

PARENTAL GUILT AMONG WORKING MOTHERS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN AFTERCARE

by

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DECLARATION

I, Ixantha Spangenberg (Student number: 22828729), declare that ***Parental Guilt Among Working Mothers of Primary School Children in Aftercare*** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality, and that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at Unisa for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.



Ixantha Spangenberg

6 February 2026

Date

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I leaned on your strength when I was only pretending to be strong myself. Every sacrifice you made was seen, even if I did not always realise it at the time.

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ABSTRACT

After-school care plays a vital role in the lives of working parents, because it provides both practical assistance and peace of mind regarding the care of their children while they work. In today's fast-paced society, many mothers manage multiple responsibilities, often juggling the demands of work and family life. This balance can limit time for meaningful family connection and may contribute to feelings of pressure or guilt when expectations become difficult to meet.

The aim of the study was to explore how working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt. The study was guided by the research question: How do working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt? The research was conducted in Tshwane South, Gauteng, South Africa, using a qualitative research approach and semi-structured interviews to better understand mothers' lived realities and coping strategies. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory complemented by Work-Family Conflict Theory, provided the theoretical framework to explore how individual, relational, and broader societal factors interact to shape experiences of guilt.

Trustworthiness was ensured through the application of Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical principles, including respect, integrity, fairness, and transparency, were upheld through procedures such as informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and reflexivity.

The findings indicate that parental guilt is a complex emotional experience influenced by individual beliefs, societal expectations, and structural conditions. Mothers' experiences of aftercare were closely linked to guilt, varying in form and intensity depending on children's wellbeing, workplace flexibility, and the presence of supportive networks. Access to reliable aftercare, supportive relationships, and adaptive coping strategies, such as cognitive reframing, appeared to alleviate feelings of guilt and promote a sense of maternal efficacy.

The study contributes to social work knowledge by providing contextually grounded insight into the experiences of working mothers within the South African context. It highlights the importance of understanding parental guilt as shaped by both individual and systemic factors and underscores the role of supportive environments in promoting maternal wellbeing.

Key words/Concepts: Parental guilt, Working mothers, Primary school children, Aftercare, Social work perspective, Parenting experiences, Work-family balance, Motherhood expectations, Emotional wellbeing, Coping mechanisms, Qualitative research

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACRWC -	African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child
CRC -	Convention on the Rights of the Child
CGE -	Commission for Gender Equality
EAP -	Employee Assistance Programme
EAPs -	Employee Assistance Programmes
ECD -	Early Childhood Development
EST -	Ecological Systems Theory
FSM -	Family Stress Model
ILO -	International Labour Organization
PPCT -	Person-Process-Context-Time model (Bronfenbrenner)
RSA -	Republic of South Africa
SA -	South Africa / South African
SACSSP -	South African Council for Social Service Professions
UNISA -	University of South Africa
WFC Theory -	Work-Family Conflict Theory

CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter One provides a general overview of the study, the research problem, the research motivation and the structure of the thesis. This study examined the subject of parental guilt experienced by working mothers whose children are in aftercare. The introduction of more women in the workplace has contributed to a growth in the work-family conflict in modern society and has raised questions concerning the proper balance between work and the parental role.

Maternal guilt is influenced by social norms and beliefs, such as the “motherhood myth” and the overall ideal of total presence and emotional availability for children (Constantinou, Varela & Buckby, 2021:852). The influence of the “ideal mother” stereotype creates a double burden for working mothers and increases the sense of guilt and shame as a mother, when a woman thinks that she is not at the level of an average parent in the society. This pressure is not only damaging for a mother’s wellbeing but also has an impact on the mother’s parenting behaviour when her primary school children attend aftercare services. Aftercare has multiple positive effects on children and their parents; however, most mothers experience guilt feelings when using it. Limited knowledge about the influence of guilt on mothers’ wellbeing and parenting, and about the coping strategies to deal with parental guilt, calls for further study.

Most mothers that participated in the research reported guilt when sending their children to aftercare, despite its benefits. The ways in which this guilt was addressed and the impact it had on wellbeing and parenting were unknown. This research also wants to explore the emotional ambivalence of parental guilt experienced by working mothers with children in aftercare. This study looks at parental guilt through personal, social, and cultural lenses. Emotional ambivalence in this research refers to the

coexistence of mixed feelings such as guilt, love, and responsibility. It represents the complex emotional state of mothers who experience contradictory emotions related to their roles both at work and home.

This definition relates to current literature because researchers explain emotional ambivalence toward motherhood as experiencing both positive and negative emotions about the parenting role (Raneberg & Maccallum, 2024). This definition also explains emotional ambivalence as a cognitive and emotional experience that is culture and social based (Routray et al., 2024).

The term maternal guilt is used throughout the study to identify mothers; however, parental guilt was discussed in cases when it was important to showcase the shared experiences of mothers and fathers. Research was conducted to identify the factors leading to the experience of guilt or the lack of guilt to better understand the experience of guilt among mothers. The results were intended to provide new input and understanding about the topics of gender roles, childcare policy, and work-family life conflicts and to help social workers, policymakers, and parents who have to deal with these issues in everyday life.

As the introduction and orientation to the study, the background of the study, problem statement, and rationale of the study. This is followed by explaining the research question, goal, and objectives, before describing the key concepts of the study, and outlining the research report's structure. The guiding theories for this research project include Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Work-Family Conflict Theory. The study employs an interpretivist qualitative research methodology to delve into the experiences of working mothers.

1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Many parents today struggle to balance the demands of their careers with family life. For working mothers, this often brings feelings of guilt when they place their primary school children in aftercare, particularly given societal expectations around highly involved parenting. In a busy world, a parent can easily take on numerous tasks, which

can lead to overloaded calendars, less time with children, and potentially consequences for children's development and wellbeing (Elbitar, 2023). Parenting itself is time-consuming and also can be costly. So, these considerations may be the cause of guilt feelings in mothers triggering a push and pull situation between work and attending to children. Understanding these dynamics is essential for exploring how parental guilt affects mothers' wellbeing and parenting experiences.

In the context of evolving family structures and increasing economic pressures, more households have to rely on dual incomes, making external childcare a necessity rather than a choice. Yet prevailing societal narratives continue to idealise full-time, hands-on motherhood. This creates a persistent tension between career demands and parenting ideals for many working mothers (Elbitar, 2023).

Parental guilt is a widespread issue among working mothers, driven by societal expectations of being the "ideal" mother while maintaining a career, reinforced by ideologies such as intensive mothering and attachment theory, which emphasise child-centred, self-sacrificing parenting and create unrealistic standards that amplify feelings of inadequacy (Maclean, Andrew & Eivers, 2020; Baker, 2019:170-171; Young, 2019). These frameworks often clash with the everyday experiences and realities of modern family life, where external childcare arrangements like aftercare programmes are necessary to balance work and family responsibilities. Aftercare is an affordable and safe environment for children, but mothers are still highly anxious and feel increased guilt when using these services for their children (Luppi & Arpino, 2020:551).

The problem this study addresses is the emotional and psychological conflict experienced by working mothers who depend on aftercare services for their primary school children. Aftercare is often idealised and encouraged as childcare, yet there are studies that suggest mothers who use aftercare experience guilt when they feel pressure from idealised parenting and caregiving standards and expectations (Borelli et al., 2017; Aarntzen et al., 2020). Little is known about the effects that this maternal guilt has on the emotional wellbeing of these mothers and their parenting practices. Moreover, the strategies mothers use to cope with the pull and tug between caregiving and work are largely unexplored.

The findings of this research may also play a vital role in trying to support families more, and children after school better. In a busy society, in many families the care of the young children cannot be solely by one caregiver, and in single-parent families, aftercare programmes can relieve the caregiver's burden. In most modern families, two or more people have to work for a living, and so external childcare is required for the young ones.

Exploring parental guilt within the context of aftercare sheds light on the complexities of modern family life and highlights the need for improved family support systems, aftercare services, and workplace policies. It will also contribute to positive practices to better support mothers so they can do both their jobs and childcare roles. For example, mothers can be counselled and supported to manage their guilt and work commitments better (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:170; Tripathi, Shukla & Randev, 2016).

This study therefore focuses on parental guilt among working mothers with primary school-aged children who attend aftercare, with particular attention to how societal expectations, cultural norms, and external childcare arrangements shape these emotions. It further explores how mothers navigate the emotional challenges of balancing work and family life, and how feelings of guilt influence their wellbeing and parenting behaviours. It will also aim to understand the coping strategies that mothers use to deal with their work-care tension and how maternal guilt impacts their wellbeing and parenting.

Primary school children were selected for this study because mothers remain closely involved in their children's daily routines, including providing transportation and assisting with homework. At this developmental stage, children are more dependent and require structured supervision through aftercare programmes, unlike the greater independence typically seen among high school learners. Maternal involvement during these foundational years plays a vital role in supporting children's emotional stability, sense of safety, and academic development (O'Toole, Kiely, McGillacuddy, O'Brien, & O'Keeffe, 2019).

The researcher's interest in this population stems from her professional experience as a social worker in aftercare settings, where she regularly observed the emotional strain and guilt experienced by mothers. This guilt conflict is something the researcher is interested in as a social worker to learn more about the personal experiences of this common phenomenon.

The situation is further explored in Chapter Two which presents a comprehensive literature review about it, by examining parental guilt, societal and cultural expectations of motherhood, and the role of aftercare in the lives of working mothers of primary school children.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Problem statements signal the importance of a study topic. The research problem indicates the reason for conducting a study. It is often the main idea of a study and provides a working understanding of what is being studied, or how a study fits into a wider context (Babchuk, 2017:79; Nasution, Onrizal & Aulia, 2019:2).

The problem explored in this study is the guilt experienced by working mothers who use aftercare for their primary school children. Despite the necessity and benefits of aftercare, many mothers experience feelings of guilt arising from the tension between their caregiving ideals, social expectations, and the practical realities of relying on external childcare. Research about the extent to which mothers use aftercare for their primary school children and what factors in their context contribute to maternal guilt, is therefore needed. Such knowledge can be used to help mothers to strengthen their resolve to pursue multiple work and family roles.

In the United States, the use of school aftercare increased by 60% from 2004 to 2020, reflecting growing reliance on external childcare arrangements (Steinecke, 2020). As of 2023, just over half (52.38%) of South Africa's workforce consisted of women. Of the female labour force, 89% were tertiary-educated women and mothers (Cowling, 2024; RecruitMyMom, 2024). This has led to an increased need for aftercare. South Africa has approximately 24 900 primary schools, most of them public (Karimi, 2024).

Gauteng has over 2 600 primary schools spread over 83 cities and towns, including 192 in the Tshwane South region (Karimi, 2024; Bhamjee, 2024). Some schools provide aftercare on their premises and others refer parents to private aftercare facilities. Many parents use aftercare even though it is sometimes associated with parental guilt, because of work or other commitments (Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken & Moss, 2017a:1734-1735; Maclean *et al.*, 2020:173).

The White Paper for Social Welfare (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1997b) stresses that the strengthening of family life is seen as a family life-cycle process in which care, nurturing and socialisation play a vital role. Thus, it is critical for social workers to support mothers who work outside the home to experience less guilt in order to help family members function more healthily (RSA, 1997b). Policies and programmes should be responsive to the needs of mothers who work outside the home and care for multiple family members in order to promote and protect the wellbeing of their families.

Parental guilt is a common experience and has been researched widely, especially in relation to new mothers and mothers who stay at home. Research on guilt in mothers who use aftercare for their primary school children, however, is limited. This study is conducted to learn how working mothers experience and cope with guilt about using aftercare for their primary school children in the Tshwane South region, so as to contribute to the knowledge of maternal emotions in a South African context. The findings may be used to develop social work interventions to support working mothers and their families. Table 1.1 summarises research on this topic:

Table 1-1 Research related to the topic

Title	Date	Author	Key concepts
<i>Factors that Affect Attachment between the Employed Mother and the Child, Infancy to Two Years</i>	2014	Kassamali and Rattani	To explore a mother's feeling of attachment and how her working status affects her attachment bond with her child.

<i>Reviewing the experiences of maternal guilt - the “Motherhood Myth” influence</i>	2020	Constantinou, Varelab, and Buckbya	The motherhood myth sets an unrealistic ideal that mothers often compare themselves to, leading to feelings of maternal guilt.
<i>Changed Landscape, Unchanged Norms: Work-Family Conflict and the Persistence of the Academic Mother Ideal</i>	2021	Miller, and Riley	COVID-19 caused a significant shift in the balance between work and personal life, leading to mothers experiencing multiple roles.
<i>Workplace Flexibility, Work-Family Guilt, and Working Mothers’ Parenting Behaviour</i>	2020	LaGraff	How workplace environments may influence parenting behaviour
<i>‘Mothering’ in a culture of (dis)connectivity: Online parenting forums, maternal guilt, and parental competency</i>	2021	Wilde	New mothers are turning to online parenting platforms for support, but these communities can sometimes be judgmental, leaving mothers feeling vulnerable and disconnected from the empathetic support they need.
<i>Maternal Guilt and Shame: Relationship to Postnatal Depression and Attitudes towards Help-Seeking</i>	2017	Dunford, and Granger	This study examined whether maternal feelings of guilt and shame were linked to postnatal depression symptoms.

Existing literature on parental guilt and working mothers provides limited insight into the experiences of mothers with primary school-aged children in aftercare settings.

Some studies, for instance, have examined parental guilt in the first years of a child's life. For example, breastfeeding challenges have been reported to induce guilt in new mothers (Constantinou et al, 2021:853). Maternal guilt in mothers of haemophilic children has been examined (Sheridan, Thompson, Lichten, Coleman & Sidonio 2023:513-514) Parental guilt has been reported as a result of work-family conflict (Aarntzen, Derks, van Steenbergen, & van der Lippe, 2022:24) and parental burnout (Sánchez-Rodríguez, Orsini, Laflaquière, Callahan & Séjourné, 2019). However, very little has been reported regarding mothers of school-aged children in aftercare. In terms of aftercare, some of the related literature has also been inconclusive.

Some literature has indicated that aftercare arrangements may have an impact on maternal guilt. For example, structured aftercare programmes that present children with an opportunity to socialise, engage in creative play and personal growth, could support parental satisfaction with after-school care arrangements, and reassure mothers that their children are safe (Simoncini & Caltabiono, 2012:40).

In a review of literature that focused on extracurricular activities after primary and secondary school, studies were conducted in Hong Kong and found that structured out-of-school care settings were associated with multiple positive outcomes. These outcomes included increased school readiness, health, wellbeing, and social competence, as well as improved parent-child relationships (Chiu & Lau, 2018:476). These findings indicate that well-structured aftercare could potentially reduce maternal guilt by addressing concerns about their children's wellbeing.

Several limitations in the literature accentuate the need for further exploration. This includes a lack of consideration of socioeconomic factors, class-based differences, or factors such as the role of fathers and coparenting in aftercare to support maternal guilt (d'Orsi, Veríssimo, & Diniz, 2023). Other research on maternal guilt was also limited in scope and has largely been focussed on children in their early years of development (Hookway, Brown & Grant, 2023). Some literature on parental guilt associated with child outcomes such as maladaptive behaviour or unhappiness indicate that these children have parents with higher levels of stress (Leung, Lai, Lo, Hui, Kwok *et al.*, 2021:1244-1245; Shalev, Sharon, Atzaba-Poria & Uzefovsky, 2023; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2011:612), but this has not been linked to parental guilt in the

context of aftercare in these studies.

Although maternal guilt has been studied among first-time mothers, limited research has been conducted in the South African context, particularly for mothers of primary school-aged children. Understanding parental guilt in this age group is essential for supporting mothers' emotional wellbeing and parenting practices. Societal changes, including increased female labour force participation, have resulted in more children being placed in aftercare, contributing to heightened feelings of guilt among mothers who struggle to balance work and family responsibilities.

While maternal employment and the use of aftercare have increased, there is limited South African research that explores how working mothers of primary school-aged children experience parental guilt within the context of aftercare.

The burden that working mothers face and the resulting parental guilt is a topic that is rarely investigated, so this study aimed to explore these experiences among working mothers with primary school-aged children in aftercare in South Africa. The study findings should enable a better understanding of how expectations, culture, and childcare arrangements influence parental guilt in working mothers.

1.4 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The rationale of a study serves to clearly express what drove the researcher to initiate a given study, including the objective of the study as well as the reason for which a certain topic is given a spotlight (Creswell, 2016:301; Arch, Twohig, Deacon, Landy, & Bluett, 2015:81).

The researcher's interest in this topic arises from interaction with working mothers whose primary school-aged children attend aftercare programmes. As a social worker involved in an aftercare facility, the researcher noticed a pattern in the day-to-day careers of working mothers as they experience different forms of parental or motherhood guilt. For this reason, the researcher was interested in obtaining more knowledge about the nature of parental guilt in working mothers with children in school aftercare.

While some studies have explored parental guilt, few focus specifically on the experiences and coping strategies of working mothers with children in school aftercare. However, the majority of the existing studies focused on mothers with infants or very young children and have not included parents with older children. The researcher had limited knowledge on this topic, which became the rationale for this study. This gap in the literature highlighted the need to deepen understanding of how parental guilt is experienced by working mothers and how they cope with this complex emotion.

The study of parental guilt has significant implications for both literature and practice, as it provides psychological insight into family dynamics and contributes to fields such as psychology, sociology, and family studies. The research also highlights cultural variations, demonstrating how societal norms shape experiences of parental guilt.

The results have applied implications for parenting educational programmes, mental health practitioners, policymakers, media narratives, and public discourse. On the one hand, parenting educational programmes could include and address parental guilt while supporting constructive ways to manage the guilt. On the other hand, mental health professionals could offer practical support using the results of the study to develop specific psychotherapy interventions for parents in need. Policymakers can also utilise the results of the study to strengthen family policies and support systems.

Overall, this research enhances the understanding of complex parenting and informed both academic and practical responses in the field of parenting and mental health. It contributes to the recommendations that provide emotional support and guidance to working mothers during their children's formative years.

Social workers, in particular, can use these insights to empathise with mothers experiencing guilt and to offer tailored support that addresses their specific emotional needs.

1.5 KEY CONCEPTS OF THE STUDY

The definition of key concepts ensures clarity of concepts used, consistency in usage and common understanding of how terms were applied in the study. When concepts

are clearly defined, the rigour of research is enhanced because ambiguity is reduced, and findings can be interpreted and generalised to practice and scholarly settings. The key concepts relevant to this study are outlined below.

1.5.1 Parental Guilt

Parental guilt refers to the emotional response that is experienced by persons when they are struggling or are dissatisfied with the way they perform as a parent. This often leads to guilt-induced behaviour towards their children (Constantinou *et al.*, 2021:855; Slobodin, Cohen, Arden & Katz, 2020:1917). This emotion usually is a result of questioning one's parenting approach or feeling as if one has failed in some aspect, and it is hard to find a balance between caregiving duties and other responsibilities such as work, personal life or other family members (Constantinou *et al.*, 2021:854). Parental guilt may be caused by the parent's love towards the child, but it could also lead to arguments, a surge in depression and feelings or even overcompensating for parenting (Diaz & Diaz, 2023).

In this study, parental guilt specifically refers to the guilt a parent (mother) feels when having to work and being unable to be with their child in the afternoons after school closes at 13h30. Although guilt experienced by caregivers has been referred to as *parental guilt* in literature, the focus of this study is on working mothers. Therefore, in this dissertation when parental guilt is mentioned, it refers to working mothers unless stated otherwise.

1.5.2 Working Mothers

The term "working mothers" describe women who balance employment outside the home with the responsibilities of raising their children. A woman is referred to as a working mother if she is able to maintain a profession and also take care of a child (Tripathi *et al.*, 2016). The meaning of working mother/father/parent in English is a woman, man or parent who has a job and takes care of her or his children (Cambridge Dictionary. 2024: 'working mother/father/parent').

In this study, the term refers to mothers employed either part-time or full-time who manage both professional and parenting responsibilities.

1.5.3 Motherhood Guilt

Motherhood guilt is a feeling when mothers consider their actions, behaviour, or practices to fall short of the perceived societal ideals and expectations of perfect motherhood (Constantinou *et al.*, 2021:853; Liss, Schiffrin & Rizzo, 2012:1117). Motherhood guilt has been described as an emotion regulation strategy influencing maternal investment in offspring and driven by the culturally imposed expectation of relentless high-quality maternal care (Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010:10). Women often feel increased pressure and guilt when trying to balance the conflicting demands of being both a 'good' worker and a 'good' mother (Cummins & Brannon, 2022:127).

In this study, the term parental guilt is used instead of motherhood guilt to reflect the broader experience of both parents. While the focus is on mothers, this terminology acknowledges that fathers may experience similar feelings, making the findings relevant to wider discussions on parenting guilt.

1.5.4 Primary School Children

In South Africa, schooling in a primary school last from seven years of age until age 12. This first stage of formal learning consists of primary education and covers the elementary learning stages in South Africa. This phase typically includes grades R (Reception) to Grade 7, accommodating children from about age 5 to 13. During this formative phase, children's development is influenced by various psychosocial and environmental factors, with primary schools serving as the main educational setting (Expatica, 2024; Fleisch, Shindler & Perry, 2012:535).

This study focuses on primary school-aged children and the parental guilt experienced by their working mothers.

1.5.5 Aftercare

Aftercare or after-school care is a childcare service given to school-aged children after the normal school day has finished. These services are offered throughout school holidays and term breaks as well. Aftercare programmes "provide a safe, structured environment for kids while parents are at work", with a focus on after school homework support and "free time for fun, creativity, and socialising" (Law Insider, 2018; Wardman, 2023).

For this study, aftercare refers specifically to centres where primary school children remain after school closes at 13h30 until their parents collect them.

1.5.6 Social Work

Social work is both a practice-oriented profession and an academic field that promotes social change and development, strengthens social cohesion and wellbeing, and supports the empowerment and liberation of individuals. "Rooted in principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities, social work informed by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledges continues to engage persons and social structures to address life challenges and promote wellbeing" (IFSW, 2014).

In this regard, social work aims to help persons and families cope with various forms of complicated and diverse family systems, lifestyles, demands and needs. Professionally speaking, social work can therefore address parental guilt felt by mothers when feeling guilty over not being able to balance work life and life as a caregiver to their children (Whitfield *et al.*, 2023; O'Loughlin & O'Loughlin, 2016).

For the purpose of this study, social work is used as a framework to explore how maternal guilt impacts family dynamics and wellbeing, as well as to identify strategies that promote empowerment, social support, and improved functioning among working mothers and their families.

1.6 RESEARCH GOAL, QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to explore how working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt, in order to contribute to social work knowledge and understanding of this population's support needs. In qualitative research, the research goal, question, and objectives should be clearly aligned to ensure coherence and focus throughout the study.

1.6.1 Research goal

A research goal is a specific target derived from the research question, representing the desired outcome of the study, while a "goal" or a "purpose" generally refers to a broader, more abstract concept of an intended achievement (Waller, Farquharson & Dempsey, 2016:19; Blaikie & Priest, 2019:68; De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2017:94).

The goal of this study is to explore how working mothers of primary school children in aftercare experience guilt.

1.6.2 Research Question

Thomas (2017: 323-324) states that a research question denotes a problem that is well-defined, and it needs to be formulated. Questions need to be formulated with attention to existing literature, creative thinking, flexibility and allowing questions to emerge from the who, what, where, when, why and how of the problem under investigation (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:71; Elbitar, 2023). Broadly speaking, questions asked in qualitative research tend to be open-ended and exploratory.

In alignment with the research goal, the study is guided by the following research question: How do working mothers of primary school children in aftercare experience and manage parental guilt?

1.6.3 Research Objectives

Research objectives are the specific actions and procedures designed to achieve the research goal. They are more concrete than the aim and are directly aligned with the research question (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:94; Kapoor, Mahamuni, Bhowmick & Qureshi, 2022:11; Doody & Bailey, 2016:22). In other words, objectives are the planned and measurable actions the researcher will take to accomplish the research goal.

Research objectives provide a structured framework for addressing the research question and achieving the overall goal of the study. The objectives of the study are as follows:

- ✚ To explore the experiences of parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare.
- ✚ To describe how these mothers perceive and manage parental guilt in the context of aftercare.
- ✚ To explore the coping strategies employed by working mothers to manage parental guilt.
- ✚ To provide recommendations for social work practice in supporting working mothers experiencing parental guilt.

1.7 OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH METHODS

A qualitative research approach underpinned by interpretivist paradigmatic beliefs enabled this study to explore the meaning and experience of participants. Employing a collective case study with exploratory and descriptive characteristics provided a contextualised understanding of the researched phenomenon. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, supported by Work-Family Conflict Theory, guided the study by allowing investigation into how systems interact with each other on an individual, family, workplace and societal level. This study focused on participants located in the eastern areas of City of Tshwane and made up of working mothers who had children attending aftercare programmes and enrolled in Grades 4-7. Semi-

structured interviews were used to collect data from participants and thematic analysis guided by Tesch's (1990) eight steps and assisted by Atlas.ti.25 software was used to analyse the data. Measures to ensure trustworthiness were guided by Lincoln and Guba's criteria, while ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and participant wellbeing were strictly adhered to. A graphical overview of the research methodology is as discussed is presented in Figure 1-1. More information pertaining to each section is discussed in detail in Chapter Three.

Components of a Qualitative Research Study

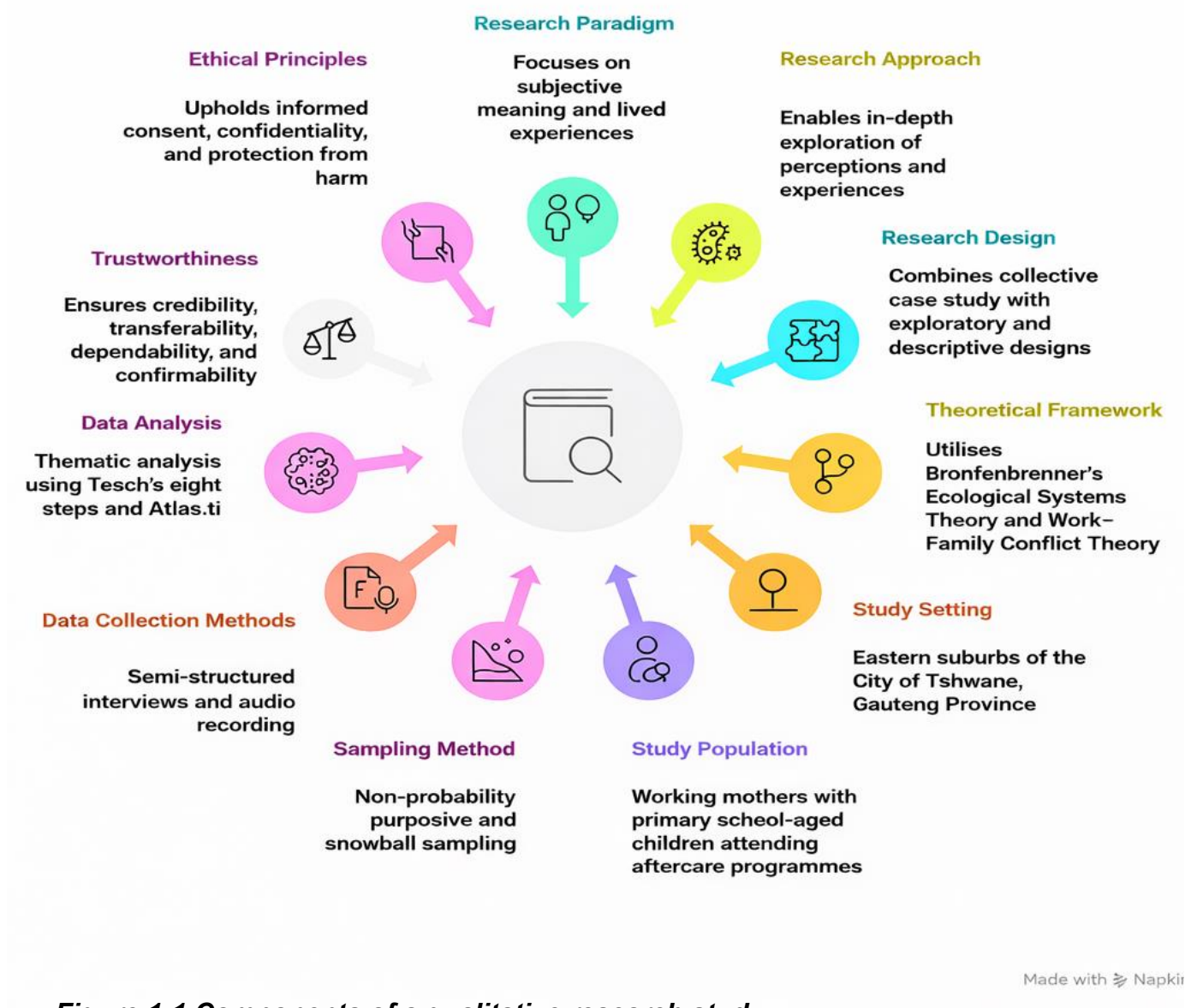


Figure 1-1 Components of a qualitative research study

(Author's own compilation, generated using napkin.ai)

As established in the methodological framework of this study, stringent ethical guidelines were followed.

1.8 ETHICAL REQUIREMENTS

Approval to conduct the research was granted on the 13th of November 2024 by the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review committee at the University of South Africa and regarded as medium risk research (Ethics Reference Number: 5639). Data collection was undertaken from April 2025 until 15 September 2025. As the researcher is registered with the South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP), they followed the guidelines from the Code of Ethics for social workers. For this research study the ethical considerations followed by the researcher were informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and protection from harm were ensured. More information pertaining to each ethical consideration can be found in Chapter Three.

1.9 STRUCTURE OF RESEARCH REPORT

This research report is structured into the following chapters:

Chapter One: General Introduction and Orientation

The first chapter introduces the study, outlining the background of the study, problem statement, rationale of the study, research question, research goal, research objectives, key concepts used in the research and the structure of the research report.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter examines existing literature and provides a theoretical discussion on the concept of parental guilt among working mothers, particularly in the context of aftercare for their primary school children. Information from the literature relevant to the emotions experienced by working mothers is inter alia presented and the context of the study is defined based on the literature.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

In this chapter, the qualitative research approach, research design and qualitative research methods used in the study are presented in detail, with respect to its application during the fieldwork.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

In this chapter, the findings of the study are reported. The identified themes, which are based on the analysis of the data, are presented along with excerpts from the transcribed interviews, discussed and related to the existing literature in the form of a literature control.

Chapter Five: Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

In this chapter, a summary of the previous chapters is presented with a special emphasis on the central points, discussions and findings of the study. The conclusions of the study are reported and the recommendations, which are logically derived from the conclusions are also provided.

1.10 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter One provides a comprehensive overview of the study, outlining the contextual background and theoretical foundations. Also addressed is the purpose of the study, specifically explore how working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt. Noted are how more women are participating in the workforce and that this development has created additional challenges for mothers who attempt to balance work and parenthood. An emphasis on certain societally defined concepts such as “intensive mothering” and the “ideal mother” persist, often causing mothers to feel guilt and shame if they cannot be with their children after the school day (Liss *et al.*, 2012:1112; Constantinou *et al.*, 2021:853).

While parental guilt has been widely studied, the majority of research focuses on mothers of infants or younger children in the contexts of breastfeeding and early attachment or with chronic childhood illnesses (Diaz & Diaz, 2023). There is a notable gap in understanding the specific emotional experiences of working mothers with school-aged children who rely on aftercare programmes.

This gap is especially significant in South Africa, where a growing number of parents have to utilise aftercare services to meet social and economic demands, but whose use and emotional impact is not yet well understood (Wardman, 2023).

In the problem statement, the knowledge gap is articulated, and the study need described in terms of examining how cultural expectations, societal norms, and child-care practices shape emotional experiences of working mothers (Slobodin *et al.*, 2020:1914-1915). The study seeks to address this by exploring the lived experiences of parental guilt in this specific context, which can inform supportive interventions and social work practice in the future.

The rationale for the study is primarily the dual positionality of the researcher as a social worker and observer in an aftercare context, which daily involves interacting with both mothers and children. The researcher noted the complex emotional and practical experience of mothers having to manage work and family during this time. This is aggravated by the experience of guilt and shame, particularly when having to leave the children in the care of another for work and not being able to be fully present with the children during these periods. These observations motivated this formal investigation into parental guilt within this context.

Key concepts, including parental guilt, working mothers, primary school children, aftercare, and social work are defined to ensure conceptual clarity and consistency throughout the study. With the research it is aimed explore how working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt and the meaning they make of it in an aftercare context. The findings from the study will be used to inform best practice in parenting education, mental health support for parents and policy development for parenting support programmes to support maternal wellbeing and healthier family dynamics.

The central research question guiding this study is: “How do working mothers of primary school children in aftercare understand and experience parental guilt?” This question is addressed through a set of research objectives that focus on exploring mothers’ experiences of guilt, examining how they perceive and manage these emotions, and identifying coping strategies and practice-based recommendations

relevant to social work.

Chapter One set the background for this study by identifying a gap in the social work knowledge base, by contextually describing the problem and problematising it through the lens of social work. This provides a foundation for framing the subsequent research inquiry and establishing the social work value base and skills of which this study can form part.

The next chapter provides a detailed review of the literature related to this study in terms of the existing theoretical frameworks and empirical research relevant to the inquiry.

CHAPTER TWO:

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Parental guilt is a familiar experience among working mothers, particularly those with primary school-aged children in an aftercare programme. Parental guilt is often the product of WFC caused by the so-called ideal mother concept (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:170-171). Parental guilt could play a role in parenting practices, as well as in one's emotional state and can also have an impact on families. This is why it needs to be explored (Constantinou *et al.*, 2021:853; Ren, Han, Ahemaitijiang & Zhang, 2020).

This chapter examines the concept of parental guilt in the context of working mothers. It also looks at some of the social, cultural, and practical factors that influence working mothers' experiences. It explores the underlying causes of guilt and its impact on parenting behaviours. The broader implication for families is also explored. International and local perspectives, including the role of aftercare services in South Africa, are explored to allow for a more contextualised understanding of the phenomenon in Tshwane South. Also introduced are key themes, such as work-family balance, societal pressures, decisions regarding aftercare and the emotional challenges associated with parenting while working.

In this review of the literature about parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare, the focus falls on the concept of parental guilt, the historical and societal context of working mothers and the aftercare system. This is followed by surveying the support mechanisms and structural influences on maternal guilt. It also looked at the legislative and policy guidelines, before describing the theoretical by outlining these areas. Chapter two sets the stage for the discussion on parental guilt, as it is related to social work practice, family policies, and intervention framework.

2.2 THE CONCEPT OF PARENTAL GUILT

Parental guilt is a complex emotion experienced by many working mothers as they navigate the demands of both career and family life. Urbanisation along with the increasing involvement of mothers in the job market, reduced the time for household work and time spent with children in general, despite the notion that it is to the benefit of the family (Shweta & Johnson, 2018). The concept of maternal guilt dates back to the 1930s, when researchers linked “over-protective methods” to feelings of guilt (Newell, cited in Constantinou *et al.*, 2021:853). Influenced by the expectation of society that women are responsible for childrearing and are more likely to be scrutinised, women experience higher levels of guilt than men in general (Li & Laughlin, 2023:2513). For many women, the transition to motherhood is difficult and can result in women feeling like failures or even “bad mothers”. This causes shame, guilt, and leads to self-criticism amongst working mothers (Dunford & Granger, 2017:1693).

