

Chapter 5

From Walking the Thin Line Between Work and Family to Self-compassion: Working with Asian American Career Mothers

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Esther's baby, Som, was a little over 4 months old when he started going to daycare. Esther, who has always been a working woman, found herself returning to work as soon as her maternity leave was up. It was quite an adjustment for both Esther and Som transitioning from homecare to daycare. Esther was feeling frustrated and guilty to send her baby to daycare at such young age due to lack of help from extended family. Although Esther has the opportunity to extend her maternity leave, financial considerations, eagerness to return to "normalcy," and the desire to complete her work project led her to the decision that it was time to return to work. Being a career mother has been fulfilling and yet stressful at times. Her story reflects many Asian American career mothers' experiences. Over the past few decades, the United States has seen both an increase in women's participation in the workforce and a rapidly growing Asian population. The nation has witnessed a significant rise in the percentage of dual-income families. More and more women have entered the labor force during the past two centuries, partly due to changes in federal legislation, educational attainment, and job opportunities (Landivar 2014).

In view of these changing demographic patterns, the increasing female presence in the workforce, and shifting societal attitudes about work and family, we (Kandice and Liang-Ying) are curious about the experiences of career mothers—women who both manage a career and raise children—in the context of Asian American families. We are both women of East Asian descent. In our personal and professional lives, we have close ties to the Asian American community and observe many Asian American women experiencing role shifts from career women to career mothers or from stay-at-home mothers to career mothers. Knowing how tough it is

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to be a career woman who must manage expectations associated with gender, culture values, and Western social structure, we also want to understand what it is like to be an Asian American career mother. In this chapter, we present data from a phenomenological study to challenge the traditional view on external supportive factors for career mothers, and most importantly to introduce a groundbreaking internal growth perspective that highlights the process of how career mothers create meaning to support their role as career mothers.

Traditional Views of Work and Family Among Asian American Women

The term “career mothers” refers to women who are mothers who work outside the home for an income in addition to the work they perform at home raising their children (Encyclopedia of Children’s Health, n.d.). To varying degrees, all career mothers face the challenge of simultaneously juggling different, often competing roles. For instance, when a child is sick, a parent, usually the mother, stays home to take care of the child or worries about her child at work. This creates a role conflict. She must choose between prioritizing workplace demands or parental responsibilities. In Asian cultures, a collectivist orientation may influence this prioritization process, as it often emphasizes family members’ obligations to one another and the support of family needs and goals over those of the individual. Familial harmony is highly valued, and it is often expected that one will sacrifice individual needs and rights for the good of the family (Quek et al. 2010).

Additionally, a hierarchical structure within Asian collectivist societies typically supports a gender-segregated division of labor, wherein women are responsible for the domestic realm and men for the work realm. Thus, these collectivist values may further burden Asian women who decide to become career mothers. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2013), employed mothers continue to shoulder the majority of household responsibilities, rather than sharing them equally with employed fathers. As a result, role conflict experienced by Asian career mothers is likely to be heavily influenced by cultural expectations of childcare and household labor.

Existing studies (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Lo et al. 2003) have explored the idea of work–family conflict, which is defined as a form of inter-role conflict in which pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some aspects. Research on the topic of work–life balance has demonstrated that conflict may arise from a variety of sources (Brough et al. 2013), such as strain-based, behavior-based, and time-based, and that the relationship between work and family can be bidirectional—that is, family can interfere with work and work can interfere with family (Carlson, Kacmar, and Williams 2000). Moreover, both directions of conflict have shown to negatively impact work–family balance.

Expansionist Theory

The expansionist theory is one of the most common theories employed to understand an individual's experience with multiple roles. It states that multiple roles (for both women and men) are beneficial as reflected in their mental, physical, and relationship health (Barnett and Gareis 2006; Lee and Phillips 2006). In other words, adding the worker role is beneficial to women and adding a family role is beneficial for men. Furthermore, added income, social support, opportunities to experience success, and increased self-complexity (Barnett and Hyde 2001) are additional benefits of assuming multiple roles. For example, added income brought in by a career mother may mitigate a family's financial difficulties.

The expansionist theory stresses the importance of role quality and its part in mental, physical, and relationship health (Barnett and Hyde 2001). Role quality may be understood as the role holder's subjective experiences in a role, including perceptions of role rewards and difficulties (Cardenas et al. 2004). The perceived importance and quality of one's role may mitigate the stress related to the multiple roles of a career mother. As such, career mothers who perceive their work role as important and rewarding are more likely to better handle the demands of competing priorities of work, family, and individual lives.

