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The sociocultural shaping of mothers' doing, being, becoming and belonging after returning to work

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the influence of social ideologies on the doing, being, becoming, and belonging of Western employed professional women who are new mothers, after returning to work outside the home within the first 18 months after giving birth. Although occupational science has provided valuable insights into mothering occupations, it perpetuates an individualistic focus that often neglects the complex and multifaceted societal influence on mothering. A narrative approach was used to collect and analyse data from seven Swiss women who had returned to professional level jobs after giving birth to their first child. Hitch et al.'s (2014a, 2014b) framework was employed to analyse how social ideologies influence working mothers' doing, being, becoming, and belonging. The findings are presented through stories that illustrate the complex interplay between social norms and participants' possibilities for doing and being as mothers and workers. Three stories are presented: 'Balancing being a mother and work: The aspect of doing'; 'I don't want to be seen as the mother only: The aspect of being a mother and belonging at work'; and 'As a mother, you get criticised a lot: The aspect of doing and belonging to society'. This study enriches current understandings of how social ideologies pervade the context in which occupations are performed and how working mothers are influenced by them in their doing, being, becoming, and belonging.

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In the special issue *Things people do: Toward a comprehensive understanding of human occupations*, Dickie and Bailliard (2020) urged scholars to develop broad understandings of human doings and beings that expand the scope of inquiry and integrate “occupations that are neglected or have been hidden or silenced because of social norms, taboos, or their declared

illegality by governing bodies” (p. 5). Echoing this call, occupational scientists have argued for the need to provide nuanced views of how social norms shape both expectations and possibilities for occupation.

This paper is about mothers as occupational beings. Grounded in qualitative data and narrative analysis, it challenges social norms that

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construct mothering occupations as only child-rearing or promote a limited view of motherhood as a naturally feminine position. Our argument is grounded on the idea that mothering occupations are constantly constructed by everyday interactions and practices, discourses, and social norms (Phoenix et al., 1991). Consequently, how social norms permeate representations of mothering occupations is considered key to exploring how certain occupations become acceptable or unacceptable for mothers within specific contexts. Moreover, although mothering occupations have been studied within occupational science scholarship, we argue that this is an area that requires further consideration.

The illustrations we provide are grounded in experiences of a particular group of mothers—educated and employed professional women who are new mothers—and focus on how doing, being, becoming, and belonging are influenced by social norms related to mothering occupations predominant in Western societies such as Switzerland. Along these lines, this paper builds on occupational science scholarship that argues for the need to examine how occupations are socially constructed as ideal/good or negative/unavailable for certain groups (e.g., Farias 2020; Kiepek et al., 2014; Laliberte Rudman, 2012). The main purpose of this study was to explore the influence of social ideologies on the doing, being, becoming, and belonging of employed professional women who are new mothers after returning to work outside the home within the first 18 months after giving birth.

Working Mothers and Social Ideologies

Occupational scientists have attempted to build scholarship that focuses on the influence of social ideologies on human beings, however, it has been argued that this area is under-examined and needs to be studied in-depth (Asaba & Jackson, 2011; Jackson, 1998; Kantartzis & Molineux, 2011; Twinley, 2013; Wada et al., 2010). Social ideologies can be defined in different ways, but generally are a set of beliefs, values, or ideas that make up a contextual fabric of socially constructed norms, which often inform everyday practices among a community

of people (Asaba & Jackson, 2011). Social ideologies that permeate representations of mothering occupations are arguably socially constructed and culturally reproduced. Using social ideologies as a tool in analysing mothering experiences is central to the arguments forwarded in this paper because of its potential to illuminate socially and culturally perpetuated ideas about mothers. Moreover, it is a tool that can offer multiple realities against which to draw attention to how ideologies can shape occupations and influence women's choice and opportunities for occupations. Within this paper, we also employed Hitch et al.'s (2014a, 2014b) framework of doing, being, belonging, and becoming, attempting to illustrate how social ideologies about motherhood shape each of these aspects in ways that may influence new mothers' health and well-being.

The representation of mothering rooted in normative expectations of what a mother should do is still prevalent in media, policy, and culture predominant in Western societies (Goodwin & Huppertz, 2010). Even though these expectations have 'superficially' shifted from stay-at-home to returning to the workforce (Avrech Bar et al., 2016), there are nuanced and multiple forms of societal pressure on mothers that place child-rearing at the centre of a woman's doing (Asher, 2011). One central aspect embedded in these normative expectations is what Hays (1996) has defined as 'intensive mothering' or the underlying assumption that the child requires labour-intensive and emotionally absorbed attention from a single caretaker: the mother.