This tension between expectation and reality is highlighted by research linking maternal self-discrepancy to feelings of shame and guilt (Liss cited in Dunford & Granger, 2017:1693). Mothers who are either experiencing a high workload or are distracted from their children due to work, can have an impact on their primary school children, as they are unable to provide the emotional support and supervision that they require (Kopp, Lindauer & Garthus-Niegel, 2023:3035-3036). To address this lack of supervision, aftercare programmes provide support and a safe place for children when the mothers are at work.

The media play a part in how mothers are perceived in different light. The media often portray women in two extremes “either as ‘good’ mothers or ‘bad’ mothers,” creating a standard that most mothers cannot meet and creating stress that has been proven to have a negative impact on mothers’ mental health (Douglas & Michaels, cited in Constantinou *et al.*, 2021:215:215). This guilt is further intensified by societal pressures for mothers to be constantly present and attentive, as reflected in the ideal of “intensive mothering” (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2022; RÚDÓLFSDÓTTIR & AUÐARDÓTTIR, 2024).

Research suggests that interventions aimed at enhancing parental involvement and self-efficacy can mitigate such guilt and improve outcomes for both parents and children (Hou, Yan & Zhang, 2023).

Although this study focuses on mothers, the term parental guilt acknowledges that fathers may also experience similar emotions. While both mothers and fathers can experience parental guilt, women are often judged more harshly for not spending enough time with their children, whereas men get praise even for little time spent with children, adding to the guilt women feel (Aarntzen *et al.*, 2022:27). Parental guilt and behaviour affect parenting styles, practices and techniques, and the wellbeing of an entire family and are based on individual as well as structural and social factors. This study explores how working mothers manage guilt while balancing work and family responsibilities, particularly in the context of aftercare for primary school-aged children.

Working mothers manage dual responsibilities, namely, careers that provide financial independence as well as the demands of raising children. Both are difficult and balancing them without neglecting either is challenging, often leading to feelings of maternal guilt from extended periods spent at work (Sanil & Chatterjee, 2024:5746). Traditional societal roles further influence how mothers perceive themselves, contributing to feelings of guilt.

International studies, such as *America After 3 PM*, highlight the growing need for afterschool programmes (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). The unmet need for afterschool programmes in the USA increased from 15.3 million children in 2004 to 24.6 million children in 2020 (Afterschool Alliance, 2020). The data show a growing trend in the unmet need for external care for parents after work. This trend, among other studies from different parts of the world, shows that maternal guilt is an experience that many working mothers can relate to and that it has structural and social causes and effects.

In the South African context, and particularly in Tshwane, the prevalence of aftercare services provides a local perspective on these experiences. Gauteng has the largest number of learning institutions in the country, and in the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, most schools in the primary phase have an aftercare programme on- or

off-site contracted to private companies (Karimi, 2024). Tshwane South, the focus of this study, has many mothers who are employed and have children in primary school who enrol their children in aftercare programmes while they are at work.

This research examines several key themes related to the emotional and practical challenges faced by working mothers, including the concept of parental guilt, its origins, and its consequences for parenting behaviours and family dynamics. It also explores societal changes, work-family balance, and the challenges experienced by mothers and their children, as well as the role of aftercare programmes in supporting families dealing with parental guilt.

Having explored the concept of parental guilt and its underlying emotional and social dimensions, it is important to consider how theory can help illuminate the broader systems that influence this experience. The following section introduces the theoretical framework and the elements that make it a supporting structure to conceptualise how the individual and contextual factors relate to each other.

2.3 HISTORICAL AND SOCIETAL CONTEXT OF WORKING MOTHERS

The historical and societal factors surrounding the experience of working mothers offer a critical perspective for understanding the emergence of parental guilt. The interplay between broad social trends and the intricate challenge of parenthood frames the day-to-day parenting struggles, including those working mothers face. To appreciate the pressures contributing to maternal guilt and to inform supportive policies and family practices, the following dynamics are discussed: gender roles and societal expectations; parenting ideologies and work-family dynamics; parental guilt, its influences and triggers; decision-making in parenting; and the consequences and impacts of parental guilt.

2.3.1 Gender Roles, Cultural Norms, and Societal Expectations

Gender roles, cultural expectations, and societal pressures greatly influence how working mothers experience parenthood, careers, and guilt. Gender roles and societal expectations surrounding parenting can influence how mothers perceive their roles

and responsibilities. Cultural norms also shape how caregiving and paid work are valued within society and can contribute to the ways in which mothers internalise feelings of guilt. While there have been cultural shifts related to gender equity and changing family structures, many societies still have underlying assumptions about caregiving and motherhood that influence mothers' decisions to participate in the workforce and their feelings of guilt. This section will discuss how gender roles have shifted over time, how culture affects societal pressures, and major social changes that have contributed to the way working mothers feel today.

2.3.1.1 Evolution of gender roles

Motherhood, over the last few decades, has experienced an ever-expanding connection with work, and this increasing integration has had complex implications for working mothers. While gender, racial, and income equality are becoming a more central focus of modern society (García-de-Diego & García-Faroldi, 2021:2888-2889), many women still experience a disruption in their work path when they become mothers (Berniell, Berniell, de la Mata, Edo & Marchionni, 2023:4-5). Mothers are often pushed into more casual forms of work that do not provide the same level of economic stability or protection from labour-market based discrimination.

Ideals of “intensive mothering”, in which caregiving is the mother’s primary role, also shape the expectations placed on mothers, and in some way, place added pressure on the women who choose to enter the workforce (Childress, LaBrenz, Findley & Baiden, 2023). While some studies suggest that traditional caregiving roles may be associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression, more recent research indicates that maintaining a balanced approach between work and family life generally promotes better mental health for mothers (Delgado-Herrera, Aceves-Gómez & Reyes-Aguilar, 2024). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic magnified these tensions, as many mothers faced an increased burden of unpaid domestic labour and renewed societal debates about the expectations placed on contemporary mothers (Cummins & Brannon, 2022:124).

It would, therefore, seem that there is still work to do in helping working mothers understand and manage the sources of guilt they feel, as despite the strides towards gender equity achieved in the last century.

2.3.1.2 Cultural norms and expectations

Cultural norms are a formidable shaper of how motherhood and employment are experienced. While culture and its role in the intersection of women's identity, mental health, and work status are considered in the context of different cultures, the importance of navigating conflicting expectations and modern motherhood roles will be relevant as workplace policies and society's understanding of motherhood and work continue to develop.

For working mothers around the world, the complex navigation of motherhood has been shaped by cultural expectations, which tend to often emphasise intensive mothering (Forbes, Lamar & Bornstein, 2020:279). While traditional perspectives view mothers as primary caregivers, those who pursue careers challenge these entrenched expectations, sometimes at the cost of reduced career growth or personal wellbeing (Chang, Chin & Ye 2014).

In South Africa, there is a uniquely historical and cultural landscape that affects working mothers' roles and decision-making power within the family unit. The apartheid regime, and its impact on families, gender roles and, the interaction between tradition and modernisation in urban settings and socio-economic struggles, and the pressure on mothers to care for multiple family members, in rural settings could all create additional constraints (Laotan-Brown, 2020; Till, Farao, Coleman, Shandu, Khuzwayo *et al.*, 2022). These issues were also exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which increased the need for unpaid labour and created a more divisive and demanding environment for working mothers who were often expected to meet both modern and traditional caregiving expectations and increasingly work in "ideal worker" cultures in their organisations (Zanhour & Sumpter, 2022).

While traditional norms remain influential, there is growing awareness of the need for gender equity and inclusivity in the workplace. Addressing these cultural and

systematic barriers is crucial to supporting working mothers in balancing the demands of both professional and family life. Working mothers' experiences are informed by the ways in which deeply engrained cultural patterns of gender, motherhood, and employment inform both the opportunities available to working mothers and mothers' own mental health and sense of self.

2.3.1.3 Societal changes

The increased participation of women in the workforce has both brought progress and challenges for working mothers. While there is a positive link between women's employment and fertility in post-industrial countries, suggesting greater gender equality at home, traditional gender-role ideologies continue to prioritise caregiving for women, which can reduce fertility intentions (Han, Gowen & Brinton, 2023:322). Gender inequality continues to be a social problem and is seen to significantly affect the life of women, particularly those who are working mothers as the societal pressure to prioritise caregiving over their careers contribute to feelings of guilt and limit their potential for career advancement (Gurieva, Kazantseva, Mararitsa & Gundelakh, 2022:66). It may be that addressing these perceptions and structural inequalities is important for supporting working mothers and promoting workplace equity.

These dynamics accentuate the ongoing tension between professional aspirations and caregiving expectations, emphasising the need for supportive policies and cultural change to reduce maternal guilt and foster equity.

2.3.2 Parenting Ideologies and Work-Family Dynamics

Dominant ideologies around motherhood, childcare, and work dedication impact working mothers' experiences within employment and family environments. Common cultural perceptions about how mothers should parent their children and handle work influence how mothers perceive their roles and judge their performance within each role, often creating tension, anxiety, and guilt. The following section will discuss how intensive mothering ideals, work-family conflict, work-family balance, and work-family transitions relate to emotions of working mothers.

2.3.2.1 Intensive mothering and work-family conflict

The ideology of intensive mothering establishes impossible standards, requiring mothers to prioritise their children's needs over their own wellbeing and professional aspirations (Henderson, Harmon & Newman, 2015:523). In practice, for many mothers, intensive mothering sets the tone for social norms, whether overtly or through more subtle expectations that a child comes first in life, which then manifests as internalised guilt when the mother tries to balance her individual and professional needs. This guilt is so normalised that mothers feel they are subject to it as an inevitable fact of motherhood today (Kleiman, 2011).

This contributes to increased guilt, anxiety, and stress for working mothers who feel torn between work and family life. The ideal of the "perfect mother" can also exacerbate the issue, impacting mental health and parental burnout (Meeussen and Van Laar, 2018).

Still, not all mothers embrace the idea of intensive mothering. Studies have identified various profiles of motherhood, including the profiles of "Relaxed Mothers" and "High Investors", suggesting that mothers approach parenting differently based on their values, culture, and socioeconomic context (Lankes, 2022:695). Social media groups have also emerged as spaces for mothers to express their experiences and resist traditional motherhood expectations (Bailey, 2021:675).

To address the adverse effects of intensive mothering, it is necessary to engage in critical self-reflection about motherhood ideologies and support more balanced and informed social discourses on the topic. Support systems, such as workplace flexibility, accessible quality childcare, and family-friendly policies, are also important for alleviating such pressures (Henderson *et al.*, 2015:512-513).

Ultimately, the notion of intensive mothering shows how socially constructed ideas and internalised expectations can exacerbate working mothers' feelings of guilt, underlining the need for more flexible and compassionate perspectives on motherhood and caregiving.

2.3.2.2 Work-family conflict and stress

Work-family conflict can exacerbate parental guilt. For instance, mothers who have to depend on aftercare services in order to work can experience increased levels of guilt. One way to explain this effect is with cognitive dissonance theory, where mothers feel they are in tension with socially constructed ideals of parenting (Ruan, Li, Zhang & Liu, 2019:26-267). Mothers may be stressed about these factors by missing important milestones or events in their children's lives as well as by the general work-family conflict of having to juggle both (Graham, Weale, Lambert, Kinsman & Stuckey *et al.* 2021:942). The daily intersection of family responsibilities and job tasks has also been shown to lead to less job satisfaction and higher guilt (Hwang & Hoque, 2023:833).

Attachment anxiety may also be a potential mediating factor in this relationship, as parents with a lower tolerance for distress have been found to be more impacted by work-family conflict (River, Borelli & Nelson-Coffey, 2019). Mothers have been found to cope with the issue by overcompensating, which can lead to further stress (Borelli *et al.*, 2017a:1735). At the same time, high parenting self-efficacy and peer support may be effective buffers for maternal guilt (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:169). Though more research on this issue in the context of South Africa is needed, other international research underscores the role of structural interventions at the workplace in reducing work-family conflict and caregiver stress (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:178).

Work-family conflict seems to contribute to maternal guilt and also can be expected to interact with stress and self-perceptions, suggesting that supportive structures at home and in the workplace are likely essential for helping mothers manage these competing demands.

2.3.2.3 Work-family balance

Parental guilt often stems from the constant struggle to balance work responsibilities with parenting. Many parents feel that they are either not performing well at their jobs or that they are not adequately fulfilling their roles as parents. They may feel inadequate or that they are always falling short (Gupta, 2023). Although parents do the best they can, sometimes they may only manage to complete the most basic tasks

because they have so many other responsibilities that they might feel overwhelmed. Consequently, they feel too pressured to really enjoy quality time with their children. For example, they may have a heavy workload at work, which can drain their emotional and physical energy. With less energy available for other aspects of their life, parents may be less involved in family life, which can increase their feelings of guilt (Foucreault, Menard, Houlfort, Lavigne & Trépanier, 2022:1066).

The concept of work-life balance emphasises the importance of establishing clear boundaries between one's professional and personal life. The balance can be seen as the situation in which the strain in one area does not have negative consequences for the other, or when a person feels satisfied and successful in both areas of life while experiencing a minimum of conflict between their various responsibilities (Gerçek, 2024b:196).

Recognising the fact that, in life, it is impossible to be perfect in every area and successful in every field, can help a person maintain the right balance. By accepting this, a parent will be able to be more rational and not torment himself with the thought that he is not doing enough. He can prioritise, share responsibilities and focus on what is most important to him (Kumari, Sye, Shakee, Bhargav, Mehta *et al.*, 2024).

The challenges of work-family balance reveal a complex relationship between work and family life, reinforcing the persistent nature of maternal guilt and the importance of supportive structures and coping strategies that promote a more sustainable and compassionate sense of balance.

2.3.2.4 Transitioning between work and family life

Decisions about aftercare and the necessity of working outside the home also intersect with parental transitions between work and family life. On a practical level, parents, and mothers in particular, often face challenges and emotional complexities when it comes to the realities of work-family transitions. Aftercare pick up, for example, is often a time of ambivalence, where mothers feel both relief at being able to pick their children up but also guilt over having to leave them for a period of time (Jewell, 2016).

Unpredictable work schedules can complicate and amplify these transitions and the emotions related to them (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2021:2; Luhr, Schneider & Harknett, 2022:25).

In general, then, it also appears that transitions between work and family life both explain the emotional load of maternal guilt and interrelate with work and childcare decisions mothers must make in order to meet both practical and emotional needs.

2.3.3 Parental Guilt: Influences and Triggers

Parenting ideologies frame working mothers' experiences with negotiating work, caregiving, and guilt. Assumptions about parenting and employment become benchmarks against which mothers evaluate their experiences and prioritise competing responsibilities in home and work environments. This portion of the chapter discusses how the concepts of intensive mothering, work-family conflict, work-life balance, and work-family transitions inform our understanding of emotion.

2.3.3.1 Societal and personal influences on parental guilt

Parental guilt experienced by working mothers is complex and multifaceted, shaped by a web of societal and cultural factors, including but not limited to gendered parenting roles, internalised expectations, and their reflections on individual parenting choices and styles. For instance, dominant social values play an important role in setting high standards of what it means to be a “good” mother or father, for whom being a caregiver is the primary role in life. Working mothers can feel they are letting their children and families down when they must tend to job responsibilities that contradict these ideals. This effect can be magnified by social constructions and myths such as the “ideal mother” and even intensive mothering (Sanil & Chatterjee, 2024:5747; Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2022; Rotkirch & Janhunen, 2010:102).

This sense of parental guilt can also be influenced by personal self-reflection on issues like parenting style and one’s own childhood as a child, and self-perception as a caregiver. A robust self-efficacy as a parent and greater confidence in one’s own parenting competence can reduce the negative effect of guilt and boost one’s personal

agency. Conversely, a low perception of caregiver competence can increase the personal impact of guilt (Wolford, Darling, Rehm & Cui, 2019:671; Maclean *et al.*, 2020:171).

It seems that maternal guilt and related emotions are likely shaped both by personal reflections and parenting self-efficacy and societal or gendered norms.

2.3.3.2 Sources and triggers of parental guilt

Working mothers often experience guilt associated with the work-family conflict. These feelings can both affect one's thoughts about one's role as a parent and actual parenting performance (Aarntzen, van der Lippe, van Steenbergen and Derks, 2020:121; Borelli, Nelson-Coffey, River, Birken & Moss-Racusin, 2017b). These feelings of guilt are often intensified by gendered social and cultural expectations of caregivers, especially those based on traditional gender roles, intensive mothering and associated normative values (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:170-171). The intensity of guilt varies with factors such as work hours and the level of work-family conflict, with mothers typically reporting higher levels of guilt than fathers (Sousa, Kuschel, Brito & Gonçalves, 2018). In terms of practical solutions, structural interventions can help, such as establishing egalitarian workplace norms and making supportive work and home environments for caregivers (Irak, Kalkışım & Yıldırım, 2019; Maclean *et al.*, 2020:169).

It appears that parental guilt arises from both societal pressures and everyday practical challenges, making it likely that supportive systems play a crucial role in helping mothers navigate the emotional demands of balancing work and family life.

2.3.3.3 Emotional differences between parents

Societal expectations that position working mothers as primary caregivers appear to contribute to their higher levels of work-family guilt compared with fathers or stay-at-home mothers. Fathers are less likely to experience guilt, while stay-at-home mothers, whose day-to-day roles more closely align with intensive mothering, are more buffered from its effects (Borelli *et al.*, 2016a:14; Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2022).

These emotional differences between parents may be the result of the complex interplay of social forces, gendered expectations and role congruity in suggesting that working mothers are uniquely challenged in guilt that might need to be directly addressed.

2.3.3.4 Demographic differences in guilt

Parental guilt appears to vary across socioeconomic, cultural, and contextual factors. For mothers in low-income contexts, for example, resource scarcity may be a source of shame and inadequacy. Research in both Singapore and Pakistan, for instance, points to poverty-related shame and resource scarcity as a potential source of guilt and shame for mothers (Shorey, Ng, Liu & Chee, 2024:429; Omer, Zakar, Zakar & Fischer, 2021).

In South Africa, socioeconomic factors also shape maternal guilt in ways that are both culture-specific and potentially universal. In Alexandra township, for example, less-educated mothers sometimes reported feeling unprepared to help their children with mental health needs, a situation that can contribute to maternal guilt (Bain & Richards, 2016:71). At the same time, some cultural practices, such as ubuntu, appear to provide emotional support, helping to alleviate some of these pressures (Mathebane, 2016).

Taken together, these demographic, cultural and socioeconomic sources of guilt suggest that maternal guilt may not be universal but may also shift with circumstances and over time. It may also follow that alleviating such guilt should be individualised to the mother's context.

Building on this understanding, the next section begins the review of parental decision-making models. This will help to expand on working mother's decisions and choices around childcare and aftercare as they relate to both their practical and emotional needs.

2.3.4 Decision-Making in Parenting

Decision-making among working mothers is multifaceted, subjective, and reliant upon many affective and social factors. Decisions around care, work, and aftercare can occur simultaneously, under stressful time constraints, immense emotionality, and pressure. Mothers may feel guilt, which may impact decision-making perceptions and behaviours. How emotions, childcare/aftercare decisions, and parenting style influence day-to-day decision-making is explored below.

2.3.4.1 Emotional and contextual influences on parental decision-making

A discussion of the emotional and contextual factors influencing parental decision-making will lay a better foundation to understanding the challenges working mothers face on a daily basis. As well as the more general practicalities of decision-making in parenting and aftercare, choices made in a parental role are often far from straightforward. They are far more complex and are likely to be both more frequent and fraught, particularly in the realm of aftercare, with working mothers having to choose parenting styles, level of involvement, working hours and other family issues that need to be addressed daily. Most choices made are influenced by both societal and personal expectations, with mothers not only juggling these pressures but also contending with their own guilt and cognitive dissonance when making childcare and aftercare decisions. The following sections will cover this in more detail as related to family dynamics, maternal guilt, and mothers' ability to juggle multiple responsibilities.

2.3.4.2 Childcare and aftercare decision-making

Mothers' decisions regarding aftercare are often shaped by the need to balance work responsibilities with their children's wellbeing, while managing feelings of guilt (Jewell, 2016). Their decision making is complicated not only by practical factors like financial costs and safety concerns, but also by the societal expectation that aftercare is somewhat of a compromise, with feelings of guilt associated in most cases (Radey, Langenderfer-Magruder & Speights, 2021:1314). Mother's decisions and feelings about aftercare are likely to be affected by cultural factors as well as social and economic context.

Mothers also often feel the aftercare decision is not ideal, not allowing for the one-on-one time they might wish to give, or providing less consistent or lower quality care (Navarro-Cruz, 2020:499).

It appears that decisions around aftercare involve a delicate negotiation between practical needs and emotional concerns. Societal expectations can also explain how maternal guilt, and maternal perspective can intertwine to shape everyday parenting choices.

2.3.4.3 Guilt and parenting styles

Parental guilt is one factor that has been shown to influence parenting styles. Permissive parenting style has been frequently associated with parental guilt (Rutledge & Swindle, 2016:1-2). Permissive parenting is characterised by low demands and high responsiveness and is also termed a lax parenting style. Parents who make use of permissive parenting often show a lack of discipline and high acceptance. Their goal to generally appease their children may stem from their need to compensate for the shortcomings. Research has been mixed, permissive parenting has been linked with various negative child outcomes, including, but not limited to, externalising behaviour, conduct problems, and low academic achievement. However, other studies have found that parental permissiveness is associated with child self-esteem (Rutledge & Swindle, 2016:)1-2. Parenting stress, associated with parental guilt, has also been shown to be a predictor of permissive parenting. Parents with elevated stress and guilt can unconsciously employ permissive parenting strategies which may contribute to child behaviour problems (Tyler, Donovan, Scupham, Shiels & Weaver, 2019:2100; Mak, Yin, Li, Cheung & Oon, 2020:2999; Sánchez-Rodríguez *et al.*, 2019).

Parental guilt, and maternal guilt in particular, appears to be a complex emotional state that is influenced by an interplay of a number of factors. Societal and cultural influences, including intensive mothering ideals and gendered social expectations, along with personal influences such as work-family conflict, sense of self-efficacy and emotion regulation strategies have all been implicated in parental guilt. Both societal and personal factors are likely to play a role in influencing parent mental health and

their resulting parenting practices. This is a critical area of support for mothers, and other parents, that calls for interventions and systems that not only support maternal wellbeing but also support healthy parent-child relationships and alleviate maternal guilt and other emotional experiences (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2022; Borelli *et al.*, 2016a; Mereish, Anderson, Hawthorne, Cox & Harris, 2020:1546).

It appears that parental guilt not only shapes parenting practices but also intertwines with societal expectations and personal pressures, suggesting that support for mothers must address both emotional wellbeing and practical strategies for parenting.

2.3.5 Consequences and Impacts of Parental Guilt

Working moms juggle many complicated emotions and social factors when it comes to decision making in parenting. Decisions about caregiving, employment and aftercare can be forced by competing demands, made in heightened emotions and impacted by mom guilt when analysing and carrying out decision-making. This section explores how emotions and external factors, childcare/aftercare and parenting styles affect moms' daily parenting decisions.

2.3.5.1 Consequences of parental guilt

Motherhood guilt can also impact parenting behaviours and attitudes. Research indicates how guilt may affect parent-child interactions, child-rearing practices, and developmental outcomes. Mothers frequently engage in social comparisons with other mothers, internalising perceived cultural expectations of parenting (Constantinou *et al.*, 2021:15). This is supported by Diaz and Diaz (2023) who acknowledge that parental guilt is a common experience. Allowing these emotions to override logical thinking and decision-making can be harmful. Parenting guilt may lead to inconsistent discipline, diminished authority and heightened internalised feelings of inadequacy.

It is likely that the consequence of parental guilt extends beyond individual emotions, influencing parenting strategies and child outcomes. This then underscores the need for support systems that help mothers manage guilt constructively.

2.3.5.2 Impact on mental health and wellbeing

Working mothers with children in aftercare experience complex emotions, including guilt and anxiety, and positive feelings when expectations are met (Johnson and Padilla, 2019:18-19). The pressure to conform to societal ideals of intensive mothering heightens stress and feelings of inadequacy, particularly during daily routines like commuting (Castro, Brady & Cook., 2020:462-463). Parental guilt can impact mothers' mental health, increasing stress, anxiety and reducing self-efficacy. The pressure to meet societal motherhood ideals can negatively affect working mothers, compounding their challenges and work performance, and emotional resilience (Henderson *et al.*, 2015:522).

Higher satisfaction with parenting roles and strong support systems can serve as protective factors for working mothers, helping to mitigate stress and enhance family wellbeing. Parents' perceptions of their competence, like parenting self-efficacy and satisfaction, influence children's healthy development and wellbeing (Holley and Haycraft, 2021). Interventions that increase maternal satisfaction and self-compassion can buffer negative outcomes and improve maternal and family dynamics (Chong, Cheng, Chien, Yau & Kwan, 2023:9). To support working mothers effectively, implementing supportive policies and ensuring reliable aftercare services are critical. These measures reduce maternal stress and promote psychological wellbeing, empowering mothers to balance their roles.

It appears that the emotional experiences of working mothers are shaped by both internal pressures and external supports, suggesting that effective childcare solutions and workplace policies are crucial for mitigating guilt and promoting family wellbeing.

2.3.5.3 Challenges of being a mother

Working mothers face numerous challenges as they try to juggle their responsibilities at work with the task of raising their children. The number one challenge for working mothers in terms of balancing their job with their family life is time constraints. This makes it difficult for them to provide attentive childcare and maintain healthy family dynamics while working outside the home and meeting other responsibilities (Adem,

2023). Societal norms around childcare often result in gender inequality, with women disproportionately bearing the responsibility of managing both work and family roles (Rahmy & Hamsah, 2023:155). The psychological strain experienced by working mothers, together with the impact on their relationships and overall quality of life, further complicate the pursuit of work-life balance (Iniya, 2023).

Such a statement proves that the maternal guilt or work-life stress women are facing at work is inextricably linked with society's expectations and structural pressures, emphasising the need for supportive policies and cultural changes to assist working mothers in handling the expectations.

2.3.5.4 Challenges and impacts on children

Parenting involves meeting children's emotional, material, and developmental needs while providing a safe and nurturing environment. When parents rely on others for caregiving, they might feel guilty about not being directly involved and may inadvertently engage in intensive parenting, showering their children with gifts and attention (Seepamore, 2016). In recent years, psychologists have observed a rise in anxiety and depression among children and young people, with younger children increasingly seeking support to cope with societal pressures on themselves and their parents (DeAngelis, 2022). Research further indicates that maternal absence or work-related preoccupation can negatively impact on children's wellbeing and behaviour, such as manifesting in hyperactivity and conduct problems (Kizuki, Ochi, Isumi, Kato & Fujiwara, 2018; Gunderson & Barrett, 2015:992-993).

Studying parental guilt, particularly among working mothers, is therefore essential for understanding its effects on families and informing practice within the field of social work. This study can further help to determine the impact of the factors on the family and help social workers to support children who have been affected by this parental issue and see better mental health and a stable family. It may also be understood that maternal guilt and work-related pressures extended beyond the mothers themselves, influencing child development and family dynamics, and highlighting the need for supportive interventions for both parents and children.

2.4 THE AFTERCARE SYSTEM

Aftercare services in South Africa play a crucial role in supporting working mothers by providing structured environments where children can engage in supervised activities after school. These services allow mothers to fulfil professional responsibilities while ensuring their children's safety and development. However, this system still has some major disadvantages, since due to insufficient policies and lack of resources, it is not easily accessible to all mothers (Mpanza, Govender & Voce, 2022).

The problem is particularly noticeable in the rural areas, which are characterised by a serious lack of aftercare support. Furthermore, lower-income mothers often experience additional pressure in finding suitable and affordable childcare that they can leave their children with. This sometimes results in mothers leaving children with untrustworthy people or under constant supervision, which can also increase mothers' sense of guilt (Horwood, Hinton, Haskins, Luthuli & Mapumulo *et al.*, 2021; Maharaj & Dunn, 2022:480). These challenges were further intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as schools and many businesses were closed, leaving many parents without professional aftercare and with an increased stress level, as well as adding additional caring responsibilities and psychological distress (Nwosu, 2021:1).

Addressing these challenges by enhancing the flexibility, affordability, and quality of aftercare services could provide meaningful support to working mothers. Improvements in these systems not only reduce maternal stress but also promote greater female participation in the labour force and support a healthier work-family balance (Horwood *et al.*, 2021).

However, research from other countries can also provide additional insight in this regard. For instance, studies of childcare patterns and maternal satisfaction with work-family life balance in the U.S. suggest that mothers who use a mix of formal and informal childcare arrangements are more satisfied with their ability to balance work and family roles (Park, Zhan & Choi, 2019:316).

Still, due to certain changes in social and family norms, such as increasing geographic mobility and trends towards delaying grandparenthood, the availability of informal types of childcare such as the possibility of getting help from relatives, is decreasing in most regions (Luppi & Arpino, 2020:569).

While aftercare services are indispensable for supporting working mothers, both structural limitations and changing social dynamics influence how effectively these services can mitigate parental stress and guilt.

To effectively understand the complex benefits of aftercare programmes, it is essential to consider their significance and role not only in providing essential support for children, but also in alleviating the challenges faced by working mothers. The role of aftercare programmes is discussed in terms of the importance of aftercare, aftercare benefits for children and mothers, perceptions of “good mothering”, and the effect of maternal employment and aftercare on mother-child bonding.

2.4.1 The Importance of Aftercare

In modern reality, many parents, especially single mothers and families where both parents work, cannot always pick their children up right after school (Hoffenberg, 2023). It is important for a child to be in a place where it will be taken care of, and aftercare programmes are more than just places for children to be. A positive aftercare programme is a great way to get your child to connect with other children. Engaging in fun activities with friends will help children learn better social skills in a safe environment that they will use throughout their lives to boost their self-esteem. An aftercare programme can also be very helpful for working mothers as it will give the children time to be supervised and occupied, making their child have a more structured day and the mother to not feel guilty for not being with her child after school (Mulberry Learning Centre, 2023).

Aftercare programmes are a way for children to better develop their social, emotional, and educational skills as well as for their mothers to have a more manageable family life.

2.4.2 Aftercare Benefits for Children and Mothers

Aftercare programmes play a crucial role in supporting children's development and wellbeing. Studies have found that low-income children with greater parenting stress have better outcomes in terms of cognitive, language, and social-emotional development in early childhood, with a beneficial impact of additional hours in non-parental care (Dore, Purtell, Chen & Justice, 2022:1447). Aftercare programmes can benefit mothers in reducing feelings of guilt from working mothers, as a study found that high-quality childcare outside the family can reduce work-family conflict (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:176). In general, aftercare programmes are a way for children to have better wellbeing in their child development and to reduce their mothers' work stress and guilt levels (Dore *et al.*, 2022:1453; Ernawati, Mawardi, Roswiyani, Melissa & Wiwaha, *et al.*, 2022:5).

Aftercare services, therefore, work as both a child supervision service as well as a supportive system for mothers.

2.4.3 Perceptions of “Good Mothering”

Ideologies of intensive mothering, or the societally imposed expectations for mothers to be constantly present and available for their children, have a significant influence on people's thoughts of what is considered (Rúðólfsdóttir & Auðardóttir, 2024). It can make working mothers feel bad about their choices because aftercare by others does go against the cultural standard of intensive mothering. Mothers will feel that they are bad mothers for taking the easy way out and not spending more time with their children.

Working mothers use aftercare because they have to. It is not a matter of not spending enough time with their children; their children do not have the capacity to take care of themselves. The guilt can be even more extreme because these mothers know that they need to use these services and still experience conflict within themselves because they know that it is against the cultural standard. Mothers who do not take on the intensive mothering ideology still experience this guilt (Collins, 2020:22; Henderson *et al.*, 2015:515).

This emotional burden reflects the broader tension between traditional motherhood expectations and the realities of modern working life indicating that societal pressures around “good mothering” can intensify maternal guilt, even when aftercare use is necessary and beneficial.

2.4.4 Effect of Maternal Employment and Aftercare on Mother-Child Bonding

Research on maternal employment, use of aftercare, and the mother-child bond demonstrates both the positive and negative aspects that can affect the bond. Maternal employment can provide financial stability to the family, and maternal work hours are associated with mother-child early bonding among low-income families in the first year (Im & Vanderweele, 2018:451). Some studies suggest that returning to work during a child’s first year may contribute to behavioural challenges; and increased paternal involvement can mitigate these effects (Im & Vanderweele, 2018:453). Additionally, infant temperament plays a key role in the bonding process, with positive emotionality supporting stronger connections, while negative emotionality can present challenges (Nolvi, Karlsson, Bridgett, Pajulo, Tolvanen *et al.*, 2016:19). Aftercare services are therefore a great support for mothers as well as for the children’s wellbeing.

The importance of having a good support system for women with children is vital in order to cope with the difficulties of both working and child rearing. The available support system can range from shared caretaking responsibilities, support from extended family, and from using childcare. Support for mothers in this situation can include both public and private interventions. These support systems can help to establish a better mother-child relationship to achieve a balance between work and family life.

2.5 SUPPORT MECHANISMS AND STRUCTURAL INFLUENCES ON MATERNAL GUILT

Understanding how working mothers deal with the stress of being employed fulltime as well as taking care of their kids, the support systems and structural variables that

affect their everyday life needs to be explored. The availability of a support system, workplace flexibility, societal expectations, and mental health resources are some of the factors that directly impact parental guilt. The following sub-sections unpack the interrelated themes to show how social, organisational and cultural contexts influence parental guilt:

2.5.1 Support Systems

Parental guilt in working mothers can be significantly reduced with strong support systems including their partners, extended family and social networks. Strong spousal support has been shown to mediate the effects of work-family conflict which can help mothers manage their guilt, in turn reducing symptoms of burnout, anxiety and depression (Irak *et al.*, 2019:58-59; Lebert-Charron, Wendland, Vivier-Prioul, Boujut & Dorard, 2021:362). Spousal support tends to become more influential as children get older, though it can present as a stressor with very young children as well (Kanter and Proulx, 2019). Extended family and social networks can also provide valuable practical and emotional support but can be lessened when maternal stress levels are high (Sadeh-Sharvit, Levy-Shiff, Arnow & Lock, 2015). Mothers from different cultures may find different support systems more or less valuable; for instance, mothers from Saudi Arabia place more importance on encouragement of career goals over direct at-home support (Alarifi & Basahal, 2023:39).

For mothers who rely on aftercare services, these support systems are particularly important in managing both logistical challenges and emotional burdens. Social policies can have a significant effect on mitigating parental guilt as well. Greater public support for mothers to share child-care responsibilities, specifically when it comes to supporting the active involvement of fathers, has been shown to improve family relationships and reduce maternal guilt and stress (Collins, 2020:1).

When combined, this support systems help working mothers navigate the challenges of balancing career and family life with greater confidence and less stress.

The quality of the parent-child relationship has been found to be one of the most important predictors of child and parent outcomes (Rafiq, Yousaf, Afzal, Imdad,

Hameed *et al.*, 2022). When those bonds are weakened by guilt or stress, both parents and children can experience negative emotional, social, and sometimes psychological consequences. Parents who experience stress from guilt are less able to have positive interactions with their children, while low-income families experience more financial stress that leads to an uptick in frustration and harsher parenting practices which have long-term effects on family cohesion (Ho, Li, Cheung, Luo & Xia *et al.*, 2022). Strong, nurturing relationships are therefore vital, as they influence not only physical and mental health but also emotional stability, including levels of loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Gallegos, Segrin & Thompson, 2021:1442).

These findings suggest that strong support networks are essential for mitigating maternal guilt, enabling mothers to manage the demands of work and family with greater confidence and emotional resilience.

