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MOTHERS' DECISIONS ON WORKPLACE REENTRY*

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ABSTRACT

Mothers' deliberate their choices and wonder what affect taking off work to raise a child will have on workforce reentry. Mothers, employers and lawmakers need to understand the decision of mothers, what biases they face, what impact they have when reentering the workforce. This quantitative and qualitative study looks at stay at home mothers or part time working mothers to view their beliefs on the choice of when or if to return to the workforce. The quantitative question asked to 169 mothers from across the United States discussed when or if they would return to the workforce. They were then provided with a comment section in which 20 mothers stated their issues about returning to the workforce. A qualitative interview was given to 3 Midwestern mothers from the United States about reenter into the workforce and if they felt they could reenter the workforce when they want, if there could be biases, and how they feel they will be viewed. Also asked was what they feel will be the hardest thing about reentering the workforce when or if they chose to.

Keywords: Career Choices; Maslow's Hierarchy; Mothers; Sense making; Workforce Reentry.

BACKGROUND

This research uncovers the perceptions of mothers who are thinking of reentering the workforce after taking time off to raise their child/children. Researchers have spotlighted the perceptions of mothers in the area of work and family in the past (Bridges and Orza 1992, 1993), but this study looks at the transition from staying at home to workforce reentry. Specifically this research looks at the choices mothers make on when to return to work and how they feel about any biases related to it.

Mothers have debated the ideas of whether to return to work after a child and at what time is the best for both child and mother to make this transition. The transition into the workforce can cause role strain as the mother takes on both the role of mother and financial provider. Role strain defined as the demands of taking on multiple roles along with the coping strategies used in dealing with this strain (Goode, 1960). Women have been found to feel role strain as they combine their roles at work and with family (Aneshensel & Pearlin, 1987). Some mothers feel that the multiple roles of both mother and employee outweigh the role strain and give them a feeling of self worth (Mark, 1977). Part time working mothers balance their financial income and caring for their children but this comes with a cost of time constrains, energy, and attention to the various roles (Nomaguchi, 2006; Roxburgh, 2005).

* The views or opinions expressed in this manuscript are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the position, views or opinions of the editor(s), the editorial board or the publisher.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Reentry Part Time

Mothers can ease the role strain of returning to the workforce on a part time bases. Mothers may also choose to work part time due to other personal or family factors. Researchers have acknowledged most part time working mothers prefer this option as it provides them time to do family duties (Abramson, 2007). Though if a mother chooses to return on only a part time basis this can cause them to be viewed differently compared to their full time counterparts without children. Employers have been found to view part time working women differently thus providing them different job opportunities or duties along with differing compensation reinforcing how vulnerable and marginalized they may feel (Webber & Williams, 2008a).

Mothers are known to move into part time employment, but this choice can negatively impact them financially while enhancing the gender pay gap (Anderson, Forth, Metcalf & Kirby, 2001; Manning & Petrongolo, 2004; Walby & Olsen, 2002). Employers can feel part time workers are less committed to the job which triggers organizations to grant these employees fewer advancement possibilities (Bonney, 2007). Employees working the longest hours were considered higher performers compared to those that worked regular or flexible hours (Waumsley, & Houston, 2009). The extra hours worked also coincided with career success and with the ability to get promotions even if it was detrimental to their work life balance (Waumsley, & Houston, 2009).

The choice to reenter part time to the workforce may not only hurt their careers but also their family life. Husbands of women that start back to work part time qualitatively view their wives differently than if they had chosen fulltime employment (Duffy & Pupo, 1992).

Stress of Mothering

Women may feel they need to be selfless and ensure everyone around them has their needs meet. The self-sacrificing mother carries the expectation of others around her and is portrayed as one that stays home or works her career around the needs of her child, always being present in their young lives (Chase & Rogers, 2000). This belief may differ from generation before which had different cultural belief.

Though the beliefs are not new, Bowlby (1969) work on attachment research, found consistently that involved parents enhanced children ability to trust and had positive effects on social skills (Farnfield, 2008). This belief has lead some mothers to become self sacrificing and give up paid work, sleep and personal time to ensure the well being of her child. Women of preschool aged children, when interviewed, were found to believe this intensive parenting method could enhance their children later success (Wall, 2010).

Mothers are found to be more stressed, depressed and have lower self-esteem than their partners after the birth of their first child (Pancer et al. 2000). Many women are not ready for the role of mother or the demands of a baby (Francis-Connelly, 2002). Being overwhelmed by the needs of a baby can cost both the health of the mother and her child. Stressed parents tend to have more negative behaviors towards their children, are found to be less supportive and are less nurturing to their children, all leading then to report their child had behavioral problems (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2007).

Workplace Reentry Transition

Women may feel depressed in the return to the workforce due to many reasons. The change in schedule, potential guilt felt that her children need her or society views that she is being selfish, can cause women to feel they are not making the right decision in workforce

reentry. Women that transition back into the workforce can feel decreased self-esteem or depression (Beeber, 1999).

