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Identity transition during pregnancy: The importance of role models

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Abstract

This qualitative study reports on how pregnant women integrate their future maternal identity with their existing work-related identity. Twenty-four women were interviewed at three times during their pregnancy: during the first, second and third trimesters. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse the data and social learning theory was adopted as a theoretical framework to assist in interpreting the findings. The findings suggest that the availability or lack of realistic and attainable role models influences the degree to which the transition to motherhood during pregnancy was successful. When role models were readily available, the transition went well, but, when role models were absent, two less successful strategies were identified, leading to negative psychological outcomes. The study also stresses the importance of other contextual factors, such as the gender composition of organizations and the educational attainment of the individual pregnant women, in the way women perceive their transition to motherhood while working.

Keywords

identity, identity transition, pregnancy, role models

Introduction

The number of women in organizations is increasing and this trend is likely to continue in the future (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2015). As a

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consequence, the number of women who become pregnant during their working lives is also rising. While the subject of women in the workplace is receiving increasing attention from researchers, pregnant women, particularly their lived work–life experiences, have only been studied to a limited extent (Kreiner et al., 2009). This study builds on work by Ladge et al. (2012), who studied the identity transition of women during the liminal period of pregnancy. Ladge et al. (2012) stated that women's experiences might differ depending on their stage of pregnancy and highlighted this as a subject for future research.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in two ways. First, it examines how women's work-related identity changes during pregnancy by interviewing the women three times: in early pregnancy, mid-pregnancy and late pregnancy. By doing so, it extends Ladge et al.'s (2012) work and explores the subtle changes and iterative experiences of this cross-domain identity transition in depth. Much of the research on identity provides insights into how people respond to the identity challenges they experience at a particular point in their lives (Kanji and Cahusac, 2015), while this study captures the dynamics and changes during a period of identity instability, as stressed by previous researchers (Ashforth et al., 2008). Moreover, this study responds to a call for research at the micro- rather than the macro-level processes of pregnancy within an organizational context (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007). In addition, several contextual factors are identified as influencing the way women experience the transition to motherhood and their employment choices after childbirth. Education level, the sector in which they work, as well as the gender composition in that sector are taken into consideration.

Second, this study examines one important aspect of women's careers: role models. The lack of female role models has been cited, after stereotyping, as the second most important barrier to career success (Catalyst/Conference Board, 2003) and several researchers have called for more research on role models for women (Gibson, 2003, 2004; Singh et al., 2006). Role models for pregnant women are other women in or outside their organization who both work and are mothers. It was felt that such models are an understudied area when it comes to how women transition to motherhood and (re) construct their work-related identity during pregnancy.

The findings suggest that the availability or lack of realistic and attainable role models influences the degree to which the transition to motherhood during pregnancy is successful. More precisely, it was found that when role models of women who juggle both work and family were readily available, as is the case in female-dominated organizations, the interviewees were confident that they would be able to make this transition as well, and increasingly focused on their maternal identity as their pregnancy evolved. When such role models were not available, as one often finds in male-dominated sectors, two different less successful strategies were identified: one consisted of an extended denial period of their future role as a mother and led to a wait-and-see attitude at the end of their pregnancy; the second strategy that emerged from the data showed that the perception of the interviewees regarding the incompatibility between their work-related identity or role and their future maternal identity increased throughout their pregnancy, leading to feelings of stress and uncertainty. This was particularly the case for highly educated women with a strong commitment to their job. These feelings led them to conceal their pregnancy for as long as possible and made them feel they 'had to choose' between their work

and their family, resulting in psychological stress and strain. It is important to note that successfulness is not defined in terms of certain measurable criteria, rather it refers to the subjective judgement of the pregnant women themselves. In other words, the interviewees labeled themselves their transition experience as successful, less successful or unsuccessful, explaining this in terms of their perceived psychological stress and strain and how easy or difficult they considered the search for a balanced identity or work–life balance in general.

Context

It is important to outline several aspects of the context in which this study took place. First, the study took place in the Netherlands. In 2013, the labour participation rate of women in the Netherlands was 65.4%, making them the highest in the European Union after Denmark (Statistics Netherlands, 2014). As a consequence, working women are an accepted social phenomenon. The increasing labour participation of women suggests that growing numbers of women will experience the transition to motherhood while in employment. A particular feature of the Dutch context is the number of part-time workers. Almost 50% of the working population works part-time in the Netherlands, compared with a European average of just under 20% (Eurostat, 2014). Of all working women, 17% work between 12 and 19 hours a week, 54% work 20–34 hours a week, while 29% work 35 hours or more (Statistics Netherlands, 2014). Labour market participation is influenced by a number of features, which can be categorized into macro-, meso- and micro-level factors.

At the macro level, mothers' labour market behaviour is shaped by the constraints and opportunities offered by social institutions at the national level (Mandel, 2009). The Netherlands has various laws that enable part-time work (Van Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2010) and women are offered 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, which is more than the 14 weeks recommended by the EU. Most working mothers use formal childcare services (Statistics Netherlands, 2015) but only part-time, since there is a culture of mothers caring for their children in the Netherlands (Kremer, 2007). Indeed, motherhood, and what is perceived as being a good mother, is influenced by national culture. Previous research found that gendered beliefs about 'the proper thing to do' strongly influence the choices mothers make (Charles and Harris, 2007). In the Netherlands, part-time work is the social norm for women and recent research has found that both housewives and full-time working mothers are frowned upon (Ruitenberg, 2014). It is likely that women have internalized such cultural prescriptions and feelings of guilt and confusion are common when such social norms are violated (Feldman et al., 2004).

At the meso level, policies and collective agreements at the industry level enable women to balance families and careers by taking advantage of parental work–family arrangements and childcare facilities (Van Doorne-Huiskes and Schippers, 2010). However, differences at the industry level exist, with education, (health)care and other public services offering family-friendly work arrangements, explaining the high numbers of women working in these sectors (Merens et al., 2011).

