

**REJECTING THE NORMATIVE 3-YEAR PARENTAL LEAVE:
MOTIVATIONS OF HUNGARIAN MOTHERS' EARLY RETURN TO
WORK**

By

Sarah Tayler

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Department of Gender Studies

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Supervisor: Professor Éva Fodor

Second reader: Professor Ashley Mears

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ABSTRACT

In Hungary, the overwhelming majority of women take advantage of the full three-year term of job-guaranteed, state-subsidized parental leave. Although the possibility of taking a lengthy parental leave can be considered “woman-friendly”, in reality, it has a detrimental effect on women’s opportunities in the labor market, and even though recent policy changes seemingly encourage women to return to work earlier, the number of women returning before the third year is still very low.

To contribute to the broader understanding of why more Hungarian women do not resume work earlier, this study presents a qualitative analysis of interviews with 16 middle-class mothers with secondary or higher education who did not take advantage of the full leave term, and explores the complex reasons for their early return.

To justify women’s employment, financial pressures are often assumed to be a decisive factor. While half of the women in my study did cite money as an important motivator, more significantly almost all interviewees mentioned work enjoyment and the opportunity to engage with peer company as a significant benefit of their employment. This thesis argues that the reason for this is that the Hungarian social policy system provides a reasonable income-replacement for women who were previously employed, enabling a significant number of interviewees to choose employment because of its various positive effects on their own well-being. Some women, who did not experience financial pressures to work, described how earning a salary also contributed towards their well-being by enhancing their self-esteem.

Although interviewees emphasized their own needs, they still positioned their children’s well-being as very important, while intricately linking it to their own needs as well. Most women conceptualized their children’s needs as remarkably similar to their own, stressing the benefits of peer company and mental stimulation provided by an institutional childcare setting. Women in this study rejected the psychological attachment theory discourses which posit full-time maternal care as central to children’s well-being. While they maintained the importance of a close mother-and-child bond, they dismissed the notion that this could only be achieved if they were continuously available to their child. Rather, some women conceptualized employment as helping them be better mothers through quality time together.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL RESEARCH AND THE WORD COUNT

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 15,997 words

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Signed Sarah Tayler

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	i
DECLARATION OF ORIGINAL RESEARCH AND THE WORD COUNT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iv
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	7
2.1 <i>Factors Influencing Mothers' Decisions Related to Employment</i>	7
2.2 <i>Effects of (Extended) Parental Leaves</i>	10
2.3 <i>Socialist Legacies in the Hungarian Family Policy System</i>	12
2.4 <i>Motherhood as a Social Construct</i>	15
3. METHODOLOGY	19
4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	24
4.1 <i>Mothers Own Needs Do Count: Working Women's Negotiation of their Own Needs</i>	24
4.2 <i>Working mothers' conceptualization of children's needs and its complex links to their own well-being</i>	39
5. CONCLUSIONS.....	51
APPENDIX 1 – Interviews	54
APPENDIX 2 – Interview questions	55
REFERENCES.....	57

1. INTRODUCTION

In May 2016, I was admitted for an M.A. in Gender Studies at the Central European University in Budapest (CEU). I was excited about this wonderful opportunity, and at the same time worried and guilty for starting my 15 month-old daughter in daycare. Was this really the right choice for us? Or would this, as I secretly feared, ruin something for her – something I was unable to specify - forever? As I channeled my stress into finding the perfect daycare for my daughter, I often wondered why I felt so guilty even though I only got encouragement and support from my husband and my family. Was it my otherwise warm-hearted neighbor and fellow mother asking me whether I was sorry for my daughter? Or the much-shared Facebook post warning against the dangers of early institutional care?

When the academic year started, I gradually felt reassured that I had made the right decision. My daughter was enjoying daycare and I felt that she was in the best possible hands during my time away from her. When we were together, I tried to give her as much undivided attention as possible. The course was demanding, but I enjoyed the mental stimulation, as well as the company I had after over a year at home. Still, I wanted to know more about how other Hungarian women end their maternity leave and whether they experience the same tensions that I did. As I started searching for related studies, among fascinating literature about gender and work in the Hungarian post-socialist context I came across an article by Zsuzsa Blaskó (2011) examining the motivations of women who stay at home for the full three years of state-subsidized maternity leave. Because I could not find research examining the motivations of women who return to work earlier, I decided to dedicate my thesis to showing the experiences of this other group of Hungarian mothers.

According to recent statistics, among women with children aged 0-2, only 13,4% of women are engaged in paid employment, which is significantly less than the EU average of 54.5% (OECD 2014). Women`s employment has important implications for gender equality, and an absence from the labor market has been shown to increase women`s vulnerability (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 3). A vast body of research documents the important effect of family policies on women`s employment (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009; Hennig, Gattermann and Hägglund 2012; Adema, Clarke and Frey 2016), of which parental leave is one of the most significant measures. Although parental leave, if its length is chosen well, has been shown to benefit women`s position on the labor market (Adema, Clarke and Frey 2016, 38), an extended absence from the labor market has a contrary effect, exacerbating existing gender inequalities in the workplace and strengthening traditional gender roles in the home (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 3). In Hungary, the long-standing availability of a state-subsidized and job-guaranteed parental leave of up to three years thus strongly shapes women`s experiences. The ongoing and complex effects of these policies rooted in Hungary`s socialist past have also been the central topic of a significant body of scholarship (Fodor and Glass 2007, Bálint and Köllő 2008, Fodor and Kispeter 2014). While the effect of family policies on the length of time women take from work is undeniable (Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow 2009), other factors are also significant, such as the labor market structure or the taxation system (Hegewisch and Gornick 2011, 124). Furthermore, a growing body of literature suggests that cultural factors also have an important role in shaping women`s choices (Pfau-Effinger 2014). For example in Hungary, public discourse has strongly incorporated the notion – endorsed by a body of widely publicized psychological research - that it is best for a child to be taken care of by their mother full-time (Blaskó 2011, 160; Haney 2002, 96).

Despite the persistence of Hungary's socialist legacy, recent changes in the system of family policies have enabled parents to return to work once their child is 6 months old and still receive the income-based benefit payments they were entitled to during their leave ("Gyermekgondozási díj"), thus providing powerful financial motivation for women - primarily those previously employed in well-paying positions - to return to work earlier. Even though these new provisions suggest that an early return to work, at least for middle-class women, is encouraged by the state, recent media accounts have shown that the number of women staying at home for the full leave term has actually grown since their introduction (EF 2016; Farkas 2016). While after 6 months, men can also take leave on equal terms with women, only a small group of men choose to do so (approximately 0,9% in 2010). Apart from traditional gender roles, probably the 18% wage gap between men and women is a strong contributor to this tendency (Linder, 2010). Therefore, my thesis analyzes parental leave policies as directly shaping women's experiences rather than men's.

To provide a deeper understanding of the Hungarian context where only a minority of mothers of young children are engaged in paid labor, in this thesis I examine how Hungarian women who end their parental leave early justify their decision and how it shapes their experiences of motherhood.

To answer my research question, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 Hungarian mothers who recently – in the past three years - returned to work before the third birthday of their child. In recruiting my research sample, my aim was to achieve diversity, and my primary principle was to recruit participants with diverse educational qualifications. Finally, 9 of the 16 women were university graduates, while 6 had completed secondary education and 1 interviewee had completed a secondary vocational course which does not provide a high school

diploma. This composition is to a certain extent a reflection of the greater statistical probability of women who were initially in a better position on the labor market to return to work earlier, as women with lower education are more likely to stay at home for the full three years (Central Statistical Office 2015, 1). Nevertheless, to achieve a fuller picture of decisions related to maternal employment, future research would have to include the experiences of more women who do not have a secondary school diploma. In addition, my study did not focus on race, however a larger-scale study would also have to pay consideration to the powerful way in which belonging to a minority shapes the work-related experiences of mothers.

My thesis will engage with 4 major bodies of and I will present these in my literature review section as follows. I start by reviewing articles which examine the most important influences on maternal employment. Then, I will turn to the effect of one such influence, parental leave policies, in particular the detrimental effect of extended leaves on women`s employment. Extended leaves are deeply embedded in Hungary`s socialist past, which is why I then review related research on gender and work in post-socialist Hungary. Finally, a review of scholarship on the ideologies of motherhood serves to demonstrate the expectations influencing and shaping women`s experiences globally.

My first analytical chapter (4.1) centers around women`s needs and well-being, because this was a significant consideration for women in returning to work early. Previous research has documented the assumption that women return to work primarily because of financial reasons (Baxter 2008, 141), and in the Hungarian context, the need for the female partner`s salary has been found a widely accepted reason for women`s return to work (Michon 2015, 191). My research findings partly support this assumption, because for half of the women in my sample, money was, in various ways, an important –although often not sole- motivation to return to work. However, I

found that more significantly, almost all women emphasized how work contributed to their well-being, citing work enjoyment and adult company as aspects of work that they appreciated very much. I argue that this centrality of women's well-being and needs is significant because gendered expectations require mothers of very young children to find sole fulfilment in caring for their children and putting their own needs behind (Rich [1976] 1997; Hays 1996; DiQuinzio 1999; Hagar 2010). In the Hungarian context, the socialist legacy of the "good mother" is also linked to full-time maternal availability for children (Haney 2002, 134), at least during the early years of the child, even if full-time employment was and still is the norm for mothers of older children. Working mothers in my study are seemingly successful in renegotiating the rigid split of full-time motherhood in the early years, and full-time employment combined with part-time motherhood later on, nevertheless, many interviewees complained about the harsh criticism they faced concerning their employment.

Based on my research findings, I reflect on recent policy changes, arguing that the opportunity to take advantage of income-based benefit while returning to work after six months has not been successful at attracting a significant number of women to the labor market because many women in its middle-class target group are not primarily motivated to return to work for money alone, as the existing system of parental benefits already provides them with a reasonable income-replacement. At the same time, women who are in real financial need fall outside of the policies' scope and are thus not able to benefit from it. However, even women who did not experience financial pressure to work appreciated earning a salary, and some felt that it contributed to their self-esteem, particularly in contrast to care work, which many interviewees felt was not as valued.