Based on this assumption, mothering occupations are often privileged over employment occupations (Hallstein, 2006), restricting women's occupational repertoire. For instance, mothers are often represented in social media and television as key in the maintenance of family life, adding to representations of intensive mothering that perpetuate the idea that families are negatively affected when the mother returns to work (Guendouzi, 2006). As such, professional women are confronted with highly diverse, controversial expectations and attitudes concerning their doing and being as a mother, which may impact their well-being and health (Backman, 2004). As occupational beings, humans have a strong desire to engage in

meaningful occupations that are perceived as socially important and worthwhile (Christiansen, 1999). Based on this assumption, it is not surprising that working mothers may prioritise occupations that are perceived as valuable and meaningful for society (i.e., caring for children). However, these priorities are also becoming more complex as expectations for mothers include both caring for children and pursuing a career. Feelings of guilt have become a more common experience among professional women who return to work (Guendouzi, 2006).

This intersection of non-paid mothering occupations and paid employment occupations (i.e., outside the home), informed by incongruent expectations on mothers, is at the heart of a problem with consequences on mental health and social equity, among more. This is relevant for occupational science because occupations can be expressions of normative ideologies and can serve as a powerful mechanism in shaping and perpetuating ideologies. In some cases, as when destructive for mental health and social equity, it is important to look more closely at emerging phenomena from different perspectives.

Occupational possibilities (Laliberte Rudman, 2010, 2012) can elucidate how sociocultural norms and structures support what comes to be viewed as ideal, 'right', and possible occupations within specific contexts and for socially constructed categories such as motherhood. Likewise, discussion of occupational choice (Galvaan, 2015) has supported a contextually situated understanding of occupation as embedded within sociocultural norms and hegemonic discourses that influence the choices available for certain groups. These concepts offer ways to understand how normative expectations and taken-for-granted assumptions regarding what occupations certain groups should or should not engage in, are shaped by sociocultural forces that extend beyond individual's control (Farias, 2020). This is important because social ideologies can support understanding of the intricacies and negotiations that new mothers can make when, for instance, returning to work.

Social perspective

The influence of organisational and societal factors on working mothers' identity, sense of self,

and balance between work outside the home and family roles have been explored for decades. As an example of this literature, Baker (2018) argued that 'intensive mothering'—a concept informed by feminist approaches (Hays, 1996)—requires mothers to spend an enormous amount of time and energy on their children, based on the assumption that mothers are the ones who should prioritise their child's needs over their own. Thus, intensive mothering serves as a means of social control, stigmatising and punishing women who resist adopting this belief. In particular, mothers working outside the home may feel pressured by implicit or explicit expectations about the meaning of motherhood from their institutions and co-workers, that they experience as unforeseen or new.

Ladge and Greenberg (2015) pointed out that when a professional woman returns to work as a mother, she may go through an intensive period of re-adaptation to organisational policies and practices that often fail to provide adequate time and facilities to support new mothers' re-entry (e.g., lack of a place to express and store breast milk). This lack of support is particularly impactful when combined with colleagues' messages and institutional expectations about how professional women should balance their work and non-work (Ladge & Greenberg, 2015). Similarly, Guendouzi (2006) argued that as women's representation in the workforce increases, working mothers may experience guilt regarding the time they spend away from their children because intensive mothering expectations may be unconsciously accepted/normalised by them. Notably, Guendouzi emphasised that the pressures on working mothers are socially constructed and deeply embedded within modern Western societies.

Occupational perspective

Despite the growing literature in occupational science regarding mothering, this construct has often been displayed through an individualistic and bidirectional perspective of mother-child interactions that do not fully account for the influence of social norms on parenting occupations (Sethi, 2020). For instance, the literature

has largely focused on the changes in occupational repertoire, roles, and identity experienced by mothers with disabilities (Del Fabro Smith et al., 2011; Farber, 2000), mothers with children with disabilities (Crowe et al., 2016; Hon et al., 2011; Winston et al., 2010), mothers of children with food allergy (VanderKaay, 2016), and adolescent mothers (Levin & Helfrich, 2004). Other researchers have examined how first-time mothers adapt to the occupational changes related to motherhood (Horne et al., 2005), the co-occupations of maternal-infant play (Larson, 2000; Pizur-Barnekow et al., 2014) and the meaning working mothers ascribe to occupations related to their mothering role (Avrech Bar et al., 2016).