At the micro level, personal preferences and attitudes also play an important role in the employment choices of mothers. Researchers have argued that people encounter

barriers that limit the number of options they have. On an individual basis, women's education level, ethnic and social background, employment record and age all affect their perspectives on future employment (Kangas and Rostgaard, 2007) and, as such, the way they perceive the transition to motherhood. Many studies have shown a positive relationship between education level and labour market participation among women (Merens et al., 2011). It has been argued that more highly educated women are more likely to continue to work after giving birth than women with a low level of education, because they earn a higher wage that allows them to pay for childcare facilities (Doorewaard et al., 2004). However, one can also argue that highly educated women generally have more interesting and rewarding jobs than those with a lower education level. As such, mothers with a lower level of education may prefer to withdraw from the labour market if this is financially possible in order to escape drudgery (Ruitenberg and De Beer, 2012). The role of the partner is another individual factor that is likely to influence the employment decision after childbirth, because of his income, the number of hours he works, his career perspectives, his attitude towards his partner's income and her career perspectives, and his acceptance or rejection of the male-as-breadwinner model (Kangas and Rostgaard, 2007). In the Netherlands, dual-income families in which the father works full time and the mother part time seem to be the norm.

Finally, the role of the woman's own mother should be mentioned. Research has shown that having a working mother and/or a mother with a high level of education increases a mother's labour participation (Cloïn, 2010; Ruitenberg and De Beer, 2012).

Literature review

Identity and identity transition

In this study, identity is defined as a 'self-referential description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the question "Who am I?"' (Ashforth et al., 2008: 327). Identity transitions involve a process of evolution in self-definition and are often owing to changes in a work role and prompted by major life events, such as becoming a mother (Ashforth, 2001). Most previous studies focused on sequential identity transitions from one work identity to another (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2007), while cross-domain identity transitions, defined as identity transitions that occur when an individual's established work identity must be adapted to integrate with a change in a non-work identity, has received less attention from researchers (Ladge et al., 2012). The transition to motherhood is such a cross-domain transition. It has been argued that motherhood can change a woman's identity, affect her values and take her decision making in a new direction (James, 2008; Kanji and Cahusac, 2015). Scholars have paid little attention to the experiences of women themselves during pregnancy (McDonald et al., 2008) and have provided limited insight into how women start to work through issues of identity change as soon-to-be mothers during the liminal period of pregnancy (Ladge et al., 2012).

Research into identity transitions has identified three phases: separation, which means that an individual detaches or disengages from the old sense of self; transition, also called liminality, when the transition to new social roles takes place and when one has to resolve ambiguity inherent to this indeterminate state; and, finally, integration, when the

individual establishes a new sense of self (Van Gennep, 1960). This study considers the liminal state of pregnancy, where the new future social role as a mother needs to be integrated into the existing work-related identity. I purport that during this period women experiment with provisional maternal and altered work-related identities with the aim of finding a new balance and that their degree of success depends on the availability of realistic and attainable role models.

Previous studies have suggested that the identity of a mother develops during pregnancy (Halpert and Burg, 1997; Hebl et al., 2007), often as the result of the reaction their pregnancy triggers at work (Millward, 2006). Pregnancy is not always viewed positively in work settings (Gatrell, 2013; Halpert et al., 1993; Kohl et al., 2005) and pregnant women often experience discrimination (Hebl et al., 2007; Morgan et al., 2013). From the perspective of the other people in the organization, pregnancy is supposed to restrict a woman's ability to perform her work duties, decrease her commitment to the organization, involve her in childcare and the likelihood of not returning from maternity leave (Gatrell, 2013; James, 2008; Miller, 2005).

Social learning theory and role models

It has been argued that identity management and negotiating between two competing identities are socially constructed through contextual cues (Kreiner et al., 2009). The focus here is on one particular aspect of the context: role models.

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977a) maintains that behaviour is learned from the environment through the process of observational learning and socialization. Individuals learn new behaviours through social observation, for example by observing and imitating role models. Role models are described as 'individuals whose behaviors, personal styles, and specific attributes are emulated by others' (Shapiro et al., 1978: 52). According to social learning theory, people observe the behaviour of others in given situations and note the outcomes of these behaviours. They then use this knowledge to shape their own behaviour in similar contexts and expect to obtain similar outcomes. By observing others, women learn the norms, values and expected behaviours that are considered appropriate for their new role as a working mother in their organization (Louis, 1980).

The importance of role models for career progression has been well established in the literature (Shortland, 2014). It is particularly the case for women that role models can help them to see how others have dealt with similar issues (Sealy and Singh, 2010). In addition, it has been argued that role models can provide a source of information, encouragement and support (BarNir et al., 2011). It is expected that women who feel that they can share their experiences because other women have undergone this transition themselves have a positive influence on the likelihood that women find a good balance between their work-identity and their identity as a mother, which would be in line with previous studies (Mäkelä, 2009; Millward, 2006) and with social learning theory. It has also been argued that individuals are more likely to attend to and imitate those they perceive as being similar to themselves. For the pregnant women in this study, similar others are likely to be working mothers in the organization or their own mothers. It is expected that women in female-dominated organizations have more exposure to role models than those working in male-dominated workplaces, increasing the likelihood of their making

a successful transition to motherhood. This relates to the concept of self-efficacy, which has been found to relate positively to exposure to role models in organizations (BarNir et al., 2011). Self-efficacy concerns the belief in one's ability to complete a specific task or reach a goal successfully. It is developed enactively (by doing), vicariously (by watching), and through encouragement by others (Bandura, 1997b). The effect of role models on self-efficacy seems to depend on gender, in the sense that women are more inspired by female than by male role models, since women face more issues in common at work, such as negative stereotyping (Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2007; Lockwood, 2006). Based on the many positive outcomes of role models, it is not surprising that pregnant women actively look for women in their own organization who both work and are mothers to function as role models during this period (Millward, 2006). Role models may be existing women in the organization who already have children and display certain qualities, characteristics, attitudes and behaviours that are inspirational to others as models for the successful integration of self and a new career (Chung, 2000).

It is important to note the difference between behavioural models and role models. Gibson (2004: 137) stated that behavioural models are 'based on the capabilities of the target and desire to learn by the individual', while role models are 'based on perceived similarity and desire to increase similarity by the individual'. This suggests that role models need to be perceived as similar for someone to want to emulate them (Sealy and Singh, 2010). A role model needs to be realistic and attainable for the individual for identification to occur (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997). It has also been argued that individuals can draw on total or composite role models (Shapiro et al., 1978) and that looking for total role models in a single person is often not only impossible, but also leads to unrealistic and unattainable goals. Drawing on several individuals and taking the best of each seems to lead to a more balanced 'ideal' for which to aim (Gibson, 2003, 2004; Lockwood et al., 2002).