In my second analytical chapter (4.2), I analyze how mothers in my study conceptualized their children`s needs, which they complexly linked to their own employment and well-being. They saw institutional daycare as contributing significantly to their child`s development, and particularly emphasized two benefits: peer company and increased mental stimulation, which is remarkably similar to the factors many of the interviewees felt were also important to their own well-being. The fact that interviewees emphasized their appreciation of daycare was in strong contrast to the distrust towards public nurseries expressed by stay-at-home mothers in Blaskó`s study (2011). Most mothers also rejected psychological discourses stressing the importance of full-time maternal care in the early years of the child cited by stay-at home mothers in Blaskó`s (2011). Although they still embraced the importance of a strong mother-child bond, they did not see their full-time presence as a prerequisite for it. Rather, many of them felt that the break from care duties which employment provided helped them be better, more intense mothers (Hays 1996), engaging in practices of attachment parenting such as long-term breastfeeding and co-sleeping, or spending `quality time` with their children after work.

Before elaborating this core analytical part of my thesis, I will first review related literature and provide an overview of my interview sample and methodological approach to conducting this research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following subsections, I will review four important bodies of work on which my study builds. These are mainly scholarly articles and books written by international and Hungarian researchers. While my review focuses on the most current studies available, I also review some seminal works from the past decades. In the section analyzing socialist legacies in the Hungarian family policy system, I also include a short factual description of the main parental benefits available and their historic evolution to provide context on current regulations for my ensuing analysis.

2.1 Factors Influencing Mothers' Decisions Related to Employment

Women's participation in the labor market is significant because of its effect on women's economic and mental well-being, while absence from the labor market and dependency from a male breadwinner makes women vulnerable if their partner ceases to provide for them (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 19). In the period since World War II, women's employment rates have grown significantly in industrialized nations, but major inequalities still exist (Hennig, Gatermann and Hägglund, 2012, 502). While gender stratification in the labor market is undeniable, research has suggested that the effect of motherhood is even more significant on the employment of women than gender (Boeckmann, Misra and Budig 2014).

A substantial body of literature documents the negative effect of parenthood on women's employment situation. When a couple's first child is born, most new parents experience a shift to a more traditional gendered division of labor, even if they previously adhered to egalitarian views (Bühlmann, Elcheroth, Tettamanti 2010). Usually it is women who take leave from work (Hennig,

Gatermann and Hägglund, 2012, 503), which often contributes to the long-term unequal distribution of unpaid work, though the extent of this has been shown to vary depending on the national (policy) context (Hook 2010).

Family policies are an important tool for the state to help parents combine childrearing and work, and present an opportunity to promote gender equality. Policies shape women's choices by providing financial incentives and deterrents (Adema, Clarke and Frey 2016, 512), as documented by a vast body of scholarship (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 56; Mandel 2012; Korpi, Ferrarini and Englund 2013). Policies aiming to help combine childrearing and paid work can be grouped into various categories depending on how they try to achieve their goal. For example, Pettit and Hook (2009, 56) categorize them into two groups from the aspect of labor market integration, "mechanisms of inclusion" which support women's (re-)entry in the labor market, such as public childcare facilities, and "mechanisms of exclusion" which alleviate the tension between paid work and childrearing by enabling them to at least temporarily exit the labor market, for example parental leave. The use of these mechanisms are an important indicator of what Marianne Kremer coins the 'ideals of care'. This cultural dimension embedded in policy frameworks channels expectations concerning what is perceived as good care, where it should be carried out and who should be performing it (Kremer 2007, 71).

Many welfare states strive to de-familiarize care work, meaning that, to a varying degree, the state takes over care work from families (Den Dulk and Peper 2016, 301), while others follow a policy route of "familisation" where care work is carried out within the family (Michoń 2015, 183). Nevertheless, the actual effect of family policies is rather complex and is determined for example, by the local context and by the nature of the policy (Pettit, Hook Hagan 2009, 170), as well as by "social and demographic groups" (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 56).

In addition to the complex effect of family policies, studies have shown that other factors also shape women's choices in a powerful way. It is important to consider that family policies, including leave policies, interact with other factors such as taxation (Hegewisch and Gornick 2011, 124). In addition, a growing body of scholarship is now exploring how cultural factors also shape women's employment decisions and opportunities (Traute and Pfau-Effinger 2006; Pfau-Effinger 2005; 2012; 2014; Kremer 2007; Hummelsheim and Hirschle 2010; Boeckmann, Misra and Budig 2014). In her article analyzing the vast differences in EU employment rates for women with children under the age of 3, Pfau-Effinger (2014, 5) conceptualizes these differences as the result of an intricate interplay between various factors related to culture, institutions, society and the economy. According to her, consideration to the role of culture would also explain some unexpected outcomes, such as the low number of Finnish mothers of children under 3 who are in paid employment, despite the wide availability of state childcare facilities (6). To illustrate her point, she explains that in certain countries, a "good childhood" is synonymous with maternal care in the home, while other countries prioritize the benefits of peer company for small children, thus powerfully shaping women's employment decisions (3).

Another suggestion was put forward by Catherine Hakim (2003) in a much-criticized theory, namely that individual preferences determine how women prioritize care work and employment, and it is these individual choices which primarily affect women's decisions. However, this theory has received little support and has been rejected for not taking into account various constraints which can affect women in very different ways (McRae 2003; Walters 2005; James 2008).

In this section, I have pointed towards the negative effect of parenthood on women's position in the labor market and the most important factors which have been suggested to influence

mothers' employment: state policies, cultural factors and individual choice. In the following section, I will examine the effects of parental leave on mothers' employment and highlight the detrimental effects of extended parental leaves.

2.2 Effects of (Extended) Parental Leaves

Parental leave is one of the most significant public policy tools to help parents care for a new family member while maintaining economic stability. This is achieved through job protection as well as income-replacement for time spent away from the labor market (Ray, Gornick and Schmitt 2010). There are various systems of parental leave, guaranteeing very different rights and material support. For example, in the United States, the 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) introduced a 12-week job-guaranteed unpaid parental leave (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 3). All other OECD countries provide a paid and job-protected parental leave of at least 12 weeks (Willem, Clarke and Frey 2016, 35). On the other end of the scale, the Czech Republic provides a state-subsidized parental leave of up to 4 years ("Maternity leave and parental benefits."). The OECD average for paid maternity and parental leave is 1 year (Willem, Clarke and Frey 2016, 35), which is an enormous increase from the OECD average of 17 weeks in 1970 (Farré 2016, 48). These widely differing systems have an important effect on equality in the domestic sphere (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 2), and in the labor market (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 3).

While the purpose of parental leave is to help combine care work with paid work, it does so by temporarily removing the parent - usually the mother- from the labor market, thus acting as an exclusionary mechanism (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 56). However, this is not necessarily a

problem: international research demonstrates that a well-chosen length of parental leave can in fact improve women's labor market participation. For example, parental leave is often tied to previous employment, meaning that on the short term it incentivizes women to search for and maintain a job before they give birth. Another long-term benefit is its potential to strengthen the woman's attachment to her employer, meaning that her accumulated work experience is not lost - which in turn has a positive effect on wages and work hours (Adema, Clarke and Frey 2016, 38).

However, if parental leave is too short, it could encourage women to leave their jobs altogether (Farré 2016, 51), thus increasing their vulnerability in the labor market and beyond. On the other hand, an extended absence from the labor market can strengthen traditional gender roles in paid and care work and worsen already existing gender inequalities, particularly if the time spent on leave exceeds a year (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 3). Women are at a disadvantage when they return to work because the skills they gain during parental leave are typically not considered useful in the job market, while men continue to accrue valuable experience (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 3). The situation is exacerbated by employers who discriminate against women because of their potential to leave the job for a lengthy leave (Farre 2016, 53). This discrimination manifests itself in various areas such as hiring and promotion (Adema, Clarke and Frey 2016, 38). This "motherhood penalty" also shows in women's wages (Avellar and Smock 2003, Staff and Mortimer 2012, Anderson, Binder and Krause 2012), and research suggests that the motherhood wage penalty could be larger in countries where parental leave is longer, even if the family policy system is seemingly much more supportive to childrearing (Gangl and Ziefle 2009).

In this section, I have reviewed the effects of parental leave, with particular attention to the detrimental effects of lengthy parental leaves due to its relevance in the Hungarian context. In the next section, I will present and analyze the Hungarian context, describing first the system of family

benefits and childcare institutions, then looking back at the development of parental leave during socialism and its implications for gender equality, and finally reviewing literature on gender and work in contemporary post-socialist Hungary.

2.3 Socialist Legacies in the Hungarian Family Policy System

The Hungarian family policy system enables and supports small children to be taken care of in the home by offering a job-guaranteed leave until the third birthday of the child. During this leave, parents can claim the following financial benefits, according to the governmental portal, ugyintezes.magyarorszag.hu: Infant care allowance (“Csecsemőgondozási díj”, CSED) is available exclusively to mothers and is based on previous employment. It provides payments replacing 70% of previous average earnings for 168 days. When the entitlement to CSED expires, parents can choose between two types of benefits (income-based and flat-rate), both of which can be claimed by mothers or fathers. A major change instituted gradually since 2014 is that parents are now able to be employed in a full-time job while claiming either of them. First, this option was available only after the first birthday of the child (ado.hu), but since 2016 it has been available from 6 months on (HVG, 2016). The first option, open to previously employed parents is the income-based childcare allowance (“Gyermekgondozási díj”, GYED). Similarly to the infant care allowance, it replaces 70% of the previous average income, however its amount is capped at 70% of the minimum wage x 2. Its term starts at the end of the CSED entitlement and can be claimed until the second birthday of the child. For parents who were not previously employed or whose entitlement to GYED has expired after the second birthday of the child, a flat-rate childcare allowance (“Gyermekgondozást segítő ellátás”, GYES) is available in an amount equivalent to the

minimum amount of old-age pension, currently 28 500 HUF. Entitlement lasts until the third birthday of the child (“Gyermekgondozást segítő ellátás”).

