

MATERNAL WORKLOAD, MATERNAL GUILT AND THE COPING STRATEGIES OF WORKING MOTHERS

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Abstract

Introduction: The current study examined intensive mothering ideals and the maternal guilt experiences of full-time working mothers. Also, it was aimed to explain how they emotionally cope with this sense of guilt they experience. Maternal guilt is common in many countries (Collins, 2020). With the increased number of working women, many mothers feel guilty about the high standards set by intensive mothering (Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Karakaya et al., 2021). While research has indicated that maternal guilt has been linked to many negative effects such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Constantinou et al., 2021; Dunford & Granger, 2017; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019), less attention has been focused on what mothers do about this guilt they feel. This study investigated the factors and experiences leading to the feeling of guilt and how full-time working mothers cope with this sense of guilt arising. **Method:** This study investigated mothers' emotional coping with guilt using in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 full-time working mothers living in Turkey. The inclusion criterion for mothers is having at least one 2–6-year-old child because mothers with younger children feel more guilty due to toddlers demanding more care (Borelli et al., 2017). The data gathered from the interviews were analyzed by using phenomenological analysis in the program MAXQDA 20. **Results:** Two main following themes emerged: mothers' experiences and coping. Mothers' experiences consisted of intensive mothering ideals and maternal guilt. Mothers had some intensive maternal ideals like they have to plan all details and fulfill all needs of children. Also, being good both at work and mothering was challenging. These expectations and the feeling of being inadequate might cause maternal guilt. They experienced guilt after they were angry with the child and in some circumstances, such as leaving the child while he/she was sick or spending less time with the child. Another emerging main theme was coping. In an effort to cope with this guilt, mothers employed social support, tried to have time to relax, gained meaning through work, refused intensive and perfect mothering, and emphasized taking less load at work. **Conclusion:** The lived experiences of maternal guilt emanating from intensive mothering ideals and the mothers' management strategies were examined. Implications for working mothers and mental health workers dealing with guilt were discussed in the light of literature.

Keywords: *Mothering, maternal guilt, coping, qualitative study.*

1. Introduction

«Guilt. Uncertainty. Trying to do it better this time around. Trying to give more. Trying to be a better mother than Mother was. In spite of such feelings or because of them, the guilt that mothers feel is endless and tyrannical. Guilt for providing too much attention or not enough, for giving the child too much freedom, or not enough, for spanking, or not- these feelings are common yet often hidden. The guilt of the working mother, the guilt of the mother who does not have to work, the guilt of the mother who tried to do both – work part-time and mother part-time – and feels both jobs suffer because of it...the guilt of the mother whose child is showing signs of disturbance, unhappiness, physical illness; the certainty you've somehow damaged your child permanently, no matter what you've done or fail to do.» Swigart (1991; p.66) *The Myth of the Perfect Mother.*

Being a mother can bring a powerful sense of guilt within the framework of traditional roles. Society and cultural transferences put the heavy burden of child-rearing on the mothers' shoulders. Feminist and sociocultural theories put forth that guilt is excessively induced in women by traditional roles and expect all parenting duties from only women (Taylor & Wallace, 2012). Especially when women start to work after birth, there are many burdens related to the baby and also work. It is very hard to balance work and family life. Mothers feel more burdened because of social judgments and labeling as "bad" mothers in society. Mothers report that they feel guilty because of intensive mothering ideals or, in

other words trying to be a “good” mother in society (Liss et al., 2013). Intensive mothering asks women to devote all energy and time to a child, being child-centered and self-sacrificing (Sutherland, 2010). Mothers are seen as the ones who are responsible for children, and they should fulfill all needs of children all the time. On the other hand, fathers who are in the other part of parenting feel less stressed and guilty about their parenting roles because fathers’ roles are more flexible and uncertain in society (Martinez et al., 2011). Working women, especially those who have young children needing more care, feel more intense guilt and anxiety than working men (Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Borelli et al., 2017). This also shows that maternal guilt arises as a consequence of high standards set by intensive mothering, it is not a natural parenting issue.

Many studies are reporting that maternal guilt is related to many negative experiences and mental health outcomes, such as mood and anxiety disorders, anger, and decreased life satisfaction (Aycan & Eskin, 2005; Liss et al., 2013; Rizzo et al., 2013). So, it is important to understand this concept to find solutions and increase the well-being of mothers. Maternal guilt is common in many countries (Collins, 2020). Constantinou and friends (2021) reviewed the studies conducted about the experiences of maternal guilt in Western cultures. They presented that maternal guilt has a negative impact on mothers’ mental health and well-being and highlighted that there is a need to understand the concept of maternal guilt and how mothers experience it in different cultures. In Turkish culture, while the family system and parenting roles are changing to a more egalitarian structure (Zafer, 2013), the mother is still seen as mainly responsible for child care and the household. In Turkish society, many discourses hand over the burden of the household and the child to the mother (ex: The female bird makes the nest; A mother would be the best nanny, and the dough would be the best yeast). This cultural transference makes mothers feel more responsible and have many responsibilities both at work and home that cause them to feel helpless and inadequate (Karakaya et al., 2021).

