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"I felt sad then, I feel free now": A case for examining the constructive resistance of opted-out mothers

Abstract

Purpose – While past research has explored how opting-out enables mothers to break free from masculinist organizational cultures, less attention has been given to how they resist disciplinary power that constitutes and governs their subjectivities. This paper adds to the discussion of opting-out as a site of power and resistance by proposing the concept of "constructive resistance" as a productive vantage point for investigating opted-out mothers' subversive practices of self-making.

Design/methodology/approach - This Malaysian case study brings together the notion of constructive resistance, critical narrative analysis and APPRAISAL theory to examine the reflective stories of eighteen mothers who exited formal employment. These accounts were collected through an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured email interviews.

Findings - The mothers in our sample tend to construct themselves in two main ways, as (1) valuable mothers (capable, tireless, caring mothers who are key figures in their children's lives), and (2) competent professionals. These subjectivities are parasitic on gendered and neoliberal ideals but allow the mothers to undermine neoliberal capitalist work arrangements that were incongruent with their personal values and adversely impacted their well-being, as well as refuse organizational narratives that positioned them as "failed" workers.

Originality/value – Whereas power is primarily seen in previous opting-out scholarship as centralized and constraining, this case study illustrates how the lens of constructive resistance can help us to examine opted-out mothers' struggles against a less direct form of power that governs through the production of truths and subjectivities.

Keywords Opt-out stories; Constructive resistance; Critical narrative analysis; Appraisal theory; Intensive mothering; Neoliberalism

Paper type Research Paper

Introduction

This case study examines the resistant discursive self-making of a group of Malaysian mothers against the organizational challenges underlying their opting out[1] of formal employment[2]. Opting-out research has been dominated by studies focused on why women exit. These have identified an array of factors relating to both the family and workplace such as gendered notions of work and care (Schnurr et al., 2020), limited childcare and flexible work options (Chevalier & Viitanen, 2002; Stone, 2007), and an unwarranted 24/7 work culture (Ely & Padavic, 2020). A smaller but no less important strand of opting-out scholarship engages centrally with questions of agency and emancipation. These studies argue that women may leave to liberate themselves from corporate values and conditions (Tommasi & Degen, 2022), regain control of their lives and well-being (Biese & McKie, 2016), and develop alternative, more sustainable careers that allow for a two-way blurring between work and family (Biese & Choroszewicz, 2019). They may see that they are being marginalised in their workplace because of their gender and elect not to continue putting themselves through that (Biese, 2017). Their emancipatory acts of agency, nevertheless, are not free of power (Foucault, 1990) but constrained by norms and structures that may be left undisturbed (McKie, Biese & Jyrkinen, 2013) or even advanced. For example, Tommasi and Degen (2022) show that although those who opt out may posit values based on "true flexibility and autonomy in terms of time, non-masculinity, work-private life compatibility, human (personal) relationships, and even flat(ter) hierarchies", they can at the same time accelerate the neoliberal principles that

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[1] Opting-out has been explored in some academic literature as a voluntary choice women make. Other studies problematize the extent women can exercise agency within an intricate web of institutional and societal discourses that drive and constrain their practices (Orgad, 2019; Padavic, Ely & Reid, 2020.). This paper does not view both orientations as mutually exclusive but sees women's exit from the formal workplace as a rich and multifaceted phenomenon that could be voluntary or forced, depending on the narrative framing of each respondent. Following Biese (2017), "opting-out" in this article also includes leaving mainstream careers for alternative ones.

[2] Formal employment in Malaysia refers to paid employment with registered companies which is covered by formal arrangements and social protection programs.

underpin global corporate culture by "building companies in a market-driven logic that strives towards economic success, submitting to the idea that hard work might pay off, and engaging in identification through economic superiority". This line of research has advanced our understanding of opting-out as an act of reinvention and (imperfect) opposition to masculinist and neoliberal capitalist work cultures that are problematic for women, especially mothers. However, largely missing from analyses are opted-out mothers' resistant discursive identity work – self-making practices against disciplinary power (Foucault, 1991) which are dispersed and small-scale (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018) yet elemental to the resistance within the opting-out phenomenon since much of neoliberal capitalism's strength - and its point of potential weakness - lie in its ability to mediate ways of being and thinking about oneself around its interests (Mumby et al., 2017).

This paper adds to the discussion of opting-out as a site of power and resistance by proposing the concept of "constructive resistance" as a productive vantage point for investigating opted-out mothers' subversive (re)molding of their selves. Constructive resistance is practices that not only contest oppressive systems but do so by recreating the self and discourses "otherwise", counter to dominant norms and values (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018). While discourses that dictate what is moral and rational are powerful forms of oppression, we are not entirely dominated by them but are both objects and agents of discourses as they operate and are (re)constituted through our forms of being, valuing and acting (Zotzmann & O'Regan, 2016). Examining constructive resistance is important for understanding what alternative ways of being are put forward in a context of power – potentially engendering change – and what is kept in play (Lilja, 2021). Bringing in the notion of constructive resistance when exploring mothers' opting-out narratives provides a lens for seeing their dissent as productive acts that not just challenge entrenched power but also (re)construct identities and discourses and sometimes even power through the same action. In this paper, we take as a case study the discursive transgressive practices performed by eighteen Malaysian mothers as they narrate and make sense of their opting-out experiences. As we will show, they produce "slightly differently structured subjectivities" (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018, p.212) which can be read as constructive resistance. While our sample does not allow us to make generalizations about the dissenting practices of opted-out mothers in Malaysia, it does enable us to empirically capture and critically discuss self-formation processes through which this group of middle-class women respond to the issues faced within organizational and sociocultural contexts.

Bringing together the notion of constructive resistance, critical narrative analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014a), and APPRAISAL theory (Martin and White, 2005), we examine how the mothers in our study use evaluative language in their opting-out stories to negotiate and resist the norms and values that created constraints for them to pursue mainstream careers. We answer two main questions: (1) What subjectivities do the mothers construct

through the evaluation patterns in their narratives? and (2) How do these subject positions resist, reformulate or collude with dominant discourses? Before we do so, we introduce the discursive and socio-economic context within which the mothers' resistance takes place, followed by the theoretical lenses applied to the narratives. After outlining our data and methodology, we present the key findings of our analysis. We then discuss the possible implications of the mothers' resistant identities for prevailing power structures and, lastly, conclude with recommendations for future research.