According to a recent study (Kapitány and Makay n.d.), very few children under 2 are enrolled in nurseries, even though state nurseries usually take children in from 20 weeks, the reason for this being that children under three are assumed to be taken care of in the home (par. 1). In 2013, 80% of children in nurseries were older than 2. Even above that age, daycare is not a popular option, because societal pressure encourages women to stay at home with their young children. In total, only about 8% of children under 3 were enrolled in a public nursery (par. 2).

The contemporary system of family policies has its roots in state socialism and although specific provisions have changed, its basics are the same and have been shaping Hungarian societal expectations towards motherhood and the distribution of care work for decades. The flat-rate benefit GYES introduced in 1967 was groundbreaking in providing Hungarian women with the opportunity to take extended paid leaves following childbirth (Zimmerman 2010, 9). Its introduction was due to various factors: tensions caused by the sudden mass incorporation of women in the workforce following World War II (Zimmerman 2010, 3), the scarcity of childcare facilities (5), declining birthrates (Haney 2002, 92), an oversupply of workers (93), a new era of economic thinking centered around productivity (94), and an emerging body of psychological work stressing the crucial importance of mothers in child development (95). All of these together contributed to the introduction of GYES and the creation of a new Hungarian maternalist welfare system (97) based on mothers as a group of women with special needs. The effect of GYES on gender equality was ambiguous: it ensured that women could return to their workplace, however it did nothing to involve men more in care work (Göndör 2012, 69 citing Rózsa, 1977, 535), making it an “institutional blessing on the unequal distribution of unpaid work” (Zimmerman

2010, 11). In 1985, the flat-rate GYES was complemented with an income-based benefit, GYED, in order to encourage middle-class mothers to take longer parental leaves (Gal and Kligman 2000, 290; Haney 2002, 178).

The concerns about the effect of the Hungarian system of parental leaves on gender equality in the labor market and in the home are still very much relevant today, as most women continue to stay at home for the full parental leave entitlement. Research documents the various ways in which women's position on the labor market suffers due to their lengthy absence: for example, research demonstrates an 8- 10% wage penalty for women who stay at home for 3,7 years (Bálint and Köllő 2008, 38) and has established motherhood as an important disadvantage in recruitment, hiring and promotion for professional women (Christy Glass and Eva Fodor 2011). Further, while many women have been found to perform some paid work during their lengthy parental leave, widespread discrimination coupled with the scarcity of part-time positions marginalizes women by channeling them towards more flexible, but poorly paid jobs for which they are overqualified (Fodor and Kispéter, 2014).

In my thesis, I will examine and analyze the recent change in policies supporting women who decide to return to work earlier, which seems like a marked change compared to the post-socialist welfare policies explored by Fodor and Kispéter (2014, 384). As their article explains, after state socialism ended, welfare policies primarily encouraged women to leave the workforce. While there are many terms used to describe this tendency of relegating women into unpaid care work, Christy Glass and Éva Fodor (2007, 325) use the term “public maternalism” to describe the Hungarian context.

The persistent significance of socialist legacies is supported by certain commonalities among post-socialist countries, even if research also points out the many differences between these

states (Szelewa and Polakowski 2008, 115 and Fodor, Glass, Kawachi, and Popescu 2002, 477). For example, post-socialist countries show similarly low numbers of mothers with young children in paid employment: within the European Union, it is Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic which have the lowest employment rates for mothers with children under 6. On the other hand, in the same countries, employment rates double when children exceed this age (Michoń 2015, 190). According to Piotr Michoń, this reflects the powerful gendered tension faced by women who have inherited a socialist legacy of commitment to participating in paid work while also feeling strong societal pressure to provide full-time maternal care to young children in the home (Michoń 2015, 193). Other commonalities among post-socialist countries include a lack of part-time work (Michoń 2015, 191) and the scarcity of childcare institutions (Boje and Ejrnaes 2012, 595).

2.4 Motherhood as a Social Construct

In the previous sections of this literature review, I have walked through sociological literature analyzing the importance of motherhood to women's employment, and the effect of extended parental leave in an international perspective and then in the context of post-socialist Hungary. In the following, final section I turn to feminist theory on motherhood. Although this conceptual body of knowledge is different in nature from the previous literature I have discussed, I believe that they complement each other well, helping to interpret social phenomena otherwise difficult to understand. In her review of research on motherhood in the 1990s, Teresa Arendell (2000, 1193) laments on the lack of integration between theoretical and empirical research on motherhood. My thesis is a humble attempt to integrate these two approaches.

Traditionally, women's maternal instincts have been said to grant them with certain qualities by nature, including tenderness, selflessness, and a capacity for unconditional love. This biological determinism has been refuted by over 4 decades of feminist scholarship arguing that even though certain biological functions related to motherhood are exclusive to women, an overwhelming portion of what is understood as instinctual and natural to mothers is in fact a social construct (Rich [1976] 1997; Hays 1996; DiQuinzio 1999). To define this non-biological part of motherhood - coined by Adrienne Rich the "institution of motherhood" ([1976] 1997, 13) - Teresa Arendell seeks to establish a common theme among feminist research and defines mothering as "the social practices of nurturing and caring for dependent children" (2000, 1192). While this definition is gender-neutral, the social reality of mothering is certainly not: mothering activities are mostly carried out by women and have powerful ties with notions of womanhood - as Arendell points out, femininity and motherhood are mutually constructive (1192).

As a social construct, motherhood is not only gendered, it is also raced and classed. A helpful concept set out by Arendell illustrating this point in an earlier working paper (1999) is hegemonic motherhood, which describes a dominant ideal of the 'good mother': a white, middle-class, stay-at-home mother in a monogamous heterosexual marriage where the husband provides or at least controls finances (3), thus remaining subordinate to hegemonic masculinity (4). All other mothers - such as employed, homosexual, minority or mothers - are according to Arendell subject to deviancy discourses, a type of social control setting differing expectations and ideologies for these mothers (4).

A fundamental part of hegemonic motherhood is to conform to practices of intensive mothering (Arendell 1999, 4), an ideology conceptualized by Sharon Hays (1996). According to Hays, the ideology of intensive motherhood is a socially constructed "gendered model" (Hays

1996: X) which prescribes how mothers should take care of their children. Hays identifies 3 basic requirements (8) which together form a standard of good mothering by which mothers assess themselves and others: (i) children should have a primary carer, preferably the mother, or another woman in the time she is away; (ii) appropriate child-rearing is “child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive and financially expensive” (8); and finally (iii), referring to Viviana Zelizer’s 1985 book, Hays describes children as “priceless”: their value is morally so high that it is immeasurable. This ideology is so widespread that according to Hays, working mothers and stay-at-home mothers are both very much committed to it. (Hays 1996, 146) Although researchers have disagreed on this point, many (Blair-Loy 2001, Johnston and Swanson 2006, Uttal 1996), although not all (Dow 2015) researchers concur that intensive mothering as the dominant, although not sole ideology is a point of reference for mothers even if they reject it. More recently, the practices of “attachment parenting”, a parenting philosophy advocating for the importance of close physical contact and attachment between mother and child through practices such as long-term breastfeeding, co-sleeping and babywearing, have been described as an intensified version of intensive parenting (Johnston and Swanson 2007, 448).

The “institution of motherhood” is temporally and geographically highly situated. For example, Sharon Hays’ (1996, 19-50) excellent chapter on changing parenting ideologies shows how idealized parenting practices have gradually shifted from beating and ignoring the child in the Middle Ages (Hays 1996, 23) to today’s dominant ideology of intensive mothering in the US. Geographically, the literature presented in this section is mostly written by Western, primarily US theorists and reflects on motherhood in that context. I have chosen this body of literature because there is little scholarship specifically dealing with ideologies of motherhood in the Hungarian context. However, the ideology of intensive mothering is certainly not unique to the US context,

as studies have identified in the Australian context (Maher and Saugeres 2007) and in the United Kingdom as well (Stirrup, Duncombe and Sandford 2015). Although intensive mothering appears powerfully in my research, as well as in my analysis, I am also aware of the contextual differences between the United States and Hungary. One such factor is Hungary`s socialist past and the ongoing legacies I have presented in the previous section. Still, even in socialist ideals of motherhood, universal traits eerily appear. For example, Haney`s description of the good socialist mother (Haney 2002, 134-5) - stay-at-home, married, white - resonates powerfully with the requirements of hegemonic motherhood in the United States.

3. METHODOLOGY

To answer my research question, I chose semi-structured in-depth interviews because it particularly lends itself to learning more about the complexities of challenging life events such as the decision to return to work following an extended parental leave. As Valerie Yow explains in the introduction to her manual on the methodology of oral history, “the recorded in-depth interview can offer answers to questions that no other methodology can provide” (Yow 2005, 9). According to her, in-depth interviews give us the opportunity to gain a unique insight into the background of complex decisions which could otherwise remain hidden (9), and it is this potential of the in-depth interview which I hope to leverage in my study.

While recruiting interviewees, my aim was to establish a study sample from a varied background. 9 respondents were university graduates, 6 had high school diplomas and 1 interviewee completed a vocational secondary course. 10 interviewees worked in full-time jobs, 4 in part-time (6 hour) positions and 1 in a flexible work arrangement. One woman was currently on maternity leave, but before the birth of her second child, she had worked full time. Interviewees conducted a wide range of blue-, pink-, and white-collar jobs, and not all women carried out work according to their qualifications. For example, several university graduates worked in jobs not requiring tertiary studies. 10 of my respondents had one child, 2 women had two and 4 had three or more children. Youngest children were aged 7 months to 26 months at the time when the interviewees ended their parental leave. 9 of my interviewees were located in Budapest, while 7 lived outside of the capital: among them 6 lived in rural towns and one interviewee in a village.

Despite my aim to achieve socioeconomic diversity, I consider it a limitation of my study that I was not able to interview more women with lower than secondary educational qualifications. Further, a much larger and more diverse sample would be necessary to provide an intersectional

analysis on the topic. To achieve a fuller picture of women's employment motivations, it would be crucial to include the experiences of Roma women and women of less privileged socioeconomic status.

My interview questions developed during the course of the research project, and I incorporated additional questions as I identified common topics and patterns during the interview process. The initial set of questions as well as ones that I later added are attached to this thesis as an appendix. My questions focused on the youngest child of interviewees with whom they had returned to work, but interviewees who had several children inevitably reflected on their experiences in relation to siblings and these responses are also incorporated in my analysis.

