

2017

Lived Experiences of Mothers Returning to Work After a Child-Rearing Hiatus

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Brenda Yahraes

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

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by

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MS, Eastern Oregon University, 2004

BA, Eastern Oregon University, 2000

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Organizational Psychology

Walden University

August 2017

Abstract

Mothers who leave the workforce to raise children may face personal and professional difficulties when returning. There was a lack of qualitative research on what these women experience in their return to work. The purpose of this study was to discover and describe how a mother in a professional or managerial position experiences a return to the workforce after a hiatus of 2 or more years to raise children. The philosophy of Husserl and the methodology of Moustakas guided this transcendental phenomenological study. Through purposive snowball sampling, 12 women participated in semistructured interviews. Data analysis followed the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method leading to a synthesis of participants' lived experiences. Key findings of the essence of the experience were identified in 6 major themes: deciding to return, changing career path, changes in the workplace, feelings upon return, changes at home, and reflections. Social change implications include heightening awareness among women and their families about the process of returning to work after leaving a professional job to care for children. Policymakers may benefit from the information to support mothers' efforts to return to work after a child-rearing hiatus through programs designed to support the reentry of mothers to the professional workplace. Life and career coaches may use findings to prepare women for the reentry process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Professional women who opt out of the workforce to stay at home to raise children are making a complicated career and family decision that brings with it many trade-offs. When a woman opts out of the workforce to raise her child(ren), she may feel as though she is renouncing her self-image as a career woman or may struggle with identity issues (Belkin, 2003; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Orgad, 2016). Cahusac and Kanji (2014) explained that “an evaporating work identity and evolving struggles for self-redefinition” and feelings of regret and loss after an exit from the workforce is an experience for many women who opt-out to become stay-at-home mothers (p. 1146). To understand the implications of leaving a career to become a stay-at-home mother, it was necessary to capture the lived experiences of mothers reentering the workforce. These women learn to negotiate or cope with role and identity changes that accompany the transition from being a professional worker to being unemployed as a stay-at-home mother to once again becoming a professional worker.

A woman’s return to work after the birth of a child is frequently discussed within scholarly research, specifically in regards to the motherhood penalty, support systems, employer policies, legislation, and childcare options (Aisenbrey, Evertsson, & Grunow, 2009; Correll, Benard, & In, 2007; Engler, 2013; Gatrell, 2007; Gough & Noonan, 2013). In the current study, I examined the lived experiences of women who reentered the workforce after leaving a professional career to become a stay-at-home mother for at least 2 years. The motherhood penalty has been shown to increase for highly educated women because they have a higher probability of working in professional or managerial

roles, positions that require a higher level of work commitment and are more likely to conflict with the demands of home life (Wilde, Batchelder, & Ellwood, 2010).

This research study focused on an in-depth understanding of the reentry process for women who have been at home. A qualitative approach was ideal for developing a deeper, richer understanding of a woman's experience. Working women who are choosing to leave the workplace to raise their families can use this information to facilitate their own reentry and to understand the experience as others have experienced it. Organizations can also learn from women's experiences to inform the creation of reentry or recruiting systems and help to create a more supportive workplace. It was necessary to analyze the lived experiences of women who are mothers and who transition back to the workplace. This chapter includes the background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research question, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

Background

The transition into motherhood and out of the workforce generates a stigma sometimes referred to as the motherhood penalty, and it is evident as mothers attempt to reenter the workforce (Budig & England, 2001; Budig & Hodges, 2010; Correll et al., 2007). The choice for professional and managerial-level women with a college education who decide to become stay-at-home mothers and leave the workplace places a heavy burden on their professional lives and creates a gap in their resume (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). Hiring managers and the women looking to reenter the workforce may view this gap as being synonymous with a gap in skills, a gap in valid work-related experiences,

and/or a prioritization of motherhood over the workplace, creating a negative perception about a women's future success in a career (Abendroth, Huffman, & Treas, 2014; Budig & England, 2001; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Rose & Hartmann, 2004). Facilitating the successful reentry of women who opted out of the workforce for child-rearing is an important issue for both families and organizations (Cabrera, 2009; Carlson et al., 2011; Guillaume & Pochic, 2007; Slan-Jerusalim & Chen, 2009).

Many studies have been conducted on the motherhood penalty and workforce reentry. Aisenbrey et al. (2009) examined the amount of time mothers were out of the workforce (short or long) and compared three different countries and the consequences in each (Germany, Sweden, and the United States). The authors found career punishment in all three countries for both long- and short-term leave, but the shorter the leave, the less detrimental the effects. Evertsson and Grunow (2012) focused on women's work interruptions and their career prospects in Germany (a conservative welfare state regime) and Sweden (a social democratic regime). The authors found that women in Sweden who sought career advancement needed to limit their parental leave time, but for German women, the authors found that there was not a significant relationship between family leave and upward career mobility (there is less occupational mobility in Germany to begin with, and many mothers drop out of the workforce completely).

Staying at home to care for children and temporarily discontinuing employment outside the home is a major decision for a woman and her family, one she must weigh heavily (Carney, 2009). Sihto (2015) reported a mother's return to work was a worrisome concern for several of the study's middle-class interviewees; the timing of the mothers'

return to work depended on the job market. These interviewees shared that returning to work after caring for children was a difficult and time-consuming process in which several women ended up taking a position that did not match their formal education or they found a way to employ themselves as entrepreneurs. Heilman and Okimoto (2008) found women with children were perceived as less competent and less likely to be considered for high-level promotions than women without children or male applicants. Heilman and Okimoto established that women with children were discriminated against when looking to advance in their profession: “Motherhood, it seems, can be hazardous indeed for a woman striving to get ahead” (p. 197).

Time spent at home to raise a child offers enormous advantages in the raising of a child or children, but during this opt-out time mothers’ “original knowledge, skills and expertise may erode” (Engler, 2013, p. 109). Gafni and Siniver (2015) found that every additional child a woman has has a negative effect on her monthly wage: each child reduces a woman’s wages by 6.6%. However, each child a man has raises his monthly wage by 3.4%, creating a wage gap of 10% (Gafni & Siniver, 2015). These findings suggest that only a small part of the wage gap related to number of children can be attributed to experience; more children means more time out of the workforce for a woman, but not necessarily for a man. Gafni and Siniver also reported that each month of unemployment due to maternity leave decreased a woman’s wages by 1.0%. Gatrell (2013) found that not one organization (in 27 cases) facilitated or supported the management of a woman’s career alongside pregnancy and new maternity. On the

contrary, mothers were left to navigate their position as mother and worker completely on their own.

Sihto (2015) discussed women's financial reasons for returning to work and how difficult the transition back to work was as mothers found the job market a major factor in their ability to return to work in a timely fashion. Brown (2010) concluded that women may have felt supported by their workplace because they were given the option for flexible scheduling, but upon further examination, these employers had a tendency not to recognize work that was completed away from the workplace, which suggested a lack of face time equated to a lack of commitment, effort, and/or labor.

In a study of two cohorts of mothers 15-20 years apart and their satisfaction with their career decisions, Woolnough and Redshaw (2016) found both groups of women were inclined to return to work for more than financial reasons; they also wanted to work. The authors found their satisfaction with a return to work relied heavily on childcare arrangements; a supportive spouse, supervisor, and colleagues; and flexible work options. Crowley and Kolenikov (2014) found that mothers who had control over time off and were offered employer flexible work options perceived less harm to their careers; they felt like they were treated as other workers because they still had the same amount of work and expectations but also the flexibility to work around family obligations.

Morgan, Merrell, and Rentschler (2015) conducted a qualitative study of 13 women age 40 and older who were professionals and first-time mothers. Findings revealed what it was like for these women as first-time mothers: they were not prepared for the reality of motherhood. Balancing career and motherhood made it difficult to do

mothering the right way. They could not do it all, and they decided being with their child was more important than their career. Orgad (2016) conducted 22 interviews with educated women in their late 30s to early 50s who left the workforce after becoming mothers. These women experienced a feeling of being invisible, a loss of confidence, feeling socially devalued, a need to stay at home to support their husband's career, and an inability to find childcare that was satisfactory enough to feel good about leaving their child. These findings were based on the juxtaposition of media representations of the mother who should and could do it all.

Spiteri and Xuereb (2012) conducted a qualitative study on the lived experiences of women who returned to work after a 14-week maternity leave. Findings indicated that mothers felt completely unprepared for this life change, and the planning required to return to work started while they were still pregnant. Planning topics included housework, managing family obligations, and childcare. These women felt overwhelmed dealing with multiple roles, had great difficulty living up to a superwoman image, and found a basic lack of family-friendly workplace conditions. Partridge's (2015) dissertation addressed career exit, staying at home to raise a family, and returning to work after a period of 8 or more years. Partridge found that all 10 of the women interviewed felt they were pushed out of their careers. These women said they did not leave by choice, and upon their return to the workplace they all experienced a lack of workplace flexibility and return-to-work mentoring programs.

Few researchers have addressed the experience women have when returning to work after staying at home to raise children. The literature cited includes reasons mothers

have for leaving and or returning to the workplace, flexible work arrangements (or lack thereof), the difficulty of transitioning back to work due to a lack of family-friendly policies, and the initial stay-at-home experience. What was lacking in the literature was the voice of women regarding their personal lived experiences of returning to the workforce after staying at home to raise their family for 2 or more years. Rich descriptions of this phenomenon, the experience of returning to work after leaving to raise a family, were deficient. This study focused on the experiences of these women and what it was like to reenter the workforce.

Problem Statement

Leaving the workforce to raise a child is often referred to as opting out (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012; Orgad & De Benedictis, 2015). Opting back in can pose problems for women who have a resume gap. The transition into motherhood and out of the workforce is likely to generate a stigma: the motherhood penalty, a term coined by sociologists (Budig & England, 2001; Budig & Hodges, 2010; Correll, Benard, & In, 2007). This penalty is evident as mothers attempt to reenter the workforce. The choice to become a stay-at-home mother may place a heavy burden on these women's professional lives.

Research about the specific experiences of women and their reentry into the workforce after opting out to raise a child or children was lacking. This study was important because of the number of women who are mothers or are planning to become mothers and intend to return to work after a significant time out of the workforce. Partridge (2015) studied how women experience the decision to leave their careers, their

experiences of stay-at-home motherhood, and their career reentry process. Although career reentry was one of nine themes Partridge touched on, she focused on why the women returned to work, not the experience of returning to work.

I addressed this gap in the literature. This study was needed because of the number of women who are mothers or are planning to become mothers, and who plan to return to work after a significant time out of the workforce. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) reported that the labor force participation rate for all mothers with children under age 18 was 70.8% in 2014. In March of 2014, 38.2% of women with children under the age of 3 years were out of the workforce (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Mothers leave the workforce to care for young children. Returning to work in a timely manner and in a satisfactory position is a crucial stage of a woman's family and career life, and being penalized for raising her child(ren) is a significant issue (Sihto, 2015).

The motherhood penalty has been discussed with regard to wages, support systems, employer policies, legislation, and childcare options, but there is a gap in the literature on how stay-at-home mothers experience returning to professional/managerial work after 2 or more years out of the workforce. This study was needed to increase the understanding of how women transition back to the workforce through individual mothers sharing their lived experiences.

The experience of career reentry was the focus of the study, specifically the experiences of women who left the workforce to raise a family and then returned to work after a period of 2 or more years. This study addressed a gap in academic literature

identified by several authors. Partridge (2015) called for more research around career reentry, and Spiteri and Xuereb's (2012) findings showed a need for a more comprehensive look at the transition back to employment after motherhood. Orgad (2016) stated that the relationship between motherhood and work and a woman's experience has been largely unexplored. Morgan et al. (2015) conducted a study on midlife mothers and work, and called for more opportunities for women to tell their stories in regard to mothering and work, setting the stage for more qualitative studies. Woolnough and Redshaw (2016) called for studies to understand professional women with children. Crowley and Kolenikov (2014) recommended studies on mothers' perceptions regarding work opportunities, and Sihto (2015) stated that more research was needed on maternal employment and a woman's opportunities and limitations. Brown (2010) suggested that the professional working lives of women who become mothers provide a "relevant and rich area for future and ongoing research" (p. 490).

If a woman plans to opt back in to the workforce after staying at home, she needs to be aware that opting back in may not be as easy as she hopes (Carlson et al., 2011; Crowley & Kolenikov, 2014). According to Heilman and Okimoto (2008), "Motherhood, it seems, can be hazardous indeed for a woman striving to get ahead" (p. 197). Women who have taken time off from work to raise children need to prepare for a significant disadvantage when applying for a job and when negotiating wages (Gough & Noonan, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe how mothers who took time off from their professional work to care for their children perceived and described their lived experiences of returning to work, and to add to the academic literature on motherhood and the workplace by exploring the experiences of women who returned to the workforce after a child-rearing hiatus. This research study helped fill a meaningful gap in the literature capturing and describing in rich detail women's experiences of returning to professional or managerial work after being at home for 2 or more years to raise a family. This study built on previous research findings, advanced awareness, and increased insight in the areas of motherhood and opting back in or returning to work.

The research paradigm was transcendental phenomenology, which calls for an open mind-set when gathering research participants' descriptions of an experience of a phenomenon (Husserl & Welton, 1999; Moustakas, 1994). This research paradigm makes use of the epoché, "a process of setting aside predilections, prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). By employing epoché "the everyday understandings, judgements, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (p. 33).

Moustakas (1994) stated that in "phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem....personal history brings the core of the problem into focus" (p. 104). The purpose of this study was to describe how mothers who

took time off from their professional work to care for their children perceive and describe their lived experiences of returning to work.

Research Question

How do mothers who took time off from their professional work to care for their children perceive and describe their lived experiences of returning to work?

Conceptual Framework

This study included the framework of transcendental phenomenology. The phenomenon that framed this study was a mother's experience of her return to professional work after leaving the workforce to raise her family for a period of 2 or more years. The philosophy of transcendental phenomenology is a "system rooted in subjective openness" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 25). Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenology does not theorize why something is the way it is. "Phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). Phenomenology captures the essence of an experience; it does not assume the experience will fit neatly into a prepared box or follow a predetermined formula. Van Manen (2014) wrote that phenomenology "offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (p. 66). Through a phenomenological lens, I took part in the core processes as described by Moustakas (1994): epoché (bracket personal theories and suppositions), the transcendental-phenomenological reduction (describe experiences through textural description), and the imaginative variation (structural essences/themes of experience).

The gap in the literature was identified as one lacking the voice of women regarding their personal lived experiences when returning to the workforce after staying at home. As described by Moustakas (1994), transcendental means moving “beyond the everyday to the pure ego in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (p. 34). Describing mothers’ experiences in rich detail and an open manner was important to achieve the purpose of this study to build on previous research findings, advance awareness, and increase insight in the areas of motherhood and opting back in or returning to work. Employing transcendental phenomenology as the study’s framework allowed me to ask a research question that would “guide and direct . . . the phenomenological process of seeing, reflecting, and knowing” (Moustakas, p. 59, 1994). A more detailed explanation of the conceptual framework is provided in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was qualitative, and the design was phenomenological. As stated by Vagle (2014), “the primary purpose of phenomenology as a research methodology stemming from its philosophical roots is to study what it is like as we *find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with others . . . and other things*” (p. 20). The question here was how do mothers who took time off from their professional work to care for their children perceive and describe their lived experiences of returning to work? This question was answered through semistructured interviews. The phenomenological interview, as explained by Van Manen (2014), is a tool to glean and examine narratives and stories to construct a deep understanding of a phenomenon. This approach aligned with the problem statement because it integrated all participants’ descriptions of their lived

experience of reentering the workforce after a motherhood hiatus. Data collection included the following:

1. Individual interviews with professional or managerial women who returned to the workforce after leaving paid work to stay at home and raise a child or children for at least 2 years. Interviews were either face-to-face or via phone. I submitted a summary of reported experiences to each participant for final validation.
2. I used snowball sampling through contacts made using flyers in local businesses, social media, and Walden's research participant database.

I organized and analyzed phenomenological data using Moustakas's (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The steps of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method are as follows:

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of each interviewee's experience of the phenomenon.
2. From the verbatim transcript of each interviewee's experience, complete the following steps:
 - a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
 - b. Record all relevant statements.
 - c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
 - d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.

- e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
 - f. Reflect on the interviewee's textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of each interviewee's experience.
 - g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of each interviewee's experience.
3. From the verbatim transcript of the experience of each of the interviewees, complete the above steps, a through g.
 4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all interviewees' experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).
 5. Validate through member checking by "continuous, informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents to the investigator's reconstruction of what he or she has been told" (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007, p. 19).

