

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**The perception of the life roles:  
gender, work and motherhood  
And the development of a career perception  
Among daughters to a careerist mother**

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of emerging adult (Arnett, 2004) women regarding the life roles: gender, work and motherhood, in light of their experience as daughters to a careerist mother. Another goal is to delve into the career patterns (Super, 1990) that they are looking to adopt for themselves, patterns that are based on the relations between the life roles, focusing on the intergenerational transfer process between a mother and her daughter.

## **Research questions**

1. Based on the experience of growing up as a daughter to a careerist mother, what are the young women's perceptions regarding to the life roles: gender, work and motherhood?
2. In what ways has there been an intergenerational transfer between careerist mothers and their daughters regarding the three life roles: gender, work, and motherhood?
3. What are the career patterns (Super, 1990) that daughters to careerist mothers embrace, i.e. how do these young women perceive the connections between gender, work and motherhood life roles?

## **Research population**

The Research population included 14 Israeli emerging adult women from the Jewish society (ages 18-33), who, in their subjective view, define their mothers as a careerist.

## **Methodology and research tools**

This research's method is narrative-qualitative. The research tool is a semi-structured personal interview, the purpose of which is to gather information regarding the subjects through the stories they tell. The questions focused on the young woman's life story, their experiences as daughters to a careerist mothers and their perceptions of gender, work and motherhood. The data collected were analyzed individually according to Gross's method (1995) following the steps: word, category, relationship between categories, and model construction.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **A. Intergenerational Transfer**

Family members are influenced by the family model they grow up in, which is in itself influenced by previous generations, as families tend to maintain values, customs, communication and behavioral patterns that pass on from one generation to the next (Verdi, 1990; Lieberman, 1979; Inside: Arel, 1989). According to Bowen's theory (1976), the multi-generational transmission process simulates a person to a grain of sand on a beach, just as each grain of sand is unique, so it is similar to all other grains of sand in relation to its origin. Thus, each member of the family is unique and still shares similarities with all other members of his family (Titleman, 2014). Intergenerational transfer is defined as the tendency of the younger generation to repeat, similarly or differently, the elder generation's past experiences (Bray, Harvey, & Williamson, 1987). Intergenerational transfer does not mean "copying" the mother's choices, perceptions and beliefs and "pasting" them to the daughter's experience, but rather an unmediated effect of the mother, through her life choices and lifestyle, on her daughter's perceptions. A similar repeat to a mother's transfer in this study was expressed by subjects who indicated that their mother inspired them to successfully integrate work and motherhood, instilling in them the belief that it is possible. A different repeat to a mother's transfer was reflected by the fact that all the subjects of this study, regardless of their upbringing and the different household role-sharing models they were exposed to in their individual homes, indicated that they were interested in equitable distribution of roles in their future homes. Their mothers took a step forward toward equality by becoming a careerist woman and they are marching towards full equality in both career and motherhood.

## **B. Life role - Gender**

This study reveals the new definition of female identity in an age when women are pursuing demanding careers in roles previously considered masculine. Bandura and Bussey's (2004) theory states that gender development is determined by social and environmental factors, including the individual's family. Participants in the study defined female identity as being associated with traits of strength, power, "elbowing", goal achievement, wisdom, ambitiousness, and determination. It is plain to see that in 2019 the characteristics attributed to women are no longer concentrated on tenderness and delicacy but are combined with qualities of strength and power, coexisting without detracting from each other. The subjects' perception of women as strong and influential can be explained by the subliminal message that was probably conveyed from their

mothers, as some of the interviewees explicitly stated. Studies have shown that parents' views on traditional gender roles have such a strong impact on children that even if they are exposed to different approaches, they will still revert to the stereotypical choices they learned from their parents (Witt, 1997). Studies have shown that there is a high correlation between mother's and daughter's attitudes regarding gender roles (Schroeder, Blood, & Maluso, 1992; Starrels, 1992).