Moreover, social learning theory focuses on learning that occurs within a social context in which people learn from one another (McCullough Chavis, 2011) and, as such, is a cognitive process in which people make sense of what they observe. The different ways in which working mothers in their organization juggle their different identities will influence the prospective mother's expectations about how easy or difficult it will be. This observation of and comparison with other women 'like them' who have become parents will influence their decision making on, for example, whether to re-enter the workforce after their maternity leave. If they have seen other women being able to do this, they will feel confident that they will be able to do the same. However, if they see that all mothers either resign, are fired or demoted, or are not as invested after their pregnancy, this may function as a signal that being a mother and a competent worker are incompatible (Buunk et al., 2007).

Method

This study uses a grounded theory approach to gain a more nuanced understanding of how women's identity changes throughout pregnancy. These methods are best used to delve deeper into an unknown phenomenon and enhance understanding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Four unstructured pilot interviews were conducted that served to develop the initial interview guide and to determine the focus of the interviews. The pilot interviews gave complete freedom to the interviewees to cover anything they wanted to talk about regarding their pregnancy and work, elaborate on topics they considered important and convey their own personal experiences with minimal direction from the researcher. While the overall theme was that of changes in identity during pregnancy, the importance of role models emerged as a topic that was considered important by the interviewees. It was thus decided to dig deeper into this topic by integrating questions on this concept in the interview guide.

Sample

The sample consisted of women who were pregnant with their first child and working full time. Since the focus of the study was changes in identity, women who were more than three months pregnant were excluded, since the first interview had to take place before the end of the first trimester.

Participants were sampled broadly through a combination of snowball and convenience techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994), using personal contacts, distributing invitations to participate in the study at schools and daycare centres and by posting details of the study on websites for pregnant women. It is important to note that the interviewees were strongly intrinsically motivated as they were intrigued by their pregnancy and did not receive any incentive for participation. Several characteristics should be discussed here, as they were expected to influence the strategies the interviewees would deploy during their pregnancy. First, the interviewees worked in a wide range of industries and jobs, from a doctor, lawyer and financial advisor to lower-status jobs such as cleaner and waitress. Clearly, the transition to motherhood is a personal and unique experience and macro-, meso- and micro-level aspects of the context all influence the way this identity transition is perceived, as explained in the context section above. However, several individual characteristics require more attention: education level, sector, the gender composition of the sector, religion, and whether one lives in an urban or rural area. Education level differed among the interviewees. This is relevant because the employment patterns of mothers vary between education levels. For example, Dutch national statistics show that 52% of mothers with a lower level of education do not participate in the labour market, compared with 12% of more highly educated mothers (Statistics Netherlands, 2011). Second, and relatedly, the sectors in which the interviewees worked differed markedly from one another. Sectors can be gender-balanced, male-dominated or female-dominated. This information is provided below, since previous research found that this factor influences the experiences of women at work (Ely, 1994; Germain et al., 2012). Family-friendly working arrangements are also more common in female-dominated sectors (Merens et al., 2011). It is important to note that none of the interviewees reported being religious. Previous studies found that being religious often has a negative effect on the labour market participation of women, owing to the greater prevalence of traditional views and less support for feminism (Bolzendahl and Meyers, 2004). All the women interviewed lived in big cities. As a consequence, the interviewees did not differ with respect to the influence of structural and cultural factors that may be different between

urban and rural areas in the Netherlands, such as the availability of jobs and childcare provision.

A total of 24 women participated in the study, each of whom was interviewed three times, leading to the analysis of 72 interviews. A selection bias needs to be acknowledged, since the participants contacted the researcher if they were interested in participating in the study. The number of interviews to be conducted was not determined beforehand. However, after 24 interviews, there was a point of saturation where little new information was obtained and where similar patterns started to recur. The women were between 23 and 38 years old with an average age of 28.8 years. The characteristics of the interviewees, their age and job title, education level, sector, the gender composition of the sector in which they worked (whether gender-balanced, male-dominated or female-dominated) and their intention to work full time, part time or not at all after childbirth are provided in the table below.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Int.	Age	Function	Educational level	Sector	Gender composition	Intention to work after birth
1	32	HR Assistant	Higher vocational	Administration	Female-dominated	Part time
2	37	Lawyer	University	Law	Gender-balanced	Full time
3	26	Teacher	Higher vocational	Education	Female-dominated	Part time
4	24	Nurse	Higher vocational	Healthcare	Female-dominated	Part time
5	28	Cleaner	Lower vocational	Cleaning	Female-dominated	Full time
6	31	Administrative Clerk	Intermed. vocational	Administration	Female-dominated	Part time
7	30	Financial Advisor	University	Financial services	Male-dominated	Part time
8	30	Admin. Worker	Intermed. vocational	Administration	Female-dominated	Part time
9	31	General Practitioner	University	Healthcare	Female-dominated	Part time
10	28	Hairdresser	Intermed. vocational	Beauty industry	Female-dominated	Part time
11	33	Business Consultant	University	Professional services	Male-dominated	Full time
12	25	Interior Designer	Higher vocational	Creative	Gender-balanced	Full time
13	23	Psychologist	University	Healthcare	Female-dominated	Part time
14	35	Osteopath	Higher vocational	Healthcare	Female-dominated	Part time

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Int.	Age	Function	Educational level	Sector	Gender composition	Intention to work after birth
15	30	Illustrator	Higher vocational	Creative	Gender-balanced	Part time
16	31	Cook	Intermed. vocational	Hospitality	Female-dominated	Full time
17	32	Daycare Provider	Intermed. vocational	Care	Female-dominated	Part time
18	30	Dancer	Intermed. vocational	Creative	Gender-balanced	Full time
19	31	English Teacher	Higher vocational	Education	Female-dominated	Part time
20	22	Cleaner	Lower vocational	Cleaning	Female-dominated	Part time
21	29	Waitress	Lower vocational	Hospitality	Female-dominated	Part time
22	36	Banker	Higher vocational	Financial services	Male-dominated	Full time
23	38	High School Teacher	Higher vocational	Education	Female-dominated	Part time
24	29	Working in a bakery	Lower vocational	Sales	Gender-balanced	Part time

Procedure

It was explained to the participants that the goal of the study was to learn more about how identity changes throughout pregnancy and the interviewees were asked to 'tell their story' of how they saw themselves as a future mother and, simultaneously, a worker. The interviewees were thus asked to create a narrative. As narrating is an essential part of the sensemaking process (Brown et al., 2008), a narrative approach provides a novel perspective from which to gain in-depth understanding of women's experiences during pregnancy. Previous studies have shown that narratives are useful in making sense of challenging transitions in life, such as the transition to becoming a mother (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010; Miller, 2005). Self-narratives help individuals to construct a 'transition bridge' (Ashforth, 2001) across gaps that arise between old and new roles and identities. Moreover, since such transitions can be psychologically straining, researchers have argued that self-narratives are used to manage strain in work identity (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and explain their role transitions to others (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2003). During a transition, an individual has to construct a new self, which includes stories that are considered appropriate by the new social group to which one is going to belong (Ibarra, 2003). By the use of narratives throughout their pregnancy, the interviewees were able to reflect on their search for a new identity and their trial-and-error approach to constructing a new identity that was both validated the external environment and led to feelings of authenticity.

