‘Juggling’, ‘Guilt’ and ‘Having it All’:

Social representations and the ‘working mother’ identity in Ireland

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Abstract

Working mothers are often portrayed as struggling to manage the incompatible demands of family and work. A combination of structural inequalities, gender stereotypes and social representations impact on women’s lives and influence the choices that are available to them in Ireland (O’Hagan, 2015). Ireland lags behind other European countries in workplace gender equality; and social attitudes around gender, parenting and work reflect this (Fine-Davis, 2012). Social representations are culturally embedded beliefs, values and concepts that are linked to a phenomenon or social category (Moscovici, 1988). Social identities can influence the creation of social representations, and social representations of their group shape an individual’s social identity (Breakwell, 1993; Lamy, Liu and Ward, 2011). This research links social representations and the identity construction of ‘working mothers’ in Ireland. Thematic analysis of extracts from 63 newspaper articles led to the identification of 3 themes – ‘Working mothers are fighting a losing battle’, ‘Women and men have inherently different experiences of parenthood’, and ‘When mothers work everyone benefits’. The findings are contextualised using Social Representations Theory and Social Identity Theory, and the impact of representations on identity negotiation is theorised, recognising public and private efforts to challenge restrictive norms.
Introduction

I'm a busy working dad... what? People are always saying how they are a 'busy working mum'. Can't us busy working dads have a category too? OK, in fairness we don't have to do all the main child-rearing as well as working, but still.

(Article 12)

So why don’t working dads have their own category? In many ways the above quote sums up the inequalities at the heart of the label ‘working mum’. Perhaps the ‘working dad’ label hasn’t caught on because it is generally assumed fathers can combine work and parenthood successfully. It is taken for granted that dads go out to work; however, only 51.5% of mothers with young children are in employment (O’Connor, 2015), so the same is not assumed for mothers. The label ‘working mum’ places a higher value on paid work, yet women still do the lion’s share of unpaid domestic work and childrearing (OECD, 2017).

Labels such as ‘Stay at Home Dad’ and ‘Working Dad’ are emerging in recent years (Doucet, 2016) indicating that attitudes around parenting and work are changing. Despite this, gendered beliefs about parenthood and work still prevail (Fine-Davis, 2014).

The creation of the Irish state is enmeshed within conservative Catholicism and it places the female caregiver and male provider at the heart of family ideals (Fine-Davis, 2014). The care-giving role of women is written into the Irish Constitution - article 42.2 states that; “mothers shall not be obliged, by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties within the home.” (Ireland, 1945 p.182) This has been condemned by the Irish commission of Human Rights as a “stereotypical view of the social roles of women as homemakers and mothers” (Mulally, 2013). This religious conservatism has informed past and present policies affecting women. Prior to 1978, the ‘marriage bar’ prevented married women from working outside the home; laws banning divorce and contraception were slower to change in Ireland than the rest of Europe, and the Irish constitution bans abortion unless the mother’s life is in danger.
The social landscape is changing in Ireland, with traditional gender roles and norms increasingly being challenged. This change has been late but rapid; instigated by economic changes after the global financial crash. The recession led to job losses in traditionally male dominated professions, and has narrowed the gender gap in workplace participation since then (Fine-Davis, 2014). There was a 53% rate of female workplace participation in 2009 (CSO 2009a) increasing to 63% in 2016, however just 59.5% of mothers with young children are in work (Ibec, 2016). The liberalisation of attitudes and gender beliefs is slower than the rate of behaviour change in Ireland (Fine-Davis, 2014) - although more women are participating in the workforce; a combination of stigma and structural factors make being a working mother in Ireland a ‘superhuman effort’ (O’Hagan, 2015). Ireland is one of the worst EU countries for gender equality in the work place, and fewer than 20% of government officials are women (EU, 2015).

Motherhood is a significant event in a woman’s life which leads to identity change and development. Complexities within the role lead women to seek resolution, and this may result in growth or decline (Weaver and Ussher, 1997). Mother roles are represented in the mass media as contested and contradictory. The ‘mother war’ is a familiar trope in the media which pits others against one another (Akass, 2012). Contradictory representations serve to perpetuate patriarchal systems and are a barrier to the empowerment of mothers (Johnston and Swanson, 2003). Mothers undergo another phase of identity change on the return to work, however, workplaces are not designed for mother’s needs and their bodies transgress the boundaries of the professional workspace with the need to breastfeed or pump milk (Turner and Norwood, 2013). The ideal image of the ‘good worker’ is based on the male default, with a wife at home to care for children, cook and clean. The ‘good mother’ identity is based on the female stereotype of warm communality and nurturing (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). Gender stereotypes such as these lead working mothers to be perceived as less efficient by
fellow workers, and also as ineffective parents – both ‘bad workers’ and ‘bad mothers’ (Okimoto and Heilman, 2012).