### **C. Life role - Work**

Various studies have found that parents are very influential when it comes to their children's career decisions (Ferry, Fouand & Smmit, 2000; Young, 1994). Gianakos (2001) emphasizes in her research the great importance of parents as role models in terms of work habits and career, and in the decision-making process of their children's career. In this study, we identified three perceptions regarding work life roles and the concept of career that emerged from the interviews: the perception of career as self-improving, the perception of career as enslavement, and a perception that incorporates elements of self-improvement and enslavement. We found that these perceptions are in perfect agreement with the daughter's experience of her mother's integration of the work and motherhood life roles, and the extent to which her mother manage to balance the work-home conflict. These young women process the experience of being raised by a careerist mother and adapt a perception of the work life role through that experience. If they feel that their mother's work comes at the expense of her time and attention to them, and therefore, she was unable to combine the work life role with the motherhood life role, they formulate a perception that regards work as enslavement and forces the woman to sacrifice. On the other hand, if the daughter feels that her mother has succeeded in balancing and integrating work and family life, or when the mother has mediated to her daughter the meanings of going to work or school and her expected absence from home, the daughter develops a view that regards work as self-improving, empowering and influential.

### **D. Life role – Motherhood**

The concept of hegemonic motherhood in contemporary society places maternal role as a central normative claim for women. The main expression of this claim is first and foremost expressed in the view of the female subject as intended for motherhood. The maternal role is integral to the way the environment defines women and how women

perceive themselves, to the extent that motherhood is considered an essential task to be fulfilled as part of a woman's development (Phoenix & Woollett, 1991). Most interviewees in this study were interested in having children and pointed out the role of motherhood as a defining female identity. However, according to research literature, over the years there has been a decline in the importance of the maternal role in many women's lives due to the influence of social and cultural processes in Western societies, and the maternal role is no longer the main road to self-fulfillment in women's eyes. The traditional image of the mother as a symbol of self-sacrifice has been replaced by the image of a self-fulfilled mother who is aware of her personal needs as well as her family's. Today, motherhood is not considered a natural obligation but a conscious and independent choice for woman (Knijn, 1994). In this study there was also representation for these ideas, in the form of two interviewees who declared and stand by the fact that they do not want to have children.

The third life role, motherhood, also includes management of the household. In the findings section, the interview analysis shows that in the homes where the subjects grew up, there are three role-sharing models: a traditional model in which the mother is responsible household and the children, an equitable model and another model where the husband holds all of the household responsibilities. All interviewees, without exception, indicated that they were interested in only one model in their future homes, the division of equal roles between the two spouses. Their perception supports the pattern of shared parental responsibility (Risman, 1998). According to this pattern, the burden of family responsibility rests with the two parents jointly and both are responsible for the household roles. This choice can be seen as the intergenerational transfer, occurring between the mother and her daughter. The research subjects grew up in homes where the mother contributed to the household income, sometimes was even solely responsible for it, and in addition most of the household chores were her responsibility as well. It can be hypothesized that this has had a decisive effect on the fact that all the subjects of this study are interested in the equitable role distribution model.

### **E. Career perception and implementation**

The three life roles: gender, work, and motherhood and the relationship between them form the subject's career perception. In order to understand the behavior of an individual

in a particular framework, we must consider all the life roles he deals with in his life apart from his work (Super, 1990). The relationships between roles, commitment to each role, the relative importance of each role, and the emotional involvement and time invested in each role constitute the individual's career pattern (Gali Cinamon, 1999). The subjects in this study explicitly stated that, in their eyes, the work roles are not 100% of life but rather one component of life's entire components, in addition to interests, hobbies, relationships, children and more. They pointed out that at different periods of life, compromises must be made in one life role in order to invest more time in another. This indicates the shaping of a career concept that consists of the person's perception of the connections between the various life roles.

