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Negotiating motherhood and career options through sharing narratives

Ilaria Boncori



I have been living and working in the UK for over a decade, after years spent in Italy (my country of origin) and China. I am a Senior Lecturer in Management, Marketing and Entrepreneurship at the University of Essex, where I also serve as a faculty Dean deputised for Education with responsibility for all teaching and learning delivered at undergraduate and postgraduate level in seven departments. My current research mostly focuses on inclusion in organization, with a specific focus on embodied practices, gender, identity, sexual orientation and ethnicity.

Having engaged on research about the experience of becoming a parent in the context of UK academia, I later found the narratives I had collected from parents within my professional context an invaluable source of learning and comfort as a new mother. I turned to those stories especially during pregnancy and later on when making work-life balance and career choices. This essay advocates the use of sharing of personal narratives in work-life organizational learning.

Keywords

Motherhood, academia, time management, organizational learning, narratives, humanistic management.

Some contextual background

I have been lucky enough to experience very little direct discrimination in my work life, but terms like “gender pay gap” and “glass ceiling” are systemic failures that have become all too familiar to most workers in contemporary organizations. My experience in academia, and even before in the marketing and communications industry, is unfortunately constellated with examples of gender discrimination in the workplace. Gender is mobilised, enacted and constructed in social ways that influence or dictate the way we understand organizations. The way people are managed is influenced by different types of bias, and the treatment of people of different genders is rather unbalanced, even within the supposedly enlightened context of Higher Education (see for instance Knights and Richards, 2003; van den Brink and Benschop, 2012a, 2012b; van den Brink, Benschop and Jansen, 2010; Winslow, 2010). Although the academic profession is based on intellectual abilities and we find many women in lower ranking academic posts, the path to top level leadership and professorship is still paved with inequality and exclusion as women are both paid and promoted less whilst facing “more difficult compromises than their male counterparts.” (Barry et al. 2006, p.275).

Some time ago, I conducted a piece of research on what it means to become a parent within the context of UK academia. At that time, I had no experience of taking care of children and no particular plans of having one of my own (which changed a few years later, after I met my husband). This meant that I approached the topic in a more 'objective' way than I would today, but also with a fair amount of ignorance, which allowed me to ask naïve and taken-for-granted questions that generated very insightful answers. I conducted 31 semi-structured in-depth qualitative interviews with 8 fathers and 23 mothers employed at a University in the UK regarding their experience of becoming a parent within this professional context. Their insights not only contributed to my research, but also to the subsequent management of my personal career choices, of motherhood and identity negotiations.

A humanistic management approach to work

Echoing contributions made in this journal's issue "Working with humans: beings not resources" (McAra, D. ed, Summer 2015), my research as an academic and my practice as a manager have always been led by a humanistic perspective. Humanistic management highlights the value of relationships, people and networks within the workplace and with external stakeholders, rather than focussing only on productivity, profit and outputs. This approach emphasises respect for people's dignity as human beings rather than just in their roles or with reference to what benefits they can bring to businesses and institutions. One of the ways to work according to this principle is to take a holistic approach to people in organizations that accounts for their lives, desires and challenges as people (not just employees) who work and live as part of an interconnected system that crosses the boundaries of personal and professional spheres.

With this in mind, I would like to note the importance for both public institutions and private ventures of avoiding the temptation of only recognising immediate profit or contingent revenues in the measurement of their staff's performance. Instead, people should be managed through a broader strategic plan that recognise the needs of individuals, especially at crucial times in their lives. Becoming a parent, and especially experiencing this for the first time, is an event that for many signifies a significant change in priorities and practices. Wise organizations would be able to retain capable staff by supporting and embracing their needs rather than ignoring these changes. Also, in dealing with people, their needs, wants and rights, decisions taken through the lens of critically engaged ethical behaviour facilitate a humanistic approach to management that moves beyond the legal towards ethical and moral decision-making processes. Although management theory has greatly developed from the early days of the 20th century, dominated by the 'scientific management' approach that highlighted productivity and cost reduction, many businesses today still fail to understand the social, emotional and embodied side of organizations. This misconception is still present even though any manager with some experience will recognise that employees who co-produce solutions, who feel valued by the organization, who are motivated and satisfied with their job and have room to grow are employees who tend to perform better and become more loyal workers. Within this perspective, the sharing of experiences, the creation of networks and the fostering of an informal peer learning culture are all measures that can support, value and develop our human resources.