Definitions

Following are definitions of key concepts and terms specific to this study:

Epoché: Moustakas (1994) defined epoché as "a preparation for deriving new knowledge but also as an experience in itself, a process of setting aside predilections,

prejudices, predispositions, and allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (p. 85).

Structural description: Structural description is an account of how research participants experienced a phenomenon, for example “feelings, sense experiences, and thoughts” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 78).

Textural description: Textual description is an account of what participants experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenology: As described by Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology is less concerned with the researcher’s interpretation of data, but more so with the descriptions provided by coresearchers (participants) of an experienced phenomenon. The researcher brackets out her or his own experiences so as to not color the data (epoché), collects information from research participants who have experienced the phenomenon, and reduces data to significant themes describing an overall essence.

Assumptions

I assumed that participants would speak openly and honestly and be able to recall their experiences with as much fidelity as possible. I assumed I would be able to create a climate in which the participants were comfortable and willing to share their experiences. I assumed I would be able to conduct an interview that allowed for a participant’s full story to be told with rich details that would not be influenced by my biases. I also assumed I would recognize the emerging themes through a thoughtful analysis of the qualitative data.

In addition, I assumed there would be potential for positive social change through information provided by this qualitative study. I assumed the experiences of the women I interviewed would transfer to other cases or experiences. Polit and Beck (2010) stated that transferability in qualitative research is usually considered a collaborative enterprise and the researcher has a duty to provide rich, thick descriptions that “allow readers to make inferences about extrapolating the findings to other settings. The main work of transferability . . . is done by consumers of research” in which the work is to “evaluate the extent to which the findings apply to new situations” (p. 1452). I assumed the study findings would transfer to a wide audience of both women and organizations.

Scope and Delimitations

The study addressed women’s experience returning to the workforce after leaving a career to stay at home and raise a child or children for at least 2 years. This focus was chosen because of an observable gap in the literature. Research showed that women were at a larger disadvantage when trying to reenter the workforce after 2 years as opposed to before 2 years (McIntosh, McQuaid, Munro, & Dabir-Alai, 2012). The experience of a more difficult transition after a longer period of time at home interested me and was needed to fill a gap in the literature.

I specifically focused on women (mothers) in professional or managerial positions who returned to a career after a child-rearing hiatus of at least 2 years. I was interested in the lived experiences of these women. Women who were out of the workforce for less than two years were not included in the study because the motherhood penalty is a more significant detriment for those returning to work at the 2-year mark (McIntosh et al.,

2012). I did not study fathers because the literature shows fathers benefit from a resume gap due to raising children or being considered family men (Aranda & Glick, 2014; Correll et al., 2007; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004).

This research had potential transferability because of thick, rich descriptions of the phenomenon. Other researchers interested in motherhood and return to work will be able to make comparisons or associations to their own interests or experiences. Women, families, and organizations who are interested in the phenomenon of return to work and motherhood may also find this study transferable to their situations or informational needs.

Limitations

The influences I could not control were the limitations of this study. First was the nature of self-reporting. Self-report bias is a factor in organizational behavior because research participants tend to respond in socially acceptable ways and may underreport undesirable behaviors and overreport desirable behaviors (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). My analysis and the chance of my experiences coloring the data were also possible limitations that the process of bracketing was intended to mitigate. Because this study was personally significant to me, I engaged in the epoché process to “be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated” (see Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). Another limitation was my lack of expertise in the qualitative method because this study was my first.

Finding women who returned to managerial or professional work after a 2-year hiatus could have been a limitation because it could have proved time-consuming and might not have produced an ethnically, age, or economically diverse group of professional women. Timely access to an appropriate number of mothers to meet the needs of an appropriate sample size was a likely limitation. However, I persevered in such a way that a sample of 12 women was identified and interviewed within a 2-month period. The time constraints of beginning and completing the study did not constrain data collection and interpretation.

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of women who returned to the workforce after a child-rearing hiatus of 2 or more years. This study contributed to filling a gap in the academic literature by enhancing the understanding of the phenomenon, building on previous research findings, advancing awareness, and increasing insight in the areas of motherhood and returning to work. Academicians, psychologists, organizations, families, and individual women may find the descriptions and insights of this study relevant to their lives. Researching how a woman reenters the workforce promoted relevant, practical, and applicable understandings and ideas that contributed to current motherhood and work-related research.

The study's findings may provide women who are able to stay at home with children while taking a career break with useful information that may help them leave the workforce and facilitate their reentry by understanding the experiences others have had. Organizations, psychologists, career counselors, life coaches, policymakers, and other

researchers may also gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences to inform their own practices, to create more supportive workplaces, to better understand the reentry process, and to design policies and practices to support women in their return to work. Depending on each woman's description of her lived experience, this qualitative study may lead to positive social change in such areas as (a) increased knowledge of hiring processes/decisions regarding mothers returning to the workforce, (b) strategies women employ when reentering the workforce, (c) and new pathways for mothers to pursue when facilitating a return to employment. These factors contribute to such social considerations as a woman's self-worth, a family's economic stability, and the hiring of valuable employees who positively contribute to their organization. As Rucci (2008) pointed out, "the core purpose of I-O [industrial-organizational] psychology is to help people breathe human energy into organizations. And at the heart of that core purpose is the critical, but rather simple notion of the dignity of human beings in the workplace" (p. 23). A working woman who has been out of the workforce for some time deserves to feel dignified. She can breathe energy into an organization. Understanding the experiences of mothers seeking reentry to the workforce is a move toward positive social change.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study addressed the phenomenon of how mothers experienced reentry to the workforce after at least a 2-year gap in employment. How a woman experiences a return to the workforce after a child-rearing hiatus was not adequately studied or reported in the academic literature. Returning to work after a child-rearing hiatus has proven difficult for many women as indicated in the literature on the

motherhood penalty (Carney, 2009; Correll et al., 2007; Sihto, 2015). There were no qualitative studies that addressed the phenomenon of returning to work after leaving a job and staying home to raise a child for at least 2 years. Through the framework of transcendental phenomenology and the methodology of Moustakas, I explored the lived experiences of 12 women who returned to work after a 2-year (or more) hiatus. Most of the studies on the topic of returning to work focused on the motherhood penalty, workplace support systems for mothers, maternity leave offerings, and childcare concerns or options. A gap in the literature was identified as one that lacked the perspectives of women regarding their lived experiences of leaving the workforce and returning after a 2-year (or more) mothering hiatus. In Chapter 2, I review the research on topics closely related to the current study and the major themes in the literature: the motherhood penalty, skills gained as a stay-at-home mother, and return-to-work experiences.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Leaving the workplace to care for a child or children for an extended amount of time affects a woman's chances of not only regaining employment but also of securing an interview (Carney, 2009; Correll et al., 2007; Sihto, 2015). I addressed how mothers who took time off from their professional work to care for their children perceive and describe their lived experiences of returning to work after at least a 2-year break from paid employment. Current literature on the motherhood penalty is plentiful in areas such as negative effects on salary and promotion opportunities, home and workplace support systems, employer family policies, legislation, and childcare options and concerns (Abendroth et al., 2014; Budig & Hodges, 2010; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). Studies suggested that mothers suffer a motherhood penalty when returning to work for several reasons: loss of job experience due to time off, child-rearing responsibilities that interfere with workplace productivity, blatant or unintended acts of discrimination by employers, and/or the choice to work a family-friendly job that results in lower wages (Aranda & Glick, 2014; Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Carney, 2009; Gatrell, 2013; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). However, qualitative studies that addressed the perspectives of mothers returning to work after a prolonged time out of the workforce due to child-rearing, appeared to be nonexistent.

Significant insights and knowledge can be achieved through a qualitative phenomenological study of stay-at-home mothers who returned to the workforce after a child-rearing hiatus. As Carney (2009) pointed out, "the care of children is an issue that needs to be accommodated over a substantial period of time, and it is envisaged that this

need will have a long-term effect both on employment participation and any subsequent disadvantage resulting from that employment participation” (p. 114). In this chapter, I provide the strategies used to search for current literature, the conceptual framework for the study, and a literature review addressing three themes: the motherhood penalty and career gap, skills gained with motherhood, and successful return to work.

Literature Search Strategies

Literature search strategies included texts such as peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles, books, and other relevant research found in the Walden University library databases. The key words used, in different combinations, while researching the topic were *motherhood penalty, motherhood, stay-at-home mom, maternal benefits, working women, working mothers, resume gap, career gap, career break, work re-entry, opt-in, opt-out, career penalty, motherhood skills, motherhood professional, mommy track, child related, employment, strategies, wages, job search, skills, identity, per child wage penalty, women and work, qualitative, lived experience, and women applicants*. The Thoreau multidatabase search engine was accessed frequently, and the terms were used individually and in different combinations.

Within the Thoreau library, the articles retrieved came from many databases including Business Source Complete, Academic Search Complete, psycINFO, and psycARTICLES. Within the Walden databases, I also searched Emerald Management, SAGE, and Dissertations and Theses. Delimiters included peer-reviewed articles and date ranges that were incorporated for all search terms, with different years depending on the search terms to narrow the results to access the most current articles. Additionally, I used

online search engines and consultations with the Walden Library staff during residencies. I also employed Google Scholar and Amazon.com for book titles. There was extremely limited research on mothers' experience of returning to work. I worked through this by searching extensively using the search terms identified above. The lack of literature on this topic was further proof of a gap needing to be filled.

Conceptual Framework

Phenomenology is both a conceptual framework and a research method. This study included the framework of transcendental phenomenology. The phenomenon that framed this study was a mother's experience of returning to professional work after leaving the workforce to raise her family for a period of 2 or more years. The philosophy of transcendental phenomenology is a "system rooted in subjective openness" (Moustakas, p. 25, 1994). Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenology does not theorize why something is the way it is. "Phenomenology is committed to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analyses" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). Phenomenology captures the essence of an experience; it does not assume the experience will fit neatly into a prepared box or follow a predetermined formula. According to van Manen (2014), phenomenology "offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world" (p. 66). Through a phenomenological lens, I took part in the core processes as described by Moustakas (1994): epoché (bracket personal theories and suppositions), the transcendental-phenomenological reduction (describe experiences through textural description), and the imaginative variation (structural essences/themes of experience).

This study benefitted from a transcendental phenomenological framework to fill a gap in the literature. The gap identified was a lack of literature on women's lived experiences returning to the workforce after staying at home. *Transcendental*, as described by Moustakas (1994), means moving "beyond the everyday to the pure ego in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (p. 34). Describing mothers' experiences in a rich, detailed, and open manner was important to achieve the purpose of this study to build on previous research findings, advance awareness, and increase insight in the areas of motherhood and opting back in or returning to work. Employing transcendental phenomenology as the study's framework allowed me to ask a research question that would "guide and direct . . . the phenomenological process of seeing, reflecting, and knowing" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59).

Vagle (2014) explained that in the case of Husserl's phenomenology, theories should not "determine or test the ways in which humans experience the world. Human experience is too complex, too fluid and too everchanging to be captured in, or worse yet, constrained by a theory" (p. 74). According to Van Manen (2014), "Husserl defines phenomenology as a descriptive philosophy of the essences of pure experiences. He aims to capture experience in its primordial origin or essence, without interpreting explaining or theorizing" (p. 89).

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts of Study

The following review of the literature includes three thematic areas: motherhood penalty and the career gap, skills gained with motherhood, and the successful return to work. There was minimal qualitative research in these areas, which was a weakness in the

academic literature. No studies had been done on the experience of a mother leaving the workforce, staying at home for at least 2 years to raise a family, and successfully reentering the workforce. The strength of the literature was the number and depth of studies regarding the penalties women suffer in the workforce once they become mothers. There was a need for qualitative studies to address what women experience in their transition back to the workforce.

Motherhood Penalty and the Career Gap

A mother-to-be is left with few choices: (a) returning to work promptly after the birth of a child and counting on a childcare center or nanny, or (b) trading roles with a spouse, or (c) staying home for a longer period of time and serving as the primary caregiver. In the first case, women may be seen as cold or uncaring as they choose to prioritize a career over the responsibility of raising a child. In the second case, role reversal may cause guilt or tension. In the third case, extended time out of the workforce to rear a child may be viewed as a loss in skills (Abendroth et al., 2014).

In Millward's (2006) study, mothers returning to work grappled internally with what they found to be a conflict between being a mother and being a worker. Their rights and needs as a mother conflicted with their ability to maintain an identity as a thriving and successful member of an organization. For professional women who are able to make a transition in their heads (and publicly) from the good mother to the good working mother, they operate from a similar place. The foundation of their new identity is built on three assertions. Mothers will (a) find excellent child care, (b) successfully divide up and monitor everyday tasks and responsibilities with a partner, and (c) experience happiness

while mothering and working (Buzzanell et al., 2005). Corroborating Buzzanell et al.'s (2005) findings, Woolnough and Redshaw (2016) reported that a mother's satisfaction with her return to work depended on a flexible work schedule, a supportive supervisor and colleagues, an involved spouse or partner, and satisfactory childcare.

The transition into motherhood and out of the workforce is likely to bring with it a stigma: the motherhood penalty. This penalty is evident as mothers are attempting to reenter the workforce. The choice to become a stay-at-home mother places a heavy burden on these women's professional lives. The mommy track, the path a woman embarks on when she chooses to focus on her family and child-rearing over a career, is "a heart-wrenching choice for many women, especially for those on a rewarding career path" (Sidle, 2011, p. 77). This loss of career opportunities can stunt a woman's employment potential in the short and long term, creating economic, emotional, and family struggles.

The price (both literal and figurative) of raising children is shouldered disproportionately by women (Aranda & Glick, 2014; Heilman and Okimoto, 2008). The motherhood penalty is frequently discussed within the literature, specifically regarding wage penalties, support systems, employer policies, legislation, and childcare options. For example, it is well documented that a wage penalty exists for working mothers. The motherhood penalty, the mommy track, career breaks, and resume gaps all contribute to a penalty in pay (Aranda & Glick, 2014; Correll et al., 2007; McIntosh et al., 2012).

Researchers have determined working mothers suffer a per-child penalty in earnings (Budig & England, 2001; Correll et al., 2007). Abendroth et al. (2014)

emphasized that the first child is the most damaging to a woman's occupational status and it does not change over time. McIntosh et al. (2012) examined the motherhood penalty literature in a study of nurses and found that "the degree of detrimental impact [to a woman's career] is directly proportional to the age of the child" (p. 361). The data showed that a woman will limit her career growth, earnings, and job prospects if she becomes a mother (Aranda and Glick, 2014; McIntosh et al., 2012).

Glauber (2012) looked at female-dominated careers and found that the motherhood penalty was actually larger than if a woman was working in a gender-neutral career. Glauber found mothers in this situation earned less than other childless women in the organization. Mothers paid a 7% penalty for one or two children and a 15% penalty (in wages) for three or more children. Female-dominated careers are not as mother friendly as other jobs, and a larger penalty is "not offset by measurable compensating differentials" (Glauber, 2012, p. 133). Gafni and Siniver (2015) found that every additional child a woman has has a negative effect on her monthly wage: Each child reduces a woman's wages by 6.6%. However, each child a man has raises his monthly wage by 3.4%, creating a wage gap of 10% (Gafni & Siniver, 2015). Correll et al. (2007) conducted a laboratory experiment and an audit study and found that Black and White mothers (as opposed to fathers) were discriminated against and perceived as less competent and placed much lower on a salary schedule, while men sometimes benefitted from being a parent. Correll et al. found that employers discriminated against mothers but not against fathers. In a world where female workers are already penalized for gender, becoming a mother penalizes them further.

Prioritizing child-rearing over a career creates a gap in a resume that hiring managers may view as a gap in skills and a gap in valid work-related experience. Abendroth et al. (2014) in a motherhood penalty study involving 13 countries found that “mothers’ occupational status seems to suffer because they fall behind in accumulating years of experience due to career interruptions” (p. 1010). In a study on women’s career progression involving 46,565 registered nurses, McIntosh et al. (2012) found that the motherhood penalty was significant due to several factors: the number of dependent children, career breaks, and part-time work. The authors reported that for women who stayed at home for more than 2 years, their careers were “detrimentally restricted” (p. 361). Also, McIntosh et al. (2012) found employers did not recognize new skills gained from child-rearing and employers did assume a loss in human capital. McIntosh et al. also reported that men’s careers were not negatively affected by career breaks.