Although these studies provide valuable understandings of mothering occupations, they keep a focus on mothers' individual experiences of doing (for their child), neglecting the sociocultural forces and expectations that may constrain mothers' choices and opportunities to engage in occupations. Yet, there are exceptions; a study that examined how socioeconomically disadvantaged conditions shape migrant mothers' exclusion from occupations (Kielsgaard et al., 2018), and another study that has explicitly focused on the social aspects that influence mothers' interactions and decision-making regarding everyday parenting (Sethi, 2020). Thus, examination of mothering occupations to elucidate the contextually situated shaping of occupation is necessary to expand the body of existing literature on mothering in occupational science, by adding an understanding of the interplay between social ideologies of what 'good' mothers should do or be available to do after having a child.

Methods

In this study, narrative inquiry was chosen based on the epistemological belief that the world is created, comprehended, and experienced by individuals through interplay with other humans and the broader social context (Maxwell, 2013). Narrative was also chosen as the primary tradition of inquiry in this study because it allows exploration of not only the meaning of occupation but also the social context and environment in which occupation is

situated (Mattingly, 1998). By carefully considering both socio-cultural and personal aspects, such as worries, beliefs, expectations, and values, the complex motives that prompt individuals to act and feel in a certain way can be explored (Mattingly & Lawlor, 2000). In this study, the exploration of sociocultural and personal aspects included employed professional women's everyday occupations and societal influences on their actions (doing); how the women saw themselves (being); how the experiences of being a mother and a worker, in a specific context, affected women's development in the future (becoming); and how women's connection to their workplace and colleagues was affected by social expectations (belonging) (Hitch et al., 2014a, 2014b).

The participants, 7 Swiss educated professional women who were new mothers, were selected through selective and purposive sampling (Holloway & Freshwater, 2007). The selection criteria were: having grown up in Switzerland and thus been socialized within the Swiss social norms and expectations, 18 years or older, having no medical diagnosis, being in a stable relationship, and having returned to work outside the home within the first 18 months after giving birth. In this study, all identifying characteristics were anonymised, and pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality. This study was approved by the Swiss cantonal ethical committee of Zurich, and all participants gave their informed consent prior to data gathering.

The first author collaborated with gatekeepers such as colleagues and members of her work/study network to gain access to professional new mothers in the process of returning to work. The network of contacts of the first author was mobilized after realizing that displaying flyers with information about the study in public spaces might not gain the attention of new mothers, who may spend most of their time between their workplace and home. As such, potential participants were contacted by gatekeepers who verbally introduced the study and handed out the contact details of the first author. The women who contacted the first author received written information about the study and a consent form via email. After participants consented to be contacted

for an interview, the first author booked a time and place that suited each participant's schedule.

All included participants were Swiss women, all with post-secondary education and working in professional roles outside the home. The participants' age ranged between 32–36 years, and their paid work hours differed between 40% and 80% of full time. An examination into the Swiss context illustrates that a regular working week contains 41.7 hours (Federal Statistical Office, 2019). Therefore, a 40% workload represents 2 days' work, 60% denotes 3 days and 80% indicates 4 days' work per week. Six out of seven participants employed some day-care services for their children and organised the other paid work days using support from grandparents or the father to take care of the child. All participants lived in the canton of Zurich in Switzerland. Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of the participants in more detail. It is essential to consider that in the Swiss context, issues related to work and family are considered a private matter since few day-care services are financially supported by the government. Additionally, it is of note that, at the time of writing, one-day paternity leave was statutorily given in Switzerland (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2019). Therefore, upon the birth of a child, the mother generally took primary responsibility for childcare in her 14 weeks of maternity leave (Bernardi et al., 2013).

Data collection

Data were gathered using narrative interviews (Polkinghorne, 1995) using a previously developed interview guide (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015). A semi-structured approach with open-ended, probing and follow-up questions was designed to support the participants' stories to unfold (Polkinghorne, 1995). The questions focused on the past, present, and future experiences, reactions, expectations, worries, and wishes of the participants. The guide was tested in a pilot interview within the ethical considerations to ensure the comprehensibility of the questions, as well as to contextualise experiences in the participants' socio-cultural context (Polkinghorne, 1995). All interviews were conducted in a location chosen by the participants and each lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Five interviews

were conducted in participants' homes, one in a coffee shop, and one over video-call. Video-calls are identified to be the closest interview mode to an in-person interview and are thus justified in qualitative research (Krouwel et al., 2019). All interviews were held in Swiss German and all were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. After the interview, a follow-up email was sent to each participant to allow them to share their thoughts on their reflection process. Four of the participants responded, and their answers were included as data in the analysis.