Working mothers in Ireland are impacted by multiple structural and attitudinal factors which combine to create complex inequalities. This, according to O’Hagan (2015) is due to competing discourses of neo-liberalism, individualism, feminism and motherhood and the ways in which these interact with choices and constraints. In another sociological study of working mothers in Ireland, Byrne-Doran (2012) focussed on the lived experiences of working mothers in recession-era Ireland, and how their choices and preferences interact with the constraints they experience in their daily lives. To date, I am not aware of any social-psychological research on the role of social representations in constructing working mother’s identities in Ireland. This issue is particularly timely in the context of state efforts to dismantle gender inequalities within Irish society; creating “an Ireland where all women enjoy equality with men and can achieve their full potential, while enjoying a safe and fulfilling life” (Department of Justice, 2017). Underpinned by the dual theoretical frameworks of Social Identity Theory and Social Representations Theory; this study analyses the representations of working mothers that are communicated by the media and how this influences identity negotiation. In the following section I will give a brief overview of the relevant theoretical frameworks that guide this research, and I will outline my research questions.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity theory is a meta-theory which explains and predicts the ways in which group membership impacts on identity. In-group favouritism and out-group discrimination are related to self esteem and bonding within groups (Tajfel, 1978). ‘Minimal group’ experiments have shown that even nominal categorisation of groups can lead to in-group favouritism (Tajfel, 1970). Social identities share traits, characteristics, values and sense of purpose, which enable group members to gain social support and make meaning from their
experiences (Haslam, 2004). Group values are internalised and become a part of an individual’s identity, and in-group favouritism bolsters self-esteem through downward comparison with out-groups (Haslam 2004).

‘Targets’ of identification are agentic and may behave in ways that challenge the stereotype, or conform to it. ‘Identity work’ is a process through which social identities are negotiated and maintained in response to threat or challenge (Major, 2012). Stigmatised identities are devalued by society and the experience of identity related discrimination leads to threat and identity negotiation. Major and O’Brien’s (2005) model of the psychological impact of stigma explains how the social representations of an identity group mediates coping with threat through involuntary stress responses or voluntary coping efforts, with the goal of managing negative emotions. For example; a mother who is discriminated against in the workplace may respond by becoming upset (emotion-focused coping) or by changing the situation (problem-focused coping), depending on her characteristics, the context and the situational cues (Major & O’Brien, 2005).

*Social Representations theory (SRT)*

Social representations enable individuals and groups to make sense of unknown, abstract concepts through the processes of anchoring and objectification; and they provide a means of communicating shared values and beliefs to members of our social groups (Moscovici, 1973). A broad theoretical framework; SRT acknowledges that a community’s knowledge is socially produced (Jovchelovitch, 2007), and it is well suited to the analysis of mass media. SRT, therefore; is useful in understanding the connections between macro and micro level processes which connect the individual, the media and society (Deaux, 2006). Social representations are commonly studied in relation to social phenomena such as the recession (O’Connor, 2012), or history (Liu et al, 1999) however, this theory has increasingly been linked with social identity (Lamy et al, 2011; Deaux, 2006, Breakwell, 1993).
Social categories share similar features with social representations, and representations of identity groups are woven into society. They interact with social structure and policy, shaping, and being shaped by it (Deaux, 2006). Labelling is usually projected upon minority groups by the powerful majority (Deaux & Wiley 2007), and these labels are often contested. Social representations are shared stories which serve a group’s aims. They enable group members to differentiate between groups and strengthen within-group bonds. Breakwell (1993) conceptualised a ‘cyclical relationship’ between SRT and SIT in which social identity effects the representations that an individual holds, and where the social identities one has are constructed by the contents of the representations that are held (Breakwell, 1993; Lamy et al, 2011).

The aim of this study is to identify social representations of working mothers in print media and theorise how they may impact on identity. The present study involves the thematic analysis of newspaper articles referring to working mothers from five of the most popular print and online newspapers; and seeks to answer the following research questions: 1) What are the social representations of working mothers in Irish print media? 2) What impact might social representations of working mothers have on identity construction and negotiation?

Method

Design

The study employs a qualitative design with data collected from online and print media sources. Using online databases, this design allows for rich detail to be captured from a range of sources within a specific date range. The social constructionist perspective views social reality as constructed in multiple ways through culture, which impact on human experience and action (Willig, 2013 p. 67). This study seeks to elucidate the ways in which a specific identity is constructed in the media, and so lends itself to a qualitative research methodology, taking the ‘quality and texture’ of data into account (Willig 2013, p8).
Newspaper data is analysed using the Thematic Analysis (TA) approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Willig, 2013), leading to the generation of themes. Theory is generated by using two broad theoretical frameworks - Social Representations Theory (Moscovici, 1983), Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) and Deaux’s (2006) model of the relationship between social representations and social identities structures the discussion.

Procedure

Using the ProQuest European Newsstream database via the University of Limerick Library portal, I searched for newspaper articles by or about Irish working mothers. The search included articles from four of the most read print media in Ireland; The Irish Independent, Sunday Independent, Irish Times and the Irish Examiner. Journal.ie, an online news source was also included to take into account the growing trend of online media consumption (www.journal.ie). Reflecting this fact; the Journal.ie reports a daily readership figure of 430,000, higher than the Sunday Independent with 211,856. The media sources included in this study have a combined readership of 857,062 in total, and encompass a range of political viewpoints (http://newsbrandsireland.ie/data-centre/readership).