Aisenbrey et al. (2009) looked at the amount of time mothers were out of the workforce and compared three different countries and the consequences in each (Germany, Sweden, and the United States). The authors found career punishment in all three countries for both long- and short-term leave. The shorter the leave, the less detrimental the effects. In the United States, even short gaps in a woman’s career increased the chances of returning to a job of lower pay or status and decreased a woman’s likelihood to be promoted (Aisenbrey et al., 2009). In a more recent article, Evertsson and Grunow (2012) focused more intensely on women’s work interruptions and their career prospects in Germany (a conservative welfare state regime) and Sweden (a social democratic regime). The authors found that women in Sweden who seek career

advancement needed to limit their parental leave time. Conversely, for German mothers, the authors found that there was not a significant relationship between family leave and upward career mobility; however, there is less occupational mobility in Germany to begin with, and many mothers drop out of the workforce completely, which likely skewed the results.

Taking time off to raise a child compromises a woman's ability to earn current and future pay commiserate with other workers, and it puts her at a disadvantage for career advancement. Wiese and Ritter (2012) caution that mothers who take a longer leave may feel more stressed at work because they will now be trying to catch up with developments in their field, technological skills, general knowledge, etc. This stress may be a factor in decreased job satisfaction. Misra, Budig, and Boeckmann (2011) advise that family leave policies that allow for a longer break from the workforce may prove to be an unsuccessful attempt at gender equality. Organizations may not support and/or employ women who are likely to take advantage of family friendly policies. Organizations don't look for employees who are going to be on leave for extended amounts of time.

Motherhood can cast many different shadows upon a woman's return to work. Hiring decisions and opportunities for promotion are also part of the challenge. Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick (2004) examined women who played both the role of mother and professional. The authors found that when a woman became a mother, she was perceived as less competent; but, she was also perceived as warmer. However, perceived warmth did not benefit mothers in the workplace and a perceived loss of competence damaged their career prospects. Additionally, from an employer's view the working mother, as

compared to a childless working woman, was less likely to be hired, promoted, or educated. On the other hand, in the same study, fathers were perceived as gaining warmth and remaining competent.

Likewise, Heilman and Okimoto (2008) found women with children were perceived as less competent and less likely to be considered for high-level promotions than women without children or male applicants. And, the authors established only women with children were discriminated against when looking to advance in their profession. Correll et al. (2007) also reported that those screening applicants rated women with children as less competent and less committed to work than women who were not mothers. Mothers in this study too were discriminated against when evaluators were making hiring and payroll decisions. Correll et al. (2007) observed potential employers called back female applicants who were mothers only about half as often as women who were not. The authors also confirmed “parental status disadvantaged only female applicants” and that there is “strong evidence of discrimination” against women with children (Correll et al., 2007, p. 1335). Mothers required a substantially greater score on a management exam than did childless women before employers would consider a mother hireable.

A perceived reduction in human capital (Human Capital Theory, HCT) is a major player in the discrimination of working or work-seeking mothers. Sihto’s (2015) study of middle-class mothers returning to work revealed that the timing of a mothers’ return to work vastly depended on the job market. These interviewees shared that returning to work after caring for children was a difficult and time-consuming process in which

several women ended up taking a position that did not match their formal education or they found a way to employ themselves as entrepreneurs. Lovejoy and Stone (2012) report women are worried about such issues as ageism, stigma, skill depreciation, and employability. These concerns weaken their confidence when beginning to make the transition back to the work force.

In an Australian study, Carney (2009) questioned “the extent to which mothers can reach *both* the goals of income and care provision, and the occupations in which both these goals can be achieved through the utilization of employment breaks or part-time employment” (p. 115). Based on study outcomes, Carney declared that “the careers of mothers are at risk while they have the responsibility for young children” (p. 126). An interesting finding from this study was that the higher a mother’s occupational status, prior to an employment break or move to part time status, the more likely she was to move to a lower-status position.

Brown (2010) studied the perception and reality of a woman’s professional advancement options after motherhood. The author found that the qualitative and quantitative data were in stark contrast to each other. More than 60% of women (n = 91) agreed (perceived) in the quantitative portion of the study that their employer supported working mothers and that advancement opportunities were not affected by motherhood; however, in the qualitative portion of the study, the author uncovered a different reality. When asked to elaborate on the two statements, women revealed that they work fewer hours or days, are given lower salary adjustments/increases, and “know” they have pulled

themselves out of the fast track. These women reported being happy that their employer at least tried to be family friendly.

The actual behavior of employers did not match what these working mothers originally reported or perceived. There was a conflict. Employers really weren't supporting working mothers or offering equal advancement opportunities. In Brown's (2010) study, it was concluded that women may have felt supported by their workplace because they were given the option for flexible scheduling, but, upon further examination, these employers had a tendency to not recognize work that was completed away from the workplace; consequently, this showed there is reason to believe a lack of face time equates to a lack of commitment, effort, and/or actual labor.

Gatrell (2007) analyzed part-time employment for career mothers and its effect on the work-life balance. This qualitative study looked at the experiences of mothers who were employed professionals and raising small children. Gatrell found that women who worked part-time while raising small children (as opposed to those who worked full-time) experienced negative short and long term career consequences such as a limiting of their career prospects and difficulties securing promotions. Budig and Hodges (2010) analysis showed motherhood penalties for all mothers, but the authors found the higher the pay, the less the proportionate the penalty. Meaning, mothers who can least afford a penalty are those who are penalized the most (Budig & Hodges, 2010). Additionally, Kricheli-Katz (2012) found higher wage penalties for women when motherhood was perceived as a choice (p. 576).

Skills Gained With Motherhood

As McIntosh (2012) reported, skills gained during a career break due to child rearing are not recognized by employers. Cahusac and Kanji (2014) reported that mothers were not able to use nor were they recognized for their talents or skill sets upon return to work. These women felt marginalized in the workplace. Woolnough and Redshaw (2016) in a study of mothers' career decisions after having children, reported women's careers "often slowed down or even stagnated" (p. 308). But, becoming a mother is an education in itself that can be learned no other way than by becoming a mother and the skills learned with motherhood are more than likely transferable to the workplace. Mothers who stay at home to raise children are learning new skills and strategies that can enhance their working selves.

Actual strategies, measured in a grounded theory study by Currie (2009), used by new mothers to maintain a sense of well-being were (a) obtaining help (mostly from their own mothers and husbands, and some from friends and professionals); (b) being organized, using a routine or flexible schedule, and being self-disciplined; and, (c) taking time for themselves such as exercising or socializing away from the home. These mothers, who had a sense of well-being, discovered they created courage and confidence through the implementation of successful strategies (Currie, 2009). These strategies, when implemented in the workplace, support a more effective employee who is more apt to be able to obtain appropriate support and assistance; be more organized, disciplined, and flexible; and, take time to focus on one's own needs, such as exercise or socialization.

Laney et al. (2014) added to the acquired skills studies by looking at 30 women who work as faculty at a university. The study analyzed identity development through the experience of motherhood. Laney et al. reported these women “*expanded* the self personally, relationally, generationally, and vocationally” (p. 1245). The authors explained that through the experience of motherhood, these women developed “greater capacities within themselves and these capacities were extended to others in relationship and through the women’s careers” (p. 1245). These mothers indicated that becoming a mother positively impacted their careers and especially cultivated their sense of self. Specific references to a new sense of self were defined as being more empathetic, sensitive, compassionate, nurturing, and practical; more emotionally aware, responsible, accepting, understanding, authentic, effective, influential, and playful; less self-centered; better at defining boundaries; and, better at slowing down (Laney et al.). Overall the women touted the benefit of an increased perspective. Employers generally seek all of these characteristics. Through motherhood, these valued qualities are born, manifested, and transferred into all aspects of a woman’s life. Again, motherhood can create a much more effective employee.

Participants in a study of 10 women who became mothers while working in academia all believed there were benefits to both themselves and their children because of their dual role as mother and educator (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009). The authors reported the women believed motherhood provided them a base from which they could effectively prioritize both their home and work lives. One of the women expressed that motherhood also made her “a more interesting person, more well-rounded and content”

(Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009, p. 291). The women in this study felt their ability to be both a mother and an academic was a positive influence for their children, especially their daughters.

Alstveit, Severinsson, and Karlsen (2011) capture one woman's thoughts regarding the benefits of becoming a mother:

I feel I have developed in some way that is hard to express. I have a sense of having grown in some way [...] perhaps I have become more secure. [...] I more readily handle stuff that's unpleasant and difficult, than I did before. [...] I think I dare more than before. [...] I feel more self-confident. [...] There is no recipe for how to be a mother. Perhaps that has made me develop; taking one day at a time, not having control over everything (E). p. 2155

Mothers interviewed in this study similarly described themselves as being more effective and organized at work, having more self-confidence, and more capable in communicating their personal needs (Alstveit et al., 2011).

In a qualitative study Ruderman et al. (2002) gave an account of the benefits women managers believed they received from living multiple roles. A major theme that emerged was that of an increase in interpersonal skills. One woman explained "I think being a mother and having patience and watching someone else grow has made me a better manager. I am better able to be patient with other people and let them grow and develop in a way that is good for them" (Ruderman et al., 2002, p. 374). Other participants reported they were better able to listen to others and facilitate their development because of the experience of becoming a parent. An appreciation of

individual differences, a better understanding of others' needs which led to a stronger sense of staff development needs, the ability to handle multiple tasks (increasing efficiency, focus, proactive planning, and organization), and new broader perspectives that led to a more objective view were also mentioned as benefits of being immersed in multiple roles. These women identified the idea of giving one's child special individualized attention helped them recognize that each employee was an individual and their needs as an individual deserved to be recognized. One woman commented:

My planning skills have improved tenfold since becoming a parent.... It's my ability to anticipate things. I can see people in a meeting scratching their head because they don't know what happened. As a parent you have to sense--I have to be able to know by a cough if my kid is going to be sick. If so, I'd better be thinking about childcare tomorrow morning. That's my life.... That ability--it's like you're like that all the time. There is no time your guard is down. It just flows much easier in work. You read signs much better because of parenting. Ruderman et al., 2002, p. 374

Ruderman et al. (2002) determined "skills learned in one domain act as resources for another" (p. 374). In an article in *The London Times*, the Minister for Women, Baroness Jay, appealed to business leaders to "give a greater recognition to the skills acquired by women when bringing up children, such as facilitation, mediation, budgeting, logistics, people management and conflict resolution" (Frean, 1999). Mothering skills are job place skills.

Many stay-at-home moms are also taking time to become more educated through courses or further training during time at home with children. Attending training courses or enrolling in college courses, to sharpen or acquire new skills, is a tactic mothers may utilize to alleviate the detrimental effects of a resume gap. Engler (2013) studied student mothers and the career effects of investing in higher education while on leave from work to raise children. Engler found an educational investment yielded returns in the short term and that the majority of the women in the study believed the most valuable aspects of earning a degree while on maternity leave was their increased chance of re-entering the workforce and the maintenance of workplace skills. Among the women who found a new job when reentering the workforce, 63% (n=121) were hired into a position that corresponded with their degree (income was correlated with their new qualifications) and 37% did not experience an advantage in their new position (promotion or increased salary as compared to the position held prior to maternity leave). Of this 37%, demotion was not an overall factor, and this might have been attributed to their investment in training. There is a need for social change, the rebranding of motherhood. Those suffering from the motherhood penalty actually benefit from a heightened skill set, expertise, and specialized training.

Successful Return to Work

Herman and Lewis (2012) focused on a group of women who were able to progress in their careers after motherhood, while working part-time (as opposed to their previous full-time positions). One woman believed changing to part-time work helped her career because her colleagues were in awe of how much she was able to do in a few days

a week while also taking care of her children. Her organizational skills and ability to say no and select only essential meetings and projects made her more effective. Her decisions and effectiveness led to offers for promotions. A second woman was also able to progress in her career even though she was working part-time. She believed flexible hours, the availability of technology (teleconferencing and online meetings), and her consistent communication of her dedication to the workplace helped her overcome the motherhood penalty.

A third woman also working part-time hours was promoted after several years to a full-time position because her manager recognized her efficiency as both a mother and an employee, successfully completing her work in a reduced number of days. In all three of these cases, career advancement was due to a company's interventions and encouragement (a reduction in hours and flexible working options) and an individual's ability to organize, make use of technology, work efficiently, and communicate a dedication to the workplace as well as to family. In Gatrell's (2013) study of maternal body work, the author expanded upon this concept by identifying 5 of 27 women who were also able to overcome the motherhood penalty. These women utilized 2 strategies: (a) they became specialists in a field or topic valued by their workplace, and (b) they invited colleagues to work in their homes whilst children were present, essentially redefining the workplace.

Aranda and Glick (2014) presented research that replicated previous motherhood penalty research, proving that in a hiring scenario, women who revealed a devotion to family over a devotion to the workplace were less likely to be hired; however, men who

revealed devotion to family over the workplace were not penalized. Conversely, work devoted mothers were equally as likely as work devoted fathers to be hired. The authors concluded that “working mothers can undercut the motherhood penalty-in hiring and in allocation of valued resources and opportunities-by claiming strong devotion to work” (p. 96). In Aranda and Glick’s study, “. . . expressing work-devotion completely eliminated discrimination against mothers (as compared to fathers) . . .” (p. 97). It seems then that conveying one’s devotion to work over one’s devotion to family is an effective strategy, whether accurate or not, for women to embrace while searching for employment.

Research also shows that women who choose to wait to have children, into their mid-thirties and beyond, do achieve higher earnings than their counterparts who raised children in their 20s and early 30s (Miller, 2011). “The mechanism by which relative career disadvantages for women are transmitted is linked to the complex relationship between dependent children, working hours, career breaks, and motherhood” (McIntosh et al., 2012, p. 347). Overcoming the motherhood penalty is not an easy task. Equal opportunities for women who choose to become stay-at-home mothers and then return to work is a social issue worthy of scholarly attention. Unfortunately, “children have a lasting negative impact across women’s entire career” (McIntosh et al., 2012, p. 360) and “motherhood results in the devaluation of women’s abilities, a denial of opportunity and a penalization in respect to careers” (McIntosh et al., 2012, p. 360). Bringing an end to the motherhood penalty must be determined by widespread social change. But in the meantime, understanding the experience of mothers returning to work is of the utmost importance.

Benard and Correll (2010) built on status discrimination research by analyzing how job applicant reviewers responded when mothers proved they were skilled, experienced, and committed employees. An important finding from this study is that female participants (college age) held those applicants that were obviously successful mothers to a higher set of standards than other mothers, single women, and men. These mothers suffered penalties in the areas of hiring, promotion, and salary. After controlling for other factors the authors found that this penalty experienced by successful mothers was affected by the reviewers' perceptions that successful mothers were deficient in interpersonal skills. Benard and Correll (2010) provided strong evidence for normative discrimination: female applicant reviewers definitively stereotyped successful mothers. The authors advise that mothers advertising their successes may "backfire" when they are being evaluated by other females. This is very important information for women to consider when they are strategizing their return to the workforce.

Summary

This review of the literature provides an objective exploration and assessment of the current state of the detrimental effects of motherhood on a woman's career progression (the motherhood penalty), skills that are gained with motherhood, and successful reentry to the workforce. The current literature provides a quantitative and qualitative examination of the difficulties women face when they make a decision to return to the workforce after staying at home to raise a family. What is known is that mothers generally face a penalty for becoming stay-at-home mothers and may find it challenging to find a position that is comparable with their training and skills. Scholarly

research in this area focuses on wage penalties, support systems, employer policies, legislation, and childcare options (Aisenbrey, Evertsson, & Grunow, 2009; Correll, Benard, & In, 2007; Engler, 2013; Gatrell, 2007; Gough & Noonan, 2013). What is not captured in the literature is a qualitative understanding of women's experiences when they do return to work.

My research begins to fill the gap. I examined the lived experiences of women who reentered the workforce after leaving a professional career to become a stay-at-home mother for at least 2 years. My research aids an understanding of how mothers who have returned to the workforce experience this phenomenon. To my knowledge, no other studies have specifically explored the lived experiences of stay-at-home mothers who have reentered the workforce, through a phenomenological study. A dissertation (Partridge, 2015) seemingly closely related to this study looked at how women experienced the decision to leave their careers, their experiences of stay-at-home motherhood, and the career reentry process. However, career reentry is only one of nine themes this author touches on, and she focuses on why the women return to work, not the experience of returning to work.

This study addressed a gap in academic literature identified by a number of authors: Partridge (2015) calls for more research around career reentry, and Spiteri and Xuereb's (2012) findings show a need for a more comprehensive look at the transition back to employment after motherhood. Orgad (2016) states that the relationship between motherhood and work and a woman's experience is largely unexplored. Morgan et al. (2015) conducted a study on midlife mothers and work, and the authors call for more

opportunities for women to tell their stories in regards to mothering and work, setting the stage for more qualitative studies. Woolnough and Redshaw (2016) call for future studies to further understand professional women with children. Crowley and Kolenikov (2014) suggest future studies look at mothers' perceptions regarding work opportunities, and in the same vein, Sihto (2015) states that more research is needed on maternal employment and a woman's opportunities and limitations. Brown (2010) suggests that professional women's working lives after becoming a mother is a "relevant and rich area for future and ongoing research" (p. 490).