Data analysis

The analysis of the narratives gathered through the interviews was ongoing and focused on comprehending the interrelation between action, the social context, and the interpretation of what was communicated by participants (Polkinghorne, 1995). Data were examined for significant events or plots, where 'significant' is characterised by the tensions and inner conflicts that the participant experienced between their own beliefs and values and societal expectations. Events that surprised the participants themselves when telling their story or were revealed by them to be particularly salient were also considered as significant events. Notes were taken to trace decisions about why certain events were considered as significant. These significant pieces were then classified into the past, present, and possible future of the participants. It was considered whether the pieces were related to personal values and beliefs, societal expectations and attitudes, or experiences. A cross-analysis of the women's stories was then conducted to identify similar plots; these were grouped to capture the social ideologies underlining them. Finally, the theoretical framework of doing, being, becoming, and belonging (Hitch et al., 2014a, 2014b) was used to interpret the stories, focusing on the influence of social ideologies on the working mothers' everyday occupations, health, and well-being. Throughout the analysis, there was an iterative going back and forth between the stories, transcripts, and the notes to ensure that emerging plots and meanings were not neglected. Illustrative participant quotes were translated by the first author after analysis was completed.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Area of employment	Age of the child	Percentage of work	Childcare
Mia	35	Accounting	6 months	65%	Two days day-care, one day grandparents
Sandra	36	Banking and finance	10 months	80%	Three days day-care, one day father
Luci	36	Psychology	18 months	60%	Two days day-care, one day grandparents
Laura	32	Occupational therapy	8 months	40%	One day day-care, one day grandparents
Mary	32	Teaching	15 months	40%	Grandparents
Samantha	36	Sports therapy	18 months	40%	One day father, one day grandparents
Nora	33	Occupational therapy	18 months	60%	Two days day-care, one-day alternating father and grandfather

Findings

The experiences shared by the seven participants demonstrate the impacts of social ideologies on women's doing, being, becoming, and belonging in their everyday life and the tensions, stress, insecurity, and guilt that these ideologies create. The findings follow a narrative approach, using a first-person voice to incorporate the feelings/impressions of the first author who conducted all the interviews. The first story focuses on how social ideologies impact the aspect of doing and participants' struggles to balance work with caring for a child. The second story illustrates the influence of social ideologies on the aspects of being a mother and feeling they belong to their workplace's culture/expectations. The third story presents the influence of social ideologies on women's doing and belonging in the wider society. In brief, the findings illustrate participants' negotiations between how they were being seen and how they wanted to belong in society while becoming a working mother.

Balancing being a mother and work: The aspect of doing

Most participants described a strong societal expectation to hold them responsible for the upbringing of their children. They perceived a certain obligation that often resulted in organising and managing all occupations related to childcare. Their stories displayed friction between the societal idea of a mother's doing and the women's choices of doing. Whether this societal expectation was fulfilled by the mothers or not, stress and inner conflicts were triggered. For instance, when Mia and I talked

at her home, she expressed that she was upset and annoyed by employers' belief that mothers must hold the main responsibilities for childcare:

A lot comes down to be done by the mother; I think even if we both worked full time, I would still be the one doing more. For example, I look after the child when he is sick, pick him up from day-care, go to the doctor for the child's check-ups. Well, first of all, because I'm the mother but also because employers more readily accept if a mother is absent.

Mia justified that her husband would help her with childcare; however, being aware that his absence at work was unfavourable for his career, Mia compromised. She tried to manage and balance childcare while knowing that being absent from her own work was equally unfavourable for her career. Although these perceptions of responsibility were her own, Mia had adopted them through socialisation due to the responses of employers and society. Through our dialogue, I realised that this pressure from society had produced tension between Mia's commitments to work and to being a mother, which made her feel obligated to excel as a mother while also proving her qualities at work. She felt as though she had been left alone and perceived a lack of support in taking care of her child. Simultaneously, she pressured herself to perform well at work to remain being valued and prove that her work was still worthwhile:

You want to perform your best at work, want to finish the analysis as fast as

possible as you know people are waiting for that but then you also want the best for your child. And yes, I do have this conflict, and this is a little stressful for me. In fact, in the end, everything comes down to being done by the mother.

