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A phenomenological study of nurses' experiences with maternal guilt in Turkey

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Abstract

Aim: This study aims to describe nurses' views on what it is like to be a working mother in Turkey.

Background: Most mothers are in the workforce but continue to fulfil their traditional roles at home. This emerges as an important factor causing mothers to try to find a balance between work and home.

Method: For this purpose, a semi-structured form was used in face-to-face interviews conducted with 17 participants. A phenomenological design was preferred in this qualitative study.

Results: The findings obtained from the study revealed the six themes of 'the sense of inadequacy/helplessness, the sense of responsibility, the strong desire to have a positive effect, gender role stereotypes, the choice between achieving a successful career and being a good mother, but with a sense of depletion'.

Conclusion: The results obtained from the study of nurses in Turkey have shed light on how policies should be developed to eliminate work-life barriers in realizing the roles of motherhood.

Implications for Nursing Management: The study results will guide nurse managers in taking the steps needed to incorporate arrangements that will result in balanced conduct of work and home for nurses.

KEYWORDS

guilt, mothers, nurses, qualitative research

1 | INTRODUCTION

Increasing the participation of women in working life is an important factor in accelerating development and achieving balanced growth (Levent et al., 2018). The workforce participation rate of women worldwide, especially in developed countries, has been observed to increase after the Second World War. Since the mid-1950s, the workforce participation rate of women seems to be steadily increasing (Karabıyık, 2012). While the workforce participation rate of women in Turkey in 2019 was 34.4% (TÜİK, 2020), this rate in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2020) countries was 65.1%, and 68.8% in European Union countries. In Turkey, the

obstacles standing in the way of female participation in the workforce can be generally expressed as overall gender inequality, family structure, fertility rates, low education levels, legislation, socio-economic factors and geographic area inhabited (Karpaz Çatalbaş, 2015; Kılıç & Öztürk, 2014).

As ever more women participate in the workforce, the belief has increased that a good career is the most important key to success, both in economic and social life. Nowadays, women live a different type of life compared with their counterparts living in past periods. Most mothers are in the workforce. In the United States, for example, working women with children under 18 made up 72.3% of the workforce in 2019, thus contributing to the domestic economy and

fulfilling their traditional roles at home (BLS, 2020). This emerges as an important factor causing mothers to find a balance between work and home life (Bird, 2020; Craig & Powell, 2011; Panda & Chettri, 2015). Some theories in the literature aim to clarify the subject and deal with it from different perspectives. First, according to the work–family conflict theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), it is stated that a working mother's inability to take care of her child as much as she would want to due to limited time and energy may cause stress and a change in roles related to childcare within the family.

On the other hand, according to the work–family enrichment theory (Barnett & Hyde, 2001), women's participation in the workforce is beneficial both for their well-being and for family relations because of the increase in the family income, implying that this will reflect positively on the family by increasing a woman's self-confidence and her pride in becoming successful in business life (Percheski, 2018; Teng et al., 2018). Although these approaches seem to oppose each other, they should both be considered, in terms of theory and practice, in studies that focus on balancing work and family life (Carlson et al., 2009). It has been observed that compared with fathers, working mothers experience more stress and feelings of guilt when balancing their children's care and their own work, even when the man and the woman bear equal responsibilities (Hays, 1996). Essentially, the concept of 'maternal guilt' is self-explanatory and seen as a natural part of motherhood that is expressed as the feeling of guilt felt by women who are mothers (Seagram & Daniluk, 2002). One of the factors that exacerbate the feeling of guilt is the fact that the mother is working (Guendouzi, 2006; Sutherland, 2006). It can also be said that behind the guilt is the effect of gender-based roles shaped by social norms (Sutherland, 2010). In other words, societies set high standards for ideal motherhood, and these normative motherhood beliefs encompass culturally determined structures that indicate how mothers should think, feel and act. However, the negative gap between motherhood and ideal motherhood that a working mother actually experiences causes mothers to feel guilty about being employed (Yüce-Selvi & Kantaş, 2019).

