"In or out" or "In-and-out": the social identity transition of female academics during the perinatal period

Abstract

The career trajectories of working mothers in academia could be adversely impacted by maternity breaks given the professional demand for consistent research performance. This study employs the postmodernist perspective of identity which addresses social context to unpack in-depth accounts of female academics' social identity transition throughout their perinatal period (pregnancy till 1-year post-birth). We collected 93 critical incidents via interviews from 23 academics who completed their perinatal period between 2019 and 2022. We found the identity transition was more dynamic than linear. This enabled us to develop a multi-dimensional identity grid matrix to illustrate the varied transitional statuses these mothers encountered as a consequence of the ongoing (re)negotiation between self and social structures (in-and-out of salient social identities). Hence, the social identities of academic mothers can be betwixt among multiple identities. The findings can help HR practitioners in forming a more supportive and consensual working culture, thereby and facilitating working mothers' ability to develop positive resources for a better social-self.

Keywords:

perinatal period, social identity, maternity care support, organisational culture, integrated identity, female academic

Practitioner notes:

What is currently known:

- Research intensive universities with a low student to staff ratio and a higher percentage of female professors are more generous in their maternity provisions.

- Contemporary neoliberal managerialism in UK HEIs can have adverse psychological effects on female academics during their perinatal period.

- Expectant/working mothers often undertake self-mobility strategies (like working harder on research) to secure their academic reputation.

- Formal organisational resources and informal social support at the workplace play essential roles in facilitating a positive perinatal experience for expectant/working mothers in academia.

What this paper adds?

- The social identity transition of expectant/working mothers in academia is more dynamic than linear and involves an ongoing (re)negotiation between self and social structures.

- A multi-dimensional social identity grid matrix is developed to illustrate the varied transitional maternal states during the perinatal period.

- Given the social identities of academic mothers can encompass multiple identities, it is important to develop more flexible maternity support and re-entry schemes to accommodate this.

- A supportive and welcoming working culture, which broadens existing academic prototype, facilitates working mothers' transformation of perceived stigmas into positive resources for a better social-self.

The implications for practitioners

- The research findings substantiate the need for mandatory training for line managers or heads of department regarding the communication and implementation of maternity support policies.

- The multi-dimensional social identify grid matrix offers a useful framework to facilitate HEI HR interventions so as to improve the identity transition for expectant/working mothers during the perinatal period.

- A formalised but bespoke maternity support and re-entry scheme is essential in helping expectant/working mothers in academia to cope with the new norms in their work-life.

1.   Introduction

The identity transition of female professionals due to motherhood has been recognised as a pivotal stage for their future career trajectory and development (Ladge et al., 2012; Ladge & Greenberg, 2015; Hennekam et al., 2019). However, existing research on working mothers' identity transition has mainly focused on snapshots of a particular maternity stage, such as identity uncertainties during pregnancy, or changes of professional identity when re-entering the workplace (Arena Jr et al., 2023). The present study extends this analysis by examining in-depth accounts of female academics' social identity transition throughout the whole perinatal period (i.e., during the pregnancy and/or up to 1-year post-birth, as defined by National Health Service). It has been recognised that female academics' career trajectories can be adversely impacted by motherhood given promotion systems in higher education institutions (HEIs) are generally underpinned by a demand for consistent scholarly performance, such as producing high impact publications (Horn, 2016). Hence, female academics often feel compelled to continue their research work and writing during their maternity leave (Maxwell et al., 2019). Considering that only nearly one-third (30%) of

university professors are women in the UK (HESA, 2023), a contextualised study across the whole of the perinatal period can provide useful insights into how female academics' experiences in balancing an academic-mother identity may inhibit career advancement (and, by extension, how HR practices can be attuned to redress this).

We draw upon the social identity approach of Tajfel and Turner (1979) who suggested that individuals' identity is significantly influenced by their preferred group membership as well as individual characteristics and traits. However, we emphasise on the postmodernist perspective of identity (Deaux & Martin 2003) that contextual factors within academic communities, like working norms, expectations and interpersonal networks (e.g., Ghosh & Chaudhuri 2023; Hennekam, et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2022), have consequential impacts upon working mothers in their transition between two competing aspirations or social identities: an ideal mother and an ideal worker (Acker, 1990; Hays, 1996). Given contemporary literature has acknowledged that social identities rooted in social psychology play an important role in the area of sociology, such as individuals' negotiation of ideal worker expectations (Croft & Fernando, 2018), we are interested in how social exchange approach (Blau, 1964), like a supportive and embracing working culture helps (re)frame expectant/working mothers' shared meanings and values within their academic community to reach a balance between social and self-aspiration. Two research questions are posed: (1) in what way does perceived support from the academic community shape female academics' social identity transition during their perinatal period? (2) how might HEIs better facilitate female academics' transitions into a balanced cross-domain (academic/mother) identity? This research does not restrict itself solely to first-time mothers, since it is crucial to investigate whether working mothers' perceived attitudes towards maternity changed over time throughout their academic career (Arena Jr, et al., 2023).