This pressure to take on the main responsibility of childcare was also expressed by Laura, who recounted that she often felt stressed due to the unfairness that it was her who generally organised and managed the childcare. I was puzzled by her feelings as she had also indicated that her husband had a very supportive attitude. Laura explained that his attempts to help produced more stress for her since she felt as if she was the one who should organise things. She had internalised the societal image of mothers that she believed others have of her. When asking Laura why she felt stressed when her husband took time off work to help her, she responded as follows:

My husband can take some time off work, but I realise that this flexibility is always connected with stress and extra effort from my side. I realise, in such situations, that it is always me who has to organise. Of course, my husband helps and tries hard, but it is annoying as it is on me to organise and take the initiative.

Laura's comments made me curious about why she felt stressed by her husband trying to help. She appeared to be emphasising a point by managing all parenting occupations while also feeling obligated to do so. When I asked, Laura shared some of the reactions that her husband received at work when explaining that he assisted his wife in childcare duties. She clearly felt annoyed by the fact that her husband's colleagues did not understand or accept that he showed interest in sharing parenting responsibilities. Her feelings of unfairness and annoyance can be interpreted as a response to how others, in this case, her husband's colleagues, perpetuated a demanding image of mothers being primarily responsible for childcare, which in her case translated to the stress of taking over and organising the childcare. Although these comments may appear insignificant by some, they are relevant to understanding how a woman's context is shaped by messages directed not only at

them but also at their partners. It was not about Laura's husband's colleagues or even about not wanting her husband to take initiative in helping at home; it was about what her husband's colleagues attitudes represent, the type of myopic perspective they symbolised for Laura, and the tensions that their messages provoked in her everyday life.

Over the course of the interviews, I became conscious of the complex pressures that women receive, both placed by others and materialised by their own doing. These pressures were sometimes hidden from the women's own self-awareness but were also masked in a set of broader societal norms and expectations that have been internalised by their employers, partners, and colleagues. The internalisation of this societal expectation was evident in the concerns that the women had received from others regarding their expected workload after becoming a mother. Sandra, for example, told me about the societal judgments that she perceived after becoming a mother. She explained: "It's classic! To my friends' husband, they say, 'Ah, that's so cool that you only work 80%', and to her, they say, 'Oh really, 80%?' Thanks for that!". Thus, as Sandra demonstrated, the workloads of fathers and mothers are not equally valued. Similarly, Mia also indicated her perceived disadvantages of filling a post or receiving a promotion, which reflected her worries about her future professional life:

Even if I worked full time, I would say that [the employers] would prefer to choose a man who can stay in until 10 p.m. instead of a mother who maybe has to leave at 7 p.m. to pick up the child from day-care.

These comments consciously or unconsciously perpetuate the discrimination that the women referred to when comparing their own employers' responses to those of their partners after becoming parents.

"I don't want to be seen as 'only a mother'": The aspect of being a mother and belonging at work

All participants reflected on the societal pressure that they felt to place their role as a

mother at the centre of their being and to primarily identify themselves as being a mother. Their stories emphasise the societal idea that a mother should undertake paid work for less time than they conduct their mothering duties. Some participants felt that this societal pressure created tensions between their sense of being a working mother and their attempts to value their other senses of being as well. Consequently, the participants indicated that they experience guilt and insecurity, and the feeling of being less valued. To illustrate this societal idea, Mia told me that she did not agree with being a mother exclusively and explained that in becoming a mother she gained a new role, but she also emphasised the importance of maintaining an independent personality. She stated: *“My son is not the only thing in my life. I still want to be an independent personality and don’t want to be ‘only a mother’”*. Mia was thus in the process of assimilating her new role as a mother into her previous sense of being. I realised in our conversation that Mia was being challenged and wanted to resist the idea of being only a mother by keeping a sense of independence, despite struggling with societal expectations. For Mia, this tension has resulted in frustration and devaluation.

When we talked about this idea of being only a mother, Mia revealed that she felt less valuable at work:

I realised that others’ perception of my person is different now. I’m not Mia who exercises in the lunchbreak anymore. Now I’m mainly the mother. When I returned to work, I realised, now I’m being valued less at work as a mother.

Besides her feeling of no longer being recognised as the same person, Mia also expressed what being a mother exclusively represented and symbolised for herself. She told me that she considered this image of a mother to be outdated and pejorative, therefore elucidating why being seen as an independent person was so important to her. Sandra articulated a similar desire to preserve her previous sense of being; she described the importance of continuing to work to maintain the sense of being a professional: *“I haven’t completed my education*

for no reason. This job is still important to me, that I’m doing this job and also being seen as what I’m doing”.