At first, I tried to recruit interviewees through friends and family, however most people I could get in touch with were university-educated women working in Budapest. In my attempt to broaden my social and geographical sources, I posted a short description of my research project in several Facebook groups aimed at mothers, and got a number of answers from members who volunteered to share their experiences with me. I recruited 7 interviewees from the group “Working Moms` Community - Kisbabák és totyogók anyukái a munka világában¹” [Working Moms` Community - Mothers of babies and toddlers in the world of work], a group established for mothers who are currently working or planning to return to work as a virtual space to share experiences, ideas and support. I found two participants in “Közelbaba²” [Closebaby], a Facebook group belonging to an Eger-based community of parents interested in environmentally sustainable living and childrearing and attachment parenting methods, and one interviewee in “Kötődő csevegő³”

1 <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=working%20moms%27%20community%20-%20kisbab%C3%A1k%20%C3%A9s%20totyog%C3%B3k%20anyuk%C3%A1i%20a%20munka%20vil%C3%A1g%C3%A1ban>

2 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/260741503943489/>

3 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1536853193246901/>

[Attachment Chat-group], a Facebook group where members interested in attachment parenting can chat about related topics. A further two participants were recruited when I posted a short description of my research project as a comment to an article entitled “How long “should” one and can one stay on parental leave? There is no right answer for everyone” [Mennyi ideig “kell” és lehet gyesen maradni? – Mindenkinek máshol van a saját igazsága] by Szilvia Gyurkó on the Facebook site “WMN” (Gyurkó 2017). One woman who I interviewed did not fit into my interview sample because she had returned to work longer than 3 years ago, however she told me - somewhat critically - about an acquaintance who, in her point of view, had returned to work very early and therefore I contacted and interviewed her.

7 interviews were carried out in person, at interviewees` workplaces, or a quiet location such as a café or the university library. 9 interviews were arranged online, mostly through the video calling function of Facebook, as it was more convenient for interviewees, all of whom had busy schedules between work and family life. I felt that interviewees were very open and willing to share their experiences, and conversations were relaxed and flowed well. The fact that I also have a young child helped in providing opportunity for warm-up conversations and a sense of commonality.

In considering my positionality as a researcher, Binaya Subedi`s article “Theorizing a ‘halfie’ researcher’s identity in transnational fieldwork” (2006) was a very useful starting point. In this self-reflexive article, Subedi explains how she realized that she was at the same time a partial outsider, as well as a partial insider in respect to her interviewees, and how she navigated these two statuses. Similarly to Subedi, I am a partial insider because I am the mother of a 2,5-year-old daughter and I ended my parental leave relatively early, after 15 months. Further, the way I planned my parental leave was heavily influenced by the same Hungarian family policy regulations and I

experience the same social, political, and economic climate and related beliefs and expectations as my interviewees. However, despite this connection with interviewees, I still consider myself a partial outsider. On the one hand, paid employment may pose very different challenges from what I expect at the moment, and on the other hand, I wish to remain aware that motherhood cannot be assumed a universal experience and even within the Hungarian context, women's circumstances could vary greatly from mine and from each other's.

Ruth Behar's chapter "The Vulnerable Observer" (1996) was also extremely helpful in understanding my position as a subjective researcher. Her work convincingly argues that if one is careful to maintain self-reflexivity, subjectivity - rather than posing a problem - can help the researcher be a more emphatic listener, and ultimately to achieve a deeper understanding of material thus gained. This was an important insight to me, because it was precisely the strong emotional response I experienced during my choice to pursue an M.A. at CEU that sparked my passion to learn more about how other Hungarian women end their maternity leave. During the interview process, I found that interviewees supplied me not only with useful material research for this thesis, but they also provided me with valuable advice, role models and a sense of companionship through shared experiences on a broader level. I believe – and agree with Cameron Macdonald (2013) - that it is this sharing of experiences and sense of solidarity that is vital for counteracting the isolation that many mothers on lengthy parental leaves experience and to finding useful systemic tools for combining work and childrearing.

As my personal involvement in the issues of motherhood and work, I also wish to remain aware of my own position of privilege as a white, middle-class, educated and stably employed woman, having many advantages that other women do not have access to. I believe that this is a positionality that I can be aware of, but cannot completely escape. Therefore, as Adrienne Rich so

eloquently put it, “what any writer hopes - and knows - is that others like her, with different training, background and tools, are putting together other parts of this immense half-buried mosaic in the shape of a woman’s face” (Rich [1976] 1997, 17).

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Mothers Own Needs Do Count: Working Women's Negotiation of their Own Needs

In this chapter, I present and analyze interviewees' reflections on how their participation in paid work contributes to their well-being, cited by women as an important reason for returning to work. Although financial motivations are often assumed to motivate mothers to choose employment rather than full-time motherhood, I find that in my sample, women talked more about how employment enhanced their well-being in other ways, in particular mentioning the joy which they found in their work activity or the adult companionship they gained after a lengthy period of social isolation. I argue that these women's openness about the importance of their own needs is significant because of gendered expectations for mothers to give up their own needs and desires, as documented by a vast body of Western feminist scholarship, and shaped by the Hungarian context. Although women in this study renegotiate the traditional model of the three-year parental leave and gendered expectations attached to it, the criticism many interviewees reported reflects their persistence and strength, despite changing policies. These policy changes enable women to take advantage of income-based benefit while returning to work after six months, however have so far not encouraged a great number of women to return early. Based on my research, I argue that it is the relatively privileged position of many of my interviewees as well as the reasonable income-replacement which the policy system ensures that contribute to the fact that many of these women's are able to pursue work for their own well-being rather than due to financial pressures. However, even for the women who did not feel money was an important factor in their employment, several explained how earning a salary contributed to their well-being by enhancing their self-esteem and conferring them with a feeling of independence.

The notion that financial pressure is the most widely accepted reason for a woman's employment (Michoń 2015, 191) is not unique to Hungary. An Australian study describes how money is assumed a primary motivation for women returning to work early, even if in reality, their decision is the result of a complex set of factors (Baxter 2008, 141). In her study examining the impact of money on Australian women's parental leave length entitled "Is money the main reason mothers return to work after childbearing?", Jennifer Baxter (2008, 146) found that financial motivations were indeed often cited by women, however usually they were mentioned as only one component of a complex set of reasons leading a woman to return to work, along with factors such as work enjoyment or the desire to retain work skills.

Among my research sample, 8 women said that money was an important factor in their return to work and 8 women said that financial motivations were not significant. Similarly to their Australian counterparts, few interviewees mentioned money as the only reason for their employment, rather positioning their decision as a composite of various interrelated factors. Edina, a mother of one whose salary was a welcome, but not crucial addition to their family budget, explained how for her, work enjoyment tipped the balance towards employment. She said: "Because I like to work, I think my attitude is absolutely different. If I didn't like to work, if I didn't enjoy my work, I would stay at home for the full three years as well, if I didn't like what I was doing. So I don't think money is enough of a motivation, because there are other things as well."⁴⁵ While Edina's salary was undoubtedly appreciated, for her it was only coupled with her enthusiasm for her job that it seemed worthwhile to return to work. Although the additional income was certainly a plus, it was only one contributing factor in her decision, and not even the most important one.

4 Interview with Edina on April 21, 2017

5 All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.

Although half of the women in this study positioned money as an important reason to choose employment over full-time motherhood, it was the non-material benefits which almost all women emphasized, similarly to Edina. Nearly all women reported that employment contributed to their employment in significant ways, predominantly through the joy they experienced in their work as well as the adult company which many interviewees missed acutely while they were on parental leave. I argue that this acknowledgment of women's own needs is significant because of its tension with traditional gendered expectations towards mothers.

Mothers are often assumed and expected to prioritize their children's needs over their own, a notion which has been intensely critiqued by feminist theorists over past decades. In a recent and very personal introspection on her struggles with motherhood, Israeli academic Tamar Hagar (2010, 36) sharply positions this requirement as one of the basic tenets of the social construct of motherhood. Drawing from Adrienne Rich's seminal book on motherhood ([1976] 1997, 22) of over 3 decades earlier, she explains that society expects mothers to let go of their own identity and desires in order to devote themselves fully to their children's needs. However, according to Hagar, the real experiences of mothers are quite different from this ideal which serves the subordination of women (36). The following interview excerpt shows how deeply this loss of identity affected a young mother, Orsi: "After the first year, I realized that if something doesn't happen soon, and I can't be an adult again, I will go crazy. (...) I am much more balanced now that I have returned to work, and I am not only Hanna's⁶ mother, but Orsi as well. You sort of get your identity back, (...) from when she was born, I was only her mother and I ceased to exist."⁷ Orsi felt that during her time at home, she was stripped of her previous, adult identity and had to dedicate herself fully to her new role as a mother. Feeling that she could not fit this mold which full-time motherhood

⁶ Pseudonym.

⁷ Interview with Orsi on April 28, 2017

required from her, she was relieved to return to work. Her employment helped her regain a lost part of herself, thus enhancing her well-being.

In Orsi's case, work complemented her motherhood. Often however, employment and motherhood are assumed to conflict, partly because motherhood and employment are both posited as requiring full dedication (Blair-Loy 2001, 690) and further, because motherhood and work, belonging respectively to the private and public sphere, are supposed to operate on not only distinct, but also conflicting logics (Hays 1996, 33). This ideological separation, according to Sharon Hays (1996) relegates women to the home, making them "responsible for unselfish nurturing while men are responsible for self-interested profit-maximization" (175) in the public sphere of work. In addition, Hays argues that the current dominant ideology of intensive mothering puts particular pressure on mothers to only consider what is best for their child (8).