A date range spanning three years from the 8th of March 2014, to the 8th of March 2017 focussed the search and allowed for the inclusion of reactions to events affecting working mothers in Ireland such as changes to childcare support with each year’s budget. The 8th of March 2017 was significant for a few reasons. International Women’s day fell on the 8th of March and it coincided with collective actions such as ‘Strike for Repeal’ and ‘March for Repeal’ appealing for a referendum to repeal the 8th amendment of the Irish constitution which upholds the right to life of the foetus, therefore prohibiting abortion in the Republic of Ireland. I expected that choosing the above dates would allow for inclusion of articles discussing the relationship of the constitution to gender equality and working mothers; however this was not found to be the case.
In the initial sampling stage I entered the search terms ‘working mum’ OR ‘working mother’, into the ProQuest European Newsstream database to search for articles The Irish Times, Irish Independent, Sunday Independent and Irish Examiner, using the date range discussed above. The first search yielded a total of 153 articles. To access articles on Journal.ie, I logged on to the news website and entered the terms ‘working mum’ and ‘working mother’ in the search bar on the archives page, leading to the identification of 6 potential articles.

In the second sampling stage I selected articles from the 159 that explicitly mentioned working mothers in Ireland. This process involved scanning each article to ascertain to what extent working mothers were mentioned. I included any article which featured one or more paragraphs referring explicitly to working mothers. The total sample at this point included 63 articles, including the 6 articles from Journal.ie. I downloaded all 63 articles from ProQuest in Pdf format, and these were saved to my computer.

In the third and final sampling stage, I extracted sections of the articles which made reference to working mothers’ experiences in Ireland. This process involved reading through each article several times, then extracted all paragraphs and extracts which made specific reference to working mothers’ experiences. This allowed me to include sections of interview features which contained reference to working motherhood without skewing the data unnecessarily. The extracts were then copied and pasted into separate, numbered Word documents along with the article source, date, title, and author information. I uploaded each of these documents to Nvivo – a computer program designed to assist with the organisation of qualitative research. In addition, the source information was saved into an Excel file which I also uploaded into Nvivo as a classification sheet. I created a table to log each article by number along with title, publication, author and date. (See Table 1 and Figure 1 for sample details and distribution.)
Data Analysis

The process of data analysis was as systematic and transparent in order to maintain rigour and quality (Meyrick, 2006). The data in this study was coded inductively in a systematic process using NVIVO software. A ‘bottom up’, ‘empathetic’ approach was used to allow the data to drive the coding (Willig, 2013). Once the coding process reached saturation, the codes were checked and re-checked in an iterative process, ensuring they corresponded to the raw data. Codes were re-named where necessary as categorisation developed. Categorical groupings allowed for contextualisation and organisation of the large body of data, which had a high number of nodes. At this point I returned to the nodes, and arranged them into sub-groups and thematic nodes based on common themes. The nodes were constantly checked, refined and re-named. Initially, I generated four higher-order thematic nodes; however, after consultation with the second author the fourth node was subsumed into the first, leaving three in total (Figure 4).

As the primary researcher I have been aware throughout this process of potential bias on my part. I am an Irish woman of childbearing age, feminist, middle class, politically liberal and third-level educated. These factors have contributed towards making the data in this study relevant in several ways to my life, and I am aware of my feminist standpoint on the issues of motherhood, employment and gender relations. While it is impossible to fully rid oneself of bias or to fully know how it impacts behaviour (Correll and Ridgeway, 2004), I have made every effort to maintain as much distance from the data as is possible.

Results

Three main themes were identified in the thematic analysis. ‘Working mothers are fighting a losing battle’ describes the multiple internal and external pressures women face in their daily lives as both workers and mothers. ‘Women and men have inherently different experiences of parenthood’ highlights the differences between motherhood and fatherhood,
and the gender biases that underpin these roles. ‘When mothers work everyone benefits’, includes positive representations of women who are successful in combining motherhood and work, who enjoy both roles and can adapt the system to suit their needs (See Figures 2 and 3 for distribution of themes by source and reference).

1. Working mothers are fighting a losing battle

This theme encompasses the multiple challenges of working motherhood. These are frequently framed as irreconcilable characteristics of the identity – inherent in their role as mother is the responsibility to care for children and be responsible for all domestic work. Working mothers are doubly bound by these gendered expectations and the financial need to work. Guilt is a widely accepted feature of working motherhood – feel that going to work is abandoning their children, who need them in the home. In order to maintain these dual responsibilities working mothers must ‘juggle’ roles and tasks in their lives, constantly striving for success in all areas. Aware of the difficulties that come with adjusting to work after having children; women report intense emotional reactions before and during this phase. Women fear discrimination and penalties as a result of being pregnant or taking a career break, and hide pregnancies or downplay their motherhood within the context of work to avoid this. Two subthemes characterise the dual strands of the coding in this theme – ‘Internal factors’ and ‘External factors’.

Internal factors

Comprising 246 references from 52 items, this subtheme refers to the emotional and attitudinal factors which impact on the ‘losing battle’ working mothers are fighting. Managing working motherhood is frequently referred to as ‘juggling’ or a ‘balancing act’, evoking images of precariousness, risk and practiced skill. Expectant mothers are well aware of this and worry about how they will ‘juggle a baby and a job’ at the same time (Article 10). Many
accounts refer to the ‘double-shift’ – when mothers have finished a full day of work they come home to do several more hours of unpaid domestic labour.