In general, most women work in the service sector (Shehan, 2016). The same phenomenon is also seen in Turkey, where women generally work in the service industry (21% of working women in 2019) (TÜİK, 2020). In the health sector, which provides essential services, nursing is an occupation that is dominated by women (Barrett-Landau & Henle, 2014). Nurses provide health care services, follow up on the patient's condition, train the patient, manage and evaluate the patient's care plan and perform other labour-intensive jobs (Ellis & Hartley, 2004). However, due to the insufficient number of nurses available per 1000 people in countries in general (OECD average is nine nurses) (OECD, 2019), nurses are increasingly facing long and irregular working hours, having to deal with the emotional needs of both patients and family, living through their illnesses and sometimes their death. It can be said that their job causes nurses high levels of stress because of these issues (Greenglass et al., 2001; Killien, 2004). Moreover, studies show that women working as nurses experience various difficulties, especially when they have children at home (Firmin & Bailey, 2008). It has been observed that many nurses

have to quit their jobs because they believe that it is impossible to strike a balance between home and work life (Williams, 2001).

It has been seen that there is a very limited number of studies in the literature on how nurses who have children feel about being a working woman and a mother at the same time. It is hoped that the study findings will shed light on the views of nurses with children about working and motherhood in Turkey, thereby filling in the gap in the literature and guiding the way for administrative decisions that must be made to eliminate the barriers preventing participation in the workforce. This study aims to describe nurses' views on what it is like to be a working mother in Turkey.

2 | METHOD

Because, at present, the rate of participation of women in the workforce has fallen in Turkey, this study aims to describe nurses' views on what it is like to be a working mother in this country. Nurses have been chosen for this evaluation because of the labour-intensive work and emotional investment involved in their profession and the fact that they are part of a mostly female working population in the health sector that is additionally employed on a shift basis.

A phenomenological design was preferred in this study. This research pattern focuses on phenomena of which we are aware but do not have an in-depth and detailed understanding. In other words, phenomenological research design can be used to investigate phenomena such as events, experiences, perception, orientations or concepts that emerge in various forms that we feel familiar with but cannot fully grasp (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016).

2.1 | Sample

This study was conducted in Ankara, Turkey, with mothers employed as nurses in a public hospital and a private hospital. The criterion sampling method was used as the sampling method in the study. In line with this technique, the inclusion criteria were determined and the sample was selected accordingly. Information was obtained from the hospitals' management about the nurses meeting the criteria. The criteria defined by the researcher in this study were as follows: to have been an active nurse for more than 5 years, to be a woman and to have children. Information was obtained from the hospitals' management about the nurses meeting the criteria. Nurses matching these criteria were invited to participate in the study, and those that agreed to participate were taken into the study after receiving their written consent. The nurses selected randomly from the participant lists created in this way were interviewed. The limit in sampling adequacy is determined as the point at which data saturation is reached. Two nurses who volunteered to participate in the study could not be included in the study due to their workload. Finally, the study sample was completed with 17 nurses, nine of which were working in a public hospital and eight were working in a private hospital. Information on the sample is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Characteristics of the study participants

Variable	n (%)
Age	
25 to 32	5 (29.4)
33 to 40	9 (53)
41 and above	3 (17.6)
Work experience (years)	
7 to 13	8 (47)
14 to 20	5 (29.4)
21 and above	4 (23.6)
Maternal age	
20 to 25	4 (23.6)
26 to 31	10 (58.8)
32 and above	3 (17.6)
Number of children	
1	9 (52.9)
2	7 (41.1)
3	1 (6)

2.2 | Data

The data were collected through face-to-face interviews via the semi-structured interview form (Table 2) prepared by the researchers. At this stage, to prevent data loss, a voice recorder was used in the interviews with verbal consent. The interviews were held with the participation of two researchers in the nurse's resting rooms or at places deemed appropriate by the participants in the hospital environment. While one researcher was conducting the interview, the other one was noting the non-verbal communications and reflections. The duration of the interviews was a minimum of 35 min and a maximum of 75 min. The data collection and analysis processing were performed by the researchers using the transcription process with repeated readings, after which the encodings were completed. The themes put forward by Seagram and Daniluk (2002) in their work have been a useful guide for researchers in the creation of themes. Due to the intertwined nature of the elements that make up the subject of the study, experts were consulted for their opinions regarding the uncertainties in cases where some codes were related to more than one theme.