Women's Workforce Participation in Malaysia: Challenges, Solutions, and Good Mother/Worker Ideals

Women's engagement in Malaysia's workforce has risen with each generation, but this growth has been plodding and in recent years, subdued, even before Covid-19. As of November 2022, only 55.8% of prime-age women are in the labor market, a mere 11 percentage point increase over four decades and 27 percentage points behind men (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2023). Although this participation rate surpasses the average globally (52%), it lags that of upper middle-income countries (64%) and the East Asia and Pacific region (66%) (World Bank, 2022). Malaysia also faces one of the widest gender gaps in labor force involvement in ASEAN, ranking 6th out of 10 countries in 2018 (World Bank, 2019). Women, despite being better educated than men on average and generally eager to pursue a career, comprise almost 90% of the working-age population outside the sphere of paid work (Khazanah Research Institute [KRI], 2018, 2019; Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development & United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2014).

Raising women's employment numbers has been a matter of considerable concern for the Malaysian government as it is deemed vital for economic growth. In particular, it is middle-class, highly educated, urban women who are viewed as catalysts for Malaysia's global competitiveness. Accordingly, policy interventions to harness women's labor have centered on this group (Elias, 2020a). Our study is primarily concerned with this category of women. As such, the rest of this section focuses on state initiatives to optimize these women's productive capacity and some of the prevailing discourses that may inform their experiences of work and motherhood, practices, and identities.

The measures taken have largely operated within a neoliberal economic framework of privatization, marketization, and maximization of competition and competitiveness. They are not only strongly motivated by a neoliberal imperative of growth and international competitiveness, but also often corporate- and market-based, which relieves the state of its duty for public welfare provision to an extent and transfers this responsibility to corporate goodwill. We can see this in efforts to ease work/family conflict, which has long

been regarded as a key factor preventing middle-class women from serving the economic objectives of the state (World Bank, 2012). Women still shoulder the major share of domestic labor in Malaysia where non-family-based care remains limited (Choong, Tan, Gong, & Mohamed Firouz, 2018). To mitigate the care deficit for middle-class women, the government has attempted to expand employer- and market-based childcare such as by offering tax exemptions and allowances to private preschool operators and companies that establish workplace crèches (Bunyan 2018; Noor & Mohd Mahudin, 2015) as well as facilitating the inflow of migrant domestic workers who are then recruited by families through the private sector. However, a care shortage remains. As a case in point, there were only 226 private sector workplace-based childcare centres in 2019 (KRI, 2019) with many organizations citing health and safety and cost as their main challenges (Bunyan 2018). Consequently, most care needs are met by mothers, grandmothers, and babysitters (KRI, 2019), which sustains a regional family ideology that care should be primarily home-based and is best provided by women (Ogawa et al., 2018). This ideology has deep resonances with Hays's (1996) intensive mothering discourse that views good mothers as those who devote tremendous amounts of time, energy, and emotion to nurturing their children at the expense of their own interests. Intensive motherhood is a powerful global script, albeit with culture-specific renderings (Kerrane, Banister & Wijaya, 2021). Research in Malaysia suggests that even employed mothers who do not fully subscribe to its tenets can be accountable to its childcare standards. This governmental discourse may operate through mothers' own ways of knowing and doing (Al-Attas & Shaw, 2020) or can be externally imposed. For example, middle-class women's pursuit of careers and consequent outsourcing of care have led to certain government and religious quarters voicing unease about child neglect and the role of migrant domestic workers in child-rearing (Elias, 2020a), thereby situating these mothers in a tension between competing discourses that position them as morally responsible for childcare on the one hand and emphasize their productive participation in the country's development on the other.

Another employer-based initiative to maximize the middle-class female workforce has been to encourage organizations to implement work/family integration practices such as flexible work arrangements. In 2013, the flexWorkLife.my programme was launched to not only support companies in creating a flexible working environment but also persuade high-potential women to re-enter the workplace with the promise of flexibility. While flexible work provisions seem to be implemented more readily by organizations since the Covid-19 health crisis, they were not in the past (UNDP & TalentCorp, 2021) and neither were they required to be. To attract multinationals to Malaysia and make the country more competitive, the private sector is not compelled to offer work/family balance initiatives (Noor & Mohd Mahudin, 2015). On the contrary, reports suggest an orientation to an ideal worker discourse that assumes that workers are unencumbered by personal responsibilities and entails uninterrupted devotion to the workplace as a standard of

commitment and competence (Acker, 1990). Between 2010 and 2018, the median working hours in Malaysia stayed constant at 48 hours per week, indicating that during this time, 50% of employees worked excessively long hours beyond the maximum threshold enshrined in the ILO's Hours of Work (Industry) Convention (Sazali & Tumin, 2020). In one survey of almost a thousand respondents, 75% were interrupted about work during their leave and 78% experienced a blurring of boundaries between work and personal life where they were expected to be contactable 24/7 (Digital News Asia, 2013). Lim and Mohd Rasdi's (2019) interviews with formerly professional mothers found that they had been pushed out by unrealistically high workloads, tight deadlines, and long working hours. While the negative outcomes of long-hours work culture impact men and women, they exact a steeper price on women's careers (Ely & Padavic, 2020) because of gendered expectations around caregiving.

In 2015, the state launched a Career Comeback programme to increase career opportunities for high-potential opted-out women. The programme offers grants to motivate companies to implement measures to mobilize professional women back into the workplace. It also connects these women to potential employers, provides them with workshops to improve their employability skills, and offers tax exemptions to eligible returnees. Yoong (2022) examined state promotion of both the Career Comeback and flexWorkLife.my programmes and identified a "happy work-family balance" discourse that urges opted-out mothers to improve their personal well-being by combining motherhood with professional accomplishment. Those who re-enter the workplace are depicted as empowered, fulfilled women who create the balance they desire. By implication, stay-at-home mothers are unable to attain real satisfaction. This denotes individual failure within neoliberalism which casts positive well-being as the main signifier of the successful neoliberal subject (Rottenberg, 2018). By inscribing balance as the ideal for progressive womanhood, the state's discursive strategy safeguards the national economic competitiveness project while ensuring women continue to play the central role in child-raising in line with traditional gendered discourses in Malaysian society. This strategy dovetails with neoliberal feminism as conceptualized by Rottenberg (2018): a mode of feminism that is colonised by neoliberalism in that it valorizes self-responsibility, productivity and an entrepreneurial mindset in place of equal rights and social justice. Emancipated womanhood is construed as the individual women's ability and active desire to cultivate happiness by integrating fulfilling work and hands-on motherhood. The neoliberal feminist subject is encouraged to find innovative, self-tailored solutions that will bring her closer to the promise of a happy balance while accepting the physical, emotional, and mental load of family care without demanding anything from the state or men as a group.

