



“Days were never long enough, yet they were never-ending ...”: South African Mothers’ Experiences of Motherhood, Role Conflict, and Identity amid a Pandemic

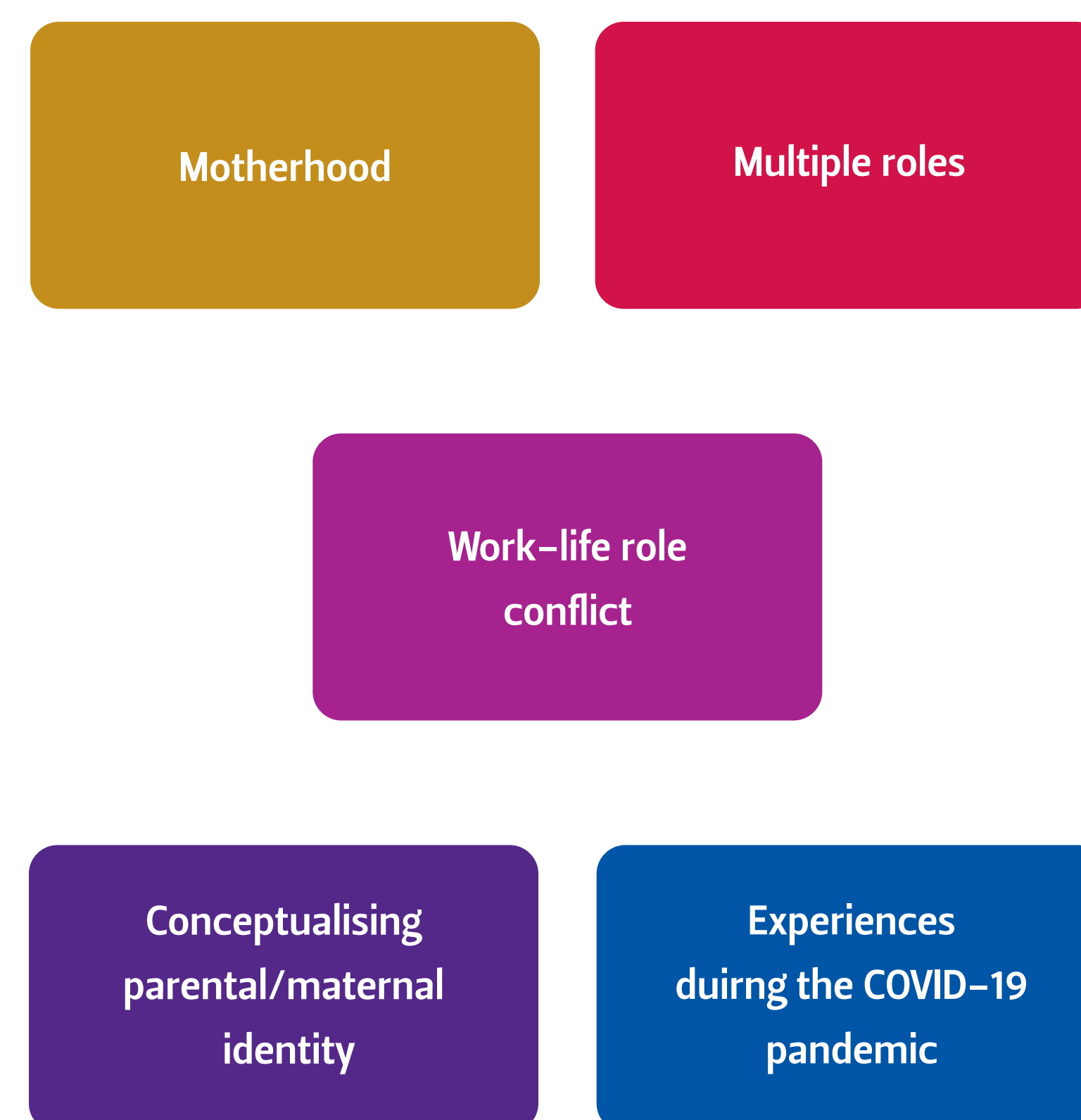
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Aim of the Study

To explore and describe:

- the role conflict working South African mothers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic concerning their maternal and work roles
- mothers’ experiences of their individual and maternal identities.

Theoretical Grounding



- The all-encompassing nature of motherhood, with implicit or explicit expectations (Ahmadifaraz et al., 2013; Berger et al., 2020; Siahaan, 2018; Verma, 2020)
- The intensive mothering ideology (Henderson et al., 2015; Williamson et al., 2022); women to balance the conflicting discourses of being a “good” worker and a “good” mother (Cummins & Brannon, 2022; Guy & Arthur, 2020).
- Work-life shock events (Hennekam et al., 2021): COVID-19 pandemic = disruptive in the personal and professional lives
- Parental stress during COVID-19 and lockdown period (Adams et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2022), but also resilience, unique opportunities for growth as mothers, people, and employees (Jones et al., 2022)
- Identity exploration and internalisation of parental roles (Piotrowski, 2018, 2021)

Collaborators



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Research Methods

Approach: Qualitative
Design: Explorative and descriptive
Participants: 9 employed mothers
Data collection: Semi-structured interviews
Data analysis: Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2020a, 2020b)

Examples of Interview Questions

What importance do you attach to your roles of being a mother and employee?

How were your experiences of motherhood different during the COVID-19 pandemic than before?

How did you experience the conflict between what was expected of you as a mother and an employee?

How would you describe the overlap/contradictions between your personal and maternal selves?

What have you learned about yourself during this pandemic and your role as a mother and an employee?

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Summary and Description of Themes

Theme	Description/definition of the theme
Experiences of Motherhood	Motherhood was described through several lived experiences, specifically reflecting on occurrences during the pandemic.
My Career or my Family?	Fulfilling both motherly and work roles was challenging, and it was often difficult to distinguish within the confinement of one's home.
Days Were Never Long Enough, yet They Were Never-Ending ...	The pandemic was overwhelming, with many time-consuming activities. Additional household duties needed to be completed, and other responsibilities required increased attention.
Relationships in Peril?	Relationships were undoubtedly influenced by the pandemic, both positively and negatively.
Integrating the Old Self With the New ...	Experiencing the unknowns of a pandemic led to exploring and re-evaluating one's identity and the integration thereof with new experiences.

Conclusion

- Mothers indicated different degrees of identity exploration and identity internalisation through questioning their roles, the meaning behind these roles, and the time and energy that each of these roles occupies in their lives. Some participants found that, without realising, certain roles had become so integrated with their personal identity.
- The role conflict that working mothers experience was intensified during the pandemic and exacerbated by confinement in their homes, limited time for self-care, and the uncertainty of the progression of the pandemic.
- Although the pandemic was described as a period of many trials and uncertainties, it was also filled with positive experiences of increased family closeness, realising one's resilience, and great enjoyment of the unexpected quality time spent with loved ones.
- The role conflict and subsequent challenges led participants to explore their personal and maternal identities, the level of interplay, and the distinctness of each.
- Although challenging and uncertain, participants considered the COVID-19 pandemic a time for reflection on their roles as mothers and their maternal identity, which led to a recommitment and strengthening of the roles and experiences of motherhood.