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Motherhood, Subjectivity, and Work

The becoming of worker mothers: The untold narratives of an identity transition

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Abstract

Worker mothers still struggle to find a good balance between their care and work identities. Most research on motherhood at work focuses on how organizational structures can enable professional women to find a balance between caring and work identities neglecting their personal experiences and how they understand themselves in relation to both motherhood and work. We propose to use a liminal identity work perspective to explore the identity tensions that professional women experience during their transition into motherhood and how they manage it. To explore this question, we conducted a qualitative study over 2 years with worker mothers in Latin and North America, Europe, Asia Pacific, and Africa. The thematic and narrative analysis of 80 individual narrative interviews shows the emergence of two coexisting identity narratives. The first narrative understands motherhood as a linear process, where women experience liminality, uncertainty, and identity loss but eventually return to work after having aggregated their new worker mother identities during maternity leaves. The second coexisting narrative challenges this linear and finite view by highlighting the transition to motherhood as a continuous, liminoid, and never-ending process. The two narratives are contextualized and managed differently according to the different cultural, historical, and social contexts where they

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are developed; the overall results present motherhood as a 'liminoid' experience that requires constant identity work to navigate the tensions emerging between potentially new and customary identities and behaviors in work contexts.

KEYWORDS

identity work, liminality, motherhood, narratives, worker mothers

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite decades of research and policy-making to find solutions to the problem, worker mothers still struggle to find a good balance between their care and work identities (Gatrell et al., 2017; Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Most research on motherhood and work has looked at how organizational or cultural structures might inhibit or enable professional women to balance it all when becoming working mothers (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015), generally neglecting the personal experiences of mothers in everyday work contexts, and how they perceive themselves in relation to both motherhood and work (Bruni et al., 2004; Murray, 2008; Spinelli et al., 2016). To complement this research, we propose using a liminal identity work perspective (Beech, 2011; Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2020; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015) to explore the identity tensions professional women experience during their transition into motherhood and how they manage them.

We have used a qualitative research design to answer this question focusing on 80 situated working mothers' stories from Latin America (LA), North America (NA), Europe (Europe), Asia Pacific (AP), and Africa collected over a period of 2 years. Our thematic and narrative analysis shows two coexisting narratives describing their journey. The first linear narrative describes how our worker mothers follow a journey that is reminiscent of the liminal phases of separation, liminality, and aggregation outlined by Turner (1987). Professional women describe how they separate from their known identity and social position when becoming pregnant, moving next into a liminal transitional period during their maternity leave before potentially re-aggregating back to work as worker mothers having regained a 'balance' between those two identities. However, the second coexisting narrative challenges this linear view and describes the tension between motherhood and work as a continuous and constant state of flux, and the mother worker identity as in permanent negotiation and reinvention.

Therefore, our research captures the liminal identity struggles professional women experience in their journey toward becoming worker mothers, stressing the importance of looking beyond the start of the journey in pregnancy (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015) or the return to work after giving birth. We also show how motherhood is a social, relational, and historically situated process and how, through identity work, worker mothers in different regions are able to position 'worker' and 'mother' identities as two sides of the same coin, rather than as contradictions. Furthermore, we illustrate how an understanding of motherhood as a processual journey that continues beyond returning to work could help shift the current mainstream assumption that organizational cultures need to be completely childless (Riad, 2007).

We begin our study by outlining the theoretical framework to frame the journey of worker mothers, summarizing research on subjectivity, motherhood, identity work, and liminality. Then, we elaborate our methodology to present thereafter our results in the form of liminal identity work narratives, before concluding with a discussion of our findings and the contributions of our study.

2 | THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 | Motherhood, subjectivity, and identity

Motherhood studies define mothering as a continual process of being and becoming with and through the child (Kromidas, 2021). Motherhood studies draw on Rich's (1976) distinction between motherhood (as ideology and institution) and mothering (experience and identity) and Ruddick's (1989) emphasis on the specificities of maternal thinking and doing (O'Reilly, 2019). While in motherhood studies, motherhood functions as an empty category into which children's needs can be placed, and gender research has argued for theorizing mothers as autonomous subjects with their own rights specially through the process of mothering (Hollway, 2001). Looking at the discourses, practices, relations, and embodiments that constitute maternal subjectivities within the tradition of motherhood studies, gender studies highlight mothering as both the site of patriarchal regulation of women's labor, bodies, time, and autonomy (Schmidt et al., 2023) and the site with radical potential for transformation of subjectivities, identities (Knott, 2019), norms, relations, and values in which we live (Gumbs, 2016). That is, there are calls for conceptualizing motherhood as a process with potential to (re)create subject positions and identities through the process of mothering, going beyond its traditional framing.

Contemporary Western mothering has its roots within the 20th century governmental regulation of families, in which 'childhood [became] the most intensely governed sector of personal existence' (Rose, 1990:121). A whole complex of apparatuses was targeted at the child: child welfare, school, juvenile justice, and the education and surveillance of parents. Government and regulation were achieved through a strategy of subjectification and normalization in which parents (mothers) internalized social and cultural aspirations, norms, and desires so that 'state' interference became only indirect (Rose, 1990:208). In this process, mothers (not fathers) were held responsible for the welfare of their children and became the main target for children normalization through the mass media, childcare manuals, advertising etc. Gender scholars largely agree that this resulted in anxious, hyperdisciplined, ever-striving maternal subjects (Vandenbeld Giles, 2014) investing an extraordinary amount of labor to become a "good mom"—keeping up with a never-ending stream of various experts' advice (O'Reilly, 2019). Thus, in traditional (Western) motherhood studies, mothers were positioned solely as objects of their babies' and families' needs, rather than people in their own right (Rose, 1990).