The gap in the literature represented a lack of rich descriptions of the reentry phenomenon. Academics, psychologists, organizations, families, and individual women could find the descriptions and insights of this phenomenon relevant to their own lives, providing knowledge applicable to their own journey. A phenomenological study, as illustrated in Chapter 3, describing how mothers experience this phenomenon has enhanced our understanding of the return to work and filled a gap in the academic literature.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this study was to describe women's experiences of returning to work after being a stay-at-home mother for 2 or more years. In this phenomenological investigation, I sought to answer the research question of how mothers who took time off from their professional work to care for their children perceive and describe their lived experiences of returning to work. According to Brown (2010), "the decision by upwardly, mobile educated management level women to leave or adjust their work lives following motherhood may perhaps be the most relevant and rich area for future and ongoing research" (p. 490).

Brown (2010) noted that "further research may help employers find solutions for retaining and cultivating strong female talent in the workforce following childbirth and thus fostering a more productive, diverse and positive business environment" (p. 491). McIntosh et al. (2012) also recommended future research in exploring women's personal experiences in relation to factors that hinder or help their career progression. Recapturing this talented workforce is the current problem. Along these lines, current research indicated the development of personal strategies for mothers to negotiate the boundary "between reproduction and organization" and "investigating pragmatic alternatives for preserving mothers' status" (Gatrell, 2013, pp. 640-641). Current studies also showed that women who "take a career break of greater than two years see their careers detrimentally restricted" (McIntosh et al., 2012, p. 361). Mothers who have a career break of 2 or more years seem to have a more difficult time restarting their careers (McIntosh et al., 2012, p. 361). Chapter 3 includes relevant information on the research design,

rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Question

How do mothers who took time off from their professional work to care for their children perceive and describe their lived experiences of returning to work?

Phenomenon to be Studied

The central concepts/phenomenon to be studied were a woman's experience of returning to work after a motherhood hiatus of at least 2 years.

Research Tradition

The research design for this doctoral study was phenomenology.

Rationale

The rationale for employing a phenomenological study was to contribute to current literature on motherhood and return to work, in which there was a gap. Capturing and describing women's voices regarding their experience of returning to work after a motherhood hiatus was an important undertaking. This study provided detailed, rich descriptions of the experiences these women have during the reentry process.

Role of the Researcher

This transcendental phenomenological study included me in collaboration with research participants with whom I did not have any previous personal or professional relationships. My role as researcher included recruiting participants, conducting interviews, transcribing interviews, analyzing data, and reporting findings. My goal was

to conduct each interview with a fresh eye and bias-free approach, recognizing that my personal experience and knowledge could not be completely erased because I have lived an experience similar to my research participants. Bracketing my biases, ideas, knowledge, and experiences out of the study by attending to personal experiences with the phenomenon was a written and recorded process in the form of journaling. The epoché (Husserl's process) did not remove me completely from the study. Moustakas wrote that "the challenge is to silence the directing voices and sounds, internally and externally" (p. 88). Removing myself and my assumptions so I may experience the phenomenon as it is experienced by others was my challenge. I made an honest attempt not to let my experiences influence the study or the reporting of findings.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

After the proposal and IRB approval process were completed, I followed the recommendations of Moustakas (1994) and based participant selection on the following essential criteria for selecting research participants. Each research participant experienced the phenomenon, was extremely interested in understanding the phenomenon, was willing to participate in a lengthy interview, and granted me the right to publish the data in my dissertation and possibly in other publications. I interviewed women who left the workforce in a professional or managerial position to raise a child or children and then reentered the workforce after a period of 2 or more years. I used a purposeful snowball sampling approach through business contacts, social media, and Walden's research participant database. When a researcher utilizes snowball sampling, the researcher

requests referrals from people who may know participants who meet the study's criteria (Patton, 2002).

The sample for the study was planned to range from 5 to 12 participants. The final number of participants interviewed was 12. As pointed out by prominent qualitative methodologists and early career researchers, the answer to the question of how many qualitative interviews is "it depends" (Baker & Edwards, 2012, p. 42). The researcher should be concerned with three specific areas, as advised by Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, and Fontenot (2013): data saturation, time constraints, and sample size from similar studies and designs. Marshall et al. shared general guidelines for applicable sample sizes for phenomenological studies. The suggested ranges are 6-10 interviews. Creswell (2013) stated that in phenomenological studies, the number of participants (sample size) ranges from one to 325. Dukes (1984) recommended a phenomenological sample size of 3-10 subjects. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) recommended 6-12 participants, stating that six interviews may be "sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations" (p. 78), and 12 interviews is sufficient if the goal of a study is to "describe a shared perception, belief, or behavior among a relatively homogeneous group" (p. 76).

I was not looking for quantity but rather quality in a rich, in-depth data set. In response to the question, "How many people should I interview?" Van Manen (2014) believes the answer to this question varies. If a researcher has too many interview transcripts, this might "ironically encourage shallow reflection . . . the general aim should be to gather enough experientially rich accounts that make possible the figuration of

powerful experiential examples or anecdotes that help to make contact with life as it is lived” (p. 353). The number of participants was planned to range from 5 to 12 as this fell within the recommended guidelines for interviewing key informants (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Dukes, 1984; Guest et al., 2006). I reached data saturation and thematic saturation at 12 participants.

Instrumentation

I conducted individual semistructured interviews (Appendix A) with women who met the study’s criteria (professional/managerial women who have returned to the workforce after a child-rearing hiatus of 2 or more years). Follow-up questions were asked for clarification or facilitation of “full disclosures of the co-researcher’s experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 116).

Interview Questions

1. Thinking back to when you decided to leave the workforce and stay at home, what was going through your mind?
2. Tell me about the experience of staying home.
3. Did you think about work or of returning to work?
4. Tell me about your decision to return to work.
5. Talk about returning to work and what the experience was like.
6. Tell me about your experience of home life when you returned to work. What incidents stand out?
7. Tell me about your experience of the workplace when you returned. What incidents stand out?

8. How would you describe your relationships with significant others in your life now that you have returned to work?
9. How would you describe your overall experience of being a working professional and a mother?
10. Have you shared all that is significant about the experience of returning to work?

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

I used a recruitment letter (Appendix B) as a tool to seek out participants for my study. I used my contacts in local businesses, social media, and Walden's research participant database. Each participant was screened once contact was made (Appendix C). After screening, I supplied selected participants with an informed consent form and collected them from each participant. I then conducted interviews with 12 participants. Two were face-to-face and 10 were via cellphone. Each interview was audio recorded in its entirety and transcribed. Interviews lasted 35-60 minutes. I was the sole data collector.

Data Analysis Plan

I organized and analyzed phenomenological data using Moustakas's (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The steps of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method are as follows:

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of each interviewee's experience of the phenomenon.
2. From the verbatim transcript of each interviewee's experience, complete the following steps:

- a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
 - b. Record all relevant statements.
 - c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
 - d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.
 - e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
 - f. Reflect on the interviewee's textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of each interviewee's experience.
 - g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of each interviewee's experience.
3. From the verbatim transcript of the experience of each of the interviewees, complete the above steps, a through g.
 4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all interviewees' experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).
 5. Validate through member checking by "continuous, informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents to the investigator's

reconstruction of what he or she has been told” (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007, p. 19).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Techniques for Establishing Credibility

Credibility is having confidence in the truth of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used member checking to establish the credibility of my findings. Coresearchers had the opportunity to provide feedback on my interpretations and suggest changes or clarify concerns.

Techniques for Establishing Transferability

Transferability means that the findings have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used thick description to ensure external validity. If the participants’ experiences are described in great depth and detail, “one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Techniques for Establishing Dependability

Dependability is being able to show findings are consistent and repeatable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used an inquiry audit during the dissertation process by soliciting feedback from the dissertation committee, a university research reviewer, and the program director.

Techniques for Establishing Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I

used reflexivity, an on-going reflection throughout the process in the form of a personal diary in which I made regular written and recorded entries, focusing on process and thoughts and feelings.

Ethical Procedures and Considerations

The IRB process, as required by Walden University prior to data collection, was completed (IRB approval code 03-08-17-0291488). I did not need agreements to access participants or data other than with each individual coresearcher. I ensured the entire process adhered to the guidelines regarding the treatment of human subjects. I provided support documents such as a recruitment letter (Appendix B), a participant screening instrument (Appendix C), and an informed consent form.

Ethical concerns related to recruitment materials and processes were addressed by an informed consent form that covered identification of the researcher and university, the purpose of the study, explanation of voluntary participation, explanation that the participant may withdraw at any time, the time commitment, a notation of unlikelihood of risk, a guarantee of confidentiality, the offering of a coffee gift card for participation, and contact information for questions or concerns. Participants gave consent via email prior to the beginning of the study, and they were also provided with written summaries for their review and approval.

To ensure data collection met ethical guidelines, access to participant data is limited to me and my doctoral committee. Data is stored on a password protected computer and in a locked filing cabinet. Data will be destroyed 5 years after the study is approved. Research participants were offered a pseudonym for privacy reasons, and the

researcher linked each pseudonym to the research participant's initials. Study participants were informed of confidentiality practices used by me. I also provided participants with the opportunity to review and comment on summaries of their experience.

Summary

I described the lived experiences of a group of women. I described the phenomenon of how a mother, in a professional or managerial position, experiences a return to the workforce after a hiatus of 2 or more years to raise children. The study was based on the lived experiences of 12 women and was qualitative in nature. The data for this study was gathered through semi-structured interviews in 35-60 minute sessions. The criteria for participants was that they were women who worked in a professional or managerial position, left the workforce to raise a family for a period of 2 or more years, and then returned to the workforce. Measures were taken to ensure the study met issues of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I was proactive in making sure there were no ethical issues, and none arose. IRB approval was granted.

Chapter 4 discusses the results of the participant interviews. Chapter 4 covers setting, demographics, data collection and data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, results of patterns/themes, and data that supports the findings.

Chapter 4: Results

As presented in Section 3, this study was designed to address the lived experiences of women returning to work after a child-rearing hiatus. The aim of this study was to identify themes and essences of women's experiences of returning to work after staying at home for at least 2 years. Moustakas's (1994) modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method was used to organize and analyze the data. This chapter contains an explanation of the participants' demographic information, the steps used to collect the data, the data analysis process, the methods used to ensure trustworthiness, and a presentation of the results including significant themes and essences.

Demographics

Table 1 reflects the demographics of the study participants. The women's time out of the workforce ranged from 5 to 20 years. The average number of years at home was 9. The average age the women left the workforce was 30. The average age the women returned to the workforce was 40. The average number of children for each participant was two. All participants were married at the time they left the workforce. Two of the women were divorced at the time they returned to work. Educational levels ranged from vocational training to a PhD. Eight of the women (66%) returned to a completely different position or career field than the one they left. Four of the women (33%) returned to a similar position or career field. Seven of the women (58%) furthered their education or training while staying at home with their child(ren).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Education	Opt Out Profession	Opt In Profession	Years Home	Age Out/In	# of Children
Tami	MA Counseling	HS Teacher	Dean of Students	5	29 / 34	4
Penny	BA Zoology	Forest Service	Librarian	5	32 / 37	2
Molly	Vocational Training	Scheduling Coordinator	Insurance Coordinator	5	29 / 34	1
Audrey	MA Education	MS Teacher	AD/Teacher	5	34 / 39	2
Lola	AA	Administrative Assistant	Administrative Assistant	5	24 / 29	2
Christine	MA Organizational Management	Organizational Consultant	Literacy Specialist	6	35 / 41	3
Jennifer	BA Communications	Golf Course GM	Philanthropic Consultant & Motivational Speaker	8	32 / 40	2
Sherri	On the Job Training	Timber Sales Accountant	Office Manager	9	27 / 36	2
Susan	MA Teaching	Banking Supervisor	Elementary Teacher	13	23 / 36	3
Mary	MA Education and Human Development	Director of Development	Real Estate Agent	14	40 / 54	2
Amy	PhD Health Services	Supervisory Technologist	Clinical Supervisor	16	30 / 46	2
Debbie	BS Health Science	Parent Education Coordinator	Real Estate Agent	20	32 / 52	2

Participant Profiles

The following participant profiles supply the reader with a basic overview of each woman's experience leaving the workforce and her time at home (each participant selected her own pseudonym). These participant profiles were developed from the descriptions and experiences the women shared of what it was like leaving the workforce and becoming a stay-at-home mother. Why or when women return to work begins with why they left the workforce and how they experienced staying at home. The return to work story cannot be told without an understanding of a woman's experiences before she returned to work. Direct quotes enhance each participant's description to provide a better appreciation of each woman's story.

Tami

Tami worked as a high school teacher prior to leaving the workforce at age 29 and she returned full-time to the workforce as a dean of students at age 34. Tami has four children and is married. She earned her Master's in Counseling by attending college part-time while staying at home with her children. At first, Tami and her husband did not plan on her staying home:

It started off as joking like I'm not going back, I'm not going back. Then it was like you've got to go back because we don't have insurance. And then I don't know exactly how it's -- you know, then I started looking at different options. If we purchased insurance and... I mean it can work.

At the time, the decision to stay home was worrisome:

I was super nervous thinking like maybe I would never get another job again. It was super scary to know that I would not be working. So, I was super nervous. I just prayed about it and figured if everything worked out with insurance then everything else would work out.

Tami felt it was the right thing to do to stay home: “Why have kids if I’m going to give them to someone else to watch?”

Penny

Penny worked for the Forest Service prior to leaving the workforce at age 32, and she returned to the workforce as a librarian at age 37. Penny has two children and she is married. Penny planned to stay at home with her children:

I was older and I wanted to -- I wanted to be with the kids, I didn’t want somebody else raising my kids -- our kids. I waited a long time to have children. I wanted to experience raising them and being with them.

At the time, the decision to stay home was easy for Penny: “I didn’t want to miss my kids, how they grew up, they just start growing up so fast. I didn’t want to trade their growing up for my job.” Staying at home proved to be more difficult than Penny had imagined:

I mean it was especially challenging and I -- I just wasn’t -- wasn’t feeling I was a natural. I wanted to do a really good job and there wasn’t, there wasn’t a handbook that told you everything you had to do with every instance.

Molly

Molly worked as a scheduling coordinator and dental assistant prior to leaving the workforce at age 29. She returned full-time to the workforce as an insurance coordinator at age 34. Molly has one child and divorced after returning to work. Prior to leaving the workforce, Molly was trained as a certified dental assistant. While staying at home, she completed medical transcription training online. Leaving work was a very difficult choice for Molly: “I didn’t want to give up my independence and rely on a man and give up a good job. But, I didn’t want to leave my baby with anyone else when she was so little.” She continually thought about returning to work:

Always from day one I was thinking about going back to work. I was worried that I may not be a good mother because I wanted to go back to work and didn’t want to be that Suzie homemaker. I didn’t feel I was very good at being a mom because I couldn’t get her to quit crying and I was depressed. And so, I was always constantly trying to figure out how I was going to get back to work.

Molly shared what her days at home looked like:

We would go to the park, go for walks, go to the library, go shopping, go to the gym - there was a daycare there so she could go to that while I worked out. We would go visit family, that was a big thing.

Audrey

Audrey worked as a middle school math and science teacher prior to leaving the workforce at age 34. She returned full-time to the workforce as an athletic director and middle school math teacher at age 40. Audrey has two children and because of a divorce,

she returned to work earlier than she had planned. Audrey has a Master's Degree in Middle School Education. While staying at home, she completed course work for her K-12 principal certification. Audrey believed her primary role was to raise the children:

The emotional piece is that I felt like I was the best person to take care of them. I wanted to be able to do that; I wanted to be the primary caretaker. The financial piece was that in teaching you don't make enough to cover the cost of child care, so it wasn't worth it to me to pay somebody to watch my kids while I was with other people's kids. That just logically made no sense to me. I mean it would have been equal for equal paying somebody to watch the kids, so that I could go and work enough to pay somebody to watch the kids. So that was the balance, that was the trade off and so my husband took it on, you know, the kid's dad was our primary income earner.