2.5.2 Workplace Policies and Flexibility

Flexible workplace policies can provide mothers, especially those in dual-income households with the support they need to balance work and caregiving responsibilities (Adem, 2023). Employer policies such as maternity leave, can give mothers much needed time with their children while also giving them the time to adapt to their new parenting roles, which can help with the guilt of returning to work (Farré, 2020:46-47). Flexible work hours and support from employers with respect to childcare are both helpful to mothers who make use of aftercare services in particular, allowing mothers to manage time pressure and experience less stress (Perry-Jenkins, Smith, Wadsworth & Halpern, 2016:226; Hipp, Morrissey & Warner, 2016:630).

In some cases, certain policies can backfire if not well designed and implemented; leave that was not aligned with the nonstandard work hours of some mothers was associated with an increase in stress in the long term (Hwang, 2018:665). In that regard, when policies are designed to account for individual differences and not a one-size-fits-all approach such as with workplace flexibility, mothers feel more empowered to manage the demands of both work and parenting which in turn alleviates guilt.

Thoughtfully crafted workplace policies play an important role in supporting the personal support systems of working mothers, giving working mothers practical tools to help overcome and mitigate the effects of maternal guilt.

2.5.3 Cultural Expectations and Gender Norms

Cultural expectations and gender norms significantly shape the experience of maternal guilt. Patriarchal systems often intensify feelings of guilt in women when their work roles conflict with traditional caregiving expectations. For example, in Turkey, societal expectations rooted in religiosity can make mothers feel guilty for pursuing employment (Dildar, 2015). Similarly, in Northern Nigeria, prioritising academic goals over domestic responsibilities can trigger maternal guilt, underscoring the cultural emphasis on traditional caregiving roles (Yewande & Olawunmi, 2023:7).

Gender norms themselves are evolving. As societies transition from less to more economically developed stages, they experience a shift from rigid gender norms to more flexible expectations. This dynamic can result in varying experiences of guilt, as societies reframe gender roles over time (Lapatinas, Litina & Zanj, 2024). Cultural expectations also influence childcare decisions. Latina mothers, for example, weigh trust and cultural values heavily when choosing childcare options, while informal workers in South Africa often resort to aftercare out of financial necessity, influenced by cultural and socioeconomic factors (Navarro-Cruz, 2020:498; Horwood *et al.*, 2021). Patriarchal cultural norms in South Africa also contribute to maternal guilt, but there is a shift as some younger men challenge traditional expectations, leading to changing family dynamics (Singh, 2016:5-6; Kehinde, Lindly, Ntombela & Hermann, 2022).

These studies can show the complex interplay between societal, cultural norms and individual experiences and how they can exacerbate or mitigate feelings of guilt, underscoring the need for contextually sensitive support systems for working mothers.

2.5.4 A Holistic Approach

Supporting working mothers with primary school-aged children in aftercare requires a comprehensive approach. Combining flexible workplace policies, accessible childcare, and mental health resources, can significantly reduce stress and alleviate guilt. By increasing fathers' involvement in childcare, flexible work policies, such as structured flexibility in work arrangements like remote work and flexible hours, can reduce stress and paternalise families, thereby mitigating some aspects of work-family conflict-induced guilt (Perry-Jenkins *et al.*, 2016:230). The provision of affordable and quality aftercare options that blend both paid and unpaid care can significantly enhance mothers' satisfaction with their work-family arrangements, offering more security and peace of mind in childcare solutions (Luppi & Arpino, 2020:549).

In addition to workplace and childcare support, mental health resources are vital. Interventions such as cognitive-behavioural therapy and mindfulness practices can enhance the emotional wellbeing of mothers who are balancing the demands of work and caregiving (Costa, Santos, Virgolino, Pereira & Stefanovska-Petkovska *et al.*, 2021:6). When these mental health strategies are contextualised within the cultural and societal frameworks of working mothers, they can effectively reduce guilt and empower mothers to navigate their dual roles with confidence and resilience. Therefore, a holistic approach that addresses workplace, childcare, and mental health needs provides comprehensive support, enabling working mothers to balance their responsibilities with greater stability and wellbeing.

2.5.5 Role of Social Work Support

The primary need for parents who feel guilty about working and aftercare is to feel emotionally supported and heard. A social worker's emotional support for families who are overwhelmed and anxious can help people with emotional support and listening. Social workers also help families identify stressors in their lives and plan to get help.

They create practical coping strategies to support each family member and identify activities that can be done to ensure that a person is getting enough good food, sleep, exercise and relaxation, and managing parenting stress to balance the daily responsibilities can also help a parent feel supported to help ease parental guilt (CARE for Children. n.d.).

The White Paper for Social Welfare (RSA, 1997b) provides an effective method that social workers should use by strengthening families through a family life-cycle approach to family development. Families should have an array of appropriate policies, programmes and intervention projects that will benefit families and individuals. The approach takes cognisance of family interactions, the broader social environment and natural support networks, with the strategies necessary to achieve economic and social protection and have access to resources that will improve their development. By studying maternal guilt, social workers get an insight on holistic support which will improve the wellbeing and mental health of individuals in our society.

For working mothers, parental guilt is often heightened by the tension between professional obligations and caregiving responsibilities. Social work interventions can support working mothers by helping them manage these pressures, improving parental mental health, and fostering healthier parent-child relationships. A study by Maclean *et al.*, (2020:169) on work-family conflict and maternal mental health found that significant work-family conflict and the pressure to be the “ideal” mother were associated with increased guilt. This intervention is particularly beneficial for families who use aftercare. It can help them maintain a balance and address some of the emotional and practical challenges they may face.

In conclusion, support, family-friendly work policies, cultural sensitivity, mental health resources and social work interventions together provide a comprehensive framework that can help alleviate maternal guilt and improve the wellbeing of mothers and their children.

2.6 LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY GUIDELINES

This section outlines the legislative and policy frameworks relevant to working mothers who rely on aftercare services for their primary school children. These frameworks highlight the structural factors that shape parental decisions, available support, and societal expectations. While South Africa has policies and international commitments to support work-life balance, gaps in implementation and persistent gender norms often limit their effectiveness, leaving many working mothers to manage parental guilt alone (Malherbe, 2020). A clear legislative and policy framework is essential for supporting working mothers in balancing their parental and work responsibilities, for the safety and development of children, for gender equity in the workplace, as well as for the emotional and financial stability of families. An enabling policy environment creates the basis for aftercare services that can support children's development while allowing mothers to maintain a steady source of income (Earle, Raub, Sprague, & Heymann, 2023:186). The following aspects forming the government policy and legislative framework support working mothers in South Africa to balance their parental and work responsibilities:

2.6.1 Labour Legislation Supporting Work-Life Balance

The following acts make provision for employees' family responsibility leave and family responsibilities:

 Basic Conditions of Employment Act (No. 75 of 1997) (RSA, 1997a):

Regulates working hours, leave and other aspects of employment conditions. This also includes family responsibility leave, which affords flexibility to employed mothers who need to meet caregiving responsibilities.

 Employment Equity Act (No. 55 of 1998) (RSA, 1998): Legislation that requires fair treatment, equal opportunity and the elimination of unfair discrimination in the workplace. It also requires reasonable accommodation for employees who have family responsibilities.

Research indicates that work-family conflict can be reduced by work-life friendly policies, such as flexible working hours, paid family leave and job control, and that policies at work can impact on the level of parental guilt reported (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:176).

2.6.2 Childcare and Aftercare Legislation

The following acts make provision for childcare, childhood development and aftercare programmes:

🌍 **Children's Act (No. 38 of 2005) (RSA, 2005):** This Act recognises the requirement for quality childcare and early childhood development and provides for minimum requirements for aftercare programmes with the best interests of the child as the primary consideration.

🌍 **South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996) (RSA, 1996):** This Act governs the provision of primary school education, and regulations relating to after-school programmes.

Legislation and policies specifically focused on early childhood development (ECD) such as the National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy (RSA, 2015) is focussed on children below the age of six (South African Government, 2015:56). While this provides context, the impact on ECD for primary school children and the aftercare required by working parents is largely indirect.

2.6.3 Family and Gender Policies

The following statutory policy guidelines and institution accentuate the changing roles of mothers and fathers in the modern family, and in the workplace, support gender-sensitive workplace practices, and gender equality:

🌍 **White Paper on Families in South Africa (1997) (RSA, 1997b):** Highlights changing roles of both mothers and fathers in the modern family, including in the workplace and calls for greater flexibility, parental involvement and choice

of caregiving arrangements, with many of the key recommendations aspirational in practice.

🌍 **National Gender Policy Framework (2000) (RSA, 2000):** Advocate for gender-sensitive workplace practices and equitable parental roles. These policies and regulations have not necessarily been translated into more gender sensitive workplaces in practice.

🌍 **The Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) (1996)** established in terms of Section 187 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, and the Commission for Gender Equality Act (Act 39 of 1996), in order to promote respect for gender equality and the protection, development and attainment of gender equality (CGE; 2024).

These statutory policies and institution reflect an acknowledgment of gendered caregiving expectations but do not always translate into tangible support for working mothers in practice (Kasan, 2024).

2.6.4 Socioeconomic and Mental Health Support

The following government policy documents and act provides the basis for the socioeconomic and mental health support of South African citizens:

🌍 **National Mental Health Policy Framework and Strategic Plan (2013-2020) (South African Department of Health, 2013:89):** Includes relevant mental health policy in relation to addressing feelings of stress, anxiety and emotional burden of working parents.

🌍 **White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) (RSA, 1997b):** Provide policy guidelines for professional social work interventions that may be put in place to support families.

🌍 **Social Assistance Act (No. 13 of 2004) (RSA, 2004):** This act provides the legislative basis for child support grants and other financial support measures.

While these support measures do not directly provide support for aftercare for mothers with primary school children, they do reduce the overall burden of providing for children and can indirectly make it easier to pay for aftercare, reducing some of the financial and mental burden on working mothers.

2.6.5 Global and Regional Frameworks

This subsection outlines key global and regional frameworks that inform the protection of children's rights and promote family-responsive labour practices, which are relevant to understanding the broader policy context shaping the experiences of working mothers.

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Promotes international standards of protective, custodial and welfare services to children and identifies principles which should guide decisions affecting children's lives including the best interests of the child, parental responsibility, and state obligations to assist parents in providing for children's development (United Nations, 1989).

ILO Convention No. 156 (Workers with family responsibilities)

Aimed at ensuring equality of opportunity and treatment for workers with family responsibilities, this Convention urges member States to adopt policies and promote practices within the world of work that enable workers to better combine their work and family responsibilities without suffering discrimination; It may be particularly useful for finding information on parental leave for mothers who work outside the home (International Labour Organization, 1981).

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC)

Addresses similar topics as the UNCRC but allows for a more Africa-centric perspective in which children's rights are understood in the context of the family and community; Responsibilities of parents is a main theme of the charter (Organization of African Unity, 1990).

Taken together, these pieces of legislation and policies provide useful background information for understanding working mothers' context within society and the workplace. International frameworks, like the International Labour Organization's Maternity Protection Convention, Violence and Harassment Convention, Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, allow comparison to national policies of other countries and show global efforts to protect working parents and children. South Africa does better than average when it comes to establishing law and policy such as the Constitution and the Employment Equity Act (RSA, 1998) to promote balance between work and family, as well as gender equality and children's rights.

However, structural inequalities that run deep in society, weak law enforcement, slow transformation of senior management positions, lack of childcare, and blatant gender discrimination in the workplace still leave parents unequipped to handle these policies when they arise (Mbebe & Du Plessis, 2024). Parents often find that there is little flexibility nor family support in the workplace and do not anticipate nor experience policies as much as they are outlined. Though 76% of working parents say having children motivates them to work more (KPMG US, 2026), parents still struggle with unseen pressure that these policies do not touch. Guy-Evans (2025) explains that children's development is impacted by parental care and their conditions and culture in the workplace. Parents that have more flexibility with accommodations such as working hours or remote work benefits have less parental guilt as working mothers and can positively impact their children's emotions and relationship with their parents (LaGraft, 2020).

2.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research studies require a theoretical framework as it provides a conceptual foundation for examining the research topic. A theoretical framework assists the researcher in interpreting findings in relation to existing knowledge and prior research.

It seeks to synthesise, integrate, and comprehensively explain the phenomenon under investigation by drawing on established and credible theories, thereby strengthening interpretations and offering coherent explanations of recognised patterns (Grant & Osanloo, 2015; Maree, 2016:32).

Exploring the social and personal factors that influence maternal guilt necessitated an integrated theoretical model capable of accounting for both individual emotional experiences and the broader environmental dynamics that shape these perceptions. During the initial stages of the research proposal, Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development was considered. Further engagement with the focus of the study revealed that this theory did not offer a direct conceptual alignment with the research goal. Consequently, the study primarily adopted Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) together with the Work-Family Conflict (WFC) Theory as the main theoretical lenses, ensuring conceptual coherence and continuity throughout the proposal (Collins and Stockton, 2018).

2.7.1 Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory, created by Bronfenbrenner in 1979, explains human development as a product of the interaction between people and various connected environmental systems. Instead of viewing behaviour and experiences as separate, the theory highlights that individuals are affected by layered contexts that interact over time. These systems include the individual level, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Each layer represents a different influence, from close relationships to wider societal structures and changes over time. In this study, working mothers' experiences of parental guilt are shaped not only by their personal emotional responses but also by their family relationships, workplace structures, and wider social expectations (Crawford, 2020; Friedman & Allen, 2014; Khuzwayo, 2020).

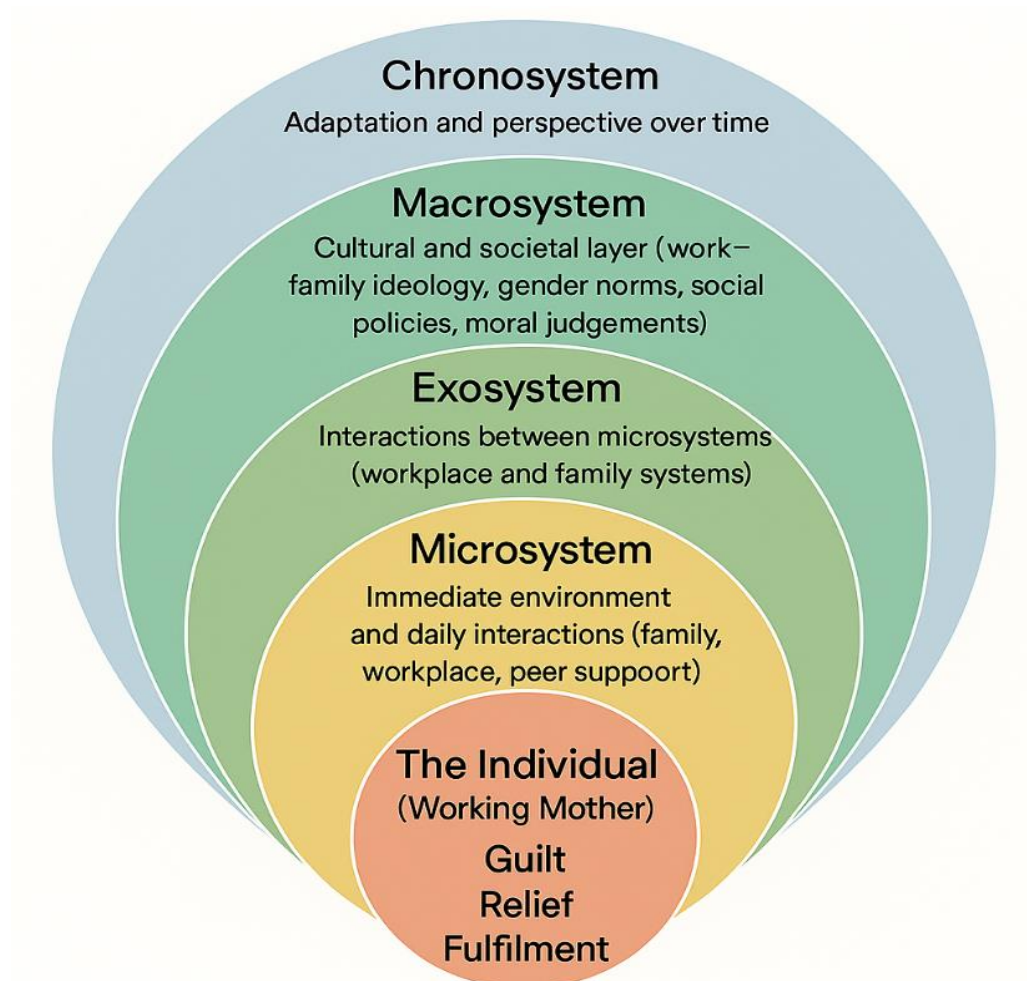


Figure 2-1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

(Author's own compilation, generated using ClickUp)

Figure 2.1 displays Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory above but has been adapted to demonstrate how multiple layers of environment can affect the working mother's feelings of guilt, relief, and fulfilment she experiences.

At the microsystem level, the focus is on the immediate environments in which the individual actively participates, such as the family and parent-child relationship. Within this study, parental guilt is often most directly experienced in interactions between the mother and her child. For example, when children spend long hours in aftercare due to their mothers' work commitments, time spent apart during the day may reduce opportunities for parent-child interaction. This can also contribute to feelings of guilt (Haight, Taylor & Soffer-Elnekave, 2020).

The mesosystem refers to the interaction between two or more microsystems. The connection between home life and the aftercare environment will be explored. The way in which these environments connect and support one another could affect how mothers view their roles as caregivers and how they handle feelings of guilt. In cases where there is positive communication and an established relationship between aftercare and families, fewer feelings of guilt may be felt. However, if they feel as though they are on their own there may be more intense feelings of guilt.

The exosystem refers to environments that indirectly influence the individual, such as the workplace. Even though the child is not directly part of this system, workplace demands, long hours, inflexible schedules, and company expectations can impact a mother's ability to take part in caregiving. These pressures can lead to emotional strain and guilt, especially when mothers feel they cannot meet both work and family demands.

The macrosystem refers to the broader societal and cultural influences that shape how individuals experience the world. This includes social policies, gender roles and expectations about motherhood. Research shows that many societies still have strong expectations for mothers to be the main caregivers (Crawford, 2020; Khuzwayo, 2020). These expectations may intensify feelings of guilt when mothers rely on aftercare services. They may feel like they are not living up to these ideals, leading to increased guilt.

The chronosystem refers to changes that occur over time, including life transitions and broader societal shifts. Over the years, more women have joined the workforce, along with changes in family structures. These changes have led to a greater reliance on aftercare services. As a result, the way in which parental guilt is experienced may also change, reflecting the changing balance between work and caregiving responsibilities.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory further emphasises that these systems are interconnected, and that changes within one system may influence others. As noted by Crawford (2020:50) and Haight et al. (2020), a change in one domain of a working mother's life may have ripple effects across other areas.

In the context of this study, this interconnectedness highlights how parental guilt is not a singular experience but rather one shaped by multiple, interacting influences across different ecological levels.

2.7.2 Work-Family Conflict Theory

Work-Family Conflict Theory, developed by Greenhaus and Beutell in 1985, complements Bronfenbrenner's 1979 Ecological Systems Theory in this study. The theory explains the tension that arises when the demands of work and family roles clash, making it difficult to engage in one role because of the other. Although these roles can coexist to some degree, increased demands can cause conflict. This, in turn, may lead to emotional stress, lower wellbeing, and increased feelings of guilt.

According to Elloy and Mackie (2002), this conflict is commonly conceptualised in three forms. Time-based conflict happens when time spent on one role limits participation in another. For example, long working hours might cut into time with children. Strain-based conflict occurs when stress from one role affects how a person functions in another. An example is when work stress lowers emotional availability for family. Behaviour-based conflict refers to situations where the behaviours needed in one role conflict with those required in another. An example of this is when a mother misses important sports events because she has to work.

Research shows that working mothers may face greater work-family conflict due to ongoing societal expectations about caregiving and the pressure from ideals of intensive mothering. These expectations often push mothers to effectively manage both roles, which can lead to emotional strain and increased parental guilt. In the context of aftercare, reliance on external childcare may heighten this internal conflict (Baker, 2018). Mothers find themselves balancing work responsibilities and caregiving expectations.

Within the ecological framework, work-family conflict comes from interactions across systems. Workplace demands from the exosystem and societal expectations from the macrosystem affect experiences within the microsystem, particularly in mother-child

relationships. This interaction contributes to the emotional experiences linked to parental guilt.

2.7.3 Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

Together, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Work-Family Conflict Theory create a solid framework for understanding parental guilt among working mothers. Ecological Systems Theory shows how various environmental systems shape mothers' experiences, while Work-Family Conflict Theory highlights the internal tension from competing demands. Considering both frameworks reveals that parental guilt is not just an individual emotional issue. It is also influenced by interconnected social, relational, and structural factors. This combined viewpoint enhances the study's ability to explore how working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt.

2.8 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the researcher explores the complex experiences of parental guilt among working mothers with primary school-aged children in aftercare. The complexity of maternal guilt and the aftercare experiences of working mothers whose children were in primary school are discussed. The exploration of parental guilt amongst working mothers with children in aftercare assisted the researcher in understanding and contextualising this common maternal emotion and how it is influenced by social norms, gender expectations, intensive parenting standards, and work-family conflict dynamics. Various influencing factors such as cultural experiences, personal circumstances, and structural realities, like access to quality aftercare and socio-economic status, were considered in understanding how mothers experience and negotiate their parenting roles and feelings of guilt.

The chapter further established the important role that aftercare centres have played in supporting working families by providing a safe and structured environment for children while parents are at work. However, it also highlighted that access to high-quality care, is often limited for mothers in lower socio-economic circumstances, thereby adding additional stress to their lives and contributing to their feelings of guilt.

The role of support systems, workplace flexibility, and access to culturally appropriate mental health resources was also emphasised as important in supporting mothers' emotional wellbeing.

The application of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory together with Work-Family Conflict Theory provided a comprehensive framework for understanding parental guilt. These frameworks highlighted how mothers' experiences are shaped by combined influences across individual, relational and broader societal levels, while also explaining the internal tensions that come from competing work and childcare demands. Together, they provided a deeper understanding of how working mothers negotiate and cope with maternal guilt and feelings of shame within the context of aftercare.

Overall, this chapter provided the conceptual and theoretical foundation for the study, highlighting the emotional and structural factors that shape maternal guilt. It provides a strong basis for the next chapter, which focuses on the research methodology used to explore these experiences in depth.

CHAPTER THREE:

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Three explores how the study investigated the issue of parental guilt among working mothers with primary school children in aftercare. The chapter begins by situating the study in an interpretivist paradigm before the reasons for adopting philosophical assumptions are discussed. Following this, the motivation and application of the qualitative, collective case study research design in this research is explained.

The chapter also details how participants were selected for inclusion in the study, the study setting, and ethical and rigorous practice are explained. In addition, details are presented of the processes that were applied to the gathering, piloting, and analysis of the data to identify themes and the lived experiences of the participants. The methodological decisions detailed in this chapter are outlined to show how the study generated in-depth, trustworthy, and contextually sound insights into complex experiences.

To summarise, the role and application of the research methodology is explained in terms of the research paradigm; research approach and design; study setting, study population, and sampling; data collection; data analysis; ensuring rigour; and ethical considerations. This chapter thus introduces and outlines the theoretical and conceptual basis of the study. The subsequent chapter will cover the methodological approach used in the study to explore the experiences of working mothers in aftercare in greater detail.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

Paradigms have been defined as the beliefs, values, and patterns of thinking that are most influential in the context of a piece of research, consequently affecting aspects of methodology, data gathering, analysis, and interpretation (Rahman, 2023:1-3). Positivism, interpretivism and critical theory have been commonly acknowledged as three well-known paradigms with distinct underlying philosophical elements (Alele & Malau-Aduli, 2023). Investigating parental guilt among working mothers may be approached through different paradigms for analysis.

In this study, the four components of a research paradigm namely ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods were considered essential. Ontology generally focuses on questions about the nature of reality. Epistemology often centres on the relationship between the knower and what is to be known. Methodology usually considers the different approaches for discovering knowable aspects of a chosen area of focus, and methods are the tools used to acquire and evaluate evidence (Bradshaw, Atkinson & Doody, 2017:3).

In the context of this study, the philosophical research paradigm has been adopted and is seen as inclusive of the four components named above (ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods). Interpretivism was used in this study as a research paradigm. Interpretivism as a philosophical paradigm mainly involves understanding and examining the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of individuals. Interpretive data analysis, similarly, emphasises understanding the perspectives and lived experiences of the participants (Olabiyi, 2024). Interpretivism further assumes that truth and knowledge are relative, subjective, socially constructed, and influenced by cultural and historical contexts (Ryan, 2018). The focus of interpretivism on subjectivity and meaning made it appropriate for dealing with the research question. It is dissimilar from positivism that advocates the objective nature of truth and can be used to generalise research findings (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Therefore, interpretivism provided the ability to generate empathetic insights that could guide social work intervention (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022:10-12).

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN

The focus now falls on the research approach and design forming the blueprint for the study about the parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare. This comprises the research plan and procedures used to answer the research questions in a systematic, valid, and reliable manner.

3.3.1 Research Approach

There are three main research approaches, namely, the quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Quantitative approaches rely on numeric data for the aim of testing theories while qualitative approaches deal with the understanding of human experiences and actions. The mixed-methods approach, in turn, seeks to combine the strengths of both the quantitative and qualitative methods to increase the trustworthiness and understanding of the problem under research by combining or mixing the data in different forms (Adhikari & Adhikari, 2023:155; Hands, 2022:1-2; Shekhar, Prince, Finelli, Demonbrun & Waters, 2018:6).

A qualitative approach is used to conduct this study. Qualitative approaches provide a systematic way for the research of social phenomena, and methods are used that can describe, explain, and explore the topic or thing being researched (Bearman, 2019:2). A quantitative approach relies on numerical data for research, is based on its logical interpretation and is sure that statistics analysis guarantees trustworthiness, precision, and objectivity. The mixed-methods approach uses methods, techniques, and procedures from both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide more insight into the problem under study (Cypress, 2017:253).

Qualitative research was appropriate in this study to explore the internal states and subjective experiences of the participants which defined their emotions associated with parental guilt. The use of a qualitative approach to explore parental guilt in different aspects allowed the researcher to understand the varying intensity of the guilt felt, the coping mechanisms, and the emotions (Shalev *et al.*, 2023). Qualitative research was used to focus on the meanings, experiences of people and their behaviour rather than measuring it, allowing the study of human behaviour, lived

experience, and social interactions (Alase, 2017:9; Singh, 2016:10). Qualitative research focused on experiences from a subjective and personal approach and focused on understanding the intrinsic way of seeing the world with its unpredictability (Creswell & Creswell, 2017:45).

Qualitative methods were used to explore the experiences of working mothers about parental guilt, how their perceptions, work-family experiences, and interactions with their children influenced their feelings about parenting and their interpersonal relationships with their children. It also inquired about their perceptions of how guilt originated, and about the outcomes and meanings of guilt in real-life settings (Tenny, Brannan & Brannan, 2022; Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-Hayes, Wadhwa & Varpio, 2015; Shalev *et al.*, 2023). Qualitative methods captured the unique and idiosyncratic reality of each mother's experiences of the guilt felt and were more open to exploring what contextual factors such as their children's behaviour or attitudes, parental self-evaluation, family conflicts, and external factors, for example, had an influence on the perception of guilt. Qualitative data were used to form a basis for several methodological choices made in the study for instance in participant selection, data collection, and data analysis.

3.3.2 Research design

Research designs are defined as different types of inquiry within the three research approaches: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method, where each type offers specific requirements that address the procedures that can be used in research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:11). A research design is a detailed and comprehensive plan or arrangement for research which is a set of methods and procedures that helps a researcher to create a cohesive and logical arrangement to make sure the research problem is well defined, and all components are related and coordinated to make the research coherent (Maclean *et al.*, 2020; Sariyildiz & Erus172, 2023). A design provides the researcher with clear instructions for data collection, measurement, and analysis (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:179; Sariyildiz & Erus, 2023).

Research design refers to the decisions about your participants, site, instruments and procedures that you will use in your study. In qualitative research, there are various

approaches or designs you can use to conduct your study (Lim, 2024:266). These approaches are narrative biography, ethnography, phenomenology, grounded theory and case study designs (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:312-313). They provide different ways of going about structuring your study, developing research questions, collecting data, and analysing the information that you gather.

For the study of parental guilt among working mothers with primary school children, the most appropriate design to use in the inquiry was the collective case study design. This would help to use multiple cases for an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon under study in a real-life situation (Yin, 2018: 57-58), to get a thorough understanding of how different working mothers with primary school children experienced and interpreted guilt in their lives while also trying to balance their work responsibilities with meeting the needs of their children.

The collective case study design was supplemented by an exploratory design and a descriptive design. The exploratory design was appropriate to use in the study because the specific research topic has had little prior research. The descriptive design was used to provide a rich, detailed accounts of the phenomenon. Using these designs led to the suitable use of methods and procedures of data collection and analysis for a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of research of how the working mothers studied experience guilt and how this experience is similar or different in each of the participants (Kapoor *et al.*, 2022:40).

3.4 STUDY SETTING, STUDY POPULATION AND SAMPLING

A detailed description of the study setting, study population, sampling approach and sample size is required. The aim is to put the study in context, demonstrate methodological rigor, and show how the study participants were identified and engaged in ways that support the trustworthiness of the study and the relevance of the findings. The following section outlines these components in detail.

3.4.1 Study Setting

The setting in a study is integral to the research process, as it influences the interactions, behaviours, and experiences of participants, and therefore the nature of the data collected (Tenny *et al.*, 2022). In qualitative research, it is vital that the study setting, study population, sampling process, and sample size are fully explained, in order to ensure that the findings are both valid and applicable (Majid, 2018:3). The study setting includes both the location of the study and the broader context in which it is set. These aspects of the study setting shape participants' experiences, perceptions, and the overall meaning of the data.

Most primary schools in South Africa have aftercare centres on the premises or in close proximity to the primary schools. This study was set in the Eastern suburbs of the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality of the Gauteng province, including Brooklyn, Monument Park, Nieuw Muckleneuk, Hennopspark and Lyttleton Manor, where working mothers made use of aftercare services for their primary school going children. These environments are settings where the day-to-day responsibilities of work, care of school children and family are experienced. This made it possible for the study to elicit mothers' experiences of parental guilt in the study setting.

According to the City Strategy and Organisational Performance Department's *Tabling of the City of Tshwane 2023/24 Review of the 2022-2026 Integrated Development Plan* (CITY OF TSHWANE, 2023), the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality accounted for approximately 6.1% of South Africa's total population in 2021.

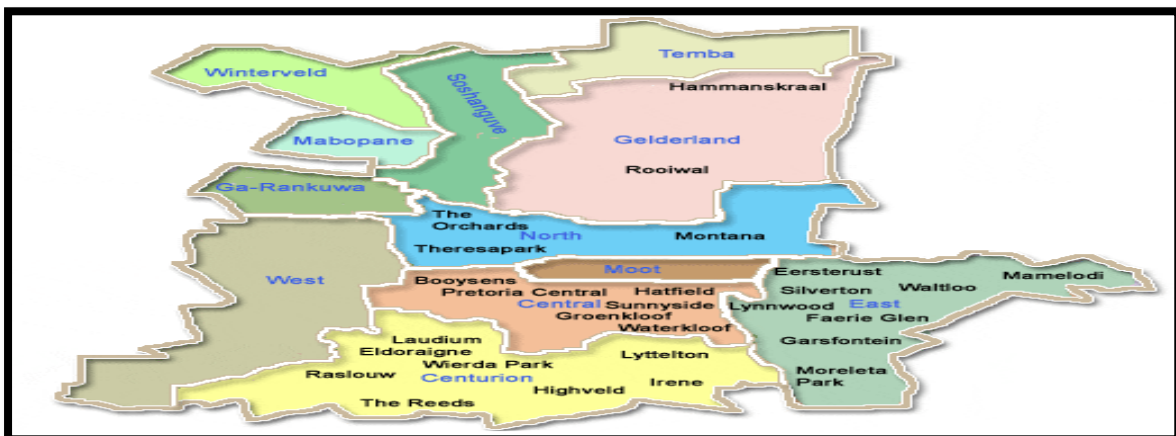


Figure 3-1 Tshwane Map Source: Sleeping Out (2025)

3.4.2 Study Population

The study population or the research population refers to the entire aggregation of people or items that are the subject of the research process. In other words, the population is the complete group of persons or things that the study is concerned with and about whom or what the researcher wishes to generalise or report (Bless, Higson-Smith & Sithole, 2016:162; Garg, 2016:641).

In qualitative research, the population is a group from which the study sample will be drawn (Lincoln, 2021:16). As described above, the study was conducted with mothers whose primary school children attend after care programmes in the southern part of the City of Tshwane. There are about 192 primary schools operating in the Tshwane South district. The research population for the study therefore included all the working mothers with primary school children attending aftercare centres in the southern part of Tshwane. This population is defined broadly in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnic diversity, and family structures, would offer a rich variety of information directly relevant to the research question.

After the population of interest has been identified, the researcher needs to consider whether the study would benefit from including all the members of that population. In most cases, it is not feasible to do this. This then leads to the selection of a sample that is drawn from within the study population (Garg, 2016:641).

3.4.3 Sampling

Flick (2018:605) suggests that sampling refers to the process of drawing specific cases and data from a group or a pool of elements, with a sampling design used for qualitative data collection. Therefore, the sample represents a sub-group of the population that was selected for the study. A sampling approach is required to ensure that any error is reduced as much as possible and the elements or items of the population chosen for the sample are representative of the population (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:223-224; Tyrer & Heyman, 2016:58).

Flick (2018:605) describes sampling as the process of selecting specific cases and data from a broader pool of potential participants, guided by a sampling design appropriate to qualitative research. In qualitative studies, the aim of sampling is not statistical representativeness, but rather the selection of information-rich cases that can provide in-depth and contextualised insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Accordingly, the sample constitutes a subgroup of the population selected based on its relevance to the research question and the study context. This approach supports a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, rather than the generalisation of findings to a wider population (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:223-224; Tyrer & Heyman, 2016:58).

There are two main types of sampling methods used in research, namely probability and non-probability sampling. As displayed in Figure 3.2 below, each sampling method has its own sampling techniques.

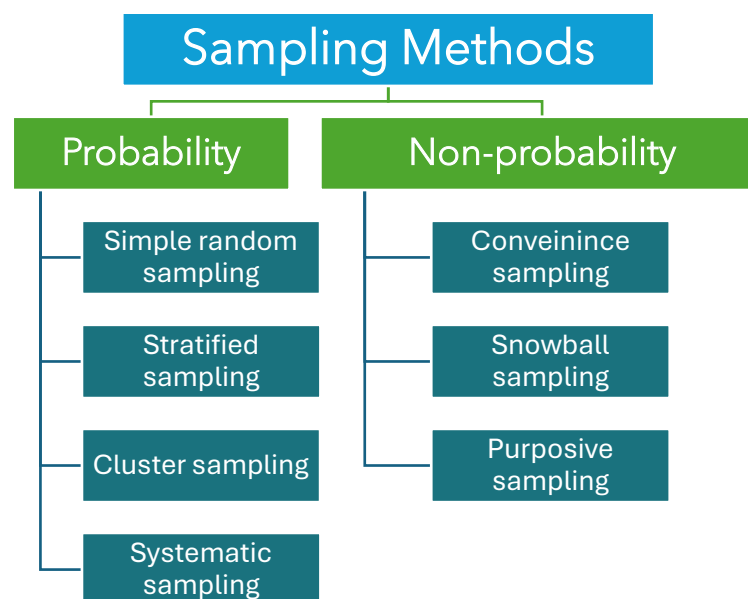


Figure 3-2 Sampling Methods

(Author's own compilation)

Probability sampling provides a method for ensuring each member of the population has an equal chance of selection, using techniques like simple, stratified, systematic, multistage, and cluster sampling (Bless *et al.*, 2016; Dudovskiy, 2024). This method helps researchers estimate how sample findings may reflect the entire population.