Within organization studies, research on mothering is still rare and mainly centered on pragmatic issues related to, for example, work-life balance (Gregory & Milner, 2009). Other objects of concern have included negotiating breastfeeding in the workplace (Riad, 2007), women's struggles to balance their careers and mothering roles (Biese, 2013), women's experiences of working in contemporary organizations (Lewis, 2014), maternal employment (Holmes et al., 2012), and male parenting (Yoshida & Busby, 2012). Critical research has started to look into issues such as the impact of female bodies in organizations (Gatrell et al., 2017), their emotional labor (Dean, et al., 2022), their embodied experiences (Huopalaainen & Satama, 2019) etc. However, organizations seem to still fear "issues of [child]care" (Bailyn, 2004, p. 1515) and this fear can lead to assumptions that mothers are less productive than either men or non-mothers (Hebl et al., 2007) with motherhood potentially "intrud[ing] upon and disrupt[ing] the ideal functioning of the organization" (Little et al., 2015). Furthermore, employers and coworkers are known to resent practical disturbances to everyday workplace routines—for example, when mothers seek to access flexible work schedules—and there are documented organizational tendencies to "exclude" mothers (Acker, 1990, p. 152) either legally (e.g., through maternity leave) or more informally, relegating them to a liminal space difficult to negotiate. Lived maternal experiences remain under theorized in the field (exceptions include Gatrell, 2014; Greenberg et al., 2021) with motherhood still seen largely as a homogeneous organizational 'problem' to be 'resolved' assuming that "the structures, institutions and practices of mothering have clear-cut and uniform effects...What is lost in the process are accounts of maternal subjectivity which can take into account...individual women's positions in relation to a variety of discourses concerning motherhood" (Hollway and Featherstone, 1997:7). The question remains therefore as to how being a mother coexists with other identities and social positions. A postmodern view of multiple fragmented selves

would suggest that they simply coexist—quite possibly in tension (Kanji & Cahusac, 2015), and particularly during pregnancy (Hennekam, 2016; Ladge et al., 2012). We favor the view that although different selves might indeed coexist, identity coherence or integration is attempted throughout professional women's journey into and during motherhood, generating identity tensions that need to be negotiated through ongoing identity work.

Recent research has started to portray mothering as an identity process of 'becoming' (Hennekam, 2016) as a fundamental transition in a woman's private and professional life. Building on this research, we take the linguistic metaphor of identity work as useful in capturing the dynamic aspects and constant struggles of identity construction in transitional states as the one worker mothers find themselves in (Brown, 2006). Identity work has been defined as the set of processes through which people develop narratives of the self in a context where external influences seek to impact on, or regulate, the nature of that self-meaning (Alvesson, 2010). A distinct characteristic of identity work is that identities are understood as temporary, negotiated, and contested in ongoing self-reflection and social interactions (Brown, 2015). Further, identity work looks at how particular narratives become imbued with meaning and are taken or rejected as being part of one's identity. Thus, identity work is also a process of absorbing, personalizing, and enacting general narratives or being constrained by them (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016).

The dialogical approach to identity work we use sees identity as held in repertoires of coexisting self-narratives that are selectively used in response to the context and purpose of particular practices and interactions (Toyoki & Brown, 2014), a view we further by emphasizing the significance of the perspective and the position the author takes in each narrative. When worker mothers position themselves in motherhood narratives, they produce a particular self, infused with the voices of the generalized 'other', making the positioning of the self in the narrative a joint relational dialogical effort between self, other, and context (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999). The positions that worker mothers take and assign to others in these narratives relate also to particular images, narratives, and practices of motherhood. As such, as the worker mothers' narrative position changes, their perception of motherhood, along with the way they act, changes too. This multivoiced and dialogical nature of the self is an adaptive response to the fractured social world we traverse, explaining its critical relevance in transitional or liminal contexts, such as the ones worker mothers face. Identity work seems particularly necessary in liminal conditions, where strains and tensions, which prompt feelings of confusion, contradiction, and self-doubt and lead to an examination of the self, are prevalent. We now move to outline this liminal identity process.

2.2 | Becoming a worker mother: A liminal identity transition

The term "liminal" was first used by Van Gennep (1960) to name the middle or transition phase of a three-phase rite of passage that begins with separation (end of previous identity and social position) and ends with aggregation (new identity and social position adopted). Rites of passage are enacted at culturally and socially significant points of transition with each stage outlining identities and clear areas of social activities. Turner (1987) further developed the concept, calling this in-between stage "ante-structure", to stress the opposition of the liminal to clearly articulated social structures. Thus, liminality removes limits from everyday life, so everything is open to question with "liminal personae" having no defined and recognized social or institutional position: they are in-between and betwixt (Turner, 1984).

Along with transgression, inversion, and parody, liminal processes notably include the reflexive contemplation of structures that have been suspended, which enables and inculcates a critical and creative attitude (Beech, 2011). Social invisibility and lack of a given 'social position' are central characteristics of this liminal condition, which remove limits from everyday life, so everything is open to question. Hence, a liminal transition can be a dangerous time with no sure standards for behavior. There is a potentially frightening, bewildering limitlessness in which societal norms appear arbitrary and cultural boundaries illusionary, a moment of 'touching the void' (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2020) but liminality is also the time/place where unlimited potentiality exists (Turner, 1987).

Any position we have in the social structure provides us with a degree of stability and coordination that steers and simplifies our activities in socially recognized and authorized ways. However, social positions are not stable;

rather, their positions are constantly enacted as they go through a number of transitions that involve the management of some sort of threshold or border. Professional women become 'something different' when they cross a border (e.g., give birth), and sometimes their context changes, too. Therefore, liminal transitions "significantly disrupt[s] one's internal sense of self or place within a social system" (Noble & Walker, 1997, p. 31) and trigger both identity and contextual reconstruction in such a way that a possible new identity and social position might become meaningful (Beech, 2011). As Turner's conceptions indicate, separation from a stable condition is not destitute of form, and although it can involve loss, liminality holds the potential for the creative resurgence of new identities and social positions (Van Gennep, 1960).