As a stay-at-home mom, Audrey described her days in the following ways:

It was pretty much dictated by their rhythm; it always included breakfast; it always included getting outside so that I could get some exercise, but I would get outside with them. It was bringing them with me for all my errands. It was trying to get into little mommy and me kind of classes. It was hanging out with other moms that had kids about the same age. It was shared caretaking so sometimes I would trade with other moms so that, you know, I could go have an hour planned time. It was all about finding things to do with the kids. I remember heading to town with another mom and our kids so we could do the little French kinder-language classes together and the little gymnastic classes for toddlers, and then

we would also grocery shop together with our babies. We could help each other out; it was that kind of picture back then.

Audrey felt pride as the primary caretaker, but she also acknowledged it wasn't great all the time:

I think, other than moments of feeling like an ass-wiper, you know, like that's all you're doing with your day, I think deep down I felt good about being the one, the primary parent and I knew that I was doing as much as I could do to give my kids a solid early childhood. There's such a small window of opportunity to be able to do that, that time to be with kids is such a gift, even if it doesn't feel that good all of the time.

Lola

Lola worked as an administrative assistant prior to leaving the workforce at age 24, and she returned full-time to the same employer as an administrative assistant at age 29; however, she left that position soon after to become a school secretary to be closer to her boys. Lola has two children and is married. Lola and her husband planned on her staying home, and she was happy to do so:

I was excited. I was excited to be home and I was excited to be an at-home mom.

I knew that it was important to be there for them and I wanted to be a part of everything while they were growing. I wanted to be that person they went to.

At the time, Lola did not worry about her future as a working professional:

You know, I guess when you're young and you're going to be a new mom, that's all you can really think about. So, I didn't – I wasn't thinking about all the other

stuff that would come later, you know, maybe missing work and stuff, but I did have a great job and I loved where I was working, so I knew I was going to miss the people that I was with.

Lola embraced being a stay-at-home mom:

Well, it was wonderful. I loved it. I enjoyed every aspect. I enjoyed making sure everything was perfect. All my drawers were perfect. I loved having everything ready – my dinners were ready. I loved that part. I enjoyed having that time to be with the boys too, to just play games and read and just do mom stuff, I loved it. I loved it.

Lola shared the most difficult part of being a stay-at-home mom was the loss of one income:

The hardest part, of course, is that I gave up a whole income, so financially you just naturally do things differently once you have kids. So, our entertainment was camping and doing a lot of things that didn't cost a lot of money.

Jennifer

Jennifer worked as a general manager for a large golf course prior to leaving the workforce at age 32. She returned full-time to the workforce as a motivational speaker and philanthropy consultant at age 40. Jennifer has two children and is married. Prior to opting out of the workforce, Jennifer earned a Bachelor's Degree in Communications. At first, Jennifer and her husband did not know whether she would stay home full-time:

We were not sure if I was going to stay home full-time or go to work. And it was, "Well let's just see how it goes and I will go back after the baby is here. I'll get

into something.” But my son was born with a major heart defect and we didn’t know that until he was born. So, quickly it was decided for me. I would not be going back to work.

Jennifer spoke of being thankful that the family’s situation allowed for her to stay home full-time:

I felt grateful. For sure I felt grateful because my son required so much medical care that I could actually be the one to not have to try to burn the candles at all ends, and he was so critical for so long. But I was just kind of in a blur. So, I was super grateful to have the opportunity to stay home. Certainly, we had to downsize some of our things. We certainly had to make sure we were going through the bills and make sure we were as simplified as we could possibly be. But time became more of an important factor than stuff and vacations, so that was sort of our shift.

Jennifer spoke of difficulties and feelings that accompanied being a stay-at-home mom:

I felt guilty because I didn’t enjoy [mothering] as much as I thought I should, and I thought, well maybe it’s just because we’re in this medical hell right now that I’m not happy. But, when my second son came along “normal” . . . it’s just hard to be at home full-time. You’re just running around, chasing after them, changing them, and I feel guilty saying it because I felt fortunate to stay home. But there’s a part of me that’s like “I would like to have an adult conversation.” My husband would come home and I’d be wanting to live vicariously through him, asking him annoying questions about his day, and then he’s like, “Could you just cut me

some slack? I just want to relax. I don't want to talk and relive that day." I'm like, "Right." I just had cartoons and Cheerios all day. I need to hear something adult.

Sherri

Sherri worked as a timber sales accountant for the Forest Service prior to opting out of the workforce at age 27. Sherri took a volunteer position on the local school board while she was at home. She returned full-time to the work force at age 36. Sherri works as an office manager, has two children, and is married. Sherri and her husband planned for her to stay home:

I wanted to be the one to be with our children. My sons' childhood was a one-time thru journey. I didn't want to hand it to anybody else. I didn't want to hand those first steps, those first words to anybody else. I wanted to be the one who could be home and experience it and be that model and that mold for them growing up. I thought, if we're going to have kids, I wanted to be the one responsible.

Sherri spoke of making adjustments as a stay at home mom:

I always refer to those years as becoming a mental marshmallow. They were tough. They are really tough mentally because you come from a busy work world. I was an Office Manager and you go to changing diapers and working on, you know, little books. They were fun. But they were also a tough adjustment for me because I just needed to be so busy and so, gosh, a part of the adult world, and you feel like you're just isolated. It's a shift into infancy and those early toddler years.

Sherri talked about how she loved that she was able to be a part of her sons' childhood stories:

As they began schooling, I was still at home. And so, I was always there, the volunteer in their classroom. I went on almost every field trip from Kindergarten to 5th grade. I was the mom who was always available, and so I was thrilled to be able to have that flexibility in my schedule to go on every field trip. I helped in the classroom on a regular basis. So yeah, I definitely filled my days with all of that.

Susan

Susan worked as a bank supervisor in England prior to leaving the work force at age 23. She returned full-time to the work force as an elementary school teacher at age 36. Susan has three children and is married. While at home with her children, Susan earned her Master's Degree in Education. Susan knew she would stay at home to be the primary caretaker:

I just wanted to stay at home and be that mom that raises her kids. I wanted to spend my time with my kids. So, I left work a couple of months before my oldest was born. And I really just wanted to be a mom. I just wanted to take care of them, be able to have that time to eat with them, play with them, take them places, just be the one to raise them. I just wanted to be able to experience my kids as much as I could.

Being at home with her children suited Susan, and she found ways to have adult connections:

I loved being at home with my kids because I read with them. I was able to take them to the park and do things with them on a daily basis. But, there was a little bit of a feeling of isolation, so what I ended up doing was joining a women's group.

Finances were a concern for Susan and her family:

As far as saving money goes...we didn't...we rarely went out to eat. I remember not even having enough to buy a pizza, but I learned to make my own. We didn't have a lot of money so most of our vacations were spent with family. We got a camper for our truck and ended up doing a lot of vacations where we were camping with friends. We didn't go on skiing vacations, you know. We didn't do any of that stuff because we couldn't afford it. We were more down-to-earth.

Mary

Mary worked as the director of development for a rapidly growing business prior to leaving the work force at age 40. She returned full-time to the work force as a real estate agent at the age of 54. Mary has two children and is married. Prior to opting out of the work force, Mary earned a Master's Degree in Education and Human Development.

At first, Mary and her husband did not plan for her to stay at home for more than a year:

The job was stressful, and I was tired, and I wanted to take a year off initially. It was a big job and it was really stressful. I was suing people. I had planned to take a year off and be home with our two kids. I was definitely going back to work.

That was my plan. I just wanted to take a year off. Like I said, I was tired and sort of worn out. And so, I was excited too. And I didn't have a good daycare

situation, honestly. My son – the daycare that we had my daughter with, was very small and the one that my son was going to go into was large and I wasn't really comfortable with it. So, it kind of made sense to take the year off until he was bigger. I can take a breather. But when I was home, the [company] sold and I lost my job while I was on maternity leave, as did my husband. So, I didn't have a choice to go back . . . My husband and I made a conscious decision, as a couple, for me to stay at home. I actually had been offered a job at the university and we just couldn't make it happen. I couldn't start a new job with young kids who might be sick. I had to pass up [the university job] because it's just really hard to do when you're the only person around. We didn't want our kids to be raised by nannies. So, it was a couple's decision. We just bit the bullet financially so I could be at home with the kids.

Mary enjoyed her time at home:

I thought it was great. I stayed home with the baby and I really, really enjoyed it. I only had a 3-month maternity leave with my first kid and it was great, actually. I never thought I would be a stay-at-home mom. Like I said initially, it was supposed to be a year. But I was pretty psyched about it. I was glad to be doing it. I didn't fight it. I saw a lot of women who fought it and then I just never did. I've tried to be present. I think it made me a happier mother, honestly. I mean, I had never ever been one of those women who thought I would -- just couldn't stay at home -- and then I wanted to be home with my kids. I was surprised how much I liked it and how much my kids liked it.

Mary created a life around her children:

I stayed at home for 14 years because my husband travelled a lot. He was gone mostly during the week and my kids were small and we needed backup. We needed someone to be there if the kids were sick, and then there was all the shuffling around. So, I would drop the kids off, go to exercise every single day. I was religious about it. Exercise was really important. I would have meetings. I was head of – both my kids went to Montessori – and I was head of the parent group at the Montessori which really had a fundraising focus – I did events. I was also president of the middle school PAC advisory council. I did feel like I had this sort of excess professional capacity and I needed to use it somewhere. I knew I could be useful. And so that's what I did. I felt obliged since I had the free time to volunteer in that way, to help raise money for public and private schools.

Amy

Amy worked as a supervisory technologist in a genetic testing lab prior to leaving the work force at age 30. She returned full-time to the work force as a clinical supervisor at the age of 46. Amy has two children and is married. Prior to opting out of the work force, Amy earned a Master's Degree while staying at home and attending school part-time and then she continued her education while at home and she has earned a PhD in Health Services. Amy discussed how she came to be a stay-at-home mom:

I knew that I wanted to stay home because it's always what I wanted to do. My mom stayed home. My sister was nine years older than me and she had three great kids and she stayed home, so it was something that I always knew I wanted to do.

However, I didn't realize I was going to have the job of a lifetime. So, making that decision, I thought, was going to be very easy and it ended up being a lot harder than I thought it was going to be . . . I was working for a university, and they had a "we will keep your exact job for six months" policy. After I had the baby, it was like, "Okay, I have six months to decide." You have this decision and you have no idea what to do. And there was knowing that I could go to work, which was something that I was really good at, and I'm getting paid for. I think I cried for the first six months of my son's life. Like every day. Like, what am I going to do? Because before I had the baby, I knew I was going to stay home and then after I had him, knowing what I had to give up was really a struggle . . . So basically, at six months to the day, I walked in with my letter of resignation. I sat down with my boss in absolute tears and said, "I feel like someone's cutting off my arms—and my legs. I'm giving this up, and I know it is a tremendous opportunity."

Amy's experience of staying at home was challenging at times:

It's not like I was waking every morning going, "Yahoo! I'm so happy I quit and I'm staying home!" The job of raising kids was my job. There was no, "Wow, it's 5 o'clock. Isn't this nice? I can dump this pack." There's no, "Oh gosh, it's so great. It's Friday." Or, even vacations. You're taking vacations and you're hauling strollers and Pack 'n Plays and all kinds of stuff. It's more work. It's not vacation. I didn't have help. I did it on my own. My kids really didn't go to daycare . . . Being a full-time mom is not an easy thing. It's really a lot harder

than going to work and all my peers were people who continued to go to work. They would say, “I don’t know how you do it” and they would get really happy on Sundays because they knew they were going into work on Monday. Those kinds of messages made me feel like, “Oh my gosh, what have I done?” And I remember trying to join some moms’ groups and stuff and I just didn’t feel a connection with the other mothers and I think that that was something that was an education-experience divide. They were all really nice people, but they didn’t really have anything to talk about and they really weren’t motivated for the future. For me, being with my kids, I knew was a temporary moment in time and then at some point, I would get back to my stuff.

Amy also discussed the changes in her behavior towards finances:

When you’re not making money, it’s like, “Okay, so, do I just want to go out and get a Starbucks coffee? No. I can make one at home.” I don’t know. Everything is—you know, we would go to the movies and we would bring our own popcorn and that was a treat. And we would get videos at the library because they were free and not go to Blockbuster. It wasn’t like I didn’t have money, but I was always conscious of it because I wasn’t working. You’re home and the world doesn’t look at you like you’re working.

Debbie

Debbie worked as a parent education coordinator prior to leaving the work force at age 32. She returned full-time to the work force as a real estate agent at age 52. Debbie has two children and is married. She earned her Bachelor’s Degree in Health Sciences

prior to opting out of the work force. Debbie did not plan on staying home, but a new supervisor changed Debbie's plans:

She basically said, "Don't bring the baby anymore". You can't come to work if you're going to bring her with you. So, I quit. I felt like it was the right choice to make for me and for my family. But, I was bummed about missing out on working. I did enjoy working. I felt like my work was a good fit. It was fulfilling for me. And, staying home is very isolating. It was difficult to make that transition.

Debbie explained some of the difficult feelings that came with staying home:

I would wake up every morning and think, "Now what do I do?" It was very obvious to me that I was missing out on something. What I was gaining was greater, but I was definitely missing out on something that was great too—the opportunity to develop a career and have personal fulfillment doing that. And we gave up a lot of money and income because I didn't work . . . It came from my mom -- that feminist era of "we're trying to create something for women outside of the home." And then I end up being this stay-at-home mom. I received messages when I was growing up about women making their own money -- and then you're in a situation, and you aren't earning money, you feel very out of control. I mean it's very much like you don't have a right to exert any control. So that was very hard for me. I would say that was the hardest part. Not making money . . . At the end of a week of working you get a paycheck, whether you did a crappy job or not, you get a paycheck. At the end of the week of work at home,

nobody even notices if you did something extra that week. It's just a part of what happens every day. You just look forward to that validation of "you did a good job." I missed that validation.

Debbie enjoyed being available for her family and for volunteer opportunities:

I liked the availability that I had as a mom staying home. If I was washing dishes and my daughter came up and said, "Mom, can you read me this book?" I could stop what I was doing and sit down and read her a book. So, just being available all the time was such a positive for my family because my husband was gone a lot . . . I did a lot of work on different committees and volunteering at church. I volunteered at the schools all the time. I was always the room mom. I was on a PTA at my kids' school. At any point in time, 80 to 120 women were actively involved and they were -- all these moms -- I used to call them professional mommies. They were doctors, lawyers, accountants. I mean you name it. These people were highly trained, very well-educated women who decided to stay at home with their kids and brought that skill set home with them. And by God, we had the most professionally run PTA you've ever seen in your life.

Christine

Christine worked as an organizational consultant prior to leaving the work force at age 35. She returned to the work force part-time in advertising sales at age 41, but at age 43 she left that job and began a family friendly job working as a literacy specialist.

Christine has three children and is married. She earned her Master's Degree in

Organizational Management prior to opting out of the work force. Christine returned after short maternity leaves previously. With her third, she changed plans:

I had a really, really hard time reconciling my love for the job -- which I loved -- and my wanting to be with my children in a way that I was fully present with them. I just constantly felt like I had one foot in the boat and one foot on the dock. I was not able to give my full attention to either entity. Transitioning back home and being with the kids when I would travel was just really hard for me, and I loved my work, but I decided I really loved being home a lot more. That became really clear to me . . . The tipping point came with the third one, you know it just became unmanageable, and I just wanted to be around my kids. I really wanted to be with them. I think I was getting better at it. Also, my youngest was going to Kindergarten. I could see that letting go process. They go to school and you're not the only influence. School takes on a primary role teaching these children, so that made me realize I would have more time with my youngest, and I really wanted to enjoy that time, and my middle child really needed me. It was a hard transition for him when my youngest was born. Also, my husband was working a lot of hours, so there were the physical logistics that were challenging.

Home life for Christine was a big change:

I was big into doing everything on a budget because my income was cut. I took advantage of the library programs and the Life Science Center. I would meet up with other moms, then we would go to every park that was around here, any farm program, you know every day was something. We always tried to do something.

Or, we would stay home and bake cookies. I had drawers and drawers of arts and crafts things. We would paint and make our own Play-Doh. We would read and watch TV shows together sometimes. But, there were definitely days when I missed being around adults. Having adult conversations. I did miss my work, there's no doubt. The first year definitely was a transitional year.

Christine reflected on giving up her career and the trajectory she was on:

It was hard to give up the career I had planned for and worked really hard for. It's still hard. It's still so hard for me; I never worked in consulting after leaving. It was definitely a sacrifice. I'm not saying it wasn't worth it, but I definitely miss that work. It definitely was a hard thing to deal with. Like you went back for your Master's Degree and went at night or you were working full-time, and you went without things and you also worked really hard on just getting into consulting and doing this kind of work and you're respected by your peers and the colleagues you were working with and, you know, that's hard to walk away from . . . You know there are definitely moments of, I would say regret, sadness? I don't know what the emotion is, but maybe it is longing, maybe because I did have friends who stayed and their careers really took off. But, I also knew in my heart, I could never be like that. That pathway was a fantasy. I was never going to do that. It wasn't going to be me.