TABLE 2 Semi-structured interview questions

1. What does working mean to you?
2. What does it mean to you to be a working mother?
3. What kind of a mother would you be if you were working in another sector, not in the health sector?
4. If you were from a different profession in the health sector, what kind of a mother would you be?
5. How are the attitudes of managers and employers towards working mothers in general? What are your suggestions for developing policies that support working mothers?

Factors such as the gender of the researchers, having field experiences, not having social friendships with the participants and having knowledge about qualitative research methods are factors that keep the role of the researchers in balance.

Creswell (2016) has stated that the fundamental strategy for researchers is to ensure validity in qualitative research. Accordingly, to ensure the validity of the research, the strategy of involving an experienced and independent researcher (using an external auditor) was used to develop a deeper meaning about the phenomenon studied and to examine issues such as the relationship between the data obtained in the study and the accuracy of the descriptions.

To ensure reliability, transcoding was performed by the two researchers, and the inter-coding ratio was determined to be 82%. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), a reliability coefficient above 80% is considered reliable. In scientific research, it is against the nature of qualitative research for more than one researcher to measure a phenomenon or event in exactly the same way in the same period. Differences that may arise between researchers regarding the data obtained through observation and interviews and about their analysis (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016) should be minimized. For this reason, the two researchers actively took part in the data collection and processing stages.

2.3 | Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the Süleyman Demirel University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (2020/96/10). Additionally, informed consent and a statement of voluntary participation were obtained from each participant. Participants were informed that the information obtained would be kept confidential, and the participants were identified by numbers in the study to ensure confidentiality.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Sense of inadequacy/helplessness

The area emphasized the most by all the participants was the feeling of inadequacy created by being caught between job-related requirements and expectations for herself in the role of motherhood. P3 expressed her feeling of inadequacy as follows:

.... I am struggling. I feel like a person who cannot keep up with anything. I think everything is left unfinished. It is not that the roles of motherhood and working women conflict, but they should be prioritized.

One of the participants, P5, said:

I mean, even when she's playing house, she becomes a working mother and makes me the child. She drops me

off at grandmother's; she takes me to school. I mean, even these roles are there when she's playing house.

These words exemplified the participant's feelings of inadequacy based on her experiences with her children. Similarly, P13 said:

For example, when my child's friends ask what kind of person her mother is, she tells them—my mother is always working. She speaks of you not by mentioning the things you love, the memories you have had together, but her sentences imply that she sees me as someone who is always working. This makes me feel like I am neglecting her.

It was clear that the participant had identified herself with the image her child had of her and stressed the feelings of inadequacy this caused. The study participants emphasized that one of the most important reasons causing them to feel inadequate and helpless was missing out on spending time with their children. 'My time left to take care of my child is getting shorter and shorter. We are missing out on the best times against our will' (P8). In expressing this situation in her own words, P17 stressed the sadness of not being able to see 'her son's first steps'.

Someone else tells you the first sentence your child says. This feels very sad. You question yourself that day, asking yourself, what am I doing? (P13)

Working in times of a crisis with my children can give me feelings of guilt. Sometimes she does not want to go to school, or I have to leave her with someone else during an illness; I have to pressure her on some issues. This can be very damaging for me because it causes me to feel guilty. After all, I am not able to give my children the time I give to my work. (P15)

P17's child was cared for by the grandmother due to job-related obligations, and she attributed the developmental problems her child was having during this time to the fact that she was a working mother, saying, 'I work so I had no other choice but to let the grandmother take care of my child'. The participant also expresses her regret by stating that 'I have lost 5 years of his life, and I cannot turn back the time'.

The participants' statements show that they frequently experience feelings of inadequacy and helplessness due to not being able to be with their children enough or not being able to show them the attention they need right now.

