

## **NEGOTIATING MOTHERHOOD: A DIALOGICAL APPROACH**

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**ABSTRACT.** This study assumes a dialogical perspective towards the processes of identity construction during the transition to motherhood, and it relies on a methodology that invites the participants to deal with the dualities of the dialogical self (Dialogical Articulation Task - DAT). Using this semi-structured interview, we ask the participants to identify the various self-descriptive dimensions of their selves and to give an independent voice to each of them. These voices are conceptualized as discursive I-positions, and the person is asked to perform the exercise of alternately moving between each of the positions and activate dialogues among them, as well as between them and the significant interlocutors. Transition to motherhood implies the construction of a new maternal identity, but it also involves a necessary re-organization and accommodation of the previous identity positions that constitute the personal repertoire. Assuming that this transition is informed by a constant interplay between different and sometimes demanding identity positions, we explore the meanings constructed in order to elaborate this experience, focusing on the ways women negotiate their new maternal identity. Ambivalence and tension between the different meanings constructed by women concerning motherhood are evidenced through the semiotic analysis of the interviews.

**Keywords:** dialogical self; self-regulation; semiotic mediation; life transition; motherhood

The topics of motherhood, and specifically of transition to motherhood, have been devoted a great deal of attention, resulting in an expanding body of research and literature. Consequently, we have now at disposal a consistent wide range of studies that point out the complex and diverse character of this personal experience, whether focused in a more quantitative approach intended to isolate the variables influencing the psychosocial adjustment to this transition (Glade, Bean & Vira, 2005), or oriented towards a qualitative exploration of the individual experience of these women (Nelson, 2003). Despite the knowledge that the transition to motherhood constitutes a highly challenging task that presents many emotional, affective and social nuances, the cultural view of this life event continues to emphasize the element of self-fulfilment of the fem-

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ine nature that motherhood experiences also carries. Several authors have highlighted the fact that motherhood, more than a mere biological event, constitutes a social phenomenon, loaded with inherited cultural and ideological images and lay theories that influence the experiences of any new mother (Woollett, 1991; Letherby, 1994; Sévon, 2005; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). In social discourses there prevails a traditional idealized view of motherhood as a source of significant personal fulfilment, development and enjoyment of intense positive emotions (Solé & Parella, 2004; Leal, 2005). This narrow vision of motherhood also carries a set of beliefs and stereotypes around what is socially and culturally accepted, in contemporaneous western societies as an adequate practice of “mothering”. These are largely sustained by the myth of motherhood as a universal need and “natural” choice of women and by the expectation of full-time mothering (Oakley, 1984; Solé & Parella, 2004; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). This myth of an “intensive motherhood” as the reflection of what constitutes a “good” mother, yet being in absolute dissonance with the present role of women in western society, still influences the imaginary of many women that fight with a difficult dilemma of irreconcilable aspirations, causing distress and guilt.

Motherhood might be, in fact, experienced in several and quite different personal contexts and subjectivities. Moreover, it is always inscribed within the network of social dynamics that, at each historical moment, define the constraints imposed on women in their experience and subjective construction of this identity dimension (Sevón, 2005). Consequently, we should not talk about the “motherhood”, but rather of “motherhoods”, assuming the diversity of trajectories and the multiplicity of discourses and practices that delineate the phenomenon. In other words, in order to fully accomplish understanding motherhood and its several expressions, we need to start from a conceptualization of this phenomenon as a social and cultural process. Furthermore, in order to understand this process of construction and integration of a maternal identity by women today, we can not neglect the fact that it is immersed in an occidental and industrialized socio-cultural context that has been subject to deep practical and social changes. These have been transforming to a large extent the status and expectations of women’s roles in society. Presently, women often carry expectations of participating more actively in social life, valuing a professional career and the consequent public and social recognition, and assuming a more proactive role in politics and citizenship. Yet, the set of social discourses concerning the idea of intensive motherhood also constitute the cultural context in which the new mothers will give sense to their subjective experience and act as discursive orientations to the construction of this new maternal identity.

Hence, we share the notion that becoming a mother is among the major developmental transitions during young adulthood and emphasize, at the individual level, the process of identity transformation as one of the great challenges that motherhood entails (Raeff, 1996; Smith, 1991, 1999; Bailey, 1999; Nelson, 2003;

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Seibold, 2004). Motherhood can not be circumscribed to the concrete experience of giving birth and objectively becoming a mother. The adoption of this identity corresponds to a process that is drawn from several elements of the concrete experience but transcends the physical and biological domain. It is inscribed into the subjective realm of the imaginary during the entire gestation and this is a phenomenon that draws out beyond the birth as the experience is represented through new modalities, in a constant interplay between diverse identity positions and between these and the cultural prescriptions available in the dominant social discourses. Thus, adopting a discursive and dialogical approach, this article intends to examine the re-organizations and accommodations observed in dialogical processes through the transition to motherhood, as well as the meanings about this transition elaborated in women's effort to negotiate their new mother identity.

### **Conceptual Background**

#### *The Dialogical Self*

The Dialogical Self Theory from Hermans and Kempen (1993) constitutes one core conceptual line guiding this study. Understanding the self as a “dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind, intertwined as this mind is with the minds of other people” (Hermans, 2002, p. 147), the authors highlight its decentred, relational and social dimension. In fact, according to this dialogical conceptualization of the self, the construction of meaning becomes a process fundamentally relational in nature, since it emerges from the ongoing dialogical exchanges happening between two or more voiced positions that, at each moment in time, compose the person's repertoire. These positions become understood as interlocutors in a process of meaning making that is always influenced and challenged by the anticipation of another's reaction. Simultaneously, the dialogical self is also a deeply social self, since the internalized voices of social others are also part of these dialogues and take place in the occurring process of meaning (Hermans, Kempen & Van Loon, 1992; Hermans & Dimaggio 2004). In line with recent contributions on the developmental origin of the dialogical self, it appears that, since very soon in infancy, early interpersonal relationships become integrated in a developing sense of self as memory patterns that will function as important voices or positions in the child's inner dialogues and influence future relationships (Hermans & Dimaggio 2004). Thus, others actually become part of one's self<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> We should note that this current focus on the embodied nature of all these processes, both in the field of developmental psychology and of neuropsychology, has been giving rise to promising contributions to the understanding of the origins and functioning of the dialogical self, namely by looking for a neural model to support the theory (Lewis, 2002; Lewis & Todd, 2004). Focusing on the autonomous functioning of two important attentional systems in the