It is known that many mothers must return to the workforce due to financial issues. Financial security has been determined to be the major reason for the increase in women returning to the workforce, in 2003 the average was after 6 months versus previous years where the average was 10 years (Hakim, 2003). Now many women are still rethinking workplace reentry and whether they want to go back when a child is at a specific age.

Women may even choose to take on different work duties or a different career path when reentering the workforce. Evidence suggests mothers may be deterred by unfavorable working conditions (De Leire and Levy 2004). Some mothers may choose to reenter the workforce but only if it provides her specific benefits. Results have shown mothers are averse to hazardous environments which could cause a health risk while preferring nonstandard work schedules even if they need to take a wage cut (Felfe, 2012). Mothers will reenter the workforce when ready and with the required benefits to make them feel comfortable in reentering.

Theory of Sensemaking and Maslows Hierarchy

The needs of mothers can be found within their biology and cultural customs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs discuss these basic needs all humans have and how lower level needs must be met before moving on to the higher level needs of accomplishment or self actualization (1943). The basic needs for mothers can start with the hormonal changes at conception and last for years as they care for their child. Mothers feel a desire to care for a child soon after conception due to hormonal change of pregnancy (Brizendine, 2006). Each woman's culture also pushes her towards social norms which may focus on the family or focus on the superwomen theory of trying to have both a career and family life. She must relook at her needs of socializing her child, caring for their needs and any personal accomplishment needs she may feel.

Sensemaking, an ongoing creation of belief by individuals about a situation or event, allows individuals the ability to rationally comprehend what is happening (Weick, 2001). Sensemaking helps individuals build meaning out of events (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), permitting them to understand the importance to decide what is significant. Sensemaking, which has been primarily use to explain crisis situations or extreme events, spotlights the major life changes of childbirth and becoming a new mother by providing guidance of what that new role means. The stress of motherhood, the sleepless nights, overwhelming advice, hormonal changes and constant media reports forced mothers to relook at their goals and what will make them happy. This continued pressure continues as a mother decides when or if to return to work. The ability to make sense of the current family situation and try to understand the future environment if she chooses to reenter the workforce causes strain and stress.

RESEARCH METHODS

The quantitative optional survey sent via email provided for the answers of 169 mothers from across the United States of America to answer when or if they will return full time to the workforce. Surveys were distributed via an online service to 100 voluntary mothers who met the parental and workforce requirements and 69 additional women were group members of two mothers' organizations within the researcher's local area.

Participants were asked to provide demographic information, which 100 participant did. The demographic information displayed mothers had children under 18 and were from every region of the United States, higher percentages from the Midwest where the researcher was located. Mothers were between the ages of 18 to over 60, the majority (54%) between

ages 34 and 44. Most mothers (46%) had one child within the household; 36% two children and 11% three children. Mothers with four or more children made up 7% of participants. The income levels ranged from less than \$25,000 to over \$150,000. The majority of household incomes ranged at \$50,000-\$100,000 (24%) and \$25,000-\$49,000 (23%). Mothers did have some higher education with 34% some college, 35% associate or bachelor degrees, and 24% graduate degrees.

The qualitative sample of 3 middle income Midwestern mothers, were between the ages of late 20's to mid 30's. All mothers had at least one child and most with two or three children under the age of 5. This small group of 3 mothers discussed how they felt employers would view them when they reentered the workforce and if they felt there were any biases or misunderstanding of mothers who choose to take time away from their careers to care for their children.

RESULTS

The majority of 169 mothers surveyed believed they could return to the workforce when they wanted with 30% agreeing, 21% somewhat agreeing and 19% either disagreeing or somewhat disagreeing (see table 1). Comments from 46 of the 169 participants regarding workforce reentry stated that the majority felt they would return once their children were in school. Though many felt they would return, some mothers stated it would be a while or they were uncertain about that choice.

When in School

Ten mothers mentioned they plan on returning to work once their children are in school. "Once all kids are in school, I hope to go back part time." "When my kids start school" And "When current and potential future child are both in school if we can afford to wait that long."

Homeschooling

The idea of homeschooling was mentioned three times. Comments from one mother mentioned, "I plan on home schooling, so I will probably not return to work until my children are in college."

Support of Children

Some mothers believed this choice supports their children. One mother mentioned, "When I am done with my college education. I was raised by a stay at home mom, and I understand the importance of being at home with my children. I believe they need guidance well into their teenage years, and believe if I went to work it would interfere with their needs and wants."

Not the Right Employment

Four mothers felt that they have yet to find the right employment to meet their needs. One mother states, "If the right job presents itself and allows for flexibility with regards to my child." Other mothers mentioned they have already returned to part time work (20 commented they have part time employment) and feel this is adequate. Two mothers mentioned they would not return to the workforce but one did mention she does not know if this will always be a financial possibility.

