

***Professional Women's Identity Work Across Career and Family Transitions***

**An Interview with Christine Bataille**

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Over the past few decades, women have made major strides in the paid workforce. However, despite being ambitious, career-focused, and progressing at work, women continue to struggle with the competing demands of pursuing professional careers and raising families (Hewlett, 2002; Slaughter, 2012). Women's careers continue to diverge from those of men, with women much more likely to have periods of part-time work or being out of the workforce than their male counterparts. Some believe that professional women are opting-out of their high-powered careers in order to prioritize motherhood (Anderson, Vinnicombe, & Singh, 2010; Volpe & Murphy, 2011), or scaling back their career ambitions by reducing their work hours once they become mothers (Moen & Sweet, 2004). Although most women continue to pursue full-time careers even after they become mothers, the media continues to tell them that it is not possible to be both a successful professional and a good mother (e.g., Slaughter, 2012; Wallis, 2004)

Christine Bataille, an assistant professor at Ithaca College School of Business, applies an identity perspective to help shed light on how women make decisions about who they want to be as professionals and mothers. Specifically, she explores how professional/managerial women craft and enact their professional and motherhood identities by studying identity work (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) in the stories they tell about the major turning points in their lives. Bataille focuses on three particularly significant life transitions: 1) student to young professional, 2) childless woman to mother, and 3) professional with no childcare responsibilities to one faced with how to navigate career and family demands simultaneously.

**Research Questions and Design:**

The research questions this study explored were:

1. How do professional/managerial women make sense of major career and family turning points as they weave them into their life stories that define their identities? The research focuses on studying this *narrative identity work* through three significant life transitions: the early career transition, the transition to motherhood, and the transition to combining career and family?
2. What recurring themes, if any, are there in the kinds of identity work women engage in within and across significant transitions?

To address these questions, Dr. Christine Bataille collected interview and written reflection data from 35 highly-educated, partnered professional women who had a minimum of three years of full-time work experience and at least one child under the age of six. In order to reflect the reality of women's career paths, she includes representation of women who, at the time of the interview, were in three different employment situations: full-time, part-time, and taking a career pause. Dr. Bataille interviewed each participant on two separate occasions approximately 3 months apart. She also asked each woman

to complete a reflection assignment in between the two interviews. In the reflection, the respondent was asked to write about events that stood out as particularly meaningful or self-defining.

### **Research Highlights**

Dr. Bataille identifies three distinct forms of narrative identity work that women use in crafting their stories about significant career transitions.

- Exploration: involves questioning and searching for one's sense of self
- Adaptation: involves actively revising and/or sensing a change in one's sense of self
- Expression: involves articulating and asserting one's sense of self

Bataille discovered that as a result of major life transitions, women evolved their self-identities in a variety of ways. Some adapted to the changing circumstances in their lives by revising their identities; for example, letting go of the identity of "career woman" and trying on the identity of "stay-at-home mom," while others transformed a "career woman" identity into the identity of "provider" when they became mothers. Other women continued to enact the identity they had created in adolescence, such as, "financially independent woman," through each significant transition. Still other women continued to engage in exploration over the course of their careers without coming to a clear conclusion about who they wanted to be, or what kind of career they wished to have.

Interestingly, the transition to motherhood stood out as particularly significant inflection point, with some women completely redefining how they saw themselves and others strengthening their commitment to pursuing a high-powered career.

### **Implications of Research for Organizations and Individuals**

Previous literature has demonstrated that the transition to motherhood is highly significant and identity-transforming for many women. However, Bataille's research illuminates that it is very difficult to predict how a woman is going to react to having a baby. For some, becoming a mother wasn't surprising and didn't alter their path. For others, although the logistics were in place, their identity shifted so significantly that their former career path was no longer desirable.

For women, this research can help them embrace that uncertainty, working to accept that they may not know how they will feel or what they will want to do professionally and personally until after the transition to parenthood. Knowing that many women experience profound shifts in how they see themselves after becoming a mother may also help to comfort women by knowing they are in good company.

For organizations, this research underscores that the transition to parenthood is critically important for professional women. Letting women know that their professional accomplishments are highly valued and helping women to envision future career steps in the organization are highly effective strategies in retaining them. Furthermore, efforts to support women during this emotional time of life – such as allowing phased returns - can go a long way in helping them to envision combining their former lives as professionals with this key new identity of being a mother. Conversely, women who encounter little recognition or support will be more apt to struggle both with the decision to return to work and with the reality of managing both roles simultaneously if they do return.

## Implications for Future Exploration

The findings from this study suggest several areas for future exploration. Inspired by the results of her research with mothers, Bataille is now studying the transition to fatherhood in order to address the following questions:

- What impact does the transition to fatherhood have on how men see themselves?
- How do men envision, and subsequently enact, combining career and family?

More generally, future studies could build on Bataille's research by seeking answers to questions such as:

- How do other significant life events influence career patterns?
- How are these events similar or different from the transition to parenthood?

## Research Links

Below are links to other researchers who have examined the influence of identity on women's career dynamics:

Blair-Loy, M. (2003). *Competing Devotions: Career and Family Among Executive Women*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hakim, C. (2006). 'Women, careers, and work-life preferences'. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, **34(3)**, 279-294.

Huang, Q., & Sverke, M. (2007). 'Women's occupational career patterns over 27 years: relations to family of origin, life careers, and wellness'. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, **70(2)**, 369-397.

Ladge, J. J., Clair, J. A., & Greenberg, D. (2012). Cross-domain identity transition during liminal periods: constructing multiple selves as professional and mother during pregnancy. *Academy of Management Journal*, **55(6)**, 1449-1471.

Tomlinson, J. (2006). Women's work-life balance trajectories in the UK: Reformulating choice and constraint in transitions through part-time work across the life-course. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, **34(3)**, 365-382.