It is this relational and multiple feature that the dialogical approach can add to an analysis of the meaning-making as a vital process in human beings and that constituted the basis for the elaboration of our methodological task – the Dialogical Articulation Task (see also Duarte, Rosa & Gonçalves, 2006). The method calls for an explicit effort at describing these ongoing dialogues among the various I-positions and their respective social interlocutors. From a dialogical standpoint, as the person assumes different positions he/she is endowing each one of them with a voice able to be part of the dialogue. New meanings are made possible by transforming the positions involved or by the emergence of new I-positions that somehow solve temporarily the dialogical tension. Thus, the meaning-making as a dialogical construction implies an “I” that is continuously moving back and forth between different positions (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Valsiner, 2004). We hope to present in this paper an useful example of the meaning-making that results from an active “positioning” from several different I-positions, underlying the notion that the meaning-making emerges as a process that occurs not from one position, but *between* two or more positions in dialogue (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

#### *Meaning-Making and Semiotic Mediation*

From our point of view the perspective of the dialogical self is important, but not sufficient for an understanding of the way meaning gets transformed. As Valsiner (2006) states: “the picture charted out for the DS remains static—it is the process of transforming the dominance structure of the given state of DS into a new one that provides us with a glimpse of how the self system works” (p. 3-4). Looking at the semiotic processes in the dialogical self is one pathway to understand the transformations in self-system.

The meaning-making processes can be viewed, from a developmental perspective, as a pre-adaptation mechanism, since it endows the self with useful semiotic tools that reduce the uncertainty and unpredictability of the immediate future and mediate the relation with the outside world (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998; Valsiner, 2002a). These semiotic devices, or signs, become organized into a hierarchical structure of meaning, in that each higher level of signs regulates the functioning of the lower level (Valsiner, 2002b).

From a dialectic understanding, Valsiner and collaborators (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998; Josephs, Valsiner & Surgan, 1999; Valsiner, 2006) conceptualize the meaning-

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prefrontal cortex, closely connected with emotional areas such as the limbic system, Lewis proposes a model of a dialogical brain that partly explains the alternation between semi-autonomous I-positions.

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making process in terms of dualities and assert that meanings arise as dual fields of unified opposites – or *bipolar meaning complexes*. The authors define meaning complexes as “signs (meanings per se) that present some aspects of the world, their implied opposites, and qualifiers that are linked with either signs or their opposites” (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998, p. 70) and present this dialectic quality as an essential condition for the existence of any process of transformation or novelty. In other words, each constructed sign immediately co-constructs its opposite, that is, a counter-sign (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998). It is this oppositional relation between the two meaning fields that sometimes can reach a state of tension and lead to a further elaboration of meanings that change the previous relation.

Therefore, tension is the crucial element in opening the meaning complex to further transformation by participating in the dialogue with other emergent meaning complexes (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998). Therefore, dialogical relations between meaning complexes may be harmonious and then change to a state of tension that results from the rivalry between meaning complexes, eventually leading to an escalation and the taking over of one meaning complex by the other. Tension is also a very common element within the dialogues described by participants in our study, often leading to further elaborations and growth of the meaning complexes constructed by the various I-positions in dialogical exchanges. These dialogical exchanges are usually modulated by the use of several kinds of *circumvention strategies*, which designate some semiotic instruments used in the meaning-making as regulators of dialogical relations. These strategies are also semiotic constructions that are continuously made as the meaning-making unfolds, in order to negotiate and maintain the goals that these women establish in each here-and-now context while maintaining their effort in making sense of the social world (see Josephs & Valsiner, 1998 for a full elaboration on this issue). In other words, participants usually turn to the elaboration of some new semiotic tool that enables them to strategically circumvent the existing conflicts so that they can keep their several and sometimes ambivalent motivations and values.

### **Method**

#### *Sample and Procedure*

The sample consists of a group of 10 women expecting their first child, in order to explore the meanings constructed around this developmental experience and increase our understanding of the ways women negotiate their new maternal identity. One of the central research questions is related to the analysis of the process of integration in the self-system of a new I-position – the maternal one. More precisely, we intend to dissect the tensions and conflicting demands that this new I-position may cause within the previous existing repertoire and analyse the way each woman negotiates and deals with this developmental challenge, considering possible changes and accommodations observed in the I-positions repertoire. However, because this study is still in a phase of

data collection and analysis, in this paper we will explore only some preliminary results based on a first analysis of four cases – Maria, a 30-year-old psychologist; Adriana, a 29-year-old manager; Ana, a 28-year-old teacher; and Madalena, a 34-year-old professional translator<sup>2</sup>. All these four participants are married women and of a middle socio-economic level.

Data collection was achieved in two distinct moments: the first evaluation happened during the 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester of the woman's pregnancy and the second evaluation took place after the 3<sup>rd</sup> month post-partum. At each of these moments, we applied a semi-structured interview developed in a previous study - Dialogical Articulation Task (DAT, Duarte, Rosa & Gonçalves, 2006).

In this interview, we invite participants to deal with the dualities of the dialogical self, exploring the way people think and construct meaning, both about possible dialogues among their different discursive I-positions (Hermans & Kempen, 1993), and about the dialogues between those and the “voices” of significant interlocutors (see Duarte, Rosa & Gonçalves, 2006, for a more detailed exposition). In order to accomplish that, we ask participants to identify their most descriptive and relevant self-dimensions, which usually correspond to social roles, personal interests and idiosyncratic characteristics (e.g. Me as a professional; Me as a mother; The emotional me). These defined self-dimensions are presented to participants as different voices or identity positions they can deploy when thinking about several daily decisions or events and they are asked to explain and describe the most usual interaction between them, while imagining that each of these I-positions is a character in a story or in a movie, which suddenly gets a voice. This procedure leads to an autonomous voicing of each I-position, and because of that, participants present their different I-positions as independent Me's.

The interview consists mostly in exploring the dialogues between each discursive I-position and all the others, in order to clarify a set of questions concerning each dialogue: (1) the usual agreement or disagreement between the I-positions; (2) their ability to negotiate and synthesise shared meanings; (3) the possible dominance and the kind of power exerted by some of the I-positions; and (4) the affective impact of the interaction solution.

Finally, in the last interview, we also present some questions concerning the experience of mothering for the first time, pregnancy and the decision to have a child.

All the interviews were conducted by the first author of this paper, two of them in the office at the University, and the other two in interviewees' homes. They lasted between 45 and 100 minutes and were audio taped and later fully transcribed.