The importance of narratives

Narratives and storytelling are incredibly powerful tools to gain nuanced understandings into a phenomenon (Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2008). By telling stories and sharing narratives we can explore the silenced side of organizations, shed light on the margins where the corporate world overlaps with human experience and uncover ways to support our staff and managers on an organizational level, as well as each other as colleagues and individuals. Being people who operate in organizations we are inevitably – whether consciously or unconsciously, in actions or thought – bound to contaminate one of our realms of existence with the other. We tell stories with words, text, photos, images and sounds. However, the balance between our private and professional lives is often lost, and especially in some professions whereby the intellectual and emotional labour involved with one's professional role casts a shadow on personal interactions, or other professions like academia and creative industries where some of the work happens when inspiration strikes, even after office hours (see for instance Eby et al., 2005; Gatta and Roos, 2002; Hammer et al., 1997). Whilst spillage of work across the personal sphere of life is often a source of stress or more generally not a positive factor, traditional organizations have often seen 'presenteeism' and a culture of long working hours as a symbol of commitment to the job and the company. On the other hand, the contamination of professional settings with family matters is seen as a distraction or as an example of unprofessional behaviour (e.g. having to leave the office early or resume work in the house due to childcare issues; having to take time off to take care of sick infants etc.).

Parenthood: a game changer

As the popular saying goes, babies do not come with manuals, so becoming a parent tends to be a journey of discovery for most people who then often need to re-think their way of living and working, implement new structures and schedules, redesign their objectives and reframe their aspirations. For instance, most of my participants in the abovementioned study (with the exception of 2 men) reported significant shifts in their personal and professional trajectories. Some women decided to put their careers 'on hold' for a few years to take care of their children; others decided to look at roles more strategically in order to engage in activities that would complement parenthood or be more 'child-friendly'. A number of people (both male and female colleagues) were instead prompted to become more ambitious by the birth of a child – either to put themselves forward for promotion or increase their productivity and/or visibility. This was undoubtedly sparked by financial needs, but some women and one man commented on the fact that having a working mother in the family unit would be considered as a role model and a source of inspiration for their children.

When I became pregnant after a miscarriage (Boncori, 2018), I spent months obsessing about my baby's well-being and my own health as the 'nurturer' of a new life. At that time, I was part of an institution that, in my experience, has a very humanistic approach to management at the broader organizational level. This was evident to me in the human resources guidelines provided in a number of processes, in the organizational values that we follow and in the centrality of inclusion and the value of diversity. However, some of the colleagues whom I had been working with for some years, in my immediate surroundings, had very different management styles that seemed to coincide with our institutional values in theory, but sadly not in practice.

This had caused me significant levels of stress, which I now realise I kept hidden from most people I knew in the workplace to just 'get on with my work' and 'act in a professional manner'. However, the moment I realised that I was going to be a mother, or at least be given the opportunity to try again to do so, I decided to look after myself and my unborn child in a more protective way. I became very mindful of the stories I had been gifted with by my interviewees and learned from their experience in the management of this new phase of my personal and professional life. My participants' personal narratives had a strong influence on three aspects of my experience: coping with the workload to achieve a better work-life balance, becoming more strategic in my career choices, and dealing with shifting identity roles.