While research has indicated that maternal guilt has been linked to many negative effects such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Constantinou et al., 2021; Dunford & Granger, 2017; Sánchez-Rodríguez et al., 2019), especially in Western cultures, less attention has been focused on what mothers do about this guilt they feel. Also, there is not enough qualitative research on this topic, especially in non-Western cultures. In order to cope with maternal guilt and negative outcomes, it is important to understand how working mothers perceive intensive mothering ideals and how they emotionally cope with maternal guilt experiences. This study investigated the factors and experiences leading to the feeling of guilt and how full-time working mothers cope with this sense of guilt arising.

2. Research design and method

In this study, descriptive phenomenological design, one of the most widely used qualitative approaches, was adopted in order to explore working mothers’ experiences of guilt and how they cope with this feeling. This design allows an exploration of the meanings of experiences and provides the development of an in-depth understanding of phenomena by simplifying participants’ expressions (Forrester, 2010; Patton, 2014).

Ten working mothers living in Turkey were enrolled in this study. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) being a full-time working mother, (2) having at least one 2–6-year-old child, and (3) having provided informed consent to participate in the study by signing the informed consent form. Participants mean age was 33.5, ranging from 30 to 35. All participants were married. Six of them had one child, and the others had two children. Three mothers were academicians, three were teachers, two were doctors, one was a diplomatist, and one was an engineer.

2.1. Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interview questions were the main data collection tool in this study. Interview questions which were created by the author were checked by two clinical psychologists, and the final version of questions was asked to participants. The interviews were carried out online as a Zoom meeting. The interviews were recorded for transcription and lasted about 20 minutes. Some example questions were: “What are the issues about motherhood that you feel guilty about?”, “How do you deal with this guilt?”, “What would help you to feel more comfortable?”.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim were fed into the MAXQDA20 computer program to complete the data analysis. Each transcript was read multiple times, and recurrent themes were defined. Initial codes were identified by the author, and then an inquirer checked the codes and discussed the themes with the author (Patton, 2014). Until saturation was achieved, the process of coding themes was continued. In order to ensure rigor, the author wrote reflexive notes and completed an audit trail (Forrester, 2010).

3. Results

According to the data analysis, two main themes emerged: mothers' experiences and coping. The main theme of mothers' experiences consisted of intensive mothering ideals and maternal guilt. Intensive mothering ideals have three main sub-themes: feeling torn between work and child, planning all things, and being the one to fulfill the child's needs.

Mothers expressed that they are feeling stuck between work and child, they think that they should carry out these two in a balanced way; however, they cannot do it. Some examples of their statements are:

Participant 3 (P3): "Motherhood means splitting both work and home for me. How can I devote myself to work, I always have a mind for my child. I can't concentrate fully on work; I don't want to take too much workload. Always such an escape. I have to go home. In other words, if I can finish the work at hand, I can leave an hour early, otherwise, I will leave at 8-9 o'clock. That's why I don't want to take full responsibility at work. I can't say that: Let me just take responsibility and show myself. I have to think about things at home too. It's always a mess."

P4: "Job responsibilities, child responsibility.. my stress level is increasing, my tolerance is decreasing, and there are different emotional situations that we need to manage constantly, it requires more effort to be in balance. You need to achieve a great balance in every sense, both emotionally and in terms of using time. When there was a meeting during a pandemic, I always said to my child: "Can you come out, there is a meeting right now, will you please go inside?". All day I felt like I rejected my daughter. The biggest annoyance is that when trying to take on more than one role, I feel like I'm sacrificing motherhood the most."

The other intensive mothering ideal is that they have to plan all details and fulfill all needs of children, such as sleeping, playing, education and food. Being the one taking care of the child is exhausting.

P2: "Being a working mom means thinking about many things at once. You have to plan constantly, it's very tiring; thinking about the rhythm of the child is the part that consumes energy, and it is like a file that does not close in mind. In our country and in my own experience, I see this: these plans always fall on the mother. The people who organize all things are mothers. It is always the job of mothers to answer their questions about their children in difficult areas, to provide support, to give them the opportunity to participate in friend organizations, to think about their meals, and to prepare their bags."

Being good both at work and mothering was challenging. These expectations and the feeling of being inadequate might cause maternal guilt. All participants mentioned that they feel guilty as they have limited time for their children due to their work hours.

P5: "When my son started kindergarten, we started to spend less time because I come from work, I have to do housework, but he needs attention. This makes me feel guilty. Then sometimes I can't cook dinner, I think I'm not a good mother. When he gets sick, I have to send him to kindergarten because I have to go to work and there is no one to look after him. I feel guilty when he goes to school sick".

P7: "I'm working as a night doctor, so I am not at home. He was unhappy because he spent those nights without me, he didn't want that. I think he feels more deficient than children whose mothers do not work. I feel guilty."

P8: "I can't spare a lot of time because after going home from work, I have to cook and do the dishes. The child gets very tired and wants to sleep immediately. Sometimes I do not do housework and say let's spend time with her but I cannot because feeling extremely tired after work. Sometimes I feel very unhappy."