**Extract 1 (Article 26)**

It's when you're utterly exhausted and your baby is crying yet again . . . or you're running all day after a toddler who has no off-switch . . . or trying to coax tired and fractious children to bed after your own hard day at work . . . or struggling to hold the line with argumentative teenagers . . . and still there is shopping to be done, meals to be made, clothes to be washed and a house to be cleaned.

Women were portrayed as ‘hardwired caregivers’ (Article 29) who do not want to be breadwinners because they lack ‘killer instinct’ (Article 3). Working mothers are responsible for arranging childcare, and this comes into sharp focus during holidays or when the child is sick. Mothers bear the brunt of these emergencies and fear the impact this will have on perceptions of them at work.

**Extract 2 (Article 15)**

In most households where two parents work, a sick child is still the mother's problem. And if she is a working mother, her first thought will be for work. And it will not just be about whatever she has to do in work that day. It will also be about perceptions. A working mother worries that missing a day in work because you have a sick child feeds into a perception that she's just not up to it any more, since she went away and had children. Her brain is gone to mush. She's lost her focus. She can't be relied upon.

Guilt is a powerful and emotive theme within accounts of working motherhood. The guilt that mothers felt stemmed from the fact that they couldn’t dedicate their full attention to the home because of work responsibilities.

**Extract 3(Article 52)**

Erskine is a mother-of-two, and recently separated. She finds the business of combining parenting and work outside the home to be difficult and says for many women, there's a sense of guilt that
their careers are getting in the way of spending as much time with their children as they would like.

Returning to work after having a child was characterised by most as being an intensely emotional time, leaving women ‘devastated’ (Article 24) and in a state of grief. After being solely responsible for their child for up to one year, the return to work involves an extreme change in circumstances and a huge psychological challenge for new mothers.

**Extract 4 (Article 10)**

And so I went back. For the first two weeks, I cried every morning and every evening. If someone asked me anything about Sarah, I couldn't really answer for fear of tears. And yes, I did go to the bathroom in work and cry. I banned my parents from sending pictures or videos. Right now, I pack a weekly little suitcase of clothes for her to take to my parents, and a daily lunchbox, which is a little bit heartbreaking...

**External factors**

Socio-economic and structural constraints combine with social attitudes to impact on working mothers in Ireland, making their lives challenging. While work is financially necessary, childcare is expensive in Ireland which leaves middle and low earning mothers in a difficult situation. Some approach this by framing work as essential to provide for their family, while others deem working to be a luxury and opt to care for their children in the home. Attitudes surrounding motherhood and work make these choices fraught with pitfalls and judgement for working mothers. Structural factors combine to eliminate free choice for most women; however, many frame their position as one of individual choice, perhaps in order to justify the challenges involved.

**Extract 5 (Article 28)**

The thing is, all of these worries – of both working and non-working mothers – are nonsensical, in that most of us do not – cannot – plan our lives in clinical isolation. We do what we have to do, when we have to do it. Sometimes circumstances change and we do something different, or we
find that we can no longer continue as we were, and we so move heaven and earth in order to do something else. If we’re lucky, we get a break and can maybe take a few years off, or go part-time. But ‘choice’ in the way of a set of possibilities between which we can carefully select the most appealing, is not just a luxury, it is quite often a fantasy. And yet we feel guilty anyway.

Childcare featured prominently in the newspaper extracts due to changes in governmental policy surrounding childcare support each budget year. These changes were discussed and debated in the news sources, and it was a highly pertinent issue for working parents – mothers in particular.

**Extract 6 (Article 17)**

The availability of good, affordable childcare is the issue all research and experts name as the biggest problem working mothers face. It always comes down to the same issue - who will mind the children? If you know your children are safe and well looked after, you can go to work with a clear head.

Linked to the issue of childcare is the fact that women and men are not equally represented in the workforce, as some women leave their jobs to care for children. Working mothers taking ‘mummy breaks’ (Article 50) to care for their children affects their career advancement in the long term, leading to what is called the ‘mammy penalty’ (Article 45). This is characterised as an unavoidable fact of working motherhood by some.

**Extract 7 (Article 47)**

It's obvious, really: absence from the workplace comes at a price. The more you're not there, the less valuable you are to a company, and the less you earn. That's just a fact.

Judgement is a recurring theme in social attitudes surrounding working motherhood. Whether a mother works or not is seen by society as a moral choice that affects her children, and working mothers are prey to criticism whichever choice they make. Working mothers are aware of the conflicting and often negative messages about different motherhood choices, which impact on their self esteem and how they compare themselves to others.
Extract 8 (Article 33)

So I won't be accepting kudos from a study that says my children are more advanced because I'm absent from their lives. And I won't be looking down on stay-at-home mums because those of us labelled "workers" have found fleeting favour. I suppose we should be flattered, really, by the constant labelling of mothers. Such attention is surely proof that they're incredibly - incredibly - important to society. And yet we still do it: we still make them feel that nothing they do is ever good enough.

2. Women and men have inherently different experiences of working parenthood

This theme charts the different ways in which women and men experience working parenthood. Women alone have the option for extended paid leave on having a child and maternity leave has a huge impact on mothers’ early experiences. Staying at home to rear children is a divisive issue and many feel they are discriminated against for doing so. As we have seen in theme 1, mothers are judged by society, and this theme describes the ways mothers also compete with each other.