Non-probability sampling is based on the researchers' judgment as it does not give each individual in a population an equal opportunity of being chosen. Non-probability sampling techniques include purposive, quota, convenience, self-selection, and snowball sampling (Bless *et al.*, 2016; Dudovskiy, 2024). This approach is particularly useful in qualitative research, where the goal is to obtain detailed, context-specific information rather than generalisable data (Köhler, Geels, Kern, Markard & Onsongo *et al.*, 2019:19; Catania *et al.*, 2015:378).

In the current study purposive sampling was used to select the working mothers with primary school children in aftercare. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling approach where the sample units are selected based on the research aims and objectives (Babbie, 2021; Frankfort-Nachmias, Nachmias, & DeWaard, 2015; Thomas, 2017:46; Gray, 2018). In this case, the sample included mothers who had the experience of parental guilt and had children attending aftercare services. This sampling method was useful for this study as it ensured the mothers who participated had direct and first-hand experience of the phenomenon under investigation. This would in turn lead to the provision of rich and detailed information by the participants (Babbie, 2021; Roberts-Holmes, 2018). In addition, purposive sampling is the most common sampling method used for qualitative studies (Babbie, 2021). This is because it allows the researcher to focus on particular individuals or settings to provide a rich description of their lived experience and the social contexts which shape them.

The sampling technique of snowball sampling was used to obtain participants for this research. In snowball sampling, initial study participants provide the researcher with the contact details of other potential participants, in this case, other mothers of primary school children meeting the inclusion criteria. This sampling technique is used to identify key informants or individuals with specialised knowledge on the research topic. Snowball sampling is most commonly used in qualitative inquiries to recruit key informants who are able to provide the researcher with in-depth and rich information (Shaheen, Pradhan & Ranajee, 2019). The sample is therefore 'snowballed' or expanded as one participant provides another and so on.

3.4.4 Sample Size

Sample size in qualitative research refers to the number of participants or units of analysis included in a study (Mocănașu, 2020:181–182). In qualitative inquiry, sample size is not determined through statistical calculation, but rather by the depth, richness, and adequacy of the data required to generate meaningful insights aligned with the research objectives. As such, the adequacy of the sample is primarily guided by the principle of data saturation.

Data saturation occurs when the information collected becomes repetitive and no new themes or insights emerge from additional data collection. At this point, further interviewing does not contribute additional understanding relevant to the research questions (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020; Lowe, Norris, Farris & Babbage, 2018:195; Naeem, Ozuem, Howell & Ranfagni, 2024). In this study, interviews were conducted until data saturation was reached at 14 participants. The recurrence of themes across interviews indicated that sufficient depth and consistency of information had been achieved to address the research aims. Therefore, the sample size of 14 participants is considered appropriate and justified within the qualitative framework of data saturation.

3.4.5 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria specify the parameters needing to be met for an individual to be part of the sample. Inclusion criteria define the characteristics of individuals to be included in the sample (Garg, 2016:642). The exclusion criteria are therefore specific factors that would exclude individuals from being part of the sample. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study were as follows:

Inclusion criteria

- Mothers who at the time were employed, either full-time or part-time.
- Mothers who had at least one child enrolled in a primary school (typically aged between 6 and 13 years).

- Mothers whose primary school children were enrolled in an aftercare programme.
- Mothers willing to provide their informed consent to take part in the study and to share relevant personal experiences.

Exclusion Criteria

- Mothers of children with severe health issues that could have significantly influenced feelings of guilt or daily routines were excluded.
- Mothers who had recently experienced a major life event (such as bereavement or divorce) that might have affected their emotional responses were also excluded, to maintain focus on the primary research questions.

The purpose of the inclusion and exclusion criteria was to ensure that the sample was specific to the population of interest, that the study focused only on mothers who met the inclusion criteria, and that factors that may have distorted the findings were excluded. In this way, participants were limited to mothers well-suited to contribute to the aim of the study.

3.4.6 Gaining access to research participants

Before embarking on the research project, the researcher submitted a formal research proposal to the University of South Africa's College of Human Sciences Research Ethic Review Committee in November 2024 (NHREC Ref #: 5639) (see Addendum E). The research proposal included information on confidentiality and data protection as well as the documentation of informed consent, the purpose of the study, the data management processes, the confidentiality measures and ethical safeguards that were to be observed.

After the necessary permission was granted by the University of South Africa's College of Human Sciences Research Ethic Review Committee, the researcher contacted several schools and their respective aftercare centres in the Tshwane suburbs

mentioned, these being the Laerskool Pretoria-Oos, Laerskool Monumentpark, Laerskool Louis Leipoldt, Brooklyn Primary School, Laerskool Hennopspark and Laerskool Anton van Wouw, to make the necessary arrangements (see Addendum C). In contacting the schools and their aftercare centres the purpose of the study and the processes to be followed were explained. The researcher also requested the assistance of gatekeepers identify and reach out to potential participants.

Gatekeepers are individuals, workplace officials or organisational representatives who can facilitate access to potential research participants, and at the same time, ensure that research is being conducted appropriately and according to their setting (Yin, 2016:116-123; Ruane, 2016:212; Spickard, 2017:377; Gray, 2018:767). In this study, the gatekeepers were the owners or managers of the aftercare centres.

During this stage, the researcher followed the Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA) (RSA, 2013) guidelines regarding ethical management of personal information. This ensured that transparency about the research, as well as privacy and dignity of potential participants, was upheld. Once all permissions were obtained ethically and respectfully, the researcher accessed potential participants.

The participants were selected based on their relevance to the study and provided rich, in-depth insights into the experiences of parental guilt among working mothers whose children attend aftercare.

3.4.7 Preparation of participants

Potential participants were contacted by the researcher through either phone, email or in person at the aftercare centres. The researcher explained the purpose of the study as being to explore the experiences of, and coping mechanisms used by working mothers when it comes to the phenomenon of parental guilt, the view to contribute to the development of parenting education programmes and family policy recommendations.

The researcher also explained the interviewing process to the potential participants, what it would involve, the expected time, the format, and arranged the date on which the interview would be held. The information sheet (Addendum A) as well as the consent form (Addendum B) were given to each potential participant, to read through. The information sheet and the consent form both provide a detailed explanation of the purpose of the study, the data management and handling procedures, the measures to be used to ensure confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of the participation. Potential participants were also informed of any risks and benefits, should they participate in the study.

The participants were assured of the confidentiality of the data, the anonymisation of all responses, and the strict data storage procedures put in place. It was explained that the data would only be used for the purposes of the study and when reporting the results of the study, pseudonyms would be used when referring to participants, and the information of the participants will be grouped with others to prevent identification. The informed consent process included detailed explanations of the study's scope and the measures to be used (Chakraborty, 2023). Potential participants were encouraged to ask questions to clarify any concerns before signing the consent form to confirm their understanding and willingness to participate.

The researcher ensured that each participant was fully informed about all aspects of the study before signing the consent form. This is a demonstration of voluntary participation and also respect for the privacy of the participants. With this, participants would feel comfortable to give an informed decision as to whether or not to take part in the study in full compliance with the ethical standards (Maclean *et al.*, 2020:172).

3.5 DATA COLLECTION

In qualitative research, data collection is conducted to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. It is made possible by applying such approaches as conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews, document reviews, focus groups, and observation (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2017:4). The steps involved defining study boundaries through sampling and participant recruitment, collecting information

through observations, interviews, documents, and visual materials, and developing a protocol for recording and storing data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:185).

Data collection is a fundamental piece of qualitative research methods and coincides with analysis. Gathering information through fieldwork allows one to collect information through multiple forms (Shaheen *et al.*, 2019; Aspers & Corte, 2019:148). For this study it was important to ensure access was timely and flexible due to working mothers having time constraints.

In this study, the data were collected by way of semi-structured interviews guided by an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions (see Addendum C), which provided an opportunity for participants to narrate their experiences and perceptions while giving the researcher freedom to ask questions about issues that appear during the discussion (Bearman, 2019:5). The open-ended format of the interviews was expected to result in detailed, elaborated information and descriptions of participants' experiences as well as their understanding of the problem (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021:1358; Husband, 2020:1; De Vos *et al.*, 2017:342). The following questions were included in the interview guide:

Biographical question:

-  Can you tell me about your current work situation (e.g., job title, work hours, flexibility)?
-  How many children do you have, and what are their ages?
-  How long has your child been enrolled in aftercare?
-  What is your household structure? (e.g., single parent, dual-income household, extended family involvement)
-  Can you describe your support system in terms of childcare (e.g., partner, family members, or other caregivers)?
-  What is your highest level of education?
-  How would you describe your household's financial situation? (e.g., comfortable, some limitations, financial strain)
-  What are your daily working hours?

- ✚ Did you or your partner (if applicable) attend aftercare as a child? If yes, how does that experience compare to your child's?

Questions related to the topic:

- ✚ What services or activities are included in the aftercare your child attends?
- ✚ Were you forced to make the decision to place your child in aftercare, or was it a choice? Can you explain your reasoning?
- ✚ How would you describe your overall experience as a working mother whose child attends aftercare?
- ✚ What emotions do you experience when you think about your child being in aftercare while you're at work?
- ✚ Can you share any specific moments when you've felt strongly about your decision to use aftercare, either positively or negatively?
- ✚ How has your role as a working mother influenced your relationship with your child?
- ✚ How do you feel about the balance between your work responsibilities and your role as a mother?
- ✚ What factors influence how you feel about your child's experience in aftercare?
- ✚ Have your feelings about using aftercare changed over time? If so, how?
- ✚ How do you manage situations where you cannot attend your child's extracurricular activities, e.g. Netball or Rugby matches? What emotions come up in those moments?
- ✚ How does your support system affect how you manage work and childcare responsibilities?
- ✚ What aspects of your current childcare arrangement give you peace of mind, and what aspects make you reflect or reconsider?
- ✚ How do you feel your responsibilities and emotional experiences as a working mother compared to your partner's (if applicable), or to stay-at-home parents?
- ✚ Have you ever felt judged when discussing your child's aftercare arrangements with others?

- ✚ What do you typically feel when you collect your child from aftercare at the end of the day?
- ✚ What interventions or support services do you think would help you manage and cope with parental guilt?
- ✚ Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a working mother using?

During interviews, the researcher employed interviewing techniques such as active listening, empathetic communication, and asking probing questions to build rapport and trust with participants. With the consent of the participants, all interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate transcription and data analysis (Roberts-Holmes, 2018; DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

Before starting with the interviews, a pilot test was conducted with two working mothers who met the criteria for inclusion in the sample, to test and refine the interview guide and observation protocols. The process of pilot testing clarified the research problem and helped with the planning of the study methodology for the main study (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:236-237). Data that were collected in the pilot testing were not used for the main study. Minor modifications were made to the interview guide following discussion with the lecturer regarding pilot interviewee feedback. These changes included re-wording questions for clarity, changing the order of some questions, deleting duplicative/redundant questions, and shortening questions to reduce participant burden. Feedback was received during the pilot testing on different aspects of the planned data collection. This was used to improve the quality, validity, and clarity of the interview guide (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Jordan, Clarke & Coates, 2021).

Qualitative interviewing has some challenges, including how to establish a relationship with the participants, plan for and deal with unanticipated problems that can emerge during fieldwork and cope with the quantity of information produced from even a short interview (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:343). These challenges were addressed through the pilot study, which enabled the researcher to refine question wording and sequencing, identify and remove overlapping or unclear questions, and develop appropriate probing techniques for emotionally sensitive topics. The pilot also highlighted the need

for flexibility in scheduling interviews due to participants' work and family commitments, which informed the planning of the main data collection process. In addition, the pilot assisted the researcher in developing strategies for rapport-building and data organisation, thereby strengthening the overall interview process.

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Data collection and analysis can take place simultaneously in qualitative research. The process is flexible and cyclical. At the beginning of the study, the earlier interviews were analysed while the other ones were done. As a result, the study was improved continuously through constant contact with the data and literature (Bless *et al.*, 2016:22; Creswell & Creswell, 2018:192). According to Marshall and Rossman (2016:214), qualitative data analysis is the search for general statements and significant or essential underlying themes, concepts, and meanings, as well as critical reflection. Researchers ask participants questions in interviews and focus groups and then analyse the data obtained to find the patterns in the answers and examine them for clarity.

Different forms of qualitative data analysis were used in conjunction with thematic analysis, which was considered the most appropriate approach for this study. These included data familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts, open coding to identify meaningful units of data, and the grouping of related codes into categories. Through this process, recurring patterns in the data were identified and developed into themes, which were systematically used to gain an overall understanding of participants' experiences of parental guilt and to address the research question. Themes may be understood as patterns of meaning within the data, enabling the analysis to move beyond mere description towards interpretation (Rosairo, 2024). Thematic analysis further facilitated the interpretation of participants' experiences by identifying and naming patterns across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022:2).

According to Marshall and Rossman (2016:17), the steps in qualitative data analysis include organising the data, immersing oneself in the data, generating possible categories and themes, coding the data, interpreting the findings, exploring alternative understandings, and writing the research report. For this study, the researcher

followed this route by applying Tesch's eight steps of qualitative data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:196). Atlas.ti.25 software for qualitative data analysis was used to systematically organise the text (interview transcripts) and to code them. The software was used for data management, to easily handle large amounts of text, create codes and categories, and identify patterns and emerging themes. Atlas.ti.25 also aided the researcher to trace the relationships between codes, modify themes in an iterative way, and check for transparency and consistency in the process.

The steps followed included a careful reading of all the transcripts and making notes of the initial ideas, selecting relevant content from interviews, compiling a list of topics, grouping topics into columns, assigning abbreviations or codes, refining topics into themes, subthemes or categories, finalising abbreviations, alphabetising codes, and assembling data under each theme. Preliminary analysis was conducted, and data were recoded where necessary. The researcher then discussed the emerging themes with the research supervisor who made suggestions that resulted in some refinements. The themes that were derived from the data reflect the participants' experiences. This approach was suitable for this research because it resulted in a combined approach in the form of an exploration of working mothers' experiences of parental guilt within aftercare, by describing their personal experiences and the broader patterns in the experiences.

3.7 ENSURING RIGOUR

Verification in qualitative research is the use of a range of systematic methods applied throughout the research process to help to ensure accuracy, confirm findings and improve the rigour, reliability and validity of the research study. Rigour is critical in research and is defined as precision, thoroughness, and accuracy (Ahmed, 2024; Maree, 2016:39).

The rigour of qualitative research is indicated by trustworthiness and is assessed against four criteria, namely, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Flynn & McDermott, 2016:111; Stahl & King, 2020: 26; Cypress, 2017:254; Creswell & Creswell, 2018:192).

The researcher used Guba's model of trustworthiness that is used to ensure that rigour was established in research by using the four criteria of trustworthiness mentioned above to establish validity (Guba, 1981). These four criteria indicate rigour, with credibility validating the research through findings that accurately represent participants' experiences; transferability reflecting the extent to which findings could be transferred to other similar contexts; dependability indicating that the research process is logical, traceable and well documented; and confirmability meaning that the study results are confirmed to be in line with participants' responses and not influenced by the researcher's personal ideas or values (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:192; Saldana & Omasta, 2018:420).

In this study, credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with participants and member checking. Transferability was supported by detailed descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was documented by clear steps taken and decisions made. Confirmability was assured by the audit trail and reflexive notes to show that findings reflected the participants' views and were not influenced by the researcher's ideas (Saldana & Omasta, 2018:420; Ahmed, 2024).

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility ensures that the research process and results convince reviewers of the study's trustworthy conduct (Saldana & Omasta, 2018:272). It is the act of accurately determining and reflecting the true situations in the research (Williamson & Johanson, 2018:15). Credibility is established through extended engagement with participants, persistent observation, and triangulation, which uses multiple data sources for validation (Ahmed, 2024). In this study, the researcher ensured credibility by long engagement with the participants, observing the participants' context, triangulation of different data sources and member checking to ensure that the participants' experiences are captured and clearly stated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:192).

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which study findings could be applied to other contexts, similar to external validity (Williamson & Johanson, 2018:15). It was

enhanced by providing rich, detailed descriptions of the research setting, participants, and procedures, enabling readers to assess applicability to similar situations (Ahmed, 2024; Saldana & Omasta, 2018:423). In this study, the researcher gave a detailed and rich description of the aftercare settings where the study was conducted, the participants' characteristics and contextual factors in the aftercare settings that influenced working mothers to feel parental guilt. Thus, transferability was ensured by a detailed rich description of the research setting and other factors.

3.7.3 Dependability

Dependability in this study was concerned with the research process being logically consistent over time. It means that the process is stable enough to produce similar findings when repeated, and for a different sample (Williamson & Johanson, 2018:15; Saldana & Omasta, 2018:423). Dependability can be achieved through the documentation of the research process, decisions taken, and the techniques used, as this allows other researchers to track the study and judge if the findings are consistent with the study process (Ahmed, 2024). In this study, dependability was assured by detailed documentation of the study steps taken, keeping accurate records, and the use of data collection and data analysis techniques and clearly documented steps. Thus, dependability was maintained by the detailed documentation of all the steps taken and processes used in the study.

3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability ensures that research findings were shaped by participants' responses rather than researcher bias or subjectivity (Ahmed, 2024:15; Forero, Nahidi, De Costa, Mohsin & Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2018:5). Techniques that can be used to improve confirmability include reflexive journaling, audit trails and peer debriefing, to show that the researcher's conclusions are a true reflection of the participants' views (Cypress, 2017:258; Saldana & Omasta, 2018:423). In this study, confirmability was assured by providing systematic coding in Atlas.ti.25, a research journal on data collection, and an audit trail to show how the results were achieved from the participants.

The researcher used Lincoln and Guba's trustworthiness criteria (Stahl & King, 2020:26-27; Maree, 2016:39) supported by recent literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:192; Saldana & Omasta, 2018:420-423), to establish the rigour of this study. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were addressed throughout the research process to enhance trustworthiness.

3.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Maintaining ethical considerations are essential in research involving human participants, as they ensure the protection of participants' rights and wellbeing while guiding morally appropriate decision-making (Bos, 2020:31; Anderson & Corneli, 2018). In this study on parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare, ethical principles were carefully applied to minimise risk, maintain confidentiality, and ensure voluntary participation (Mirza, Bellalem & Mirza, 2023:441-442; Barrow, Brannan & Khandhar, 2022).

The ethical framework guiding this study included informed consent and voluntary participation, non-maleficence, objectivity, confidentiality and anonymity, balancing risks and benefits, appropriate data management, and participant debriefing.

3.8.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

Obtaining informed consent from participants played an essential role in the research process, as it ensured that the purpose of the study, its procedures, and any potential risks or benefits were clearly explained to participants before participation. This enabled them to make an informed decision about whether or not to take part in the study (Abrar & Sidik, 2019:186; Lune & Berg, 2017:46). Participants were briefed at the beginning of each interview and were reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences (Arifin, 2018:30).

In addition, participants were provided with sufficient information about the study to safeguard their wellbeing and to ensure that participation remained both informed and

voluntary throughout the research process (De Vos et al., 2017:117; Bless et al., 2016:32).

3.8.2 No harm/Beneficence

Measures were taken to prevent potential harm or distress to participants, firstly, by not including questions that were intrusive or unnecessarily prying, and secondly, by ensuring that suitable support resources were available to the participants in the event that the study proved to be distressing to them for whatever reason. It was crucial to not only avoid any potential harm, but also to make sure that the research process was not creating harm for the participants in some other manner, for instance through negative emotional or psychological distress (Bos, 2020:43).

Lahman (2018:58) points out the principle of beneficence which necessitates that researchers provide a justification for the proposed study with regards to its purpose, should clearly consider the knowledge gap as well as the potential usefulness of the research, the potential impact of the research, the knowledge that will be gathered through the research and the potential risks to the participants. For Spickard (2017: 90) and Babbie (2021:64), research should not be harmful in any way to the participants in any way, and at the very least should provide the participants with some form of benefit.

3.8.3 Ensuring Objectivity

In ensuring objectivity the researcher considered and was very sensitive to the fact that the participants could have been under stress due to their dual role as mother and employee and the subsequent guilt that such role duality could have evoked. Objectivity was also maintained by the realisation that certain cultures and social norms could potentially present their own influences on the role of a mother in the household and on the potential guilt that a mother could experience in the sense of the actual arrangement for the aftercare of her children (Sanil & Chatterjee, 2024:5746; Kumalasari & Alhasyimi, 2023). There may be a unique need or set of expectations from the participants that are determined by the cultural and social norms

of the participants. A researcher must be sensitive to such needs and not intrude on the participants' set of expectations by, for instance, overstepping boundaries and rushing to obtain informed consent by inappropriate methods that may not be suitable for the participants' needs or preferences.

The researcher is currently working at an aftercare centre, but in order to ensure objectivity of the study, researcher did not include participants from the aftercare centre where she is employed.

3.8.4 Anonymity

Anonymity is closely tied to confidentiality, ensuring that participants' data are not directly linked to their identities. Researchers must maintain confidentiality and anonymity to protect participants' privacy and prevent personal identifiers from being disclosed in reports or publications (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:119; Bless *et al.*, 2016:32-33; Abrar & Sidik, 2019:187).

In order for them to remain anonymous, real names of the participants were not used. Pseudonyms were used instead. Complete anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the entire study, and no participants information was linked to any specific identity. Any personal information was expunged from the data. Access to data will also be limited only to the research team members.

3.8.5 Confidentiality

The use of confidentiality in research refers to both the protection of information and the responsible handling of information. The researcher has an ethical responsibility to protect the confidentiality of the research participants as well as the security and confidentiality of all the data gathered throughout the study (De Vos *et al.*, 2017:119; Bless *et al.*, 2016:32-33; Abrar & Sidik, 2019:187).

This also implies that the participants were assured that the information that they have given to the researcher will not be shared or disseminated to anyone else in any form by linking it to them (Babbie, 2021:67).

All real names of the participants were substituted with pseudonyms in the research records and in reporting of the research. The data are stored securely, and only the researcher has access to it, thereby ensuring the confidentiality of the records (Lahman, 2018:83; Thomas, 2017:46).

3.8.6 Balancing Benefits and Risks

In an ethical study, the potential benefits of a study are weighed against the risks or even the burden it could impose on the participants.

This researcher provided a clear justification for the study with regards to its purpose, the benefits that were to be ascertained, the benefits outweighed any potential risks and the transparency of communication that would be maintained with the participants and will make sure to abide by the principle of beneficence.

3.8.7 Management of Information

Ethical considerations in research involve secure data collection, storage, and handling practices to protect participants' information and ensure compliance with data protection laws. In managing research data, researchers must prioritise accuracy and confidentiality to uphold ethical standards (Walter, 2019:109; Thomas, 2017:46).

In this study, data management specifically relates to issues of anonymity and confidentiality. All information pertaining to the participants, including interview transcripts, field notes, and audio recordings, is stored securely in a protected location accessible only to the researcher. In accordance with the University of South Africa's research ethics policy, all research data will be retained for a period of 10 years, after which it will be appraised for further retention or securely disposed of in line with institutional guidelines (University of South Africa, 2021:7).

3.8.8 Debriefing

During the interview process, some questions may evoke emotional responses from participants due to the sensitive nature of the research topic (Babbie, 2021:70). For

this reason, arrangements were made to ensure that participants had access to appropriate debriefing and emotional support if required. Participants were informed during the recruitment phase that support would be available should the interview process elicit distress or strong emotional reactions (Greenspan & Loftus, 2021:708; De Vos *et al.*, 2017:122).

Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, measures were implemented to safeguard participants' emotional wellbeing while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. Although the researcher is a qualified social worker, no therapeutic support was provided by the researcher in order to avoid role confusion and to maintain objectivity (Hay-Smith, Brown, Anderson & Treharne, 2016:8). Instead, an independent, registered social worker was identified prior to data collection and made available to provide debriefing or emotional support should any participant experience distress during or after the interview process. Written confirmation of this arrangement is included as Addendum D. Although the service was offered - no participants requested debriefing.

In addition, limited feedback on preliminary interpretations was shared with selected participants as part of a member-checking process, aimed solely at validating the accuracy of the researcher's interpretations and ensuring that participants' meanings were accurately represented. This process did not involve counselling or therapeutic engagement.

These measures ensured that ethical principles relating to participant wellbeing, professional boundaries, and responsible research practice were upheld throughout the study.

3.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY

Chapter Three describes the research methodology used to explore the experience of parental guilt in working mothers who have children in aftercare. An interpretivist philosophy of science was employed, and a qualitative approach was used in order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the study participants.

The study setting, research population, and sampling are described together with the purposive and snowball sampling methods used to recruit the participants. Semi-structured interviews were used as the data collection method, and a pilot test was used to improve the reliability and validity of the interview guide. Tesch's (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:196) eight steps of qualitative data analysis were followed, supported by the use of Atlas.ti.25 computer software for qualitative data analysis. The process of coding and categorising the data helped in the systematic development of themes.

Steps to ensure rigour in the study were followed by applying Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness. Ethical issues were also considered by adhering to informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, beneficence, and debriefing of the participants.

A few of the participants were given feedback in order to verify the researcher's interpretation of their experiences and to confirm that their views and voices were accurately captured in the study.

In summary, the methodology chapter described the various procedures that were adopted to ensure that the study was carefully planned and ethical, and that the research outcomes and the findings of the study were reliable and will have value.

The following chapter presents the results of the data analysis relating to how working mothers experience parental guilt when placing their primary school children in aftercare.

CHAPTER FOUR:

RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the research findings, integrating participants' experiences with existing literature to provide insight into how working mothers experience parental guilt when placing their primary school children in aftercare. It explores emotional responses, daily challenges, and personal reflections associated with this experience, aiming to explore how mothers cope with feelings of guilt. While many mothers reported experiencing feelings of guilt, some indicated that they experienced little or no guilt, reflecting the wide range of experiences among working mothers. This is in line with the finding that parenting is a deeply emotional journey, encompassing both joy and frustration, as well as self-conscious emotions such as guilt and shame, which often emerge when parents reflect on and evaluate their own practices (Li, Ng & Chiu, 2024:565).

The findings are based on verbatim transcripts from semi-structured interviews with 14 working mothers whose children attended aftercare programmes. The data collected for this research were analysed by following Tesch's eight steps of qualitative data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:196-198). The information obtained was subjected to careful coding and its interpretation guided the identification of themes, subthemes and categories. Atlas.ti.25 software supported the organisation and management of the data, allowing recurring codes and patterns to emerge, which appear to reflect common experiences among the participants. Emerging themes and interpretations were discussed with the research supervisor to ensure accuracy and consistency, and to confirm that the findings reflected participants' experiences (Mirza *et al.*, 2023;445).

In this chapter, a general demographic profile of the participants is provided followed by an overview of the themes, and the presentation of the themes exposed. The latter

is presented by means of direct quotations from the interview narratives to provide evidence of the participants' experiences and enhance credibility. These quotations also position the findings within broader academic discussions (Eldh, Årestedt & Berterö, 2020) in the form of a literature control. The purpose of the literature control is to confirm or contrast the views and experiences of the participants with existing research as penned down the literature. Together, the themes illustrate both personal struggles and coping strategies of the participants, as well as the broader social and cultural context of motherhood in South Africa, shaped by gendered expectations, work pressures, financial constraints, and available support systems. This is followed by a reflective summary of the findings.

4.2 PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

The participants in this study were 14 working mothers whose primary school children attend aftercare programmes. Participants were selected based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined in Chapter Three (see section 3.4.5), ensuring that their experiences were directly relevant to the research focus. Inclusion required mothers to be employed and have at least one child enrolled in aftercare. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, indicating that additional interviews were unlikely to yield new insights. Presenting demographic information provides the context for understanding participants' experiences and how personal and contextual factors shape perceptions of parental guilt (Lee, Yildiz & Chaudhary, 2024).

Table 4.1 presents a demographic overview of the participants that forms the basis for understanding the findings. It illustrates how individual and contextual factors interact with experiences of parental guilt, laying the groundwork for the themes and subthemes identified in the analysis.

Most of the participants were married or in long-term partnerships, with a few single mothers, highlighting different family structures and levels of shared caregiving responsibilities among the participants. The number of children per mother varied from one to three, influencing the complexity of managing work, childcare, and household responsibilities. Employment included both full-time and part-time roles across various sectors, demonstrating differences in work demands, schedules, the level of flexibility,

and income stability. Socioeconomic backgrounds varied, though most participants were financially stable, allowing access to aftercare services without significant hardship. While the study does not aim for statistical representation, these characteristics should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Examining these demographic characteristics sheds light on how family structure, work demands, and socioeconomic circumstances shape mothers' experiences of guilt and their decisions about aftercare. For example, mothers in dual-income households as well as those with limited support networks often reported heightened pressure, whereas those with flexible work arrangements or strong partner support experienced less stress and greater wellbeing. Throughout the study, ethical standards were carefully maintained, with participants' personal information protected to ensure confidentiality, as outlined in Chapter 3 (section 3.8.5) (Mirza *et al.*, 2023:444).

Table 4-1 Table Demographical Details of Participants

Participant	Marital status	No of children	Ages of children	Employment status	Socioeconomic background	Highest level of education	Extended family involvement	Flexibility
N.H.	Married	2	7 & 9	Fulltime	Limitations	University Degree	Limited	Limited
N.V.	Divorced	2	10 & 12	Fulltime	Limitations	University Degree	Yes	Limited
A.P.	Married	2	16 & 13	Fulltime	Comfortable	Matric	Limited	Limited
S.B.	Divorced	1	9	Fulltime	Strain	Matric	Limited/None	Limited / None
J.J.	Married	2	8 & 10	Fulltime	Comfortable	Master's degree	None	Yes
L.C-W.	Married	2	7 & 10	Fulltime	Comfortable	University Degree	Yes	Yes
T.H.	Married	2	6 & 9	Fulltime	Limitations	University Degree	Limited	None
M.K.	Married	2	8 & 4	Until 14h00	Comfortable	Master's degree	Limited	Some
T.J.	Married	2	5 & 8	Until 14h30	Comfortable	University Degree	Yes	None
E.dS.	Partner	1	9	Fulltime	Comfortable	University Degree	None	Yes
T.vO.	Married	2	9 & 8	Fulltime	Very Comfortable	PhD	Yes	Yes
J.B.	Married	2	9 & 13	Fulltime	Comfortable	Higher Certificate in Banking	None	Some
Y.M	Single	1	9	Fulltime	Strain	Matric	Yes	None
M.M	Partner	3	6, 11 & 14	Fulltime	Comfortable	Postgraduate diploma	Limited	Limited

4.3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

As described, the data analysis followed Tesch's eight steps of qualitative data analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018:196-198), guiding careful coding, categorisation, and interpretation of participants' narratives. Applying Atlas.ti.25 facilitated the organisation and management of the data, allowing the researcher to visualise code distribution across interviews and link codes directly to relevant verbatim extracts, which highlight recurring patterns in participants' narratives (Soratto, De Pires & Friese, 2020; González-Prieto, Perez, Diaz & López-Fernández, 2020).

The thematic analysis identified key themes and subthemes that illuminate working mothers' experiences of parental guilt in the context of aftercare. Each transcript was examined for recurring patterns and emerging themes, providing insight into how mothers appear to navigate aftercare decisions while balancing work and family responsibilities. Direct quotations are presented throughout to preserve participants' voices and provide evidence of their lived experiences. It also enhances credibility, and a literature control connects the findings to existing literature and broader academic discussions (Eldh *et al.*, 2020). These quotations illustrate the complex interplay between work, family, and societal expectations that shape parental guilt, as well as the coping strategies mothers employ to manage it.

The themes and subthemes are listed in Table 4-2. This is followed by presenting the research thematically, highlighting the central experience of parental guilt, followed by factors shaping guilt, the challenges of work-life balance, and the ways mothers manage and moderate guilt. The presentation then turns to support strategies, including peer groups, quality aftercare, and the role of social workers.

Table 4-2 Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
1. Parental Guilt	1.1 Mothers Who Feel Guilty
	1.2 Mothers Who Do Not Feel Guilty
2. Factors Shaping Parental Guilt	2.1 Child Wellbeing
	2.2 Support Networks
	2.3 Rigid Working Hours
	2.4 Financial Considerations
	2.5 Community Perspective / Societal Expectations
3. Work-Life Balance	3.1 Workload & Strain
	3.2 Work Identity and Fulfilment
	3.3 Gendered Division of Domestic Labour / Household Management
4. Moderators of Guilt	4.1 A Lifestyle Fit: Balancing Work and Family
	4.2 Employment, Fulfilment, and Parenting Assurance
	4.3 Flexible Hours as Relief
	4.4 Perspective and Reframing
5. Managing Guilt	5.1 Overcompensating
	5.2 Child's Happiness as mitigating factor
	5.3 Practical Support from the Aftercare
6. Support Strategies	6.1 Peer Support Groups
	6.2 The importance of Quality Aftercare / Trusting the Aftercare Environment
	6.3 Role of Social Workers

4.4 THEME 1: PARENTAL GUILT

Parental guilt emerged as the dominant theme across all interviews. Its intensity varied among participants and appeared to represent a consistent emotional response linked to the use of aftercare services. Parental guilt refers to the emotional struggle parents experience when they feel conflicted between their parenting duties and other

demands that compete for their time and attention (Foucreault *et al.*, 2022:1067). Two subthemes were identified, namely, parents who feel guilty and parents who do not feel guilty, as depicted in Figure 4.1 and discussed below.

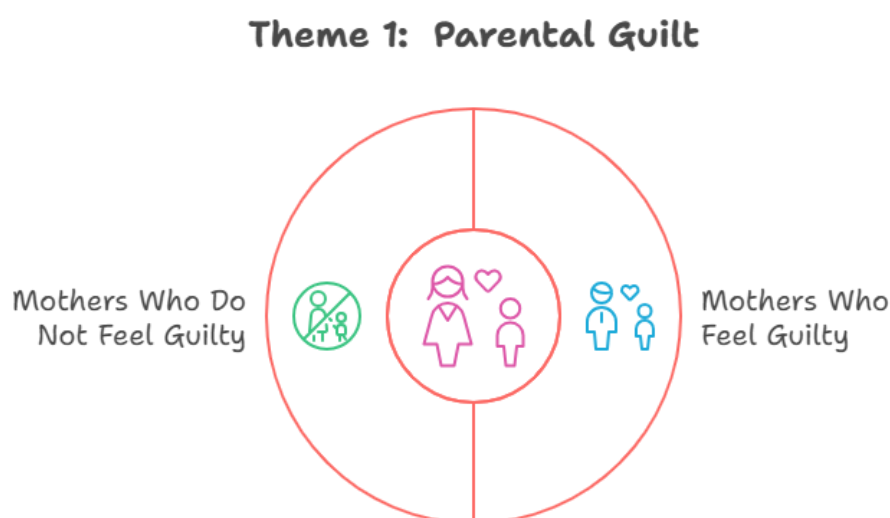


Figure 4-1 Theme 1 Parental guilt

(Author's own compilation, generated using napkin.ai)

Made with Napkin

4.4.1 Subtheme 1: Mothers Who Feel Guilty

This subtheme was noted by mothers who described a persistent feeling of guilt about their use of aftercare. Embedded in their descriptions was an emotional ambivalence wherein using aftercare was simultaneously coupled with parents blaming themselves, worrying, or feeling like a “bad” parent. This subtheme described guilt that mothers seemed to struggle with consistently; it was a residue of social forces (rules), other parents' actions (comparison), and ideals of parental practices (desires for time with children). The storylines below demonstrate how this guilt was built, rationalised, and negotiated, especially in response to the question: “What emotions do you experience when you think about your child being in aftercare while you are sitting at work?” These reflections align with literature emphasising how parental feelings of guilt arise from perceived shortcomings and the tension between work and family responsibilities. Participants described their experiences about it as follows:

- “Oh, I hate it. I have a lot of mom-guilt. You feel your child needs you - and you are not there. Look - the reality is there will always be someone who can take

over your job. If I would to pass away right now - my position at work will be filled very quickly. But he only has one mother. And I feel SO guilty to have to work - knowing my child wants or needs me. And I cannot be there for him now - as I am at work.” (T.H 92-96)

- *“I question my life choices. I wish I could work less - especially with him being so young still. I want to invest more time into my child - rather than have an aftercare invest time into my child. That is one hundred percent what I feel.” (E.dS. 86-88)*
- *“There are days I feel guilty - especially at my previous job where I really worked long hours and my kids were always the very last kids to be fetched at the aftercare in the afternoon.” (J.B 63-65)*
- *“I think as a working mom, you always have a certain level of guilt that you are, experiencing. You - you have to divide your attention, right, between your kids, between your husband, between your friends. You have all these roles to fulfil.” (T.vO. 88-90)*

Several mothers described experiencing guilt when thinking about their children in aftercare, particularly if they were among the last children to be picked up at the end of the day or if they believed they had not spent enough time with their child. This was particularly painful for mothers who recognised that, while they could be easily replaced in their work role, their role as a mother was irreplaceable. Some participants questioned their life choices and longed for more time with their children instead of relying so heavily on aftercare. Mothers often felt these emotions in their everyday lives; they were a consistent presence, serving as a reminder of the tension between the demands of work and the desire to be more available to their children.