However, this opposition between work and motherhood is artificial, as women do work, in paid employment or performing unpaid tasks in the home (Crittenden 2001, 47). Nevertheless, gendered expectations often require women to conduct ideological work to negotiate the seeming incompatibility between their identity as workers and mothers. For example, as Hays (1996, 143) explains, many of the women in her study enjoy their work and are not forced into employment, nevertheless they feel ambiguous about their decision and thus seek to demonstrate that they are equally committed to intensive mothering as their stay-at-home counterparts, ultimately conceptualizing their employment as benefitting their child (Hays 1996, 146). In a recent study, Karen Christopher (2012) described a "new" idea, namely that mother's own needs are important to them as well. In her study, rather than complying with the dominant intensive mothering ideology, interviewees took an "extensive approach", meaning that they adopted a managerial role as mothers, delegating childcare tasks to childminders and assuming responsibility for their

outcome (85). These women saw themselves as good mothers, even though they did not adhere to the requirements of the dominant childrearing ideology (83). In addition, they described their employment as an important part of their own identity, something that was primarily important to them rather than an activity ultimately geared at the well-being of their child (87). In my study, I argue that most women do strongly adhere to an intensive mothering ideology (which I will discuss in detail in chapter 4.2). However similarly to the women in Christopher`s study, and contrarily to women in Hays` study, working mothers I interviewed ultimately justified their work engagement as important to their own identity and well-being. Even if they also conceptualized their employment as benefitting their child, their own well-being was nevertheless a primary consideration.

In the following section, my purpose is to show the real and multi-faceted way in which participation in paid employment contributes to the well-being of interviewees in my study. During the interview process, it was striking to notice how many women spoke about their work with passion and enthusiasm. “My work is my hobby” and “this is my dream job” were phrases that several interviewees used with apparent pride. Before the interviews, I had braced myself to listen to many complaints about the difficulty of combining work and motherhood, but instead I was surprised by an air of positivity which provided for intensely enjoyable interview experiences. In hindsight, it is perhaps unsurprising that in a country where only 13,4% (OECD 2014) of women with young children return to work, it is mostly those who are favorably employed in jobs they enjoy who go against societal expectations and return to work early.

Kriszta, a mother of five children initially worked as a manager`s assistant. She enjoyed her busy job very much, however after the birth of her first child, she would only have been taken back as a receptionist. Rather than pursuing this option, she instead opened a shop selling

needlework equipment, where she returned only a few weeks after giving birth to her youngest two children: “I love my [5] children, I really do, but my work is my hobby, and that’s such a great thing for me, I love these shitty buttons, I buy them by the ton and could put a button on everything, I knit and crochet for my girls continuously and I put it on our (Facebook) page, too.”⁸ Although Kriszta admitted that she chose this job because she expected that no employer would take her on as a mother of five, nevertheless her account shows that for her, the business she started is a form of recreation. In fact, noticeably work and home are not separate spheres; rather needlework appears as a joyous activity connected to both “worlds”. She explained that she had debated closing the shop several times with her husband because of the immense amount of work and relatively small gains. “What would I do?” she asked rhetorically, “More housework?” They had always concluded that the shop was something that Kriszta needed to keep up for her own well-being.

Eszter, a mother of two, worked almost continuously throughout her pregnancies and returned to work in her helping profession in a flexible schedule a few months after her children were born. After her first child was born, work provided her with a welcome escape from a difficult marriage and the shock of first-time motherhood. The only time she could “truly relax”, she explained, was when she was working and she felt very lucky to have a job that was also her hobby. Apart from the relationship difficulties she faced with her partner, Eszter also felt that motherhood presented her with a new set of challenges and expectations from her family that were difficult to manage.⁹ Eszter’s account of new motherhood mirrors Hays’ critique of intensive mothering ideology, which makes mothers as the primary caregiver of children feel “a little guilty, a bit inadequate, and somewhat ambivalent about their position” (Hays 1996, 151). For her, work meant that she could let go of her worries and insecurities stemming from the overwhelming task of

⁸ Interview with Kriszta, April 20, 2017

⁹ Interview with Eszter April 20, 2017

intensive mothering for some time and do something for herself which helped her feel skilled and content.

The Hungarian context also shapes the experiences of mothers in my study powerfully. Firstly, the long-standing possibility of a 3-year parental leave seems to have an important effect on women's choices, given that over 86% Hungarian women take advantage of the opportunity to be absent from the labor market during this time (OECD 2014). Another post-socialist legacy presents itself in the fact that after the end of the maximum term of parental leave is up, most women reenter the labor market full-time. As Susan Zimmerman (2010, 4) points out, although women's participation in the labor market was the norm during socialism, this did not ensure gender equality in the labor market, nor in the home. However, it did set the cultural expectation (Pfau-Effinger 2014) that during the first few years of a child's life, women should take care of them in the home, while later, they would be engaged in full-time positions on the labor market skillfully juggling work and care duties as "brave victims" (Gal and Kligman 2000, 53). This arrangement meant that women often experienced the years of parental leave as a time of intense isolation which they did not have- to deal with before, nor after their return to work. According to Zimmerman (2010, 15), the terms "GYES depression" or "GYES illness" were employed in public discourse to describe the symptoms of mother on parental leave who often felt under-stimulated and trapped during their extended leave, even if young women were also reproached by older generations for not appreciating their chance to stay at home with their child during this time.

This feeling of isolation and understimulation during parental leave and the appreciation of the adult companionship provided by work was mentioned by nearly all women, to varying degrees. Adrienn, a highly qualified mother deeply engaged in her scientific career was unpleasantly surprised at how acutely it affected her. Previously, she explained, she had worked

long hours and imagined herself as appreciating the contrast of a quiet time at home. Instead, she described herself as feeling trapped: “I felt as if I was shut in a little concrete block, our apartment, and even though I had our beautiful healthy baby - who I adore, of course – I was very soon forced to realize that it’s just not enough for me to sit at home all day.”¹⁰ Adrienn’s slightly apologetic mention of her love for her daughter highlights some ambivalence related to her own feelings of unfulfillment while at home, nevertheless she positioned her need for more mental stimulation as the most important reason for her return to work.

Other women, such as Anita, felt content during their parental leave. Although a single mother, she was among the few who did not feel lonely during their time at home. Nevertheless, she deeply appreciated the adult companionship gained at work:

When I returned to work, I realized that on a certain level, I really missed working and really missed being among intelligent adults. (...) And you miss these kinds of things, you know, for example discussing the latest fashion in nails, or for example, who the US president is, or any other topic, and not always talking about your child.¹¹

Anita missed the mental stimulation experienced in adult company, and appreciated it very much even though she had made a conscious effort during her parental leave to meet other people. However, as she pointed out, the mother-and-baby activities she had participated in with her daughter were rather used to discuss issues related to childrearing, and rarely other topics of general interest.

With the above interview excerpts, I have demonstrated how women in my sample talked openly about the importance of their own needs and desires in their decision to return to work. This goes against not only the universal image of the self-sacrificing mother, but also shows how the rigid split typical in Hungary between full-time devotion to motherhood in the early years and

¹⁰ Interview with Adrienn on April 28, 2017

¹¹ Interview with Anita on April 18

full-time work combined with motherhood later on is renegotiated in my sample. Nevertheless, the decision to go against ingrained cultural expectations is no easy task, and this was shown in particular by the criticism that was directed at interviewees for their decision to return to work early.

Karen Christopher's recent article (2012, 74) has expanded the argument that motherhood is a social construct by drawing on West and Zimmerman's (2002) theory of "doing gender". According to the concept of "doing gender", gender is accomplished in social interactions (4) with the knowledge that any actions will be continuously assessed by others (13). As motherhood is an integral part of "doing" the female gender, this concept can be applied to motherhood as well, and Christopher (2012, 75) argues that women are held accountable for how they care for their children. Accountability is not only deeply ingrained in the experience of motherhood, but as my research material demonstrates, also reflect cultural expectations concerning the good mother.

Although most women reported that their family was supportive, many complained about comments from acquaintances who criticized their decision to return to work early, positioning it as a selfish act, and thus reflecting expectations concerning mothers' natural (and extreme) lack of egoism. For example, a woman who returned to work after a year said she felt "looked down upon" for her decision¹². A young widow was accused of "not having a heart" because she returned to work to ensure their financial stability¹³. A mother of four¹⁴ said she was called a "career bitch" and was reproached for giving birth if she was not prepared to stay at home with her children. Although several women mentioned that they had learned not to pay attention to hurtful comments, it was apparent that women felt criticism concerning their motherhood deeply. Even if this

¹² Interview with Maja on April 20, 2017

¹³ Interview with Linda on April 29, 2017

¹⁴ Interview with Judit on April 27, 2017

criticism usually came from distant acquaintances, a mother explained that they “sting just as much as if they were coming from people with whom you are close”¹⁵.

The question however arises, if women’s own well-being is considered a selfish reason for choosing employment, what is considered acceptable? According to Michoń (2015, 191) in contemporary Hungary, the financial need to have two earners in the family legitimizes women’s employment, whereas during socialism, ideology was more often cited as the cause for women to engage in paid work. Zita, a lawyer who returned to work after 1.5 years following the birth of her son, explained that to her, the area of law she deals with “has a brighter color than everything else in the world”¹⁶. Even though finances had little to do with her decision to return to work, she explained in a subsequent conversation how it might have been easier to blame their financial situation rather than acknowledge her own desire to return to work:

If I think about it, it would be easier to say that money was my motivation than that I wanted to return to work. I feel that if I said it was for the money, I would get compassionate looks from everyone. (...) If you “had to” return, then that implies that you didn’t want it that way. Then you wanted the right thing, to stay at home with the child and nothing else. And that’s approved by society and they’re sorry that you aren’t able to do it that way. If I say that I wanted to return to work myself, there’s a much bigger chance that I will get disapproving looks.¹⁷

According to Zita, the woman returning to work due to financial pressures provides an alternative embodiment of the ‘good mother’ who sacrifices her own wishes of full-time devotion to childrearing by working in the labor market to fulfill her family’s material needs. This is of course not to say that many families in Hungary do not have extremely pressing financial problems and needs in Hungary, simply that society’s assessment of a woman’s choice to return to work for

¹⁵ Interview with Adrienn on April 28, 2017

¹⁶ Interview with Zita on February 28, 2017

¹⁷ Personal communication with Zita on May 4, 2017

financial reasons is judged more favorably than other more “selfish” motivations, such as enjoying one’s profession.