Fatherhood is a qualitatively different experience; men are expected to be the breadwinners, not primary caregivers. ‘Hands-on’ dads are commended for their participation in the home - however some conflate this with a feminisation of their role. A piece about the satirical Twitter account ‘The Man Who Has it All’ (Article 62) is worth mention here for the ways in which it comments on the inequality at the heart of gendered parenting labels such as ‘working mum’. By ‘flipping the genders’ it makes fun of the way working mums are portrayed as stressed out and oppressed, highlighting the unfairness of that approach.

While implicit ideas about gender underpin much of the data in the current study, explicit mention of the role of gender bias and roles was included in this theme, as these are closely linked to discourses that differentiate the roles of motherhood and fatherhood. The
main strands within this theme are organised into three subthemes; ‘Motherhood’, ‘Fatherhood’ and ‘Gender’.

Motherhood

This subtheme includes accounts of motherhood in general. The most prominent features of this subtheme were motherhood as competition, the challenges and benefits of staying at home, and the transformative nature of motherhood. Motherhood is framed by the media as highly competitive - the ‘schoolgate tribes’ (Article 44) who judge other mothers against their model of ‘perfection’ and the ‘mammy war’ between mothers with different approaches.

Extract 13 (Article 31)

MOMMY WARS. Or, since we’re in Ireland, let’s say Mammy Wars. I don’t like the term, but it’s the widely-used name for the phenomenon of mothers judging mothers on every element of parenting, originally coined to refer to mothers working outside the home versus stay-at-home (SAHM) mothers. The internet is laden with extreme positions on most topics, including the SAHM/mothers working outside the home debate. Look at the comments on any feature about parenting choices, and you’ll find at least a few provocative, extreme, judgemental opinions – often because people see advocates of one particular parenting choice as judging alternative choices.

Staying at home is sometimes framed as ‘opting out’ of the work force, but many mothers are aware that it is often the ‘harder choice’, involving hard work and little validation (Article 52). Despite the stress of staying at home, mothers can be fulfilled and rewarded by it.

Extract 14 (Article 31)

Some days I envy the mums who are at home, especially during my most guilt filled moments (or during the heatwave last summer!), but I’m under no illusion about the hard work that’s involved
in being at home full-time with children. I’ve done it while on maternity leave and for weeks here and there since I went back to work. It was tiring and at times very stressful (though ultimately rewarding and fulfilling in a way that far outweighed the exhaustion). I am certain that, similarly, SAHMs sometimes envy their friends who go out of the home to work, and can have a cup of tea that isn’t cold, or sit in silence for a moment or two.

Motherhood is a positively transformative experience, it is ‘all-consuming’ (Article 10) but ‘it gets easier’ over time (Article 29). Mothers talk about the deep bond they have with their babies, and after all the challenges; motherhood is ‘a wonderful job’ (Article 16).

Extract 16 (Article 10)
Sometimes if I'm in Brussels, or if I'm visiting two or three constituencies in another part of the country, I might overnight for a night or two. But Paul would be at home then. I miss her. It's funny, when you don't have kids, and you hear about people missing their babies, you almost think they're making that up. Like, 'Oh God, it's only a night or whatever'. But you really do; it's just an instinctive, natural thing.

Fatherhood

This subtheme included 36 references across 18 coded items. Mothers praised some fathers for being ‘hands-on’ (Article 4) with childcare and domestic tasks and successful working mothers championed the ‘50-50’ style of parenting.

Extract 17 (Article 4)
On a Monday and Tuesday, Brian will often take him off for the whole day,” she says. "They'll go and visit [Ollie's] great granny and stuff.” Brian and she are very 50/50 with the parenting, Pippa says, though he will be much busier when his new show for TV3 starts....

Typically ‘female’ labels were adapted by a small number of male writers to describe their situations such as ‘working dad’ or ‘stay at home dad’ (Article 46). These labels are not commonly used however, and the satirical tone of this extract points towards the inequalities that lead to such labels being used for women rather than men.
Extract 18 (Article 62)

'A successful career?' Children? Perfect hair? I don't know how he does it" said no one, ever. The idea that men might have to juggle it all, while maintaining that precious work/life balance, is rarely talked about. Which is presumably why a parody Twitter account -- Man Who Has It All -- has hit such a nerve. If you're not one of his 107k followers, The Man is an anonymous "working dad" (now there's a sentence you don't hear every day) who dishes out 140-character nuggets of advice for "men juggling a successful career and fatherhood".

Gender

This subtheme included explicit references to gender difference, biases, stereotypes, roles, and inequalities. In all areas of life the issue of gender backgrounds the choices available to women and men, and the following quote illustrates the impact this has on parenting roles.

Extract 19 (Article 29)

Women grow up with in a society that sees more mothers than fathers at home with children, and therefore consciously or subconsciously see it as the norm.

Gender differences in behaviour can lead to some women being more risk-averse in work contexts, and so they may miss out on career advancement opportunities. This argument is employed as an explanation of the gender gap in workforce participation; however, it is not always clear whether these differences are assumed to be ‘natural’ or socially constructed by the writers.