In general, the storylines illustrate the emotional and psychological impact of balancing work and parental responsibilities on mothers. Guilt, conflict, and sacrifices were the most prominent emotions identified among the participating mothers. The participants expressed guilt about not being able to spend as much time or energy with their children due to their work commitments. Mothers also described the significant role conflict they experience, feeling unable to fulfil their roles as both a professional and a parent simultaneously. The storylines also reveal the emotional challenges and self-blame that mothers endured when they felt torn between work and parenting

responsibilities. In many of the participants' storylines, it is clear that specific work time constraints, such as long working hours and dependence on aftercare services, have increased mothers' guilt and sense of failure in meeting their children's needs. As a result, they have often experienced feelings of inadequacy and struggled to manage their maternal instincts with work demands.

Analysing the storylines through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST, mothers' guilt and conflict can be understood as being shaped by multiple, interrelated systems. Mothers' direct interactions with their children and work-related demands and expectations contributed to feelings of guilt and conflict at the microsystem level (Guy-Evans; 2025). This is also supported by Zaatari and Maalouf (2022) who state that "Bronfenbrenner's EST, in particular the person-process-context-time model, provides a useful framework for understanding how proximal settings impact peoples' everyday experiences. At the mesosystem level, the connections and lack of supportive coordination between home, work, and aftercare settings often left mothers feeling emotionally strained. At the exosystem level, indirect factors such as workplace schedules and policies also impacted mothers' emotional wellbeing (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). At the macrosystem level, cultural values and societal expectations of motherhood reinforce and perpetuate mothers' sense of obligation. Overall, the ecological approach highlights how mothers' guilt and work-family conflict is shaped by a complex interplay of systems that reinforce and interact, resulting in chronic role conflict and difficulties balancing work and family life.

Parental guilt is experienced when parents feel they have fallen short of personal or societal standards (Aarntzen *et al.*, 2022:14; Shalev *et al.*, 2023). In effect, mothers experience a gap between their expectations for their role as a parent and their work responsibilities. Guilt can be felt on a day-to-day basis when events or circumstances are not in line with a parent's beliefs, such as when a child is misbehaving or when a parent experiences a "failure" in their parenting. Although guilt is often a key motivator of adaptive, change-oriented responses to misbehaviour and is distinct from the more maladaptive and debilitating shame (Wolfers, Nabi & Walter, 2024:121), these parental responses have a role in shaping the aftercare experience. When examining parental feelings of guilt from the perspective of the storylines collected during the study, some

broader themes and concerns emerge regarding the role that guilt plays in shaping parents' emotional experiences in the aftercare context and work-family relations.

In conclusion, the subtheme described above shows that maternal feelings of guilt emerge at the intersection of multiple levels of structural, cultural, and individual influences. In other words, mothers' experiences and narratives revealed that work-family conflict is not simply the product of the individual's inability to cope with multiple stressors but is more likely the result of multiple systemic pressures, including but not limited to expectations at the workplace and gendered cultural constructions of ideal motherhood (Baykal, 2023:73). Informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST and the extant literature on work-family conflict and gendered role conflict, maternal guilt and conflict might be shaped not only by microsystem interactions of family members but also by broader workplace policies and cultural norms that equate good motherhood with physical presence and self-sacrifice (Guy-Evans, 2025). Such realisations could be a first step towards advocating for more family-sensitive workplace policies and more compassionate societal attitudes towards women's dual roles as mothers and employees.

4.4.2 Subtheme 2: Mothers Who Do Not Feel Guilty

Although it was initially anticipated that this study would reveal consistently high levels of parental guilt, an expectation supported by existing literature linking maternal employment to emotional conflict and self-doubt (Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken & Moss, 2017a:1734; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018), the following storylines suggest a more complex reality:

- *"I don't think that parents feel guilty about placing their child in an aftercare - well I don't."* (L.C-W. 231)
- *"No, actually I don't feel guilty."* (Y.M 196)
- *"Honestly, my work is too busy. I do not even have time to even think about anything then what I am doing at the moment during work. I am so busy. I only start thinking about them again when I pick them up."* (M.K 102-104)

Positive parent-child interactions when parents pick them up, together with children's enjoyment of aftercare, both functioned as protective factors that helped mothers reconcile work commitments with parenting responsibilities:

- *"it's exciting to see her and to see how excited she is there."* **(M.M 149)**
- *"And when you see how happy they are to see you again, it's all worthwhile."* **(A.P 135-136)**

Several mothers did not express feelings of guilt about their children being in an aftercare. Instead, their accounts conveyed reassurance and trust in the aftercare. Some even mentioned that they knew their children were having positive experiences. Some participants also shared that their work requires so much of their concentration throughout the day leaving little time for them to think about their children being at the aftercare until they collected them.

These experiences point to the emotional regulation aspects of guilt relief: The more confident parents felt in the quality of care in the aftercare and that their children were in good hands, the less stress they reported. These findings complement research that highlights the idiosyncratic nature of parental guilt, and the critical role that contextual and psychological resources (such as parenting self-efficacy, workplace support, reliable childcare) play in parents' guilt experiences (Borelli *et al.*, 2016a; Martínez, Espinar, Aza, Carrasco & Blanco, 2018:21; Sirois, Bögels & Emerson, 2018:327).

Parental guilt was shown to be highly individualised. For some mothers, it was persistent and emotionally intense, reflecting the tension between professional obligations and the desire to meet children's emotional needs. For others, reassurance from aftercare quality and children's positive experiences reduced feelings of guilt. Interestingly, many mothers did not report feeling guilty about their child's aftercare placement - contrary to initial expectations and much of the existing literature.

The researcher theorised that these narratives are linked to both the work-family conflict theory, which indicates that simultaneous incompatible demands of parental and professional roles bring about strain and negative emotions (Liang, Cai & Duan,

2023:1148), and the internalised gender role expectations, where women with traditional beliefs about mothers' and family roles may be more susceptible to parental guilt when job and family demands clash (Aarntzen *et al.*, 2022:12).

The identification of this subtheme within the study indicates that this parental guilt is not universal; it is constructed and influenced by a complex of personal, organisational, and societal-level factors. This includes the existence of protective factors such as emotional reassurance from the child and the quality of alternative care, which influence the experiences of parental guilt among working mothers. These results inform the development of strategies to support working mothers by considering their guilt within the family context and individual psychological features and the conditions of their work.

These findings connect directly to Theme 5: Perspective and Reframing, which is about how mothers reframe the situation and gain perspective to minimise the guilt and maintain parental confidence. The level of parental guilt is also influenced by parental reflective functioning (Shalev *et al.*, 2023). In turn, self-compassion has been shown to positively moderate the relationship between guilt and physical and psychological wellbeing by promoting forgiveness of self-blame (Sirois *et al.*, 2018:227-228).

4.5 THEME 2: FACTORS SHAPING PARENTAL GUILT

Building on the insights presented in Theme 1, Theme 2 explores the factors that shape the intensity and experience of parental guilt among working mothers. This theme brings together five subthemes: Child Wellbeing, Rigid Working Hours, Societal Expectations, Support Networks, and Financial Considerations, which collectively illustrate the various pressures mothers navigate. These subthemes are presented in Figure 4.2 and discussed below.

Theme 2: Factors Shaping Parental Guilt



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Figure 4-2 Theme 2: Factors influencing parental guilt

(Author's own compilation, generated using napkin.ai)

4.5.1 Subtheme 1: Child Wellbeing

A widely held belief about childhood is that it should be a consistently joyful period, with the expectation that children ought to be happy most, if not all, of the time (Stearns, 2019). Mothers often connected the issue of their child's wellbeing to their own guilt experience in aftercare. If their children were reported to be happy, content, and well-adjusted, mothers said that they felt relieved and less guilty. These reports suggest that when children experience positive emotions, it can have an emotional buffering effect on the distress they might otherwise feel.

Participants expressed this connection clearly by stating it as follows:

- *"So initially even though I still suffer from mom guilt, initially it was worse when they started going to aftercare. But after seeing how happy they are it has made it easier for me."* (N.V 90-92)
- *"I went to pick her up in the afternoon, she literally cried when she saw me walking in. She did not want to go home! And I am like, how does that work? You know. So, I know she is very happy to be there!"* (M.M 80-82).
- *"...if he tells me he is not happy I will not leave it at that."* (J.B 114)

- *“He is very happy with the teacher. And my son is happy, which is the most important part.” (M.K 163-164)*

These reflections demonstrate how mothers closely monitored their children’s emotions as a way of managing their own; when children were content, mothers felt validated in their choices; when they were unsettled, their feelings of guilt and worry intensified. One participant explained that -

- *“It is not the aftercare. It is just he does not want to be there and that makes it even worse for me having to place him there.” (T.H 87-88)*

Taken together, the narratives in this subtheme display the strong emotional interdependence between the parent and the child. The child’s sense of happiness seemed often to bring the parent a sense of relief and mental peace; conversely, indications of the child’s unease or unhappiness gave rise to self-doubt and guilt. This subtheme therefore demonstrates how the mothers’ emotional wellbeing was closely linked with their perceptions of the child’s adjustment and level of contentment in the aftercare setting.

Parental reflective functioning moderated this dynamic as the parents’ understanding of their children’s emotional experience impacted their own reaction to this experience (Shalev *et al.*, 2023). Parenting is a highly emotional experience, and parents often feel parental guilt when they subjectively feel that they are falling short of their own or a societally determined level of being an ideal “good” parent. The perception of such shortfalls and the associated guilt are moderated by personal characteristics (such as perfectionism), as well as a range of external sources and stressors, for example societal, others and children’s needs and expectations, cultural pressures, criticism, and pressures that arise from work-family conflict, information overload, and the pressures of parenting in and of itself (Li, Ng & Chiu, 2024:595; Shalev *et al.*, 2023; ImPossible Psychological Services, 2024).

The data obtained from the mothers explained the presence or absence of their emotions similarly to those who have been reported previously in the literature (Collins, 2021).

This means that cultural factors and women's gender roles create higher expectations for mothers in family life, which in turn results in the feeling of guilt, when they have to work for some reason (Korabik, 2014:146). The mothers in the research, however, primarily connected the absence or presence of their guilt feelings with the level of their children's wellbeing. If the children were doing well in aftercare and were excited about it, their mothers felt confident and emotionally relieved that they were doing the right thing for their children. However, this relationship was not homogenous across all experiences. When children showed unhappiness to attend aftercare, the mothers' feelings of guilt intensified. These moments contributed to their internal conflict between professional responsibilities and their desire to meet their children's emotional needs.

In conclusion, the children's wellbeing could both reduce and increase mothers' guilt feelings, depending on the situation.

4.5.2 Subtheme 2: Support Networks

Support from partners and extended family has a large influence on a working mothers' experiences of guilt. Practical assistance with childcare and shared responsibility for daily routines reduced feelings of inadequacy and stress.

Participants described as follows how practical and emotional support shaped their daily experiences:

- *"He [husband] definitely is involved. It relieves some of the strain. He drops them off in the mornings and picks them some afternoons, so it is not all up to me to do everything. If it were all on me, I think I would be exhausted."* (J.J 147-149)
- *"My support system can take my hand and help where I cannot. Like going to the tennis when I am not able to. So, they help a lot."* (T.J. 176-177)

- *“They are very involved. My parents and my husband’s parents live very close to us, and the kids visit them each weekend. We - ja - we see each other basically on a weekly basis, and the kids go and sleep over at their grandparents houses at least once a week. At one of their parent's houses - so either my parents or my parents in law. They are also very involved with the children in like attending their activities.” (T.vO 21-26)*
- *“It is me and my husband. That is all.” (J.B 37)*

Analysis of the participants’ experiences suggested that the family support they received resulted in less practical difficulty and less feelings of guilt for the mothers. Mothers who had positive descriptions of support from a spouse/partner or extended family members indicated that sharing the childcare and care for the home, either informally or through the use of workplace flexibility, assisted with their emotional response to feeling they were not always present with their children. The reassurance of having other trusted family members who assisted with the children also helped the mothers not feel as guilty. In this way, support networks mitigated the guilt from perceptions of not meeting children’s needs.

Mothers who reported a lack of support from a spouse/partner or extended family members also had more feelings of guilt. These participants described the impact of having sole responsibility for managing work and home life, feeling tired and constantly falling short of what was needed for their children. The emotional impact of no other support that could be counted on was also evident, leaving the mothers feeling emotionally overburdened and increasing the tension between being a “good mother” and a dedicated employee.

Family support is a cornerstone of parental psychological wellbeing, often underpinning emotional contentment and happiness (An, Zhu, Shi & An, 2024). Similar research by Martínez *et al.* (2011:823) also shows that an equal distribution of domestic and parenting tasks, is one of the factors that can lighten mothers of their traditional roles and, hence, lead to a more balanced family system.

The results of the current study also support these findings and have highlighted that working mothers suffer less emotional stress and guilt if their spouses are involved.

In addition to a more practical dimension, emotional support from the family also has a positive impact on feelings of safety, confidence, and resiliency. Understanding and encouragement from the family members help women in managing stress, anxiety, or the challenges of everyday living. In turn, this positive effect on emotional health can result in the better mental wellbeing of mothers in the form of reduced depression and feelings of capability and belonging (An *et al.*, 2024).

Despite many changes in the last decades in the lives of families and gender equality, working mothers still struggle to fulfil their roles at home and work (Gerçek, 2024a:138-139). As a result, conflict often arises between home and work responsibilities and feelings of guilt (Gerçek, 2024a:138). Notwithstanding changing times, traditional gender ideologies are still very much evident and focus on women as the ones who carry the main responsibility for the smooth running of a family and ensuring caregiving (Baykal, 2023:70; Bernhardt & Bünnig, 2021:741). In fact, with rising dual-earner families, the involvement of the spouse and immediate members of the nuclear family are becoming more central to mothers' emotional adjustment (Bernhardt & Bünnig, 2021:729).

A supportive spouse and family members can serve as a buffer against the challenges of handling the home, work, and other activities such as study and can help mothers in minimising their stress levels and free up energy and attention for the different domains of life (Boakye, Mensah, Sackey & Muah, 2021). This finding can be understood through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST. Support within the microsystem (family or spouse) directly impacts a mother's capacity to cope with daily demands, while the interaction between these systems within the mesosystem further influences emotional wellbeing (Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). At the macrosystem level, cultural expectations of motherhood contribute to the pervasive belief that mothers should be always present, amplifying feelings of guilt when this ideal is not met.

The interplay of these ecological systems provides insight into how both emotional strain and relief arise not only from individual factors but also from broader environmental influences.

This study indicates that support networks not only help alleviate workload stress, but they also directly buffer emotional guilt associated with perceived parental absence.

4.5.3 Subtheme 3: Rigid Working Hours

Parental feelings of guilt also related to the issue of work flexibility: inflexible schedules limited the mothers' capacity to address their children's needs, which enhanced the conflict between professional and parental roles. Stress from family life can be transferred to the work environment, draining individuals' psychological and physical resources (Liang, Cai & Duan, 2023:1140). Flexible work arrangements, however, can help mothers spend more time with children and decrease guilt (Adisa, Osabutey & Gbadamosi, 2016; Cooklin, Westrupp, Strazdins, Giallo, & Martin *et al.*, 2014:273-274).

Participants highlighted the emotional and practical impact of rigid work schedules as follows:

- *"I think as with any parent you sometimes feel guilty because you have times you need to place your work responsibilities before your child. That was part of the reason I quit my previous job - I remember when he was four years old my son got on my lap and closed my laptop and begged me to play with him. It broke me. At that stage I worked at Absa... till about 23h00."* (J.B, 93-98)
- *"I have a very flexible work situation. Obviously, I need to be there when I am lecturing. But other than that, I am very flexible."* (T.vO, 10-12)

One participant (T.H) offered particularly insightful reflections that illustrate the emotional strain of balancing professional and parental responsibilities, when she described her work demands as "set in stone" and explained how exhaustion affected her parenting:

- *“There is no real flexibility. That schedule is set in stone” (T.H, 23).*

These accounts demonstrate how rigid work structures contribute to enhanced guilt and feelings of inadequacy, as mothers struggle to remain patient and present while also managing competing demands.

Participants also noted as follows that inflexible hours created a sense of helplessness and frustration, reinforcing internalised ideals of a “good mother”:

- *“There’s no afternoons off, or the possibility of working flexi hours at this stage.” (S.B, 8-9)*
- *“My working hours are from 7:45 in the morning to 4:15 in the afternoon. I am flexible, but not so that I can just leave any time I want to - I need to arrange with my boss. I am an administrative officer, so I do not do any overtime.” (A.P, 9-11)*
- *“No, none at all. If I want to take leave, I need to put in a whole day.” (Y.M, 22)*

These storylines suggest that inflexible work settings may contribute to heightened levels of stress and increased feelings of guilt among mothers. They also appear to constrain mothers’ ability to meet both work and caregiving demands effectively. In the participants’ accounts, this was reflected through experiences of time pressure, emotional strain, and difficulty balancing competing role expectations, which together indicate patterns of work-family conflict rather than a single causative pathway. The incompatibility of work and school schedules in dual-earner or single-earner families is identified in the literature as a source of parent-role overload, time scarcity, and work-family conflict (Obrenovic, Jianguo, Khudaykulov & Khan, 2020; Schneider, 2011:103). Within this context, flexible working arrangements are therefore considered important in reducing such pressures, as they may support parents in maintaining both productivity and emotional wellbeing, while also alleviating feelings of guilt.

Mothers’ perceptions that non-flexible work schedules amplified their distress and guilt also find support in empirical research. Parents’ ratings of their schedules as less

flexible have been linked to difficulties in being fully attuned to their children's needs. Shifts and non-standard hours have also been associated with increased strain, especially because they are more often discordant with hours when childcare services are available (Pilarz, 2020:2060; Luhr *et al.*, 2022:34). These work schedules also deplete the emotional and psychological resources parents draw on to provide consistent and sensitive care to their children at home (Zhao, Cooklin, Butterworth, Strazdins & Leach, 2021:2). Research also indicates that workplace cultures that truly support flexibility, over and above stated policies, are related to less work-family conflict and psychological distress among mothers with children (Yucel & Fan, 2023:1828).

This subtheme, analysed through the EST, highlights that workplace policies represent an element of the exosystem as they indirectly influence the home life of parents. Particularly, mothers experienced a sense of rigidity and non-flexibility of their workplaces, which negatively impacted their emotional availability, thus disrupting the microsystem by creating conditions of 'strain' for their family life (Guy-Evans, 2025). The mothers described a significant contrast when they were offered workplace flexibility and resources that were more understanding and receptive of their caregiving roles, which helped them to regain their sense of balance. The support and availability for mothers not only help to achieve a more practical work-life balance but also played a crucial role in enhancing emotional availability and resilience.

The described rigidity and lack of flexibility in workplace policies as a result created a conducive environment for maternal guilt. Greater workplace flexibility resulted in both practical and emotional balance, which extends beyond just administrative or financial considerations.

4.5.4 Subtheme 4: Financial Considerations

Financial pressure was another reason given for parental guilt, as mothers described their struggles and challenges in balancing the need to earn an income with the desire to spend quality time with their children.

These experiences further highlight the emotional cost of work-family trade-offs. Participants expressed these tensions clearly as follows:

- *“Work always wins - it is your income. And you need to make it work otherwise you will not get paid at the end of the month!” (T.H 128-129)*
- *“I was forced. As I need to work, I needed to place her in the aftercare.” (A.G 53-54)*
- *“In the beginning I was very against it, and I used to feel so guilty about having to place him in an aftercare... But once I saw how much he enjoys it, I stopped feeling that way.” (T.J 148-151)*
- *“...I was definitely forced. There is no one who can fetch him. Me and my husband work. So, I had no choice there.” (J.B 58-59)*

These narratives illustrate that financial necessity often framed aftercare placement as a practical obligation rather than a choice, which could heighten feelings of guilt. Some participants initially resisted placing their children in aftercare, exploring alternative solutions such as hiring an au pair or changing jobs closer to the school, but later reassessed their decisions after observing their child's enjoyment and engagement in aftercare.

The findings of the mothers' stories are strongly corroborated by the evidence on the relationship between the cost and flexibility of paid childcare and the extent to which parents are able to attain satisfactory work-family compromises. Luppi and Arpino (2020:553) claim that the costs and constraints associated with the affordability and flexibility of paid childcare are negatively correlated to parents' satisfaction with work-family balance. In the study, the mothers reported feeling “forced” into using aftercare, as the alternative arrangements were unaffordable or not feasible. In this respect, another study by Ruppanner, Moller and Sayer (2019:2) reports that mothers in particular are more likely to scale down their employment in response to higher childcare costs. The storylines reflect this finding, as the mothers mentioned that they had considered a number of solutions (saving more money, finding a new job, or looking for other personalised arrangements), but ultimately were financially trapped, as this was not possible. Taken together, these narratives justify the stress,

powerlessness and guilt that mothers felt and articulated. Financially constrained decisions about work and family are also indicative of choice made due to necessity rather than preference, which is related to greater emotional distress and guilt (Luthar & Ciciolla, 2016:19).

More recently, financial pressure has also been found to interact with expectations about caregiving to increase maternal guilt; mothers who feel they are unable to achieve an ideal level of attentive or intensive mothering experience greater guilt (Baykal, 2023:71; LaGraft, 2020). Similarly, the mothers in this study described a lack of childcare options and significant trade-offs between income and caregiving, which were both shown to be emotionally costly in economically constrained work-family decisions.

The storylines indicate that financial pressure and emotional reactions intersect mothers, who face a difficult choice between employment and aftercare. They experience that the aftercare even in a safe and child-friendly environment that guarantees mental stimulation, can increase their guilt feelings because of the need to earn money. According to the Family Stress Model (FSM), financial distress is associated with heightened stress in parents that in turn can affect their parental behaviour (Neppl, Senia and Donnellan, 2015). Also, Work-Family Conflict (WFC) Theory underlines that a contradiction between parents' responsibilities at work and their responsibilities as a parent can result in feelings of guilt and seems to be stronger for women (Clark, D'Ambrosio & Barazzetta, 2020:342-343).

The subtheme illustrates the intersection of structural limitations and financial hardship with maternal emotional reactions. Although financial pressure can strengthen guilt feelings, children's enjoyment of aftercare can serve as a resilience factor for mothers.

4.5.5 Subtheme 5: Community Perspective/Societal Expectations

Societal and community expectations played a significant role in shaping mothers' experiences of guilt, as they try to meet unrealistic demanding mothering standards. This can lead to, self-critique and unavoidably to feelings of inadequacy (Fielding-

Singh & Cooper, 2022). Participants reflected as follows on how perceived judgement from others influenced their emotional responses:

- *“A bit judged for that. But I think it’s-it is maybe not really people judging me, more me having judged other people.” (T.vO. 250-251)*
- *“I always feel that people... especially moms are judging me. But that is unfortunately my reality. It can be my own guilt making me think so, but I have felt extremely judged.” (N.V 115-117)*
- *“I have been judged by lots of moms. Mostly because they do not have insight into our situation.” (J.B 163-164)*
- *“And then, yes, you can feel a few glances and whispers when your kids are in the aftercare.” (N.N 169-170)*

Several mothers described experiencing feelings of guilt shaped not only by their own perceptions but also by societal and community expectations. These narratives suggest that maternal guilt is influenced by how mothers believe others view their parenting choices, particularly decisions about aftercare. Perceived judgement amplified internalised pressure to conform to cultural or social norms of a “good” parent (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018; Liss *et al.*, 2012:1113-1114).

According to Afrocentric theory, the community expectations and the “Ubuntu” philosophy (“I am because we are”) directly contributed to the participants’ experience of motherhood (Shambare, 2021). While communities can provide support, this also came with an added layer of pressure for mothers to be judged according to the standards of the community. Furthermore, the phenomenon of being “mom-shamed” as a result of peers’ judgements intersected with the mothers’ parenting practices, leading to a perceived judgment that negatively affected their emotions (Guy-Evans, 2025). This subtheme indicates that the participants’ mothering expectations and parenting practices were being either supported or harshly judged by their peers.

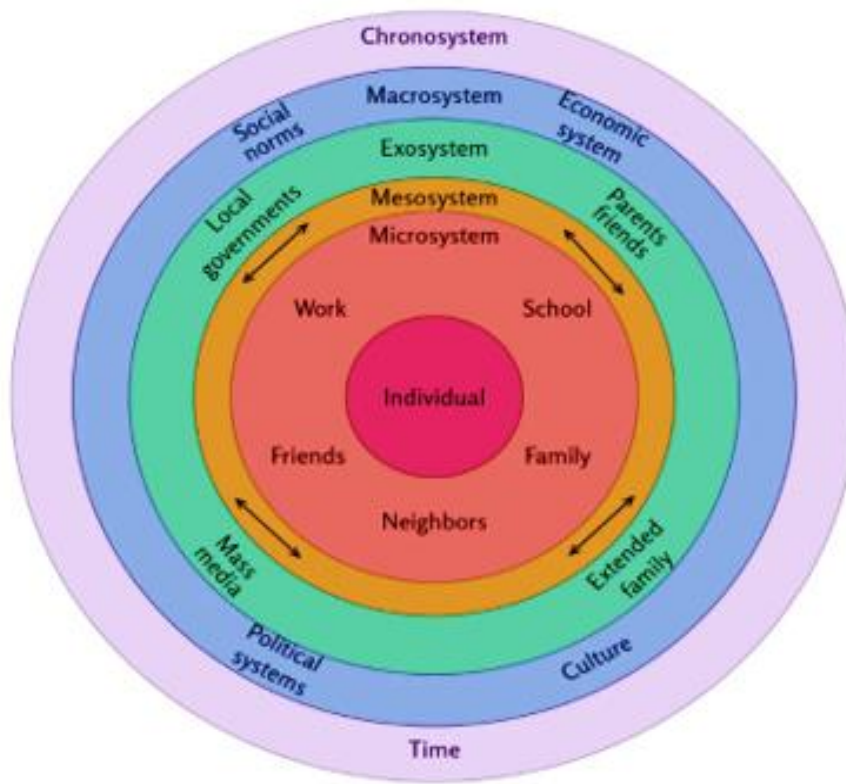


Figure 4-3 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems (Guy-Evans, 2025)

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST was also used as the lens of analysis in this subtheme to see the multifaceted sources of the mothers' feelings of guilt. The parental guilt appeared to have a dynamic influence on mothers' parenting at the microsystem level, which was in constant interaction with peer judgements and other parents in their mesosystem. In addition, the influence of their community as well as the macrosystem of culture and social values appeared to have a substantial role in mothers' perception of being scrutinised and judged by their peers (Guy-Evans, 2025).

In summary, this subtheme suggests that mothers' perception of being judged by their peers and their community contributed to the participants' guilt feelings about mothering. Their feelings of guilt are a result of the complex interactions between children, family, work, and the society, which cannot be analysed separately from their personal experiences and social context.

Theme 2 demonstrates that parental guilt among working mothers is a multifaceted construct shaped by the interactions of a number of variables. The theme shows that children's happiness and a supportive family and friend network have a protective effect on parental guilt, whereas variables such as inflexible work schedules, financial strain, and rigid societal expectations about mothering and parenting serve to

exacerbate it. This finding shows that parental guilt cannot be deconstructed in isolation and is a dynamic interplay between variables affecting the parent's life.

These insights provide a foundation for Theme 3, which explores how mothers manage the broader tension of work-life balance and the strategies they use to cope with pressures contributing to guilt.

4.6 THEME 3: WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Theme 3 examines the work-life balance of working mothers. Three subthemes were identified, namely, Workload and Strain, Work Identity and Fulfilment, and Gendered Division of Domestic Labour as depicted in Figure 4.4 and described below.

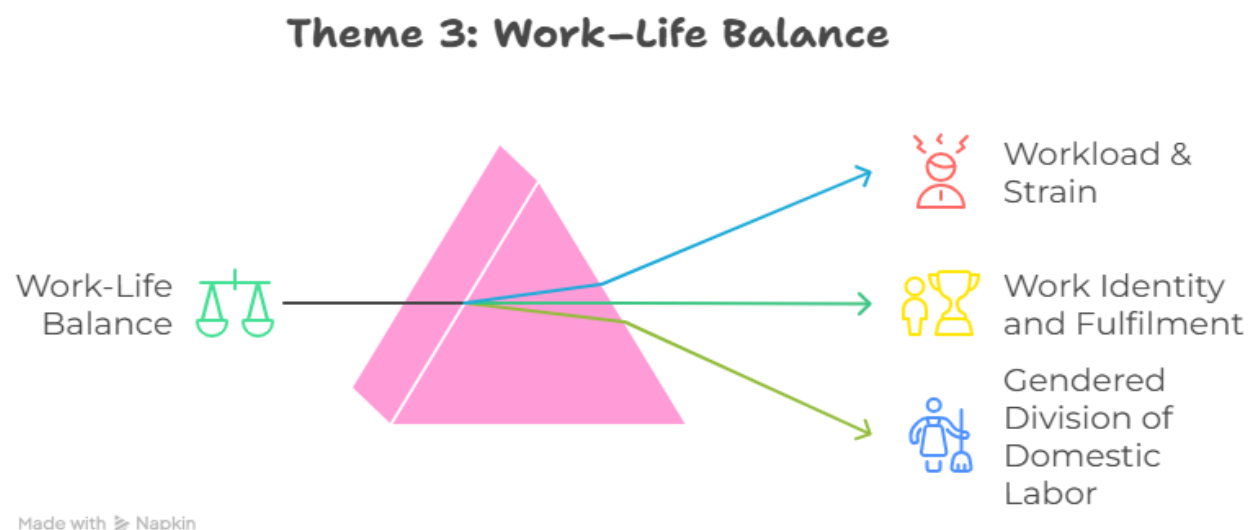


Figure 4-4 Theme 3: Work-life balance

(Author's own compilation, generated using napkin.ai)

Participants reported that work demands often reduced the time and energy available for family responsibilities, which in turn intensified feelings of parental guilt.

4.6.1 Subtheme 1: Workload and Strain

Heavy workloads were consistently described as leaving mothers feeling overwhelmed, limiting their capacity to engage fully with their children, and intensifying feelings of guilt. Participants highlighted this tension vividly as follows:

- *"It is full-time work, full-time mom, and full-time lady of the house. So - It is quite tiring sometimes."* (J.B 152-153)
- *"Because work always takes priority. You have obligations that you must fulfil and, um, the kids' things can always be done later or postponed, where work cannot necessarily be."* (N.N 115-117)
- *"I cannot be busy with anything else when I want to be with him. So, I did freelance work and that is very difficult because there is a big level of frustration that comes in when you have to work while looking after your child."* (E.dS. 110-113)
- *"I hate it. I have a lot of mom-guilt. You feel your child needs you - and you are not there."* (T.H 92-93)

Many of the mothers reported feelings of being stretched thin when trying to juggle both work and family life. They stated that although they tried to devote time and energy to both areas of their life, their job description made it so that they often needed to prioritise work over home. They could not be "present" for their children the way they would like, and this caused chronic guilt and frustration. They further explained that even flexible or freelance work did not really fix this problem because even if the mother worked while caring for a child, there was still high stress and no real relief from guilt. T.H. for instance, expressed continual guilt about not being available to her child and this was representative of the idea that absence and stress were essential to workload and inflexible scheduling.

These storylines collectively illustrate the impact of workload and role strain on maternal mental health and work-family balance. They show how the emotional effort of meeting both work and family demands become a persistent challenge in achieving equilibrium. The themes of strain and exhaustion correspond closely with the concept of Hochschild (cited in Luppi & Arpino, 2020:550) of the "double shift," whereby women

navigate the simultaneous demands of paid work, childcare and domestic responsibilities. Participants' descriptions of feeling like a "full-time worker, full-time mother, and full-time lady of the house" (J.B.) and the frustration associated with working while also caring for a child, strongly reflect these overlapping and, at times, contradictory expectations. Luppi and Arpino (2020:550) also highlight that these competing expectations can cause a significant amount of pressure. This high level of emotional stress and sense of imbalance were common in the narratives. This finding can also be seen cross-culturally, because studies have shown that working mothers tend to experience more work-family conflict and lower job satisfaction (Islam, Alam & Ahamed, 2025).

While the overall tone of the storylines focused on strain and guilt, some also related work to being rewarding and fulfilling, as is confirmed by the evidence that employment can offer a sense of purpose, stability and identity (Ortiz-Ospina, 2017). The wider literature associates work-family balance to organisational commitment, job and family satisfaction, mental health and marital quality (Luppi & Arpino, 2020:550), emphasising the significance of mothers being able to meet a number of, sometimes opposing, expectations. Childcare is often cited as being a key facilitator of women being able to balance employment and motherhood (Arpino, Pronzato & Tavares, 2014:370) and is mirrored in the narratives of the participants' desire to be both available to their children and earn money.

Work-family guilt tends to arise when mothers perceive themselves as falling short of childcare expectations, particularly under strong societal pressures (Hairina & Hartini, 2024; Borelli *et al.*, 2016a:4; Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017:54). High workloads further deplete personal resources, reducing the time and attention that can be devoted to family interactions and intensifying feelings of guilt (Foucreault *et al.*, 2022:1065).

Theorising this subtheme through the EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the experiences shared by the mothers can be perceived at different levels. Mothers' guilt, as a consequence of insufficient time with their child(ren) due to their work commitments, fits into the microsystem which relates to the interrelationship between the children, mother and work demands. Mesosystem refers to home and work environments which overlap in the mothers' experience (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, the exosystem

and macrosystem, which allude to organisations' policies and societal views on childrearing, respectively, are two levels which fuel and amplify work demands (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

This subtheme has helped to establish the multiplicity of levels at which work-related factors affect mothers, both in terms of wellbeing and work-family relationship. Mothers' narratives have revealed that work and guilt as a result of the perceived trade-off between the two, are deeply embedded in the systemic, cultural and organisational settings, in which the mothers and their families are immersed.