It has been argued that individuals construct their own experience of transition to motherhood at work and that this is done through active sensemaking (Millward, 2006). By interviewing these women, the researcher became part of this sensemaking process and, as she collected and analysed the data, she has a fundamentally interpretative role that needs to be acknowledged. A set of general questions guided the interviews, but other themes were explored when identified by the researcher. All the interviews were conducted by telephone and each lasted for approximately one-and-a-half hours. The interviews were conducted in Dutch and translated into English by the use of parallel translation by two native English–Dutch speakers. It was stressed that all interviewees could leave the interview at any time without providing a justification and that confidentiality was ensured. All interviewees were interviewed three times: once during each trimester of their pregnancy.

Analysis

All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis was done by hand, without the use of a software package. The analysis was inductive in nature. However, the various steps are interrelated and going back and forth through the different stages was necessary to explore and analyse the dataset fully. This approach is similar to that taken by other qualitative researchers on identity (Kreiner et al., 2009; Pratt et al., 2006).

Initial themes, such as the lack of realistic role models, feelings of loneliness, insecurity and guilt, as well as social pressure regarding how to balance motherhood with paid work, were identified. All the interviews were then coded. The focus of this article is the transition and the changes women experience throughout their pregnancies. To capture the transitional experience, each woman's interviews were analysed as part of a case occurring across three different times (early pregnancy, mid-pregnancy and late pregnancy). By analysing each woman's case this way, the psychological changes in terms of the women's identity could be captured. However, cross-case patterns were also noted in the process to identify both similarities and differences. The codebook was constantly modified, as the codes identified in earlier cases were tested in the later ones using a process of analytic induction. Two coders were used to reduce error and bias in coding the transcripts (Mays and Pope, 2000) and inter-coder reliability (Cohen, 1960) was established. Five rounds of discussion between the coders, involving modification of the codebook, coding and calculating inter-coder reliability, were necessary to obtain reliabilities of 0.83 to 0.97. An inter-coder reliability of 0.80 was used as a cut-off point (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The iterative process moved towards the identification of broader themes, distilling the main findings while also being careful to represent all the cases in their unique context.

Findings

This study interviewed 24 women three times during their pregnancy and obtained in-depth insights into the way they reported the changes in their identity. Two main themes emerged: their changing identity throughout the different stages of their

pregnancy and the importance of role models to the success of their transition to motherhood. The data revealed patterns and strategies in dealing with changes in their existing work-related identity and their upcoming maternal identity. Differences in terms of contextual factors, such as education level and the gender composition of the sector in which the women worked, are discussed below in order to provide a complete picture of how they influence this transition. The findings are discussed chronologically by trimester. The figure below gives an overview of the main patterns identified.

First trimester

First, it was found that three-quarters of all the interviewees tried to hide their pregnancy for as long as possible. This is not surprising, since previous studies have shown that how and when women disclose their pregnancy has implications for their well-being (Jones et al., 2013). Moreover, by concealing their pregnant status for as long as it is invisible, there is less potential for stigmatization (Little et al., 2015). Almost all the interviewees who concealed their pregnancy waited at least three months because of the possibility of miscarriage, but more often up to four to five or even six months in order to reduce the likelihood of stigmatization, discrimination and other negative reactions. This strategic choice is in line with previous research, in which women also reported that, despite legislation requiring employers to treat pregnant women fairly (Kohl et al., 2005), they did not believe that equal opportunities policies would protect them from discrimination regarding their pregnancy, which led them to conceal their pregnancy for as long as possible. Extended periods of concealment occurred most often in male-dominated sectors, in which negative outcomes related to their pregnancy were perceived to be the most prevalent:

> I'm now almost five months, but not showing much. I mean, with the right clothes I can easily hide it. No one at the organization knows it yet. By postponing making it public, I win time, they'll have less time to put me in this stigmatized hole of unproductive, useless, unprofessional future mum. (Interviewee 22, Banker, four months pregnant).

The concealment of pregnancy can be related to the lack of role models. More than three-quarters of the women expressed the notion that there was a lack of role models. They explained that role models such as Cheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, or Marissa Mayer, Chief Executive Officer of Yahoo, are neither inspirational nor realistic: 'You have those superwomen who seem to be able to have it all. I don't know how they do it, but I don't find any support in there, it's rather frustrating' (Interviewee 3, Teacher, three months pregnant).

However, the presence of realistic and attainable role models decreased the likelihood of women concealing their pregnancy. This is in line with Ragins (2008), who stated that the presence of similar others, thus role models, is an important construct in disclosure research.

The gender composition of the sectors in which the interviewees worked was found to influence the transition to motherhood. In female-dominated sectors, there were more working mothers and, therefore, more potential role models. As a consequence, pregnant

women could observe how others disclosed their pregnancy and how the organization reacted, giving these women an advantage over those working in male-dominated sectors in which women did not have role models and also could not deduce the organization's attitude towards pregnancy and working mothers through observation:

> The organization is very feminine. There are lots of working mums and they're all accepted. That really helps to come out, I'm not the only one. I know people will react in a positive way, so I am keen to inform my colleagues soon! (Interviewee 17, Daycare Provider, two months pregnant)

Apart from the decision about when to announce their pregnancy at work, most of the interviewees characterized the first trimester as an uncertain period. First, they reported feeling unsure because miscarriages are common within the first three months of pregnancy, but the interviewees also found it difficult to imagine how it would be once the baby arrived, possibly because a pregnancy is often invisible at this stage. As one interviewee explained:

> OK, so I'm pregnant, but I actually forget it most of the time. It may sound stupid, but I feel nothing, you can't see it, no one knows it, life just goes on. This whole baby thing, we'll see that later when I have a big belly. (Interviewee 18, Dancer, two months pregnant)

Second trimester

During the second trimester, most of the interviewees could no longer deny they were pregnant and then had to face the difficult question of how to integrate their upcoming maternal identity with their existing work-related identity. Two-thirds of the interviewees perceived the two to be incompatible and explained moving back-and-forth between different possible scenarios, not yet knowing what to do. The data suggest that perceptions of incompatibility were strongest for women with high levels of education and in jobs with high levels of responsibility. Their attachment to their job and their related unwillingness to let this go increased their feelings of incompatibility. They started to experiment with diverse and even contradictory possible selves:

> I'm kind of trying things, sometimes I'm hanging out with the mums at work and try to imagine that I'll be part of them soon. I hear them talk about their kids being ill, sleepless nights, preparing birthday parties . . . But the week after I'm trying to kind of leave my pregnancy aside and behave as if I wasn't pregnant, being extremely active, telling people at work I can take charge of an important project . . . It's a little strange, I guess I'm trying out where I belong, what fits me best. (Interviewee 6, Administrative Clerk, five months pregnant)

In line with Ibarra's (1999) seminal study, more than half of the interviewees had tried out several selves: they observed role models to identify potential identities, experimented with their provisional selves, and evaluated these 'experiments'. They explained how different identities 'felt', which is referred to as authenticity or internal validation in Ibarra's (1999) study. Sometimes, they explained that a certain identity felt unreal and made comments such as '*no, this just isn't me*'. They also explained that the external environment

played an important role and that they looked for the '*balance between who I am and what society expects me to be*', since a culturally accepted discourse facilitates the granting of identity (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Some women had a clear vision of their working lives after the birth of their baby and disregarded the reaction of others when opting for a socially unconventional decision to either continue to work full time or to withdraw from the labour market altogether. In line with previous research in the Netherlands (Merens et al., 2011), it was found that women with a university degree were most likely to express the intention to work full time after the birth of their child. In addition, the pressure to conform to the part-time norm was less present in male-dominated sectors:

> When I announced that I would keep my full-time position after my maternity leave, people weren't very supportive and I got a lot of negative reactions with the underlying message that if you put your baby to daycare five days a week, you're a bad mum. I think this could have a destabilizing effect on some future mums, but not me. I know what I'm doing and I know what I want, whatever others think of it. (Interviewee 2, Lawyer, six months pregnant)

These experiments were part of an ongoing process that women continued until they had found their personal answer to the following question: what does it mean for me professionally to work and simultaneously be a mother?

> I'm looking at how other working mums do it. I observe them and reflect then on how well their idea of a working mum suits me. I sometimes actively look for more info, asking them about how much their partner is involved in caring for the kids, the prices of childcare, etc. Just so that I can have an idea of what would be the best solution for me, my husband and the baby. (Interviewee 13, Psychologist, six months pregnant)

Role models were perceived as crucial during this stage. The interviewees explained that when there were no or few examples of women juggling family and career, they felt lost and unsure, which was reported particularly by the pregnant women working in male-dominated sectors. For example, '*Am I ever going to make it all happen if, apparently, no one seems to have found a balance?*'. They also explained that the reactions of others during their 'trials' influenced their ideas, which is in line with social learning theory. For example, one interviewee received a negative reaction from her manager on the few days she decided to spend time with the groups of mothers at her organization. This made her realize that '*making your mother-identity too salient at work is not done*'. Other negative reactions from colleagues or managers all emphasized how pregnancy is perceived as something negative in the workplace. Examples of comments include: '*You don't look very professional now, can't you hide it better?*' or '*Now that you're pregnant, someone else will represent the company, we have to show a serious and dedicated image*'. Such negative reactions show that the concealment of pregnancy makes sense in order to reduce stigmatization and stereotyping. The storytelling of other women helped the interviewees to identify their own preferences and learn competing interpretations, unfamiliar views, and others' stories.

Finally, the interviewees highlighted the need for 'average-performance' role models, in whom career success is defined as a balance between having time with children, for oneself and also having a fulfilling and meaningful job in a company where one feels

good, and the financial resources to have a good standard of living. Many women felt they had to choose, regardless of education level or the sector in which they worked. As one interviewee stated:

> I see some women making a career after having had babies, but they're like, so career-oriented. I don't say I don't care about my career, but I'm wondering why those women had kids really, all they want is to get higher up. While, at the same time, you have those mums who are just mums even when they are at work. They only talk babies, they're not professional, you feel they don't care about their careers any more, I don't want to become like that either. (Interviewee 3, Teacher, six months pregnant)

Clearly, based on the data, there seems to be a lack of role models of women who had not had to choose but had found a balance. Since such role models were often not available, the interviewees explained that they had to construct or create their own role model by taking the best elements of the different role models that they perceived as unsatisfactory and combining them to function as a total role model.

The lack of realistic and attainable role models led to feelings of confusion, insecurity and loneliness. Previous studies found that women actively look for role models and similar others (Millward, 2006) and, not finding them, caused them to wonder if they were the only ones in that situation. By not being able to share their experience as a pregnant worker and a future mother in the workplace, many of the interviewees wondered if what they were feeling and experiencing was normal:

> Women don't tell other women how it is to be pregnant or how it is to balance work and private life. I guess people are scared to be rejected, scared to be perceived as a bad mum or bad professional. This pressure of being perfect is so strong that people don't openly talk about it, the topic seems too sensitive but as such future mums never get the guidance they need to make it all work. (Interviewee 4, Nurse, six months pregnant)

The women also talked about external pressure and uninvited advice on how to balance work and personal life, which was found to be particularly prevalent in female-dominated sectors. The interviewees explained that the working mothers at their organization, who probably just wanted to be supportive, often gave a lot of unwanted advice. The interviewees disliked the normative tone and felt that they could not make a choice themselves but *had to* act like the role model, since this behaviour had apparently led to success in the past. Women who were still uncertain about how to balance the arrival of a baby with their work seemed more vulnerable to such social pressures than women who already had an established and clear idea of how they were going to manage their situation. For example:

> I don't yet know how I'll juggle with work and baby. I'll see, but apparently I can't just wait and see. There is this norm of how it 'should be' you see? I feel that I can't deviate from it. I should work part time, like most working mums in the organization, and that's it. But I'm not sure if that's the best solution for me. (Interviewee 19, English Teacher, four months pregnant)

The interviewees mentioned the social pressure from other working mothers and the perceived social norms of part-time work in the Netherlands (Ruitenberg, 2014), but also cited

role models outside their organization; in particular, their own mothers were mentioned by over half of the interviewees. These mothers reflected on how their own mother had juggled having children and paid employment and this often functioned as their benchmark and strongly influenced their own perception of what constituted the 'right' balance, which is in line with previous research (Cloïn, 2010; Ruitenberg and De Beer, 2012).