Theoretical Framework

Constructive Resistance

Constructive resistance challenges and negotiates relations of power by producing alternative understandings and subject positions (Lilja, 2021). It consists of initiatives that not only criticize and undermine what is considered undesirable and wrong, but simultaneously create and cultivate what people need or want to see replacing dominant structures (Sørensen, 2016). It open ups "cracks" in the status quo, yet without ever achieving total liberation (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018) as it is never outside of power (Foucault, 1990) but "occurs *within* dominant discourses and systems" as it carves out "somewhat other ways of being [...] from the discursive material and subjectivities that are made available" (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018, p.221). Hence, power relations can be both undermined and reproduced in the same act of resistance (Mumby et al., 2017).

Our study focuses on constructive resistance through discursive self-making. One of the ways resisting subjects attempt "to be governed a little bit less, or in a different way" (Lilja and Vinthagen, 2018, p.212) is by refusing subjectivities imposed by power relations and recreating themselves through resistant subject positions (Lilja, 2018). This could emerge from self-reflection and ethical considerations as one remembers the past, narrates the present, and considers who one wants to be in the future (Baaz & Lilja, 2022; Lilja, 2018). As Lilja (2021) noted, subject positions displayed do not have to be "new" to be resistant; they could be stereotypical but at the same time strategic responses to local power relations, acted in line with gendered expectations but with different intentions. She demonstrated how women politicians in Cambodia draw upon different aspects of male and female stereotypes when performing a figuration of the "female politician" to resist subalternity in a male-dominated environment. Both a reaction against and parasitic on a gender order that does not reward women's political activities, their constructive resistance allowed them to advance, but unintentionally reinforced the same power structures and stereotypes that they struggled against. According to Lilja, women's self-making can be regarded as resistance even when it is hard to ascertain their deliberate intentions and the transgressive act goes unnoticed by its targets. Resistance is not "an intent or effect, but [...] a particular kind of act, which unintendedly breaks contemporary gender norms and contributes to alternative discourses" (p.9).

The resistance in the opt-out accounts is examined by bringing together insights from APPRAISAL theory and critical narrative analysis.

APPRAISAL Theory

Evaluation is a powerful resource for maintaining and contesting values and norms within a culture (Thompson, 2014). If we understand ideologies as the value systems of a community or subcommunity (Gajardo & Oteíza, 2017), then evaluation is an important linguistic concept for exploring power and resistance. Evaluation is also a means for construing different personae for oneself (Martin & White, 2005). To investigate what values and subject positions our participants take up, construct, and reject through evaluation, we use APPRAISAL, a theory describing the language resources used for communicating emotions, opinions, and normative assessments (ibid.). The APPRAISAL[3] framework is considered the most fully developed model of evaluation (Thompson, 2014) with three interacting systems: ENGAGEMENT ("the play of voices around opinions in discourse"), GRADUATION ("grading phenomena where feelings are amplified and categories blurred"), and ATTITUDE ("our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgments of behavior and evaluation of things") (Martin & White, 2005, p.35).

Our analysis focuses on ATTITUDE. This itself involves three sub-systems: AFFECT (resources for construing **un/happiness**, **in/security**, **dis/inclination**, and **dis/satisfaction**), JUDGMENT (resources for assessing behavior in terms of **normality**, **capacity**, **tenacity**, **veracity**, and **propriety**, i.e. how exceptional, capable, reliable, truthful and ethical someone is), and APPRECIATION (resources for evaluating things in terms of our **reaction** to their impact and quality; their **composition**, i.e. balance and complexity; and their **value**, i.e. how innovative, worthwhile, helpful, etc.) (ibid.). These sub-systems reflect not only the conventional mechanisms for expressing appraisal but, importantly for this study, the parameters within which people "place" their experiences (Thompson, 2014) and, in so doing, legitimate certain positions and social values above others (Oteíza, 2017). The source and target of evaluation are termed the **appraiser** and **appraised** respectively while evaluative expressions are called **appraising items**. In Table 1 below, we list examples from the data to illustrate the sub-systems of ATTITUDE.

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[3] Following conventions in linguistics studies, we use SMALL CAPITALS to distinguish the technical and everyday uses of terms within this theory.

Table 1: Sub-systems of ATTITUDE

	Sub-systems	Examples (with appraising items underlined)	Appraised
AFFECT	**Un/Happiness**	I felt <u>sad</u> then [-happiness]	Retrenchment
	In/Security	I got <u>pretty comfortable</u> jumping into new roles [+security]	Taking on new roles
	Dis/Inclination	I am <u>not keen</u> on returning to formal employment [-inclination]	Formal work
	Dis/Satisfaction	I feel <u>no regrets</u> over my decision [+satisfaction]	Opting-out
JUDGMENT	**Normality**	I had <u>very good</u> house help [+normality]	Domestic worker
	Capacity	I was <u>somewhat of an expert</u> in certain areas [+capacity]	Self
	Tenacity	I was <u>very much hands on</u> [+tenacity]	Self
	Veracity	And promises were made but <u>never delivered</u> [-veracity]	Management
	Propriety	They were <u>not always fair</u> [-propriety]	Management
APPRECIATION	**Reaction**	I felt the PR firm was a <u>very toxic</u> environment [-reaction]	Previous workplace
	Composition	The up and down curves are <u>steeper</u> as a freelancer [-composition]	Freelancing
	Value	I've accepted that it was <u>necessary</u> [+value]	Opting-out

The APPRAISAL model further distinguishes between evaluation that is expressed explicitly (or **inscribed**) using attitudinal lexis, and evaluation that is conveyed implicitly (or **invoked**) by "tokens" of appraisal that rely on the addressee to recognize that evaluation is happening although it is not overtly encoded (Thompson, 2014). Evaluation can be directly inscribed, for example, via modification of participants (e.g. "*<u>very inconsiderate</u> management*"), affective mental processes (e.g. "*I <u>enjoyed</u> learning new things*"), modal adjuncts (e.g. "*bonuses were given <u>unfairly</u>*"), nominalised realisations of qualities (e.g. "*freelancing does come with <u>the stress of uncertainty</u>*"), and relational attributive processes (e.g. "*I <u>am happy</u> with her development*"). Evaluation can be invoked, for instance, by lexical metaphor (e.g. "*the company became <u>a sinking ship</u>*"), intensification (e.g. "*I cook <u>almost all</u> the meals*"), and expressions that connote values that cultural insiders are assumed to share (e.g. "*It offers <u>a lot more freedom</u>*").