4.6.2 Subtheme 2: Work Identity and Fulfilment

Maintaining a professional identity alongside the parental role contributed to greater wellbeing among the mothers in this study. Participants emphasised the personal and familial significance of their work as follows:

- *"I love my job. I think loving your job makes a big difference as well. And I feel I add a lot of value in my job, which I also think makes a big difference."* (T.vO. 105-107)
- *"You need to talk more because most of the time you are not there. Most of the time mommy's busy, so it causes us to talk more so that they understand why mommy cannot give me certain attention at, at certain times."* (M.M 89-91 & 94)
- *"If I am not with my child I am at work - contributing to the economy of South Africa. It is a full circle system. I am thankful someone else trustworthy is there and I can go to work with piece of mind."* (M.K 199-201)
- *"Most people work these days - it is the way the world works. And if I had to choose, I would definitely choose to work. I won't be able to stay at home and be a housewife. No, thank you."* (J.B 165-167)

These reflections demonstrate that work enhances mothers' wellbeing, providing a sense of identity beyond caregiving, even as balancing professional and parental roles remains challenging. Thus, for many mothers, maintaining a work identity and role appeared to be a protective factor. Several participants presented work as a sphere in

which they could make a difference and experience purpose, respect, and competence. T.v.O.'s statement about "loving" her job and "adding a lot of value" also characterises other storylines, in which working life was shown to be a positive contributor to self-esteem. This finding accords with research on maternal employment, which highlights that besides financial security, work provides personal fulfilment, a sense of competence and value, and ultimately strengthens the sense of mothers' contributions at home and at work (Zagefka, Houston, Duff & Moftizadeh, 2021:2457) For some participants, work thus also seems to have represented a dimension of identity, underpinning their psychological wellbeing beyond role strains.

Work as meaning and protection can also be seen in other storylines. M.K.'s emphasis on how reassured she felt in knowing she could leave her child in trustworthy hands while she was able to do her economic duty is another example. She described this as "a full circle." This accords with research, which shows that meaningful work is strongly connected to overall wellbeing, and that job satisfaction positively influences mothers' sense of identity, value and stability (Zagefka *et al.*, 2021:2452). Napora, Andruszkiewicz and Basińska (2017:62) similarly found that women satisfied with their work were better at coping with setbacks, using stronger social and emotional coping strategies. This may be related to the attitudes expressed by some mothers in the study, including J.B., who clearly preferred work over being a full-time homemaker. These participants also appeared to strongly commit themselves to their professional identity and may have drawn on this sense of work as essential to their emotional and psychological wellbeing.

The literature, however, also indicates that the connections between maternal employment and wellbeing are multifaceted. Keldenich (2021:1349-1350) writes that, while work is associated with higher financial security, female empowerment, and life satisfaction, in general, it has been found to lower subjective wellbeing among mothers who experience the strain of combining working and caregiving roles. This dual pattern can be observed in some of the participants' storylines, and in particular M.M.'s mixed depiction of needing to communicate with her children more while at the same time having to say, "mommy's busy" and thus being emotionally absent. Knabe, Schöb and Weimann (2015:1257) report that a working mother may experience satisfaction (cognitive wellbeing) in general with her life while looking at her achievements and

contributions but at the same time feel (affective wellbeing) stressed, exhausted or sad on a day-to-day basis. A similar dual pattern is reflected in the storylines, as some participants expressed satisfaction and pride in fulfilling their role at work, even while also describing the stress of combining this with their parental duties.

The narratives indicate that maintaining a professional identity alongside motherhood contributes positively to maternal wellbeing. Mothers reported that meaningful and enjoyable work provided a sense of personal fulfilment, which in turn mitigated feelings of guilt associated with being away from their children. Work was described as both a practical necessity and a source of personal satisfaction, allowing mothers to feel that their contributions extended beyond the home while reinforcing their competence and autonomy. Trust in aftercare providers enabled mothers to engage fully in their work roles, enhancing peace of mind and reducing emotional strain. In this way, employment functioned as a protective factor that strengthened maternal identity and emotional resilience.

From the perspective of Bronfenbrenner's (1994) EST, mothers' experiences reflect interactions across multiple system levels. At the microsystem level, mothers navigate direct responsibilities toward children and work commitments. The mesosystem illustrates how these roles intersect, with aftercare arrangements facilitating smoother coordination between home and workplace demands. At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, societal expectations regarding women's employment, professional contribution, and gender roles influence how mothers perceive the value and legitimacy of their work, shaping both guilt and fulfilment.

Overall, the findings show that employment is not merely a practical necessity but a significant contributor to maternal wellbeing. Meaningful work provides fulfilment, supports identity, and builds emotional resilience, even within the context of work-family tension. Alongside protective factors such as reliable childcare and supportive family networks, professional engagement helps mothers navigate the complex interplay between guilt, parenting, and personal growth.

4.6.3 Subtheme 3: Gendered Division of Domestic Labour/Household Management

Mothers frequently described how household responsibilities and childcare largely fell on them, reinforcing the perception that women are the primary organisers of family life.

Participants highlighted the ongoing tension between professional responsibilities and domestic expectations as follows:

- *“Mommy does everything, and daddy does not think mom does a lot. It is really difficult because I juggle everything. I am also the one who does all the chores at home.” (J.B 149-151)*
- *“I sometimes feel like I give 100% and still feel like I am falling short. And my husband also has a lot of meetings after hours. But I am usually the first one home, so I handle most of the housework.” (T.H 174-176)*
- *“Everything is on me. Everything, you know, um, as a single mother I am everything, I am working and trying to juggle. I give myself a pat on the back because I am alone and I am doing everything.” (Y.M 167-169)*
- *“I think the expectation for a woman is very high. The difficulty is that you still have to keep a household going. You still have to keep a relationship with your child going, and you still have to keep a relationship with your partner going, and the intellectual relationship with the work.” (E.dS 158-163)*
- *“All the planning surrounding the kids and their activities are on me My husband will, if it is in the evening, he will help with that, if it is after seven. Otherwise, everything is on me.” (A.P 126-128)*
- *“I am still mostly the provider of the children - you know- making sure they have the correct clothes, that they are at the right school, doing the correct activities and all that. The running of the house does not happen on its own - that is still with me.” (J.J 170-172)*

Some participants acknowledged that support from partners or extended family made a significant difference by stating that:

- *“It makes a big difference. My husband is luckily a very involved father. And my husband and I have a system that works. And between us we make it happen.” (M.K 156-157)*
- *“He [husband] is a very involved dad, and he would always be at the activities if he is not traveling for his work, and if I can’t pick them up, he will do it.” (T.vO 237-239)*

The narratives consistently accentuated the tension between professional responsibilities and domestic expectations. Many mothers described managing household routines, children’s schedules, and emotional needs on top of full-time employment, creating feelings of exhaustion and guilt. Single mothers, in particular, experienced the burden of carrying these responsibilities alone, whereas mothers with supportive partners or extended family members described experiencing relief and balance when responsibilities were shared. These storylines illustrate how the persistent gendered division of labour contributes to parental guilt, showing that societal norms and intensive-mothering expectations exacerbate work-family conflict.

Even while working full-time, mothers often felt responsible for managing household routines, children’s schedules, and emotional needs, thereby adding to the pressures of parenting. This aligns with broader research showing that the gendered division of labour persists, with mothers disproportionately carrying unpaid domestic work (Borelli *et al.*, 2016a; Maclean *et al.*, 2020:170). Within the intensive-mothering culture, working mothers are expected to manage the majority of childcare and housework while also performing successfully at work, creating ongoing work-family conflict (Lamar, Forbes & Capasso, 2019).

These experiences illustrate how societal expectations about women’s roles in the home interact with professional obligations to intensify stress and the potential for parental guilt.

Recognising the unequal distribution of domestic labour emphasises the importance of social support, equitable partnerships, and flexible workplace arrangements in supporting working mothers’ wellbeing.

WFC is another theory that can be used to understand these experiences. This theory suggests that when work and family roles become incompatible, pressure in one role impairs performance and emotional presence in the other (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Time-based conflict arises when long or inflexible working hours restrict the parent's time available for caregiving, and strain-based conflict occurs when physical exhaustion, stress, or emotional depletion in work hinder the parent's ability to be fully present and engaged at home.

The storylines from this study exemplify both types of conflict, as mothers felt forced to prioritise work even though they desired to be more present for their children, and they also reported experiencing feelings of guilt, frustration, and emotional fatigue. WFC Theory also acknowledges that work can provide identity, fulfilment, and psychological resources, which aligns with narratives of mothers who valued their professional roles despite the challenges of managing dual expectations. Viewing the experiences through the lens of WFC Theory helps to see the emotional tension, guilt, and the delicate balance between fulfilment and fatigue described by the participants as part of a well-documented pattern of role conflict that working parents commonly face (Stepanek & Paul, 2022).

In general, the stories told in these narratives suggest that unequal distribution of household tasks intensifies the emotional and practical stress of juggling multiple roles at work and at home, and support from spouses and extended family can mitigate this (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018:1330). However, mothers still face competing demands and expectations that interrelate performance at work, management of the household, and care for children. These factors suggest that work-life balance is not just a time issue, but is also shaped by responsibility allocation, societal and family values, and psychosocial adjustment, with maternal guilt the nexus point for all of these. The findings suggest that equitably distributed partnerships, social support, and organisational policies that validate the dual role demands on working mothers are necessary for the mental health of both mothers and children.

Theme 3 highlights the interplay between work demands, parental responsibilities, and personal fulfilment. On the one hand, high work demands, as well as the role strain that mothers face, increase guilt and reduce time and energy mothers have for their

children (Foucreault *et al.*, 2022:1065-1066). On the other hand, work helps mothers meet personal needs such as professional fulfilment and competency, as well as financial security. The mothers use strategies such as boundary setting, childcare sharing, valuing personal work-related reasons, and ensuring children's happiness to manage the role conflict between work and parenthood. These results underscore the need for the wellbeing of mothers and children to support working mothers' sustainable work-life balance that provides a healthy environment for child rearing and development.

The parental stories described in this section all are a lead-up to the workplace flexibilities that are addressed in Theme 4, which are a protective factor against guilt, lower stress, and give mothers more agency to manage both work and family.

The next theme describes further moderators of guilt, including coping strategies and appreciation for accomplishments.

4.7 THEME 4: MODERATORS OF GUILT

Theme 4 looks at the factors that can be seen as moderators of guilt. Four subthemes were identified, A Lifestyle Fit: Balancing Work and Family, Employment, Fulfilment, and Parenting Assurance, Flexible Hours as Relief and Perspective and Reframing as depicted in Figure 4.5 and explained below.

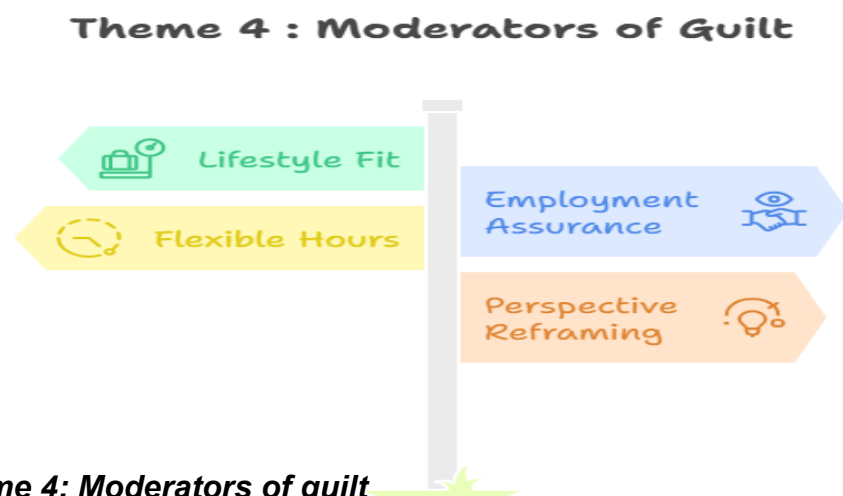


Figure 4-5 Theme 4: Moderators of guilt
(Author's own compilation, generated using napkin.ai)

Made with  Napkin

In line with the literature, several participants in this study described factors that appeared to lessen their feelings of guilt. Mothers who trusted the quality of aftercare, felt competent in their parenting, or experienced supportive work environments, reported lower levels of guilt and an improved ability to balance work and family responsibilities. Olivieri, Presti, Costa, Ariemma and Fabbri (2024:750) confirmed that when mothers feel confident in their childcare decisions, they are more likely to experience reduced guilt and to navigate work-family demands effectively. Together, these insights demonstrate how personal confidence, social support, and contextual flexibility can help to buffer the emotional strain associated with maternal guilt.

Research indicates that when mothers tend to feel more assured about the quality of aftercare, confident in their parenting, and supported in their workplaces, they tend to experience less guilt and manage work-family demands more effectively. These factors emphasise the role of personal confidence, social support, and flexible work contexts in buffering the emotional strain associated with maternal guilt (Olivieri *et al.*, 2024:750).

4.7.1 Subtheme 1: A Lifestyle Fit: Balancing Work and Family

For many mothers, structuring work and aftercare to fit their family's lifestyle was central to moderating guilt. Employment provided personal fulfilment and purpose, while reliable aftercare offered reassurance that children were safe and cared for. Together, these factors created a sense of balance, allowing mothers to reconcile professional responsibilities with parenting. Participants reflected as follows on the practical and emotional benefits of aligning work and aftercare with family life:

- *"It makes life easier. But If I had to now listen to myself to this recording, I probably would come across sounding selfish ... but it made MY life easier. I am less stressed, and I can give more when I am with my kids" (J.J 202-204).*
- *"Honestly, I am very happy. Even when I was not working, I think I still would have sent them to aftercare... I am very pro aftercare." (L.C-W. 113-116)*
- *"No, for me, it's a positive because I have a structure with people in their lives that adds more value in certain areas than I think I would have added value."*

I think I would have had a more negative effect on our relationship if I did not work.” (T.vO. 159-161)

- *“I know my child is safe, he attends his activities, and what I realised with my eldest it that this is teaching him responsibility. He developed a strong sense of responsibility for his own work - as he knows I am not there.” (M.K. 90-93)*

The storylines show that many mothers described feeling relief and emotionally available when childcare arrangements matched with their work and lifestyle. Others felt they were able to better balance the guilt they felt in relation to the various spheres in their life once they felt that the work and aftercare requirements matched up. J.J., for instance, mentioned that her aftercare “made life easier” and that with less stress, she was able to spend more quality time with her children. While J.J.’s mention of sounding “selfish” reminds one of the perceived needs to match one’s needs with the ideals of being a mother, her description of a lower level of stress making her a better parent to her children, is also indicative of how guilt was lifted when aftercare arrangements better matched with her life.

A few other mothers focused on the enrichment that aftercare arrangements added to their children’s lives. L.C-W. felt that aftercare provided structure, time for homework, and peer contact that “was enriching for [my daughter],” in ways that she was not able to provide at home. L.C-W. was vocal about her endorsement of aftercare and described how structured and safe her children were in their aftercare programmes as opposed to spending time at home.

T.vO. also focused on her reflection on the need for children to be cared for in spaces where they could receive specialised attention, and how her children required support she “could not provide”. Her storyline, therefore, spoke to a transition in her understanding of responsibility where she believed that by engaging with outside aftercare options, she was better able to relax and have quality time with her child, instead of being stressed and having an unrealistic understanding of what she could provide her child.

M.K. described a sense of reassurance when aftercare made it possible for her to allow her son to stay home alone, and she knew he was occupied. For M.K., the

aftercare programme also made her son's growing independence possible, in addition to providing her peace of mind regarding his safety.

Storylines one and three show that mothers were able to reduce their guilt once childcare arrangements, work, and lifestyle matched up, and aftercare worked as an extension of care that was comfortable, enriching, and safe. Many mothers in the sample could feel that they were both taking care of their children and taking care of themselves once they trusted that their children were safe, engaged, and well while they worked. These results contribute a more detailed perspective to the debate regarding how and when mothers "make work, work" to experience less maternal guilt when making employment decisions. The mothers I spoke with that felt their arrangements more deeply "fitted" their lifestyle when it was a seamless extension of care, making childcare an afterthought as the children were in a safe and enriching environment. In this way, the decision to use aftercare can feel less transactional, and more part of the fabric of family life.

This is in line with the operationalisation of work-life balance proposed by Valcour (cited by Arpino & Luppi, 2020:551) Valcour, whereby work-life balance is described as a sense of wellbeing that emanates from individuals' evaluations of the extent to which they are successfully managing both work and family roles. These evaluations are related to the individual's cognitive assessments of resource adequacy, role fit and integration but are also likely to involve an affective component in the form of emotional experiences resulting from these appraisals. In the present study, mothers who reported good coordination between their employment and family schedules similarly expressed less stress, higher emotional availability and more balance in their daily lives. Consistent with this, previous research has shown that work-life balance can be protective against parental guilt, with higher levels of parenting self-efficacy (Martínez *et al.*, 2011:813), positive social norms and less traditional gender ideologies being associated with less guilt when making work-family sacrifices (Borelli *et al.*, 2016a; Borelli *et al.*, 2017b:1743; Maclean *et al.*, 2020:176). Maternal wellbeing practices have also been found to predict better caregiving by improving mothers' abilities to manage the emotional challenges of caregiving, for example, through the practice of self-compassion (Sirois *et al.*, 2018:228). Taken together, this research supports the trends that the researcher observed in the storylines, where positive experiences of

balancing work and parenting were associated with work arrangements that fit with family life, as well as mothers' psychological and social resources.

In addition to being interpreted alongside the written sources, the narratives also echo explanations for how and why better work-life fit contributes to better wellbeing in the existing literature, such as those within the WFC Theory (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The way in which mothers described themselves as more balanced, present, and less guilty in instances where their work and family lives were in harmony with each other implies a reduction in the strains that occur when competing expectations from work and family roles vie for time and attention. Conversely, when the women felt fulfilled by their work, confident in their parenting, or reassured by dependable childcare, the researcher felt that it for instance, also seemed to reduce the conflict that might otherwise be present between these roles, suggesting a condition where the clash is lessened. This conceptual framework also lends understanding to why perceived work-life fit or positive psychological resources - like self-efficacy or self-compassion - that were facilitative of greater wellbeing, were so strongly interconnected in the narratives that were reported.

In other words, this is to say that work and family life do not always conflict with each other. Narratives of the mothers have proven that the conflict between the two is subjected to what circumstances one is in, how overwhelming one's life is, and whether one is being supported or not. When work-family life equilibrium is achieved, there is not as much an interference of work to family life as the cases of mothers who did not feel guilty and who felt a sense of stability have shown.

This is also why the mothers who have meaningful work believe that work-life balance has more to do with their professional satisfaction than it does with their detachment from their families.

Overall, when work and aftercare arrangements fit the family's lifestyle and meet children's developmental needs, mothers experience reduced guilt, enhanced emotional wellbeing, and greater engagement, accentuating the importance of integrated support systems in managing the challenges of work-family balance.

4.7.2 Subtheme 2: Employment, Fulfilment, and Parenting Assurance

In addition to aligning work and aftercare with family lifestyle, mothers emphasised that employment itself, as well as the fulfilment it provides, can buffer parental guilt. They emphasised as follows that work offered purpose, self-esteem, and a sense of identity beyond caregiving, while reliable aftercare alleviated practical stressors such as homework, meals, and structured activities:

- *“It is very an ungrateful job to be a mom, well a stay-at-home mom. You never get praise. You never get a raise or a bonus or any kind of positive feedback really, which I think I need in my life.” (T.vO 162-164)*
- *“If I am not with my child, I am at work-contributing to the economy of South Africa. It is a full circle system. I am thankful someone trustworthy is there and I can go to work with peace of mind.” (M.K 199-201)*
- *“And if the aftercare is providing them with a place to learn and play, I don’t see anything wrong with that.” (M.M 166-167)*

M.K.’s quote appears in both this section and 4.3.3.2, because it illustrates the interplay between professional fulfilment and practical reassurance, showing how work and reliable aftercare together help mitigate maternal guilt.

Participants explained as follows that aftercare also reduced their common daily stressors:

- *“I was happy because they made him do homework. He had to read, and he does not like reading. So, it helped. We would normally fight about homework, so aftercare helped me a lot.” (S.B 84-86)*
- *“The aftercare helps a lot ... It definitely improves the entire experience of being a working mom and having a kid in primary school.” (T.J 99-103)*
- *“To me, it’s, it’s a great experience because, like, there’s a sort of a different load taken off my shoulders.” (Y.M 84-85)*

Mothers frequently mentioned that employment is a source of personal fulfilment, and aftercare offers practical reassurance to balance parental guilt. Work provides purpose, identity, and self-esteem beyond caregiving, while aftercare relieves daily stressors and supports children's structured routines. Participants emphasised that dependable aftercare allows mothers to focus on work knowing their children are safe, occupied, and building a sense of responsibility. Additionally, some mothers noted that aftercare alleviated household conflicts, such as arguments over homework or meals.

The shared motherhood stories reveal that professional fulfilment and the practical assistance of aftercare are working together to offset maternal feelings of guilt. Employment offers mothers confidence and financial security while aftercare provides for children's safety, structure, and engagement. This combination helps mothers reconcile professional and parental roles, manage stress, and facilitates more meaningful interactions with their children.

The results are supported by research demonstrating that engaging work and available childcare contribute to wellbeing, facilitate problem-solving and time-management skills, and decrease parenting stress (Adem, 2023; Torres, Barbosa-Silva Oliveira-Silva, Miziara & Guahy *et al.*, 2024:7).

As previously indicated, women who are satisfied with their jobs are more likely to cope with setbacks by seeking help, and that work is of greater subjective importance to them (Napora *et al.*, 2017:62).

Storylines that emerged from the mothers' accounts further highlight how aftercare alleviated stress and the daily burdens of work and parenting responsibilities. Participants reported that aftercare diminished arguments and other conflict-rich times at home, for example, homework, getting children to activities and school, and the emotional weight of these activities after coming home from a full day of work. The sense of relief in S.B.'s comment that aftercare "made him do his homework" and prevented arguments, as well as T.J.'s appreciation of healthy meals and not having to do so much in the evenings, resonates with the literature indicating that one of the most difficult aspects of life for working mothers is tending to children's tasks, studying

and household expectations in addition to working full time (Ravindranath, Singh, Arumugam & Kularajasingam, 2021:21).

The importance of dependable, organised childcare for reducing work-family conflict and helping women to be more efficient, emotionally balanced, and better performing at work has also been documented (Tripathi *et al.*, 2016). The “load taken off my shoulders” that Y.M. talked about, echoes evidence that insufficient time, as well as family-work role conflict and time scarcity, can increase stress, feelings of burnout and fatigue and make it difficult for mothers to parent in the relaxed, emotionally attuned way that they want to (Barkati & Fellow, 2021; Singh, 2019). The literature has also shown that a reliable, caring childcare setting that mothers know their children are safe in can positively impact children’s education, social and early life skills, as well as mothers’ peace of mind (Azizah, Saleh & Sulistyaningrum, 2022:54; Yasin, Nawawi, Devy & Nadhiroh, 2025:91). In this light, the mothers’ reflections on how they can notice their children being more responsible or how they value that aftercare is a space where their children learn and have structure in an organised way align with other evidence that after-school programmes allow working mothers to combine their dual roles by taking care of their children’s academics, supervision, and safe, orderly routine (Singh & Ghani, 2025:727).

Taken together, the storylines in the mothers’ accounts highlight how aftercare both lightened their load and provided emotional relief, dovetailing with the broader evidence that structural childcare support is a critical protective factor for working mothers to manage employment and family demands.

These findings also highlight the ecological interplay where the microsystem of mother-child interactions is linked to the exosystem of workplace and childcare resources, illustrating how broader systemic supports influence emotional experiences and coping strategies (Guy-Evans, 2025). WFC Theory can also be used to understand why aftercare had such a positive effect on mothers’ stress in this study.

This theory suggests that conflict occurs when work and family responsibilities compete for the same scarce resources such as time and emotional energy, which can result in fatigue, frustration and guilt. Participants’ stories showed how this conflict

was resolved when aftercare took up some of the daily burden such as overseeing homework, preparing afternoon meals and managing childcare logistics. This minimised the extent to which work responsibilities impinged on participants' ability to parent as they would have liked, thereby reducing time-based and strain-based conflict. Aftercare left mothers feeling more balanced, more emotionally available and better able to fulfil their obligations in both areas.

In summary, fulfilling work combined with reliable childcare appears to decrease mothers' feelings of guilt and increase reassurance, allowing for more quality time with their children. These findings underscore the importance of integrated professional and familial support systems in promoting maternal wellbeing and maintaining work-life balance.

4.7.3 Subtheme 3: Flexible Hours as Relief

Participants emphasised the significance of workplace flexibility in managing parental guilt and stress. Mothers with adaptable schedules reported experiencing less anxiety about aftercare, whereas those in rigid work environments experienced heightened frustration and guilt due to their limited ability to adjust work hours to family needs. Mothers explained as follows that flexible schedules enabled them to manage school pickups, attend events, and participate in their children's routines:

- *"My work is right opposite the school. That is why I have lots of flexibility to fetch them."* (T.vO. 77-78)
- *"Yes, but mainly because I have shorter hours. I think it must be very difficult for someone working from 8 to 4 or even harder from 8 to 5. With my hours I can still manage to be involved in their sports and other activities. But even then, it is still tight."* (M.K 139-132)
- *"I work for myself... so I am very flexible. I go to the office do my work, and then I can pick up my kids from sport in the afternoon if I want."* (L.C-W. 16-22)
- *"There are days I feel guilty - especially at my previous job where I really worked long hours ..., but now that I am a little bit more flexible - it's not so bad."* (J.B 63-66)

These storylines suggest that workplace flexibility was another protective factor against guilt. The mothers who had control over their work hours were able to attend important events and be present at key pickups. They felt actively involved in their children's routines and avoided being away from home for long periods of time. In contrast, those who had less flexible work hours and more rigid workplace policies experienced work-family conflict, guilt, and stress because of conflicting work and family demands. The mothers in the more flexible workplaces mentioned how this not only helped with the practical demands but also removed the guilt that came from feeling like they were not there for their children, making it easier to feel more present and effective at both work and home.

Workplace flexibility can be understood in terms of a range of different practices, such as starting or ending the day earlier or later, working part-time (fewer paid hours), or working from home. A flexible workplace has been shown to increase a mother's sense of control over her work-family interface, such that she is able to meet the needs of her family and thus worries less about missing out on key opportunities for connection with her children (LaGraff & Stolz, 2023). Flexible work arrangements have also been shown to support positive parenting practices. Parents with more flexible work arrangements are more able to give more time, attention, and care to their children. Policies and workplace interventions that support work flexibility also play a role in reducing maternal guilt and increasing the wellbeing of parents and families (LaGraff & Stolz, 2023).

Flexible working arrangements have also been shown to support autonomy, an individual's basic psychological need for self-direction. This corresponds with the finding that workplace flexibility, like many other intrinsic motivators, when provided as part of the work environment, increased people's sense of autonomy in their working roles, and thus strengthened self-development and fulfilment (Jiang, Pan, Luo, Guo, & Kou 2023). This autonomy in work schedules and hours is important to mothers because it allows them to better manage and balance their work and family demands. In contrast, a lack of control over working hours has been found to be associated with a stronger work-life conflict, making work more of a stressor than something that is rewarding (Hamplová, 2018:475).

Framing from the EST, workplace flexibility can be understood in terms of part of the exosystem in that it can have an indirect influence on a mother's experience of stress and guilt based on how it affects the parent-child interactions in the microsystem. A sense of autonomy or control over working hours can help to better align work and family roles and thus reduce work-family conflict and feelings of guilt. External support systems also can provide mothers and families with additional resources, such as in the form of partners, extended family members, friends, and childcare providers, who can support the work-family interface by reducing some of the practical and emotional demands of parenting (Adisa *et al.*, 2016; Cooklin *et al.*, 2014:268).

In summary, the storylines provided evidence that the mothers who had the advantage of flexible working arrangements were not only able to meet the practical demands of work and family life but were also able to experience less conflict between the two. They were able to work less and experience less pressure at work as well as feel better about their role as a mother.

These narratives also highlighted the importance of external support that was available to some of the mothers, including workplace flexibility.

4.7.4 Subtheme 4: Perspective and Reframing

The mothers coped with the feelings of guilt by reframing their situations. This can be by reinterpreting aftercare as an opportunity for their children and by perceiving the benefits of their work on the family's wellbeing. Reframing the situation, and not blaming themselves, allows the mothers to feel that they are in control of their decisions as parents. This is also known as cognitive restructuring, which is the process of identifying, challenging, and changing negative or unhelpful thoughts and beliefs that contribute to emotional distress (Wenzel, 2017:597). The participants explained their reframing techniques and how their views changed as follows:

- *"I come from a home where my mother did not work... I have had lots of guilt feelings about having my child in an aftercare and not doing the same for him as I had when I was growing up. But times have changed. So, I work..." (T.J 229-233)*

- *"I am very grateful that aftercare exists. And that it is a good aftercare, and that my child is happy. It helps keep the system running."* (M.K 198-199)
- *"I am positive about an aftercare... It is the way we as working parents cope with everything. If I compare it to my daughter in high school - where there is no aftercare - it becomes very difficult! So, I am very grateful for an aftercare."* (J.B 185-188)
- *"Having my son in the aftercare is working for me. It works on a positive side because it helps me to juggle my other things."* (Y.M 223-225)
- *"It is a positive thing if such a service is available. It makes your life much easier. Especially if it is a good aftercare that really helps with, erm, everything the kids need to do after school. So, when you pick them up everything is already done."* (N.N 185-187)
- *"I'm very grateful for an aftercare and I'm glad that there are people that are actually willing to do it for people like me that work a lot."* (N.V 131-132)
- *"I wouldn't have thought that I would put them in aftercare because of my childhood experience and let's say bias towards aftercare children and the stigma around it."* (T. vO. 189-191)

One participant, J.J, provided reflections that capture the tension of balancing maternal responsibility with practical demands. Initially anxious about returning to work and managing school pickups, she recalled the following:

- *"I thought I would get it right ... And on day one of Grade 1 I left at 1 to fetch my child from school and while driving home it totally freaked me out. I was like - I have a half a day of work still to do! So, I got on the phone to the aftercare and asked if they still had space!"* (J.J, 71-75)

She later thought as follows on her initial reluctance to rely on aftercare, believing she could manage her child's homework herself, and the relief she felt once she accepted external support:

- *"The only reason I did not want to use them in the beginning was that I thought I could manage helping and doing the homework myself... But then I realised*

this is just not my personality. Since then, they have been in the aftercare, and I have felt consistently positive about the decision. I am happy and I would not change it.” (J.J, 126-130)

As these stories suggest, reframing one’s cognition and holding positive beliefs and attitudes towards aftercare allow mothers to align paid work and parenting roles, reduce guilt, and preserve emotional equilibrium. On the one hand, motherhood and children were idealised, which could create tension and conflict when mothers experienced negative emotions. On the other hand, mothers demonstrated an increasing propensity to question, challenge, and reframe their ideas about the “perfect mother.” This is not dissimilar to the ideal-actual discrepancies framework, where mothers evaluate their experiences against societal and/or individual ideals of “good motherhood” (Jackson, O’Donoghue, Helm, Gentilcore & Hussain, 2024:3031). Positive cognitive reframing that constructs a more realistic narrative in which good and bad emotions coexist promotes emotional homeostasis and resilience.

In addition, the researcher examined the mothers’ experience of shame. Shame can be conceptualised differently from guilt, being defined as the apprehension of social disapproval or negative evaluation of the self (Liss *et al.*, 2012:1113). The researcher felt it was important to include shame alongside guilt to present a more complete picture of how mothers reframe their experience and manage negative self-conscious emotions, including the push and pull of personal expectations and external social or cultural influences. The influence of cultural narratives and constructs about childcare, the self, and the family is reminiscent of macrosystem-level influences, and these can contribute to maternal self-evaluation and guilt. Cognitive reframing strategies, in contrast, were more microsystem-level, being dependent on the parent-child relationship, as well as factors like aftercare and social support outside the home (Guy-Evans, 2025).

Taken together, these findings suggest that parental guilt is not an immutable response, but it can be buffered by one’s point of view, work and childcare experiences, and cognitive reframing. Mothers are more likely to reduce or buffer feelings of guilt and preserve a positive parenting identity when they can find value in work, trust the quality of aftercare, or successfully reframe their ideas about what

makes a “good mother.” This subtheme illuminates the role of personal resilience and cognitive strategies, as well as systemic supports, in helping working mothers navigate competing roles.

4.8 THEME 5: MANAGING GUILT

Theme 5 examines the work-life balance of working mothers. Three subthemes were identified, Overcompensating, The Child’s Happiness as a Mitigating Factor, and Practical Support from the Aftercare as depicted in Figure 4.6 and discussed below.

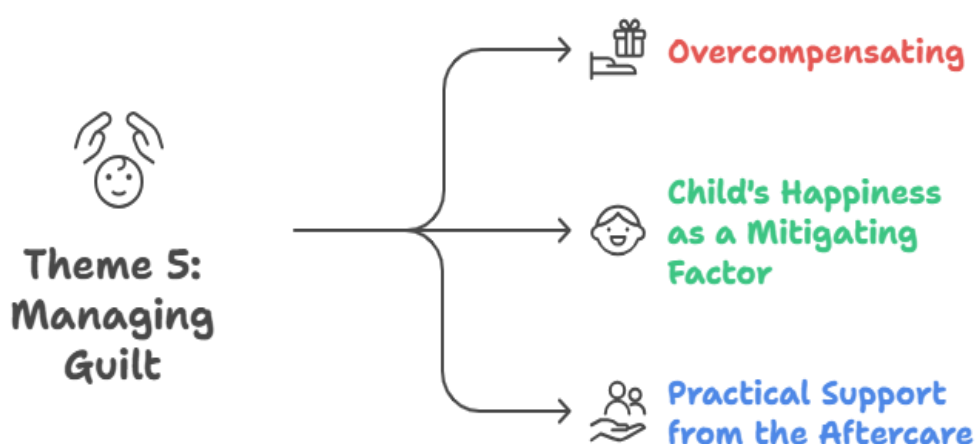


Figure 4-6 Theme 5: Managing guilt

(Author’s own compilation, generated using napkin.ai)

Made with Napkin

4.8.1 Subtheme 1: Overcompensating

Several mothers described coping with guilt by intentionally compensating during the limited time they spent with their children. This often took the form of giving extra quality time, attention, or treats, and at times, relaxing boundaries when everyone was emotionally drained. They expressed themselves as follows about it:

- *“Since you see each other so little, um, people tend to overcompensate for all the time you miss... And then they also get away with a bit more and they get more spoiled.” (N.N 104-105 &108)*

- *“You see your kids for such a short time during the day, so if they are not with you - you still want them to be happy. I focus on my kids and doing nice things with them when I am with them.” (L.C-W. 165-167)*
- *“At the end of the day we are all exhausted. The kids are overstimulated; I am tired from work - it is a lot emotionally for everyone... Then I just let them be and do what they want for a while, while leaving me alone.” (T.H 187-190)*
- *“It’s our special time alone - so I enjoy it very much!!” (J.B 174-175)*

Between these four storylines, participants described a common experience of emotional conflict over balancing work and motherhood in the context of contemporary family life. Individual circumstances and responses were, of course, diverse. Still, their narratives together drew attention to the tension between internalised expectations of the “good mother” and the realistic need to work.

Feelings of guilt were often balanced with a pragmatic effort to make the most of time with children, and several mothers described various forms of overcompensation for their time apart. This could take the form of relaxing boundaries at home when both mother and child were tired from the day’s activities, putting aside tasks to prioritise connection and calm, or emphasising quality time, such as referring to evenings with children as “special time”. Others mentioned additional attention, affection or rewards, or carving out small moments of meaningful connection in the limited time available. These experiences reflected the constant calibration in parenting of structural and attuned responses, while the additional pressure of guilt over long working hours seemed to influence mothers to use the time, they did have with children to reinforce emotional connection.