Qualitative Interviews

Qualitative interviews provided insight into mothers' perceptions of reentering the workforce. Specifically 3 Midwestern mothers were asked if they felt they had hurt their

career goals by taking time off, how employers would view them on their return and if they felt there was a bias towards them. Each of the 3 mothers was given the opportunity to either discuss the questions with the researcher or given the questions to write and return to the researcher. This allowed for well thought out insights into each question.

Qualitative Interview Results

Career goals helped or hurt. Mother number 1 with two children mentioned, "Hurt, well I guess I do not have any future career goals. I am not planning on returning, I am keeping the option open. I don't think financially I will need to.... By the time my children are in school I would have been out of the workplace for 10-15 years and for an engineer that is not a good thing to do for a career. I would be forty-something getting an entry level career and I don't think that would be good for respect or go over well for coworkers."

Mother number 2 with one child and one on the way stated, "I don't think it helped or hurt my future career goals. I know if I want to go back to work it might take a bit of time to get on track compared to currently working mothers. "

Mother number 3 with two toddlers stated, "I feel like the decision for me to stay at home has caused me to put career goals on hold. Staying home has caused me to reconsider my future career ambitions, so that in itself is positive. However, being absent from the workforce for so many years has drawbacks such as lessened earnings potential (than if I had stayed on a career track throughout these years and been able to further climb the ladder at work), inability to stay in the loop with current education within the field, and loss of experience that could make my resume less competitive if/when I would re-enter the workforce.

Employers view of reentry to workforce. Mother number 1 with two children stated, "Definitely,.... I left with the stigma of she left with her first kid when is her next kid going to come. She is probably going to leave then to. Yes a bias."

Mother number 2 with one child and one on the way mentioned her view on employers, "I think they should understand that every woman should have their choices. They should give the same opportunity to the entire candidate. A Stay-at-Home mom is also a full time job with full responsibility the same as other jobs.

Mother number 3 with two toddlers stated, "I anticipate being treated as a bit "green" after being absent from the workforce for several years. Any absence of work for an extended period of time on a resume could also be a deterrent for some employers during the interview process."

Biases or misunderstandings of mothers who choose to stay home. Mother number 1 with two children stated, "I think there are biases not always bad. I think that mothers that stay home are view as the devoted mothers. Or at least I do. While mother number 2 with one child and one on the way mentioned, "I've never experienced anything like that." These mothers do not see any problems with staying at home and feel they will not find problems reentering the workforce.

Mother number 3 with two toddlers provided insight into the United States view of a mother who chooses to stay home. She mentioned, "I think that we live in a culture that places a lot of emphasis on job titles and career accomplishments. As someone whose title is simply "staying at home", I feel like people generally think there is an absence of work in my life, which couldn't be further from the truth!

Hardest thing about reentering to workforce. Mother number 1 of two children stated, "Being away from kids all day, if they were not in school all day." She also mentioned more personal issues such as, "Um Getting up in the morning." While mother number 2 with one child and one on the way stated, "The hardest thing will be getting used to a new routine and new environment." Both these mothers discussed common issues not necessarily related to being a parent rather a change in schedule and environment.

Mother number 3 with two toddlers gave an honest yet almost resentful view of reentry by stating, "My resume will be stale if I choose to enter the workforce. I will not have invested my time during this phase of my life in pursuing career goals or keeping up with continuing education. I believe that this could make it difficult to be a competitive candidate in a job search."

DISCUSSION

The quantitative data show many mothers feel they can return to the workforce when they want. Mothers suggested from their comments that they would reenter once their children reached school age. Some mothers mentioned they would wait until college or planned on homeschooling their children. Many mothers have already returned to the workforce or plan on returning once they find the right job.

The qualitative interviews show mothers differed about workplace reentry, if the laps will affect them, feelings of biases and personal issues with returning. Mothers ultimately want what is best for themselves and their families. Many mothers are willing to sacrifice for the good of their child/children and feel staying at home is the right choice for them but for others a return to work is what is needed.

Employers and lawmakers need to realize mothers may want support for the role they play in the family whether they choose to reenter the workforce soon after the birth of their child or never return after having a child. The support employers and lawmakers can provide include career support services, childcare options, various tax deductions and ensuring that employers are unbiased in their hiring practices.

Mothers should be allowed to make a choice that supports her family's needs and her own personal desires. Parents today have many stresses and need to be provided with external support. Research, employers and lawmakers can accommodate them by encouraging women to speak out on what they need from their job, society and from the government. Support to mothers can ensure proper development of our children while allowing parents the ability to find happiness in whichever role they choose.

TABLE 1
Percent and frequencies of beliefs of workplace reentry

	Frequency	Percent
Agree	51	30.18
Somewhat Agree	38	21.3
Neutral	15	8.88
Somewhat Disagree	34	20.12
Disagree	33	19.53
	169	100

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