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2 All names have been changed in order to protect participant's privacy.

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### *The Analysis*

Data analysis may be organized into two levels that are closely related, through representing two different approaches to the phenomenon of integration of the new maternal position within the repertoire of previous positions defined by each woman. Therefore, we started by proceeding to a first wide approach to the participant's discourse, looking for the existence of conflicts and ambivalences, and framing them within a more macrogenetic perspective. In order to do that, we used discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1995; Edley, 2001) as a method to identify the fundamental interpretative repertoires used by these women as discursive resources in their effort to give sense to their motherhood experience and to construct a new maternal identity. This methodology seems quite adequate to assess the processes that people use when resorting to images and notions available in social discourses to construct their personal identities, in interplay between socially disseminated discourses and their personal experience and agency. These images and ideas, usually identified in the discourse as clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech, are then labelled by Potter and Wetherell (1995) as "interpretative repertoires".

The relevance of this analysis draws from the notion that motherhood as a socio-cultural construct holds various images and directives that constitute strong constraints in women's behaviour. As stated by Valsiner (2000, p. 157), the "regulation of women's conduct during their pregnancies entails, in parallel, new ways of constraining their actions, thinking and feeling" that guide them towards their new powerfully symbolic role as mothers.

Second, we chose to complement this first analysis with a more microgenetic and detailed scrutiny of the existing tension and conflicts through a semiotic analysis of the meaning-making process exemplified in the discourse of each participant. This process of microgenetic analysis is applied to the dialogues narrated among the several I-positions and focuses on the process of meaning-making triggered by the first question concerning each dyad of I-positions – Is there any dialogue between these two?. Considering the presented dialectic notion of meaning-making (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998), we understand that this question presents the first bipolar meaning complex the person can use to elaborate on any of the meaning fields – DIALOGUE  $\diamond$  NON-DIALOGUE. Once this first opposition is suggested by the interviewer, the person's meaning-making may follow in one of two different ways: by acceptance and increasing differentiation of field A – DIALOGUE (called *growth*); or by acceptance and increasing differentiation of field NON-A – NON-DIALOGUE (called *constructive elaboration*). This last possibility of meaning construction is the most likely to lead to further elaboration and novelty, since it allows the insertion of new competing meaning complexes – e.g. B  $\diamond$  NON-B. The analysis follows, then, the process of meaning-making looking for the identification of: a) new bipolar meaning-complexes elaborated by the person; b) consequent growth or constructive elaboration of any of the meaning

fields; c) whether harmonious coexistence or rivalry between the elaborated meaning complexes emerges; d) circumvention strategies elaborated in order to deal with the tension.

## Results

### *Analysis 1 – Interpretative Repertoires*

The significance and influence assumed in the process of individual signification by some collectively shared meanings has been pointed also in the realm of a dialogical conceptualization of the self (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Regarding this, we should not only consider the role of socio-cultural traditions as discursive resources that influence and constrain each individual process of meaning-making, but also the way people transform these social prescriptions, creating a personal culture in their ongoing development (see Valsiner, 2000).

Aware of the importance of these social and cultural elements, we will begin by highlighting the presence of two fundamental interpretative repertoires in the discourse of these women that to some extent, define the discursive boundaries within which their negotiation of a new maternal identity proceeds.

#### *Repertoire 1 – The ideal of traditional motherhood and the myth of the “good” mother*

The word “motherhood,” understood as a discursive construct with deep socio-cultural roots, involves a set of widely spread stereotypes around the notion of “good” mother as opposed to “bad” mother (Solé & Parella, 2004). These stereotypes, or set of social discourses concerning motherhood, constitute the cultural context where new mothers will experience their transition to motherhood. Thus, the imaginary of the “good” mother or of the “intensive” motherhood clearly emerges in their discourses, either as a position of resistance or of conformity towards these guidelines.

In the discourse of these participants, we can explicitly see their worries about being a “good” mother or about learning “well” how to be a mother, which is reinforced by a preoccupation and a very significant anticipatory anxiety with a search for information in order to “be prepared”. This concept of a “good” mother and of a certain ideal of motherhood also becomes clear from the doubts and the intensive questioning about the personal abilities for the exercise of motherhood, which suggests a situation of a strong need to correspond to the social and personal expectations. This effort of compliance with the social prescriptions of what constitutes a “good mother” is also translated in the subtle use of the pronoun “we” (highlighted in bold) by Adriana and Madalena, that states their identification with the “generalized woman”. Underlined are the discursive markers that allow identifying the presence of the interpretative repertoires.



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*“But... I’m very very afraid... I am! I don’t know... (silence)... I can’t wait... but I’m afraid that I’m not going to be a good mother... (silence)... I’m afraid! And I don’t know, within a few weeks, how it is going to be... will he cry a lot? Because **we**... everyone says that “well, you learn how to be a mother!”. You do. I believe you do, but **will we** learn well how to be mothers?” (Adriana, pre-partum 1)*

*“In what concerns being a mother, I never know if I’m a good mother. I never know... I think so, but **we are** never sure whether we are good mothers or not, but **we do** the best we can to be one.” (Madalena, post-partum 1)*

*“Sometimes I read because I feel that I need to be prepared!... (laughing)... must know how to change diapers... or must know how to feed the baby... I think... now it is almost like... a countdown... and then I must be prepared...” (Maria, pre-partum 1)*

*“... this was something... it was planned, so it wasn’t something that frightened me exactly, but... at the same time, there were always doubts.” (Ana, post-partum 1)*

In addition to the obvious inexperience and insecurity of these new mothers, there is usually an “assault” of suggestions, guidelines and criticisms from close relatives and friends, medical experts and sometimes even strangers, which are often regarded as intrusive and disorganizing due to their frequent contradictions. While this is a very visible situation in the first days or weeks after the birth, there seems to be a certain resistance against this intrusion through an effort in searching “their” own way of being mothers. Note that this attempt in resisting the prescriptions of social others becomes a task of the couple, whose space they try to preserve in the face of existing pressure. Here we also find the use of the pronoun “we”, but now referring to the couple and constructed in opposition to the former “we” (woman’s generalized role). In this sense, the ideal motherhood becomes in certain moments used as a discourse that helps these women in their identity definition through opposition and resistance.