For Sandra, performing her job and remaining in her position represented a ‘pay off’ for the effort that she had put into her studies and the job that she valued highly. She did not express a social pressure for being the ‘best’ at work but more of a personal pressure to keep work as a part of herself in which she had invested time and effort. Furthermore, Sandra recounted how reactions concerning her workload were hurtful and led her to often justifying her work-related choices now that she was a mother. She stated: *“I kind of feel a need to justify myself. I mean, I don’t want others to think of me as a bad mother. It could be that I feel a little offended”*. Sandra also experienced conflict between what she wanted and wished as a person and how she perceived herself due to the way the society saw her as a person, stressing her mothering role. This had resulted in feelings of guilt as she was confronted with the question of whether working 80% caused her to be a bad mother. Over the course of our conversation, I understood that the participants felt in certain ways that they should exclusively attend to their roles as mothers and that this societal expectation was deeply rooted beyond their consciousness.

Reactions from society regarding how much a woman should work as a mother are also present in Nora’s story. She related that the reaction from friends and colleagues regarding how much she should work as a mother primarily framed her as exclusively being a mother:

Everyone only gives feedback regarding being a mother: ‘60% is a bit much. You are not home very often’. I think nobody has ever said: ‘Cool, 60%, so you can still participate very actively in your job’. The focus is always set on being a mother and never on the other aspects.

When I asked Nora how she felt about receiving those reactions, she shared that she was easily affected by them; they made her question whether her attempt to continue to value her sense of professionalism made her a bad mother. Nora and Sandra’s experiences

highlight societal judgment on the mothers' workload that collides with their values of doing what is beneficial both for their children and for their careers. Nora explained that she often felt a need to justify herself:

I realise that I quickly start to justify myself, like: 'It's because of this that I'm working 60%, and the goal is that my husband is at home more often'. There is this inner conflict, in my head, I think: 'It's good the way it is!' And then still I have this discrepancy, what is the right thing to do?

I was puzzled by how strongly the participants were impacted in their sense of being by experiencing the social perception of them as mothers (i.e., caring from their child) that differed from their own self-perception. Moreover, their sense of being was influenced by not having their value of being independent and a professional appreciated by society. The societal shaping of their sense of being went beyond reactions from others; it was deeply internalised by the women, producing guilt and conflict with their choices.

“As a mother, you get criticised a lot”: The aspect of doing and belonging to society

The participants described the societal idea that a woman often cannot contend with the expectations imposed on her as a mother; whatever she does is perceived as insufficient or is criticised by society. All participants communicated a constant tension between being a 'good' mother and doing what they believed to be expected of them. This constant social pressure made participants feel disconnected as they found it difficult to connect and feel like they belonged to a society/workplace that constantly criticised them. For instance, Sandra expressed that she felt as if she was doing the wrong things all the time since everyone had a different opinion about what she should be doing as a mother while neglecting her individuality:

Everyone has an individual personality, so everyone should let others do things in a way that works best for them. If you chose to be a stay-at-home mom or work

a certain number of hours, you should be left in peace. But, you know, I struggle with that; as a mother, you get criticised a lot.

Sandra's attitude of allowing other people to live without judgment caused her to be more upset when she was criticised for her way of doing things. She experienced that the critique produced tension that prompted her to question if she was a good mother. Similarly, Luci explained the impact of being criticised on being a good mother:

If we are honest, being a good mother is impossible. Because of this reasoning, there is a risk of having the feeling that at work I have to be the best, at home, you have to be the best, and your child should be the best child as well.

When I asked Luci about work, she revealed that she perceived a lack of gratitude from her colleagues as they did not seem to understand her efforts to balance work and being a mother. Over the course of our interview, I became conscious of Luci's feeling of not being valued as her attempt at doing her very best in all aspects of her life still was not recognised as 'good enough'. Although this pressure of being expected to do her best in all aspects was Luci's own, it was reinforced through critique from others and the lack of acknowledgement of her effort.

Resulting from this pressure, Luci was at risk of feeling insecure because the social standards of doing her 'best' as a mother and worker were unattainable. This pressure was also discussed by Nora, who described her struggles to conduct her life 'the right way' while being influenced by the socio-cultural ideal of being 'a good mother'.