In exploring this phenomenon, careful thought was put into the exploration of each participant's experience of leaving the workforce and their time at home to lay the foundation for extrapolating a description of their experiences and capturing the essence

of the return to work phenomenon. The following two sections will describe the process used to collect and analyze the phenomenological data.

Data Collection

I created a recruitment flyer (Appendix B) and emailed it to all my contacts, asking each to pass it on or post it via their social networking and media sites. I received approval to post the study in Walden's participant database. I printed and laminated flyers and delivered them to local business offices and day care centers and handed them out as opportunities arose.

Twelve women who returned to work after a child rearing hiatus of many years engaged in single, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Appendix A) which allowed for saturation. After initial, brief phone calls or email correspondence, participants were screened (Appendix C) and subsequently agreed to the Informed Consent Form, IRB approval #03-08-17-0291488. I conducted 10 interviews via cellphone (as was the preference of these participants) and conducted two interviews face-to-face. The purpose of the research was discussed as was my sincere interest in their stories.

Epoché was employed to ensure any of my "prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85) were set aside. I bracketed the phenomenon as described by Moustakas in which "the world is placed out of action, while remaining bracketed" (p. 85). Each interview was approached openly. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 to 60 minutes. I recorded all interviews using a digital audio recorder. All participants completed the interviews. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Thank you cards were mailed to participants along with a \$25.00 coffee-house

gift card. Each participant was sent a summary of her interview and offered a one week review period in which she could edit, change, delete, or add to their interview summary.

Comments from these summaries were all positive in nature:

I enjoyed doing the interview and reading your summary. It gave me an opportunity to reflect on my decisions and how they affected my life. Reflection and introspection can be a good thing. Thank you! It's great! You have simply captured verbal conversation in writing!

Data Analysis

I organized and analyzed phenomenological data using Moustakas's (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. The steps of Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method are as follows:

1. Using a phenomenological approach, obtain a full description of each interviewee's experience of the phenomenon.
2. From the verbatim transcript of each interviewee's experience, complete the following steps:
 - a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
 - b. Record all relevant statements.
 - c. List each nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statement. These are the invariant horizons or meaning units of the experience.
 - d. Relate and cluster the invariant meaning units into themes.

- e. Synthesize the invariant meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience. Include verbatim examples.
 - f. Reflect on the interviewee's textural description. Through imaginative variation, construct a description of the structures of each interviewee's experience.
 - g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of each interviewee's experience.
3. From the verbatim transcript of the experience of each of the interviewees, complete the above steps, a through g.
 4. From the individual textural-structural descriptions of all interviewees' experiences, construct a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description of the experience representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).
 5. Validate through member checking by "continuous, informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents to the investigator's reconstruction of what he or she has been told" (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007, p. 19).

Data analysis using Moustakas (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (p. 121) as described above began with epoché in which I did my best to eliminate all preconceptions of the experience. Following epoché I utilized bracketing. I bracketed "out the world and presuppositions to identify the data in pure form,

uncontaminated by extraneous intrusions” (Patton, 2015, p. 575). The data was then horizontalized. In horizontalizing, every statement relevant to the phenomenon and the research question were viewed as having equal weight. These invariant meaning units were recorded and repetitive statements were deleted. Moustakas described horizontalizing as follows:

Each horizon as it comes into our conscious experience is the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character. We consider each of the horizons and the textural qualities that enable us to understand an experience. When we horizontalize, each phenomenon has equal value as we seek to disclose its nature and essence. (p. 95)

After multiple listening and reading sessions, I considered each coresearcher’s statements and their significance to the phenomenon being studied. Next, I created a list of invariant meaning units for each participant. The meaning units were organized into three time periods: deciding to leave work, staying at home, and returning to work. Within each time period thematic clusters were created. The time periods of deciding to leave work and staying at home were used to create a profile of each participant in order to lay the foundation for the return to work phenomenon, the focus of this study. The third time period, returning to work, was the focus of the study’s results. These invariant meaning units from the return to work time period were then clustered to form themes.

The invariant meaning units and themes were synthesized into a “description of the textures of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122). This description is known as the noema or the “what” of the experience. The researcher texturally describes the

phenomenon from many “sides, angles, and views, until a sense of fulfillment is reached” (p. 78). From this textural description, using imaginative variation, the researcher constructed a structural description. This description is known as the noesis or the “how” of the experience.

The noesis refers to the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging—all of which are embedded with meanings that are concealed and hidden from consciousness. The meanings must be recognized and drawn out.

(Moustakas, 1994, p. 69)

According to Moustakas,

The challenge in this process of looking and reflecting, looking and reflecting again, is to obtain true, accurate, and complete descriptions, both in the preliminary phases of viewing something, of letting it linger before one, and in the noetic phases of reflecting on the experience, to discover its hidden meanings.

(p. 70)

Moustakas also noted that

The relationship of texture and structure is not that of object and subject or concrete and abstract but of the appearance and the hidden coming together to create a fullness in understanding the essences of a phenomenon or experience. (p.

79)

I employed imaginative variation to create a textural and structural synthesis.

From this inductive process, I extrapolated six overarching themes with subthemes. The essence of this phenomenon is revealed through these themes and subthemes in the

results section. The summary is the succinct essence of the experience captured in narrative form.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Techniques for Establishing Credibility

Credibility is having confidence in the truth of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used member checking to establish the credibility of my findings. Coresearchers had the opportunity to provide feedback on my interpretations and suggest changes or clarify concerns.

Techniques for Establishing Transferability

Transferability means that the findings have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used thick description to ensure external validity. If the participants' experiences are described in great depth and detail, "one can begin to evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Techniques for Establishing Dependability

Dependability is being able to show findings are consistent and repeatable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used an inquiry audit during the dissertation process by soliciting feedback from the dissertation committee, a university research reviewer, and the program director.

Techniques for Establishing Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I

used reflexivity, an on-going reflection throughout the process in the form of a personal diary in which I made regular written and recorded entries, focusing on process and thoughts and feelings.

Ethical Procedures and Considerations

The IRB process, as required by Walden University prior to data collection, was completed (IRB approval code 03-08-17-0291488). I did not need agreements to access participants or data other than with each individual coresearcher. I ensured the entire process adhered to the guidelines regarding the treatment of human subjects. I provided support documents such as a recruitment letter (Appendix B), a participant screening instrument (Appendix C), and an informed consent form.

Ethical concerns related to recruitment materials and processes were addressed by an informed consent form that covered identification of the researcher and university, the purpose of the study, explanation of voluntary participation, explanation that the participant may withdraw at any time, the time commitment, a notation of unlikelihood of risk, a guarantee of confidentiality, the offering of a coffee gift card for participation, and contact information for questions or concerns. Participants gave consent via email prior to the beginning of the study, and they were also provided with written summaries for their review and approval.

To ensure data collection met ethical guidelines, access to participant data is limited to me and my doctoral committee. Data is stored on a password protected computer and in a locked filing cabinet. Data will be destroyed five years after the study is approved. Research participants were offered a pseudonym for privacy reasons, and the

researcher linked each pseudonym to the research participant's initials. Study participants were informed of confidentiality practices. I provided participants with the opportunity to review and comment on summaries of their experience. Participants were also offered an electronic copy of the completed dissertation.

Results

This research describes the experience of returning to work for women after a child-rearing hiatus. The women stayed at home for a range of 5 to 20 years. Although their experiences are individually distinctive and happen at diverse points in their lives, the essence of the experience as lived by all the women was captured through six themes and subthemes (Table 2). Every story was told through the six themes. Subthemes breakdown the different ways the overarching theme was experienced. The results section introduces each of these themes. Each theme is elucidated through its subthemes, supported by participant statements.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Theme (Total unique participants n = 12)	Subthemes
1. Deciding to Return (12)	They don't need me Show me the money Saying goodbye to Barney and ballet Super mom
2. Changing Career Path (12)	That ship has sailed Parlaying of experiences So I can come and go It just happened
3. Changes in the Workplace (12)	Everything is different The school of motherhood Meeting the millennials and everybody else The flexible schedule
4. Feelings Upon Return (12)	I sat in a cubicle and loved it The stress
5. Changes at Home (12)	The juggle and the adjustment Super man? My mom isn't just a mom Their life
6. Reflections (12)	I wouldn't trade it for anything

Theme 1: Deciding to Return

As the coresearchers discussed the experience of the phenomenon, each had a number of reasons for returning to work. The women described planned, unplanned, and forced returns to work. All the women believed their children were old enough for their mothers to return to work. After being home for five or more years, the women's children were entering preschool up to graduating from high school. The time one is "needed" at

home was different for each woman. The women believed their children would not suffer if they returned to work at the point they did.

Finances were also a major factor for returning to work, either due to divorce, barely making it every month, or just wanting a slush fund. The women felt a need to make money as it signifies power and worth in the household, to them, their husbands, and their children. All of the women missed working and using their brains, and they looked forward to returning to the workforce as a point of personal fulfillment. Whether it was 5 or 20 years, each woman needed something for herself outside of the home. To be fulfilled she needed to be doing something more. Additionally, it was important for the women to be role models for their children and show them that mommy is and can be a professional too. There was a need to confirm (for herself, her family, and the world) that a woman can do both, be a mom and a professional. This need to prove oneself was fulfilled through returning to work after doing the best she could at home during the time she was needed most. Following are examples of the coresearcher statements, organized by subtheme, only edited for fillers and understanding.

Theme 1.1: They don't need me. Coresearchers explained that upon their return to work they did not feel as needed at home. Their children were school age, out of the house for a good part of the day, and the women felt they needed something for themselves outside of the home.

- “I was ready. I was excited. It was mainly because my husband’s job had settled down. My son had activities until 6 o’clock every evening. So, I just wasn’t as needed. My days of caregiving were ending.”

- “I’m glad the way it worked out for me. I’m glad I was home when my kids actually needed me. And I’m glad I’m not there when they don’t.”
- “They were old enough for me to work. You have responsibilities at work which is why I waited. I didn’t want to give my work less than what they would expect, less than what I was being paid for.”
- “When [. . .] hit first grade and it was all day, I think I felt very pressured. You know, what are you doing? What is the plan here? So, I said I would go back to work.”
- “I think when he actually started kindergarten, that’s when I thought, I need to do something. I’m not going to spend the rest of my life at home.”

Theme 1.2: Show me the money. The coresearchers needed and wanted to return to work to start making money again. Supporting the family, gaining independence, and feeling like a contributor all were reasons for seeking a paying job.

- “Your expenses go up so much more with a child than you’ll ever dream they will.”
- “We needed the money.”
- “My husband got sick and was forced into retirement. So, I needed to work financially, but I really wanted to work.”
- “He was excited for me to go back to work, just financially it was going to be easier. I was ready to start doing something again, but it was mostly financial. We were tired of struggling every month.”

- “I always felt like I should be doing my share in terms of either getting insurance or bringing money in to pay for the bills other than just sitting at home waiting. I needed more extensive self-independence and not to rely on someone to give me money.”
- “Everyone was sort of ready for me to make some money.”
- “None of it really went as planned, but that’s how I ended up doing it. I got a divorce and I needed to go back to work.”
- “I felt a huge responsibility to make money and contribute to the family.”
- “For a really long time I really was happy. I arrived at a place where I was good being home, like I’m good doing this. I really like it. I was very, very busy. I was doing a lot of volunteer work. I felt very fulfilled. I had gotten to the place where work wasn’t the only way to fulfill that kind of need that I have. I was doing other things in my life with my kids and with my volunteer work that made for a rewarding, fulfilling, busy life. I don’t know if I would have gone back to work when I did if there wasn’t the financial pressure.”

Theme 1.3: Saying goodbye to Barney and ballet. These moms were ready to say goodbye to staying at home and to start using their brains for professional reasons again.

- “Once the kids start going to school, once you start thinking what’s your purpose, you have been all wrapped up in them and then pretty soon they are back in school, and then you are like, what do I do now? I wanted to get back at something and use my brain again.”

- “I was looking forward to dressing nicely and working all day and being around professionals. It was all about networking and I really had to push myself. And I was ready for that. I was ready to push myself.”
- “I was ready to use my brain.”
- “I said, ‘I’m going back to work.’ I just told him. I said, ‘I can’t do it anymore; I don’t want to be stuck at home all the time. I’ve got to find a job.’”
- “I was missing, certainly number one, the adult interaction. I was missing the intellectual stimulation of a job, certainly missing the money. Missing adult interaction is certainly something that gets to you after a while. And the fact that [the kids] drain the life out of you.”
- “I thought it would be good for everybody, good for me, good for the kids, good for my husband, I just – because staying at home did not really suit me – not making my own money. I was used to making my own money and I guess it was hard for me to be fulfilled just staying home. I wasn’t unhappy, but I wasn’t as happy as I could have been.”
- “I know I needed to do something. I was looking for something. Something to keep my brain occupied other than Barney and ballet. I didn’t like that I just became an at-home-mom. I was just – make the dinner and lunch and breakfast, wash the clothes. There wasn’t a lot of interaction and stimulation for me throughout the day.”

- “There was nothing that I was doing that wasn’t around my kids. And I just felt like –I just wasn’t getting a whole lot – I wasn’t getting what I needed out of [staying at home].”

Theme 1.4: Super mom. The coresearchers wanted their children to see them as successful women in the workforce and not just as a mom at home. Communicating to one’s children, through action, that a woman can do it all was important for every coresearcher.

- “They gained a different perspective of me as a working mommy.”
- “My kids were getting older and they were going to see me as a model.”
- “It has been very good for them to see me go to work. I mean I will tell you one of things about staying at home was my kids made judgements about me. I was just a stay-at-home mom. There is another part to me. I’m successful. I can do all that. It’s been a real positive for them to see.”
- “I don’t think my son sees it yet, but I want him to know I’m Super Mom. I can take care of everyone and work and do it all and still make him feel like he is number one.”
- “One of those things about those traditional roles that mom stays home and dad does the work is that your kids start to see you in a very limited perspective. So, I wanted them to see me do something different and see me be successful and see me be able to take care of them and work.”
- “You don’t want your kids thinking you’re just a mom. And I don’t mean to insult moms, but that’s the way I saw it.”

- “My daughter thinks that she was raised really great, and I was a super mom. It just blows me away really. I did a lot wrong. But she thinks I was a super mom, and I took all this time off, and I went back to work and made money, and I think she is going to follow in my footsteps. It’s horrifying. But, I’m glad at least she has positive memories.”

Theme 2: Changing Career Path

All twelve women returned to different positions than those they left. Seven of the twelve entered completely new, unrelated careers. Five of the women returned to the same field as the one they opted out of, but in a different position. Three of the women increased their salaries upon re-entry (two had furthered their education, one completely reinvented herself and started her own business). Five of the women took significant losses in salary and four reentered close to or on par with their leaving salaries. For most of the women, change in career was a process that depended on opportunity, training, experience, skills, and the ability to balance work and family life as priorities had changed. Climbing the career ladder was no longer the focus.

The women took advantage of opportunities that arose or sought them out to connect to the world they were interested in, mainly their child’s school. Seven of the 12 women secured positions that were directly related to their child’s schooling, either currently or as the child grew older. They were in the vicinity of their children while at work. Availability became the most important factor in their return to work. Only one of the women described having a difficult time finding work. For the other 11 women, they either fell into the job unexpectedly or were promptly hired as soon as they started their

search. However, starting their search and determining a new direction or poking around in their old field was a challenge that didn't have an easy answer. It was obvious that the old job was either not an option or it was not going to work with the new life. The loss of a pathway was a reoccurring theme. Many made a point to communicate that they were not entering in to a dream profession. It was just a profession that worked for their current reality.

Theme 2.1: That ship has sailed. Feeling lost and without a path, the participants had to reinvent themselves. The reality that their previous jobs were not going to work set these women on a new course.

- “I felt very lost and not able to really find a new direction or figure out where I was supposed to go back in if I wanted to go to work. I think that’s a big deal – if you start a career in your 20s and you move forward in this path – there’s a path. But, when you leave your job and stay home, you abandon the path. So, then you decide to jump back in . . . you don’t even know where the path is anymore. You’re like, I don’t even know what to do.”
- “I thought in my mind “okay, I can get back to [my old job]” and you kind of hold onto that for a bit. It was a hard transition in the beginning because you’re just giving up some of your independence, your freedom, the travel, stimulating conversation and thinking. Yet, as time goes on, you recognize the ship is sailing further and further out to the ocean and you can’t just jump on. You’re on the dock and that leap is way too far for you to make the ferry. You’re not going to get on.”