Lessons learned from others

The workload balancing act

The parents' narratives of coping with workloads, stress and career development were all invaluable in the choices I made during my pregnancy. For instance, I consciously tried to step away from my 'people pleaser' nature and learned to 'say no' to some of the tasks that were not relevant to me or my role, whilst I would have previously agreed to engage in those anyway to support colleagues. I also realised that I had been the enabler that had led to their being a little complacent with their job. This is because I was available to carry out things they did not want to do or did not want to learn to do themselves, even though it was part of their role. I also learned to manage my time in an increasingly effective manner and not only by managing my calendar more strictly to carve out time for emails and task/meeting preparation but also by prioritising in a more conscious way, which made me more efficient. In fact, the last year (which I spent half on maternity leave and half at work) has been the most productive of my life in terms of professional achievements, personal wellbeing and research outputs. This is also partly because interviewees made me very aware of the need to discriminate more strategically between roles and commitments. This led to an analysis of what was already on my plate and what could have been in the pipeline: I gave my all to the commitments that are necessary and important for myself as well as the organization. I then focussed on the tasks that I found interesting and motivating for myself even though not significant for my institution, or vice versa those of significance for the organization but not interesting for me or useful in terms of my career progression. Things that were not useful (did I really need three jobs as an external examiner?), not particularly relevant (did I need to embark on a lengthy translation of a book to make a colleague's life easier?) or not impactful enough (did I have to volunteer for that small scale but very time consuming working group at this stage in my career?) at the organizational and even at the individual level were all eventually declined.

Returning to work

Having lived in the UK for well over a decade I feel rather at home here, far more than in my country of origin or other places I have lived in around the world, but whilst expecting my baby I became aware of the lack of support I would have suffered from upon baby's arrival, due to lack of family members in the vicinity. My family and financial needs would have meant only being able to take six months of maternity leave. And, like

one of my interviewees said regarding her experience, my return to work was going to be a case of 'ready or not, here I come', as parental leave choices are frequently dictated by practical and financial reasons rather than one's level of readiness or physical recovery. Male colleagues all commented on their very short parental leave entitlement (ranging from no leave in the past to two weeks in more recent times), and the fact that they had decided not to take advantage of shared parental leave with their partners to allow mothers more time to recover, or due to financial constraints.

Surprisingly, I was actually quite glad to be back to work as I did start to get a bit bored on an intellectual level after five months of leave. I remembered other academics saying the same thing, so I felt less guilty and less of a 'bad mother' in comparison to my non-academic friends who were all taking at least one year of maternity leave and dreaded the time they would have had to return to work. I actually loved being back at work, talking to adults about intellectually stimulating points, having time to read and engage in research. Being able to take advantage of a nursery on campus which my daughter loves to attend, definitely helped managing that delicate transition between maternity leave and return to work full time without that feeling of guilt often experienced by mothers in the tension between being a good parent and a good employee (Brewis and Warren, 2001). Having heard the stories of people working in the same context proved to be more useful than, for instance, only relating my experience to that of my sisters and friends. This is because commonalities in terms of motherhood can not fully encapsulate the psychological, emotional and professional dynamics that come into play within a certain work environment at the personal/professional boundary-spinning intersection one experiences during the last stages of parental leave, the 'keep in touch' days and the initial stages of one's return to work.

Identity negotiations

Colleagues' narratives also helped me deal with another type of transition that I had not expected, which is often called 'identity work' (Watson, 2008) and entails the psychological and emotional work people do when "engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p.1165).

As Irigaray notes (1985), in many cases it's almost as if women cease to be women and are only seen as mothers in their seemingly main role of procreators. This is culturally mainstreamed, for instance, in some places, like my husband's country of origin, where one's first name is no longer used upon giving birth but it is replaced by "Mama" plus the name of the first child (i.e. in my case I would be called "Mama Livia" rather than "Ilaria"). In what probably seemed like an unnecessary form of feminist fussiness to my in-laws, I refused to be called by my newly established identity tag and to be annihilated as an individual in what felt like a mere reduction to the embodiment of the over-pervasive role of mother. I am a mother, but I am also a woman, a daughter, a wife, an academic, a teacher, a researcher and many other things that have defined who I am, through countless experiences for almost four decades, and well before parenthood. Through the wonderful experience of motherhood, I want to maintain and enrich rather than negate my existing identity and roles. My profession and my career are intrinsic parts of who I am, so I decided that I definitely did not want to put that away or to the side my professional experience and aspirations while raising children.