*“And at some point I thought “No, from now on I will do what **my husband and I** think is good for him (the baby) and what is correct... what makes us feel good also!” Because I think that it is also important that **we are** doing the things which we can identify **ourselves** with and not only “I’m doing this because that person told me to...”” (Maria, post-partum 2)*

*“... therefore the two of us have to act on our own as if there was nobody else. And I try to think a lot about it... I leave some space for my brothers and for the family, but I try to make this our thing, of the two of us.” (Ana, pre-partum 2)*

This belief in the existence of an adequate and perfect motherhood leads us, then, to the question: what defines a “good” mother? Through which dimensions is this notion of an ideal motherhood decomposed?

*1.1 – Motherhood as a “natural” and tacitly expected step*

One of the dimensions that describe the traditional vision of motherhood is the belief that all women aspire to be mothers, excluding the choice of non-motherhood as an acceptable one (Meyers, 2001, Oakley, 1984). In the following excerpts we can effectively notice how the notion of motherhood as a natural desire for women is present, in a more or less explicit way, in the discourse of these three participants. Motherhood is presented as an old time expectation and a natural choice, to some extent, it is implicitly expected. Note, once again, the use of “we” as an expression of a clear identification with all women, as if this desire was obviously shared and intrinsic to some kind of womanhood.

*“It’s like this, the moment... I think that for **us, women**, being a mother is something that some day... some day **we** just feel like it! I think that’s the way it is.”* (Adriana, post-partum 2)

*“... I’ve always had the wish of having a child, since... a very young age! Not since I was a child, but for a long time now... I always wanted to have at least one child... so I won’t let time pass me by and then... regret never having had a child.”* (Maria, post-partum 3)

*“I’ve always had the idea that I would love to be, but... I had no idea... I just wanted! Wanted!... it was an idea that was... I’d like to get married and be a mother.”* (Ana, post-partum 3)

The fourth woman - Madalena - reveals a totally different position in assuming that she never even considered becoming a mother as one major life goal. Still, this position is also drawn against a social reality identified with this spread expectation that women invariably wish to become mothers. That is, whether adopting a position of compliance or resistance, all these women define themselves in relation to this myth of motherhood as an unavoidable destination of women. This seems to be the very reason for the need of this participant to justify her non compliance, advancing other motives than the simple absence of the wish of becoming a mother.

*“I never even... what!?... when I hear people saying like... kids! – “My dream is get married and have children” - ... I never had the dream of getting married and having children. I don’t know... or if I had, it was sound asleep, I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it.”* (Madalena, post-partum 2)

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*“No... perhaps I didn’t feel capable... I didn’t feel capable of being a mother! Until she was born... even in the last days... I used to think many times – “What am I getting myself into! How will I be able to raise a defenceless baby?” (Madalena, pos-partum 3)*

Whereas in the first example we see an obvious ambivalence between wanting and not wanting to be a mother, in the second excerpt the reason given for the absence of this desire is again elaborated through the implicit use of the notion of a “good” mother, as Madalena highlights her inadequacy to meet the necessary requirements.

### *1.2 – Notion of maternal love and instinct*

A second element that seems to compose this ideal motherhood and that is very obvious in these women’s discourse is the notion of maternal love as an instantaneous reality, parallel to a statement of the maternal instinct that “naturally” speeds the adaptation to the baby and to the care giving tasks (Oakley, 1984; Matlin, 1987). Once again, we can find in the second excerpt a movement from an “I statement” to a “we statement” that reinforces this notion of the generalized and unavoidable nature of such an innate instinct.

*“... Even, well, in terms of... even taking care of her... And I think that if other little babies used to disturb me, with her I think I did everything naturally! Well, changing a diaper, even the umbilical cord that used to disturb me so much, does not disturb me at all! Because it is ours or because... It doesn’t disturb me at all!” (Ana, post-partum 4)*

*“Seriously, I’ve completely changed! It’s a radical change, totally. It’s a crazy thing, totally. From that moment on we change – not by need – it is instinctive. Really! It is really instantaneous and instinctive.” (Madalena, post-partum 4)*

### *1.3 – Mother as the prime caregiver*

Finally, the ideal of traditional motherhood also portrays expectations of a full-time dedication of the mothers to their children, to the extent that every child needs his/her mother and her presence in order to grow up healthy (Oakley, 1984; Solé & Parella, 2004; Johnston & Swanson, 2006). This idea of the mother as the privileged caregiver of her child has, thus, a correspondence in the fact that the familiar realm had been traditionally presented to women as a central context of personal achievement.

In the following examples, this notion of the mother’s presence as an important requisite is somehow reflected in the difficulty in leaving the baby and in delegating the care giving function, even with the father or other family members, as in the case of the grandmother.

*“... it is a separation, even with him staying with my husband or with my mother. I completely trust them, but it is no longer with me, right, so if you are used to being with him all day that’s a bit...” (Maria, post-partum 4)*

*“... because my husband has a job that doesn’t allow him to get home early and I see that he doesn’t spend any time with the baby and I don’t want her spending little time with both of us. I know that I’ll probably be getting in troubles, but I think that she needs it. She shouldn’t just be raised by her grandmother!” (Madalena, post-partum 5)*

Differently from the previous women, Ana reflects about the importance of preserving some space for herself as a woman, outside the monopolizing realm of motherhood, but still highlighting that she considers delegating the care of her child only for brief periods of time and exclusively to her own mother, someone absolutely trustworthy. Similarly to the previous examples, Ana also uses the pronoun “we” in a way that somehow reinforces her statements in the sense that present them as shared and accepted by a group of other women. However, in this particular case, the “we” refers to a different kind of women, the emancipated modern mothers that, yet still loving their babies, value some time for taking care of themselves. Nevertheless, this situation seems to cause some ambivalence or at least some fear of being judged, since Ana feels compelled to justify her behaviour, highlighting the fact that she only allows herself these breaks because she spends plenty of time with her child.

*“And these hours that we leave them with someone we trust and go, this is also good for us! It’s our little hour to calm down and relax a bit... it would be very difficult... without the help of the family. (...) But I spend a lot of time with her and I think that... well, I only go to the gym because I know she is with my mother, because if it was with someone else I wouldn’t... right, I go relaxed, I don’t worry.” (Ana, post-partum 5)*

Accordingly with this feeling that their presence and care are absolutely needed, these women generally reveal an extremely positive image concerning motherhood, which emerges at this moment as top priority in their lives. Apparently, for them, motherhood has coloured all the other experiences and contexts, leading to a devaluation of some more negative aspects implicated in this transition. Therefore, the familiar realm is regarded as the main context of affective and time investment, achieving a much more manifest centrality in this gestation period, although to all of them family was a value priority even before. This familiar centrality, as expected, is stressed in the post-partum period, when motherhood is understood as reinforcement of the family concept, which is reflected in the image that a “new family” has in fact been formed and in the use of the pronoun “we” to describe the experience, as if the couple and the new child were now an unique whole. This fact also leads to a greater feeling of

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achievement and completeness concerning other identity positions within the family sphere.