Extract 20 (Article 45)

It isn't just mothers or a non-mother thing -- it's a female thing," argues Deirdre Waldron, President of Network Ireland, a women's business network made up of around 70pc entrepreneurs and 30pc professionals. "Studies show that women are more risk averse in general, so sometimes that stops them putting the hand up and going
for the promotion or starting their own business. 'The "Guys will just say, 'Ah we'll go in and try it, sure if we don't get the grant or if I don't get the promotion, that's grand'. Generally women won't go for the promotion or the new business unless we feel we can tick every box."

3. Working mothers make a positive contribution to society

This theme is concerned with how working mothers positively value themselves as both workers and mothers. Successful working mothers bring transferrable skills to both roles. They are equally fulfilled by motherhood and work, and they feel that they are positive role models for their families. Working mothers benefit from flexible and egalitarian workplaces and they advocate for social change. This theme has been divided into two subthemes; ‘Positive identification with work’, and ‘Changing the system’.

Positive identification with work

This subtheme charts the ways in which mothers identify positively with work. Many working mothers enjoy their work, to the extent that they do it for more than financial reward.

Extract 21 (Article 10)

I love my work. Even if I won the Lotto, I'd probably still do it in some shape or form.

Working motherhood can be an ideal situation in which family and career goals can be achieved – choice is a key part of this.

Extract 22 (Article 10)

"I've made this choice. I want to be successful in my career. I know that the kids are happy. I'm happy. I love my job. And then when I go home in the evening and at the weekend, I'm there with them and we have great fun. And having that peace of mind when I get up in the morning makes everything OK."

Working mothers reported becoming more productive and efficient since becoming a mother, and their careers have benefited from this. They are more driven to provide financially for their family and they need to develop time management strategies to cope with
the demands of both roles.

**Extract 23 (Article 34)**

Having said that, becoming a mother has changed me as a person and allowed me to really look at my passions. I was barely blogging before I had my baby. I've since written a novel... When you spend hours a day looking after a baby, you relish every precious moment that you get to yourself. You become much more productive. It's the same at work: because I know my time is limited during the week, I plan and organise my days. Becoming a mother has impacted my career in a 'very positive way.'

*Changing the system*

This subtheme gives voice to an emerging narrative of positive societal change spearheaded by working mothers. Flexibility at work is an important issue for all parents, but working mothers are the most affected by such policies.

**Extract 24 (Article 37)**

"Jackie says that her employers are extremely supportive of working parents, in particular providing for job sharing."I have work-shared since Liam was born almost 13 years ago and I realise how lucky I am to be in a job that I love which also gives me the flexibility I need to raise my family.

Increased workplace participation of women is facilitated by changing legislation in Ireland, and in turn, influences it. In this way working mothers can become role models for the next generation.

**Extract 25 (Article 13)**

I think my girls will look at me as a role model -- my mom was extremely successful in her career, and she opened her own business.

This theme reframes working mothers as a positive force for change; advocating for more inclusive systems and providing better representation of women at all career levels. By participating in the workforce they may eventually pave the way for more female decision makers, and more gender equality overall.
Discussion

This study aimed to identify the links between social representations of working mothers and identity through thematic analysis of 63 newspaper extracts making explicit mention of working mothers. Three themes were identified; ‘Working mothers are fighting a losing battle’, ‘Men and women have inherently different experiences of parenthood’ and ‘When mothers work everyone benefits’. Newspaper data is well suited to Social Representations Theory, because an understanding of social representations hinges on the study of communication systems, in this case the formal systems of print media (Moscovici, 1983; Hoijer, 2011). Shared representations give shape and content to social identities; and in turn identity groups propagate and shape representations to serve group aims (Breakwell 1993, Lamy et al, 2011). In the following section I will use Deaux’s model of the interaction between social representations and social identity (Pettigrew, 1997; Deaux, 2006) to contextualise the findings of this study.

Macro - Structural factors and social representations

Ireland’s constitution states that a woman’s work within the home is necessary to ‘the common good’ of the country and the childcare, social benefit and maternity leave policies that stem from this position directly impact the lives of Irish working mothers. The structural and social factors that affect working mothers in Ireland have been comprehensively analysed from a sociological perspective (O’ Hagan, 2015; Byrne-Doran 2012; Fine-Davis, 2014; O’Sullivan, 2012). Detailed discussion of this is somewhat beyond the remit of the present study; instead I will use a social psychological lens to focus on representations of working mothers.

Working Mother’s Guilt
‘Working mother’s guilt’ featured prominently in the first theme. Guilt is a “self-evaluative emotion that arises when people feel they have violated a societal or moral standard and deserve reproach for their wrongdoing” (Jones & Kugler, 1993; Klass, 1987; Tangney, 2003). This may manifest whether or not there is any real harm done, merely the feeling that harm has occurred is sufficient to experience guilt. ‘Work-family guilt’ (Korabik, 2015; Borelli et al, 2016) refers to the negative emotions that parents experience when the demands of their work and family life are in conflict. The subtype ‘work interfering with family guilt’ featured prominently in the data. It is widely accepted that mothers experience higher levels of work-family guilt than fathers, and this assertion is supported by a growing body of qualitative and quantitative data (Borelli et al, 2016; Korabik, 2015; Aycan & Eskin, 2000). This guilt is normalised and conceptualised by many working mothers as ‘part and parcel’ of the identity, something ‘all working mothers feel’ (Article 38).

