have to “rebel” against their own mothers (or mother-in-laws) to form their identity around balancing work and life.

Moreover, high achieving women may experience dissonance as they put pressure on themselves to be role models for other women facing similar challenges during this transition. They may think: “I need to figure out how to do this for other women. What does it say for all women if I opt out? If I can’t do this with my status and level of achievement, who can?” These feelings may be compounded when other women do look to them as role models, watching how they behave closely.

For example, when Michelle Obama, the First Lady of the United States recently stated that her primary role as the First Lady was to be a mother of her children there were articles in the media criticizing this statement (Jackson, 2008). The criticisms implied that she was somehow doing it wrong. For example, in a recent article in *The Boston Globe*, which was accessed online, it states:

Certainly, the mantra "family comes first" is valid, especially in a country that provides so few public or private supports for working families....

Yet, however politically strategic and privately compelling, Obama's decision to be foremost the "first mom" potentially sends a wrong message: that high-level paid work and motherhood don't mix, or that women need to be the ones to step down to care for family. Although former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife, Cherie, kept up her law career during his time in office and French President Nicolas Sarkozy's spouse, Carla, is still cutting albums, perhaps we're not ready for a dual-earner couple in the White House. (Will we see that milestone reached only after a woman becomes president?)

But that doesn't mean that a high-powered candidate's wife has to hide behind a banner of cookie baking and sleepovers when she becomes first lady. This is 2008, not 1958. (Jackson, 2008, http://www.boston.com/jobs/news/articles/2008/11/30/first_mom_has_other_roles/)

Statements like this imply that Michelle Obama's personal decision to design a life that fits for her and her family is somehow "not good enough." This public criticism feeds into women's psyche about what they "should" and "ought" to do and can be a source of dissonance for high achieving (and all) women making similar choices about who they are, and how they will structure their lives to fit with their personal values.

Choice and Dissonance

Clarifying values may also lead to an increase in dissonance because of the implications for choice, the cost of trade offs, perceived regret, and the stress associated with decision making when faced with many options to choose from. Indeed, there are a number of studies that show the conflicts women experience when juggling work and family demands (Bianchi, Milki, Sayer and Robinson, 2000; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004).

Many women may envy high achieving women because they are top wage earners and presumably have highly marketable skills. It could be argued that this affords them the luxury of choosing from an array of childcare options, companies and flexible work arrangements. Indeed, a number of studies indicate that women with higher incomes are more likely to use outside childcare, which gives them more options when balancing work (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004; Raskin, 2006; Hewlett, 2007). However, more choice is not always a good thing. There is a point where the number of options becomes overwhelming (Schwartz, 2005). Instead of creating a feeling of control, the options create stress because it becomes clear that it will be difficult to choose wisely.

The dissonance felt due to a myriad of choices is supported by a recent series of studies titled, "*When Choice is Demotivating*" by Iyengar and Leper (2000). Although based on consumer purchasing patterns rather than career options, the studies demonstrates that

when people have more choices available to them, and have more options to select from, they feel less satisfied and more frustrated about their choices compared to people given fewer options.

Choice can also be challenging and a source of dissonance for high achieving women because it requires them to know what they want. As previously mentioned what they want may feel like a tug of war between their “old self” and “new self” or between their achievement and caregiver values. Barry Schwartz in his book, *The Paradox of Choice* (2005) argues that one way we figure out what we want is by anticipating how a choice will make us feel. To do this, we rely on *remembered utility* and *expected utility*.

Schwartz explains that when we make choices, we first consider our past experience relative to the choice we are making. We will then make future choices based on this experience. He refers to this as *remembered utility*. This is in contrast to *expected utility*, which refers to the prediction people make about how they expect to feel after making a decision. He says that in the ideal world these two things would line up but when making complicated decisions, they usually do not (p 48-49).

He further explains that remembered utility follows a “peak-end” rule (p 49-50). Citing research by Nobel Prize winning author, Daniel Kahneman (1999) he explains that when recalling a past experience, people consider the peak of their experience (good or bad) and the end. We use this “peak-end” rule to summarize the experience and to create a snapshot of how we felt. This influences our decision making more so than the proportion of displeasure and pleasure or the time spent.

Applying this to high achieving woman, remembered and expected utility are a potential source of dissonance. For example, when a woman decides whether to return to work, she may reminisce and ask herself: “How did working make me feel?” “Did I like my job?” In doing so, she would recall the peak memories (good or bad) and the end. She may also ask herself questions about her childhood experience of her mother and whether she worked or stayed home. She may ask herself: “How did this make me feel? Did I

like it as a child?” If she had positive memories from work, she would likely feel a stronger tug back to the workplace. This tug would be a source of dissonance if it conflicted with her beliefs about parenting or her childhood memories of her mother.

As pointed out by Schwartz (2005), these memories will be considered along with her expectations for her new life as a mother and juggling work and family. The hitch here is that it can be difficult to know what to expect. The “wild card” is the child and how a woman adjusts to the new relationship. Not knowing what to expect, can be a source of dissonance. It can lead to feelings of incompetence and insecurity about what the future holds. A woman may realize that she can’t adequately plan her next move, which may be uncomfortable given the value placed on this skill in her executive role.

Choice can also be a source of dissonance because it can lead to regret and trade offs. That is, no matter what choice a woman makes about returning to work, it may not be perceived as optimal. Roese and Somerville (2005) conducted a study on what areas of life produce the greatest regret and why. With regret being a negative emotion that feels bad because it implies fault in personal action. They compare it to dissonance in that a person feels tension and tries to anticipate which options available will lead to less regret. They did a meta-analysis of 11 regret ranking studies and revealed that the biggest areas for life regrets (in order) are education, career, romance, parenting, self and leisure.