This woman does it that way, the other does it the other way, and then you see that and think: 'Could I do more of this too? Don't I do enough of this?' For me, finding the right way is hard.

By comparing herself to other mothers, Nora questioned whether she was doing enough as a mother or if she should change what she was

doing. These comparisons caused Nora to feel insecure; moreover, they influenced her sense of belonging as her perceptions induced the fear that she was not fulfilling societal expectations of a good mother. In contrast, in our conversation, Mary stated that though she compared herself to other mothers, she did not criticise them. Arguably, Mary's comparisons with other mothers allowed her to feel more secure in her own raising of her child.

I had to admit that I wouldn't do it that way with my child. But I didn't give my opinion to the other mother. But then I talked with my husband about it and said: 'I want this differently with my child'.

I was surprised how antithetically Nora and Mary were influenced by these contrasting attitudes and I asked Mary what supported her in feeling secure in her doing. She explained that she developed a clear image of how she wanted to raise her child through her work as a teacher. Conversely, similarly to Nora, Laura indicated that she was aware of these contrasting attitudes and was thus confronted with feelings of insecurity about being a good mother:

When you have people around, they let you know what they think, even though they might not directly communicate their opinion. In the beginning, when we had certain people around for dinner, it was tough to have them thinking: 'Oh, they can't handle their kid very well'.

Laura's attempt to feel more secure in her doing as a mother was through avoiding certain social contacts. I, therefore, became aware of how society's unattainable expectations of mothers caused the participants to feel insecure in their doing and in their being as a person; they feel unable to reach up to society's definition of 'good'. This tension is produced through reactions, masked opinions, an attitude of making comparisons, and the internalised societal image of a good mother.

Discussion

This article elucidates how social ideologies influence women who have returned to work

in the first 18 months after giving birth. As the stories in the findings reveal, the societal norms perceived by the participants produce tensions in a variety of aspects of their lives. Based on these illustrations of the influences on the participants' doing, being, becoming, and belonging, two social ideologies that are described in the literature will be proposed to frame the discussion of the findings.

Balancing work and caring for a child

Despite the steady movement of mothers into the workforce from about 1920 (Abrahams, 2008), universal assumptions of motherhood still consider caring for a child to be mainly the responsibility of a woman (Asher, 2011). A sociological study indicating this societal attitude discussed the prevalent expectations that mothers should balance and combine domestic and labour markets without obtaining much help from their partner or society (Bernardi et al., 2013). The expectation that mothers would accept primary responsibility for the childcare was explained by gender preferences or their assumed ability to be better at doing the given task (Bernardi et al., 2013). In line with this, the findings indicate that due to a perceived social expectation, the participants in this study undertook more childcare duties than their partners. Further connecting this ideal with the participants' stories, there is a clear tension between a perceived obligation in the participants' desired doing and their actions. This collision of obligatory and valued doing is considered from a sociological perspective to lead to an imbalance that affects well-being and self-determination (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001).

This tension between the participants' perceived obligations related to doing and their desired occupations were in line with the occupational science research of Håkansson et al. (2006), which concluded that a balance between an individual's doing and their values and needs is necessary to preserve well-being. This is in accordance with the negative feelings that the study participants perceived when their doing did not correspond with their personal needs or values. Wilcock and Hocking (2015) argued that perceiving satisfaction and having the ability to make choices about one's actions is

essential for positive health. In connection with the socio-cultural ideal of balancing work and mothering occupations, a mother's satisfaction concerning her ability and resources to fulfil the demands of both senses of being is decisive for her well-being (Clark, 2001). Societal norms guide the way of doing (Christiansen, 1999) and thus influence a mother's ability to make choices in her doing as a working mother. Therefore, if this satisfaction is not met, whether due to feelings of inadequacy as a working mother or choices that are influenced by societal norms, the emotional health and well-being of the mother are at risk.

As previously asserted, the ability of the participants in making choices is societally influenced; in addition, the behaviour and therefore the doing of a person is also socially associated with certain roles (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004) and the sense of being. Consequently, when meeting the societal idea of the behaviour and characteristics of a mother, working mothers perceive a feeling of belonging and a sense of connectedness to other people, places, or communities (Hitch et al., 2014a). Therefore, as Wada et al. (2010) demonstrated, the doing of the participants was guided not only by the societal expectations of mothers but also by their aspiration of belonging. The tensions in the women's narratives display how their sense of belonging was influenced when faced with this social ideology. Due to the incomprehension and comparative attitude of others, the participants' feeling of satisfying the responsibilities imposed by society and their connectedness to other people and society were weakened. Therefore, it is likely that the well-being and health of working mothers were affected.