Half of the women in my study suggested that to them, financial motivations were not significant in their decision to return to work, and instead listed other factors, predominantly related to their own well-being. I attribute this relatively high proportion to the socioeconomic composition of my sample. Although I tried to achieve variety, many of my interviewees returned to relatively well-paying jobs and/or had a financially stable and supportive spouse or wider family, which meant that the loss of their salary did not affect the family budget fundamentally. According to statistical data, it is an overall tendency in Hungary that women who are highly educated and employed in a good position are more likely to return to work earlier (Central Statistical Office 2015, 3) than women who have low education, are single or were previously unemployed. The latter group, who are in a vulnerable labor position anyway, are more likely to stay at home for the full three years of state-subsidized and job-guaranteed parental leave (1), thus making their opportunities for further employment even worse.

Although highly qualified women are more likely to return to work earlier, the actual percentage of them working in the first three years of their child is still low. According to a recent statistical survey, even among highly educated women, 16% of women were planning to return to work after the second birthday of their child, and only 4.2% before this time. (Central Statistical Office 2015, 3) and even the new family policy provisions enabling parents to claim the GYED benefit while being employed have not proven successful in luring them back early to the job market (EF 2016; Farkas 2016). These policies, although they were praised by some of my interviewees, further privilege middle-class women and do not motivate them to return to work earlier.

Based on my research, I argue that a number of factors contribute to the fact that this effect was not achieved. Firstly, the insurance-based GYED benefit which women who were previously employed with a relatively high salary provides a monthly financial compensation for lost income. This means that although most families probably sense a fallback in their financial situation, the loss of income does not cause a major inconvenience.

Secondly, rational choices based on policy incentives do not provide sufficient explanation (Kremer 2007, 59) and other factors have to be taken into account. For example, work enjoyment was a predominant factor in my study, which can be considered a factor of individual preference as per Catherine Hakim's preference theory (2003). According to Hakim, women increasingly make the choice between staying at home and engagement on the labor market based on individual preferences. I however concur with Hakim's critics who point to how the theory misses other crucial factors which determine women's labor market opportunities. (McRae 2003; Walters 2005; James 2008). In this case, it is a matter of privilege that many interviewees' financial situation as well as the relatively high income-based GYED payment they are entitled to enables them to choose freely between employment and staying at home.

Another factor to consider is cultural expectations concerning a "good childhood" as suggested by Birgit Pfau-Effinger. (2014) According to relevant statistics Central Statistical Office 2015, 3), 75% of respondents currently on leave expressed the opinion that it is best for the child to stay at home with a parent until age 3. Interestingly, this view was most strongly held by highly educated respondents (93% of them) in the survey, while only 52% of respondents with primary-level education agreed with the statement. The latter group more often cited the challenge of combining work and family life as a reason to take advantage of an extended leave. This suggests that cultural expectations are also classed and highly educated women are more likely to feel

pressure to stay at home in the interest of their child's well-being and optimal development, while women with lower education rather struggle with the practical implications of coordinating work and childrearing in a financially optimal manner.

Nevertheless, the interview material demonstrates that even for the relatively well-off women in my sample, earning a salary can be important by enhancing their self-esteem and independence. While recent psychological studies have linked financial independence stemming from paid work with higher self-esteem in working women (Bharvad 2016, Whadhawan 2016), feminist writers have for centuries advocated the importance of women's economic independence (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1992, 160; de Beauvoir [1949], 498). This demand - the need to be financially independent from men - has been one of the starting points of feminist thinking (Nyberg 2002, 72), voiced even before the wish to be included in politics (73). As Anita Nyberg points out, earning a salary is not only "an expression of material well-being, but an expression of control over resources, which enhances women's choices and possibilities to decide over their own lives" (75).

Recently, young women in the West have streamed into higher education and the labor market in masses, which has placed a different emphasis on women's capacity to earn an independent salary (McRobbie 2008, 534). This tendency came hand-in-hand and entangled with the postfeminist notion that gender inequalities no longer exist (Fraser 2009, 98; Gill 2007, 153), and women are thus able to be "career girls" who are "independent, hard-working, motivated, ambitious" (McRobbie 2007, 733), while discarding feminism as outdated (McRobbie 2008, 533). This tendency, though primarily seen as stemming in the West, has been described as global due to its dissemination via media (Lazar 2006, 506), accessible to women all over the world. In this neoliberal, postfeminist discourse of womanhood, consumption has a special role. According to

Tasker and Negra (2007), women are constructed as “both subjects and consumers, or perhaps as subjects only to the extent that we are able to consume” (8), thus positioning consumption as a crucial part of a woman’s identity.

For some women in my study, the reduced financial independence they experienced during parental leave – perhaps exacerbated by postfeminist-neoliberal emphasis on the ability to consume – was a painful realization. While several women were easily able to comply with the ideal of the highly educated, successfully employed, independent woman, the sudden shift to the role of dependent caregiver resulted in a painful identity crisis. The subjective importance of earning a salary is apparent in the following interview excerpt with Zita, a lawyer: “For me, personally, the financial thing, the salary is important, because it’s maybe a bad thing, but it’s part of my self-esteem, so I really felt that I was less valuable when I had less money.”¹⁸ For Zita, her salary was a form of appreciation for the work she carried out, and she felt that her decreased income was a reflection of her diminished value in society. The same sentiment was echoed by Anna, a shop assistant at a high street fashion store who was at home with her son for one year: “At last, I feel useful in society and I feel useful in my family. I was brought up to be very independent (...) I created everything for myself. Now that GYED is hardly enough for anything, and I had to ask for money [from my partner], that was very hard for me.”¹⁹ Anna felt more valuable when engaged in paid labor, and her reduced financial independence was closely linked to the reduced societal appreciation of herself which she perceived while on parental leave. Linda, a single mother reflected on how housework relates to paid employment. According to her, “Housework is just something you get on with and do, there are no real benefits, not like going to work for example. You do it because you have to, so that your flat is clean etc. etc. But if you go

¹⁸ Interview with Zita on February 28, 2017

¹⁹ Interview with Anna on April 28, 2017

to work, that's more visible, because you get money for it, and you can use it to buy loads of things”²⁰ For Linda, the financial independence and ability to consume enabled by her salary was considerably more attractive than housework, which was almost invisible, and certainly did not have the same added financial acknowledgment as employment.

Many women in my sample felt similarly, and complained that work they carried out in the home was not seen as valuable as that performed in the labor market. This notion of the “unproductive housewife” (Folbre 1991) has been critiqued by a number of Western feminist scholars, whose works describe how mother became to be seen as dependent family members who “don’t work” (Crittenden 2001, 46). According to Anne Crittenden, it was with the advent of the industrial revolution and the notion of separate spheres - which allocated the public sphere to men and the domestic sphere to women - that this devaluation was initiated. Later, the ever more labor-intensive task of childrearing only served to exacerbate the demands on women. While men and employers benefitted from the free labor of women, their work was re-evaluated as a “labor of love”, suggesting it was immeasurable in economic terms (Crittenden 2001, 47).

Many women expressed frustration at how care work was undervalued in society. One of the interviewees, a mother of one explained, “you know, when you are at home with your child, and try to concentrate on her, or you dedicate your energy mostly to her, others see that as sort of useless.”²¹ A mother of five complained that on the one hand, she was criticized for wanting to work even though she had several children, but on the other hand people also suggested that she decided to have several children because she was trying to avoid having to work. Overall, it seemed that while working mothers of young children were criticized for engaging in paid employment,

²⁰ Interview with Linda on April 29, 2017

²¹ Interview with Anita on April 18

their work in the home was also undervalued, meaning that neither option was met with full approval.

4.2 Working mothers' conceptualization of children's needs and its complex links to their own well-being

In the previous chapter, I have reflected on women's motivations to return to work and have primarily analyzed factors related to women's well-being as they appeared with special emphasis in interviews. In this chapter, I will analyze how working mothers in this study think about the effect of their own well-being and employment on their children, and how their own and their children's needs are often complexly interlinked. Most interviewees dismiss psychological discourses centering on attachment theory popularized in Hungary from the 1970s on, which require full-time devotion to motherhood in the early years of the child. Nevertheless, they still accept the importance of a strong mother-child bond, but reject the notion that their full-time presence is needed to achieve it. Rather, some women suggest that for their child's well-being, it is important that their own needs are met as well. Almost all interviewees viewed institutional daycare as highly advantageous to their children and emphasized peer company and increased mental stimulation as an important benefit, which I argue is similar to how many women conceptualized the benefits of their own employment to themselves. Further, some interviewees explained how their participation in work helps them be better - more intensive mothers - and to spend "quality time" with their children.

A growing body of literature documents how women negotiate their identities of worker and mother, and how this affects their children. According to Hays, working mothers in her study (1996, 146) stressed the benefits of their employment to their children, rather than themselves,

despite the fact that many of them enjoyed their work and willingly participated in paid employment (143). Thus, ultimately they complied with the dominant ideology of intensive mothering, which requires mothers to constantly prioritize their children's well-being over their own. Since Hays' book, studies have appeared counteracting this notion and suggesting that sometimes, working women renegotiate or even reject intensive mothering ideology to demonstrate that work and motherhood are in fact compatible (Johnston and Swanson 2006, 511). For example, Mary Blair-Loy's study (2001) examines how finance executives who are mothers negotiate the "family devotion" schema and the "work devotion schema, which she calls "gendered models" (690) of commitment to either work or family life. The youngest generation of professionals in her study integrated the two schemas by constructing good motherhood as providing financially for their families and managing child-care and education in a delegatory manner, including hiring and firing household staff. Recently, Karen Christopher (2012) has also described mothers in her study as assuming a managerial role in childcare tasks, an approach she coins "extensive mothering".

Mothers in this research negotiated their employment as being advantageous to their children, however unlike Hays' (1996, 132) "supermoms", they were also vocal about how employment was important to them, as I have previously set out. Although most mothers saw their employment as creating a situation advantageous to them as well as their children, none of the mothers referred to their children's interests as the ultimate justification for their decision to return to work, rather citing their own needs as well as to a smaller extent other external factors, mainly financial pressure. Unlike the managerial role adopted by mothers in Karen Christopher's (2012) study, most interviewees positioned themselves as mothers who are themselves intensely engaged in their children's lives.