Liminality can have positive and negative implications not only for individuals but also for their social context. On one hand, 'communitas' (a bonding over and above formal social bonds) (Turner, 1987) can spontaneously emerge from liminality through the support of those involved in a similar process and can play a significant role in ensuring a smooth transition toward a reaggregated identity. However, there can also be 'outsiderhood', where the individual is "situationally or temporarily set apart" (Turner, 1984) from others in chronic (Ybema et al., 2011) or permanent 'liminoid conditions' (Turner, 1987). This is a distinctive kind of liminality, where the process of transition is never brought decisively to a close, or it is constantly re-opened again by events that suspend the transition (Garcia-Lorenzo et al., 2018). In this case, identity reaggregation does not occur. What is crucial here is the long-term, continuous, or permanent experience of liminality as an interminable transition generated by the cumulative suspensions of structures and the constant negotiation of order and norms.

In times of fundamental change as for those experienced in motherhood, when old norms, identities, and expectations transcend into new ones, the ability to improvise and learn is even more important (Beech, 2011). It is in this context that the concept of liminality enables us to understand borders, gaps, and movements between identities and social positions not as empty space, but, rather, as space/times where new identities can be created, played with, and experimented with. Indeed, it is in liminal conditions that professional women becoming mothers can use various 'interstices'—the spaces that fall between the cracks of events—to creatively become something different. We explore this process below.

3 | METHODS

This research investigates the experience of professional working women (women with higher education and working in a profession or with an important position in a company or business) becoming worker mothers from a liminal identity work perspective within different social and cultural contexts. To answer this question, we used a qualitative research design with narrative interviews as the primary method of data generation. Our aim was to obtain information both retrospectively and in real time through participants' accounts of their personal experiences (Gioia et al., 2013) as worker mothers.

3.1 | Data generation

Participants were recruited based on a purposive sample, as this is a specific demographic. Participants needed to be proficient in one of the languages spoken by the research team (being either English, Spanish, Arabic, or German, although the majority of interviews were conducted in Spanish or English), possess, and have access to basic digital communication skills (including email, social media, and platforms like Zoom). The research additionally focused on women who had a successful birth and then subsequently returned to work of some kind.

Personal networks were used to spread and share a short introductory explanation of the study after which participants who wanted to share their experiences with the research team got in touch. Specific social media platforms (e.g., LinkedIn and Facebook), emails, and online community forums were also used to recruit participants,

particularly in some difficult-to-reach regions, for example, Africa. Despite personal networks being used, we made sure that researchers had no personal connection with any of the participants, maintaining the boundaries of the researcher–participant relationship (Birch & Miller, 2000). Finally, snowball-sampling was also used as all participants were asked if they knew anyone else that would be interested in participating in the research.

Due to physical restrictions and the global scope of the research project, many of the interviews were conducted online via Zoom. While there are differences between face-to-face and online interviews, researchers have found that the quality of the interview does not differ (Cabaroglu et al., 2010). Participants were asked to turn off their cameras for them to focus solely on the audio and feel more comfortable during the interview. Some interviewees, however, preferred to keep the camera on. Recent studies have suggested that building a rapport and a deeper connection can be more challenging over an online interview compared to face-to-face interviews (Roberts et al., 2021) while the distance afforded by online interviews may make participants feel more comfortable and secure, resulting in more transparent and rich insights (Gray et al., 2020). Prior to conducting the interview, we provided a debrief explaining the concept of the research and the interview procedure via email or phone call. During the interview, participants were asked to sign a consent form and fill in their demographic information. We used a topic guide with one broad central question: “*How was your experience of becoming a worker mother?*”. We let the participants speak without interruption until there was a coda (pause or any sign of the end of the story). We then introduced some complementary questions, relating them to any events that participants specifically mentioned, while recounting their experience of becoming a worker mother. Interviews lasted 45 min on average with the longest interview lasting close to 120 min. All interviews were recorded with the recordings transcribed verbatim and the participants' names replaced by pseudonyms for confidentiality. We interviewed a total of 80 professional women who had made the transition from working women to worker mothers in the following regions: 13 in NA, 20 in LA, 21 in Europe and the Middle East, 19 in AP, and 7 in Africa.

3.2 | Data analysis

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic and narrative analysis using NVivo and followed inductive and deductive approaches and quality indicators to meet required qualitative research standards (Gioia et al., 2013). All researchers participated in this codification process and common work was carried out to interpret the data.

The data was analyzed in three stages. First, we conducted a full thematic analysis with all interviews to identify and analyze patterns of meaning across our dataset. This analysis also enabled us to obtain general knowledge about the most common differences and similarities in the worker mothers' transition process, challenges that worker mothers face, their daily engagement with the mothering process, and the different interactions worker mothers reported as experiencing. These themes, among others, were included in the coding framework as first-order concepts (Gioia et al., 2013). Second-order themes emerged as our analysis uncovered the liminal (Turner, 1987) transition worker mothers undergo: first, an initial stage of separation from a previous, clear professional identity and position in their social structure during their pregnancy; second, living in an unstructured social and personal period of uncertainty during their maternity leave; and third, in few cases, starting to outline a new identity and social position as worker mothers.

After obtaining an overall view of how interviewees understood the different stages of their liminal transition into worker mothers, we sought to identify the narratives worker mothers constructed in regard to their experience. For this, we followed organizational identity research that theorizes identities as texts constructed through language, discourses, and narratives (Brown, 2015). We focused on their personal narratives, where worker mothers described the process of motherhood and positioned themselves within particular mothering experiences as well as within local and wider discourses that justified and sustained their positioning in those narratives. The personal stories illustrated worker mothers' ability to (re)produce and (re)create identities through identity work.

Two main narratives emerged from the narrative analysis with regard to the women's own reflections on their identity. The first narrative combines an 'organizational perspective' that details the transition to motherhood primarily in the language of logistics and productivity and an effortless ability to care for or support everyone with a developmental focus on personal transformation, in which the 'before' of a professional working life and the 'after' of motherhood find a way to fit together in an integrated singular identity. This narrative describes the transition to being a worker mother as a linear process, where women experience liminality, ambiguity, and identity loss but where returning to work means for the most part assimilating a new 'combined' identity as a 'worker mother'. This is a narrative of continuation, benefiting both organizations that favor childless cultures and traditional social structures that expect mothers to be the primary caregivers. However, a second coexisting narrative emerged from the analysis. This second narrative challenges the linear view of aggregation of the identities of worker and mother into the 'worker mother' final identity, describing instead the constant identity work required to navigate the 'worker mother' identity. In this narrative, becoming a worker mother is portrayed as a liminoid (open-ended) process in a permanent state of negotiation and reinvention. After the narratives had been developed, the transcripts were re-read to validate them.