Career decisions – Yes we can!

Some of my interviewees had decided to avoid work altogether during maternity leave to fully enjoy that phase of their lives, whilst others had kept busy with research (but nobody worked on any teaching or administrative duties when on leave). In many cases that had been a personal or family-oriented choice, but others had made a conscious career plan as they felt that the impact of slowing down on research outputs would have been too negative on their future prospects. As academics engaged in scholarship or research, we often take part in conferences or events that involve travelling. This had reportedly been a source of frustration and failure for many of my female interviewees who felt they could not have left their young children at home (especially if breastfeeding) as the provision of childcare and child-friendly arrangements is still rather limited at most conferences, unless the other parent or a carer accompanies the mother (which may however mean prohibitive costs). This was partially reflected in my own experience, as I happened to give birth about two months before an overseas conference I had been organizing for the previous three years. My colleagues were a great example of a humanistic approach to work, and made me feel valued as a person, both within and outside of my organization. I had felt pressure for some time from some male colleagues and other attendees to go to the conference as they belittled the impact that travel could have had on my recovering body, on my baby or my family arrangements (“just bring the baby along, I read on Google that they can fly fairly soon after birth”). Having completed all my required actions as a conference organizer, I stood my ground for what I thought would be the best choice for me and my family and eventually remained home with my baby (albeit with some regret as going to that conference always feels to me like returning to my intellectual home). I was saddened by the thought of my peers not being able to empathise with my situation and considering me unprofessional and “uncommitted”, but instead I received a wonderful gift signed by a great number of conference participants wishing us well as a new family unit. Being professional does not mean having to be inhuman.

Another professional challenge I faced during the early stages of motherhood was in terms of career development. A few weeks before the start of my maternity leave it became clear that a Dean position was going to become available in my Faculty in the following months – a role that I had been aspiring to for some time. I fought with myself as I listened to concerns expressed by relatives and friends highlighting that usually people go back to work part-time or seek easier jobs, so why did I want to engage in something intense and more challenging? Why was I still thinking as my previous working self and not as a mother?

At that point I turned to the professional experiences I had come to explore through my interviewees' narratives. A number of people had been promoted during pregnancy, and some had become head of departments, professors or directors of important projects soon after becoming a parent. At the end of my interviews I asked all participants what piece of advice they would give to someone who was about to embark on the wonderful journey of becoming a parent in academia. Many people shared practical tips, a few people told me that one would not need to give up one's self, who we are, our aspirations and career plans.

This gave me hope and led me to think that whilst I would probably need to make some compromises, I could indeed still try to find some work satisfaction and quality of life as a young mother; I could, in fact, dare to 'have it all'. And so I applied for the Dean role. I was offered the job while on maternity leave and I was asked when I would have liked to start the new post, with no pressure or limitations on my personal life choices. Good organizations can adopt a humanistic style of management and do not need to be draconian keepers of antiquated images of masculine ideals of professionalism.

Conclusions

As a new parent living in a foreign country with no relatives around to support me in the practical aspects of parenthood, I know that the experience of becoming a mother could have been very challenging. I don't think I would have been able to effectively manage this crucial transition had it not been for the personal and professional stories I had collected years before from people in the same professional setting. Their narratives were based on a solid foundation made of taken-for-granted knowledge of what it means to be an academic, the challenges involved in this particular professional context, the specific institutional environment and what developing an academic career as a parent might entail. Through the generous sharing of their work-life experiences, my interviewees shed light on organizational behaviour as participants in my research, but also, as colleagues, they contributed to the management of my own experience of motherhood in the workplace. Organizations that not only implement, but also foster a culture of humanistic management could promote the sharing of stories, experiences and personal narratives through the establishment of formal and informal networks, social groups and mentoring schemes. The implementation of humanistic management approaches in organizations through the use of personal narratives can offer embodied, emotional and personal accounts of what it means to be a human being in today's increasingly de-humanised workplace.

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