Relevant to this paper, Gajardo and Oteíza (2017) used APPRAISAL to examine the ways in which a group of Chilean women of the lower socio-economic class constructed mother identities in their life stories. The interviewees constituted themselves as mothers who have the capacity to raise well-behaved children, through positive appraisals targeted at

the latter's behavior; as the most important figure in their children's lives, by describing the children's affection for them; and as self-sacrificing mothers, through inscriptions of positive judgment showing how tenacious they are when it comes to providing for their children. Gajardo and Oteíza argued that the construction of identities was informed by the women's sociocultural backgrounds and position as poor mothers. Reinforcing traditional representations of motherhood was a resource for them to reverse their invisibilization and become salient.

Critical Narrative Analysis

Critical narrative analysis (CNA) takes a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to the examination of the personal stories that people tell (Souto-Manning, 2014a). CDA is an analytical paradigm that interrogates how social inequality is reinforced or subverted through language use. It believes that "language provides a finely articulated vehicle for differences in power in hierarchical social structures" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p.10). This accords with our understanding of personal narratives not as "truth" but constructed experiences (Mullany & Lumala, 2022) that "bring together the micro (personal) and the macro (social or institutional) situations in place" (Souto-Manning, 2014a, p.163) and, therefore, cannot be examined separately from issues of gender and power. As such, CNA offers the ideal approach to connect the micro-acts of resistance in the women's stories to organizational and cultural discourses to elucidate how socio-ideological structures both shape and are challenged by the women's practices and linguistic evaluations of their worlds.

CNA has been fruitfully applied to stories ranging from long biographic narratives to short tellings, like those examined in this study. It has been used to explore how women interviewees re-author normative institutional discourses to construct their professional identities (Souto-Manning & Cheruvu, 2016) and align their actions with what is "morally good" in their dropping-out-of-school narratives (Souto-Manning, 2014b). It has also been employed to analyze carefully-crafted narrations, such as in Martel et al.'s (2022) study of patient stories on healthcare websites.

Central to the field of narrative analysis is Labov's (1972) model of narrative structure. Labov identified a pattern in narratives wherein they typically start with an abstract (a signal that the narrator has a story to tell), and then present an orientation (a description of the setting, time, and characters), complicating action (the events that are the core of the narrative), resolution (the final event), evaluation (the narrator's attitude towards the events, or the point of the story), and finally a coda (a signal that the story has ended, and general comments on the effects of the events on the narrator). Even as the field of CNA grows richer in analytical tools, Labov's model remains relevant as a potential resource

for tracing the logical development of personal stories (Emerson & Frosh, 2004). In this paper, it proved useful for consolidating the appraisals on the clause level and exploring the distinctive characteristics of the stories in terms of what evaluations are enacted at which narrative phase, to understand how the appraisals work together as resistance.

Methodology

The Participants

In late 2021, we gathered first-person narratives from twenty-six Malaysian women who had left formal employment, including women who were self-employed or working part-time but were not receiving certain legally-mandated benefits and were not subjected to income taxation. In Malaysia, these forms of employment are regarded as informal work. We advertised our project through the first author's departmental Facebook page as well as our Twitter accounts. Further participants were recruited through purposive sampling using our personal networks and a snowball strategy. For the purpose of this study, we focus on eighteen mothers who had not exited voluntarily. Table 2 summarises key information about them.

Table 2: Participant Information

Pseudonym	Sector prior to opt-out	Age group	Period in formal workforce	Children when exited	Reason(s) for leaving	Current work status
Qadira	Advertising	26-30	2014-2020	1	Job dissatisfaction	Self-employed
Gauri	Information technology	36-40	2006-2016	2	Job dissatisfaction	Stay-at-home mother
Fern	Education	41-45	2003-2016	1	Job dissatisfaction	Stay-at-home mother
Marina	Administration	41-45	1996-2003	Expecting first child	Job dissatisfaction	Stay-at-home mother
Pei Yin	Marketing	41-45	2004-2014	Expecting first child	Job dissatisfaction	Stay-at-home mother
Kate	Engineering	41-45	2001-2015	1; Expecting second child	Job dissatisfaction; Work-family conflict	Self-employed
Nalini	Business development	41-45	2000-2018	3	Job dissatisfaction; Work-family conflict	Self-employed
Sue	Public relations	46-50	1998-2000	Expecting first child	Job dissatisfaction	Stay-at-home mother

Aria	Education	Above 55	1989-2019	3 adults	Job dissatisfaction	Self-employed
Daya	Human resources	Above 55	1986-2016	3	Job dissatisfaction	Self-employed
Xoey	Journalism	36-40	2007-2015	Expecting first child	Childcare issues	Self-employed
Jasmin	Quantity surveying	41-45	2000-2006	1	Childcare issues	Self-employed
Ysobel	Accounting	41-45	2000-2011	2	Childcare issues	Working part-time
Becca	Engineering	31-35	2012-2018	2	Company shutdown	Self-employed
Olivya	Finance	46-50	1998-2011	0 (2 in 2021)	Company restructure	Self-employed
Wardah	Accounts administration	Above 55	1984-2021	1	Retrenched	Retired
Sophie	Education	31-35	2011-2017	1	Husband relocated	Returned to formal workforce just prior to interview
Elena	Education	36-40	2009-2021	1	Husband relocated	Stay-at-home mother

All of the mothers held middle-class professional jobs prior to opting out. Based on their accounts, ten had young children when they left the formal workplace; four were pregnant with their first child; Aria had grown children; and Olivya was childfree at the time but had primary-school-age children in 2021. Daya and Wardah did not indicate their children's ages. We found no correlation between the participants' reasons for leaving and their stage of motherhood. Ten opted out owing to job dissatisfaction from various combinations of overwork, unprofessional and unsupportive management, stress, discrimination, and job insecurity. Of these, five mothers of young children or expectant mothers (Gauri, Fern, Pei Yin, Kate, and Nalini) had faced long hours, demanding conditions, and exhaustion, but only Kate and Nalini shared that this conflicted with their parenting obligations. Three mothers quit because of a lack of flexibility and childcare options, including Xoey who was pregnant with her first child. Another three lost their jobs and decided to pursue self-employment or retire. Sophie and Elena left reluctantly as their husbands had accepted positions elsewhere and the women could not afford to live on their own.