A final step in our analysis was the identification of how the two narratives were contextualized within the different cultural, historical, and social contexts where they were developed. To that extent, we identified the themes that were common in the narratives but were enacted differently in the various regional contexts. Key themes emerged, such that the influence the support systems available to the mother during identity transitions (at a social, organizational, and personal level) has on her efforts to explore, accept, and navigate the identity transformation of becoming a working mother as well as the theme of social expectations and norms that weigh heavily on the worker mothers' internalized view of their ability to manage working motherhood. We present those results in the next section.

3.3 | Results: Becoming a worker mother

In this section, we illustrate how worker mothers articulate the process of mothering through narrating their experiences. Our analysis showed the same timeline following Turners' three stages in liminal processes across all interviews: a separation period during pregnancy or childbirth, a liminal period away from the organization during maternity leave and an aggregation period once the mothers return to work. However, not every mother reported the same ending to the transition period with a final identity aggregation, resulting in a different ending to the motherhood narrative. The two narratives below illustrate how worker mothers position themselves in their motherhood narratives while engaging in identity work and manage identity tensions during their liminal transition process.

3.4 | The liminal linear narrative

3.4.1 | Separation (pregnant at work)

As Van Gennep (1960) suggested, when worker mothers describe the first stage of their transition, they report emergent feelings of detachment from their old professional identity triggered often by a change in their social conditions. This emergent separated state affects their confidence and perceptions of self-worth in relation to work. Thus, our worker mothers undergo what Turner (1987) describes as being 'situationally and temporarily set apart' from others. Strong triggers for that identity separation process were usually the pregnancy and the birth of the baby.

The first experience of becoming 'other' starts when professional women announce their pregnancy at work. Being pregnant is seen as a hindrance to working life by peers and colleagues, especially in competitive professional environments, a 'stigma' that can taint a career. It starts with being looked at differently, predominantly by male managers and clients.

It's that stigma in the legal community...a woman returning back to work after a year after being on mat leave or after years of staying home with children. And then there's this gap in your resume... people think they had vacation from the working world, it's, a stigma of ... 'they were lazy'

(Lily, NA)

I tried to get a different job within my company when I was pregnant. And they said 'no, you are pregnant now, so it will be way too tiring for you and for the baby to get a different job. So this is not a great timing' and at that moment I was like 'oh that's really nice that you are so considerate that you are thinking of me' but then afterwards...they are drawing these conclusions that have consequences on my motivation.

(Georgia, Europe)

I remember that when I became pregnant I was told that I had only thought about my times and had not considered those of the organisation. I felt awful

(Natalia, LA).

During pregnancy, identity tensions between being a mother or an efficient worker start to arise fueled by the fear of being seen as less competent and/or losing career development opportunities due to, for example, new physical challenges, from morning sickness to changes in body shape. The fight to balance daily work responsibilities and performance with motherhood also starts at this stage:

I was the only mom on staff [among] the bunch of young, 20 year olds...no matter how much I tried to do, I couldn't keep up to what they were doing because they would spend longer hours. Like your workday is an eight hour day, but we were working on projects and they had the ability to take work home...to come in early, stay later, you know, dedicate more time to work

(Ella, NA)

Becoming pregnant while at work was described mainly as a stage of concern and self-doubt for professional women due to the negative organizational responses perceived through interactions with their peers and managers.

3.4.2 | Liminality (maternity leave)

In this linear narrative, the initial separation from a previous identity or social position initiated during pregnancy is followed by a phase of liminality or experimentation in which worker mothers try out different forms of attachment to other groups or identities (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) through constant self-questioning and reflection (Beech, 2011) before aggregating into a new identity. Following Turner (1987, 1984), this liminal stage in the rite of passage involves 'being in a tunnel', stripped of normal status and authority and removed from the social structure that employment provides. All our worker mothers found themselves in this phase, particularly during their maternity leave, as they were 'separated' from 'normal' work and employment expectations, rules, and norms and had to adjust to the identity challenges that their new role as mothers brought.

The period of liminality of being 'apart' starts after the birth as the first major adjustment, having to disconnect from work to take care of their newborn. Physical challenges, such as sleep deprivation or breastfeeding, made new mothers physically exhausted and compounded strong feelings of loss.

Postpartum after I had him was...there's a lot going on to adjust to aside from having a new...little human...my living situation changed, my whole world just changed.

(Lily, NA)

Yeah...you just change completely as soon as you've got this small vulnerable person to care for. Your mindset changes...your expectations...priorities, everything shifts as soon as he was born.

(Joanna, Europe)

The start of maternity leave is also experienced as a period of uncertainty and chaos. While the experiences of the interviewees varied between those who felt they did not have enough maternity leave to those who found the lack of social connection and loss of intellectual engagement difficult to cope with, the common identity tension in this period was the adjustment to a new identity as 'mother' while having to reassess their identity as professional women. Unpredictability, instability, and lack of knowledge are some of the common feelings reported during this period:

And so certainly in the four months that I went unemployed, I really felt like I had lost part of my identity. And I remember having this sort of crisis, like an internal crisis, and then speaking to my husband about it, like, I don't have work. This is all that defines me, like, at the moment, being a mom, and that should be enough. I wanted it to be enough, but it was not fulfilling.

(Susi, Africa)

When I didn't work, I didn't feel that I had a sense of purpose. And I really struggled to even know what to talk to people about, playdates...kids' groups and things.

(Eve, Europe)

A profound sense of loneliness and 'invisibility' was apparent for many women, especially those who did not feel immediately comfortable in their new 'mother' identity, compounded by the pressure of societal narratives of what makes a 'good' mother and how 'good' mothers are expected to behave and feel; so new mothers find themselves forced to redefine priorities, dreams, and goals.