3.2 | Sense of responsibility

Another important point brought out in the statements of the participants about the maternal caregiver guilt experienced by the

participants was about their sense of responsibility. The participants expressed an intense belief that it was their primary responsibility as the child's primary caregiver to be involved in the management of the child's developmental process.

P4 described this sense of responsibility as, 'In addition to my job, I have to be in charge of everything No one else helps me with these responsibilities'. P8, P9, P13 and P16 all emphasized the sense of responsibility felt by the burden of also taking care of the housework.

3.3 | Strong desire to have a positive effect

One of the most important tools the participants use in dealing with their intense feelings of responsibility and inadequacy regarding their children is tapping into their desire to have a positive impact on their children.

I think it is good to be a working mother, in other words, to secure a good future even though it has very difficult aspects. Despite the difficulties, I think of it as securing a good future for him as a financial investment in his career and education too. (P9)

While emphasizing the financial contributions made to secure her child's future, P4 stated that she could make a positive contribution to her child's life with the financial means she provides, and P10 stated that her economic freedom as a woman is the desired position in terms of her children.

The participants stated that being a working mother has positive effects on their children's lives in terms of providing economic means and that their presence in working life also positively contributes to their children's personality development.

The children of working mothers mature faster because we do not take them to school like other mothers, we cannot always be with them, we cannot protect them, they have to take on our roles, and so we transfer responsibilities to them a little earlier than usual. (P17)

By expressing this in her own words, P4 stated that she was the child of a working mother herself and that her children got used to being alone at a young age, not being dependent on their mother and learning to stand on their own two feet more confidently. P5 and P7 stated that the children of working mothers quickly developed self-expression skills and a more active and stronger character because of their earlier entry into social life. P15, on the other hand, made a different point and emphasized the positive image that she had of her children as a working mother:

My image is much better in my children's eyes because I am working. They try to understand what I'm doing

and ask questions. They try to learn about different professions in society and look up to me as a professional When you are a working mother, you have to deal with more complex things related to work and life. The children see this also, and when they see that I can handle other issues besides housework, they develop a positive perspective and trust toward me.

The participants' desire to positively affect their children is an important element that enables them to cope with maternal guilt. They stated that taking part in working life eases their children's lives economically and has a positive effect on their mother's image in their eyes.

3.4 | Gender role stereotypes

Based on the participants' statements, it was seen that the mother was the main actor of the household responsible for caring for the child. Although the study data were not analysed from the perspective of feminist theory, the participants' statements led the research team to delve into gender roles. P15 expressed her experiences with the following words:

Although my husband tries to support me, the expectations from me are very high since I am the mother. I've felt this from both my husband and from other people in and around the family.

It can be seen that some participants internalize their gender roles and blame themselves when they fail to act in this role. P7: 'Role conflicts always happen. I think that I am unable to keep up with my children and with my household. I am unable to be a good housewife.'

One of the most important reasons underlying the maternal guilt experienced by the participants is the hegemony established by gender roles on maternal forms. In parallel with this, it can be easily understood from the participants' statements that this hegemony shapes the careers of the participants. The following words of P7 are proof of this:

If you are creating an atomic nucleus in marriage, your spouse, mother-in-law, father-in-law, that is, all the other people around are the electrons, and unfortunately, it is usually the electrons that govern. In other words, the centre is not the managing party; it's always the electrons that are directing you.

3.5 | A preference between a successful career and good motherhood

The participants noted that sometimes they were torn between advancing in their career and being a 'good mother'.

I did not experience anything during the period when the children were young. I had a lot of ups and downs later on. I wondered if I should quit my job and just take care of the children. (P10)

In expressing her situation in her own words, P12 showed that she faced a similar dilemma and stated that 'You are in conflict, first you say that you should not work but stay home and take care of the children, then you say that we need to work for the future of the children'. P7 explained the conflict she faced between being a mother and having a successful career in the following words:

So there have been situations where I wished I had never gone to school or worked at all. I wish I could only have spent time with my children and lived this life with only my husband's salary, or I wish I could have completed my career first (bring it up to a good point) and then started my family and family life. I still have regrets.