Following the starting of her family, the woman embarks on a journey to fulfill her own individual career perception, which, as mentioned, includes how she sees the connections between life's roles. This study shows that subjects think in a complex way about the balance of the home-work conflict and share thoughts about conflict management both with their spouse and with themselves. Their ability to see the complexity of the home-work conflict might exist from a very early exposure to it, as well as exposure to both changes and costs, as noted in the interviews. In managing a home-work conflict, the subjects mentioned the prices they were willing to pay, their red lines, and their coping mechanisms for managing the conflict, referring to their experience as daughters to a careerist mother. Here, too, intergenerational transmission takes place, as each generation learns from watching and imitating the previous generation (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The modeling that took place during the subjects' childhood led them to develop their own way to conduct, in light of their experience with their mothers.

### **Research contribution**

This study is a tier to the research literature that addresses the identity of women in general and young women who were raised by careerist mothers in particular. This is the first study examining the process of shaping young women's perceptions of gender, work and motherhood life roles and the process of developing these women's career concept through the perspective of intergenerational transference. The topic of this research is at the center of the discussion of family counseling practitioners, and is an essential part of the complex issues underlying family systemic therapy in the modern and postmodern world. From a practical point of view, understanding emerging adult

women's perceptions and opinions can help guide and counsel them, since there is insufficient knowledge nowadays about the generation growing in a dual-career family or a single provider careerist matriarchal family. This present study reiterates and adds to the existing research by engaging in the intergenerational transfer of perceptions of gender, work and motherhood life roles as related to each other and form the daughter's career perception in a family with a careerist mother.

### **Summary**

This study found that an intergenerational transfer process took place between careerist mothers and young women, which contributed to the forming and shaping of the latter's perceptions of gender, work and motherhood life roles and then to the establishment of a career perception and the path to its fulfilment. The findings showed that emerging adult women today define feminine identity as composed of power, strength, and ability to accomplish any task, identified with modern feministic perceptions. We have identified in the study that following the mother's management of the work-home conflict or, alternatively, her mediation of the conflict, the daughter formulates a perception of the work life role: enslavement, self-improving, or a combination the two. We have also identified that the role of motherhood is still central to women's lives even in the modern age and it is an integral part of defining their female identity. However, we also saw in the study a representation of women who do not see their female fulfillment in having children. These three perceptions of life roles: gender, work, and motherhood and their intertwined relationships form the young woman's career perception, which is directly influenced by the experience of being a daughter to a careerist mother. That is to say, the way young women see the connections between the various life roles and the consideration they give to each role is related to their experiences with their careerist mother. The findings of the study indicate that according to the woman's career perception, which, as mentioned before, includes how she sees the connections between life roles, she develop the way to achieve it. We learned that the subjects think in a complex way about the balance of the home-work conflict and discuss conflict management with both their spouse and themselves. They consider the prices they are willing to pay, their red lines, and their de facto coping mechanisms of conflict management, all of which relate to their experience as daughters to a careerist mother. As a second-generation of the "career revolution" of women, these young women hold a more complex worldview than a young woman who is not a

daughter to a careerist mother and has not directly experienced a careerist woman dealing with any work-home conflict model. The findings of this study indicate an intergenerational conscious and unconscious transfer process that occurs directly in conversations with the mother and in an indirect form of viewing and imitation. The intergenerational transfer process works in several paths: A few of the subjects pointed out how they were inspired by their mothers, and since their mothers succeeded in integrating self-fulfillment in the work life role alongside the life role of motherhood, they are sure that it is possible for them as well. Some have stated that it is precisely because of their experience as a careerist mother's daughter that they have made a decision and are not interested in pursuing a career or alternatively having children. Another path the subjects pointed out to is the development of a different ways of action regarding child raising and household management, whether in equal distribution of roles or in mediating the mother's work life role to her children. The subjects spoke a lot about the things they would do differently than their mothers. This study can have practical implications for professional family therapists, given the many transformations that have occurred in the family characteristics and relationships.