I didn't process this idea of being a parent the same way...other mothers might be doing. And it's always very difficult to talk about...about feeling unsure about becoming a mother, you feel alone because it sounds like you don't want your kid, and you don't want to ever put that on any record that you didn't want your child, because of course you wanted your child. I just didn't know how to feel about having a child.

(Christina, Europe)

It was like an internal war, being a mother and being yourself. My therapist has told me that I have not changed as a person, but I feel I have...I automatically took on the role of a mother. I was not Alicia anymore; I was Jane's mother

(Alicia, LA).

The sense of separation and loneliness is ameliorated by the support interviewees' encounter from the 'communitas' of others like them. Support also comes from close family members, partners, as well as from private or governmental support structures like day care, which help make their transition into motherhood and later on, back into working life, easier:

I don't think I would have approached a mentor or a coach for motherhood because we are surrounded by women who have been mothers. Like, my mom, my grandmother, my aunts, my cousins, like my friends, like there's so many people out there. Motherhood is a topic that everybody wants to give you suggestions and advice on. You meet others like you. Circles like, govern-

ment run circles, like parents' circles or expectant mothers' circles...I actually attended one, it's like an eight week program or something like once a week, you attend, and they talk about pregnancy birthing.

(Mariah, NA)

so this is one of the things that I am telling other women, like you know, it's a natural process, you may feel quite lonely in there, but it is part of it and you are not alone, we've all been through this and let's try vocalise these things to get it better.

(Georgia, Europe)

In this narrative, society is positioned as framing traditional male and female roles and the expectations ascribed to those roles. The role of 'mother' appears as central to a woman's identity. In this narrative, parenthood is expected to be more salient in women's self-conceptions than in men's because while men are expected to 'do' fathering, women are expected to 'become' mothers (Katz-Wise et al., 2010).

Motherhood - it's just another 'hood' that reinforces the skewed gender division of labour and, and amplifies the amount of work...the number of hours and energy you have to do everything... men are socialised to behave a certain way, then men behave in a certain way

(Karen, NA)

...being that I am a woman and he is a man, most of it's on me...Even if I have a wonderful, committed, engaged partner...If someone has to take on extra, it's usually me [the mother]

(Felicity, NA)

To cope with the new responsibilities, new mothers approach the 'task' of motherhood with a language of logistics and productivity. Women position themselves in this narrative as 'jugglers', constantly attempting to care for or support everyone while still trying to perform to a high standard in both areas of their lives in compliance with society's expectations. The two identities of worker and mother manifest as mainly divergent in this period, as our participants describe being a mother and their professional life as separate, with a thin line in between.

It is not that you are doing something heroic, but society makes it so difficult that you feel you are 'wonder woman'. Because our life speed is not very friendly to the changes that women face when they become mothers

(Maria, LA)

As the period to return to work came forth, feelings of self-doubt and uncertainty reappeared. While also concerned about how getting back to work would impact the children, most professional women see returning to work as a necessary part of contemporary life for both personal growth and the family's financial situation.

I'm the primary person [kids] come to for everything, for food, for taking them to sports, extracurricular activities they're studying. So it's gonna be quite a shift for me and I'm kind of scared. Not looking forward to that, but I also know at the same time it's necessary...I should get back to work and my kids should get more independent, and I should help out, with finances with my husband...I'm still getting there, you can say

(Soraya, NA)

3.4.3 | Aggregation (returning to work)

A sense of re-aggregation happens when, following a transition, one does not return to 'normal' but is gradually able to construct a new identity (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) and move to a new identity of worker mother. The re-aggregation, incorporation, or post-liminal rite is the ultimate end point in the identity transition according to this linear narrative. Not all worker mothers reach this point, but some seemed ready to move into this re-aggregation state having achieved some clear personal gains (e.g., self-motivation, self-acceptance, and self-belief) and social gains (e.g., social recognition as mothers, potential new social position as both workers and mothers).

Returning to work was described as a difficult period with women having to navigate their own challenges and the negative assumptions about their ability and potential performance at work, while also trying to (re)adjust to the social narratives and expectations around a mother's role:

I had concerns like, will I be able to do it when I get back?...I was feeling at my lowest...from that stress and the anxiety and the depression and whatnot

(Sarah, NA)

Since I became a mother, I have neither been given more responsibilities nor have I been promoted because they think it is not worth investing in me. And so, that is why I want to change jobs

(Amelia, LA)

Why is it acceptable in his life that work can say, 'No, you can't go and pick the kids up', and therefore I have to go and do that. This is what I mean about society's expectations. I used to feel he'd let me down, but there's something about where he works and where we live, and the school. The school doesn't phone him if no one's turned up to pick the kids up, they phone me. That's wrong. They're 'our' children. He should have the same expectations on him as on me.

(Eve, Europe)

While some of the participants interviewed returned to work within a shorter period of time, the majority took at least 5–6 months maternity leave, meaning they had established themselves as the primary carer before returning to work. The separation from the baby together with having limited support at work fearing the loss of career development opportunities and the limited time given, for example, time to extract milk or not having a private space to do it, also led many worker mothers to start questioning their self-efficiency as good mothers, professionals, and wives.

I spent quite some time feeling I was not doing anything well. I was not giving the best of myself to my baby; I was not giving 100% to my work, and mainly the fact that my house was a complete mess. I felt I was a terrible wife, a mediocre mother, and not good enough at work...

(Paula, LA)

Going back to work, it was very difficult, because I was breastfeeding. So I was pumping and hiding in meeting rooms. Everyone knew to go find me in a meeting room... my body needed to get used to it, which is very uncomfortable.

(Caro, Africa)

The tension between the identities of work and motherhood is very present in this last stage of the narrative. It was in these initial few months after returning to work, that for many participants, the tensions resulting from having to aggregate two different identities came to the fore:

Going back to work slightly rebuilds your self-confidence. It isn't that you lost it but you are fragile after the delivery. You don't know who you are, or what you want, you doubt yourself, and you have many insecurities...Work gives you an identity as a person and connects you with a sense of purpose.