‘Juggling’/finding a ‘balance’

Another prevalent social representation of working mothers is that they need to constantly ‘juggle’ tasks and roles in their lives, with the aim of achieving a ‘work-life balance’. While this is a relevant concern to all working parents; traditional gender norms require women to be primary carers and do domestic work; so the representation of ‘juggling’ is most relevant for working mothers. Juggling is required in order to stave off the ‘working mother’s guilt’ which stems from ‘dropping the ball’ or failing to control all aspects of home life. Successful working mothers advise others to obtain ‘guilt relief’ by improving their time management and organisational skills so they can juggle more effectively (Article 35). Juggling is required because working mothers need to traverse different identities and situations to manage their tasks effectively. The data show that women who are facing the prospect of combining motherhood and work are well aware of the stresses and pressures of the dual roles, and the potential conflicts that may arise. Working motherhood is seen as a
huge undertaking, one that requires a high level of skill and determination. This is reflected in the language that is used when women are describing the tasks of working motherhood.

‘Having it all’

‘Having it all’ is a continually contested notion that frames a successful career and successful home life as being the ultimate ideal for women. This could be seen as a ‘polemic representation’ (Deaux & Wiley, 2007; Moscovici, 1988) because subgroups within the category disagree about its validity. This representation is more frequently contested than accepted in the data; however, the third theme contains accounts of women who could be seen to ‘Have it all’.

‘The Man Who Has it All’ is a parody Twitter account which swaps the genders in discourse around parenthood and work epitomises the power of this social representation of working motherhood. Few would ask a man how he manages to ‘have it all’, yet it is something working mothers are asked continually. Even within subgroups there is little consensus on what ‘Having it all’ actually represents, and this is reflected in the debate around this representation. The fact that it is used almost exclusively to refer to women indicates the fact that it is underpinned by the gender norm that women cannot be fulfilled without children (Ridgeway and Connell, 2004).

Discourses around ‘Having it all’ tend to see ‘women’ as a homogenous group. This ignores class, cultural and racial differences between women, and assumes that ‘having it all’ is something all women should strive for. The phrase has been in popular use in the US since the 1980’s and has its roots in advertising campaigns and self-help books which claimed to offer advice to women in successfully combining children and work (Szalai, 2015). Since then, ‘Having it all’ has become a cliché; however, it is still the subject of articles, opinion
columns and online comment threads today (Szalai, 2015), indicating that it is a powerful representation of working motherhood.

**Meso - Intergroup relations**

The meso level is concerned with social interaction between and within groups. Social representations about social categories are propagated and transmitted through verbal and non-verbal channels, eventually becoming part of social identity (Philogène, 2012; Deaux, 2006; Lamy et al, 2011; Breakwell, 1993). Although this research is focussed on the ‘working mother’ identity, there are a number of sub-groups that featured in the data; for example ‘stay-at-home-mums’ (SAHM), and emerging groups such as ‘stay-at-home-dads’ (SAHD) and ‘working dads’. These groups were framed as being in conflict with each other, and language is employed to evoke images of conflict and war. ‘Mammy wars’, ‘schoolgate tribes’ and mothers from different subgroups are ‘pitted against one another’ (Article 33). The US media itself may have created the idea of ‘mommy wars’ (Akass, 2012), however, it remains a powerful concept in discourse surrounding motherhood. Women feel that they will be judged for whichever choice they make - if they choose to work they may be seen as a ‘bad mother’ or if they stay at home they could be disregarded as ‘just a mum’.

Social identities bolster self-esteem through positive identification with in-groups and differentiation from out-groups via a process of downward comparison (Haslam 2004). Groups orient themselves differently to the representation of ‘Having it all’, depending on the purpose that representation serves to their group. Different meanings are associated with the representation; some define it as happily combining work and family life, and others define it in terms of idealised success in both realms. This difference of perspective adds to the perceived differences between groups and leads to conflict. Between the two poles of ‘Have it all’ and ‘Can’t have it all’, there is a diverse spectrum of opinion which is related to gender,
age, educational background and career type among other factors; however ‘Having it all’ is still a question that women grapple with more than men (Slaughter, 2012).

**Micro - Individual level processes**

Macro and meso-level processes influence the content and negotiation of working mother’s identity in relation to their in-group and out-groups. Individually held gender beliefs play a role in shaping social identity, they impact on the choices men and women make, and how they orient themselves to the social world (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). While behaviour around gender roles has changed significantly in the past 30 years, attitudes towards gender roles have taken longer to change (Fine-Davis, 2014). Attitudes such as these influence individual decision making and behaviour – for example giving up work to care for children full time, making up for lost time at the weekend, changing career to allow for more flexibility, joining a Whatsapp mums group or micro-managing the home environment. The data show the prevalence of gender stereotypes which view gender differences as ‘natural’ rather than socially constructed in media coverage of working mothers (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004; Seguino, 2007). This explains inequality as natural and problematizes the relationship of mothers to working outside the home. By working, mothers are violating a gender-norm explaining ‘working mother guilt’ (Borelli, 2017), anxiety and distress (Seguino, 2007).