A growing body of research also indicates that parental guilt can motivate compensatory behaviours to restore a sense of competence (Borelli *et al.*, 2016a; Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018). Moderating this effect is the presence of coping resources. Parents with greater stress or depletion may be more likely to relax their boundaries as a short-term strategy to offset their own fatigue as well as their children’s needs (Kroshus, Hawrilenko, Tandon, Browning & Steiner *et al.*, 2023:1192).

Parents also often express love through materialism, with gifting as a symbol of connection and care (Gupta, 2023).

Overall, overcompensation in various forms seemed to be a common experience for mothers responding to guilt, bounded and expressed within social expectations of motherhood and constrained by limited time and energy. For many, it was a way of reasserting their self-identity as “good mothers”, while also negotiating work and family demands. The impact of parental reflecting functioning differences was also clear, with some mothers having greater cognitive flexibility and emotional balance to mediate their guilt and implement boundary-setting, and others feeling more emotional distress or exhibiting more erratic boundaries as a result of the pressure of guilt on their capacities (Stuhrmann, Göbel, Bindt & Mudra, 2022:9). The emotional, cognitive, and structural factors within the mothers’ stories illustrated some of the multiple ways in which guilt can manifest, interact, and be transformed in the context of aftercare experiences.

In pulling these stories together, a picture emerges of maternal guilt as neither a fixed nor wholly negative experience, but one that can lead to growth in emotional insight and resilience, through reflection, reframing, and changes to coping strategies. Cognitive reframing of their emotions, alongside validation from their communities and consistent childcare experiences, allowed mothers to rework guilt into a motivating force for emotional connection with children and confidence in their parenting.

Guided by the EST, the present findings both deepen the understanding of how maternal guilt is experienced and reframed and illustrate how this is done not in isolation but as part of a complex interaction between beliefs and available systems. With supportive systems on personal, family, workplace and social levels in balance, mothers can navigate reframing guilt and finding positive meaning in working and motherhood. Maternal guilt, when supported by the personal and social systems in which it is situated, can become a transformative experience in developing empathy, self-knowledge, and balance in the emotional lives of working mothers.

4.8.2 Subtheme 2: Child's Happiness as Mitigating Factor

Mothers often reassured themselves about their decision to place their child in aftercare by observing the child's happiness and wellbeing. Several mothers described how their children's contentment eased their feelings of parental guilt:

- *"I feel guilty - I do not want to have to have them be there the whole day - but on the other hand he is so happy there, and he gets lunch - and goes to his sport. So even though I feel guilty - I know he is ok."* (J.B 71-73) *"My kids were always the very last kids to be fetched at the aftercare in the afternoon, but now that I am a little bit more flexible - it's not so bad. And I also know my child enjoys it at the aftercare, so it softens the feelings of guilt."* (J.B 64-67)
- *"Yes, I am happy. She is happy."* (M.M 76)
- *"Guilt... uhm. and relief. Even though I would want to be there for him and have him with me I am happy that he is happy to be there."* (T.J 109-110)
- *"Even though I want to be there for them, they love it there."* (T.vO. 82-83)
- *"The staff are responsible and keep the children safe - that really matters to me. And the fact that my child wants to go back, which is always a good sign."* (M.K. 78-80)
- *"I know she does not always want to be there, but she understands. So as long as she is happy."* (A.P 104-105)

As also reflected in Theme 2, J.B frequently described how her children were the last to be collected, which was a significant source of guilt for her. This highlights how rigid work schedules intersect with maternal guilt. Similarly, T.J initially framed her struggle in financial terms, wishing she could earn differently to avoid aftercare, but this concern softened when she witnessed her child's enjoyment and growth, showing how financial guilt was reframed through the child's positive experience.

Mothers also noted that their children's individual personalities influenced their emotional responses:

- *"It depends a lot on the child's personality. Some kids enjoy it. But for my child, it is a struggle every day... It was terrible for him. And I hate having to send him."*

(T.H 75-78)

These storylines, display a pattern that becomes apparent. Mothers turned to their children's happiness as an emotional barometer to navigate and even reframe guilt. Visible markers of joy, engagement, and belonging in the aftercare setting reassured mothers that their decision was okay, and that their children were not only surviving but also flourishing in their absence. Conversely, when children exhibited distress or reluctance, guilt deepened, underscoring how mothers' emotional wellbeing was intricately linked to their children's adjustment and satisfaction.

Empirical studies echo these narratives, highlighting that positive school and aftercare environments characterised by warm relationships, supportive teachers, and meaningful peer connections, are pivotal to children's happiness and engagement (Gramaxo, Seabra, Abelha & Dutschke, 2023:375; Ovalle, Nussbaum, Claro, Espinosa, & Alvares, 2024:1321; Potharst, Aktar, Rexwinkel, Rigterink & Bögels, 2017:1239). When children feel secure and connected, parents perceive aftercare not as a compromise, but as a supportive extension of care and development.

Bringing these strands together, the child's happiness can be said to act as a powerful guilt mitigating force that underlies and mediates the mother's emotional conflict between the worlds of work and caregiving. Crucially, this relief from guilt is conditional and when the child is visibly happy and flourishing, the mothers guilt subsides. When the child is struggling, the researcher found that guilt intensified. From the vantage point of an EST, this dynamic speaks to how the child's microsystem (daily aftercare experiences) resonates with the parent's emotional world, in shaping the broader ecosystem of the family unit.

In conclusion, children's happiness does more than assuage guilt. It fortifies mothers' confidence in their parenting decisions, empowering them to better balance the

demands of employment and caregiving with a heightened sense of emotional stability, reassurance and peace of mind.

4.8.3 Subtheme 3: Practical Support from Aftercare

As narrated below, mothers pointed out that practical support from the aftercare programme and its staff played a significant role in easing the burden of daily responsibilities and reducing feelings of guilt.

- *“At least at the aftercare there are lots of ladies helping - and they have seen that question a few years and answered it a few times. The kids are also not exposed to TV the whole afternoon. So as much as it feels selfish and it sounds selfish, it really is a win-win for a child as well as for a parent.” (J.J 206-210)*

L.C-W. emphasised the relief provided by assistance with meals, homework and emotional care, noting that these supports lightened her workload and allowed her to manage work and home responsibilities more effectively:

- *“I know my kids get good lunch. Also, the fact that they also help with homework is fantastic, because when you get home, tired from work, you still have dinner to make it is nice to know you do not have to spend hours on homework. Of course, sometimes you have to help a bit like when they did not finish before going off to sport, but they really assist well. There's also holiday care during school breaks, which is amazing.” (L.C-W. 85-89)*

T.H. highlighted how attentive staff, oversight of homework, and involvement in extracurricular activities provided peace of mind ensuring her child was cared for and engaged:

- *“Well, the aftercare provides lunch and an afternoon snack. There are also outside activities done at the school they attend to what the aftercare sends them. They send updates on the homework if it is not done or finished.” (T.H 60-62)*

M.K. described the advantages of holiday care and flexible communication with staff, which allowed her to relax knowing her child was safe and supervised, even when activities changed:

- *“They offer holiday school. That is one of the things that attracted me to the aftercare the most.” (M.K 68-69)*
- *“When an activity is cancelled - the only thing I have to do is send a WhatsApp to the aftercare cell phone and inform them he does not need to go for that activity - and I can relax... knowing he is safe, and I can collect him when I am done working gives me peace of mind.” (M.K 108-113)*

The participants have repeatedly pointed out how practical, hands-on support from aftercare staff lessened the burden of daily life. Assistance with meals, homework and extracurricular activities has made their lives lighter and significantly relieved the burden on a mother. Mothers often described how it reassured them that their child was safe and well cared for, making it easier to cope with work-family demands.

This is in line with research that has found that mothers are likely to turn to outside sources of support to reduce workloads and manage competing demands for parenting and employment (Nel, Naudé & Piotrowski, 2024:667). The same findings are also intertwined with the ideology of intensive mothering, which maintains idealised and often unattainable standards of constant maternal presence and perfection (Lamar *et al.*, 2019). Practical support from aftercare staff challenges these norms by providing evidence that shared caregiving is not only beneficial for maternal wellbeing but also for child development. From the perspective of the EST, aftercare can be viewed as part of the mesosystem that connects the microsystems of home, school and work and strengthens family functioning through a network of supportive relationships (Guy-Evans, 2025).

Taken together, practical support is a form of coping resource that is used by mothers. By reducing logistical and emotional pressures, an aftercare programme gives mothers the ability to keep a healthy balance between different life domains. The peace of mind gained from knowing that one's children are happy and supervised by

trusted staff, changes the use of aftercare into an emotionally restorative support system that is used by many parents.

Together with the child's happiness, practical support reflects the various ways in which mothers cope with their feelings of guilt and shows how emotional reassurance and instrumental assistance work together. However, not all parents are the same, and some of them may not experience aftercare in the same way. As previously mentioned, the effects of every strategy depend on the specific family context, the child's temperament and the mother's resources (Lamar *et al.*, 2019).

4.9 THEME 6: SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Theme 6 examines the support strategies working mothers can use to help them manage feelings of guilt. Three subthemes were identified, peer support groups, quality aftercare, and the role of social workers as depicted in Figure 4.7 and described below.

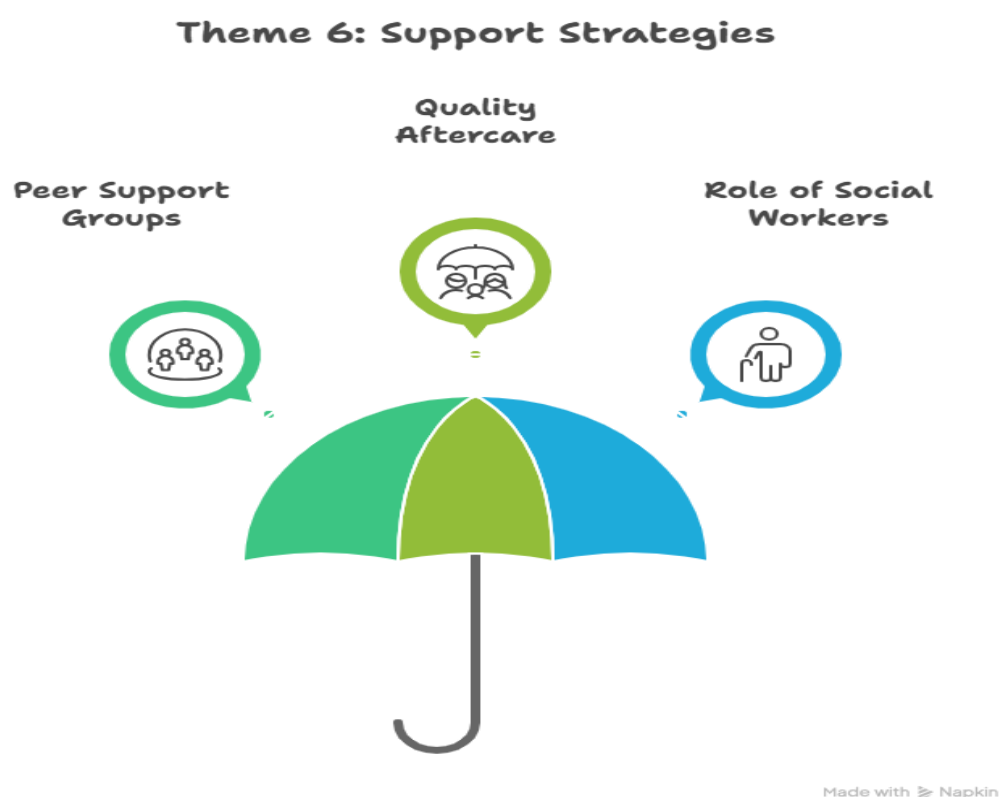


Figure 4-7 Theme 6: Support strategies
(Author's own compilation, generated using *napkin.ai*)

4.9.1 Subtheme 1: Peer Support Groups

Mothers in this study regarded informal mother-to-mother support networks as a valuable strategy for sharing experiences and reducing guilt, reflecting the Ubuntu principle of collective support, describing it as follows:

- *“Get on to a WhatsApp group I suppose - with moms that are working? You will quickly see that others understand and are supportive. I think that can help a lot. That is the best support nowadays.” (J.J 190-192)*
- *“I think one of the best ways is to have a group of moms that you see, like the playdate weekly. Then you realise you go through the same thing, and you laugh about your guilt.” (T.vO. 259-261)*
- *“I can see the contrast with someone not having fellow moms as a support structure and then someone who does have it, what the difference is... I have that. And I can see it works. We have a new mom that slotted into our mom group at the school, and I can really see it meant a lot for her.” (T.vO 263-267)*
- *“We are in an environment where people understand. You surround yourself by the same type of people as you. I surround myself with other working moms, so I do not feel judged.” (J.J 178-180)*

However, as indicated below, peer support was less accessible or less helpful for some mothers:

- *“I do not know if my reassurance lies in something like safety in numbers. Because knowing I am not alone does not make me feel better because it does not make a difference for my child... So, I do not think it is something that would personally make me feel better. I think for my own state of mind, workplace trust and flexibility would work best for me” (E.dS. 189-193)*
- *“A support group I think would be really well, but I don't think people will have time to go.” (N.V 125-126)*

Across these narratives, mothers explained how peer support helped to provide emotional validation and reduce feelings of isolation by normalising the guilt commonly

experienced by working mothers. Those with active support networks described how sharing experiences, strategies and validation with other mothers helped to alleviate stress and create a sense of belonging. In contrast, mothers lacking such networks were more likely to rely on alternative resources such as workplace flexibility or family assistance and to view these resources as more relevant to their coping. These experiences show how reliance on peer support varied according to practical constraints, individual preferences and local availability.

In terms of the EST, peer networks form part of mothers' mesosystems, connecting their microsystems of work, home and social relationships. By enabling emotional exchange and collective coping, peer networks can help buffer parental stress, reduce isolation and promote maternal wellbeing. A wider literature broadly supports the findings that a reliable support system, whether from family, friends or childcare providers, can reduce the challenges of juggling employment and parenting, which in turn reduces feelings of guilt (Adisa *et al.*, 2016). Good mental health and a strong sense of parenting competence are also related to reduced guilt, and interventions that target stress management or resilience can help to improve mothers' confidence in childcare decisions (Van der Zee-van den Berg, Boere-Boonekamp, Groothuis-Oudshoorn, Ijzerman, Haasnoot-Smallegange & Reijneveld, 2017). Problem-solving coping and active social support can help parents to manage stress and maintain a balanced view of their parenting (Sivberg, 2002). Mobility and physical distance from extended family can, however, diminish social support networks and exacerbate work-family conflict due to a lack of available assistance (Lamar *et al.*, 2019).

WFC Theory's applicability is further illustrated by the storylines. As the theory posits, the stress resulted when time, effort, and emotional resources were insufficient to meet work and family demands. Notably, having good peer support at work, flexible hours, and dependable childcare acted as coping mechanisms in this study, alleviating time-based and strain-based demands conflict (Obrenovic *et al.*, 2020). For instance, participants who felt supported had lower stress and guilt, suggesting that external resources helped ease role competition and decrease work interference with caregiving. Alternatively, when support was sparse or lacking, conflict increased. Seen through this theoretical lens, positive peer groups and reliable childcare may be

examples of broader dynamics discussed by WFC Theory in role overload and other stressors.

In this study, informal peer networks (such as WhatsApp groups and close friendship circles) acted as a coping resource by providing shared understanding, emotional validation and practical reassurance. These experiences are in line with broader evidence that social connections reduce parental guilt and enhance maternal wellbeing. Overall, the stories illustrate that peer support can play a meaningful role in helping working mothers to cope with the emotional challenges of dual roles. At the same time, they also show that mothers differ in their reliance on peer networks, with some preferring support from family or the workplace.

4.9.2 Subtheme 2: The importance of Quality Aftercare/Trusting the Aftercare Environment

Mothers also emphasised that the quality and structure of aftercare played a central role in shaping their emotional experiences, particularly on their feelings of parental guilt. Their confidence in the safety, reliability, and nurturing environment of aftercare provided reassurance, and enabled mothers to merge work demands with parenting responsibilities. Participants described how careful selection of aftercare services helped alleviate their stress and build trust as follows:

- *“Do not just take the first aftercare you come across. Okay. Do your homework thoroughly and talk to other moms about their experiences because what they experience, whether positive or negative, it can influence your answer or your decision about where to place your child.” (A.P. 160-163)*
- *“My kids were just not happy at the first aftercare. So, there I had to move them. I could not have them in that setting anymore.” (N.V 68-69)*
- *“Well... knowing that they are on the school grounds and safe gives me peace of mind.” (J.J 153)*
- *“But my children are in a good school and good aftercare with good staff. We are very blessed with the quality of staff here.” (L.C-W. 241-242)*
- *“I’m very grateful that aftercare exists.” (M.K 198)*

In contrast, when facilities lacked structure or flexibility, mothers reported experiencing heightened stress and frustration as follows:

- *“At our previous aftercare, it was a bit, it was not easy or comfortable to change arrangements. And that added a lot to my stress.” (A.P. 154-156)*
- *“So, with my experience of our school’s aftercare, I feel they do not see the opportunity with what they can all do there, and even if it costs more, it would not bother me. So, there is potential for further growth in aftercares who can invest so much more in the lives of the children that are there in the afternoons.” (E.dS 202-205)*

In summary, it seems maternal experiences and beliefs around aftercare services are not neutral. If aftercare feels safe, well-coordinated and predictable it can decrease parental anxieties and assuage guilt. Disorderly, chaotic, or rigid and insensitive aftercare settings can amplify stress and cause parents to second guess their childcare choices which can cause anxiety. These views propose institutional care quality compounds informal care available from family members, friends and peers lessening or exacerbating stress (Bode, George, Weist, Stephan & Lever *et al.*, 2016:3044; Collins, 2020:22).

In essence, the literature indicates that mothers’ perceptions and experiences of aftercare services are not neutral. When aftercare is experienced as safe, well managed, and consistent, it can help to reduce parental fears and alleviate feelings of guilt. In contrast, unstructured, poorly organised, or rigid and insensitive aftercare environments may intensify stress and lead parents to question their childcare decisions, potentially increasing anxiety. These perspectives suggest that the quality of institutional care interacts with informal support from family, friends, and peers, either reinforcing or easing emotional strain

Looking at this from a theoretical standpoint, aftercare can be viewed as part of the microsystem of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory because it is a system children live in and actively experience. Aftercare can also fit into the mesosystem because it bridges home and school, showing how one microsystem can connect to

another. This is just one example of how multiple social systems are interconnected and how parents' decisions about childcare and after-school programs affect their children's daily lives.

Quality aftercare appears to buffer parents from stress by providing both practical support and emotional wellbeing. It was reported that mothers experienced higher self-confidence in their decisions about childcare after they chose a well-known and reputed service (Hart, Vandell, Whitaker & Watts, 2022). This can provide the feelings of being in control, as well as having taken the right decision on their children's care during parents' working hours, which reassured parents that their children were safe, occupied, and not being neglected while in care. Related studies about these issues point out that "parental trust in childcare contexts was associated with higher parental self-efficacy and reduced strain from work-family conflicts" (Van Der Zee-Van Den Berg *et al.*, 2017).

Additional research supports the aforementioned point about quality childcare centres affecting parents' wellbeing. In a study by Van Heerden (2016:11), mothers placed importance on process quality indicators, such as emotional support and holistic development, when rating ECD centres. This evidence not only highlights the role of trust in the childcare context but also that this trust addresses both the children's and the parents' needs for emotional assurance. Sluiter, Fekkink and Fekkes (2025:775) found that higher process quality of childcare was associated with better socio-emotional outcomes of children. This implies that parents may feel more assured and less worried if their children are in good care. Glatz, Lippold, Chung & Jensen (2023:86) provided evidence that higher parental self-efficacy was associated with more coping (or less stress) within a work-family balancing context. This finding thus also suggests that parents, who are confident that they have made a good decision about the childcare arrangement for their children, may be more likely to experience less stress or guilt from these needs and, as such, efficacious parents are better able to manage challenges.

In conclusion, based on the mothers' experience in this study, the quality and structure of aftercare can be seen as a key protective factor for parental guilt. The findings of the present study show that, when they are able to trust the aftercare setting, mothers

can face the work-family issues with confidence. These results help to understand how aftercare services are important for parents in terms of both practical and emotional needs for them to be able to deal with parental guilt and improve their mental wellbeing. In this case, the mothers' narratives demonstrate that institutional help and family, friends, and peers (informal social networks) are operating side by side to act as a buffer against stress and parental guilt. These findings also give support to the claim that parental guilt is an emotional stress caused not only by individual or family factors but also by the social systems and structures in which parents live and make decisions.

4.9.3 Subtheme 3: Role of Social Workers

Although participants did not explicitly refer to social workers, their responses suggest that a potential need for support from helping professionals like social workers was recognised by Mothers in managing and alleviating parental guilt. Through guidance, resources, and practical strategies, helping professionals like social workers help to enhance emotional wellbeing and support mothers in balancing work, family, and self-care.

Participants emphasised the practical and emotional benefits of receiving professional support as follows:

- *“Counselling for the mother or father can help, especially if there’s trauma or unresolved issues. If you are emotionally balanced adult that can understand your own triggers, then you are less likely to feel guilty. So, think that counselling will help them.” (M.K 191-194)*
- *“Maybe just someone who can help you manage everything!” (S.B 155-156)*
- *“Um, for mothers feeling guilty, it is a psychological issue that they just need to accept that the situation is the way it is or see someone about it. Maybe they can just engage in the aftercare, see what they do, how the kids enjoy it, so that they can relax.” (M.M. 167-170)*

The stories from this reflection piece have revealed that mothers according to their narratives, experience many kinds of guilt, such as exhaustion guilt, shame, feeling judged, and split loyalty. Social workers would intervene through empathic listening, counselling, and psychoeducation, normalising guilt, and psycho-educational support to parents who experience guilt (Irak *et al.*, 2019:59-60). In this way, they can identify potential triggers to help parents mitigate the intensity of their feelings and duration of guilt. Organising peer support groups and facilitating structured parent networks are helpful ways for parents to vent, compare their notes, and borrow coping strategies to promote solidarity, which reduces isolation, and encourages mutual support (Glaser, Knowles & Damaskos, 2019:767).

In these examples, helping professionals like social workers can help to facilitate these connections and interactions as part of the larger ecosystem. This is a way to reduce the chronic stress and build parental resilience. In this case, the social worker would be functioning in the child and parents' mesosystem and exosystem of Bronfenbrenner's EST. Social workers provide services that allow the parents and family to connect with the outside world and other forms of support outside the direct family system.

Equally important, social workers also provide psychoeducation around self-compassion and adaptive coping strategies. Through a structured exercise that challenges parents to notice their internal critic and respond with positive self-talk, reframing thoughts, and gratitude, parents may develop an adaptive pattern of turning towards themselves rather than turning away or, worse, turning against themselves (Gibson, 2013:339). Social workers can introduce self-compassion and self-care into the parent's lexicon and inspire resilience through building resources within families. In this way, parents may become less affected by the emotional weight of guilt and shame to remain more fully present and responsive in work and family life.

4.10 REFLECTIVE SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Findings from this chapter showed that mothers' experiences with aftercare in terms of guilt, socialisation, and support are intrinsically intertwined. All participants' experiences of aftercare were underscored by the emotion of guilt. However, while all women experienced guilt to some degree, it presented in different forms and intensities. Factors such as children's happiness in aftercare, mothers' satisfaction with their work, flexibility at the workplace, and the presence of reliable support systems all influenced the intensity of guilt experienced. Mothers also employed a range of strategies to cope with or resolve these feelings, such as spending quality time with children, reframing their thinking and feeling reassured when children were happy and adapting to aftercare.

At the same time, participants accentuated that various external sources of support played a vital role in helping them to manage or mitigate guilt. For example, peer networks provided understanding, validation, and a sense of shared experience; dependable aftercare sources offered reassurance about children's safety and wellbeing; and social workers provided professional support, advice, and validation that enabled more positive coping and emotional management. In this way, support from multiple sources was found to be important to helping mothers balance, reduce guilt, and feel competent, balanced, and confident as parents.

This means that mothers' guilt is not just an individual emotion, but one that is socially and relationally constructed by expectations, and one that can be managed or allayed through shared caregiving. This points to the need for understanding and intervening around guilt in a manner that is sensitive to social and cultural context, and that builds on African values of interdependence, empathy, and solidarity. This should include attention to structural factors such as workplace demands and requirements, as well as practical support for childcare and aftercare. In addition, a child's experience of happiness at school also matters for parents as it informs parents' own emotional state, shapes perceptions of school quality, and directly impacts parents' future school decisions.

In this way, this chapter points to the fluid and malleable nature of feelings of guilt for working mothers about the care of their children. As a complex and evolving emotion, feelings of guilt can be shaped by relationships, reframed by cultural understandings, and softened by personal coping mechanisms and perspectives to allow women to confidently and compassionately juggle and reconcile the demands of work and caregiving.

4.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, the results of the study are discussed. In summary, the study set out to explore the experience of parental guilt among working mothers who send their primary-school children to aftercare centres. The analysis of the data received by conducting semi-structured interviews with fourteen participants were informative. It revealed six themes of interest with subthemes relating to parental guilt which appeared as an important part of the participants' experiences, and was moderated by various personal, familial and structural factors. The mothers described feeling different levels of guilt and there were some who felt little to no guilt. The participants described experiences of both mild and severe guilt, and fluctuating guilt as well as more constant feelings of emotional turmoil and stress as a result of their experiences and related challenges. Some moderating factors that participants believed helped to reduce their guilt included their children being happy, suitable workplace requirements, financial hardship, a good fit between lifestyle and values, engaging employment, workplace flexibility, and support from family and friends.

Contextual factors, including the children's wellbeing, strict working hours, social pressure and expectations, financial challenges and lack of supportive structures and networks were also discussed. Aspects related to work-life balance tension were also elaborated, as the participants described issues with their workload, professional role identity and the gendered division of domestic labour. The moderating factors, including good fit of lifestyle and values, engaging employment, flexibility of workplace, and some emotion regulation strategies, such as taking different perspectives and reframing, were also shown to help alleviate guilt and related challenges and enhance coping.

Finally, various support factors were discussed, including mother's peer groups, a good quality of aftercare and support from social workers. In this regard, their roles in the family and other subsystems, including workplace and the broader society, were also conceptualised. All of the above, which had been divided into several distinct themes for a better understanding of the results, when combined together, may be viewed as a single complex whole that characterises the experiences of the mothers. The next chapter provides a general discussion of the findings by summarising, evaluating, and concluding it, and presenting the study's recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE:

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter brings the work of this study to a close. The contribution of the chapter includes an increased understanding of the phenomenon of parental guilt, particularly among working mothers who have children attending primary school and who need aftercare for their children. Guidance is given for social work practice, policy, and further research.

The research process and the major findings of the study are summarised. The potential significance of these findings in a broader context are discussed with the view that some of these reflections may be useful in contextualising mothers' experience of guilt in juggling their working life, family life, and their children's aftercare responsibilities. The study's limitations are acknowledged, its contribution expounded, and suggestions made for further research. The aim is to bring the work to a conclusion while at the same time highlighting the practical and theoretical importance of this study.

In brief, the summary, conclusions and recommendations of this study regarding parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare, focus on a chapter wise summary and conclusions of the study; attainment of its research question, aim and objectives; its delineation and limitations; the unique contribution of the study; and its recommendations.

5.2 CHAPTER CONCLUSIONS

Drawing together the key findings of the study and providing a synthesis of the main elements of each chapter, this chapter offers a holistic summary of the research. The chapters have sequentially detailed the development of the study from grounding in theory and context through to conceptual development through to methodological approach which then informed the empirical investigation.

Collating these components, this chapter will show how the study's approach, framework and findings respond to the research question and aims, and how they demonstrate cohesion across the study.

5.2.1 Research findings

The research findings revealed six core themes and their subthemes that elucidate working mothers' experiences of parental guilt in the context of aftercare. The six core themes and their 20 subthemes are depicted in Figure 5.1, followed by their listing summarised in Table 5.3. This in turn is followed by a brief discussion of each theme.

Themes and Subthemes



Figure 5-1 Themes and Subthemes

(Author's own compilation, generated using napkin.ai)

Table 5-1 Working mothers' experiences of parental guilt in the context of aftercare

- **Theme 1: Parental Guilt** - Differences between mothers who felt significant guilt and those who did not feel guilt.
- **Theme 2: Factors Shaping Parental Guilt** - Identifies both internal and external pressures that contribute to parental guilt such as child wellbeing, support networks, rigid work hours, financial considerations, community perspectives and societal expectations.
- **Theme 3: Work-Life Balance** - examining the strain of managing dual roles and impact of flexibility in both work and care environments on balance and guilt.
- **Theme 4: Moderators of Guilt** - Factors that influence guilt, including support systems, job satisfaction, lifestyle fit, and cognitive reframing.
- **Theme 5: Managing Guilt** - Actions that parents took to cope with guilt including overcompensation, prioritising children's happiness, and relying on aftercare for practical support.
- **Theme 6: Support Strategies** - Identifying support strategies that can alleviate guilt and provide support including peer networks, quality aftercare, and the role of social workers.

Cross-checking the findings with the related literature and drawing a concept map showed the researcher that maternal guilt is multi-factorial and appears to be constructed through interactions between intra-personal, interpersonal and structural factors. Furthermore, the findings suggested that aftercare either acts as a buffer against guilt, or as a potential amplifier of guilt depending on the features of the aftercare mothers have access to. The availability of work-family resources was found to be directly relevant for mothers' mental wellbeing, with mothers who have access to flexible and supportive workplace and aftercare structures tending to describe their emotional experiences as more manageable, and mothers with access to more rigid and unsympathetic structures describing their experiences as more emotionally straining.

Overall, it illustrated how the working mother's everyday experiences of maternal guilt were constructed at the intersection of present-day family arrangements and more traditional and gendered expectations for parenthood.

The themes identified in the study significantly contribute to answering the research question. They provide a comprehensive understanding of how working mothers interpret, experience, and cope with parental guilt in the aftercare setting. They helped the researcher meet the study's objectives by outlining how mothers experience guilt as an emotion, what factors shape guilt, the strategies mothers use to cope with guilt, and the factors that moderate guilt and its impacts.

5.2.1.1 Theme 1: Parental Guilt

This theme is directly related to the first objective because it shows how mothers describe parental guilt. The participants described various experiences resulting in two subthemes namely, working mothers who feel guilty and parents who do not feel guilty about having put their primary school children in aftercare.

Mothers explained parental guilt in terms of conflicting internal and external expectations. Some experienced guilt as intense and persistent, resulting from perceived inadequacy, idealised expectations of mothers and children, and mothers worried about not being present for their children after school. Others felt little guilt as their children were 'settled' and 'happy' in aftercare, and/or they had more relaxed or realistic standards for themselves. Guilt overall was an emotionally laden reaction to managing work-family demands and expectations in the context of wider social norms.

This theme indicates that parental guilt varies from person to person based on a mother's personal values, her circumstances, and societal influences. It supports the importance of guilt as a relevant emotional framework in the life of working mothers and lays the foundation for the development of the next themes.

5.2.1.2 Theme 2: Factors Shaping Parental Guilt

This theme is significant because it shows factors that shape the emotion of guilt. The theme is also associated with the second objective as it shows how the mothers experienced and perceived guilt-shaping factors. Five subthemes were identified namely, child wellbeing, support networks, rigid working hours, financial considerations, and community perspective/societal expectations.

Mothers' guilt was driven by a range of both intrapersonal (internal) and interpersonal (external) factors. Internally, notions of "good motherhood" as well as the mothers' own expectations and emotional sensitivity increased guilt. Externally, inflexible work hours, economic stress, social judgement and the internalisation of others' perceived expectations put pressure on mothers emotionally. Positive experiences like workplace support, children's adaptation to aftercare and positive feedback from teachers or staff were external factors that decreased guilt. The dynamic interplay between these factors demonstrated how guilt can arise from a constant negotiation between mothers' values and their practical realities.

This theme suggests that guilt is generated at the connection of individual meaning and social structure. It demonstrates the need to consider the broader ecology of workplace arrangements, cultural expectations, and childcare settings that shape mothers' experiences when analysing parental guilt.

5.2.1.3 Theme 3: Work-Life Balance

This theme matters because it illustrates the production of guilt regarding social and economic expectations placed upon mothers and that their feeling of balance or imbalance played an important role in maternal guilt. It relates to the second objective because it clearly demonstrated how mothers understood guilt as an emotion that was socially constructed. Factors that contributed to maternal guilt were complex and involved personal, relational, and structural contributions. Mothers experienced guilt because internally they held beliefs about what made them be good mothers, had self-inflicted expectations, and were emotionally sensitive. External factors that created feelings of guilt were rigid workplace hours, financial stress, perceived judgment from

others, and feeling watched. Alternatively, guilt was eased when there were flexible workplaces, kids that reacted well to aftercare, and positive reactions from teachers/staff. Essentially this theme showed that guilt was produced through negotiation between what mothers valued and what they were capable of managing. Three subthemes were identified namely, workload and strain, work identity and fulfilment and gendered division of domestic labour/household management.

Internal factors (self-expectations, emotional sensitivity, and personal definitions of “good motherhood”) and external factors (rigid workplace hours, financial stress, felt judgment from others, and feeling watched) contributed to maternal guilt. Flexible workplaces, children that reacted well to aftercare, and positive reactions from staff helped reduce guilt. Mothers experienced guilt through balancing what they felt was best for their child and what they had to do to provide for their family. Each of these categories had its own subthemes that further described mothers’ experiences. Structural, social, and personal themes played a role in mothers’ guilt as demonstrated by the information above. This helps with objective four because it highlights the importance of supportive work environments and aftercare structures in alleviating maternal guilt.

5.2.1.4 Theme 4: Moderators of Guilt

The theme is associated with the second and third objectives as it shows the guilt-moderating factors mothers identified, including social support, workplace understanding, and aftercare trust. A number of other variables moderated the extent and influence of guilt, namely, mothers' trust in the aftercare environment, their children's happiness and adjustment, the reliability of mothers' support networks, and mothers' reframing of internal standards. Mothers who received reassurance about the quality of the aftercare environment experienced less guilt because this support validated that they were doing the "right thing" by providing the best care for their children. Mothers who had their own internal justifications of their decision to return to work such as accepting limits, re-defining success, or focusing on what is best for their children experienced less guilt. Four subthemes were identified in this theme namely, a lifestyle fit: balancing work and family, employment, fulfilment, and parenting assurance, flexible hours as relief and perspective and reframing.

The results of this research suggest that guilt does not always have to be perceived as a negative emotion. Levels of guilt and impact of guilt are influenced by many factors such as individual maternal circumstances, amount of social support, and ability to have a flexible work schedule. If mothers have supportive systems in place, guilt can actually have a positive impact on family. Rather than trying to get rid of guilt, mothers should focus on how to cope with guilt. When mothers have support and adaptive thought patterns.

5.2.1.5 Theme 5: Managing Guilt

This theme was relevant because it shed light on how mothers used cognitive, emotional and behavioural tools to cope with guilt. It most closely related to objective 4 because it demonstrates how mothers coped with this difficult feeling in many ways. Participants described multiple approaches to managing their guilt. Some mothers justified their choices by telling themselves they had to work for financial reasons or because they believed that the aftercare provided their children with benefits they otherwise would not have had. Others found ways to emotionally compensate for the time lost, by having special one-on-one time with their kids, putting more attention into bedtime and making the weekends count. Many mothers pointed to validating their feelings with other mothers and practicing self-care as useful as well as accepting that their feelings can be complex. A small number internalised their guilt which put them at risk for chronic stressors or burnout.