This study collected 93 critical incidents through in-depth interviews with 23 female academics (15 first-time and 8 second/third time mothers) who recently finished their maternity leave in the UK. A grid matrix (Figure 2) highlighting the different social identity statuses of academic mothers during/beyond their perinatal period is constructed as we contend that academic mothers' social identity transition should be viewed as dynamic, ongoing and socially constructed rather than a sequent of linear process (Ladge et al., 2012). Consequently, experienced mothers can also undergo a similar mother/professional academic identity process due to organisational and working culture as do first-time mothers. Our study further extends identity transition discourses from the social mobility horizon, where identity management is seen as a consequence of personal effort (Little et al., 2015, 2018), into a collectivistic movement. Thus, instead of leaving expectant/working mothers to *'fight'* for their maternity rights (i.e., the social mobility approach), we argue that existing HR strategies for maternity support should be revisited so as to encourage a more inclusive academic prototype, a prototype that softens distinctions among sub-groups (e.g., cultural and (non)parental identity). Our study suggests, as a consequence, further explicit HR discussions regarding maternity challenges as well as support in core diversity, equality and inclusion training can provide a foundation for a more inclusive working environment.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Maternity care in a gendered academia

Whereas increasing scholarly attention has been directed to the consideration of maternity care provision in UK academia (e.g., Davies et al., 2022); the ideal worker concept, a dedicated and extremely productive masculine body, nevertheless continues to underpin gendered academic working culture (Acker, 1990; Acker & Wagner, 2017). This extant academic ideology, regulated by neoliberal managerialism, prioritises long working hours over personal or caring priorities, and is in contradiction to the traditional physically and

emotionally devoted model of mothering (Hays, 1996). Contemporary literature on academic maternity care has focused on how working mothers negotiate and adjust their motherhood aspirations around a masculinist value and working culture (e.g., Huopalainen & Satama, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2019). Our approach differs as we aim to discover whether a more support working system can help transform established ideal academic *'prototype'* into inclusive community. Our literature analysis of maternity care in existing gendered academia covers the macro societal culture and gender orders, micro interpersonal relations and individual perinatal experiences, and meso working system supported by HRM schemes (Wilkinson, 2023).

2.1.1 Macro social culture and gendered order: maternity leave provisions and policy.

Given capitalism and gender hierarchies are dominant forces in shaping the ideology of societal culture and sub-cultures (Acker, 1990, 2006), studies employing macro-level economic and gender gap perspectives (Davies et al., 2022; Epifanio & Troeger, 2020) have investigated the generosity of UK maternity leave schemes and return to work rates in HEIs. Research suggests only a few universities of the 160 HEIs in the UK offered mothers up to six months of leave on full salary, the majority of HEIs instead offering just eight weeks of full maternity pay (Epifanio & Troeger, 2020). Epifanio and Troeger (2020) discovered that research intensive universities with a lower student to staff ratio and a higher percentage of female professors were five times as generous in their maternity provisions when compared to more teaching oriented HEIs. In a study of 24 UK Russell Group universities, Davies et al. (2022) found that the return rate after maternity leave for academic working mothers on fixed contracts were 59% lower than for academic working mothers on open-ended contracts. These studies also revealed problematic maternity care schemes leading to hidden pregnancy and maternity discrimination, despite these being protected characteristics under the 2010 Equality Act (Wilkinson, 2023).

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2.1.2 Micro interpersonal relations and individual perinatal experiences.

Some scholars (Lord & Joel, 2019; Wilkinson, 2023) have scrutinised the micro-level interpersonal relations of the expectant/working mother within their given workplace setting so as to monitor the emotional adjustments triggered by the perceived impact of their pregnancy, as well as interactions with their professional colleagues. Maxwell et al. (2019), for example, found that the line manager's attitude and the (in)formality of workload re-arrangements often engendered adverse psychological effects on expectant/working mothers in academia. This was particular so when line managers exhibited negative attitudes to maternity leave and left expectant mothers to negotiate their ex-post workload arrangements with other colleagues unaided. This approach, Maxwell et al., (2019) found, often inflicted invisible emotional tolls, serving to conceptualise maternity leave as a burden. Lord and Joel's research (2019) also indicated that expectant/working mothers' perceived managerial support such as line managers' attitudes and non-verbal communications play a crucial role in their maternity experiences. Hence, expectant/working mothers' hidden emotional tolls and challenges need to be acknowledged in their work-life transition process.

2.1.3 The meso-working system and HRM scheme: the alignment between self and professional community.

In line with Wilkinson's framework (2023), meso-system research elaborates upon interactions at the intermediate-level, such as the relationship between working culture shaped by HRM schemes (appraisal evaluations), maternity care support and individual experiences (Doughty & Moore, 2021). Huppatz et al. (2019), for example, have drawn upon the performance management system to understand how meso-level HEI audit and ranking neoliberal culture creates invisible pressures on females to either engage with research activities during their maternity leave, or to cause them not to take their full maternity leave entitlement. Rather than addressing the existing individualistic and competitive work culture,

working mothers' career ambitions are instead blamed for their poor work-life balance (Huppatz et al., 2019). In a similar vein, Huopalainen and Satama (2019) examined the psychological tensions between two social expectations: a *'good mother'* and *'dedicated academic'* for early career academic mothers under a neoliberal HEI managerial culture. This autoethnography unveiled both authors' embodied experiences in navigating two inherently meaningful and intertwined passions in their lives. Huopalainen and Satama's self-narratives (2019) discovered that these two traditionally contrasting roles could be combined and thence reinforced through encouraging HRM schemes (e.g., shared parental leave), family support and an inclusive working culture that embraced the presence of maternal bodies and babies. Therefore, we are interested in how a more consensual HRM supporting system could facilitate a better social identity transition for expectant/working mothers in academia.

We draw upon distinctive interpretations of *'the self'* within a social context provided by the lens of identity to understand an individual's thoughts, motivations and actions (Brown, 2015), since an informed understanding of individuals' self and professional-allied identities can offer particular insights into internal meaning, and the values of their work (Brown, 2022; Pudelko & Tenzer, 2023). The identity transformation process in our study is grounded in the identity work perspective of Brown (2022) who acknowledges that identities are fluid on-going cognitive activities (forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising) which are required to negotiate and re-negotiate between self and relational societies in order to reach a balanced ideal or desired version of self (Ramarajan, 2014).