*“At this moment... I as a mother involves everything around me, you know... the whole me!” (Adriana, pre-partum 3)*

*“That’s a new phase. It is like we had gotten married again with another goal in life. It isn’t anymore... I don’t know... it’s impossible to explain. Everything loses... importance in life. The goal is another one. You live for that! It’s impressive!” (Madalena, post-partum 6)*

*“... feelings even more of a family... now it is really our family! I think there was reinforcement here, that the two of us and our daughter are a new family, apart from the other two!!”; “Yes, that’s it! I think it makes you more of a wife, because that’s the role, isn’t it? Mother, wife!!” (Ana, post-partum 6)*

### *Repertoire 2 – The autonomous and professionally successful woman*

Similarly to the presented stereotypes that legitimize a certain identification of the feminine with motherhood and family, we see nowadays, at least in the occidental countries, other images of womanhood that demand the right to assume different roles in society. The great changes verified in terms of the possibility of planning childbirth, the access of women to higher levels of formal education and their massive entrance in the labour market, as well as the value transformation that is associated with it, legitimated an emancipation of the feminine and the maintenance of new expectations and aspirations concerning the social role of women. Professional success arises increasingly among new generations of women as a target to accomplish (Solé & Parella, 2004; Alberdi et al, 2000).

In our data, we can also identify a second interpretative repertoire in these women’s discourse - one that is related to the significance of a professional career and to the necessity of progression and recognition, and that reflects the values of individuality and autonomy, so imperative in contemporaneous industrialized societies.

#### *2.1 – Profession and career as personal achievement*

Today, many women see labour as a crucial element of self- fulfilment, leading them to strongly invest in their academic education and in the search for a professional career that becomes a source of satisfaction and a central vector in their personal trajectories (Alberdi et al., 2000). In fact, it becomes obvious from the following examples the great importance attributed to the professional/vocational dimension, especially because of the self-fulfilment character that it holds for these women. This importance becomes particularly manifest when it contrasts with the anticipation of motherhood demands. Apparently, these women feel that somehow the fact of being working mothers may value even more their practice of motherhood, in the sense that it

enriches and completes them as a whole person. Once again, these women seem to be constructing a new identity as “good” mothers by resisting to the prescriptions of an intensive motherhood.

*“... the most important to me... as a professional, is to be a good professional in whatever I do, to dignify the institution I work in, above all... because I’m proud...” (Adriana, pre-partum 4)*

*“Concerning the professional part, I always wanted and have somehow fulfilled my dream. I always wanted to be a teacher and have graduated in teaching... (...)... so, it is something that I really love and still... I can’t give it up!” (Ana, pre-partum 7)*

*“I’m kind of a perfectionist maniac, but that’s something that everyone is... When I get involved in a project, for fun, I go through with it till the end! I like it very much, like a lot... perhaps because I’m loving the work I’m doing.” (Madalena, pre-partum 7)*

## 2.2 – The need of improvement and recognition

Another frequent element in these women’s discourse is the perspective of career improvement and the will to continue evolving professionally. However, it is here that the first ambivalences appear between a professional enhancement goal and the realization that the decision to have a child might become an increased difficulty in the eye of the employers. At this point several elements come into dialogue – the wish of progressing and being rewarded; the expectation of increased difficulties due to the demands of their new family life; and the priority of having some pleasure with what they do.

*“... I like to be good at what I do... and above all, I like what I do. I consider myself a good manager. I don’t know if someday I’ll be a good director, right? I won’t be thinking about administration... (laughing)... unfortunately that is more... well, that is reserved for men, isn’t it?... (laughing)... No, but I think that... I won’t say that it wouldn’t be an interesting challenge, obviously!” (Adriana, pre-partum 5)*

*“Ah, at this moment it is still a bit complicated because there is a lot of pressure and I don’t know if our department will be maintained, but... I want to keep growing. Actually that’s something that... I don’t want to just stay there?, that’s why I started studying again!” (Madalena, pre-partum 8)*

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### *Ideological Dilemma - Ambivalence and contradictions within the working mother perspective*

Between these two repertoires there is an important focus of tension within the discourse of these women and this tension has clearly increased after the birth of the baby.

Initially, in the pre-partum, there is a general maintenance of the value of professional career, but paralleled with the acceptance that it is temporarily a second priority. This acceptance happens without conflict or distress, especially because it is understood as a temporary situation and, to some extent, an “excusable” fact due to the greater physical difficulties caused by pregnancy. At the same time, there is already visible some anticipation of the conflict that an effective return to work will cause.

*“... an example, if I'm not able to finish something, I won't be too worried about it, not as much as I would have been some time back, because I think that physically I can't do much more... some time ago I would take work to do home, even if it wasn't necessary, but I would do it in order to be a good professional and have things on time. Now it's more like... that's it for today!” (Maria, pre-partum 5)*

*“But the Me as a professional knows that this is something temporary! Even because I as professional has given up a lot and all that was post-laboral schedule has been given up, is finished, but I'm very interested in coming back... in having all these activities again! It's only at this moment that... it's a provisional experience! (Maria, pre-partum 6)*

In the second moment, post-partum, the anticipation of returning to work causes a much higher anxiety and worry and becomes approached in a radically different way. It is in this stage of preparing for the return to the labour market, after a period of exclusive devotion to their new position as mothers that a confrontation emerges involving the dilemma of attending to an ideal of “intensive” motherhood or keeping the image of professionally successful and competent women.

In this sense, we are interested in understanding how do women circumvent some social guides about what is a good mother, when their life style is not totally in agreement with those prescriptions. A microgenetic approach is used here as a methodological tool to deepen our understanding of these dynamics, since it permits a detailed scrutiny of the meaning-making process “on-line”.

### *Analysis 2 – Meaning-making and microgenesis*

Considering the four participants studied in this first analysis, two of them included right in the first pre-partum interview, a somehow preparatory maternal position

Table 1.