(Ina, AP)

Organizational support for re-entering work becomes very important, from formal policies to the interactions with coworkers, perceiving support results in higher motivation and commitment. In contrast, those who received contradictory messages experienced more tension during their re-entry process. As motherhood might disrupt their career, worker mothers work hard trying to maintain 'business as usual'.

I'm careful when I'm in the office not to mix my private life with my office work. I do share personal stuff. But I don't share too much, like when my child is sick, or when things are going on, I try to handle it privately.

(Tessa, Europe)

The final stage in this linear narrative is the expectation that worker mothers become 'better' workers during the maternity leave. In trying to aggregate the two identities, worker mothers position themselves returning to work as an improved version of their professional selves as they have developed new skills that benefit their professional performance, such as efficiency, better concentration, ability to multitask and plan better etc., by becoming mothers:

[Motherhood] brings a level of clarity for me, brings a level of discipline, much more conscious and intentional about how I spend my time, and what kind of input I bring into the different work projects that I'm doing. So because of that, I've been able to also look at my skills and ability in a different perspective. As a leader, as a manager, as well as a woman who is in the tech industry. I have new dreams now.

(Joanne, Africa).

The narrative is described using metaphors that reflect journeys, growth, transition, and the hopeful arrival to a mythical closure and 'balance'.

You will not be the same after you become a mother, you will never go back, never. But you are going to reach a new balance

(Amelia, LA).

In this linear narrative, the 'before' of a professional working life and the 'after' of motherhood always find a way to fit together as a singular identity. Motherhood is represented as a process that can 'improve' professional women by making them 'better employees'. Yet, not every mother reported the same ending to the transition period with a final clear and neat identity aggregation. We therefore also looked into the open-ended narrative of motherhood.

3.5 | The liminoid process of mothering

In describing the liminal process, Van Gennep (1960) understood 'liminality' as the state between 'separation' and 'aggregation'. In this process, negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety and doubt, are pervasive and in some cases persist over time:

...even if you are not pressurised directly, I think maybe you as a person put your own pressures on, right?...Okay, I am a mom, but I don't know if I could separate those hats, and you want to make sure that you don't get any sort of pity

(Barbara, Africa)

...it feels like nothing changed. But everything has changed. It's difficult. Now that I'm a mum... [I] think the idea of slotting in being a mom and being responsible for a whole other life...how am I going to do that? How am I going to fit that in? How am I going to achieve that?

(Alex, Europe)

Liminality results in feelings of 'outsiderhood' for some of our worker mothers. Such outsiderhood takes the form of disconnection and alienation from others. This may result in an ongoing feeling of dislocation or distancing in personal relationships, of feeling constant guilt, a lack of access to further development at work or feeling "excluded from my own friends" as one mother reported. This tension is represented in many cases as being in a *constant* limbo of neither here nor there and always transitioning between both.

The mental load that I have as a mum that my husband doesn't have...that my husband wouldn't get. And I feel a disconnection between that and having to juggle work and the little one and my husband, at the same time.

(Theresa, AP)

[It's like] a bridge where I'm kind of standing...walking back and forth between two different sides [and] I have to bring things from one side to the other, I have to get to the other side, I have to get there.

(Riv, Europe)

This lack of aggregation, of finding a clear entrance into a new social position, means that worker mothers find it difficult to plan a 'clear future' for themselves. Those in liminoid conditions tend to focus on the immediate present as it is difficult to conceive of a self as 'other' or any other future projection. The motherhood narrative remains therefore unfinished, open, and ongoing. The images associated with this narrative were often ones of perpetual motion, of effort, and of messiness.

...[it's] related to that guy who's always trying to push that rock up the hill or treading water and never getting anywhere. I don't know, something like that, the sense of putting in a lot of energy for very little return.

(Eve, Europe)

While the continuation narrative acknowledges periods of readjustment but ultimately finds realignment once more, in this narrative, becoming a worker mother is portrayed as an identity that has become liminoid, that is destined to be in a state of permanent evolution, leaving worker mothers to constantly negotiate their different possible selves.

It is complex, it is so complex, that is such a constant, you're in like a constant dichotomy...there's such a difference between pre baby you and post baby you.

(Tara, Africa)

They need you emotionally more the older they get...that emphasises how hard it is to parent somebody who's also developing at the same time. You're learning as a parent and they're learning to be a human

(Jessica, Europe)

The two narratives outlined above illustrate the ways in which worker mothers navigate the processes of mothering. They also show how some mothers are unable to reaggregate into a clear new identity and seemingly stay longer in a liminoid state that generates anxiety and a lack of a clear identification, where the motherhood narrative remains unfinished and open.

3.6 | Contextual differences framing the narratives

Identity transformations are never an individual endeavor but rather a social and cultural process. This section briefly illustrates two key regional contextual differences among our interviewees—the social and cultural expectations about motherhood and the support worker mothers' received during their transition—and how those differences shaped the narratives and the identity work struggles our worker mothers experienced.

3.6.1 | Social and cultural expectations

In some regions, for example, NA or Europe, the expectation is for mothers to return to work after giving birth. Thus, motherhood, while often idealized, is also regarded as transgressing the primary social role as worker (Collins, 2019). While countries within these regions have varying social expectations around the timing of a woman's return to work, and there is a large variance in maternity leave provisions, many governments incentivize women to return to work after maternity leave (whether i.e., through positive incentives or by penalizing those who do not). The challenge for worker mothers is to resume work efficiently while still managing to take care of the children, leading therefore to an overarching narrative in which the new mother identity is to be integrated into the established one of workers.

I think the work itself was really just too much to handle when you've added parenting responsibilities on top of it

(Emma, NA)

...mainstream society has imposed this idea that you can do it all right? It's stressful, professional: continue to have drive in your career and looking to farther in your career, while wanting to be a mother...

(Penelope, NA)

[going] back, I was very adamant I was going to progress at the same speed, keep working at the same level...But ...my priorities are changing. I thought it would still be work which is very important to me. And now, work is important because it pays the bills and I really do enjoy what I do. But it's almost, it's paying the bills. I enjoy what I do, but then I need to spend time with my son.