Being a mother exclusively

In sociology and psychology, mothering has been seen as the main instrument through which women form their identity and affirm their position in society (Phoenix et al., 1991). From an occupational perspective, mothering has been understood as a highly valued sense of being; allegedly carrying great meaning (Larson, 2000) and salience in a woman's life (Avrech Bar et al., 2016). These representations perpetuate the idea that a woman should place

the sense of being a mother into the centre of her being and primarily identify herself as being a mother.

This social ideology can be linked to the stories of the participants, who revealed the tensions between the societal idea of being exclusively a mother and the remaining values of their other senses of being, such as being a professional. This discrepancy between their own and the societal expectations led to feelings of guilt, insecurity, and of being less valuable. Wada et al. (2010) described this from an occupational perspective, illustrating that when a woman's sense of being a mother differs from the societal norm and expectations, women are questioned about their competence in meeting the demands of being a mother. This reflective process not only impacts the sense of being of a mother but also her sense of becoming indicated in her development, adjustment, and modification over time (Hitch & Pépin, 2020).

In addition, the findings of this study indicate that, for some mothers, being perceived as a professional is essential to maintaining their sense of self. In line with other occupational science studies, the sense of being a professional is central in the Western world as it provides an impression and judgment about an adult's status, class, and wealth (e.g., Blank et al., 2015). Work can provide a sense of belonging through social engagement, a sense of becoming through the development of new skills, and a sense of being through the opportunity to feel valued (Davidson et al., 2005). Furthermore, work contributes to individuals' self-esteem as it allows them to hold a socially valued role, and also provides a way of establishing a personal identity (Gewurtz & Kirsh, 2006).

As previously illustrated, the participants experienced tensions between their values, such as remaining a working mother, and those of society which no longer equally valued them as professionals. For them, the lack of appreciation as being a worker was hurtful, producing questioning of their doing as mothers as not 'good enough'. Their aspects of being collided with social ideologies about the 'good' mother existing in their context. Scholars have described this conflict between social ideologies and personal beliefs, highlighting the impact of social expectations on human beings when

personal values and desired choices differ from the norm of society (Dow, 2016; Wada et al., 2010). This confrontation disrupts women's perceived balance of life and their perceived competence in meeting the demands of being a mother.

Finally, the small sample of participants might appear as an apparent limitation of the study (Krefting, 1991). However, to ensure the credibility of the findings, the first author contacted the participants after the interviews via e-mail to clarify if any point that was ambiguous in the findings. Notes were also used by the first author to keep track of the decisions made throughout the research. Triangulation of researchers' interpretations was conducted in relation to the data collection and data analysis. Moreover, as quotes were translated from Swiss German to English, it was possible that some meaning would be lost during the translation (van Nes et al., 2010). To avoid this, the first author, who is a native Swiss German speaker with a good command of English language, translated the participant quotes after completion of analysis. A native English-speaking person external to the study then checked the quotes and made grammatical corrections, which were thereafter revised by the first author to ensure accuracy, credibility, and authenticity of the quotes presented.

It is of note that the participants of the study were Swiss women who were white, young (30-40 years old) and well-educated (i.e., having post-secondary education), who tend to return to work faster and have a higher work percentage than women with lower levels of education in Switzerland (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2017). Nonetheless, the findings provide insights into the tensions that this demographic group face and the social meanings associated with work and motherhood for them. Likewise, the findings of this study raise awareness of how the predominant ideals of motherhood present in modern Western societies such as Switzerland impact mothers after they have returned to work. Yet, it is important to notice that the impact of these ideals on professional women's work re-entry may vary in contexts with different laws concerning maternal and paternal leave, benefits, and institutional support.

Conclusion

The findings highlight how social ideologies are part of the contexts in which occupations are performed. They provide insight into the complex interplay between social norms, individuals' desire to engage in occupations related to mothering and work, and identities for women. Although this study did not seek to generalise participants' contextually situated experiences of returning to work after giving birth, the understanding of motherhood as socially constructed can offer opportunities for further exploration of how 'doing' motherhood is contextually shaped by institutional and social expectations and pressures. Further research is suggested to explore how policies and structures (re)produce sociocultural expectations on diverse working mothers and fathers (i.e., single, immigrant, same-sex parenting), and how those who resist adopting or following these expectations manage, accept, or create ways to engage in meaningful occupations.

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