## Synthesis of I-positions defined by each participant in both DAT interviews

Participant	DAT – Pre-partum	DAT - Post-partum
Maria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Me as a future mother</b></li> <li>- Me as a professional</li> <li>- The child in me</li> <li>- Me as a family member</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Me as a mother</b></li> <li>- Me as a professional</li> <li>- The child in me</li> </ul>
Adriana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Me as a future mother</b></li> <li>- Me as a professional</li> <li>- Me as dreamer</li> <li>- Affection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Me as a mother</b></li> <li>- Me as a professional</li> <li>- Me as dreamer</li> <li>- Affection</li> </ul>
Ana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Me as a professional</li> <li>- Me as family member</li> <li>- The emotional me</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Me as a mother</b></li> <li>- Me as family member</li> <li>- The emotional me</li> </ul>
Madalena	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The childish me</li> <li>- Me as a professional</li> <li>- The emotional me</li> <li>- Friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Me as mother</b></li> <li>- Me as a professional</li> <li>- The emotional me</li> <li>- Friends</li> </ul>

while the other two did not. In common is the fact that all of them have defined defined a maternal position in the second moment, that is, during the fourth month post-partum.

Since the maternal position is precisely the one that assumes a greater relevance to the present study, we focus our semiotic analysis on the dialogical dynamics between this I-position and the remaining positions defined by each participant. In this paper, we will explore, though, only the dialogues described between the maternal and the professional positions, since they have important specificities and can in fact be taken as the representation of each of these conflicting interpretative repertoires. In other words, the first presented repertoire - *the ideal of traditional motherhood and the myth of the “good” mother* – is mostly sustained by the maternal position, while the second repertoire - *the autonomous and professionally successful woman* - is presented by the professional position, leading to a clear ideological dilemma and creating a field of dialogical tension.



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In this sense, a microgenetic semiotic analysis of the meaning-making process concerning the dialogical dynamics between these two positions seems very useful in order to identify which are the strategies used by each participant to circumvent and/or solve the existing tensions and conflicts.

Following, we present some excerpts of each of these women's discourse concerning the nature of the dialogue between maternal and professional positions at the post-partum moment, as well as the previously described microgenetic analysis of this meaning-making process, focusing on the tensions and the semiotic tools elaborated in order to circumvent it.

### A. Maria, post-partum

*“Me as a professional knows that she should go back to work... (laughing)... which I'm already doing, after all, it's just that I work from home now. And Me as a mother probably would rather continue with this working at home situation in order to pay attention to the baby as well. Yes, maybe that's it... (laughing)...”*

ANALYSIS: After proposal of the opposition DIALOGUE  $\diamond$  NON-DIALOGUE, by the interviewer, two meanings arise, each one associated with a position and related to the imminent situation of returning to work - TO GO BACK  $\diamond$  NON-TO GO BACK and TO CONTINUE AT HOME  $\diamond$  NON-TO CONTINUE AT HOME. These two meanings enter into a relation, from which emerges a contrast of meaning complexes that reaches a state of rivalry. Associated with each voice there arise different circumvention strategies (see table 2 below for a summary of all the circumvention strategies used by participants), on one hand the voice of *Me as a professional* uses a circumvention strategy focused on a moralist macro-organizer - “knows that she should go back”; and on the other hand, the *I as a mother* uses a circumvention strategy focused on a personal preference - “would rather continue at home”.

(10 seconds later)

*“Me as a professional knows that I must go back to work and that this must happen and... to get more experience, to enrich her curriculum and so on... (And there is also some will, thinking as a professional, of going back?) Yes, of having that day-to-day with colleagues and so on, yes, that as well. You spend a lot of time locked up at home and that's not very healthy either, isn't it? (What about the other?) Then Me as a mother... (laughing)... sees things more like this, since I've already been working from home for a long time now, she thinks more like “ok, I can conciliate both things and that would be ideal!”*

ANALYSIS: Once the contrast of meaning complexes is established, contents of each one of the two voices in dialogue are elaborated. The state of rivalry is maintained without development, but the same circumvention strategies are used again by each of the voices and there is a synthesis of a new meaning that qualifies the relation (by the voice of *Me as a mother*) and opens the place to negotiation – TO CONCILIATE. This search for negotiating is also underlined by the tag question – *isn't it?* – which can be read as an appeal to the listener for confirmation and reinforces the personal need to maintain the goals and meanings carried by both positions.

In this excerpt we can also find a new resource advanced by the professional position that underlies, although with some ambiguity, the “not *very healthy either*” nature of an all-consuming motherhood. By using these semantic qualifiers in such an evaluative way, there is a circumvention of the meaning TO CONTINUE AT HOME, and a strengthening of the professional position’s view.

*(Immediately following the last excerpt)*

*“(How do you negotiate these two...\_this divergence? Does this reach the point of being a conflict for you? Does this cause you any distress?) Some, but I don't know if it reaches the point of being a conflict. Maybe it is more simply two opinions that are like a bit different.”*

ANALYSIS: Two oppositions emerge: NEGOTIATION <> NON-NEGOTIATION and CONFLICT <> NON-CONFLICT and the accepted opposition is CONFLICT <> NON-CONFLICT, but in an ambiguous way.

The ambiguity of this location is underlined by the new semantic qualifiers “some” and “to the point of”. The tension that this disagreement may trigger is clearly reduced by the synthesis of a new meaning, more conciliatory – DIFFERENT OPINIONS – and that is still limited by semantic qualifiers that reduce the tension (“simply”; “a bit”). Although assuming the obvious disagreement between the two voices, the circumvention effort of the meaning CONFLICT in order to maintain an acceptable level of tension is clear.

*(21 seconds later)*

*“(And how do you think that this will be solved?) I don't know, it all depends... (silence)... depends, but... (long silence)... no... these are things that surpass me also! (And if you are given the conditions, what do you think you would choose?)... if I could choose it would be like fifty-fifty... It would be like working some days at my working place and the others at home.”*

ANALYSIS: Finally, the opposition SOLUTION is accepted, but without clear positioning – “I don't know, it all depends” – what seems to be a clear avoidance of

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elaboration about this question. This ambiguity is clarified by the estimation of “these are things that surpass me also” which reinforces a personal distance. When located in the present dialogue, its characterization is focused on a notion of rivalry that is impossible to solve at the moment. When somehow forced to assume a position, there’s a clear desire for NEGOTIATION.