2.2 Identity transformation from academic to academic- mother: the social identity lens.

Identity, in general, refers to the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves through social interactions: to seek the answer of *'who am I?'*, *'how should I*

react?' and *'who do I want to become?'* (Brown, 2015, p.23). Research has disclosed how working mothers' maternal identity evolves from the pregnancy period (e.g., Hennekam et al., 2019; Ladge et al., 2012). However, women often experienced uncertainty and self-esteem issues in transitioning to be a working mother due to stereotyping (Ladge et al., 2015). This transition process consequently triggered a series of internal conflicts, such as denying and delaying, before finally embracing their mother identity (Ladge et al., 2012). Most studies on this identity transition discovered that formal organisational resources, relevant policies, and informal social interactions at the workplace had a significant influence on expectant/working mothers' perceived identity during the pregnancy period and in their subsequent resocialisation with their workplace community (Hennekam et al., 2019; Ladge et al., 2012; Ladge et al., 2015). Explicitly, the evolution of a new cross-domain (mother/professional) identity is often imposed, shaped and negotiated by/within relations of power, such as social norms, organisational expectations and preferred group prototypes (Brown, 2022, Coupland & Spedale, 2020). This also suggests that working mothers' perceived organisational support strengthens their shared identity with their professional community (He et al., 2014). Accordingly, our research employs a social constructivist lens which views identities as socially and subjectively made meaningful (Ybema, 2020). Given that the social representation of academia (e.g., professional reputation and/or identity stereotype) has essentially underpinned expectant/working mothers' adjustments during their perinatal period (Ladge et al., 2015; Maxwell, et al., 2019), we adopt the social identity approach which scrutinises the interplay between self and professional membership impacted by social interactions with their communities (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Social identity theory (SIT) suggests that individuals often develop a sense of who they are in relation to their group memberships (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), such as their professional peers or societal linkages. SIT was originally developed to understand why

people usually identify with, and support their own group. It explains how personal cognition and behaviours are affected by the norms found in their preferred social milieus (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This cognitive process is usually understood as *'de-personalisation'* and *'self-categorisation'* (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1985), and sees individuals view their own identity and behaviours as being interchangeable with their preferred groups, such as their professional peers. However, social identities are also relative, and differ subject to context or perceived meaning/value with the designated group[s] due to human interactions (Ramarajan, 2014; Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Moreover, an individuals' perceived affiliation with their preferred groups could alter as a result of significant life-changing events (e.g., becoming a mother) and interpersonal network support (Deaux & Martin 2003). Nevertheless, when individuals place less emphasis on their existing social identity and engage more with a new identity [motherhood], this may induce a potential conflict between the two social identities (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). This competition is likely to occur at critical junctures in their evolving transition into motherhood, and thereby become critical incidents (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). We thus employ the critical incident technique (CIT) of Flanaghan (1954) and collect real-life responses and social interactions at such critical events to better understand how these influence on the evolution of the mother/professional dichotomy.

2.3 Multiple social identities as a career professional and working mother.

Existing research into the multiple identities of expectant/working mothers tends to be centralised around professional membership and inadvertently grants it a higher status than motherhood, by establishing an image of a *'good'* working mother (Turner & Norwood, 2013), or by prioritising the maternal self over the professional identity as a *'self-regretful'* decision (Ladge et al., 2012). In the instance of academia, the symbolic scholarly prototype is generally defined through the peer-review process and attendant records of high-ranking

publications (Horn, 2016). Following from this neoliberal, managerialist view then, an ideal worker, is one who is fully committed (and totally able) to develop their work without any external commitments (Acker, 1990; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2016), thus fitting the prototype so as to ensure a successful academic career (Ghosh & Chaudhuri, 2023). However, the salience of an ideal academic worker identity is potentially compromised when expectant mothers start to engage with maternal activities (Ladge et al., 2012). This can lead to working mothers in HEIs being viewed as academic failures when they prioritise family and caring responsibilities over the ideal worker profile (Ghosh & Chaudhuri, 2023). Hence, there is often a divide or tension between these two identities (ideal worker vs working mother) in academia and this may trigger diverging agendas, values and perspectives when determining resource and workload allocations (Eggins et al., 2002).

In line with SIT, several strategies have been proposed to explain how individuals may attempt to reconcile these tensions: often referred to as the individualistic and the collective approaches (Tajfel, 1978). An individualistic social mobility approach is likely to be pursued when the lower status group [here 'working mothers'] believes there to be a permeable group boundary (e.g., no career glass-ceiling) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). One practical illustration of this is how female academics tend to work during their maternity leave, or harder after their return, so as to restore their scholarly status (Huppatz et al., 2019, Maxwell et al., 2019). In contrast, the collective approach is more pertinent with a social change intention. The social creative response here may try to redefine the comparative dimensions and embrace characteristics between groups for a social stability purpose (van Bezouw et al., 2021), while the social competition approach (e.g., industrial actions) may directly challenge the other group's superiority (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Insomuch as scholars and HR practitioners have sought to adjust or enhance maternity care systems in line with the collective approach (e.g., Epifanio & Troeger, 2020); we argue

that the fundamental neoliberal managerialist paradigm (i.e., an ideal academic worker) still carries meanings that are embedded in power relations and status. Given the social mobility approach generally induces a great deal of psychological stress (e.g., anxiety) for working mothers in academia (Lord & Joel, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2019), our study favours the view of social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) and suggests that academic prototypes should be expanded to embrace any individuals who are passionate about education and research regardless of other attributes (e.g., races, genders or (non)caring responsibilities).