Compared to the Hungarian stay-at-home mothers in Zsuzsa Blaskó's study, women in this study conceptualized their children's needs very differently, and rejected popular psychological discourses justifying children's need for full-time maternal care cited by this latter group (Blaskó 2011). The roots of these psychological discourses stretch back several decades, to the introduction of GYES which was strongly backed by a body of psychological research emphasizing the utmost importance of full-time maternal care for the child's optimal psychological and cognitive development in the first 3 years (Blaskó 2011, 160; Haney 2002, 96). The basis for this body of psychological research was attachment theory (Blaskó 2011, 161), developed by psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth in the 1950s and 1960s (Bretherton 1992) and emphasized the long-term importance of children's attachment to a 'primary caregiver' in developing a sense of security vital for the development of the child.

According to Bowlby, early on, the role of the primary caregiver is to be constantly available to the child, while later in childhood, he or she only has to be available when needed. Attachment theory was criticized mainly on the grounds that the model of one primary caregiver is not universal, and there are countries where multiple caregivers successfully cooperate to raise children ("Attachment Theory"). Nevertheless, attachment theory was widely popularized internationally, and its implications for working mothers were deeply worrying, suggesting that mothers (usually the primary caregivers) who were not available for their babies full-time were endangering their emotional development. Reflecting on her own struggles, Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, American primatologist highlights the tensions Bowlby's theory engendered in the introduction to her book *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants and Natural Selection* thus: "Bowlby's insights (...) produce a series of new - often seemingly irreconcilable dilemmas for mothers who want to rear emotionally healthy, self-confident children, but who also want lives and careers of

their own” (Hrdy 1999, xiii). While attachment theory gained international popularity, according to Blaskó it is a Hungarian specificity that psychologists placed the necessary time for full-time maternal care at three years (Blaskó 2011, 161).

Hungarian psychological research findings based on attachment theory were widely publicized and influenced public discourse (Blaskó 2011, 161), thus setting cultural expectations for what a “good childhood” is (Pfau-Effinger 2014, 3). Despite the importance of post-socialist legacies, their effect is not necessarily constant and change and variation does happen. Already in her 2011 article, Blaskó noticed a shift in psychological discourse and cited Tamás Vekerdy - undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in the field of Hungarian child psychology in at least the past three decades – who stated that it was best for a child to stay at home with the mother until age 2-2,5, unless the mother feels very isolated (Blaskó 2011, 161, emphasis added). In 2015 Vekerdy elaborated this thought further, putting the needs of the mother rather more into the forefront:

(..) if we are able to live our own life (in an authentic way), that’s very beneficial for our child. And in this respect, people are very different from each other: there are mothers who are happy to stay at home with their little ones, and there are others who feel after a few months that they are going crazy like a “green widow on a housing estate”, because they hate to live far away from everybody, but they persevere heroically because of external expectations. But that’s just silly. If a mother thinks she should go back to work, then that’s what she should do. (Bévé, 2015)

In this quote, Vekerdy encourages women to follow their own needs, even if this contradicts societal expectations, because the mother’s well-being is crucial to the child. Whether this quote reflects a wider shift in psychological discourse related to mothers’ and children’s wellbeing is an open question and exceeds the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it is particularly relevant, as women in my sample seemed to follow this exact philosophy by acknowledging the

importance of their own needs. While mothers in my study did not question the importance of the mother-child bond, they felt that their continuous presence was not necessary to achieve secure attachment; and therefore dismissed the necessity of full-time motherhood in the early years.

Alíz, a caregiver in a Budapest nursery school said²² that according to her, the view that women should stay at home for three years to achieve secure attachment with their child was “complete nonsense”, and questioned how keeping a woman in the home could be beneficial to the mother-child bond if the mother did not enjoy her role as a stay-at-home parent. This latter point, namely that the well-being of the mother was crucial to the well-being of the child was rather nicely rephrased by another interviewee who explained that her philosophy was “if the queen is well, then the court is happy, too”²³.

These women rearticulate Vekerdy’s point, and emphasize the importance of acknowledging one’s own needs as an adult woman and acting upon them. Thus, they renegotiate the image of the self-sacrificing mother, and they position the fulfillment of their own needs as conducive rather than contradictory to their child’s well-being.

Judit, a mother of four elaborated this point further. She had suffered from postpartum depression after the birth of her first child, and since then, she has been either studying or working during the early years of all of her children, as she realized this was vital for her well-being. Now working in her “dream job”, she said she would have happily returned to work after her fourth child was six months old. She explained that according to her “the point is not how long the mother is at home, it’s the mother-child relationship that’s important. There can be a very good relationship between them even if the mother returns to work after 6 months, and the relationship can be very

²² Interview with Alíz on April 25, 2017

²³ Interview with Orsi on April 28, 2017

bad even if she stays at home for three years.”²⁴ She described her parenting philosophy as “responsive”, meaning that for her, it was extremely important to respond to her children’s needs, while also remaining aware and expressing her own needs. She explained that the point is that this acknowledgment of needs, “as everything else, should be mutual”²⁵.

While women were working, almost all children were in daycare. Without exception, all of these women mentioned the benefits of institutional childcare in some way and most women emphasized that their children were very happy and thriving there. Women’s satisfaction with daycare is a significant in comparison to the opinion of stay-at-home mothers in Blaskó’s (2011, 165) study, who showed a marked distrust towards nurseries. They perceived nurseries as providing low-quality care, and were particularly critical of the child-to-carer rate which they considered much too high. An ambiguity towards daycare is not new and has been described by Donna Harsch (2014, 497) in relation to socialist countries in general. According to her, the opening of daycare centers early on in communist countries was an important and much praised fact, but in reality there were not many of them. Further, many people also complained about the low quality of the scarce daycare opportunities. The combination of these two factors was an important encouragement for psychologists to research the detrimental effect of institutional care, thus contributing to the introduction of lengthy parental leaves in socialist countries (498). Thus, the low-quality and scarcity of daycare facilities and the institution of lengthy parental leave is complexly interlinked.

Women in my study did not voice any concerns about the quality of care their children were receiving at daycare, rather they perceived institutional care as contributing significantly to their child’s development. As in Blaskó’s study (2011), women in my research placed great

²⁴ Interview with Judit on April 27, 2017

²⁵ Interview with Judit on April 27, 2017

emphasis on the psychological and cognitive development of their child. However, while the stay-at-home mothers in Blaskó's study felt this was best attained by their staying at home, these women felt that rather than endangering it, daycare offered opportunities for development which they could not have provided at home. Often, interviewees explained that they felt after a while that they were "not enough" for their child, suggesting that the stimulation and company they could provide was not sufficient once their child reached a certain developmental stage. In fact, mothers predominantly mentioned two important benefits of daycare: peer company and increased mental stimulation, which is remarkably similar to the way in which many women in this study appreciated the same aspects of work. Strikingly, by mentioning peer company and mental stimulation as important to themselves as well as their child, women thus created another subtle link between their needs and their child's well-being.

Rita, a mother of two who accepted a job as a cook when her daughter was seven months old, talked about the benefits of daycare as follows: "I was planning to return to work anyway when she was one-year-old so that she could get used to the company of other children, at home we would just have been getting bored. (...) Luckily her caregivers are lovely, we chose a great daycare, she loved to go there and hardly wants to leave."²⁶ Although Rita's child was the youngest to start daycare in my interview sample, she said she was happy with her choice and was planning to return early with her next child as well. By using the second person-plural ("we would just have been getting bored") she accentuates how the decision to enroll her daughter in daycare was beneficial for both of them, offering more stimulation in a different setting for both of them.

Another often mentioned argument for an early start in daycare was that children were thought to find it more difficult to adapt to an institutionalized setting later on. Most mothers

²⁶ Interview with Rita on April 27, 2017

mentioned this as “common knowledge”, something that they heard from other mothers. Alíz²⁷, a caregiver in a daycare was able to refer to her professional experience when explaining why she felt that 12 months was an ideal time for her son to start daycare. According to her experience, younger children were more flexible in adapting to institutionalized care than children who were in their “terrible twos”. Thus, some women also justified their decision by the easier transition they provided their child from home to kindergarten.

In general, it was a much echoed sentiment that women felt that the age their child started daycare was an appropriate age to introduce children to peer company. On the other hand, most women had a lower age limit before which they would not have considered enrolling their child in daycare, and this age limit approximately coincided: usually interviewees either mentioned the one-year mark or the ability to walk which for them were important milestones. For them, it signaled their child’s readiness for daycare and established a lower age limit for how much most women were willing to bend existing cultural expectations for full-time maternal care. While most women formulated their opinion very carefully, reflecting mostly on their own experiences and views, three interviewees – two of whom returned to work after their child was 2 or older- had distinctly strong views. One of them said that it was “really-really brutal” for a child to start daycare at 6 months, the other said that she was surprised that a mother would consider taking her child to daycare before the age of one because she would not have been able to do it, and the third interviewee said that it “breaks her heart” to hear about children who start daycare very young. This overall lack of openness towards daycare under the age of one even among this non-normative group of women who returned to work early is significant, because although my sample is not representative, it could signify a difficult-to-overcome resistance for policy makers.

²⁷ Interview with Alíz on April 25, 2017

In addition to the often-mentioned benefits of daycare above a certain age, some women mentioned another, indirect way in which work contributed to the well-being of their child. According to these interviewees, their time away from their child helped them be a “better mother”, because they felt it was easier to provide more concentrated attention in the now reduced time they spent with their child. This notion, often referred to as “quality time”, was first popularly discussed in 1977 in a *Business Week* article reporting on high-level professional mothers who argued that their work was not detrimental because the quality of time spent together was more important than the actual amount of it. (Snyder 2007, 320). Despite its apparent neutrality, quality time is a gendered concept, as women have been found more likely to feel compelled to offer it to children. The notion is also mentioned by Sharon Hays (1996, 148) in relation to intensive mothering. According to her, one of the strategies employed women used to demonstrate their adherence to intensive mothering was quality time, suggesting that they made up for not being constantly available by providing intensified attention in the time they were together. In her analysis of quality time, Lynet Uttal (2002, 121) emphasizes the sense of guilt mentioned by Hays (1996, 161) which is inherent in the concept. Thus, while quality time could be conceptualized as a time management tool, Uttal rather sees this as an image management strategy, helping working mothers feel that they are fulfilling their roles as mothers as well as workers (119).