### B. Adriana, post-partum

*“This is a total interest’s disagreement!! But I think that... (But has Me as a mother in some way silenced or muffled a little the professional voice? Or that just doesn’t happen?) It happens! Of course it happens, but I know what I have to do, right, I know I must go to work... I wish I could be with him all the time! That’s why I do agree that women stay at home and take care of their children, I think that’s right!”*

ANALYSIS: Once the implicit estimation of DIALOGUE is established (after proposal of the opposition DIALOGUE  $\diamond$  NON-DIALOGUE), there is an immediate move to the field DISAGREEMENT, underlined by the qualifier “total”. Two meanings arise then, related to the imminent situation of returning to work, and each of them associated to one of the positions – TO WORK  $\diamond$  NON-TO WORK and TO BE AT HOME  $\diamond$  NON-TO BE AT HOME – which enter in relation leading to a contrast of meaning complexes that reaches a state of rivalry. Associated with each voice there arise different circumvention strategies: the professional position uses a circumvention strategy focused in a macro-organizer - “*I know I must go to work*”; and on the other hand, the *Me as a mother* uses a circumvention strategy focused in a personal preference – “*I wish I could be with him all the time*”.

*(Immediately following the last excerpt)*

*“Not forever but... I think that at least during a year the mother should stay at home! Or at least while the baby needed breastfeeding. But I know that’s not possible and because of that I must go to work! There’s no other way, is there?!”*

ANALYSIS: Reinforcement of the rivalry state through the elaboration of the maternal position with growth of the field TO BE AT HOME, and the use of a strong moralist macro-organizer – “*should stay at home*”. Yet another macro-organizer, of a more prescriptive nature, is attributed to the professional position – “*I must go to work*”. The rivalry is somehow restrained by a circumvention strategy focused in a symbolic helper – “*there’s no other way*” – which, however, doesn’t seem very satisfactory in circumventing the tension since it is followed by the use of a tag question – *is there?* - that apparently functions again as an appeal to the listener for confirmation and support.

(15 seconds later)

*“(But does your professional voice tell you that it must be that way?) It must be that way! No, it must be and I must continue with my life and... I have my career! It’s not because he’s born that... when I decided to have him (baby) I didn’t think “now I’ll give up everything because of him!” No, because it wouldn’t be a good thing for him either.”*

ANALYSIS: New reinforcement of the rivalry state, now through the elaboration of the professional voice, with growth of the field TO WORK and repetition of a new prescriptive macro-organizer – “*it must be*”. Following, there is a focus on the goals of the professional voice and the synthesis of a new and different macro-organizer (“*I must continue with my life*”), as well as of an evaluative account emphasized by the use of semantic qualifiers – “*it wouldn’t be a good thing for him either*”.

The elaboration of these dialogical exchanges proceeds then through a reinforcement of the state of rivalry between the meanings sustained by each of the positions in dialogue. On one hand, the maternal position is associated with a personal preference, but on the other, the professional position extracts some negotiation power from a strong macro-organizer. Again, as in the former case, the participant uses an evaluative account (“*it wouldn’t be a good thing for him either*”) to express the personal value also ascribed to the professional position.

C. Madalena, post-partum

*“... they (the two positions) will quarrel! They will quarrel a lot... Because I know that it’s going to be very hard for me! Either I change my conduct now and I start leaving her (baby) with my parents a bit, or else I see that my childish I will be crying all the time! Because it’s going to be very hard for me... I believe I’m becoming too chicken. They will quarrel a lot, a lot... they are already quarrelling.”*

ANALYSIS: Proposal of the opposition DIALOGUE  $\diamond$  NON-DIALOGUE, with implicit acceptance of the field DIALOGUE, which is followed by the immediate synthesis of the new opposition TO QUARREL  $\diamond$  NON-TO QUARREL, relating to the future. There is then an acceptance and growth of the field TO QUARREL, which is reinforced by the repetition of the qualifier “a lot”. There is also a new elaboration of the maternal position and attribution of the new meaning “TO BE HARD”, also reinforced by the qualifier “very”. Recovery of the field QUARREL and reinforcement of this meaning through the repetition of the qualifier “a lot”, this time followed by a move into the present and estimation of “*they are already quarrelling*”.

*(Immediately following the last excerpt)*

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*“(Are you already feeling that conflict?) Yes, yes! And time passes on increasingly fast... They will quarrel a lot. It is only two months away! Perhaps I’ll react well! But I think I’ll take it badly. And then it will be a shock they (employers) wanting me to stay longer and me not wanting to stay... but in the first year it is a right and I will want the right to my hours to be with my child.”*

ANALYSIS: Proposal of maintenance in the present and of a new opposition CONFLICT <> NON- CONFLICT, with acceptance of the field CONFLICT. Immediate move to the future and recovery of the field QUARREL, again reinforced by a qualifier - “a lot” – and subject of growth. Adoption of the maternal position and synthesis of new meanings that sustain the maintenance of the field QUARREL: TO HAVE THE RIGHT.

(3 minutes and 40 seconds later – after an episodic narrative)

*“They will pressure me because they need me! It’s not because they’re mean... but because it’s necessary! And it’s going to be very complicated for me because I don’t want to go! That’s the problem!... I don’t want to go... (*whispering*)... I don’t. Oh my **God!** Let’s see!”*

ANALYSIS: Proposal of the opposition TO PRESSURE <> NON-TO PRESSURE, with acceptance and growth of the field TO PRESSURE, that is elaborated within the professional voice and leads to a circumvention strategy focused on a competing goal – “because they need me”; “but because it’s necessary”. The underlying tension leads to an elaboration of the maternal position and estimation of “it’s going to be very complicated for me”, sustained by a circumvention strategy focused on a personal preference “I don’t want to go”.

There is a first estimation of conflict between the positions in dialogue, referring to the future, followed by a move into the present and new assessment of the dialogue as difficult and conflicting, which is highlighted by the profusion of qualifiers. The elaboration of the maternal position presents the value dissonance and the reasons for the conflict, once again due to the personal preference in delaying the return to work and the impending necessity/prescription to go back.

### D. Ana, post-partum

Finally, in the case of Ana, this relation is not as much conflicting, to the extent that her objective conditions are quite different from the rest of the participants. In this case, she was only working part-time because of some difficulties in entering the labour market. For this reason the professional position loses significance in the second moment of interview and thus she did not include it again in her repertoire, but nevertheless we can still find some references to this same situation.