The ‘working mother’ identity is not a unified and homogenous group, but one that is intersected by a range of identities such as sexuality, class, ethnicity and ability, shaping the privileges and opportunities conferred on individual group members (Philogène, 2012; Cole, 2009). In contexts where the ‘mother’ identity is stigmatised, for example in male dominated workplaces (Heilman and Eagly, 2008) mothers must engage in coping mechanisms in order to maintain their self esteem against social identity threat. This leads to identity negotiation
and construction through subjective appraisals of the threat, challenging essentialist stereotypes by attributing negative outcomes to external causes and avoiding upward comparison with dominant groups (Major, 2012; Crocker and Major, 1987). Characteristics and representations of a group identity shape the appraisals of identity threat and influence an individual’s emotions, beliefs and behaviour (Major and O’Brien, 2005).

Negative stereotypes about one’s in-group lead in-group members to strive to maintain positive self-esteem (Major and O’Brien, 2005). The data in this study show multiple accounts of working mothers striving to do this by juggling the demands of many roles, attempting to be both ‘ideal mother’ and ‘ideal worker’. This also occurs through downward comparison with other groups, making sense of their position in terms of ‘having it all’ or not.

Individuals and groups experiencing identity threat may also act to challenge stereotypes and re-define social norms in order to maintain positive self-esteem (Major and Wiley, 2007). The third theme of this study shows women claiming the ‘working mother’ label as a sign of strength and positivity. They are happy in both roles, and share the load with their partners. These working mothers are in jobs where they have the advantage of increased flexibility; they are leaders in their fields and are positive role models for the younger generation. Socio-economic status and type of job is a factor - in roles which allow for flexibility; working mothers will be able to progress further, and these jobs tend to be at the higher end of the pay scale (Slaughter, 2012).

**Future Directions**

Future research in this area should incorporate mixed methods; combining newspaper data with interviews and focus groups in order to ascertain the impact of social representations on the identity processes of Irish working mothers. Triangulating data types would have enabled the current research to make a stronger link between the roles that
representation plays in shaping the identities of working mothers in Ireland. Findings from this type of exploratory study may enable researchers to develop a series of hypotheses related to the impact of social representations on identity and behaviour. Quantitative methods in future study designs would allow for the use of representative samples and increased generalisability.

The range of sources in the present study did not include ‘red top’ or tabloid newspapers. This was due to accessibility – such newspapers were not available to be systematically searched on the ProQuest database. To counteract this, the popular online source Journal.ie was included which has instantly accessible articles archived on its website. Although the inclusion of the tabloid news sources would have added external validity to the study, the sources chosen represented the most popular news sources in Ireland and so were useful in assessing the most widely held social representations of working mothers in this context.

The present study focussed solely on the identity of ‘working mothers’, and reflected on the gender beliefs that shape the representations of this identity group. Mothers, however, exist in relational spaces with their partners and children and at work; depending on their profession. Gender stereotypes and social norms have changed a great deal for women and are beginning to change for men. This can be seen with the emergence of new sub-groups such as the Stay at home Dad (SAHD) and ‘breadwinning mothers’ (Doucet, 2016). Future research should include these emerging identities – how do individuals cope with exhibiting behaviour that transgresses gender norms? What are the representations about these emerging groups? How do these representations impact on the active construction of identities? Reflecting the prevalence of informal online forms of communication – blogs, message boards, facebook, twitter and other online platforms should be analysed in future studies alongside interview and focus group data.
Conclusion

Identities and representations shape each other in a two-way process, and are products of the social context. Minority groups are labelled by the powerful and this impacts their everyday lives. However, minorities can begin to change the norms related to their identities by challenging the status quo, changing the content of the social representations and the characteristics of their identity. There is evidence to show that gender norms are changing worldwide in tandem with women’s increased economic empowerment (Seguino, 2007). Economic crises were found to increase the prevalence of patriarchal gender norms, which may explain the gap in Irish behaviour and gender attitudes found by Fine-Davis (2014). During the financial crash, there was a higher level of unemployment in male dominated industries, leading to more men staying at home (Fine-Davis, 2014). A combination of this sudden shift in the gendered division of labour coupled with the slowing of progress in egalitarian gender roles that occurs during times of financial crisis may partly explain the continuing prevalence of restrictive norms and stereotypes that affect working mothers.

Globally, working mothers are challenging these norms in a variety of ways, by writing about their experiences (Slaughter, 2012), normalising motherhood at work (Sandberg, 2015) and through highly visible public acts such as breastfeeding in parliament (Irish Times, 2017). In Ireland, working mothers are advocating for change in their workplaces (Byrne, 2017) which can give rise to new representations and positive identities in the future. The two-way interaction of social identity and social representation is key to this shift in perspective, however, broad structural change is required to create a system in which the term ‘working mother’ is no longer a synonym for doubly oppressed.
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## Tables

### Table 1 – Source details

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<td>16/08/2015</td>
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<td>05/03/2016</td>
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Figures

Figure 1: Number of article extracts per publication in newspaper sample

![Figure 1](image1)

Figure 2: Distribution of themes by number of article extracts (sources)

![Figure 2](image2)

Figure 3: Portion of text within the sample corresponding to each theme

![Figure 3](image3)
Figure 4: Thematic map - breakdown of themes and sub-themes in Thematic Analysis
Figure 5: Model of the interaction between Social Representations and Social Identity, based on Deaux (2006)