Social Support

In current literature, social support is one of the most frequently discussed topics related to the experience of career mothers (Blanch and Aluja 2012; Greenhaus and Allen 2011). Social support is defined as the physical and emotional comfort given to an individual by family, friends, coworkers, and others (Pines and Zaidman 2003). It includes a sense of belonging to a community in which members love and care for one another, as well as a community that values and thinks well of the individual. Kahn and Antonucci (1980) identified three interpersonal components to social support: (a) affect—expression of liking, admiration, respect, and love, (b) affirmation—expressions of agreement or acknowledgement of the appropriateness or rightness of some act or statement of the individual and (c) aid—transactions in which direct aid or assistance is given. Unsurprisingly, career mothers who belong to strong social support networks are less likely to demonstrate burnout symptoms in their attempts to fulfill their multiple roles (Blanch and Aluja 2012).

Some research has been done regarding how career mothers manage work and family. Simon (1995) found that women reported more work-to-family conflicts than men, and attributed them to marital problems, feelings of guilt, and negative self-evaluations as parents and spouses. Studies suggest that the balancing of work and family life is more stressful for women than for men (Hammer et al. 2005; Simon 1995). However, there is a lack of understanding regarding the ways that

career mothers construct and give meaning to their roles and experiences. Their process of integrating work with responsibilities within the home, and their ability to make sense of these multiple roles, have yet to be explored. In this vein, we cannot help but wonder about the meaning and essence of what it is like to be an Asian American career mother and how these meanings evolve.

Discussion in this chapter is inspired by the findings from phenomenological research. The study used in-depth qualitative interviews with ten self-identified Asian American career mothers whose ages range between 26 and 35 years old and who have at least one dependent child. Participants either were born in the United States or have lived in the United States for more than 10 years. Most of them held at least a bachelor's degree. Open-ended questions were used during the interviews to explore the meaning of being a mother, the meaning of work, and how Asian American career women attend to these commitments. Research data were collected by interviews and analyzed following Moustakas' method (Moustakas 1994). This method was chosen to best understand *what* the participants experience as career mothers and *how* they experience it. It involved transcribing the interviews and developing a list of significant statements and/or keywords that captured and described the essence of the participants' experiences as career mothers.

Building Connection Between External Resources and Internal Strengths

The stories of these Asian American career mothers disclose how they are shaped and reshaped through life influences, perceptions of careers and relationships, etc. within their social locations. Specifically, their voices reveal the importance of involving both external resources and internal strength during the journey of becoming a career mother. A creation of meaning involving both external resources and internal strengths emerges from their narratives.

Connection to External Resources

The support and connections that these Asian American women receive from their spouses, social circles, and workplace are tremendously important. These connections include: (1) teamwork between the couple in managing the needs of the family, (2) joint effort from extended family to provide physical and emotional support, (3) normalizing with friends and peers, and (4) a pro-family work culture. Together, these connections highlight both the emotional and physical support they received from relationships with different groups of people in their lives. These connections are external and made through negotiated relationships, in contrast to internal connections made with oneself, which are discussed later in this section.

Teamwork between the couple in managing the needs of the family. Among these Asian American women who view the family work as primarily their responsibility, spouses are viewed as a source of support. Teamwork between wife and husband is manifested in the division of housework and childcare. Yuki and Abby shared:

My husband is very supportive and we have this mutual understanding. He works too and he works hard. We have the mutual understanding of “If you’re really tired today but I’m not, I’ll take over in taking care of the baby. Or if you’re really tired, you can go to sleep and I’ll clean up today.” This mutual understanding is teamwork. (Yuki)

I’m lucky that my husband helps me a lot with the kids and he cleans the house. He doesn’t cook but he helps with cleaning and washing the dishes. Sometimes he helps me put out the groceries to be cooked so that when I come home from work, I can start cooking right away. Usually after we eat, he does the dishes so I can go shower and relax for a bit. (Abby)

Abby and Isabelle further illustrated the importance of dividing up childcare responsibilities using this teamwork approach

My husband goes to work earlier than me, so he comes home earlier than me. I work later and come home later. It really works out well because when my older daughter goes to daycare, he comes home earlier so he can pick her up from school. (Abby)

Being a mom is busy work but at least my husband is here, so he usually takes my oldest child and she would be with him. I would have my son so that is at least a 1:1 ratio so that’s why it is helpful to have a supportive husband. (Isabelle)