**Table 2. Circumvention strategies elaborated by the two conflicting positions at the post-partum moment**

Participant	Circumvention strategies
Maria	<p><b>Me as a mother:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on a personal preference (“would rather continue at home”)</li> </ul> <p><b>Me as a professional:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on a moralist macro-organizer (“<i>should go back</i>”);</li> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on semantic qualifiers (“<i>not very healthy either</i>”)</li> </ul>
Adriana	<p><b>Me as a mother:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on a personal preference (“<i>I wish I could be with him all the time</i>”);</li> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on a moralist macro-organizer (“<i>should stay at home</i>”)</li> </ul> <p><b>Me as a professional:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on an evaluative macro-organizer (“<i>I know I must go to work</i>”);</li> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on semantic qualifiers (“<i>it wouldn’t be a good thing for him either</i>”)</li> </ul>
Madalena	<p><b>Me as a mother:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on a personal preference (“<i>I don’t want to go</i>”)</li> </ul> <p><b>Me as a professional:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- circumvention strategy focused on a competing goal (“<i>because they need me</i>”; “<i>but because it’s necessary</i>”)</li> </ul>

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*“I mean, the Me as a professional probably would stay at a lower level. I’m working kind of in a part-time situation... I’ve started in some private schools... a part-time... but at this moment we are going on vacations and thus it won’t be a Me with a great interest... That’s it; it’s a very passive role, because it doesn’t interfere with anything.”*

*“... family is important, but our focus, at least at this moment, is our child. I think that’s it. And the others are... for example the Me as a professional now is not so relevant, it is more passive. It is important also in terms of subsistence, isn’t it? But... but the maternal one is... well, it is the most important! It is the most central one.”*

### Discussion

Starting with the presented analysis we can observe the effort of these women in negotiating between two distinct identity positions, each of which may be identified with very different and equally valued meanings. The difficulty in harmonizing the values and interests held by each position is even greater since both the maternal and professional positions are strongly connected with two interpretative repertoires inevitably rooted in rival discourses that become particularly problematic at this specific moment in these women’s lives. In other words, each woman is at a pivotal moment of their personal trajectories, when a set of more or less shared social meanings come into play and work as a cultural guide to their subjective processing of the experience. This is not a linear and unambiguous process and women often move between resistance and compliance with the mainstream social discourses, entering different coalitions in an effort to strengthen their statements. At different points of their discourse, these women seem to identify themselves with and adopt discursive resources made available by distinct groups or images of womanhood, as reflected in the use the pronoun “we” with several correspondents: *we* women and good mothers as expected by the (general) others; *we*, me and my husband or our new family; *we* emancipated working mothers that still love our babies. These movements or positioning between distinct Me’s and We’s seems to be well in line with a feeling of having a “widened I”, a sense of multiplicity that is in fact at the core of the notion of a dialogical self. Apparently, due to the novelty and transformation that transition to motherhood implies, parallel with the high social attention and prescription that it triggers, this moment in a woman’s life becomes a particularly demanding task of self-definition and identity transformation, highlighting the nature of a multiple and diverse “I”, one that is negotiated in the interplay between ambivalent personal values and motivations, as well as between these and the social discourses that frame their experience.

Moving between the boundaries established by these cultural guidelines and their own individual subjective experience, each of these women proceeds into a processing of the events related to motherhood, returning to the construction of semiotic

devices that enable, at a microgenetic level, some stability to the experience. In fact, we can see from our interviews that these women are somehow using the meanings and semiotic tools available in social discourses to guide their own behaviour and thought, trying to act as “good mothers” since the moment they knew about the pregnancy.

Later, the decision about whether to return to the workplace, the definition of the leave duration and the anticipation of some satisfactory future articulation of the maternal and professional worlds, figure as choices that suppose a negotiation of values and meanings that are difficult to reconcile.

In a first global look at these negotiations between the maternal and professional positions in each of these cases, we could conclude that the subjective experience of motherhood is lived in such a positive way that it leads to a complete congregation of priorities within the family realm. In fact, the conflict and tension manifest in these dialogues comes up most of all from the imposition of returning to work and from the maintenance of a personal preference in not doing it yet. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis reveals the ambivalences that characterize these women’s discourse to the extent that they still attribute some authority and negotiating power to their professional position. This authority of the professional position comes not only from an economic dimension (sometimes referred to), but also from the value of personal fulfilment, as becomes equally clear in other moments of the interviews.

Therefore, on one hand, the maternal position is often fortified by the use of a strategy focused on a personal preference, which reflects the priority systems of these women at this early post-partum. On the other hand, the frequent use of strong circumvention strategies focused on more or less evaluative macro-organizers (with a prescriptive nature) or in a competing goal, highlights a certain institutional need in returning to work, thereby strengthening the professional position. Similarly, we can also observe the use of strategies focused on semantic qualifiers and evaluations of personal preferences that also emphasize the value of personal fulfilment attributed by these women to their careers. Thus, the manifest need in conciliating and negotiating both worlds reveals that they are not willing to renounce either of these positions.

The role of circumvention strategies as a way of increasing the flexibility of people’s reasoning (for example about the mundane world and the existence of miracles) has already been beautifully demonstrated (see Josephs & Valsiner, 1998). In this sense, the authors argue that these strategies can be regarded as devices of “semiotic liberation” from the constraints of logic, since they enable the simultaneous adoption of different and even competing positions and/or meanings. Nonetheless, this expansion of flexibility is not limitless and must be constrained by reverse circumventions. Thus, for a healthy construction of life and functioning, we must consider this constant interplay between semiotic liberation and semiotic constraint (Josephs & Valsiner, 1998).



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We believe that this interplay was clearly evidenced in these women's process of meaning making. They usually resort to several strategies of meaning circumvention in order to keep their personal values and goals, but at the same time without escaping the boundaries defined by social guidelines that they share to a more or less extent, and that constitute the constraining limits of their meaning-making.

### Further Ideas

In the second moment of interview, and still in a very early stage of this new motherhood, the maternal position invariably appears as the centrifugal element of the whole repertoire, congregating the greater part of affective and time investment and standing as the absolute priority in the life of these women. Looking at this phenomenon from the perspective of a dialogical understanding of the self, we can say that there is a new voice or identity position that looms into consciousness and is legitimized by a very significant authority. But how does this position arise? How does it become progressively defined and influential to the point of being so very consistently present in the discourse?

We are interested in understanding how and when these women start identifying themselves as mothers. How is this position built and how does it emerge within the realm of the previous I-positions repertoire, becoming then materialized in behavioural, emotional and social transformations. This is a future line of research that the authors would like to explore.

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