Resonant with past studies (McKie, Biese & Jyrkinen, 2013), most of our participants were unwilling to relinquish their professional identities after transitioning out of the formal economy. When they shared their stories, nine were freelancing or running home-

based businesses and one was teaching part-time. Sophie had just resumed full-time work after four years as a stay-at-home mother whereas Gauri had begun attending interviews but was being rejected because of her five-year career break. Apart from Fern, the remaining stay-at-home mothers were open to working formally or informally in the future.

Overall, our informants' participation in the formal workforce had been curtailed to different extents by power relations between employees and managers/employers, masculine ideal worker standards, and a gender order that privileges men's careers and breadwinning and expects women to assume social reproduction privately and perform "largely unpaid or possibly part-time work, or work in the home" (Schnurr et al., 2020, p.415). All eighteen participants shared that they would have stayed had conditions been more conducive.

Data Collection

The informants were invited to share their stories through an online questionnaire or an in-person, virtual or email interview depending on their preference. Like other narrative analysis studies before (Mullany & Lumala, 2022), we used multiple elicitation methods so that women who did not want to be verbally interviewed or did not have time to be interviewed could still contribute their stories. Sixteen completed the questionnaire while two elected for email interviews. This suggests that the participants possibly wanted to avoid revealing their identity to us and/or to engage in the research at their own pace and within a physically safe space as COVID-19 was not yet endemic in Malaysia at that time. Elena contacted us after answering the questionnaire and volunteered for a follow-up interview, which we conducted via email to maintain consistency in our data gathering.

The questionnaire comprised eleven broad, open-ended prompts designed to encourage participants to thoughtfully write about their experiences in the workforce, their decision to exit, their present day-to-day lives, and their plans for the future without steering them in any particular direction. Examples of questions include "Could you tell us about a day that stands out in your memories about your last workplace when you were formally employed?" and "How did the decision to leave your job come about? What did you feel about it then? How do you feel about it now?". We did not impose any word limit, and responses to each question ranged from one sentence to multiple paragraphs. Qualtrics settings were configured to allow participants to leave the questionnaire and resume at their convenience. The semi-structured email interviews used the same demographic questions and prompts as the questionnaire, but we often probed further to thoroughly explore the stories as they emerged. Questions were sent one at a time so that the

interviewee could focus on that question, and no deadline was specified. All participants provided informed consent and were anonymized.

The mothers' questionnaire responses and emails totaled 18,572 words with an average length of 1,032 words per participant. Although these stories may seem short and, in some cases, fragmented compared to prototypical interview narratives - i.e. stretches of rarely interrupted talk that produce "pages and pages of transcript" (Georgakopoulou, 2007, p.146) - they fulfill "the most widely accepted definitional criteria of narrative [in that] there is temporal ordering and transition from one state of affairs to another, some form of a complicating action (e.g. problem arising, circumstances changing, newsworthy events) and evaluation of the events and/or characters talked about" (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p.240). Some narrations depart from Labov's (1972) classic pattern, for instance by deviating in terms of linearity or dispensing with abstract, but as Georgakopoulou (2004) argued, the Labovian structure is not absolutely required for a unit to be identified as a story. Instead, stories can be unfinished and elliptical "as opposed to fully developed units with a beginning-middle-end; they can be interactionally drafted [...] as opposed to monologic; [and] their tellings can be heavily embedded in their surrounding stretch of discourse as opposed to readily detachable and free-standing" (p.10). Although some narratives diverge from Labov's "prototypical" cases, the clauses in these accounts still correspond to the phases in his model. For example, single-clause answers in the questionnaires that were not high in narrativity can be understood as part of a larger set of interspersed responses that, when taken together, constitute complicating action or provide orientation material that gives coherence to the story and evaluations.

Face-to-face and video interviews could have produced longer stories but not necessarily richer and deeper ones (Namey et al., 2020) since the opportunity to contribute stories at their own pace may have created space for the women to recall and reflect more deeply on their experiences and how they see themselves (James, 2017). Having the time to carefully consider their responses and rewrite could raise questions about the authenticity of the representations of the experiences (James, 2007). On the other hand, it can also generate narratives that are shaped more closely to the participants' perspectives and reflections on their experiences, and the meanings they give to their lives (James, 2017). The high degree of anonymity afforded by the questionnaire may have also encouraged the respondents to discuss their feelings and experiences more freely. At the same time, undertaking asynchronous online data collection meant that paralanguage that co-articulate evaluations (e.g. voice quality, loudness, facial expression and gesture) (Martin & White, 2005) were absent. Nevertheless, the large body of research using APPRAISAL theory has demonstrated that attitudes can be effectively examined based on their linguistic realizations alone. This includes past studies on stories in asynchronous computer-mediated communication. For example, Georgakopoulou (2004), Page (2010) and Dayter (2015) examined storytelling through private emails, Facebook status

updates, and tweets respectively, while Rees, Monrouxe and McDonald (2013) investigated written narratives of 'most memorable' professionalism dilemmas collected through online questionnaires. Ultimately, letting our informants choose how and when they wished to share their stories reflected the aims of CNA to humanize research, allow participants to reflect on and learn from their narratives, and move away from positioning them as subjects of the researcher's agenda (Souto-Manning, 2014b).

Data Analysis

We scrutinized the narratives to identify inscriptions and tokens of evaluation, appraisers, and what was appraised. We coded each instance of evaluation using the AFFECT, JUDGMENT and APPRECIATION sub-systems, noting whether the appraisal was positive or negative. As Martin and White (2005) note, examining invoked evaluation introduces an element of subjectivity into the analysis. As with past studies, we have attempted to be as transparent as possible when presenting examples of implied appraisal in our findings by explaining how we reconstituted the assessment.