Indeed, perceived managerial support, in particular employees' beliefs on the extent to which their line manager values employees' contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger et al. 1986), has been interpreted as helping to reduce new mothers' work-family conflict and exit intentions (Ladge et al., 2018; Lord & Joel, 2019). In a similar vein, our study extends the research scope to the societal level and asks in what way expectant/working mothers' perceived support from their organisation (including the line manager, HR and peers) can help re(shape) their shared meaning and value with their expectant/working mothers'.

3.Methods

3.1 Research design

To establish a clearer picture of how critical events and interactions within the academic domain shape female academics' perinatal experiences and working-mother identity transformation, this research employs the critical incident technique (CIT) in the interview process (Flanagan, 1954). CIT was originally developed to study subjects in organisational psychology which gathers information concerning certain phenomenon or behaviours in defined situations as a means for solving practical problems or identifying connections between cognitive decisions (Flanagan, 1954). Nevertheless, this approach has

been expanded to explore critical social and contextual issues in organisations (e.g., Abgeller et al., 2024). Given the identity transition experienced during a female academics' perinatal period has been identified as a pivotal stage informing their future career trajectory (e.g., Hennekam et al., 2019), it is well-suited to allow interviewees to share specific happenings and facts - in terms of interactions with their professional community as part of their new cross-domain identity sense-making process.

3.2 Participants

Interviewees were recruited through purposive sampling via professional focused social medias (e.g., LinkedIn) and a snowball approach using both authors' academic connections. A total of 23 female academics (15 first-time and 8 second/third time mothers) who took their maternity leave during the research period (2019-2022) across 16 HEIs in the UK, and who had worked for their institution for at least twelve months as either a Research Fellow, Lecturer, Senior Lecturer or Reader (known as an Associate Professor in some HEIs), were recruited. The average leave period (maternity leave, combined with the annual or research leave offered by their respective institutions) was seven and half months (range 3-14 months). This study did not restrict recruitment to the first-time mother given that we wanted to understand whether identity transition or perceived maternity attitudes altered across time or experiences (Arena Jr. et al., 2023). We did not collect detailed geographic background (e.g., department, age and academic title) for maintaining a professional boundary when carrying out research in researchers' familiar environment and domain (Kreiner & Joshi, 2021). Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect interviewees' identity.

3.3 Data collection

Participants were asked to share details of critical incidents (e.g., interpersonal interactions with their professional peers) via the Microsoft Team online platform across three pivotal periods; prior, during and post maternity leave (i.e., three critical incidents). Those who had more than one maternity leave were asked to share essential incidents that occurred in the first and recent (last) perinatal period (i.e., six critical incidents). Interviews for first-time mothers lasted, on average, 90 minutes, and second/third mother interviews extended to 120 minutes so as to allow for a longer discussion. The interview protocol is attached in Appendix One. A total of 93 critical incidents were collected (756 pages), transcribed and analysed via thematic analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

To ensure rigour in the qualitative analysis, we followed the three-stage qualitative data approach outlined by Gioia and his colleagues (Gioia et al., 2013). First, both data analysers thoroughly reviewed all transcriptions and open coding was conducted. Statements relevant to our research questions, such as significant interactions and communications with line managers, colleagues or the HR team were highlighted and displayed in an Excel sheet. Second, we clustered similar statements, and associated these clusters with relevant research questions. Finally, the identified codes from all the interview transcriptions were cross validated between the two data analysers using a correlative comparison technique (Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1. here]

4. Results

In general, female identity transition from professional academic to working mother was found to be non-linear due to the constant publication demand and the prolonged nature of an uncertain peer-review processes (Horn, 2016). Given that the receipt of peer reviews often helps consolidate one's scholarly identity (Horn, 2016), interviewees often experienced mixed emotional reactions about losing this part of their professional identity during the peri-natal period. The generosity of maternity provision was indicated as an important contributing factor, nevertheless an inclusive working culture (e.g., nuanced interpersonal interactions) and responsive maternal support schemes facilitated expectant/working mothers in developing their confidence to deliver in both roles (Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

Our research identified four distinct social identity statuses (clustered under three themes) expectant/working mothers often encountered during their perinatal period triggered by maternal support provision and interpersonal interaction with their professional community (Table 1), which we explore in more detail below.

[Insert Table 1 here]

4.1 Denial of the mother identity

While the majority of interviewees indicated that their pregnancy brought them excitement and joy, they often initially kept their pregnancy private and discreet for fear that being pregnant and being a mother would be viewed as being unambitious (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019). This stigmatised interpretation of mothers is usually derived from the notion that motherhood still largely lacks social recognition (Federici, 2012). Interviewees thus tended to mask their mother image by deferring the announcement due to the perception that workplace culture was unwelcoming to individuals with caring responsibilities.

"I didn't want the fact that my pregnancy to have any impact on my profession, I wanted this distinction that I'm still a lecturer, still that person interested in research and my career. It is hard to explain, so I decided not to say anything." (Alanna, first time mother, 6 moths leave)

Whereas COVID-19 has worsened academic mothers' work-life challenges (Ghosh & Chaudhuri, 2023), the new virtual work arrangements also offered an opportunity for expectant/working mothers to mask their mother image.

"I was relieved I didn't need to go in much due to everything is online now." (Catherine, first time mother, 10 months leave)

We found some interviewees who held a contract-based position (e.g., research fellow) deferred their maternity leave discussion with the line manager and HR team due to the unclear maternity provision policies in this area.

"I waited until pretty much the last minute to tell them since I'm externally funded and I was not sure I am qualified for the paid maternity provision, or whether my contract would be terminated. I was pretty worried for a while." (Helen, first time mother, 6 months leave)

Whilst experienced mothers usually underwent a more straightforward transition during the second/third perinatal period, some of them, nevertheless, had still experienced similar (or worse) challenges as first-time mothers in those instances where they lacked positive relational support from their professional community (Maxwell et al., 2019).