Another emerging main theme was coping. In an effort to cope with this guilt, mothers gained meaning through work, refused intensive and perfect mothering, employed social support, and tried to have time to relax. Nine participants out of ten emphasized that having a job is a chance due to many reasons (earning money, finding meaning, and feeling useful). Mothers stated that they are happier when they work and produce something. They said that when they quit their job, they would struggle psychologically and financially. They stated that working is better therefore, they should not feel guilty. They said that their children would be proud of them in the future.

Mothers try to cope with the feeling of guilty by refusing intensive mothering ideals. They stated that being perfect is impossible and spending a good time and having a good attachment are the most important things in their relationship.

P1: "When I feel guilty, I talk to myself: "I'm not the only parent, and I'm doing my best. I can do that much. I should stop trying to be the perfect mother." I'm trying to be more accepting of myself. The most important things are not cooking and cleaning. It is important to make the child feel your love".

P5: "... We must reject the rules of perfect mothering. You don't have to be perfect to be a good mom. You don't have to do all responsibilities. Good enough mothering is enough. Setting up a secure attachment is paramount."

P10: "The important thing is that he feels my love, I tell him that I love him all the time. I was more aggressive when I was at home. When I come from work, I try to spend a little but more quality time. Even if there is no food or the house is dirty, the important thing is the bond and love, I remind myself of this."

Mothers gave importance to having a social support system to cope with guilt. They emphasized spousal/family support as well as tangible support. Many participants indicated that their husbands tried to help them with household and childcare. Many participants stated that they would be more relaxed if they have enough social support in their system.

P9: "My husband and I looked at baby alternately day and night. It was very exhausting; I didn't sleep for weeks. It is very difficult for both the baby and work. If my mother or a mother-in-law was in the same city as us, it would be very helpful. There is no one to leave when the child is sick, no one to leave for 5 minutes. This made me very tired. because it is very expensive, I also could not take a nanny."

Mothers stated that they should have time to relax in order to be healthy and happy mothers. They emphasized that one of the mothers' responsibilities is taking care of themselves.

P2: "I remind myself of my own needs, I say I need this right now. Simply going to the hairdresser, and having coffee with my friends. You will release the tension created by all the roles so that you can continue as a calmer and more pleasant parent".

P4: "Sparing time for herself is something that contributes to motherhood. So you need to have a separate world from children and family. Well, when you catch a world apart from them, if you have such a possibility, if you can spare a special amount of time for yourself in your social circle with your friends, then I think you become a more peaceful and pleasant person. This reflects directly on your mood. I mean, happy mother, happy child".

4. Discussion

This study examined maternal guilt experiences and coping mechanisms through in-depth interviews with 10 Turkish full-time working mothers to develop a richer conceptualization of maternal guilt and coping. Findings helped to explain how mothers cope with this feeling created by the intensive mothering ideal and the pressures of childcare and heavy work life. It was found that mothers have ideas that they should perfectly balance work and family life. They are affected by cultural and social leanings. Even if they know that it is very hard to take on all responsibilities, they unconsciously believe that they should plan every detail about the children and house and also fulfill the child's needs. Dean et al. (2021) mentioned that the mental load that women disproportionately undertake in a family is a combination of cognitive and emotional labor. This makes them very stressed because all these duties need extra energy and time. Additionally, locking mothers lead to an anxiety-producing loop because they as they continually intended to meet unrealistic intensive mothering standards, then critique themselves when they unavoidably feel inadequate (Field-Singh & Cooper, 2021). This guilt loop has some psychological, economic, and social costs. As supported in previous studies (e.g., Derella & Milan, 2021), because of the ideals for good mothers, intensive mothering pressures are related to more stress, anxiety, and depression.

Mothers expressed that they try to manage their emotionality by refusing perfect mothering ideals, having a job (i.e., earning money and being productive), and taking social support. They also stated that spare time for themselves is very helpful in reducing stress and being a healthy and happy mother. In Turkey, motherhood is seen as a sacred living, and like in other cultures, the society gives the burden of childcare to a woman's shoulders. Likewise, Bianchi et al. (2012) found that mothers spend double the effort compared with men in providing childcare and doing housework. So, it is not surprising that mothers try to refuse these roles in order to deal with negative emotions. As indicated in Aycan and Eskin's (2005) study, spousal support is a necessity for childcare and reduced work-family conflict, this study also put forward that spousal, social, and tangible support is crucial for women's management of emotionality.

This study has an important limitation. The sample was small and limited to highly educated mothers. However, it is valuable to be an example of a qualitative study in a non-western country, Turkey and put the fact forward that maternal guilt is universal and related to the intensive mothering ideal. Furthermore, it provided a more robust understanding of the concept of maternal guilt and how mothers try to cope with it. It is recommended that further qualitative and quantitative research in different countries may help provide a better understanding of maternal guilt and coping mechanisms. When the needs of mothers are fully comprehended, what kind of changes and solutions need to be made in society and the family system can be better put forward and studied.

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