(Emily, Europe)

While in other contexts—for example, Africa, LA, or AP—mothers are expected to be the primary caregivers for children and may even receive a new name after becoming mothers, stressing the identity of mother over that of worker. Here, the challenge for new mothers is reversed, how to manage the care of children efficiently while still managing to work. However, regardless of whether the mother or the worker identity is the primary identity for women, as understood through the lens of society's expectations, the tension between both identities can generate some traumatic experiences and intense identity work among new worker mothers.

When you have a child...you have a new name. In my country, we say mama XYZ so you're mama Jubran, mama Jean, and you immerse yourself into that experience. And then at some point, you're like, but who am I, I used to wear lipstick, and I can't smell like milk all day

(Joanne, Africa)

In Japan, still, breastfeeding is believed, you know, the best...but I didn't have enough milk in my breast. So I had to feed some formula milk...you feel guilty giving artificial milk.

(Wendy, AP)

3.6.2 | Social and institutional support

The second key difference shaping mothers' narratives was the type of support they expected and received through their transition. In more collectivistic regions such as Africa or LA, the expectation is that the extended family and the community would support the new mothers in their revered new-motherhood state, while in regions, such as Europe, mothers relied more on partners or non-family support (e.g., childcare professionals) particularly when returning to work.

...as a working mother, I have been very much sharing some of the burdens of childcare and household management with others...it was with my mother-in-law, and I've always shared with my husband. I've always shared the burden of both childcare and household management as well.

(Ina, AP)

In other regions, reliance on the surrounding community plays a very important role for new mothers. For example, African mothers describe benefiting from, and being expected to, embrace support from the community, including extended family members, friends, neighbors etc., as they care for the child and new mother.

In my community, when a woman is becoming a mother, she's assigned family members who help her through that experience. So when I had that baby, I had my grandmother with me. Because my mother passed away when I was younger, but I had my grandmother and most of my family members, including my sisters, and my cousins with me, until my child was six months old. And as well as having my partner there, it was a good enough support system for me to not have the challenges most women face when this transition happens, both mentally and financially. I always feel relieved that my child is in good hands.

(Joanne, Africa)

Having non-family members (e.g., daycare professionals) taking care of one's child—the norm in Western societies—is becoming somewhat more common in societies—Africa, AP, and LA for instance—that have traditionally emphasized reliance on the extended family or the community to take care of children. Despite this increased prevalence, it still creates resistance however for some African mothers:

I didn't trust myself enough to employ any help to stay in my house. Because, there's a lot of issues in Nigeria with house help. So I didn't leave her at home, I was taking her to the office.

(Maya, Africa)

Additionally, the state regulations in terms of maternity leave and financial support differ within the many countries the participants live in: from the three to 4 months of maternity leave in Africa and LA, to longer periods in Europe and AP, and this also shapes women's experiences in the workforce. In Canada, for example, maternity leave policies are relatively progressive with a state mandated 18 months of parental leave (Milligan & Stabile, 2011). In contrast, the United States falls behind in maternity leave provisions with no federal mandate for paid leave (Rossin-Slater, 2017). In Europe, maternity leave policies tend to be more generous than the United States, allowing for both longer periods of leave and higher mandated statutory pay for new mothers, although with considerable variance between countries (Schiavi & van Rens, 2019). There is also considerable difference in the expectations on fathers to take leave during the early years of a child's birth, thus impacting the level of support received by mothers and arguably the overarching stigma felt by mothers in not achieving (the unachievable) ideal mother or ideal worker status. These disparities reflect varying societal priorities and approaches to work–life balance, gender equality, and family support. In general, whether it was paid or unpaid leave depended on the country, the employer and the period of time women have been working for the company. Having financial and institutional support or its lack can enable women to have an easier transition into becoming worker mothers or can trigger enormous amounts of stress:

If I were living in the US, I would be very much more concerned, a lot more stressed because they don't have such a thing as a one-year mat leave. But living in Canada, I feel very fortunate because we do have a mandatory one year mat leave, which your workplace has to give.

(Mariah, NA)

In Nigeria some people just resign from their jobs immediately when they find out they are pregnant, or immediately when they have children because...some organisations don't pay... and you're buying diapers, baby clothes, formula and all that.

(Maya, Africa)

These diverse social and institutional conditions framed many of the new mothers' narratives generating in some cases negative feelings, particularly when mothers' experiences did not match idealized cultural images of motherhood.

4 | DISCUSSION

Our research explores how professional women experience the transition to becoming worker mothers. Our findings show that while many reconstructed their experience as a linear liminal narrative presented as a continuation of their life before being pregnant—which coincides with the organizational approach to motherhood—there was also a coexisting narrative that talked about motherhood as an ongoing, open, and liminoid process.

In our research, we have seen how the transition to motherhood by working women is ultimately a transformative process shaped by context and occupying liminal spaces of 'in betwixtness' (Turner, 1987). We have illustrated how worker mothers in their everyday identity struggles separate from their initial identities and social positions, experiment with alternative visions of themselves, and (re)connect with working motherhood ideas and practices in a new way (whether driven by the social expectation that mothers will continue to work, or alternatively by the assumption that once a mother women no longer want to pursue their careers). While a successful liminal identity aggregation is not always possible, the in-between liminal situation of worker mothers is particularly suited to understanding how interruptions, breaks, and disruptive situations can become a source of identity transformations.

In starting their motherhood journey, worker mothers find themselves temporarily undefined as they move from a clear social position and identity as an employee toward a potential new identity as worker mothers. In between lies a liminal phase, where they accept having moved beyond their earlier roles but have not yet acquired the new one. In this liminal phase, they are rendered somehow invisible with no comfortable social or institutional position:

they are in-between and betwixt (Turner, 1987). This resonates with research that understands motherhood itself as a transition starting while pregnant at work (Greenberg et al., 2021).