Third trimester

During their last trimester, around three-quarters of the interviewees reported that, as they progressed through their pregnancy, their identity as a future mother strengthened. This was particularly true for two groups of women: those with a low education level working in jobs with a low occupational status, and those in family-friendly female-dominated occupations. The women with a lower level of education did not feel strongly about their occupations and, therefore, had no difficulty in placing their work-related identity in the background. The pregnant women working in female-dominated sectors with a number of family-friendly arrangements, on the other hand, did not perceive their upcoming maternal identity as a threat to their existing occupational identity, and felt that dealing with both was possible. When role models were available in their organization, they felt confident that they would also be able to become successful working mothers after the birth of their child. The interviewees explained they felt increasingly attached to their unborn babies, putting their work-related identities in a different perspective. A shift from a fairly detached attitude towards their future role of mother from the first trimester to a trial period in the second trimester and, finally, towards a stronger sense of responsibility for their future babies became visible. However, exceptions to the identified patterns emerged, as illustrated by the following excerpt from a highly educated financial advisor, who had always been strongly committed to her job and worked in a male-dominated sector:

> I remember myself thinking that my career was my life in the beginning. But . . . I don't know . . . nature is interesting [laughs], women are made for reproduction and feeling this baby now inside, I just know already that my job can't compete with this baby. I've talked to other women at work and some of them are so detached from their maternal side, I can't be like that and don't want it anyway. I want to be a good mum and my career will come second. (Interviewee 7, Financial Advisor, eight months pregnant)

In the excerpt above, the phrase '*I can't be like that*' clearly shows the importance of authenticity in identity reconstruction. The presence of realistic role models helped these women to reconstruct a new identity, integrating their future maternal identity with a changed work-related identity, as the interviewee below outlined: 'There are so many working mums, I've plenty of examples of how to keep on working and be a good mum. It's a comforting idea that dealing with both is common practice here' (Interviewee 17, Daycare Provider, seven months pregnant).

However, the interviewees who did not find realistic role models reported increasing feelings of incompatibility, which was mentioned most often by the interviewees in male-dominated occupations, those with a strong commitment to their jobs and with a high education level. This led them to feel they had to choose between their forthcoming maternal identity and their work-related identity, as the following interviewee explained:

> I thought I could have it both. My pregnancy is easy, no nausea, not too tired, all is going well. But I know that there will be a trade-off. Why are there so few balanced women, why do we always only see the two extremes? The career-oriented working mums who neglect her kids and the who-cares-about-my-career women who are stuck at their positions from the moment they fall pregnant? I feel I have to make a choice too. (Interviewee 22, Banker, seven months pregnant)

This, in turn, resulted in psychological stress and strain and increased their feelings of uncertainty. The interviewees who perceived their different identities as incompatible and had no role models who showed 'how to do it' were extremely stressed about the arrival of their baby:

> I'm so stressed out. I thought it would work out, but it doesn't. What the hell am I going to do? Do I stop working, do I get a full-time nanny at home? I'm a wreck, I feel torn and depressed, I thought pregnancy would be a fun and happy period, but it just complicates life and I'm afraid to have this baby, I'm afraid it means the end of my career, afraid to be a bad mum, I so don't know what to do [cries]. (Interviewee 12, Interior Designer, eight months pregnant)

In some cases, this liminal state became a frustrating enduring one, as one interviewee explained:

> It stresses me out that none of the mothers in the organization have found the right balance. I'm not superwoman, it means I'm going to be the same. You feel their regrets, their constant battle, being dissatisfied with both their professional career and their role as mother . . . They're tense, still not knowing who they are and what is important to them, a bit like I feel now. Does it mean that I'll stay in this in-between state until my kids have left the house? (Interviewee 1, Human Resources Assistant, nine months pregnant)

Three main strategies or categories were identified, as depicted in Figure 1. Almost one-quarter of all the interviewees opted for a strategy that is in line with Ladge et al.'s (2012) findings, and an approach emerged of women who still concealed their pregnancy at a late stage and behaved throughout their first and second trimesters as if they were not pregnant. These women consequently reported that they would wait and see. These women were strongly committed to their career or occupation, which was such that having a baby would complicate their professional life. For example, the dancer interviewed explained that her occupation required her to be geographically mobile and accept irregular working hours, as well as long working days, which are characteristics that are indeed not ideal for obtaining a satisfying work–life balance. Such characteristics of certain occupations thus enhanced the likelihood of these women denying their pregnancy in the beginning, leading to inaction in their last trimester. The interviewees in this group had unclear expectations and did very little to prepare for the arrival of their baby:

> Everything worked out well during pregnancy, so I guess it'll be the same when the baby is there. I mean, I'll be there during my maternity leave and that gives me plenty of time to see how we will do next. Well, it's a bit late now to change things, we'll just go with the flow. (Interviewee 16, Cook, eight months pregnant)

	First trimester	Second trimester	Third trimester
When role models are available in female-dominated organizations	No need to conceal pregnancy after three-month threshold	Experiments with provisional selves that feel authentic and are validated by others	Increasing focus on maternal identity
When no role models are available in male-dominated organizations	Extended concealment of pregnancy	Denial of pregnancy	Inaction
When no role models are available in male-dominated organizations	Extended concealment of pregnancy to reduce stigmatization	Long trial and error period, increasing perceptions of incompatibility, feeling of having to choose	Feelings of stress, psychological strain and uncertainty

Figure 1. Main patterns identified during different stages of pregnancy.