- “I dropped out of a professional role and when you step across that line, you don’t get the same opportunities. I did notice that. I was never going to get as good a job as I had before. I just wasn’t.”
- “I had been out of the workforce so long that I really felt like a dinosaur at that point, trying to get back in. It was hard to get back in. When you’ve not managed for eight years and you’re going back in, you’re not going to be the top choice.”
- “I didn’t want to go back to my old job because then there would be required hours that would not be conducive to anything. I couldn’t do that with a family. Because you have to be on the property and they’re open 7 days a week and the nighttime events and all the other stuff, I just knew I couldn’t do that with the family.”

Theme 2.2: Parlaying of experiences. Each woman had to be introspective and look at the skills they did have, what they had been doing during the years they were at home, who their contacts were, what kind of networking they could access, where they needed to build skills, and their areas of expertise. This introspection helped lay a foundation for new directions.

- “I was approached by members of our local community and they asked me to run for the school board. With that, I thought okay this is my next purpose. I am going to run for the school board and try to make a positive change in my kids’ education. And so, I got it, and I was on the school board for four years.

And I was thinking that being on the school board was another avenue for me to broaden my experiences in the educational world.”

- “I got my real estate license. [The company] has an outstanding training program so that was very attractive to me because at the end of the day, I didn’t know a damn thing about real estate.”
- “I got my real estate license and started doing real estate. It’s very clear that this is a perfect fit for my personality. And, I’m probably better at it today than I would have been if I started it in my 20s.”
- “I always believed I would go back to work and when my son was a newborn, I was elected to the school board. The school board was my way of connecting with the school in order to one day work there and in terms of letting people know who I was and what my educational background was. And so, I got back into the profession via the school board. Being involved with the teachers and the administration was a way of maintaining my connections and it was all about envisioning down the road of going back to work.”
- “I was like, okay, I’ve got to do something. I went back to school to get my Master’s. It was evening classes and I would go when my husband got home. It wasn’t online, but on campus in the evenings.”
- “I went to [business school] and took some Excel and Word classes and a couple others just to get back into the game.”

- “I just looked around and I was like, “Alright so what do I have? What experiences have I had in the last eight years that I could parlay into something?” And one was obviously our healthcare experience and I’ve had a lot of opportunities to speak over those years in lots of different capacities for the hospital, lobbying congress . . . I had been speaking quite a bit actually. I put together a keynote speech that I could take to healthcare conferences. I paid a speech coach to work with me. I found a couple of bureaus to sign me and they started promoting me that way. And we had done a lot of philanthropy work – it’s like, “What have I been doing?” I’ve seen a lot of ways I think these groups can improve and so what if I came alongside some of these that I know need some help, and I could help them in the marketing space, the networking space, and solve that. So, I created a philanthropy consulting business.”

Theme 2.3: So I can come and go. The most important factor for these women in securing a position was workplace flexibility. They needed to be available for their children or be able to leave the workplace in case of emergencies. Prior to opting out, family friendly careers were of the upmost importance.

- “Even though I’m associated with a brokerage I am actually self-employed so I can come and go as I please. It makes the work/family balance much easier. I don’t have a team of people relying on me being in the office at a certain time or to meet a deadline. If I don’t work the only person who suffers is me.”

- “For me it was close to home. I just thought, okay, that will cut out some time away from the kids if I’m just in [town] at the high school. That was a big thing.”
- “The flexible schedule made life easier.”
- “This job satisfied a number of boxes I had to check off. It was local. For the most part I could set my own schedule. I really felt like I had to apply for a job that I wouldn’t be able to devote my all to. I just wasn’t going to do that, so I needed a job that I could do well and feel challenged and stimulated, and I wanted to do. I wasn’t going to do something like “This is now my profession for the rest of my life; I’m going to rise to marketing director, I should be eyeing the prize,” which is the mindset I had before I left: I was definitely going to be a consultant. I’m going to do this. I’ll be on track for junior partner. That progression for me was in my old life. And I did not feel that way. And I also didn’t feel like I had a lot of choices going back. I couldn’t do consulting because it was either all or none. This was enough of a career for me to manage.”
- “I chose real estate because I wanted something flexible, something with sales, so I could make a little more money and be really flexible timewise.”
- “We all just did a gut check—what’s important? And time, spending time together was. It became one of our most important decisions.”
- “The job I have now is very flexible. Sometimes if I need to pick my son up or help him do something, I just do it. It’s pretty unusual that I would not be

there for him. But, he doesn't need me like he used to. So, it's all kind of worked out. It's not my life's dream profession, but at this point in time, after taking so long off, I don't know what else I would do."

Theme 2.4: It just happened. A reoccurring theme centered on job opportunity. Openings or positions presented themselves and the women seized them. No one had a plan and followed that plan. Chance, good timing, and fortuitous events befell each coresearcher.

- "I had an opportunity to reinvent myself. So, it's been easier to embrace this whole thing because, you know, I'm not stuck in those roles that other people thought I should be in or I thought I should be in. There are a lot of life changes and we do what we have to do in the moment and something different came along. I got a little older and things changed."
- "Returning was actually fairly easy because I had experience, at least in the dental field. Since I had work experience in the past, that helped. It was a small town. That made it easier. And while at home I also did a medical transcription program. That helped."
- "I had worked for the US Forest Service. I had a career. I had lifetime reinstatement and I thought maybe, in the future, I will just go ahead and go back to work for them. Then a position at our local elementary school became available. The convenience of working where my kids go to school, less travel time to work, you know, the forest service stations are typically more remote locations."

- “Going back to work wasn’t a choice; it just happened. I didn’t really think about it. The position opened unexpectedly, and I said, ‘Okay, I’ll do it.’”
- “Everything fell into place. The opportunity presented itself. I wasn’t really seeking employment at that time. I just had the opportunity arise.”
- “I didn’t know I was going to end up here, but the person who recruited me was a literacy director where I had been volunteering. I was PTO president; I was just so involved. I worked really closely with a lot of the administrators. I had very good relationships with them. I just loved the school community. I loved how they taught my kids. I was really in support of the curriculum. I think it’s a fabulous school system, you know it’s something I could get behind. It’s something that wasn’t a stretch for me.”
- “I told my husband, ‘I’ll take the first job that’s offered to me.’ So, I got on whatever recruiter, whatever something and I found this job and it was a supervisory job and I got it. And as I told you, it was like the short straw job that nobody wanted so it has ended up being kind of a nightmare.”
- “It was just a good fit. It wasn’t too big—there were a lot of things I liked about it; it just felt like a really good fit. So, I just kind of shopped around and stumbled into it honestly. I didn’t realize until later that my timing was perfect. It’s a little harder than I made it look. Anyway, it was just kind of Venus aligning with Mars really.”
- “And that just came upon me, ‘Alright. If I assess the last 8 years, where do I think I could take something and be able to create something?’ And then you

just go to your contacts and your network and you just see who can lead you to somewhere and every job, looking back, was a building block.”

- “But none of this was preplanned, right? Like these were just opportunities that presented and they worked out.”

Theme 3: Changes in the Workplace

As participants spoke of the changes in the workplace, the overriding theme that emerged consistently was that of changes in technology and feeling as though one had lost ground. There was a general feeling of basically faking competence at the outset of returning. The women felt like their brains were not as good, but they also felt that their hearts were stronger, emotionally. These women understood people better and were more compassionate because of motherhood. Not only were they more compassionate but many important workplace skills were established or strengthened during their time at home. Multitasking and prioritizing topped the list.

Women who returned after longer periods of time felt some effects of ageism and were taken aback with millennials. Returning was an effort in cultural re-acclimation. The initiation period was a time women felt they needed to prove themselves. However, the overriding feeling for these women was that of excitement. The return to work was a return to self. The flexibility their new jobs offered increased their happiness and a loss in salary was not a point of contention. The women valued time over money.

Theme 3.1: Everything is different. Upon return to work, the women experienced what they described as culture shock. Technology had advanced

considerably, and playing catch up was described by all the coresearchers. Pretending to be comfortable or that one knows what they are doing was common among the women.

- “Everything is different, computerized. There’s Google Docs, there’s this and that. Technology had changed dramatically. You’re having to act like you know what you are doing. You have to get brought up to speed. Technology. The lingo, the work phrases had changed. I had to observe and apply.”
- “I didn’t even know what they were talking about when I first got back in—it was just like a culture shock. It’s like you have been asleep for eight years and then you try to wake up and get dropped back into society.”
- “You have all the enthusiasm, but you’ve lost confidence. I stayed at work a lot. I tried to catch up because I had taken so much time off. And I think I did it. I think working a lot did it, but it was not easy.”
- “It was very stressful. I was a little older. It was just really difficult. It was like going from 0 to 60. I wasn’t using my brain like I thought I had been. It was a bit of a shock to my system. But it was good for me. But, it was quite stressful. I didn’t feel as smart as I used to be.”
- “Everything is online. I mean there are millions of programs, millions of marketing tools. I was definitely behind. I’m still behind quite frankly. There’s still just so much to learn. I don’t know if I’ll ever learn it.”
- “I had been home for five years so I was behind. I was just behind. When I started looking for positions, I felt very quickly that I was out of the loop.”

- “I think I pretended a lot. I have a personality that people say, “Well, you always act so confident.” And on the inside, I’m like shaking in my boots going, “What is going on here?” I tried to downplay the fact that I had basically been a stay-at-home mom for 16 years. When asked about my background, I talked about what I had accomplished (not when) and spoke of the consulting/contract/volunteer stuff probably as if it was more than it was.”

Theme 3.2: The school of motherhood. Each coresearcher described new skills they had accrued or bolstered while being a stay-at-home mom. First and foremost was compassion. Raising children taught these women how to prioritize, create sensible budgets, listen attentively, and care deeper for people. They also described strengthening their patience, empathy and communication skills.

- “I had way more compassion for the people around me. Because when I managed—and I managed 120 staff from different departments. It was a very diverse staff and so the moms that would need to run, go get kids from school, or take kids to a dentist’s appointment, or whatever would totally annoy me, because I’m like, “Ah! Stay here and focus and do your job!” And I had that kind of attitude about it. I didn’t have kids, and it was just me and I wasn’t even dating at that time so I was like 100% dedicated to my job. And I just needed everyone else to be the same.”
- “Boy oh boy, once I had a child, and once I had a child with a medical condition, I almost wanted to go back and make amends. I mean, it was so bad. I just feel like going back now. I just have way more compassion. I have

way more compassion for people who do try to balance and make sure they're getting enough time for all the spokes of life and not just work.”

- “Oh, motherhood taught me time management, prioritizing, budgeting, organizing, multi-tasking, not to make mountains out of mole hills, patience, empathy. I was so much better for it.”
- “A teacher without kids just doesn't even have any clue about that parent-child dynamic. Being a mom helped me in a lot of interactions with parents. I became less defensive and more empathetic. I just understood what it meant to be a parent, so much more. It allowed me to be a better communicator with kids and with parents and not to take things so personally.”
- “Being a mother taught me selflessness and listening and caring for others and it gave me a whole new view of people. I notice the difference between people who are a parent and people who aren't. Not that it's good or bad. It's just – there's a different sensitivity to people who have parented.”

Theme 3.3: Meeting the millennials and everybody else. For the older women, who had been out of the work force for eight or more years, did not expect to find the work place full of millennials, who they found off-putting. Others found that those they worked with were just as happy as they were that they had reentered the workforce. Initially though, there was a trial period each felt they had to pass to be accepted.

- “Working with millennials was a big shock to me. I just couldn't relate to new ways of working, like not answering e-mails and being really snappy, and having personal relationships not matter, and being very closed. I was looking

forward to a work environment where everyone was friends. I had a hard time relating to them. They are data heads and just sit behind their computers. There's a sort of unwelcome feeling. They're moody. They're just this computer generation I am not familiar with. That did not help my confidence level, honestly. It kept me off-balance in a way I was not used to. I'm sure it's a generational thing. I mean I am their mother's age. They didn't know how to deal with me."

- "I was working with the 30-year-old millennials who wanted nothing of authority."
- "After a lengthy exit from the work world, I felt the need to prove my abilities and skills upon re-entry. I felt a step behind staff for a while, tackling each work day as a full-time employee. I felt a bit unsure of the relevancy of my skill-set as it had been a while since using the brain at a higher capacity! I sensed staff 'testing' me a little, making sure I was ready for re-entry. Overall, transition time was short, but I did feel a testing period."
- "I found I had to earn the respect and trust of people who did not know me, but for the most part it was very positive."
- "It was a little like getting accepted into a club. There was the watch and wait period, where colleagues seemed to be keeping a distance until I proved myself."
- "I know it may just sound kind of silly, but I was, you know, I was excited. It was a new chapter. I was nervous. I didn't feel like my co-workers treated me

differently because they knew “Oh, she’s a mom and she’s coming back to work.” They were very genuine and kind and accepting.”

- “Everyone was very welcoming and understanding when I went back to work. It was my own misgivings and feelings of inadequacy. It wasn’t from those I worked with.”
- “I like socializing. I need to socialize a lot. Going back to work was huge for that. And then you get to make friends and I was not doing that at home.”
- “I got along great with everyone because I was so jazzed to go back to work and start something new. I was probably annoying, but I brought a new happy vibe, and they loved it. People couldn’t help but be positive.”

Theme 3.4: The flexible schedule. The coresearchers had set ground rules for needing a flexible workplace and each found that their chosen path worked with their family’s scheduling needs.

- “My work was good, letting my fly home and go to different events the kids would have at school.”
- “If I needed to not be there or go take the kids somewhere or someone is sick or whatever, [my boss] made it okay. So, I felt really supported. Like I wasn’t afraid to say to him, “My kids are sick and I’m staying home or I’m leaving now.” So, it made it easier. There weren’t any sideways looks or guilt trips or judging.”
- “I would say for the most part my boss was very good about recognizing that I wasn’t going to be available 10 hours a day.”

- “It felt like it was okay to be a mom. I really felt like it was. I could work my schedule around my son’s schedule without feeling penalized.”
- “Fortunately, as a teacher your work schedule can be a little more in sync with your kid’s schedule. So, I felt very fortunate in that respect, and we were like a little threesome. We’d all get up and we would do breakfast and make lunches and we’d all go to school together.”

Theme 4: Feelings Upon Return

All the women felt a sense of fulfillment and pride on returning to work.

However, with this feeling of fulfillment came a twinge of guilt. Guilt was rooted in the idea that they shouldn’t enjoy something for themselves so much, or that they should continue to be at home, or that being a mom should be enough. A good woman shouldn’t need a job to feel complete, content, or accomplished. Raising children should do that. The women knew they should not feel guilty, and this guilt did not dissuade them from enjoying the independence and validation a job provided them. The women loved returning to work. The initial reentry was a time in which they had to learn to balance their time, manage stress, and acclimate to a new lifestyle.

Theme 4.1: I sat in a cubicle and I loved it. The return to work was exhilarating and gratifying. The women did not feel a longing for the stay-at-home life. Work was satisfying, even if twinges of guilt crept in on occasion.

- “I felt more fulfilled. I felt guilty even feeling that as a mom. Like oh my gosh, you shouldn’t be feeling that. Your kids should be enough.”

- “Refreshing! I had a focus and future in something other than child-rearing. At times, I felt guilty and missed my kids, but I loved the flexibility I created for both parts of my life.”
- “When you’re home with your kids it’s all about your kids. So, work ended up being something I really enjoyed for myself, and I was really surprised about that. I really liked it, but there’s always guilt. I felt like I was still taking away from the kids even though they were in school most of the time.”
- “I think I would have lost it, but I was doing something that I could feel good about and that I knew I was good at. As an educator, your work is who you are in a lot of ways. Getting back to that professional side and doing something I knew I was good at outside of the home was awesome. It’s absolutely empowering and coming back to myself in a lot of ways.”
- “It was nice to dust off the old brain cells. Staying at home singing kid songs, coloring, watching Barney, etc. makes you start to wonder if you really are a smart person after all. Raising kids can be kind of a nebulous existence when it comes to feelings of accomplishment. You work and work and work and wonder if you’re actually making a difference. Creating and developing a human being can take a long time to show fruit. A job, however, has little projects, deadlines, pay periods, etc. that are all fairly concrete events. Of course, adult social interaction is a bonus. Working outside of the home is *way* easier.”
- “It was nice to be able to answer the question, ‘So, what do you do?’”