After coding all instances of appraisal, we related them to Labov's narrative stages. We examined the subject positions that the mothers embrace, negotiate, and recreate through their patterns of evaluation. Taking a CNA perspective allowed us to oscillate between the micro (linguistic) and macro (social) levels involved in these self-reconstructions, and explore what dominant discourses are recycled, refused, and reformulated within and across the accounts as the women reinvented themselves, and how these practices of self-making work as a form of constructive resistance. We do not make any claims of definitiveness in our identification of discourses since this is contingent upon "what seems self-evident, 'common sense', or simply salient to" us (Sunderland, 2004, p.33). How discourses are detected and named in this study are both enabled and constrained by our sociocultural backgrounds and feminist perspective. Others may "recognize" a different array of discourses in the same stories. Further, the expression of ATTITUDE is not simply a personal matter – the writer "commenting" on the world – but an interpersonal resource for construing social personae whilst signaling attitudinal (dis)alignment with the putative addressee (Martin, 2000). Hence, our role as *feminist* linguists, as implied in the information sheet given to our participants, may have influenced the emotions and opinions codified through the women's language use.

Findings

The mothers in our sample tend to construct themselves in two main ways, as (1) valuable mothers (capable, tireless, caring mothers who are key figures in their children's lives), and (2) competent professionals.

Valuable Mothers

The women typically constructed their valuable-mother identity through positive Judgments toward their own and their children's Capacity, Tenacity and Propriety (i.e. their ability, steadfastness and integrity), as the extracts below illustrate:

(1) My typical day in my life <u>starts at 5.30 am with preparing breakfast for my boys and sending them to school</u>. I will clock-in work at 7.30 am until 3.30 pm. After that I have my personal time before <u>picking up my boys from school at 6.15 pm</u>. I've **more time** to <u>spend with them coaching and checking on their schoolwork at night</u>. We **even have enough time** <u>for bonding activities and also a bedtime story or a night chat</u>. (Nalini, emphasis added)

(2) Looking at my kids today, <u>well-behaved</u>, <u>doing well in school</u> and **having stability and security**, I think I made the right choice of choosing them over my career. (Ysobel, emphasis added)

In (1), the lexicalization of time coupled with actions that Nalini performs for/with her children (underlined) serve as tokens invoking positive Judgment of how tenacious she is when it comes to meeting her children's educational, developmental and emotional needs. The phrases in bold could stand as tokens of positive Judgment of how well she organizes her time for child-rearing. In (2), positive Judgments directed at Ysobel's children's Propriety and Capacity (underlined) position Ysobel herself as a mother with the capability to bring up well-behaved and intelligent children. The phrase in bold is an inscription of Affect that appraises Ysobel positively, from her children's perspective, for the Security (i.e. emotions concerned with ecosocial well-being) she provides them.

The valuable-mother identity can be regarded as a resistant subjectivity that directs itself toward a meaningful life and away from work conditions that were incongruent with personal values. The positive inscriptions and invocations of judgment that construct this identity correspond to Labov's "evaluation" phase where the mothers assess the outcomes of their opting-out by comparing them with the "complication action", i.e. the undesirable events that caused them to opt out. The "complicating actions" in most of the narratives were packed with negative Judgments of management's unethical behavior (e.g. *This was the kind of <u>nonsense</u> I had to deal with [...] So <u>unprofessional</u>*", "*promises were made but <u>never delivered</u>*") and negative Affects (Dissatisfaction) directed at management and work conditions (e.g. "*I was <u>furious</u> and <u>raised my voice</u> at the top*

management", "*I didn't think I was contributing to society in any significant way*"). Hence, by constructing themselves as valuable mothers - the most important figure in their children's lives – and endowing their everyday here-and-now with meaning, they suggest living "otherwise", in ways that stay true to one's values and break from the meaninglessness of neoliberal capitalist work arrangements.

However, the valuable-mother identity is closely linked with power as it is somewhat in line with facets of intensive mothering. It reinforces expectations that caregiving is a mother's role which should be carried out privately. By drawing on the categories and vocabularies used by dominant forces in order to contest power, this form of self-making recreates power.

In some cases, the mothers linked their intensive mothering and balancing act with positive feelings, constituting themselves as *happy* valuable mothers. This identity is realized by combining Affects of Happiness and Satisfaction (i.e. emotions concerned with affairs of the heart and the pursuit of goals) with positive Judgments of their mothering practices as exemplified below:

> (3) It has been very fulfilling most of the time. I wake up happy to start my day. I <u>don't have a domestic helper</u>, so I <u>do some chores</u> before my daughter wakes up. I <u>help her with her schoolwork and piano practice</u>. I <u>sit with her for Zoom classes</u>. I <u>cook almost all the meals</u> [...] I'm happy despite my very busy schedule. (Fern, emphasis added)

This extract is packed with inscriptions of positive Affects of Happiness ("*very fulfilling*", "*I wake up happy*", "*I'm happy*"), constructing Fern as contented with being a stay-at-home mother. She also positions herself as a hands-on parent through the multiple actions she performs by herself in her daughter's upbringing (underlined). These phrases count as tokens of positive Judgment of her ability, commitment and, within an intensive mothering discourse, moral worth. While intensive mothering can be a vehicle for personal fulfillment (Kerrane, Banister & Wijaya, 2021), such emotional expressions across the stories can also be seen as means of resistance as the mothers choose which feelings to display (Lilja, 2021). When these positive inscriptions of affect are read in light of the negative affective load of the "complicating action" leading to their exits (e.g. "*I was getting exhausted of how the management was treating us*", "*Small things accumulated over the years and snowballed into a real anxiety for me*", "*I felt frustrated, unappreciated and used by the company and management*"), they accentuate the negative emotional values assigned to the organisations to contest the norms and structures that had taken an emotional and psychological toll on the mothers (e.g. *exhaustion*, *anxiety*, *frustration*). They also implicitly promote a way of life - outside the confines of organizations - that prioritizes the mothers' and their children's well-being. Hence, the production of a happy persona can be understood as constructive resistance

that undermines the masculinist work conditions that had adversely impacted the women's emotional health (cf. Biese & McKie, 2016).

The mothers' resistance targets manifestations of the neoliberal logic of individualization and competition in working life (e.g. pressure to achieve individual success, long working hours) but paradoxically sustains the neoliberal focus on self-responsibility as the key to survival (Tommasi & Degen, 2022), which illustrates again how power and resistance are entangled in the narratives (Foucault, 1990). The accounts continue to cast individuals as "entirely responsible for their own self-care and well-being" (Rottenberg, 2018, p.7). While they are not compelled to pursue happy, meaningful lives through work – which breaks with neoliberal logic – they are still made fully responsible for improving their living conditions (Tommasi & Degen, 2022).