Their aim was to continue to live their lives, without being '*disturbed*' by the babies growing inside them. While the denial strategy worked, in general, quite well and for the first six months, during the last trimester, the women had to acknowledge the forthcoming event of delivery and, therefore, the need to integrate a new maternal identity. These women moved from denial to inaction. They often felt strongly committed to their job or occupation, mainly had high education levels and worked in sectors where there were few women. These women enjoyed their job, were reluctant to give this up and lacked role models in their organizations because of the skewed gender composition, leading to a focus on their work-related identity while downplaying their forthcoming identity as a mother:

> I love my job and while my husband and I decided to have a baby this doesn't mean that the arrival of the little one is going to change everything. I hope my husband will do a lot, because I'm honestly not prepared to give up my career, I've worked so hard to get here. We'll see, I'm sure it'll work out. (Interviewee 11, Business Consultant, eight months pregnant)

In summary, the availability or lack of role models, as well as the interviewees' occupation, the gender composition of the sector in which they worked and their education level, all influenced how the women reacted to their forthcoming maternal identity, and this was a dynamic process that evolved throughout the different stages of pregnancy. In the first trimester, feelings of insecurity were expressed, the women reported having unclear expectations of how to juggle family and work and envisioning themselves as a mother at that time was difficult for most. For those interviewees who were mainly working in female-dominated sectors, in which family-friendly working arrangements are widely available, they had a number of role models and the principles underlying social learning theory can be seen to have operated. As a consequence, they felt increasingly

confident that they would be able to juggle both family and work and experimented with several possible future selves during the second trimester to try to establish which one fitted them best. In the third trimester, in most cases, these women's priorities shifted from work to the arrival of their baby. For women with a lower level of education, this shift also occurred, but the function of role models was less evident here. Women in jobs with few career prospects, low status and low pay, such as cleaners, perceived the arrival of their baby as a way to escape from jobs that they did not perceive as being satisfying. However, most women were bound to continuing to work part time for financial reasons.

In contrast, for the more highly educated interviewees who reported a lack of realistic and attainable role models, many of these women concealed their pregnancy well beyond the threshold of three months in order to avoid stigmatization and discrimination. During the second trimester, the interviewees stressed the lack of realistic role models to whom they could relate. Women working in male-dominated sectors seemed to report the most marked lack of role models. They also highlighted the need for female role models who had found a balance between having time for family and other occupations, while also enjoying a meaningful and satisfying job. Very often, they reported the feeling of having to choose. In addition, the interviewees mentioned the existing social norms regarding balancing work and family and the social pressure of how they were supposed to deal with this, which was particularly prevalent in female-dominated sectors. The prescriptive way in which the women were told how they should integrate their future maternal identity was not appreciated. These women reported a long experimental phase, trying out several possible selves without finding a resolution, leading to even stronger perceptions of incompatibility between their existing identity and their future maternal identity during the last trimester, resulting in psychological stress and strain. A small proportion of interviewees who were strongly committed to their careers moved from a denial strategy in the first two trimesters to a strategy of delay in their last trimester, continuously focusing on their career and leaving their maternal identity integration for after the birth of their child.

Discussion

This study examined in depth the way in which pregnant women gradually try to integrate their future identity as a mother with their existing work-related identity. Twenty-four women were interviewed three times: during the first, second and third trimesters of pregnancy. The findings suggest that women's ideas, attitudes and preferences evolve as they move through the different stages of pregnancy and that role models play an important part in this process, as well as other contextual factors, such as the education level of the woman, her occupation and commitment to her job, the sector in which she works and the gender composition of that sector.

The role models' behaviours were examined for guidance as to what is appropriate behaviour in a particular organization and with particular goals in mind. An important part of the value of role models is that they demonstrate the possibility of attainment for those similar to them. In this respect, they are symbols of possibility, offering inspiration and removing uncertainty – the fact that role models have got there means

that it is possible to do so (Chung, 2000). However, the findings highlight the lack of realistic role models for many future working mothers. The lack of role models, particularly evident in male-dominated sectors, made it difficult for pregnant women to observe how others had experienced this transition and to find the support they needed, which is in line with Ely (1994). This finding is worrisome because previous research has shown that role models have a positive influence on career intentions (BarNir et al., 2011), which means that women who are exposed to other women who have found a balance between their professional and familial lives are more likely to continue working after giving birth than those who do not have such examples (Buzzanell and Liu, 2007). In another study, all the women seemed to achieve revalidation as employees and as mothers when they felt that their experiences could be shared openly, because the team in which they worked was genuinely supportive and/or others had experienced the transition themselves (Millward, 2006). Moreover, Brown et al. (2002) found that others' attitudes towards their pregnancy played an important role in how satisfied women were with their jobs before, during and after pregnancy. The researchers argued that having visible positive role models is likely to lead to higher job satisfaction during and after pregnancy, which, in turn, can lead to other positive organizational outcomes, such as the retention of women after their maternity leave and higher performance. Since role models are more readily available in female-dominated sectors, women working in such industries have an advantage over those in gender-balanced or male-dominated organizations. In addition, the women interviewed could not draw on full role models since they either did not exist or were considered to be unrealistic. The fact that 'superstars' were considered unattainable and unrealistic is in accordance with previous findings (Lockwood and Kunda, 1997) and contradicts the media where such role models are presented as 'superheroes'. The findings stress that the role models referred to in this study are people who are moderately successful at keeping all the balls in the air. As a consequence of the lack of realistic role models, the interviewees had to construct their own role models by using various characteristics from several different individuals. This allowed them to create a role model that really fitted their ideas and, as such, be quite successful in their transition to becoming a working mother. This is in line with Ibarra (1999), who studied young professionals as they transitioned into more senior roles and found that the less successful tended to use total role models, whilst the more successful individuals constructed a composite template from several different role models. In addition, it has been argued that women may also find role models outside the business world, perhaps in their social world or among their family or community (Singh et al., 2006), which this study can confirm by pointing out that more than half of all the interviewees referred to their own mother as a partial role model.