"*I was conscious that this would be my third maternity leave in five years, I had the feeling, people thought 'well…how about your career?' via their subtle facial reactions. Unlike my first maternity leave in a different institution, it's harder this time with different colleagues, it made me feel stigmatised."* (Chloe, third -time mother, 14 months leave)

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This denial of their mother identity at times also re-emerged right after their return to work when they re-encountered how their workplace primarily venerates the ideal academic worker profile (Acker, 1990).

"I just hated that, the first thing anybody said when I returned: are you not missing research? It made me stop sharing my personal feeling and baby's photos." (Catherine)

One interviewee even went as far as to disgrace her own motherhood when being questioned by a male work colleague while expressing new challenging work-life.

"One of my male colleagues teased me and said: you seem to BLAME your baby for everything, when I was [simply] sharing my authentic feelings, like sacrificing my sleep for writing or [it being] harder for me to commit to exercise. I felt as if I was a very awful mother and so decided not to talk about my kid at the workplace." (Layla, first time mother, 10 months leave)

Some interviewees indicated that the gender imbalance in academia (the majority of staff in many disciplines are masculine) did sometimes restrict the line manager and peers' experiences in maternal relevant events (O'Connor et al., 2018).

"I think the gender imbalance of our group did play a role in the fact that the line manager had no idea about maternity leave policy and support schemes, but at the same time that's not an excuse, managers need more training." (Ellen, first time mother, 3 months leave)

Overall, most interviewees struggled or hesitated to openly disclose their maternity and impending motherhood during the first trimester (1-12 weeks of their pregnancy), or immediately after returning to work. They often sensed that their new role as an expectant/working mother represented an *'identity threat'* to their academic role (Ladge et al., 2012). There was a tension between being a public *'performing'* academic (Karran, 2009)

and *'hidden'* domestic mothering (Federici, 2012), in particular with regard to their social interactions with colleagues (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019). Unfortunately, existing research culture and ingrained gender norms within their organisation encouraged them to instead employ an individualistic response, hiding away their mother image (Huppatz et al., 2019).

4.2 Confusion over academic identity or ambiguity of mother/academic identity

In addition, several interviewees often underwent a period of disengagement from their prototypical academic identity since the second trimester (after the discussion of maternity leave plan and workload rearrangement with the line manager or HR representative) or throughout the perinatal period while lacking empathetic perinatal support schemes from their academic community.

Some interviewees developed a sense of confusion over academic identity and instead formed a stronger psychological attachment with their new maternal community (e.g., midwives or other expectant/working mothers) due to an established gendered construct of motherhood, such as caring responsibility is women's concerns or mothers should stay at home (Biese, 2013). Meanwhile, their line manager or colleagues' indifferent attitudes based on gender orders in academia (Acker, 2006) could also worsen a negative impression regarding their new status and contribute to a *'divided'* identity.

*"My line manager was very 'by the book', he has two kids.. but I'm sure his wife did a lot of the work in raising the kids **[scoff]** and I didn't feel like he was particularly sympathetic. We just went through the standard procedure. It was like I was 'out of' the (academic) game from now. It does not matter I wanted to come back my career or not. I indeed doubted the value of this job, and wanted to stay away, be invisible and just be with my family."* (Helen)

The feeling of being an outsider also occurred for experienced mothers in instances where there was a lack of formalised and empathetic workload rearrangement policies.

"I didn't see this coming as the second maternity leave in the same department. The new HoD basically left me to negotiate my workload with other colleagues. The maternity leave financial package was actually pretty generous, but this insensitive approach really stressed me out" (Belinda, second time mother, 7 months leave).

The impersonal nature of maternity care support offered by the HR team also impacted on some interviewees perceived value in their academic community.

"I had a horrible experience negotiating the face-to-face teaching in January 2020 (during COVID-19) with HR, cos I was heavily pregnant and a bit scared. This experience made me feel I was disposable because becoming of a mother, made me like to escape from academia. The only people I could share these feelings are my other working mother friends" (Chloe).

The ambiguity over their professional identity also occurred after returning to work. Layla disclosed that:

"There was no welcome back meetings or sessions from anyone, I was quietly sitting in my office and checking my new teaching timetable. It seemed sad, as if I never existed here. A nice surprise text message from my antenatal class mother, it made me feel happier to spend time with other mothers".

In some worse-case scenarios, several interviewees highlighted what we choose to define as an ambiguous stage of both their social identities during the second trimester (13-26 weeks of their pregnancy) of or throughout the perinatal period. Attending their first scan usually strengthened their awareness of their maternal image and prenatal attachment (Skelton et al., 2024), but it also provoked anxiety regarding their new responsibilities. Whereas women with

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a higher education level were most likely to express their professional work commitment after the birth of their child (Hennekam, 2016), interviewees often disassociated themselves from both identities when lacking support from both professional and personal life community.

"The feeling was like [being] in a dark shell, I had to read and figure out the complicated maternity provisions and finish my research paper before my leave etc. So exhausting. I wish I could have just enjoyed the moment welcoming my baby girl. I didn't have much time to explore the information and skills I need to become a mother or attending any antenatal classes and groups to build the network I needed." (Catherine)

This ambiguous period also caused a great deal of psychological angst (e.g., anxiety or depression) to experienced mothers. Zoe, who just discovered her third pregnancy during our data collection period expressed:

*"Being a British-Asian, lots of the parental responsibility falls on the mother, there is a kind of divide between an academic and mother. However, I never felt that kind of personal support from my university or line manager, it is all about long and complicated regulations or policies on the webpage. Umm but **[sighs]** yeah it was really anxiety filled, worried about falling behind, I like to get away not even thinking about the baby at the time".*

Overall, interviewees who experienced the ambiguity of both identities were recognised as being at certain extent of depression, our interviewees, nevertheless, mostly declined to seek support from their professional or personal network due to social pressures in surrounding communities (Wilkinson, 2023).