In general, the ways that mothers coped such as reframing guilt, acceptance, and relying on routine and support helped mothers to function well at home and work. These findings also connect to the second objective by showing how the more difficult effects of guilt can be softened when supportive resources are available. The four subthemes that fell under this theme were overcompensating, child's happiness as a mitigating factor, and practical support from the aftercare.

What this theme showed was that coping with guilt was something that mothers did on purpose everyday. They used emotional, cognitive, and behavioural strategies to feel balanced. When these coping resources were limited or not there, guilt became heavier and more difficult to manage, with the potential to affect overall wellbeing.

This highlights the crucial role of supportive interventions in helping mothers steer these emotions effectively.

5.2.1.6 Theme 6: Support Strategies

Support networks - both formal and informal - were instrumental in mothers' experiences. Partners, family, employers, peers, and trusted aftercare providers could offer emotional reprieve and stability. Mothers also found solace in informal communities (WhatsApp groups, close friendships with other mothers) that promoted understanding and normalised their experience. Professional support (i.e. receiving advice from a social worker) can also equip mothers with better coping strategies and help them balance competing demands. Participants who did not have strong support reported increased strain, feelings of uncertainty, and guilt.

The findings within this theme present the resources to which mothers can turn to alleviate guilt and protect their emotional wellbeing.

It also links back to the fourth objective, as it provided ways in which the mothers managed guilt as an unpleasant emotion. Two subthemes were presented: peer support groups and the importance of quality aftercare / trusting the aftercare environment.

The significance of this theme lies in its demonstration that maternal wellbeing is not solely an individual matter but is deeply shaped by social context. Supportive relationships and well-structured aftercare services alleviate guilt, increase confidence, and help mothers meet the demands of work and family life. On the other hand, the absence of such supports makes mothers feel more vulnerable and highlights the importance of community and institutional involvement. These factors clearly point to the importance of social work practice, as the mothers can access different forms of social support to strengthen their daily experiences.

In conclusion, the findings show that parental guilt is a typical but socially constructed experience for mothers in the aftercare setting. This emotion is often exacerbated by children's responses, maternal concerns about their own availability, and the ongoing

struggle to balance work and family life. Mothers reported a wide range of coping strategies to deal with guilt, and these strategies were most effective when underpinned by factors such as workplace flexibility, social support, and confidence in the aftercare environment.

In general, the findings are sufficient to answer the research question and address the study objectives, while providing important implications for social work practice.

5.3 ATTAINMENT OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION, AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The study was driven by a specified research question, aim, and objectives, which informed each step of the research process. The research goal or aim of the study was to. to explore and describe how working mothers of primary school children in aftercare experience and manage parental guilt. This purpose of the study was translated into a research question, formulated as: *How do working mothers of primary school children in aftercare experience and manage parental guilt?*

To address the stated question and achieve the research aim, the following research objectives were formulated:

- ✚ To explore the experiences of parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare.
- ✚ To describe how these mothers perceive and manage parental guilt in the context of aftercare.
- ✚ To explore the coping strategies employed by working mothers to manage parental guilt.
- ✚ To provide recommendations for social work practice in supporting working mothers experiencing parental guilt.

The goal, and the conclusion on the attainment thereof are presented in Table 5.2 below.

Table 5-2 Attainment of research goal

RESEARCH GOAL	EXPLORATION PROCESS	CONCLUSION ON THE ATTAINMENT OF THE RESEARCH GOAL
The goal of this study is to explore and describe how working mothers of primary school children in aftercare experience and manage parental guilt.	The research goal was achieved from the literature review presented in Chapter Two and the semi-structured participant interviews, which were analysed with a literature control in Chapter Four.	By integrating the insights gathered from the literature with the perspectives obtained from the interviews, the study achieved a thorough understanding of how parental guilt is experienced and managed by working mothers within the everyday realities of aftercare, work demands, and broader societal expectations.

In summary, the research objectives are unpacked, and its attainment is listed in Table 5.3 below.

Table 5-3 Attainment of research objectives

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE	EXPLORATION PROCESS	CONCLUSION ON THE ATTAINMENT OF THE RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
To explore the experiences of parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare.	This goal is addressed in detail in Chapters Two and Four . The social, cultural, and structural elements that influence maternal guilt, such as high expectations for mothering, work-family conflict, and the practical and emotional challenges of making childcare decisions are the subject of Chapter Two's literature review. In Chapter Four , the experiences and storylines of participants complemented and added on to the exploration of how guilt manifested in their day-to-day realities, including feelings of regret, pressure to meet idealised expectations, comparisons to other mothers, and worries about whether aftercare met their children's needs. Conclusions are drawn in Chapter Five based on both Chapter Two and Chapter Four's results.	This objective was attained and contributed to the overall goal of this study. It was achieved through the development of an interview guide (with open-ended questions) and conducting semi-structured interviews with 14 participants who met the inclusion criteria. In conclusion, the study achieved its objective to explore the experiences of parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare. It provided valuable insights into how guilt was constructed by working demands, societal norms around mothering, emotional struggles in deciding and the concern for the children's wellbeing in aftercare. It also drew attention to the importance of social workers in acknowledging these pressures, affirming mothers' experiences and providing psychosocial support at family and community levels.

To describe how these mothers perceive and manage parental guilt in the context of aftercare.	These findings are presented in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four provides mothers' perceptions of guilt as something tied to internal standards, comparison to other mothers, and beliefs about what "good mothering" should look like. It also illustrates how guilt fluctuated depending on the child's age, aftercare experiences, work stressors, and the availability of support. Chapter Five draws these insights together by explaining how mothers make sense of guilt as an emotional response to competing expectations and how they actively reinterpret, challenge, or accommodate these feelings.	The researcher provides a thorough description of mothers' perceptions of guilt in the context of aftercare. The findings contribute valuable insights into how mothers construct meaning around guilt, how they reconcile the decision to use aftercare, and how they evaluate their own parenting in light of practical constraints. These insights offer guidance for practitioners, policymakers, and future research, particularly regarding how to strengthen psychosocial support, enhance aftercare communication, and promote workplace policies that acknowledge the realities of working mothers.
To explore the coping strategies employed by working mothers to manage parental guilt.	These findings are presented in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four identifies the coping strategies used by participants, including cognitive reframing, seeking reassurance, relying on social support, focusing on the benefits of aftercare, adjusting expectations, and practising acceptance. Chapter Five builds on these findings by evaluating how effective these strategies were in helping mothers	The researcher provides a thorough appraisal of the coping strategies employed by working mothers to manage parental guilt. The findings contribute valuable insights into the various personal and relational resources mothers draw upon to cope with guilt, such as emotional regulation, problem-solving, support networks, and communication with aftercare staff. These insights offer guidance for practitioners, policymakers, and future research by highlighting opportunities to strengthen

	manage emotional strain, reduce guilt, and navigate work-family pressures.	mothers' coping capacities through psychoeducation, supportive counselling, workplace flexibility, and enhanced aftercare-parent partnerships.
To provide recommendations for social work practice in supporting working mothers experiencing parental guilt	Recommendations and suggestions for social work practice, training, and policy in supporting working mothers are made in Chapters Four and Five. Chapter Four identifies key areas where mothers experience strain or require support, while Chapter Five integrates these insights to formulate practical recommendations.	The researcher offers suggestions for social work practice by drawing upon the conclusions reached in Chapter Five, which were based on the comprehensive findings from Chapter Four. The insights gained from the research data, and the literature review assisted the researcher in providing targeted recommendations aimed at enhancing the effectiveness of social work interventions in this context. These suggestions are discussed in more detail in section 5.6

The themes identified in the study significantly contribute to answering the research question. They provide a comprehensive understanding of how working mothers interpret, experience, and cope with parental guilt in the aftercare setting. They helped the researcher to meet the study's objectives by outlining how mothers experience guilt as an emotion, what factors shape guilt, what strategies mothers use to cope with guilt, and which factors moderate guilt and its impacts.

5.4 DELINEATION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

As pointed out by Theofanidis and Fountouki, (2018:155), "Authors should openly and extensively report their research limitations, delimitations and assumptions in order to improve the quality of their findings and the interpretation of the evidence presented".

While the qualitative approach used in this study offered rich and contextual insight, as discussed throughout the chapter, it also presented certain limitations. These include researcher subjectivity, challenges in ensuring consistency such as data saturation, and reliance on interpretation (Mwita, 2022; Othman, 2025). Qualitative research can also be time- and resource-intensive, produces findings that are not statistically generalisable, and may involve ethical complexities when exploring sensitive topics and vulnerable populations (Kazanskaia, 2025; Lim, 2024; Othman, 2025).

This study is limited by its geographical focus on a small group of middle-class working mothers in Tshwane. This meant that the findings are closely tied to this particular setting and socio-economic group, which limits their transferability to fathers, caregivers from different socio-economic backgrounds, or families in other regions. .

The study was also limited by the exclusive inclusion of mothers. While research shows that mothers tend to experience higher levels of parental guilt than fathers, research also shows that the challenges of work-family balance can negatively impact fathers as well (d'Orsi *et al.*, 2023; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2016:381). The absence of fathers therefore restricts the study's ability to provide a more comparative or gender-inclusive understanding of parental guilt.

It is recommended that future research on the topic consider both male and female participants for a more representative picture of parental guilt.

Data used were self-reported and thus based on what participants felt and thought at the time of interview. As with guilt, participants may not have felt comfortable sharing everything or may have tried to answer in a socially desirable way, which is a recognised limitation in interview-based qualitative research.

Furthermore, given the limited availability of South African research on parental guilt in this specific context, it was also difficult to consider some of the more context-specific cultural values and social norms, as well as features of the aftercare system, that might have provided additional support and alternative frameworks in other countries.

Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful insight into working mothers' experiences of parental guilt and contributes to an under-researched area within the South African context. It provides a foundation for future research and may inform social work practice, aftercare services, and policy development aimed at supporting family wellbeing and work-family balance.

5.5 UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF THE STUDY

In reflecting on the research question, aim, and objectives, this study offers a conceptual refinement in understanding parental guilt among working mothers within the context of aftercare provision. Parental guilt is found to be not just a single emotion, but a spectrum ranging from more severe and constant emotions to the less intense experiences. This contributes to the existing literature by conceptualizing parental guilt as something constantly changing rather than a single outcome of work-family conflict.

In relation to Work-Family Conflict Theory, the findings suggest that guilt in parents can be not only the result of conflicting demands, but a reflection of their intensity and manageability at any particular point in time. This refinement highlights that emotional outcomes such as guilt may differ in severity depending on the availability of contextual

supports and constraints, rather than always resulting from conflicting roles.

From the perspective of the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Systems Theory, aftercare services operate on the level of mesosystem, shaping the interaction between home and school or work environments. The research expands on this model by showing that aftercare is not always helpful in reducing maternal guilt but may depend on situational variables that would determine whether aftercare contributes to reducing or increasing maternal guilt. In other words, aftercare should be considered a two-edged phenomenon because, although it may be helpful, it might become one more source of stress for the mothers.

Taken together, the study presents a more layered and complex understanding of parental guilt as an emotionally variable experience shaped by interacting ecological systems, rather than a direct or uniform outcome of work-family conflict, with emotional responses shifting in relation to ecological conditions.

5.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

This section lists recommendations gathered from the findings of the study. They aim to help improve social work support given to working mothers with children attending primary school who experience parental guilt upon 'not being there for' their children. The recommendations will be listed under three overarching categories. The first category will provide recommendations related to social work practice which will provide guidance to social workers, aftercare staff, and community structures on what can be done to better support mothers both emotionally and practically when accessing aftercare. The second category will list recommendations based on social and policy implications and will focus more on larger scale structural changes to create environments which are more conducive for families. Finally, a list of recommendations for future research will be included to prompt additional research ideas for researchers who wish to study parental guilt and its effects on families from a social work perspective.

5.6.1 Recommendations for Social Work Practice

Recommendations from this study can help provide ideas on what social workers can do from a practice-based perspective to help support working mothers experiencing parental guilt. They are divided into three categories which include interventions social workers can facilitate on an individual level, what can be done to intervene or suggest changes on a workplace or structural level, and how to collaborate with aftercare centres and other community resources.

5.6.1.1 Individual and Emotional Support

Recognising that guilt is something all working parents experience at some point or another, social work intervention with mothers should aim to normalise guilt and help mothers manage it. Ways in which social workers can add value are through the following practice-informed tips:

-  Encourage supportive networks: Organising mothers' groups or informal meetings where women can share their experiences helps prevent mothers who utilise aftercare from feeling alone.
-  Providing individual/group therapy: Therapy can help moms work through emotional challenges that are related to aftercare usage. Therapy sessions that aim to address stress management, the management of emotions, while also building skills to be kinder to ourselves can assist mothers in dealing with their emotions around using aftercare. Group sessions can be presented to teach relaxation practices, how to restructure negative thoughts, and also other emotional coping skills.
-  Reflect on parenting: Mothers can work with social workers to process what sets them off and how to develop an inner nurturing voice. Mothers can also benefit from developing routines that allow them not to be so reactive each day. By reflecting on what they want and need from parenting they can develop healthy coping skills that will work best for their families.
-  Creating parent peer-support groups: Parent groups can be established through aftercare facilities, work or local neighbourhoods to assist parents in

building confidence in their parenting and efficacy.

5.6.1.2 Advocate for Workplace-Family Support Through Social Work

Social workers can help promote more family-supportive work environments by:

- ✚ Sharing information with employers about stressors experienced by working parents using workplace wellness programmes or employee assistance programmes (EAPs).
- ✚ Convening discussions between employers and workers on reasonable accommodations to care for children.
- ✚ Promoting the uptake of family friendly workplace practices on a voluntary, context-specific and sustainable basis.

5.6.1.3 Implement Parent Support and Psycho-education Programmes

Parent-focused programmes delivered in schools, aftercare settings, or EAPs could include:

- ✚ Providing guidance to parents on dealing with feelings of parental guilt, self-compassion, and also on how to navigate multiple roles.
- ✚ Workshops which focus on practical work-family balance strategies that are tailored to working parents' specific needs.
- ✚ Support groups that allow parents to share their coping strategies and learn from one another.

5.6.1.4 Improve Communication Between Schools/Aftercare and Parents

Social workers can strengthen communication in aftercare settings by supporting efforts to:

- ✚ Share frequent updates about daily routines, how children are adjusting, and what they are learning. This alleviates parental anxiety and guilt.

- ✚ Coach parents in implementing nurturing transition rituals to ease separation at drop-off times.
- ✚ Create clear avenues for feedback between parents and aftercare staff.

5.6.1.5 Provide Individual and Family Counselling

Examples of social workers supporting maternal guilt in emotional ways include:

- ✚ Counselling that focusses on cognitive reframing and emotional regulation.
- ✚ Support for families that experience work-family conflict.
- ✚ Interventions that are aimed at reducing guilt-driven overcompensation or parental stress.

5.6.1.6 Advocate for Accessible, High-quality Aftercare

Social workers can strengthen aftercare provision by:

- ✚ Collaborating with schools and community organisations to expand access to aftercare services.
- ✚ Supporting training for aftercare staff in areas like child development, parent communication, and sensitivity to parental guilt.
- ✚ Promoting inclusive, affordable aftercare options for lower income families.

5.6.1.7 Community and After-care Collaboration

Facilitating structures like aftercare centres and community-based organisations can also help mitigate some of the guilt parents face. Services need to be accessible and involve ongoing reassurance. Here's where social workers can play a role:

- ✚ Promoting positive communication: Supporting aftercare staff to provide feedback to parents about children's social, emotional and behavioural functioning in ways that normalise behaviour and concerns.

- ✚ Optimising aftercare support: Consultation and staff training can ensure environments are physically safe, emotionally nurturing and cognitively stimulating. Staff also need support to identify and sensitively respond to children's emotional needs.
- ✚ Running psycho-educational groups with parents: Groups can be used to bolster parents' confidence in their parenting abilities and skills, foster "good enough" parenting and mitigate any tendencies toward perfectionism. Groups can provide additional support around how to manage work/home life balance as well as how to avoid overcompensating for aftercare hours.
- ✚ Collaborating across disciplines: Teamwork with schools, aftercare providers, community organisations and social development centres is key. Social workers should also consider joining case discussions with other professionals when working with mothers who face both emotional and logistical difficulties.

5.6.2 Recommendations for Social Work Policy

Policies implemented by employers could better support mothers in their workplaces and families overall. The recommendations described below target practice with the intention of establishing workplaces where caregiving is understood and supported rather than punished. While the following recommendations may be aspirational within the current South African context, they are intended to inform longer-term policy development and highlight areas where structural support for working mothers could be strengthened:

- ✚ Greater inclusion of adequate working conditions for families within labour law and social welfare policy should be considered, as this would ensure that support for caregiving responsibilities is recognised as a core component of worker wellbeing.
- ✚ Consider policy incentives for employers to support caregivers of primary school-aged children to participate in flexible work arrangements, as this will promote healthier work-family integration.
- ✚ Collaborate between social workers, the Department of Employment and

Labour and organisations representing employers to support workplace cultures that value caregiving.

- ✚ Regulated, affordable, and safe aftercare programmes should be upheld through stricter guidelines within the Children’s Act (No. 38 of 2005) (RSA, 2005), as well as within family support and after-hours care. Collaboration between the Departments of Social Development and Basic Education could support the development and assessment of a nationwide minimum standard for aftercare environments.
- ✚ Policies could support sliding-scale fees or subsidies to improve access to quality aftercare.
- ✚ The development and implementation of evidence-based programmes targeting parenting guilt, anxiety, and work–family conflict should be encouraged, ensuring responsiveness to family needs.

5.6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results of this study, future research should:

- ✚ Compare levels of guilt experienced by other caregivers (i.e. fathers, two-parent situations, grandparents) within the family.
- ✚ Conduct quantitative research with a larger sample size to assess how many caregivers experience guilt and what factors predict it.
- ✚ Research parenting guilt within different cultures and societies to develop a more cross-cultural understanding. Including an analysis of the impact of Afrocentric ideology such as “ubuntu” which translates to “I am because we are” could provide insight about the impact of these values.
- ✚ Evaluate how existing aftercare and community-based programmes may influence or indirectly shape experiences of parental guilt among working mothers. Collaborate with longitudinal research to assess how aftercare supports family relationships, children, and mothers over time.

The researcher considers the recommendations provided to be realistic and implementable at micro, mezzo and macro levels of social work practice. The majority of practice-oriented recommendations are fairly simple and low-resource. Peer-support groups, psycho-educational groups, better communication between aftercare centres and parents, counselling/reflective parenting support can be implemented immediately and/or integrated into existing school-based, community-based and aftercare programmes.

The more complex interventions that require training of aftercare staff, development of structured and timely feedback loops between schools and aftercare centres, and stronger collaborative partnerships between agencies and social workers will need careful coordination and continued professional dedication but are also realistic. Many of these recommendations build on community services that already exist and can easily be integrated into early-intervention and family-strengthening programmes.

Recommendations at the organisational level are also realistic depending on buy-in from institutions and, in some cases, a change in organisational culture. Organisations can include social workers as part of their EAPs and workplace wellness programs by supporting parents through, for example, advocacy for family-friendly policies like flexible working hours where possible (may depend on the setting/sector).

Policy recommendations such as increasing regulated and subsidised aftercare, greater interdepartmental collaboration, and nationwide implementation of evidence-based psychosocial interventions are long-term and consider more systemic change. Realistic but will need budget, political commitment and buy-in from multiple sectors and may take time to see the effects.

5.7 CHAPTER SUMMARY AND FINAL REMARKS

Chapter Five provides a summary and conclusion of the study and its main findings. The chapter firstly reviews the components of the previous chapters and, after discussion, presents a summary of how they were all addressed in the study. The

chapter begins by explaining how the study background, literature review, methodology, and findings address the study's aim, research question, and objectives, while also demonstrating how the main concepts of the dissertation are interconnected. The chapter begins by explaining the way the study background, the literature review, the methodology and the study findings answer the study's aim, research question and the objectives, as well as relate and interweave the main concepts of the dissertation.

The chapter further reflects on how the findings address the research question, namely how working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt. It reviews major themes from the findings (focused specifically on maternal guilt: experience, mediation and management, and work-family and aftercare interconnections), offering implications for social work practice, policy recommendations for societal support of working mothers, and future research directions. Discussion of feasibility is presented at micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels. The study's delineation and limitations are presented to further contextualise the results.

In summary, the study aimed to explore how working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt. The findings reveal that parental guilt is complex and modulated by overlapping societal, cultural and workplace expectations, work demands, and concerns about children's wellbeing and happiness. The availability of, and access to aftercare acts both as a source of reassurance and, when poor in quality or when there was a lack of trust, as a source of anxiety.

Work-family balance appeared to be a key factor influencing mothers' mental wellbeing and sense of success as parents. The provision of a supportive work environment, with flexible working arrangements and reliable, quality aftercare that met families' needs was associated with less guilt and better mental health, whereas limited work support or inflexible workplaces, high parental expectations, guilt and poor-quality aftercare was linked to stress, burn-out and higher levels of guilt.

The study's results point to the understanding that parental guilt is not something that can be overcome by individual adjustment or sacrifice. The findings suggest that support at a systems level may play an important role in shaping how working mothers with primary school children in aftercare experience and cope with parental guilt. Flexible work schedules, affordable childcare regulations, and community supports can also help create stronger families and allow parents to focus on bonding with their children.

There were limitations to this study as well. This includes its relatively narrow sample and focused research topic. Because this study used self-reported data, it is recommended that future research look to include more diverse research participants. In addition, it is recommended that future research use longitudinal designs to examine how parental guilt may decrease with the increase of structural supports.

The study validated the experiences of working mothers and advanced understanding of maternal guilt as an emotion experienced by mothers in contemporary family life. The study's results, show that guilt is not just an individual experience but is socially and structurally constructed, shaped by work demands, cultural expectations of mothering and caregiving, and the presence or absence of support. The study provided a holistic view of maternal guilt in the South African context and has practical implications for strengthening aftercare services, workplace policies, and public discourse about shared responsibilities of parenting.

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ADDENDA



ADDENDUM A : PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER

Ethics clearance reference number: Rec-240816-052

Research permission research number:

Date:

Title: PARENTAL GUILT AMONG WORKING MOTHERS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN AFTERCARE

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Ixantha Spangenberg, I am a student enrolled for a Master's Degree in Social Work (MSW) at the University of South Africa. I am doing research with my supervisor Dr. Taetske Calitz. She is a senior lecturer in the Department of Social Work at the University. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled "Parental Guilt Among Working Mothers of Primary School Children in Aftercare".

The research study is part of the fulfilment of the requirement for obtaining a master's degree in social work. This study is expected to contribute to the body of knowledge in the social work to improve service delivery.

I hereby kindly request you to participate in this study. The study is targeted at working mothers who have primary school children in an aftercare centre. Your willingness to participate in the research will be highly appreciated. If you are willing to participate in the study, you will be asked to sign a consent form and you will be requested to participate in a face-to-face interview about your experiences in relation to the topic. The interview will be conducted at a suitable time and venue as agreed with you. It is estimated that the interview will last approximately one hour.

You will be asked the following questions:



At the beginning of the interview, the following biographical question will be asked:

1. Can you tell me about your current work situation (e.g., job title, work hours, flexibility)?
2. How many children do you have, and what are their ages?
3. How long has your child been enrolled in aftercare?
4. What is your household structure? (e.g., single parent, dual-income household, extended family involvement)
5. Can you describe your support system in terms of childcare (e.g., partner, family members, or other caregivers)?
6. What is your highest level of education?
7. How would you describe your household's financial situation? (e.g., comfortable, some limitations, financial strain)
8. What are your daily working hours?
9. Did you or your partner (if applicable) attend aftercare as a child? If yes, how does that experience compare to your child's?

Questions related to the topic. (The following open-ended questions will be discussed with you to obtain information)

10. What services or activities are included in the aftercare your child attends?
11. Were you forced to make the decision to place your child in aftercare, or was it a choice? Can you explain your reasoning?
13. How would you describe your overall experience as a working mother whose child attends aftercare?
14. What emotions do you experience when you think about your child being in aftercare while you're at work?
15. Can you share any specific moments when you've felt strongly about your decision to use aftercare, either positively or negatively?



16. How has your role as a working mother influenced your relationship with your child?
17. How do you feel about the balance between your work responsibilities and your role as a mother?
18. What factors influence how you feel about your child's experience in aftercare?
19. Have your feelings about using aftercare changed over time? If so, how?
20. How do you manage situations where you cannot attend your child's extracurricular activities, e.g. Netball or Rugby matches? What emotions come up in those moments?
21. How does your support system affect how you manage work and childcare responsibilities?
22. What aspects of your current childcare arrangement give you peace of mind, and what aspects make you reflect or reconsider?
23. How do you feel your responsibilities and emotional experiences as a working mother compared to your partner's (if applicable), or to stay-at-home parents?
24. Have you ever felt judged when discussing your child's aftercare arrangements with others?
25. What do you typically feel when you collect your child from aftercare at the end of the day?
27. What interventions or support services do you think would help you manage and cope with parental guilt?
28. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a working mother using aftercare?

Participation in this study is voluntary, and you are under no obligation to participate. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this study. Your decision to participate or not will not affect you in any way, now or in the future. If you decide to take part in this study, kindly sign the consent document herewith, as proof of your willingness to participate. After you have signed the consent form, you are still free to withdraw at any time should you so wish, without providing any reasons for your withdrawal, with no repercussion or penalty, even in the middle of the interview. If you

decide to take part in the study, you will be asked to sign a consent form, and this information sheet is yours to keep.

The information that we collect from this research project will be kept private and confidential. Any information about you will have a code number or pseudonym, instead of your name. Only the researcher and identified members of the research team will know your involvement in this regard and no one will be able to identify you or link the answers you gave to you. You also have the right to ask any questions concerning the study at any time.

With your permission the interview will be audiotaped. The recorded interviews will be transcribed word-for-word. Your responses to the interview (both the taped and transcribed versions) will be kept strictly confidential. The audiotape will be coded to disguise and identify information. Please note that your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including the transcriber, external coder and members of the Research Ethics Review Committee. Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

Please note that the study will not involve any financial or other benefit to you for participation. There is no anticipated risk or harm that may befall you from participating in the study. Should it happen that the information you have shared left you feeling emotionally upset, or traumatised, I am obliged to refer you to a counsellor for debriefing of counselling (should you agree).

The researcher will store hard copies of your answers for a minimum period of 10 years in a locked cupboard for future research or academic purposes. Electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further research ethics review and approval from the University. After five years all hard copies will be shredded, and any electronic copies will be



permanently deleted from the hard drive of the computer through the use of a relevant software program.

The study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Social Work at Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researchers if you wish.

You have the right to ask questions concerning the study at any time. If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Ixantha Spangenberg at 082 357 1079 or email: 22828729@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted you may contact Dr. Calitz on 012 429 8768 or via email: caltizt@unisa.ac.za. Contact the research ethics chairperson of the Health Research Ethics committee, Prof MA Antwi Email: antwima@unisa.ac.za. Alternatively, Prof Moodley, the CHS Research Ethics and Integrity Advisor can be contacted on - moodlijk@unisa.ac.za.

Based upon the above information provided to you and being aware of your rights, you are asked to give written consent should you want to participate in this research study by signing and dating the information and consent form provided herewith and by initialling each section to indicate that you understand and agree with the conditions.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in the study.

Yours sincerely



IXANTHA SPANGENBERG



ADDENDUM B : PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, _____ (participant's name), herewith confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has informed me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participating in the planned research.

The participation information sheet has been explained to me, and I understand what the study is about.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, an article to be published in a journal and/or presented at a conference, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the face-to-face interview proceedings on an audio recorder.

I have received a signed copy of the consent form.

Participants Name and Surname: _____ (Please print)

Participants Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researchers' Name and Surname: _____ (Please print)

Researchers' signature: _____ Date: _____

ADDENDUM C : REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A STUDY

To: The Principal

Dear Sir/Mam,

My name is Ixantha Spangenberg and I am a student enrolled for a Master's degree in Social Work at the University of South Africa. I am conducting research with my supervisor Dr. Taetske Calitz, who is a senior lecturer in the Department of Social Work at the University. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled: **“Parental Guilt Among Working Mothers of Primary School Children in Aftercare”**

Your aftercare has been selected to form part of the study. This study intends to collect important information that could contribute to strengthening support systems, enhancing mental health outcomes, and promoting healthier family dynamics. It is expected that a maximum of about 10 participants will participate in the study, and they will be interviewed individually. The study will entail face-to-face interviews with working mothers who have primary school age children in an aftercare at a place and time that is convenient for the participants. The estimated time per interview is approximately one hour.

The university guidelines for conducting research studies require that the researcher is bound to the prescribed ethical principles, including obtaining informed and voluntary consent from participants to participate in the research, maintaining the anonymity of participants, confidentiality, and proper management of the data obtained by storing hard copies of answers for a minimum period of five years in a locked cabinet. The participant will not be exposed to any risk or harm that will arise from participating in the study.

Please note that the study will not involve any financial or other benefit to participants for participation. If you would like to be informed of the research findings, the researcher could furnish you with a report about the findings.

You have the right to ask questions concerning the study at any time. If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Ixantha Spangenberg at 0823571079 or email: 22828729@mylife.unisa.ac.za

Should have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted you may contact Dr. Calitz on 012 4298768 or via email: caltizt@unisa.ac.za. Contact the research ethics chairperson of the Health Research Ethics committee, Prof MA Antwi Email: antwima@unisa.ac.za. Alternatively, Prof Moodley, the CHS Research Ethics and Integrity Advisor can be contacted on - moodlj@unisa.ac.za.

Thanking you in anticipation of your assistance

Yours sincerely

Ixantha Spangenberg

Researcher (Social Work Master's Student)

ADDENDUM D : INTERVIEW GUIDE

FEELINGS OF PARENTAL GUILT AMONG WORKING MOTHERS OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN AFTERCARE

Section 1: Biographical Information

1. Can you tell me about your current work situation (e.g., job title, work hours, flexibility)?
2. How many children do you have, and what are their ages?
3. How long has your child been enrolled in aftercare?
4. What is your household structure? (e.g., single parent, dual-income household, extended family involvement)
5. Can you describe your support system in terms of childcare (e.g., partner, family members, or other caregivers)?
6. What is your highest level of education?
7. How would you describe your household's financial situation? (e.g., comfortable, some limitations, financial strain)
8. What are your daily working hours?
9. Did you or your partner (if applicable) attend aftercare as a child? If yes, how does that experience compare to your child's?

Section 2: Aftercare Context

10. What services or activities are included in the aftercare your child attends?
11. Were you forced to make the decision to place your child in aftercare, or was it a choice? Can you explain your reasoning?
12. How would you describe your overall experience as a working mother whose child attends aftercare?
13. What emotions do you experience when you think about your child being in aftercare while you're at work?
14. Can you share any specific moments when you've felt strongly about your decision to use aftercare, either positively or negatively?

15. How has your role as a working mother influenced your relationship with your child?
16. How do you feel about the balance between your work responsibilities and your role as a mother?
17. What factors influence how you feel about your child's experience in aftercare?
18. Have your feelings about using aftercare changed over time? If so, how?
19. How do you manage situations where you cannot attend your child's extracurricular activities, e.g. Netball or Rugby matches? What emotions come up in those moments?
20. How does your support system affect how you manage work and childcare responsibilities?
21. What aspects of your current childcare arrangement give you peace of mind, and what aspects make you reflect or reconsider?
22. How do you feel your responsibilities and emotional experiences as a working mother compare with your partner's (if applicable), or with stay-at-home parents?
23. Have you ever felt judged when discussing your child's aftercare arrangements with others?
24. What do you typically feel when you collect your child from aftercare at the end of the day?
25. What interventions or support services do you think would help you manage and cope with parental guilt?
26. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a working mother using aftercare?

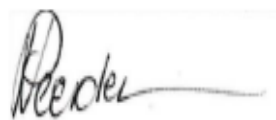
ADDENDUM E : LETTER FROM DEBRIEFER

To: The Chairperson of the Ethics Committee: College of Human Sciences

Re: Parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare

I, Pauli van Heerden, hereby agree to serve as a debriefer for the proposed research study. As a qualified social worker, I believe I possess the necessary skills to conduct debriefing sessions effectively. I am committed to upholding ethical standards and safeguarding participant well-being throughout the debriefing process. I recognize the importance of addressing any questions, concerns, or emotional responses that participants may have fostering an environment of trust and mutual respect.

Warm regards,



Pauli van Heerden

SACSSP Reg nr: 1018173

ADDENDUM F : ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



College of Human Sciences_CREC

Date: 13/11/2024

Dear: Mrs Ixantha Spangenberg

Decision: Ethics Approval from 13 November 2024 to 12 November 2025

NHREC Registration # : (Rec-240816-052)
Ref #: 5639
Name: Mrs Ixantha Spangenberg
Student #: 22828729

Researcher: Mrs Ixantha Spangenberg

64 Gembok Avenue, Monumentpark.

Pretoria

22828729@mylife.unisa.ac.za 0823571079

Supervisor: Dr Taetske Calitz calittm@unisa.ac.za

Parental Guilt Among Working Mothers of Primary School Children in Aftercare

Qualification: MSW

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the College of Human Sciences_CREC for the above-mentioned research study. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The **medium-risk application** was **reviewed** by the College of Human Sciences_CREC on **13 November 2024** in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College of Human Sciences_CREC.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.
4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.

5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data requires additional ethics clearance.
7. No field work activities may continue after the expiry date (**12 November 2025**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal, for Ethics Research Committee approval.

Additional Conditions

1. Disclosure of data to third parties is prohibited without explicit consent from Unisa.
2. De-identified data must be safely stored on password protected PCs.
3. Care should be taken by the researcher when publishing the results to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the university.
4. Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be ensured: "Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible." Unisa will not be liable for any failure to comply with this principle.

Note

The reference number 5639 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Kind regards,



Prof Khatija Khan
Chair of College of Human Sciences_CREC
E-mail: khankb@unisa.ac.za



Professor Omwoyo Bosire Onyancha
Executive Dean / By delegation from the Executive Dean of College of Human Sciences_CREC
E-mail: onyanob@unisa.ac.za

ADDENDUM G : EDITOR LETTER

DR J LOMBARD

RESEARCH REPORT CRITICAL READING, LANGUAGE & TECHNICAL EDITING

Cell: 078 116 8018
e-mail: berto@woodcarving.co.za
JoubertoLombard@outlook.com

136 Erich Mayer St
PRETORIA NORTH
0182

W126

EDITOR'S LETTER

EDITING OF THESIS: MS I SPANGENBERG (S/NO 22828729)

This is to certify that I, Jouberto Lombard, have critically read and edited student Ixantha Spangenberg's dissertation for the degree Master of Social Work (MA SW), at UNISA, titled:

Parental guilt among working mothers of primary school children in aftercare

Study leader: Prof TM Calitz

The following aspects of the dissertation were edited:

- Spelling
- Grammar
- Sentence structuring
- Logical sequencing
- Argumentation
- Presenting the dissertation as a holistic whole
- Format of the dissertation
- Numbering of sections
- Formatting of tables and chapters
- Use of acronyms and abbreviations
- Format of references

The responsibility to do the corrections and implement my comments and suggestions correctly, remains that of the student.



DR J LOMBARD
20 January 2026

ADDENDUM H : ORIGINALITY REPORT

IXANTHA SPANGENBERG Ixantha Spangenberg 22828729.docx

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PARENTAL GUILT AMONG WORKING MOTHERS
OF PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN IN AFTERCARE

by
IXANTHA SPANGENBERG

Submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of

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