Joint effort from extended family to provide physical and emotional support. These career mothers also discussed the importance of their extended family members, such as grandparents and siblings, in providing them with physical support, such as helping out with childcare, and providing emotional care by being supportive and having a nonjudgmental attitude toward career mothers. One mother shared that sometimes her sister took her children out for the day so that she could have a little time to herself. Also, many mothers identified that geographic proximity to grandparents aided them in childcare. Cindy shared:

When I had my second daughter, my mom came from Vietnam to help me take care of my kids. She now lives with us. Before I had my second child, my mother-in-law was taking care of the first one while my husband and I went to work. She lives about five minutes away from us. (Cindy)

The joint effort from extended family also encompassed emotional support. Dani shared about the emotional support she received when she needed a break from caregiving. She said:

My family is very helpful, very non-judgmental... My family is supportive. If I want to vegetate and don’t want to do anything, they will still be there for me. There is no pressure from them. There is acceptance, non-judgment and support.

Normalizing with friends and peers. Many career mothers identified that normalizing the challenges of balancing work and family with their friends, colleagues, and other career mothers has been helpful to them. One mother, Beatrice, shared that “touching base with other mothers has been helpful for me... especially

as a first-time mother. I felt like I could ask if what I'm experiencing with my daughter is normal." Hearing and sharing experiences with friends and peers about their utilization of maternity leave, resumption of work after delivery, duration of breastfeeding, etc. helped to relieve these young mothers' anxiety and normalize the many demands they faced. These experiences and knowledge bring comfort and connection with career mothers who share similar social locations.

Pro-family work culture. All the career mothers discussed their relationships with their employers and identified factors that were helpful as they sought to juggle multiple roles. These factors include workplace culture as well as relationships with colleagues. A pro-family work culture included benefits such as a flexible work schedule, an understanding supervisor, and a workplace that encourages family involvement. One mother remarked that her work is very flexible with time: "If something happens with my daughter in school, I can go home from work right away and my boss will be OK with that." Another shared that her flexible work schedule is one of the reasons she stayed with her company for so many years:

They [employers] are super flexible, and that's the reason I stay too. Towards the end of my pregnancy, I took half days and they were very understanding. They are like a family. We all know each other; we've seen each other grow up and have kids, so they are very understanding and flexible. It makes a difference, like if my son is sick and I have to leave early, they don't mind. That's one of the reasons I know why my coworkers stayed too because they are so flexible with that. As long as you have everything done and [are] not slacking off, you're OK. (Yuki)

In terms of supervisory practices, having an understanding supervisor or management makes a tremendous difference:

The management staff all has family so they are really understanding... If I need a day off, they don't ask me why. Rather, they will ask me if I'm OK, but they never question why I am not at work. You don't have to give them an explanation if you don't want to. They are just really understanding of people having a life outside of work. (Ella)

Workplaces can even encourage family involvement by hosting child-friendly events at work and having "bring your children to work" days. Grace applauded her family-oriented work environment:

The whole organization is family friendly. The benefits are awesome. We even have this Halloween event where you can bring your children to work that day.

Connection to Internal Strengths

Learning about self. Most women from this study identified a connection to their internal strengths that helps create the narrative of who they are as career mothers. The process of finding these internal strengths occurs through a culmination of their experiences and lessons learned as they balance family and work. These internal strengths include having self-compassion, patience when adjusting to a new role, and being flexible with expectations.

Self-compassion. One of the most powerful and important internal strengths is self-compassion. Self-compassion is about extending forgiveness, acceptance, and kindness to oneself when confronted with personal failings. These sentiments highlight the relationship one builds with the self. Showing self-compassion means learning to accept one's current situation and limitations without feeling bogged down by the demands of multiple roles as a career mother. The following statements were chosen to highlight the idea of self-compassion:

The advice I would give to a mother stepping into the role of a working mother is to have self-compassion because at the end of the day, you are the only one that understand[s] and know[s] how hard things can be with the demands and pressures. Try not to be too hard on yourself. Don't take yourself too seriously. Do meaningful things that keep you going, rest if you must, and enjoy when you can. (Dani)

Give yourself a break. We all make mistakes and no one is perfect. I know at least with talking to a lot of moms, we are very hard on ourselves. We are probably the hardest on ourselves when it comes to things we forget to do. (Jenny)

I would encourage them that it's OK to ask for help. It's OK to take time for yourself. There are days where you don't have to do it all, and that's something I have to remind myself [of] all the time. You don't have to be a superwoman all the time. You can ask for help and that is OK. (Fiona)

Patience when adjusting to a new role. It is important to have patience when adjusting to being a career mother. Like any adjustment phase, it requires time to adapt to the new role and responsibilities. This also means being patient with oneself and allowing oneself to experience the ups and downs of this new role. One mother shared that the adjustment to being a career mother was very difficult for her at first. She often questioned whether she could handle juggling work and being a mother. However, she reminded herself to "not be in a hurry to get back to your old routine. Take some time to enjoy being a mother. This adjustment phase is not forever. Just be patient and take your time. Everything is going to be OK."