Competent Professionals

Most of the mothers constructed their previous selves as capable, committed employees through positive Judgments directed at their Capacity and Tenacity (e.g. "*I excelled in my work*", "*The GM trusted me to head the presentation*", "*Whatever I was able to master, I learned while on the job*", "*always put in my best effort*"). This self-positioning aligns them with the neoliberal ideal of the resilient, passionate, industrious, and highly-skilled professional woman (Rottenberg, 2018) – the type of female citizen that the state wants in order to realize its economic aspirations. To assume a subject position that is imbued with expertise, status, and institutional desirability could be viewed as a representational strategy to gain "rewards" in terms of admiration and approval (Foucault, 1991). However, these positive assessments of past professional abilities and achievements also function as "orientation" in Labov's terms. It provides background information about the informants themselves and sets up a contrast with their negative positionings by their former organizations in the "complicating action" (being dismissed, treated unfairly, bypassed for promotion, exploited, and/or undervalued). In this sense, the mothers' self-constructions as competent professionals can be read as a form of resistance against the "failed" organizational subjectivities previously imposed on them.

Some stories did not provide separately identifiable "orientations" and "complicating actions" but entwined positive self-making with negative judgments of managers' Propriety to produce a subversive version of the past, as illustrated below:

(4) I was overlooked for a senior post. The decision to opt out became even more certain when I was still depended upon to hand in data and reports so others could just copy and paste. My worth was just that - the go to (sic) person who saved all. (Aria, emphasis added)

By claiming that she "*was overlooked*", Aria implies positive Judgment of her Capacity and readiness for promotion. She goes on to construct herself as a key employee who was "*depended upon*" and looked upon to "*save all*", which can be taken as indirect positive Judgments of her Tenacity. She is simultaneously critical of her managers. The target of the evaluation invoked by "*was overlooked*" is twofold: this phrase not only realizes a positive Judgment of Aria but also a negative Judgment (Impropriety) of those who unjustly passed her over for a promotion she deserved. Their impropriety is underscored by the causative construction (underlined) which indirectly portrays the management as complicit in unethical practices. In the final clause, the intensifier "*just*" invokes a negative Judgment of the management's unfair view of her. In this way, Aria refuses to collaborate with the organizational narrative that she was not fit for promotion and offers her own mode of being known and seen.

The mothers' formation of the competent-professional identity can be regarded as micro-resistance to organizational structures that construct "successful" or "failed" identities through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Nevertheless, this resistance is parasitic on neoliberal discourses that celebrate productivity, diligence, individual achievement and a strong commitment to work, thereby both challenging and reinforcing "the neoliberal conversion of human beings into specks of capital, which posits winners and losers, worthy capital-enhancing subjects, and the disposable rest" (Rottenberg, 2018, p.133-134).

Discussion

This case study has examined the constructive resistance of eighteen middle-class Malaysian mothers as they reflect on their opting-out experiences and generate narratives of who they were and are now. Our goal is not to produce a comprehensive, generalizable picture of the dissenting self-formation practices of opted-out mothers in this country, but to empirically demonstrate how constructive resistance can be useful for exploring opted-out mothers' struggles against disciplinary truths concerning them, for example, their (in)ability to be good neoliberal workers who persist through adversity and are dedicated and satisfied in economic activity (Vassallo, 2020). Past scholarship has focused on why women opt out and issues of agency and self-determination in this process. Power, in these studies, is primarily understood as centralized and constraining. The concept of constructive resistance helps us to turn our gaze to a less direct form of power that governs through the production of truths and subjectivities (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018). While opting-out may allow mothers to free themselves from organizational working conditions that they perceive to be unsupportive, hostile or meaningless, it is difficult to escape dominant discourses that work to position them as certain kinds of professionals (e.g. uncommitted worker) or mothers (e.g. unfulfilled stay-at-home mom).

Our sense of ourselves is regulated through discourses, especially those that have gained "a very special kind of obviousness" (Althusser, 1971, p.139) such as neoliberalism which has penetrated multiple domains of social life. A disciplinary regime par excellence, it operates "at a distance" (Miller & Rose, 2008, p.7) and increasingly at affective and psychological levels, moving ever deeper into subjectivity and feelings (Kanai & Gill, 2020). Yet, opted-out mothers can refuse to be "hailed" into place and create other ways of being from the discourses and subjectivities available (Lilja, 2021), thus potentially destabilizing and reconfiguring dominant discourses of motherhood and work, and engendering "a slow transformation of values" (Bleiker, 2000, p.276). At the same time, in turning themselves into certain resistant subjects, they can contribute to disciplinary regimes. This perspective departs from previous studies that have largely placed opted-out mothers in opposition to power, as subjected to domination and liberating themselves from it. The lens of constructive resistance facilitates us in interrogating the complex entanglements of power and dissent that have so far received relatively limited attention in opting-out literature.

We investigated the mothers' discursive resistance by addressing two research questions: (1) What subjectivities do the mothers construct through the evaluation patterns in their narratives? and (2) How do these subject positions resist, reformulate or collude with dominant discourses? APPRAISAL theory, Labov's (1972) model and CNA, respectively, enabled us to provide a principled account of the evaluative patterns in the narratives and the identities these create; contrast attitudinal assessments across narrative stages to show how these subject positions function as resistance; and connect the micro-level of individual dissent to the macro-level of discourses that constitute and are reconstituted by these practices. We found that the mothers constructed themselves in two main ways, as valuable mothers and competent professionals.

The valuable-mother identity is realized via Judgments of Capacity/Tenacity/Propriety together with Affects of Happiness/Satisfaction. In the narratives, presenting as mothers who are of central importance to their children's development is a critique of the emptying out of career purpose caused by unethical leadership that values organizational interests over those of employees. Located within a satisfying home life, this identity refuses the neoliberal invitation to find meaning in work and stress (Fegitz, 2022; Wrenn, 2022) or to lean on the "pro-capitalist therapeutic device" of resilience to ameliorate the ills wrought upon them (McRobbie, 2020, p.63). Grit is a major feature of neoliberal visions of the good worker (Vassallo, 2020). Although the valuable-mother identity is produced via a language of resilience (positive Judgments of Tenacity), this vocabulary is redefined away from devotion to work toward devotion to family. In this regard, this resilient subjectivity centered on an ethos of care "reverses" (Foucault, 1990) the discourse of grit; it draws on the language of a neoliberal disciplinary mechanism but does so to assign significance to social reproduction which has received minimal institutional and welfare

support in Malaysia (Elias, 2020b). This micro-resistance may seem trivial as there is no dramatic rupture in current sense-making, but when alternative figures and linguistic statements are repeated over time, dominant concepts can be loaded with new subversive meanings (Lilja, 2021). Hence, the enactment of the valuable-mother identity could be seen as a slow-motion, small-scale form of reclaiming the language of resilience for a more feminist thinking about care (cf. Allen, 2021).