Moreover, existing re-entry support schemes have been considered to play a critical role in shaping expectant/working mothers' identity transition. Some interviewees revealed

that impersonal and bureaucratic re-entry schemes for academics with caring responsibilities aggravated their anxiety level.

"I don't think universities are not great at recognising the special needs of academic mothers who are constantly under a peer-review process. We can only make one formal request a year for flexible working arrangements. However, I've never been a working mum before, and I don't know when my baby will be sent back from the nursery due to sickness and when paper feedback would be returned! Eventually I got there, but who knows how many sleepless nights I have had to reach my current stage." (Jo, first time mother, 10 months leave)

Our interviewees mostly cherished the critical roles of both communities (professional – personal/mothering) during the perinatal period, however impersonal maternal care policies and working culture often alienated them from their professional aspirations (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012) or constricted their passion for both identities.

4.3 An integrated identity: mother and academic

In general, our research participants exhibited a strong resilience as regards their academic career and transitioned to an integrated identity via various means. Hence, we conclude that female identity transition from professional academic to working mother was more dynamic caused by constant paper or funding reviews.

"I'm not able to give a straightforward story; I had mixed feelings between sadness and excitement, between missing out on publication and a decent time with my family, during my maternity leave." (Claire, first-time mother, 12 months leave)

Most interviewees likened their perinatal period to a navigation exercise between two social groups they care about, and retaining their own personal psychological space. It was not categorised as a clear-cut stage by stage transition, but rather as an ambivalent and

uncertain transition, at least until the new social-self and career aspirations had been reached (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019).

"I was happy to have my son and enjoyed my maternity leave since people around me were so supportive, including the HR team. I wasn't contacted for work but liked to do a bit on a personal research project to 'taste' what it is like as a working mother in academia" (Michelle, first time mother, 7 months leave).

Some interviewees achieved this integrated status expeditiously and smoothly, especially when benefiting from [unexpected] economic and social support (e.g., hiring of external maternity cover) designed to reassure them of their academic belonging.

"The head of school was very understanding. She had decided to hire someone externally to cover for me before I mentioned it. My flexible working request was approved immediately, and a breastfeeding room was sorted out in advance. That's such a relief. I stopped feeling a burden to my colleagues" (Courtney, first time mother, 10 months leave).

This sympathetic managerial approach also offered interviewees a safe psychological space from which to *'explore'* and *'navigate'* the new motherhood and empower them to developing strengths critical for each role (Hennekam, 2016). Courtney specified:

"I was more confident with the whole thing. I could use the flexibility to reflect on my new skills as a mum and how these can be applied into my research in a positive way, like being focused and patient".

Personalised relational support from an HR team could also play a pivotal role in enhancing an expectant mothers' shared identity with their professional community (He et al., 2014).

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> *"When I was confused and anxious [as a consequence of] complicated maternity leave policies, the HR officer offered me and my husband a face-to-face meeting. This extra personal touch from them reassured me of my value as part of this community and that I could handle the upcoming challenges."* (Ellen)

Whereas social expectations regarding *'ideal mother and worker'* are still entrenched around the concept of gender norms (Schmidt et al., 2023), our research disclosed that the gender match between the line manager and expectant/working mother had only a minor effect on an interviewee's feelings of belongingness with their professional community. Instead, an inclusive working culture (e.g., working in an environment that embraced a wider academic prototype and placed less focus on an individual's gender and cultural background) and nuanced interpersonal interactions facilitated expectant/working mothers in developing their confidence to deliver in both roles (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Several interviewees reported they received immense support from a male line manager or research collaborator.

> *"Whereas I was worried about my research contract would be terminated due to my pregnancy, he's (line manager) like a massive feminist, he's brilliant. He was involved in the conversation with the HR team and made the maternity leave application and workload arrangement easy. It was like not a big deal I would be away for several months."* (Amy, first time mother, 7 months leave)

> *"A paper review was sent back two months after my daughter was born, but I was totally indulged in my motherhood. Fortunately, my co-author (he) was very understanding and handled most resubmission chores to ease my anxiety."* (Layla)

Our interviewees overall demonstrated a strong commitment to their academic career. However, an open appreciation of their increased involvement with home life and more

flexible working arrangement options (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012) was recognised as essential

by them if they were to achieve this integrated identity smoothly.

5. Discussion

This study highlights that expectant/working mothers' perceived support from their

professional community plays an important role in shaping shared meaning and values during

the perinatal period (RQ1). The stronger the shared identity derived from a more inclusive

working culture generally the softer the distinctions and conflicts between sub-groups in the

institution (e.g., ideal worker – working mother). However, it is also evident that existing

HEI maternity care schemes often pressurise expectant/working mothers to conform to an

individualistic social mobility strategy (e.g., writing papers during maternity leave) and

causes psychological strains (Maxwell et al., 2019). Scope for an enhanced social creativity

strategy, which focuses on the improvement of group meaning and attributes (Tajfel &

Turner, 1979, 1985), would be preferable so as to consolidate and reinforce

expectant/working mothers' identity. Our study discovers that a supportive leadership style

and working culture as well as more sympathetic HR support schemes broaden the prototype

of the ideal academic worker into a more inclusive one and facilitates the expectant/working

mothers' identity transition process (RQ2). The study makes several contributions to

contemporary literature and recommendations for HRM maternity care practice which we

elaborate in the following sections.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study is novel as it explores expectant/working mothers' identity transformation

across the whole perinatal period in academia. We develop a conceptual framework (Figure