Being flexible with expectations. Another internal strength comes from being flexible with expectations. Women said that this means being flexible with your schedule, expectations, and any changes that come along the way. For example, Yuki shared that being flexible with her own schedule helped ease her stress:

Just pick your battles because there will be days where working and being a mom, you just have to learn to let things go. Like laundry. I always have to do laundry on Sunday, always Sunday. But once I was back to work, you realize that Monday is OK; I can do laundry on Monday too.

Another mother talked about shifting her priorities and re-organizing the family's priorities as a way to be flexible with the changing demands of raising a child. She said:

I had a conversation with my friend and we were just chatting about going back to work and so forth, and she's having a hard time with her workplace. Her workplace was being less supportive. I told her to go over her priorities with her husband and figure out what her short-term and long-term goals are. The time with the baby is very short. Although it may seem long, it's just a phase in life. The babies grow up and it becomes another ball game. (Jenny)

Beatrice suggested that being flexible with oneself is simple: “You roll with the punches. Life happens and stuff happens and you roll with it.”

Creation of Meaning Through the Interaction Between External Resources and Internal Strengths

These results highlight the significance of external resources and internal strengths. These are not two separate spheres, but rather, intersect to create a dynamic and systemically meaningful interaction between social environments and career mothers.

The career mothers interviewed exhibited great tenacity of spirit, seeking to make the best of their situations and looking for the silver lining despite challenges along the way. For example, they chose to see positive feelings of fulfillment and excitement in their work. One mother shared:

I honestly love my job. I really do. I've been there a while so I had students that come back and to visit when they have kids. It's so rewarding to see the families and kids that made it. It makes me proud for them and also for my work as it makes a difference... Oh yeah, it's not just about money. (Yuki)

In above example, Yuki felt that the external resource (grateful clients) builds her internal strength (valuing the impact of her work) to create a meaningful experience in her career.

On the other hand, some mothers are motivated by their internal strengths. For example, Grace shared, “I want my daughter to grow up knowing that her mother was able to do it all and be successful. I want her to know that she can as well. I want to model that for her.” In this example, Grace’s internal strength strongly influences her self-image as a career mother and her desire that her daughter be successful like her. This internal strength helps her utilize external resources, ultimately allowing her to achieve a balance between her work and family life.

Career mothers shared that taking on a paid job also allows them to use the education they have worked so hard to earn. Some of them also expressed that they had worked prior to having children and felt like they earned their positions at work. Thus, to stay home after having children would be a waste of both the time they invested in their education and careers. Moreover, many of them expressed the importance of career as a status symbol in Asian cultures. One mother said, “Being Asian, status is really important. I want to show people that I work, I have a good job, I make good money, and I am successful.” In this example, her internal strength comes from her cultural expectation, which helps her commit to both work and family.

The voices of these Asian American career mothers demonstrate the influence of external resources and internal strengths in creating a well-rounded experience of what it means to be a career mother. The creation of meanings involves a connection between social and environmental resources (external) and intrapersonal motivations, beliefs, and goals. Each aspect plays an important role in the experience of career mothers.

Going Beyond External Supportive Factors: An Internal Growth Perspective

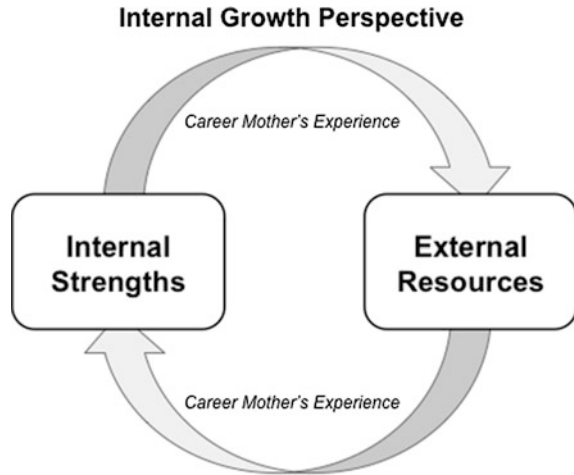
Based on the experiences of these Asian American career mothers, we can see that integrating work and family life requires going beyond identifying and accessing external resources. Contrary to the current one-directional view of work–family life balance, which highlights the significance of supportive factors coming from external resources such as family and friends, we are able to identify a cyclical process involving an internal growth perspective.