The participants frequently pointed to the effects of being a mother on their careers. P8 associates being a mother with work and career life by saying:

.... (Referring to situations where overtime is mandatory) They tell us that we'll be working next week so forget (seeing) your child Let us say there is a single male employee. There is also a married woman with children. The man is preferred.

P16 stated that she could not achieve her post-graduate plan after becoming a mother, and P17 stated that many of her friends had to quit their jobs because they could not manage their work-life and motherhood together, and it was difficult to set a balance as a working mother. She also added that she had to return to work immediately after her children were born to maintain her position in the workplace. P15 stated that she could not further her career:

I could not attend some of the training programs and conferences that I had to attend professionally because my children were young. So I had to postpone some professional things. I was obliged to take care of the children No matter how far you are away from your job, you continue where you left off while other people have progressed. That is why a woman has to sacrifice her career.

These statements also took the research team to another reality: Women are forced to choose between having a successful career and being a 'good mother', pushing them to burnout.

3.6 | Sense of depletion

Some signs of burnout were noted in the experiences conveyed by the participants. For example, P2 stated that she consumes all her energy in the workplace and at work and that she does not have the energy to take care of her child. P7 showed signals of burnout by expressing that 'I'm wasting away here (at the workplace); I go home, and I don't have much patience, so I can't tolerate the children, and it's very difficult'.

Whereas P8 explains her situation with the words, 'The intensity and stress at work ... I feel like telling my children, let me relax, let me rest for a while ... I'm at the end of my rope; a working mother can just barely make things work', P5 explains a similar situation: '... and I'm so tired; for example, he doesn't want to go to bed—you try to put him (your child) to bed; he wants to pass the time, even playing house is tiring because you've just come back from being on duty'. Participants said that the effects of their struggle to combine being a mother with a work-life led them into physical, mental and spiritual exhaustion. P17 shared the emotional experience of her motherhood in the early stages with the following words:

I was leaving my 6-month-old child at home, coming to work, with no such thing as a beginning or end to my shift. I would go in through the door of my workplace in the morning (and would not be allowed to leave even at 10 at night). In fact, for a long time, I wasn't allowed a breastfeeding break. I would go home, crying the whole way; I would cry from the minute I was let off all the way to the bus stop. It was very difficult (This is so frustrating both for the child and for you.)

4 | DISCUSSION

This study aimed to describe nurses' views on what it is like to be a working mother in Turkey. We observed that all of the participants in the sample group coped with feelings of inadequacy, helplessness and burnout at some time in their lives, struggling between the roles and responsibilities of working life and the responsibilities of being a mother. Although our own study targeted a limited sample group, Collins (2020) found that maternal guilt transcends cultural and political contexts in his interviews with 109 working mothers from four countries. In parallel with the mothers living in the different countries included in Collins's study, mothers who constituted our study sample also had similar concerns about having enough time to be with their children and providing care. These results show that the maternal caregiver guilt of working mothers is not a problem limited to women living in a certain country or belonging to a certain occupational group. Maternal guilt over being unable to provide proper caregiving is a global issue.

The majority of the participants believed that as mothers, they were the ones to be primarily responsible for childcare. Although this pattern of thinking is not as strong as in previous centuries, the

pressure from underlying gender roles is still felt. For example, mothers spend twice as much effort compared with their husbands in providing childcare and doing housework (Bianchi et al., 2005). The participants stated that they experienced burnout due to the difficulties they experienced with trying to cope with housework, caring for the child while also balancing domestic duties with their professional duties and responsibilities. They even said that they sometimes felt obliged to choose between being a good mother and having a successful career. Difficulties in accessing people or institutions that will provide care to the child, especially in the early period, force women to make a mandatory choice. In Turkey, having access to quality childcare for children aged 0–6 years is particularly a factor in a woman's decision to work or not work (Soyseçkin, 2016). Ensuring that women become a part of the workforce can be made possible through policies that support women who experience motherhood. Collins (2020) has stated that public policies that allow mothers time outside of work and encourage the father to increase his role in childcare have an important role in reducing maternal guilt. Although the expectation that social norms related to gender will suddenly change is unrealistic, the most important element that can prevent the injustice that prevents women from contributing to the workforce is adopting public policies.