2) which illustrates their varied transitional statuses. In general, we find female academics

social identity transition is more dynamic and fluctuating given neoliberal managerialist

demands for a consistent publication record (Horn, 2016). Instead of a linear and sequential

process (Ladge et al., 2012), expectant/working mothers often transit *'in-and-out'* of their

maternal and professional identities after discovering their pregnancy. Many interviewees

feared de-categorisation from [and re-categorisation with] their academic membership amid

exploring new norms in life (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1985). Whereas most interviewees

reached their new dual (academic/mother) identity towards the end of their perinatal period,

many female academics had to undergo uncertainty, scepticism and denial, regarding either

one of, or both, of their social identities while receiving limited support from their academic

network. Some interviewees expressed the intention to withdraw from the academic

community permanently in those instances where they experienced a toxic working

relationship with peers and/or their line manager. This study expands upon the existing

literature by suggesting a working mother's identity transition is an open-ended

(re)negotiation with self and related societies (Brown, 2022; Caza et al., 2018). Our study

also broadens the definition of a transformative academic-mother identity from a binary

'good-bad' working mother (Turner & Norwood, 2013) into a more complex and nuanced

dual identity (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Second, this study shifts the research standpoint from a focus upon the professional

domain when reviewing working mothers' identity transition (i.e., the dominance model) to

an equivalent acknowledgement of both academic and maternal identity (i.e., the merger

model) (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Existing research often accorded expectant/working

mothers' professional membership superior status by proposing a linear transition towards a

socially accepted working mother identity (Ladge et al., 2012; Turner & Norwood, 2013).

The presumption of a female professionals' ultimate destination as being a *'good working*

mother' after their maternity leave implies a higher-class stratification of their professional

identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). This also explains why existing maternity care schemes often employ a social mobility lens. Prevailing academic research has habitually endorsed the superiority of ideal academic prototypes by producing studies to assist expectant/working mothers to conform to the neoliberal managerialism norm in academia (Buzzanell & Liu, 2007). Hence, maternity leave provisions can be interpreted as a means for ensuring organisational and social conformity, through the regulation of identity transition (Buzzanell & Liu, 2007). However, we argue that expectant/working mothers perceived belonging with both their maternal and academic community should be equally acknowledged (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Given working mothers in academia mostly recognised their dual identity and demanded a negotiation of tension across both maternal and academic spheres (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019), female professionals' maternal attributes should not be neglected in this pivotal transformation. In fact, our interviewees indicated the sense of belonging to their maternal community sometimes transcended academic identity when reaching significant maternal milestones during/beyond the perinatal period. Interviewees also intermittently de-emphasised their professional identity when their maternal persona was not appreciated or valued in the department/workplace (Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). This is to say female academics usually commit to mother and academic identity simultaneously (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019), despite the relationships between their multiple social identities being potentially conflicting, enhancing, overlapping or integrating (Ramarajan, 2014). Whereas recent research has been primarily dominated by analyses of the relations of power within the organisation (i.e., Guy & Arthur, 2020), our research suggests identities represent compromises between self-interpretations and social relations (Brown, 2022). Therefore, this study advances our understanding into the identity transition of working mothers in academia by acknowledging their other salient social identities in their perinatal period, and analyses

how these identities interact with each other for a more optimal forward-looking progression (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019; Ramarajan, 2014).

Third, our study advances comprehension of the empirical interactions between social exchange and social identity approaches (He et al., 2014). By offering a contextualised explanation of the ways in which perceived workplace support can diminish the identity stigma of working mothers in academia our research unravels how working mothers' perceived identity stigmas and stereotypes can be overcome through a supportive and welcoming working culture. In general, stereotypes have been historically oversimplified as fixed mental representations. Yet stereotypes can change, depending on how an individuals' perceptual relationship with their recognised ingroup and outgroup evolve (Cambon et al., 2017). Our research results are in line with this view (Odenweller et al., 2020) and finds an expectant/working mother's subjective sense of the ideal academic prototype to which they might aspire is contingent on the extent of their inclusiveness within their organisational environment. Working mothers are often labelled under existing competitive working culture as *'less competent but warmer'* when compared to colleagues without childcare responsibilities (Odenweller, et al., 2020). In this study, perceived workplace support (i.e., a mother's persona is welcomed and recognised) alleviated the sense of rivalry and strengthened belongingness between the two groups. Blau (1964) reports that welcoming gestures initiated by one party generally promote communal relationships and trust. We discovered that with improved psychological safety, via stronger identification with their professional community (Singh et al., 2013), interviewees developed a cognitive capacity to re-interpret stereotypical prejudices, transforming them into distinctive strengths as part of a social creativity strategy (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These strengths included being more patient, better at multitasking and more tolerant of uncertainty. The appropriation of negative stigma to create a sense of empowerment can secure social self-concept within the

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professional domain (Galinsky et al., 2013). Moreover, this study also sheds light on the distinctions between economic and social exchange given research findings suggest social reciprocity creates enduring social patterns, while pure economic exchanges simply lead to short-term transactional relationships (Buch et al., 2019).