In this liminal journey, worker mothers confront identity tensions that lead to interruptions in their sense of self and their activities. Being both worker and mother generates a tension between attempting both identity continuity and innovation and shapes their understanding of working motherhood as both feasible and risky. Accordingly, our results reflect the continuous identity work required to balance potentially opposing, but mutually dependent, identities, such as 'worker' and 'mother', to move toward identity shifts rather than stressing polarized identity dualities (Farjoun, 2010). Once rendered salient, identity tensions stimulate either positive or negative responses in the form of diverse narrative positions. Worker mothers' attempts to resolve the identity tensions they confront include strategies that try to overcome or accommodate those tensions (Lewis, 2014), like embracing both 'worker' and 'mother' identities as distinct, yet mutually enabling, and trying to avoid practices that lead toward one of the poles in the tension, such as quitting their work or 'outsourcing' completely the care of their children (Greenberg et al., 2021).

However, as the identity work tensions expressed by worker mothers indicate, starting a shift in subjective position ('who am I?') is not enough to make the identity transition real; the shift in identities and social positions also needs to be intersubjectively recognized by partners, coworkers, their community, and wider society. Such identity work efforts aid self-directed action by helping worker mothers to reflect and act upon their own identity tensions (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007), leading to a constant examination of the self and 'others', particularly in relation to the motherhood journey. Thus, motherhood is very much a process of becoming, and becoming is always a co-production between the worker mother, the generalized 'other', and their socio-cultural-historical context.

Lying outside the mainstream, the liminal state allows for liberation from routine social structures, norms of behavior, and other expectations (Tempest & Starkey, 2004). This indicates that liminal periods can also be periods of increased creativity and innovation as those involved take advantage of the additional freedoms and lack of constraints. Liminality, despite potential negative consequences such as feeling lost or 'disconnected' from friends and family, may lead to a sense of autonomy and personal freedom, as worker mothers might start to transcend institutional and social constraints. Such a position can enhance opportunities for creative identity work as, unbound by structural procedures, individuals challenge existing boundaries like society's narratives of motherhood, potentially fostering deviation and originality (Turner, 1987). It is in conditions of liminality where we find that alternative and creative understandings tip the balance, allowing worker mothers to develop new unscripted identities.

As mothers need to be able to 'tell themselves' (Henriksson et al., 2023:2), it is important to understand how worker mother narratives are constructed. We have seen how worker mothers take and assign identity positions to themselves and others (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1999) when describing their transition in motherhood narratives and how those positions relate to particular images, narratives, and practices of motherhood through which they do and redo the process of mothering. For instance, mothering is seen variously as 'part of being a woman' or 'society's imposition of gender roles' throughout the different narratives, where mother workers portray themselves also in a diversity of positions from 'jugglers' to 'wonder women'. As worker mothers confront identity tensions and their identity narrative position changes, their perception of motherhood, along with the way they act, changes too.

We have also seen how liminality is 'done' in situated interactions by actors through material arrangements and discourses. To navigate ante-structural conditions, our worker mothers engage with and overcome invisibility, lack of diverse representation in dominant cultural narratives, and the self-doubts emerging from their own personal situation. Recent research also suggests that to reclaim the experience of worker mothers from a stifling idealized discourse (Athan & Reel, 2015), we should consider the societal contexts in which motherhood activities are enacted. This has been taken up by many researchers increasingly showing an appreciation for context and its role in facilitating or inhibiting working motherhood (Schmidt et al., 2023). In our research, we have seen how public discourses of motherhood vary across regions and while many position 'well integrated' worker mothers as both desirable and feasible, some emphasize a primary social ideal of worker in which motherhood is a hindrance, while others assume a social ideal of mother in which women are expected to disregard their earlier worker identity. In either case, the 'superwoman discourse' prevails; worker mothers are expected to take up most of the care for children, as well as

taking themselves through the transition, while maintaining the drive to succeed in their careers when coming back to work. Not surprisingly, many of our respondents express frustration at the misalignment between what they live and feel and the idealized version of worker mothers present in many societies' narratives (Gutman, 2014). Our results are consistent with research that indicates that worker mothers have to revalidate themselves continuously as successful professionals and mothers (Millward, 2006) by adopting a 'superwoman' attitude of invincibility to survive in a corporate world with linear and ascendant careers (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013) and childless organizational cultures (Riad, 2007). However, as we have seen, many of our respondents internalize that narrative contributing to the 'conspiracy' of silence surrounding the transition to motherhood (Figs, 2008) and the secondary transition to worker mother.

All these indicate that alternative ways of being and doing emerge in the liminal, 'alternative spaces' our worker mothers inhabit. Within this 'ante-structured' space, worker mothers need to improvise in-between: interpreting, responding, and performing anew in an unstructured situation (Cornelissen et al., 2012). The liminal, therefore, not only provokes critical thought; it also can incite feelings, action, and the exploration of new possibilities (Turner, 1995).

5 | CONCLUSIONS

Our research illustrates empirically how worker mothers experience the transition into motherhood from a liminal identity work perspective. We see the contributions of our research as threefold.

First, in uncovering the liminality inherent in their transitions, our research captures the in-between identity struggles worker mothers experience in their journey toward motherhood. Motherhood studies in organizations focus on how the journey starts or how it is completed when women return to work at the expense of recognizing the psychological and relational processes needed in the full journey to become worker mothers. Those in-between identity shifts we have observed in our research could be just the one necessary step toward a subsequent action that will eventually achieve a successful identity transition or simply change the worker mothers' status quo constructively.

Second, we show how motherhood is a social, relational, and historically situated process. Through identity work, worker mothers in different regions are able to position 'worker' and 'mother' identities as two sides of the same coin, rather than as contradictions. Such framing can reduce anxiety, enabling acceptance and appreciation of tensions, with the resulting mindset helping worker mothers cope with the ambiguity inherent in identity transitions. Our research opens new research questions in this respect.

Third, our research has potential implications for supporting better organizational practices. The organizational context influences the degree of uncertainty that women experience during this transition and impacts their productivity, engagement, and retention rates. Those participants that felt valued and understood could better integrate their personal and professional identities as worker mothers. An understanding of motherhood as a processual journey that continues beyond returning to work after birth would help to shift the current mainstream assumption that organizational cultures need to be completely childless because mothering is something that belongs only to the private sphere.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

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