This perspective involves a process whereby the meaning-making experiences of career mothers are created through the interaction between external resources and internal strengths. While the external resources give career mothers space to combine career goals with family aspirations, internal strengths coming from the self seek to operationalize this process. Internal strengths focus on the *self* and show how growth and empowerment can also come from within. The internal growth perspective shows that a career mother’s experience is fluid because it is constantly shaped by the interactional relationship between external resources and internal strengths. Depending on how career mothers access their internal strengths and external resources, it changes their state of experience. It also highlights the active role that career mothers play in shaping their experiences by identifying internal strengths rather than relying solely on external resources (e.g., familial support, community, spirituality, etc.) to help them achieve family and work life balance.

In our study, the career mothers laid out two important components related to an internal growth perspective: learning about oneself and finding meaning in one’s role as a career mother. First, learning about oneself involves having self-compassion, patience when adjusting to being a career mother, and flexibility with expectations. Many career mothers often feel like they have to be superwoman and do it all by having the perfect family and career. However, learning about oneself as a career mother requires self-compassion and giving space to oneself in order to grow and adapt. Second, the internal growth perspective is about the interactional process between external resources and internal strengths, a process that constantly shapes the career mother’s experience. Figure 5.1 illustrates the cyclical process of engaging both external resources and internal strengths. This process reflects that internal strengths and external resources are equally influential to this experience. It also speaks to the fluidity of a career mother’s experience, as it is continuously shaped by all the elements in the system.

The internal growth perspective suggests that internal strengths do not develop in isolation; rather, they are continuously shaped by experiences with the external world. For example, one mother shared that she realized it is OK to ask for help from her family. By acknowledging that she does not have to do it all, this mother allowed herself to turn to an external resource. In this case, her familial support reinforces her internal strength of being resourceful and knowing when and what she needs in order to help her balance family and work. With the internal growth perspective, we see a more in-depth connection between a career mother and her

Fig. 5.1 Internal growth perspective



environment, including significant others and extended families, and how being aware of her internal processes leads to more awareness of available external resources and the utilization of these resources.

Guidelines for Clinicians: Using a Connection-Building Approach

The three messages we hope to deliver to clinicians working with career mothers are: (1) the existence of internal strengths and their influence on career mothers' experiences, (2) the interactional relationship between external resources and internal strengths, and (3) recognizing and challenging societal idea that parenting is a woman's job. We hope that clinicians will help career mothers develop the "self-of-a-career-mother" by creating empowering meaning that is inclusive of their work, family, and self. The phrase "self-of-a-career-mother" is a modification of the term "self-of-a-therapist." Similar to the understanding of "self-of-a-therapist," self-of-a-career-mother promotes one's inner process—accepting what is, knowing oneself, and looking at possibilities (Lum 2002). To do so, we recommend clinicians consider a connection-building approach that is based on the internal growth perspective discussed previously to help career mothers get in touch with their internal strengths and activate the cyclical process of engaging both internal strengths and external resources. The following are some pointers that can help clinicians engage the internal growth perspective:

- Facilitate discussion with the client to explore one particular experience in which she was aware of the relationship between internal strength and external resources.

- Explore the client's external resources such as faith community, friends, and extended families and then discuss how these have reinforced an internal strength.
- Involve fathers in co-parenting as this process can positively impact on client's inner strengths.
- Help clients create a work/family narrative that sees parenting beyond a woman's job while involving self-compassion when faced with challenges.

Clinically, we promote working with Asian American career mothers from a circular process wherein a discussion of external resources as well as the involvement of significant others and extended families becomes routine in the meaning-making process. We would also like to encourage all clinicians working with this population to take an advocacy role and challenge the societal discourse of parenting as a woman's job by encouraging significant others, spouses, and extended family to be accountable for their role in shifting this societal discourse. As career mothers learn to advocate for themselves and engage with external resources, it allows them to further develop their connections to internal strengths and solidify self-empowerment. In other words, based on the internal growth perspective, a client's ability to self-advocate serves as an indicator that symbolizes her integration of internal strengths and external resources, as well as reveals the nurturing and engaging nature of her environment in which family work is shared responsibility among family members.

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