By embodying happiness, the valuable-mother identity opens up cracks in Malaysia's competitiveness project that strives to increase middle-class mothers' engagement in the formal economy by repeating the neoliberal feminist "truth" that real happiness lies in combining motherhood with professional accomplishment (Yoong, 2022). Happiness, as Ahmed (2010) tells us, functions as a promise that directs us toward certain objects and life choices. Within neoliberal feminism, the promise of happiness hinges on women's active desire to have both a meaningful career and children (Rottenberg, 2018). However, by establishing an alternative truth that motherhood can bring women in closer proximity to eudaimonia than the joint pursuit of career and family, the resistant identity undermines the "happy work-family balance" discourse. If diffused and performed over a period, it can weaken the discourse and decelerate the mobilization of high-potential mothers back into the workforce.

"Speaking" from a resistant subject position is not always an act of opposition but also a form of protection from subalternity (Baaz, Heikkinen & Lilja, 2017). As a dynamic and efficacious figure, whether in her care duties or in organizing childcare and her informal work, the valuable mother is still in keeping with neoliberalism's fetish for productivity despite not conforming to the full-time, productive worker ideal. The identity also strongly aligns with intensive motherhood and "Asian values" that see childcare as a family and, particularly, maternal responsibility (Elias, 2020b). While it suggests the internalization of dominant mothering ideology, claiming the cultural capital of hands-on mothering also helps the women justify their workplace departures and avert the stigma of foregoing ideal-worker norms in a context where being a successful career mother is actively promoted as the ideal for progressive womanhood and national growth. However, this self-positioning paradoxically bolsters the same power structures and stereotypes that negatively impact mothers in the workforce (cf. Lilja, 2021). The valuable-mother identity reifies women as the main parent and legitimizes the continued neglect of the childcare sector in Malaysia that hinders women's workforce participation (Mohd Amin, Abd Rahim Ridzuan, Mat Saad, & Subramaniam, 2019). Compliance with intensive mothering in the narratives is further sustained by a parallel absence of fathers in accounts of childcare. The availability of work/family accommodations at husbands' workplaces, as well as the challenges for husbands to be present fathers, are never discussed. The proffered subject position also implicates the mothers as women who are not obligated to work and their husbands as breadwinners (cf. Yoong, 2020). As such, the

valuable-mother identity indirectly normalizes women's work trade-offs that disrupt their careers as well as the long-hours work culture and the unreasonable, and often unnecessary, demands of the ideal-worker norms that create the need for these trade-offs (Ely & Padavic, 2020; Lim and Mohd Rasdi, 2019).

The mothers constructed themselves as competent (former) professionals through Judgments of Capacity/Tenacity. The competent-professional identity, when related to the elements in Labov's framework, can be understood as resistance against subaltern positionings by former employers as inconsequential, failed workers who lacked the qualities needed to prosper in their fields. Harding, Ford and Lee (2017, p.1224) argue that "in the mundane world of work, resistance may take the form of a refusal to accept challenges to one's identity or sense of self that threaten to reduce one to abjection". Such subversion may manifest in "seemingly insignificant material-discursive moves, such as the insistence on particular interpretations" (Mumby et al., 2017, p.1166). In a similar vein, the mothers, now outside the world of work, may experience that their unemployed, retrenched or informally employed identities are deemed low status in Malaysia's neoliberal capitalist context, and so, create a culturally-valued version of themselves to become salient. Assuming the identity of a competent professional allows them to oppose the unreasonable organizational demands made on them without relinquishing their claim as a good worker, albeit in the past. This practice of construing themselves as human capital – what McNay (2009) speaks of as neoliberalism's economization of subjectivity – indicates that although the opted-out mothers have liberated themselves from neoliberal working conditions, they may experience "a regulated freedom" in which they still evaluate themselves based on their (past) ability to live up to the neoliberal ideal of excellence (Mumby, 2016, p.892). In other words, while the surface impression is that identification with ideal-worker norms has weakened from negative work experiences, an attachment to the optimally productive ideal persists.

Conclusion

This case study contributes an original insight into how the concept of constructive resistance can be useful for exploring the subjectivities that opted-out mothers produce as they make sense of their opting-out experiences, and how these subject positions undermine and reinforce the local contexts of power that led them to exit the formal workforce. Their self-positionings, as valuable mothers and competent professionals, can be understood as constructive resistance emerging from the mothers' critical evaluations of the values and practices of their former organisations that caused them to opt out (cf. Foucault, 1985). They transformed themselves "otherwise" to undermine neoliberal capitalist work arrangements that were incongruent with their personal values and adversely impacted their well-being, and refuse organizational narratives that positioned

them as "failed" workers. However, as Lilja and Vinthagen (2018) argue, an individual's room for maneuver when reconstituting oneself is structured by the prevailing discursive context of a society, and indeed, the ways in which the mothers in our study make meaning of their opting-out experiences and discursively position themselves are informed by normative understandings of work and motherhood in the wider Malaysian context. Through their self-making, they not only contested power but also sustained gendered and neoliberal ideals. Nevertheless, these practices still qualify as resistance as they challenge "prevailing games of truth" by activating forms of knowledge that have been marginalized, which can have gradual effects on the dominant orthodoxy (Mumby et al., 2017, p.1164). When repeated and spread over time, for example through familial and friendship networks, these alternative identities, meanings, and ways of knowing and living have the potential to weaken dominant discourses of work and motherhood. Thus, opting-out research needs to move beyond the agency and resistance displayed in leaving repressive mainstream careers and organizations. We need to think more expansively about resistance against disciplinary forms of control and normalization. How do opted-out mothers subvert the ways in which power regimes construct them through discourses, and how can these practices become stumbling blocks (Foucault, 1990) to neoliberal efforts to mediate mothers' experiences and identities? What challenges do attachments to dominant subjectivities present for destabilizing "common sense neoliberalism" (Hall & O'Shea, 2013)? To answer such questions, constructive resistance can be used as a chemical catalyst (Foucault, 1982) to illuminate the network of power/resistance that opted-out mothers occupy.

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