5.2 Practical implications

In terms of practical implications, the present conceptual framework (Figure 2) offers HEIs some guidelines to facilitate HR interventions to improve the sense-making and identity transition process for expectant/working mothers during the perinatal period. Each of the four social identity status captures working mothers' identity conflicts and challenges which could serve as a basis for relevant training and policy design. Our research underlines four principal and practical HR actions for facilitating expectant/working mothers in academia to achieve their integrated identity expeditiously. First, the need for mandatory training for management teams, so as to both provide a greater understanding of expectant working mothers' identity states and guidance in how to demonstrate positive attitudes towards their new role. We find expectant/working mothers often downplay their maternal persona due to an unwelcoming work culture to individuals with caring responsibilities. A more supportive leadership style can play an important role in shaping an embracing working environment for expectant/working mothers, enabling them to exhibit their authentic feelings at the first trimester and return to work (Amina et al., 2021). Second, more people-centric approaches from the HR team need to complement the supportive culture afforded to expectant/working mothers. For instance, HR representatives should be actively engaged in advising on the maternity application process, so as to ease expectant mothers' psychological distresses caused by [complicated] regulations at the second trimester. In addition, we advocate streamlining existing maternity leave provisions and application processes for expectant

mothers so as to 'free-up' their personal space and help them prepare for their new role. Given that social and psychological exchange relationships have been highlighted as more enduring than pure economic exchanges (i.e., financial schemes), establishing a culture that extends beyond economic exchanges is imperative for the identity transformation processes of expectant/working mothers (Buch et al., 2019). Several interviewees indicated some targeted personalised support or gestures from the HR team (such as sharing resources regarding psychological well-being services, supportive networks, keep-in-touch events and welcome back packages) would have strengthened their psychological connections with the work community. Third, more empathetic workload re-arrangement procedure (e.g. outsourcing cover during mothers' maternity leave) should be put in place as part of maternity leave provision to prevent potential mistrust between sub-groups in the institution as non-transparent resource and workload allocations often engender the identity divide (Eggins et al., 2002). Fourth, a formalised yet bespoke re-entry scheme is essential to reinforce working mothers' professional aspirations. Many expectant mothers doubted their academic existence at the second and/or third trimester or re-entry stage (Figure 2) while existing maternity support schemes often ignore the unique performance evaluation culture in academia (e.g., constant publication pressure). Therefore, a framework which spells out expectant/working mothers' needs at different perinatal stages could enable HR partners to liaise with executive teams to improve current support systems, such as offering a follow-up sabbatical leave period, providing extra support to encourage new mothers' mobility for attending conferences with babies/family.

6. Conclusion

This research extends the existing literature on maternity support by proposing a multi-dimensional framework that allows expectant/working mothers' cognitive evolution during the perinatal period to be unpacked using a social identity approach. Our objective is

to better understand female academics' sense-making process and ensure the conceptualisation of an adjusted academic-mother identity is more fluid. The four identified social identity statuses distinguish interactions between the academic-mother identity of the mother to be. The research findings also expand upon the empirical interaction between social exchange and social identity approaches, disclosing a positive communal relationship that dilutes identity stigma and transforms prejudices into resources to help conceptualise the new identity.

While this study offers new insights into female academics' social identity transformation during their perinatal period, several research limitations are identified. First, by choice we have restricted the study to UK academia, owing to the fact UK HEIs have similar maternity leave polices, promotion systems and academic career trajectories. Nevertheless, future research should extend this analysis to other academic systems, so as to incorporate other cultural and social circumstances as contextual factors (e.g., academic tenure track in other countries) in the academic mothers' identity transition process (Brown, 2022). Second, the present research can be extended by analysing the extent to which organisational culture impacts on an academic mothers' sense-making process. Our research recruited interviewees from across various HEIs in the UK. A future study should examine how participants sharing the same organisational culture and workplace setting interact in offering social support, and the role different organisational cultures play in social identity transformation. With the growing international focus on questioning the various manifestations of gender inequality in academia (Llorens et al., 2021), this research could be a good starting point in discussing how we might more effectively incorporate social dimensions into maternity support policies in academic organisations. Moreover, given other professions (e.g., legal professionals or management consultants) share certain managerial and workplace culture characteristics, like consistent performance records, with academia

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(Palmer, 2014), it would be valuable to examine how our findings can inform HR support within related professions with regard to the enhancement of perinatal support. Finally, we wish to conclude this paper by sharing an evident remark observed from our interviewees: expectant/working mothers are not indifferent to their professional aspiration. They should be recognised by taking two equally important roles and responsibilities and a more embracing and inclusive culture will facilitate them to blossom and thrive on their new social-self in both communities.

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Table

Table 1. Four common expectant/working mothers' social identity statuses during the

perinatal period.

Social identity status	Potential period	Examples
Denial of the mother identity. High: Academic identity Low: Mother identity	The first trimester or/and returning to work.	▪ Delaying the announcement of their pregnancy. ▪ Avoiding from motherhood related topics. ▪ Hiding any family related images.
Confusion over academic membership and identity Low: Academic identity High: Mother identity	From the second trimester or throughout the perinatal period.	▪ Being exhausted by workload re-arrangement discussions and maternity application process with HR or line manager. ▪ Felling vulnerable in the academic community. ▪ Lacking energy and motivation to learn skills for the motherhood. ▪ Experiencing symptoms of depression or panic disorder.
Ambiguity of both identities. Low: Academic identity Low: Mother identity	From the second or throughout the perinatal period.	▪ Feeling offended and undervalued in their academic institution. ▪ Withdrawing their attention from their academic community. ▪ Avoiding conversations with peers or line managers. ▪ Manifesting more excitement about their motherhood community, such as antenatal classes or regular check-ups.
An integrated identity: mother and academic High: Academic identity High: Mother identity	In the end of or throughout the perinatal period.	Social change aspect: ▪ Everything was considered and pre-planned by the management level. ▪ Receiving extra personal support from the HR team. ▪ Inspiring by role models in the professional and personal network. Social mobility aspect: ▪ Sacrificing personal interests and life to maintain a fabricated cross-domain identity.