Apart from the importance of role models, other contextual characteristics also need to be discussed. First, this study was conducted in the Netherlands. The specific situation in the Netherlands, with many mothers in employment, the availability of a number of childcare facilities, and the possibility of parental leave and flexible work arrangements, would suggest a welcoming and accommodating attitude towards pregnancy and work–life balance issues. However, it was found that even in a country such as the Netherlands, there are stereotypes to fulfil, such as the

perceived need to conform to being a part-time working mother. Second, the pregnant women interviewed worked in different occupations and industries. In female-dominated sectors, such as (health)care and education, role models were available and family-friendly working practices were common. However, the transition to motherhood was hindered in female-dominated sectors by the social norm of working part time that was felt to be imposed. While in public discourses the employment choices of mothers are presented as being the individual's personal choice (Beagan et al., 2008), this perspective ignores the effect of normative beliefs (Ruitenberg, 2014; Ruitenberg and De Beer, 2012). This suggests that (future) mothers who either wish to work full time or to stay at home are not accepted in society, leading to stigmatization and more problems regarding finding a balanced identity as a (working) mother. In addition, the findings suggest that two groups of pregnant women expressed the notion of continuing to work full time after childbirth: highly educated pregnant women who are strongly committed to their occupation, and women in low-status occupations who had to continue to work out of financial necessity. Previous studies found that intrinsic characteristics of work, such as self-development and having pleasant colleagues are more important than extrinsic ones, such as pay, career possibilities and status in the decision of mothers to work full time, part time or not at all (Portegijs and Keuzenkamp, 2008). The findings of the current study suggest that this might only be true for women who have a fairly high education level and a well-paid job.

Practical implications

First, the perceived need to conceal pregnancy for as long as possible in order to avoid stigmatization and other negative reactions regarding pregnancy in mainly male-dominated industries shows that, despite the growing number of women at work and legislation to prohibit unfair treatment based on pregnancy, the transition to motherhood is not yet a socially accepted phenomenon in all organizations. As a consequence, organizations could start with diversity sensitivity training in order to increase awareness of the issues pregnant women face and create a more inclusive and tolerant workplace. In addition to sensitivity training, it is suggested that managers and supervisors actively support women who are looking for ways to balance their job with family commitments. Previous research has shown that family demands and mothers' ambitions are often ignored by supervisors (King, 2008), contributing to the withdrawal of mothers from the labour market.

Second, it was found that the lack of realistic and attainable role models can lead to feelings of confusion, insecurity and loneliness among pregnant women. Affinity networks could help pregnant women, those in male-dominated organizations in particular, to share their experiences, feel less lonely and recognize that their feelings and doubts are normal and part of a natural transition process. Affinity networks offer support and career advice and create connections within identity groups such as pregnant women (Dobbin et al., 2011). In addition, previous studies found that women are often not aware of the fact that they may function as role models for other women (Shortland, 2014). Both women themselves, as well as their organizations, may want to identify women who could act as role models and make them more visible and available to others.

For women working in female-dominated sectors, in which role models are more easily available, the implications are different. Through others' observation of them, role models help to create clearer expectations about what is going to change. Nonetheless, human resources management departments in organizations could be more proactive in providing pregnant women with their policies and practices regarding working women, so that women better understand the different options available and can prepare for them. In female-dominated organizations, the interviewees reported pressure in the form of the social norm to work part time after childbirth. While the widespread use of part-time employment can be perceived as a chance for women, if deviating from this new norm (Ruitenberg, 2014) is stigmatized, organizations should stress that the transition to parenthood and decisions regarding striking a balance between family and work are a personal matter and that women should not feel forced to opt for a part-time job.

Finally, for some women, practical considerations play a role in their transition experience and employment decision after childbirth. While the Netherlands is progressive in terms of childcare facilities, flexible working options such as part-time work and working from home, there is still room for improvement. Individualized arrangements that meet the unique needs of each individual are strongly recommended.

Theoretical implications

Social learning theory was used as a theoretical framework in interpreting the findings.

First, individuals learn new behaviours through social observation, for example by observing and imitating role models. According to social learning theory, individuals are more likely to attend to and imitate those people they perceive to be similar to themselves. For the pregnant women in this study, similar others are likely to be other working mothers in the organization or their own mothers. Women in female-dominated organizations thus have more exposure to role models than those working in male-dominated workplaces.

Second, social learning theory stresses the importance of the reaction of the working environment. It was found that the feedback the pregnant women received from colleagues, managers and other people produced changes in their stories and identities, since individuals replicate behaviours that win them approval and seek alternatives to those that do not. Indeed, the work environment can react to the behaviour of pregnant women in either a positive or negative way. During the liminal stage, in which the interviewees were experimenting with possible future selves, the different reactions they received from their environment played an important role in how they evaluated their trial of a particular identity. For example, receiving negative comments from a superior when making one's future maternal identity salient could be perceived as a punishment, leading pregnant women to understand that this behaviour is not valued and should not be reproduced. However, socially accepted behaviour, such as expressing one's intention to continue working part time after the delivery of the baby, led to positive appraisal and positive reinforcement, making it more likely that this way of integrating their future maternal identity with their existing work-related identity would be retained.

Ibarra and Barbulescu (2010) stated that successful stories, those that generate feelings of authenticity and are deemed valid by their target audience, are more likely to be retained, while unsuccessful ones lead to a search for alternative narratives. The findings of this study are in line with this, since successful stories helped the interviewees internalize their new identity and led to positive psychological outcomes, while the endless search for successful narratives prolonged the transition and led to negative psychological outcomes.

Limitations and avenues for future research

Although this study provides some insights into how pregnant women's identity changes as they move through the different stages of pregnancy, and the part of role models and certain other contextual factors in this process, this study also has shortcomings.

First, while this study considered several contextual factors, many others are likely to influence how women redefine their identity and how much support they receive from role models. For example, it is expected that occupational status or prestige, women's centrality to work prior to becoming pregnant and whether or not women have a partner and how much this partner contributes to parenting, will influence this process. In addition, the interviewees in this study were between 23 and 38 years old. While differences between mothers of different ages were not studied here, it is possible that the strategies identified differ among women of different ages, making this an interesting avenue for future research. For example, one can imagine that an older woman who had problems becoming pregnant is more likely to invest a lot of time in the long-awaited baby and will put her identity as a mother at the forefront. In addition, it was not possible to distinguish between age and cohort effects and, as a consequence, longitudinal studies that allow for disentangling these effects are required. Moreover, differences might exist between women who intended to work full time versus part time after childbirth.

Second, while this study provides some clues about the importance of role models for pregnant women, future studies are encouraged to delve deeper into this phenomenon by studying in depth how women construct composite role models and how successful they are in this process.

Third, it would be interesting to extend this study by considering identity changes once babies are born. For the group of pregnant women who moved from denial to inaction and had a strong let's-wait-and-see attitude in particular, more research is necessary to establish whether and how these women actually juggled motherhood and work.

Finally, it is important to stress the influence of the Dutch national culture in which this study took place. It is likely that, for example, the part-time norm does not exist in other national cultures, which, in turn, have their own unique beliefs and attitudes towards working mothers. Research in other national cultural contexts is needed.

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