For Adrienn, a mother of one this strategy was more than a mere compromise, as she felt that the condensed time she spends with her son is more valuable than when she was always available to him. In the interview, she explained: “Although we spend a much smaller number of hours together, what we do spend together is quality time because I have the patience to sit down and play with him. He climbs all over my lap, we read the same book 25 times, I think it makes more sense this way than when I was sitting at home all day, waiting for his father to return from

work.”²⁸ By limiting the timespan of their interactions somewhat, and allowing herself to assume the identity of worker as well, Adrienn is thus able to comply with the requirements of labor-intensive and child-centered motherhood. Not only does she use this time- and “image-management strategy” (Uttal 2002, 121) to show her commitment to intensive motherhood, this excerpt rather suggests that she now sees herself as a better mother than when she was at home full-time.

Another interviewee, Kriszta also felt that the opportunity to step out of her home was necessary for her to be the devoted mother she wanted to be. She, as some other mothers in this research practiced attachment parenting, which has been described as “even more intensive in terms of mothering expectations” compared to intensive mothering (Johnston and Swanson 2007, 448), advocating for the importance of close physical contact and attachment between mother and child through practices such as long-term breastfeeding, co-sleeping and babywearing. A host of studies critique it (Bobel 2004, Büskens 2001), primarily because of the potentially socially isolating effect of this type of symbiosis between mother and child. On the other hand, one of the primary figures of the attachment parenting movement, William Sears positions it as facilitating women’s employment, writing that “attachment parenting is the ideal parenting choice for working mothers. Building a strong attachment can actually make it easier both to work and parent your baby” (Sears and Sears 2001, 3).

Kriszta reverses the order, rather positioning work as enabling her to carry out attachment parenting, than the other way around as suggested by Sears. She explained: “I breastfeed, babywear and co-sleep with my children but I have to be able to go out so that my children don’t end up with a mother who is a nervous wreck.”²⁹ Though she said she has been criticized for “dumping”

28 Interview with Adrienn on April 28, 2017

29 Interview with Kriszta, April 20, 2017

(lepasszol) her children at daycare, she explained that she sees it as handing over the tasks related to lunch- and nap time to someone else. In the afternoon, she picks them up early and they go to the playground where she pays undivided attention to them, joining them in their play, for example in the sandpit. For Kriszta, this is clearly important as she distinguished this type of mothering from some other mothers, who do not engage so actively with their children during their play. Though she doesn't mention 'quality time', her idea of giving concentrated attention in the shorter time span they are together is clearly consistent with it, and not dissimilar to Adrienn's notion. As Adrienn, Kriszta conceptualizes work as helping her be a better, more intense mother than if she was staying at home full-time. For these women, the break from motherhood is necessary to be able to contently practice intensive mothering. Given the expectation that mothering should be carried out happily by the woman (Johnston and Swanson 2003, 23) the arrangement to honor their own needs by engaging in paid work, while also complying with the super-intensive mothering they expect of themselves in the remaining time seems a workable compromise for these women.

In this chapter, I have analyzed how women in my study conceptualized their children's needs, complexly interlinking them with their own well-being. Interviewees rejected the need for full-time maternal care, instead, some women emphasized the importance of their own well-being for their child. Women were actively engaged in the lives of their children in the time they were together, and saw institutional daycare as providing additional opportunities for optimal development. By emphasizing the benefits of peer company and increased stimulation at daycare, I argue that women create a subtle parallel between their own needs and their child's. Although daycare in general was seen as highly advantageous to children's development, most women still mentioned the one-year mark or the ability to walk as milestones before which they would not have considered starting daycare. In addition to the advantages of daycare, some women also felt

that work helped them be better- more intensive – mothers, complying happily to the labor-intensive demands of contemporary parenting.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Evidence from my research strongly suggests that apart from financial reasons for returning to work, many working mothers returned to work earlier than the norm because it contributed significantly to their well-being. After a period of understimulation and isolation during parental leave, women greatly appreciated the joy and fulfillment they found in their work and enjoyed the adult companionship of the workplace. Further, for some women earning a salary contributed to their subjective feelings of independence and self-esteem. Despite this emphasis on their own needs, mothers in my study remained strongly involved in their children's lives and conceptualized their needs as a priority. In their accounts, most interviewees negotiated this duality by complexly linking their children's needs with their own well-being, ultimately concluding that their employment was beneficial to both of them. They rejected popular psychological discourses positing full-time maternal care as essential for a child's long-term development, and instead saw institutional daycare as highly beneficial, emphasizing peer company and mental stimulation, factors many women themselves enjoyed at work. In addition, some women felt that employment enabled them to more happily devote themselves to intense interactions with their child in the reduced time they spent together, thus contributing to the win-win effect of their employment.

These findings contribute to the research on mothering ideologies, primarily because they support the notion recently put forward by Karen Christopher (2012) that in choosing paid employment, women's own needs can be an important factor, a finding that is in strong contradiction with gendered expectations of selfless motherhood. However, differing from working mothers in Christopher's study, interviewees embraced intensive mothering practices, while intricately balancing and coordinating their own needs with their children's. Interviewees,

similarly to working mothers in Hays' seminal work (1996) stayed committed to intensive parenting ideologies, however they also differed from them by vocalizing their own well-being and positioning at as an important factor in their employment.

Further, my research also contributes to scholarship on the factors which influence maternal employment, by highlighting some of the forces which shape Hungarian mothers' decision to return to work, among them policies, cultural expectations, and individual preferences, although the latter is strongly determined by structural constraints such as financial status.

Finally, my study also adds to research on post-socialist legacies, for example by drawing attention to how a family system originating in socialism continues to determine the opportunities of women and how it created deeply ingrained popular expectations which are difficult for women to bend, even in a changing policy context. Further, I also point to the weakness of these new policies for its middle-class target group.

Many of the women in my small study sample were from a relatively favorable socio-economic background, which is a limitation of my study. Therefore, I suggest that future research should include many more women with lower educational qualifications from poorer, rural areas, even if the number of employed women among this group is much lower. Further, I propose that it would be crucial to support the employment of these women, particularly given that they almost completely fall outside of the scope of recent policy changes supporting the early return to work of women.

In addition, my research points to the possibility that middle-class women at whom these policies are aimed are not primarily motivated by money, particularly since many of them receive a reasonable compensation for their lost income through the system of parental benefits. Rather, or perhaps in addition, other policy tools should be explored. For example, the "use it or lose" it

type of paternity leave - where a period of leave is reserved for fathers to take, however is lost if he does not take advantage of it – has proven to contribute significantly to a more equal distribution of care work between couples (Pettit, Hook and Hagan 2009, 175). Given the traditional division of gender roles in Hungary which are exacerbated by parenthood, it would be highly beneficial to foster the deeper involvement of fathers in childcare, thus providing institutional encouragement for a more egalitarian work division between men and women.

APPENDIX 1 – Interviews

Interviewee ³⁰	Occupation	Education	Number of children	Medium	Date	Age of youngest child at return to work
Alíz	Nursery caregiver	Tertiary	1	Video-call	April 25, 2017	1 year
Zsuzsa	Accountant	Secondary	3	Video-call	April 26, 2017	18 months
Edina	Assistant	Secondary	1	Video-call	April 21, 2017	14 months
Kitti	Shop assistant	Secondary	1	Personal meeting	March 27, 2017	26 months
Kriszta	Shop owner	Secondary	5	Personal meeting	April 20, 2017	17 months
Bori	Teacher, temporarily employed as assistant	Tertiary	2	Video-call	April 21, 2017	18 months
Rita	Cook	Vocational studies	3	Video-call	April 27, 2017	7 months
Anna	Shop assistant	Tertiary	1	Personal meeting	April 28, 2017	Appr. 1,5 years
Maja	Employee at multinational company	Tertiary	1	Video-call	April 20, 2017	1,5 years
Judit	HR assistant	Tertiary	4	Personal meeting	April 27, 2017	16 months
Eszter	Equestrian therapist	Tertiary	2	Video-call	April 20, 2017	16 months
Orsi	Family business	Secondary	1	Personal meeting	April 28, 2017	18 months
Adrienn	Researcher and lecturer	Tertiary	1	Personal meeting	April 28, 2017	15 months
Anita	Sales executive	Secondary	1	Video-call	April 18, 2017	2 years
Zita	Lawyer	Tertiary	1	Personal	February 28, 2017	16 months
Linda	Kindergarten assistant	Tertiary	1	Video-call	April 29, 2017	10 months

³⁰ All names are pseudonyms chosen by me to protect the privacy of interviewees.

APPENDIX 2 – Interview questions

Tell me about your education and work experience before having a baby.

What did you like/didn't you like about your work?

When you were still working, how long did you plan to stay on maternity leave? When did colleagues typically return to work? Did you notice any expectations from your supervisor (or even colleagues) concerning the length of maternity leave?

What was it like being on maternity leave? What was good/difficult about this period?

How long were you on maternity leave? Was this period longer/shorter than planned (or was it the same as planned)?

When did you decide to return to work? What reasons motivated your decision? Did you make the decision alone or together with your partner?

What advice did you get about when you should return to work and what is good for your child?

What did your partner say? What did your parents (in-law) suggest? Did you get any advice from friends? What other sources did you take into account (e.g. books, internet, health visitor, etc.)?

If you could go back and give yourself advice then, what would you say?

Who took care of your child while you were at work? If your child was at daycare, how did your child/you experience daycare? What did you think about daycare before having a baby, did you hear about it from other people? What would you say is the ideal time for a child to go to daycare?

What was it like returning to work? Did you return to the same position? How did you find balancing work and family life? Did anything change in how you were treated by colleagues/supervisors? Did you perceive work any differently from before having your baby?

How could the system be made better to help mothers and young children? What would be ideal for women and what would be ideal for children? Is there a common ground?

Further questions, added during the interview process:

Did you ever consider your partner going on parental leave?

Now that women have the option to return to work after six months and still receive benefit payments, would you consider returning earlier?

How did you distribute work in the home with your partner?

Have you heard about attachment theory? What do you think about it?

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