

BAR – ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Family-Work Integration among Secular Women
with a demanding Career on the one hand and a Large Family on the other**

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the experience of secular women whose lifestyle combines raising a large family on the one hand and a demanding profession on the other. The purpose of the research is first and foremost to examine the motives for combining these two life roles and study their methods of coping with the challenges that arise from this integration. Secondly, the research will test the implications of this integration in light of these women's identity development as well as generative perspective which is related to the concern for the welfare of the next generation.

Modern times and progress in the western world brought with them many significant changes, women's education and employment among other things. On the one hand women still bear the main responsibility for raising children and family, as it has always been. Nevertheless, they also made progress in their education and advanced in their workplaces, so they are likely to feel conflict and tension between these two demanding roles and the resources each one of them requires (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Parasuraman & Greenahus, 2002).

Due to this conflict, and together with other global changes, a change in the family structure has also occurred. One of the prominent expressions in this era is a change in birth rate; in the developed western world the more the woman is intellectually educated, the fewer children she will have (Moore, 2017; Okun et al., 2007). Another novel phenomenon occurring in the western world is of individuals who choose not to have children at all, partly due to their desire to invest their personal resources, undisturbed, in their own professional development (Gillespie, 2003; Goldin, 2007; Grier, 1992).

The negative correlation between education and birth rate occurs in Israel as well, but it is not as strong as in the rest of the western world. The tendency towards decline in the number of children in correlation with women's education takes place in Israel as well (Raz-Yurovitz, 2008), and this negative correlation also exists within the religious population in Israel, and even among the Arab-religious population (CBS, 2018). According to data from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics, the average number of children that a woman in Israel is expected to have during her life is 3.1, significantly higher than the average in the OECD countries which stands at 1.6 (CBS, 2018).

However, within this broad phenomenon with a very clear trend, there is a unique phenomenon of women who are part of the culture of the western world but behave in opposition to it. The women spoken of are intellectual women, who emphasize their personal development, including their profession, and who dedicate their best years to their own growth. But at the same time, as they develop themselves, they establish large families, significantly bigger than the average birth rate in the developed western world. This phenomenon is a fascinating source of interest, looking at its motives and consequences.

Besides education and demography, this phenomenon might have different meanings in other domains. One of them is the realm of ego-identity and the effect of the professional realm and the familial realm on identity formation processes and on generativity processes occurring within these women. According to Erikson (1963; 1968) in his developmental theory, during one's life span, the individual goes through eight different stages and conflicts, and the one resolves them will affect identity formation as well as one's mental well-being. The 7th stage in this theory represents a significant conflict in the life of an adolescent. Solving the conflict at this stage will lead to generativity or stagnation. "Generativity", which is defined as the will and concern for the welfare of the next generation, has an extensive impact on the family, on relationships within it, as well as influencing work and society (Lawford et al., 2020). Accordingly, and in accordance with the importance that the family domain and the professional domain have on the formation of personal identity, it must be understood how these women with their unique lifestyle, experience their ego-identity, and what meaning they grant to generative issues in their lives.

Therefore, in a more focused way, we will seek an answer to three main questions in this study: (A) What are the motives of these women in taking on their unique lifestyle, both as far as the size of the family and pursuing a demanding profession; (B) In what ways do these women cope with this challenging combination, while addressing the pros and cons of their decisions, and how do they perceive the challenges and struggles that may arise; and (C) What significance does this lifestyle have on their ego-identity formation as well as their attitudes regarding generative issues in their lives.

The study population is pre-chosen by predefined properties. It includes secular

educated women, who bore a family of at least five children, in addition to a taking on a demanding profession which requires constant development. The study was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews with these women. The interview was based on a combination of the interview structure of Spradley (1979) and Shkedi (2003) and was adapted to the main research topics: questions dealing with identity, career, family, conflict and how it is coped with. The study findings were then analyzed using Gross' (1955) method of analysis, which includes four steps: word, category, relationship between categories, and a theoretical model. This method was chosen as it allows for an understanding of social phenomena by analyzing the meanings that the individual gives to his or her decisions, conduct and life.

The main research findings deal with the theme of choice and the theme of conflict versus enrichment. The notion of **choice** is an essential and very significant concept, in the set of motivations of the women who are the subject of this study, and in relation to their ways of dealing with the challenges arising from their way of life. The fact that they **chose** to take on this lifestyle reappeared in their interviews, where they emphasized their autonomous desire for the existing integration in their lives.

Furthermore, the very choice empowers them and gives them strength to cope with life challenges, because the reality of their lives has not been forced upon them. On the contrary, it is a direct result of their autonomous choice. Autonomy, meaning 'self-determination', refers to actions that the individual initiates and regulates. When a person's choice is autonomous, his actions are experienced as being carried out wholeheartedly and voluntarily (De Charms, 1968; Deci, 1975), and indeed this experience is significantly reflected in the study participants. A parallel study examining religious women with a similar lifestyle, which combines a large family and a demanding profession, revealed other findings, such as a sense of mission and self-fulfillment, but the issue of choice did not arise (Binenefeld-Izak, 2017). If so, comparing the studies reinforces the importance and the significance of choice in the lives of the women who participated in the current study; this choice enables them to face the challenges of their lives.

The other theme is **conflict versus enrichment**. The findings of the study indicate that although one might assume that the lifestyle of the study participants serves as a basis for a conflicted experience, the women participating describe a non-conflicted life experience, with a sense of balance and acceptance of their various choices.

Moreover, they even describe how the very combination empowers them, and does not rob them of resources, as one might think. This finding is consistent with Enrichment Theory, according to which, it is precisely the multiplicity of roles that provides a more positive effect on the individual, rather than a negative one (Blom et al., 2007; Carlson et al., 2006).

Considering the theme of choice and the theme of conflict versus enrichment, a theoretical model has been proposed that presents choice as an essential cornerstone in these women's lives. According to the model, the women's choice of a large family and a demanding profession is an essential part of their ego-identity. When they perceive their choice as autonomous, the choice empowers them and makes them feel full and satisfied; And conversely, where they do not see their choice as autonomous, they will perceive the combination as conflictual and as one that saps energy from them. Finally, their choice is also related to their ways of dealing with generative issues. In light of their choice, they experience themselves as powerful women, who define clear priorities in life, perceive themselves as having a destiny, and the combination they choose as empowering them and not vice versa.

As a follow-up to this study, and with a desire to expand its findings, it is advisable to further examine this unique female population on a larger scale, and in a quantitative study, so that more characteristics can be identified. It is also advisable to further research other populations related to the phenomenon studied, such as the spouses of these women and how they experience their unique lifestyle. One can further investigate the phenomenon from the perspective of the children of these women; in what ways do they experience the lifestyle mentioned above, and what are its implications for them.