Roese and Somerville (2005) use the term “The Opportunity Principle” to explain this (p 1). This is essentially that opportunity breeds regret. When we believe we have an opportunity, we have the potential for the greatest feeling of dissatisfaction. If opportunity is denied or we have problematic circumstances that prevent it, we typically experience cognitive dissonance. When this happens, people try to rationalize the feelings away to mitigate the feelings of regret. The regret persists if we have the opportunity for positive action and don’t take it.

Schwartz (2005) further explains this principle and says that when we have a number of options available to us and we reject some of them, we do not forget about the rejected

options. No matter what we choose, our satisfaction is diluted because we perceive a “cost” associated with not pursuing the options we reject.

Following this logic, the trade offs associated with motherhood would be particularly challenging for a high achieving woman because it is natural to consider a number of scenarios: 1) return to work; 2) stay home; 3) do something in between. Each of these options has a significant cost or trade off associated with it. For example, given the level of status and achievement an executive experienced at work, staying home will likely lead to feelings of loss. At the same time, if she goes to work, she will miss out on being with her child during the formative years. Perhaps she will say to herself: “my career will always be there but my child is only young once.” If she opts to do a hybrid model, she may find that her organization is not set up to truly accommodate her and having flexibility and a reduced work schedule limits her. Although it is “better than nothing,” it still represents a trade off.

Trade offs may also lead to dissonance because in the end, the “choices” do not feel like real choices at all. If they are wrapped up in “shoulds” and “ought to” and identity and role confusion, women may feel trapped by the options and trade offs required. This trapped feeling may be a source of dissonance in itself in that it directly conflicts with the “freedom of choice” around work, birth control, and having children that Generation X women in Canada are taught is so fundamental to their well being and advancement. Indeed, Schwartz (2005) describes how most people find it extremely challenging to balance the conflicting impulses of freedom of choice with loyalty and commitment to social relationships.

Dissonance and Decision Making

Dissonance may also come from the pressure to make a return to work decision within the time constraints of legal maternity leave. These time constraints may negatively impact a woman's ability to make a good decision.

Maternity leaves are finite and although they are one year in Canada, executive women may feel pressure to come back early or to connect with the office sooner due to their level of responsibility. Indeed, a close friend, who is also the Chief Financial Officer of a large not for profit returned to work after four months. She explained to me, "I could have legally taken more time off but I was afraid about the cost to my career, the state of the department I worked so hard to build, and the implications for my finances."

The Catch-22 for high achieving women is that if they feel stress or pressure to make a decision sooner than legally required, it can lead to five patterns of coping, four of which can lead to poor decisions (Schwartz, 2005; Janis and Mann, 1977). Good decisions arise when women employ a coping strategy called vigilance (Janice and Mann, 1977, p 58). Vigilance involves appraising a situation and carefully evaluating available options before making a choice. When applying this coping strategy, women may feel pressure to make a good decision and they likely understand there are consequences and risks if they make the wrong choice, yet they also feel like they have adequate time to come up with a good solution, and they feel moderate stress throughout the process. They also feel hopeful that they can come up with a positive choice.

Less positive coping strategies, which a woman may use under pressure, include:

- 1) Unconflicted adherence – The decision maker's evaluation of a situation leads to the belief the risks for not changing are negligible. Because little or no stress is generated, the person does not become vigilant in appraising options.

- 2) Unconflicted change – Here the person recognizes the risks are high for not changing and low for changing. Some stress is generated and a decision is made without fully considering the alternatives.
- 3) Defensive avoidance - Here the decision maker believes the risks for changing and not changing are both serious and they feel that the prospects for finding a good solution are unrealistic. Stress is high and the pursuit of new opportunities is prematurely curtailed.
- 4) Hypervigilance is like panic. The risks for changing and not changing are serious. Although a good solution exists, the decision maker feels like there is not enough time to find it. Stress is high and an alternative is hastily selected without careful consideration of possible consequences (p 58-62).

In addition, research shows that when under stress people become insensitive to contextual subtleties (Nicolson, 1995) and it increases their urge to control situations (Sampson, 1993). In turn, they lose the ability to see multiple perspectives on a situation and they may shut out potential solutions to a problem that directly challenges more stable and predictable ways of seeing things (Wicklund, 1999). This may lead to decisions and choices that have predictable outcomes rather than choices that are the best for them in the long run, and that take into account their whole self (Wicklund, 1999).

This is not to suggest that all high achieving women will experience high levels of stress to the point that their decision-making is impaired. However, even the most cool, calm, and well adjusted woman, can not help to be impacted by the trade offs associated with these decisions in some way (Simon, 1992; Abram, 2008).

Family, Organizational Dynamics, and Dissonance

Clarifying values may also create dissonance because values indicate what is important to a woman and they may conflict with values, beliefs or attitudes held by her partner, other family members or her organization.

If, for example, a woman's values indicate that she is highly achievement oriented, this may not fit with more traditional concepts of family and motherhood held by her partner,

mother, or potentially her mother-in-law. Or, on the other hand, if a woman decides she wishes to act more in accordance with traditional views of motherhood or create a work situation that accommodates both work and family, it may conflict with her organization's definition of success, particularly if her organization is male dominated or ascribes to traditional lock-step career models. In these scenarios it may feel like she cannot realize her vision of success or that it is difficult due to emotional and systemic barriers. Although this may be true, navigating these issues and understanding that her contradicting feelings are normal, is a critical step in living her values.

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