5 | LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Among the research constraints were that the research sample group was formed of only married nurses employed in Turkey's capital, Ankara. Although maternal caregiver guilt is a common phenomenon, the effect of cultural and regional factors cannot be denied. For this reason, it can be suggested that researchers on the subject should carry out their studies in different regions, cultures and different occupational groups. At first glance, maternal caregiver guilt can be seen as a gender-specific problem, but this problem is more of a tragedy for working women, and its consequences produce a domino effect. It is because of this that the role of female employment in a country's development, the role of female labour in every sector as a contributing factor in production and the role of women as a parent who takes part in the cognitive, social and psychological development of a child should all be considered. The experience of motherhood, which stems from a woman's biological differences, should not be turned into a virtual punishment that prevents her from achieving her goals in the working environment. These findings should be taken into consideration in future studies.

6 | CONCLUSION

The conclusions of our study focus on three main themes: the dilemma of the nurse who is squeezed between the requirements of her job and her role as a mother, the feeling of the participants that

hold only themselves responsible for the care provided to their children and the contributions a working mother makes to the well-being of her child.

All of the participants stated that they felt inadequate in meeting society's expectations regarding their role as a mother. They felt that the requirements of working life were the cause of their inability to meet the expectations of their motherhood role. They also emphatically expressed their belief that they, as mothers, are the primary caregivers of their children and have the leading responsibility in managing the child's development. They noted that sometimes they were torn between having a career and being a 'good mother'. Participants who experienced all these contradictions experienced signs of burnout. One of the most important tools that help the participants cope with feelings of responsibility and inadequacy is their intense desire to have a positive impact on their children. It was observed in this study that performing a profession that requires working long working hours under intense pressure (such as nursing) and being a mother at the same time mostly created negative feelings in the participants. On the other hand, in a country such as Turkey, where motherhood is considered a sacred occupation and society place the brunt of caring for children on the woman's shoulders, it is not surprising that this general cultural outlook naturally influences nurses who are mothers.

7 | IMPLICATIONS FOR NURSING MANAGEMENT

Nursing is one of the divisions of health care in which the majority of the employed are women. Working conditions are stressful and intense; therefore, when nurses experience changes brought about by motherhood, this sets the stage for an environment that nurtures maternal caregiver guilt. Considering the adverse effects of such a situation on both family and the workplace, it is essential that both micro and macro policies are developed to reduce maternal caregiver guilt. This study may affect the decisions of nurses, nurse managers, administrators of health institutions and policymakers regarding maternal guilt and contribute to increasing awareness about this issue. It is expected that the results obtained from the study will guide nurse managers in taking steps towards making the necessary arrangements that are conducive to achieving the balanced conduct of work and family life among nurses who are also mothers.

The strengths of this manuscript include the direct quotes taken from the mothers and pertinent examples of the themes that were discovered. It falls within the scope of nursing management as a universal issue that can plague all nurses who are also mothers.

This study sets forth the problems nurses encounter in their working lives as mothers and how these issues reflect upon their careers. The data and results of the study can be useful for policymakers and administrative nurses alike. While administrators should be urged to provide the needed working conditions for nurses who are mothers, supporting programmes can also be organized as a platform for nurses to express their thoughts about motherhood to raise awareness.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have met the criteria for authorship, approved the final manuscript and agreed to be in the authorship team. The first author (P.Ö.K.) provided substantial contributions to the literature review, design of the study, data analysis and interpretation of the findings. The second author (S.S.) contributed to the study development, literature review, data collection, interpretation of findings and revision of the manuscript. The third author (E.A.) contributed to the literature review, design of the study and revision of the manuscript.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study was approved by the Süleyman Demirel University Social and Humanities Ethics Committee of the University (E-87432956-050.99-125466).

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors elect to not share data.

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