- “Returning to work gave me freedom in many ways: from the kids and the housework, and from financial dependence. I loved going back to work and my job.”
- “I was bringing in money and starting a retirement fund. Here I was – contributing to society and not just my kids.”
- “I sat in a cubicle and I loved it. I got to be in my own space, do my own thing, and not feel like I was unappreciated about what I did all day long. I appreciated work so much more because I had been out of the workforce for years.”
- “I am a better mom when I am happier, so working makes me happier. I have been the wife, the mom, where we had good money. So, I had money and could go shopping, do things . . . money did not make me happy. It’s keeping busy.”
- “It was all happy time for me because I was so enthusiastic about working again. I was the annoying girl that was super happy about her job.”
- “The adult world was absolutely invigorating and refreshing. I felt like an individual again. Independent. It’s like losing weight and feeling skinny. Seriously. I came home with spunk and was happier and a better more attentive wife and mom.”
- “It was very exciting getting back to work. I was literally thrilled to be there and just the fact that I was learning something new every single day was—it

just really met a need in me and it did—it gave me a certain amount of validation. And, I just loved that.”

Theme 4.2: The stress. Returning to work was not without stress. Learning how to manage it all, not making the money one used to make, catching up on skills, and a change in the daily schedule were all factors related to an increase in stress.

- “I burned the candle at too many ends. At the beginning, I didn’t quite know how to balance my time.”
- “The first year was really difficult. I had to just cram my brain and I worked probably 40 hours a week sitting. That was certainly unusual for me. Just sitting, sitting, sitting.”
- “It’s really hard to manage it. I wasn’t very good at managing my stress early on, but I’m a lot better now.”
- “The overall experience of returning to work was pretty stressful. I felt unsure of myself and don’t think I presented myself as the confident person I remembered being in the workforce.”
- “Forty grand has been good for us, and it’s only my second year. So, I’m trending in the right direction. That’s kind of just different stress. It’s not a ton of money, but we’re pretty happy to have it.”
- “When you return to work, there’s way more questioning about what a crappy parent you are because you’re working. And you’re too tired at the end of the day to be focused on what your kids need. That was a huge thing for me.”

- “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. And some days, you feel like you’re getting killed. I can’t really separate out what the source of all the stress was because it was just a big life change.”

Theme 5: Changes at Home

The changes in the home effected the entire family. Two of the women changed places with their husbands and became the sole wage earner. Eight of the women leaned on their husbands for support. Two of the women returned to work because of a divorce. The adjustment centered around who would be doing all the jobs mom used to do. Children were required to pitch in and women had to learn to ask for help from others or family members to make it all work. There was a letting go of some things that used to seem important: cleaning house in particular. Communication was the cornerstone of a successful household. If a woman’s husband was her support system, life was less complicated. For the women who were single or did not have a supportive husband, the demands of the household and new job were more significant. The women reported these demands were doable, but they were also overwhelming at times.

The women enjoyed showing their children that they too had a brain and they too could be successful (and had been) in the workforce. They wanted their children, especially their daughters, to know that a woman can be a mom and a professional. A woman does not have to choose one or the other. However, when the women reentered the workforce, letting go of being there all the time was a difficult transition for them and their children. But, it was only a period of time that passed quickly and then the adjustment period worked itself out and life was rearranged into something that worked

for everyone. Moms, dads, and children discovered they could survive without mom at home.

Theme 5.1: The juggle and the adjustment. Juggling work and family and household duties required everyone to make adjustments. It also required that the women learn to ask for help and accept it when it was offered.

- “It was just a juggle: working, single-motherhood, freaking out about finances – it was all a little much.”
- “It was an adjustment for everyone. Here I was catering to everyone’s needs. The groceries were always available. It was always on the table, good meals. Laundry was always done. It was an adjustment. My husband started cooking more and my son pitched in, but there was an adjustment.”
- “When I was home I thought everything had to be perfect. It took me a long time and a lot of frustration to realize that it’s just impossible to keep things up. I just really try to be organized with my time and preplan ahead for meals and not be afraid to ask people for help. That’s been the hardest thing for me—asking people for help.”
- “I just say I wish I had a wife, a stay-at-home wife.”
- “I think we’re super blessed. It’s something I take for granted when I see how people are juggling and paying astronomical fees for daycare. We’re super lucky because we just had someone that was blood related that could just step in and help us whenever we needed.”

- “We still eat dinner every single night together even though it may be at 8:45 at night. Every Sunday, we have to sit down and talk—all the kids, we have to talk about our schedule and who is going to help washing clothes and doing this because they all know that we’re going to be at practice until late and dad is going to be traveling with the softball team. So, it brings us closer together because it’s not like “oh, that’s mom’s job, or that’s dad’s.”
- “Everybody is used to everything being a certain way and then it’s not like that anymore. I left having everything organized. My husband was used to coming home to having dinner, really having everything. It was just rescheduling all that. Everybody had to pitch in. And, I still picked up and did a lot of the stuff.”
- “Well, it’s like a village. I had so much help with my parents and then you get to know all the other moms and we helped each other too. We were all working moms, but we all made that work, and we worked together which was really nice.”
- “A girl traded living in this tiny studio above my garage for being like my mommy’s helper. I had her as my backup. That was really awesome to put that in place. I needed that, there was no way I could be in all places at once.”
- “We just make everything work. We just work together. It was an adjustment—okay our house is not as clean as it used to be. It’s a lot of work to keep up your house and then go back to work full time. I think it made our family stronger.”

Theme 5.2: Super man? Spousal support or a lack of it was discussed by all the women. The general sentiment was that those who had the support of their husband felt they had a less complicated time returning to work than those who did not.

- “He’s pretty domestic anyway. He grew up in a large family and it was sort of a matter of survival. He learned a lot. So, he was already our main cook, and he loves the grocery store, and he loves to do laundry. So that actually wasn’t a huge burden for him to absorb. We certainly share that more.”
- “My husband has loved the money. It’s not like I’m making so much, but I’m making some as opposed to nothing.”
- “Everyone understands that mom needs time to do her thing and that’s totally fine and my husband’s there too—I can say yes to every job that’s around the country because I know that my kids are covered.”
- “I think we have the tightest relationship because we have to be in sync. We look at our lives like we both are busy . . . And all our kids are on travelling teams. It’s a crazy circus, but I don’t know what else we would be doing if we didn’t have all this.”
- “I was exhausted a lot. I thought he would help more. It was hard to keep up with the kids and the job. We hired a cleaning lady for a while and then just decided that cleaning wasn’t a priority. I had to choose my battles.”
- “He was a better husband and father when I went to work. I am guessing probably because he felt like he was more allowed, I don’t know. I was more tired. I decided he felt like he didn’t think it was his job or that he was

supposed to be doing it. Then when I went to work, it was like his way to save the day I guess. It was fine. He would share dropping off and picking up our daughter and then he was helping make dinner and it was crazy. He might have even helped with laundry. He liked me going to work.”

- “I was waking up every day saying, “What can I do to get out of this house?” He wakes up every day and thinks, “This is my list.” He has all the laundry done all the time. There’s almost no laundry in our laundry basket ever. He has dinner on the table every night, and he’s an excellent cook. It actually has been an amazing change for us.”

Theme 5.3: My mom isn’t just a mom. Each coresearcher wanted their children to know that their mom was more than a maid, cook, or babysitter. She was a role model for her children and she was a successful professional.

- “I do think when you’re home they tend to forget that you had a life and a real job and that you actually had a brain at one point. I think they have been surprised.”
- “I got a small honor and it’s no big deal, but things like that or when I make a sale . . . I think it impresses my kids, “Oh, my mom isn’t just a mom.” In fact, my daughter told me last week it was a little easier to explain to people that I was a realtor as opposed to a stay-at-home mom.”
- “It is just the way of the world anymore. It gave my boys the view of family where in our house everybody is an important part of the family, instead of me doing absolutely everything. They get to see a woman who is well-rounded.”

- “I required them to be more independent and I think they learned resiliency. They gained a different perspective of me as a working mommy.”
- “That’s something that I think the kids start to understand that they’re not the center of the universe. And mom does have something that she wants to do. And why wouldn’t we want the best for her when all she has ever done is find the best for us, and all she’s ever done is sacrifice everything.”

Theme 5.4: Their life. The women began to see a separation of their daily lives from their children’s daily lives. Children were at school and activities, living lives without mom by their side at all times. Letting go of being the all-knowing, ever-present mom was a progression.

- “I mean it’s like I started missing out on their life. I had to be more intentional about setting some boundaries on night times or weekends and things like that so I didn’t get sucked in. I was making sure that I was spending enough time with the kids that was quality time.”
- “There are times they wish I was there. I miss out on a few things. It is really hard knowing I am not going to be there for everything. My mom was home most of the time when I grew up and I was worried that I would have taken away some of that special stuff, like coming home and having your mom there. I guess as a mom you worry. I want my kids to feel confident and comfortable and know that I’m always there.”
- “Her going to daycare is like me going back to work. She needed it. She needed outlets. She needed to learn because I am not that kind of mom who’s

going to do all kinds of crafts and learning skills with her. She learned a lot more going there and she was happier and she would sleep better, so I never felt horribly guilty.”

- “I would say the hardest thing has been keeping track of what’s going on with my kids. I used to be the mom who was completely hardwired. If people ever had a question about what was going on at school or at church or in the community or in the neighborhood, I was the one who knew. And now I don’t know anything. That has been a real shift for me.”

Theme 6: Reflections: I Wouldn’t Trade it for Anything

Reflections for the women were focused on the choice to stay home – not the choice to return to work. What mattered was that they had done the right thing for their families. The sacrifice of career was well worth raising their children. The women all speak of their time at home, either 5 or 20 years, as a flash in the pan. Children grow up so fast and there is only one time a woman can choose to be a mom. A woman can choose to work throughout her life.

- “I think sometimes we stigmatize moms that actually enjoy working. You get kind of like, you know, your kids should be enough. I love being with my kids, and I love working. It should just be do what’s best for you and your family at the time. It’s so important to balance your family and your time because you can’t ever get that back. You have to enjoy your kids while you have them because they grow so fast.”

- “There’s a season for everything. I never dreamed I would want to be a stay-at-home mom, never in a million years. The time with kids goes really quickly. I’m just super glad I did it. I think my children turned out well because of it, honestly. I mean so far so good.”
- “Women who decide to stay home need to relax. And they should volunteer – help someone else with the skills they have. They shouldn’t feel bad about themselves. Time passes really quickly. The next thing you know the kids don’t want you anywhere around. Enjoy the moments because really, I’ve seen a ton of women just fight it – fight it, fight it, fight it.”
- “It’s hard as a mom—you don’t want to be selfish as a mom. So, you have a lot of emotional stuff that comes up within you, and it’s impossible to do everything. You have to pick the things that are truly important. And the things that are truly important are having relationships with your kids.”
- “I enjoyed returning to the adult world and being around people again. When I was at home I spent all of my time around “kids’ stuff” – from babysitting, and volunteering at school, and running our children’s program at church. Although I loved every minute of it and would not take back even a second, I could not help enjoying the new adventure of mixing both the adult world and maintaining my ‘kids’ stuff.”
- “I mean we all are trying to do the best job we can as parents and yet you know on so any levels we blow it. Having been at home with my own children and understanding just how huge that is, and what a hard job it is . . . because

there's no glamour in it. Nobody is telling you that you're doing something that's so great by being home with your kids. It's all so emotional."

- "I think there is always an opportunity to go back, if you really want to. It seems scary to let go of the path you're on, or the ladder. It makes you vulnerable and you feel like you are going to miss out. But really, it's invaluable to take time with your kids."
- "I mean, it's doable. That loss of ground, that feeling of 'gosh, so much has changed' and so have I, I've changed in that period of time in a significant way, that you were not the same person you were when you left. And the world isn't the same as when you went back in. But it's certainly doable. You just put one foot in front of the other."
- "Being at home full time can be such a nice bubble to live in. One where you get to create each and every day the way you want - or, more often, the way the kids want. Still, even if it's doing what the kids want—and sometimes you would prefer doing just about anything else—it's still better. Being selfless for them reaps such a nice feeling inside (and no, not every time, but over time). Being a full-time mom is the greatest job I'll ever have, and my kids were just the neatest people to hang out with (most of the time)."
- "I would not trade seeing my boys grow up and watching those first steps, hearing those first words. I am grateful that we had the opportunity that I could make the decision to stay home. We, you know, we had a tight budget, because it was one income, but I am so grateful that I don't have to look back

and go “Man, I missed a lot” by not being at home with my kids - by working. I don’t have to say I wasn’t home with my boys in their early years and that was, you know, that was not the norm because a lot of my colleagues had to go back to work. And I was just grateful that I didn’t have to. And I wanted to be home with them.”

- “I was glad I got to spend time at home with her. I needed to be able to bond. I didn’t have that automatic motherly nature or instinct. Staying at home helped with making that mother-child connection.”
- “I remember my sister telling me that the best time of her life was when she was home full time and her kids were little. She told me that when I was there and I thought she was crazy because I was pulling my hair out. I now know what she meant. Nothing I am doing since, including my PhD, really touches that. I really think that [staying at home] WILL be the best part of my life and I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to do it. I often tell my kids I wish I could just keep them little in a jar on the shelf, but that’s not reality. They continue to grow and I know that the foundation I provided will carry them throughout their lives. Now that’s a feeling of accomplishment.”
- “The idea that going back to work with children is some kind of constant linear process isn’t true. It’s way more fraught with emotion than I had ever thought. It was emotional because of the leaving and emotional because you’re embracing your children and your motherhood. It is not a clear-cut kind of emotional thing. It’s definitely jagged, and it has edges. I wouldn’t say

its static. There were definitely days where I felt like “ugh,” you know? “This is hard being at home. I’m sitting in a library with my kids, but I could be drinking wine at the Ritz-Carlton with my colleagues.” You’re just learning about yourself, you continue to learn, and I think being at home you learn things about yourself that you never ever would have thought were possible in the work force.”

Summary

The aim of this study was to identify themes and essences of a woman’s experience of returning to work after staying at home to raise a family for multiple years. The return to work story can’t be told without an understanding of a woman’s experiences before she returned to work. For this reason, this chapter opened with a brief description of each participant, the reason why they left the workforce, and a brief snapshot of what life was like as a stay-at-home mom. With the focus shifted to the time in which the women decided they would return to the workforce, the women described planned, unplanned, and forced returns to work. All the women believed the timing of their reentry coincided with their children reaching an age that was suitable for their mothers to return to work. The amount of time a mother is needed at home was different for each woman. All the women believed the timing of their return was one that would not impact negatively on their children’s lives.

Finances were a major factor for returning to work, either due to divorce, barely making it every month, or just wanting a slush fund. The women felt a need to make money as it signifies power, worth, and independence in and outside of the home. These

mothers looked forward to returning to work as a point of personal fulfillment. Whether it was 5 or 20 years, each woman needed something for herself outside of the home in order to know herself, feel complete, feel validated, and be accomplished. Additionally, it was important for the women to be role models for their children and show them that mommy is and can be a professional too. There was a need to confirm (for herself, her family, and the world) that a woman can do both. She is a mom and a professional. This need to find and substantiate oneself was fulfilled through returning to work after doing the best she could at home.

The coresearchers returned to different positions than those they left. Seven of the 12 entered completely new, unrelated careers. Five of the women returned to the same field as the one they opted out of, but in a different position. Three of the women increased their salaries upon reentry (two had furthered their education and one completely reinvented herself and started her own business). Five of the women took significant losses in salary and four reentered close to or on par with their leaving salaries. For most of the women, change in career was a process that depended on opportunity, training, experience, skills, and the ability to balance work and family life. Priorities had changed. The loss of a pathway was a reoccurring theme. A laser beam view of climbing the career ladder was no longer the focus.

Only one of the women described having a difficult time finding work. For the other 11 women, they either fell into the job unexpectedly or were promptly hired as soon as they started their search. However, starting their search and determining a new direction or poking around in their old field was a challenge that didn't have an easy

answer. It was obvious that the old job was either not an option or it was not going to work with their new life. They may not be entering their dream profession, but they were securing positions that worked for their current reality. The women took advantage of opportunities that arose. Or, they sought out opportunities to connect to the worlds they were involved in, mainly their child's school. Seven of the 12 women secured positions that were directly related to their child's schooling, either currently or as the child grew older. These positions ensured that mom would be in the vicinity of her children or have a similar schedule as her children. Availability became the most important factor in their return to work.

The return to work was fraught with feelings of inadequacy and of lost ground. As participants spoke of the changes in the workplace, the overriding theme that emerged consistently was that of changes in technology and feeling as though it had passed them by. There was a general feeling of basically faking competence at the beginning. The women believed their brains were not as good as they had been, but they also believed their hearts were stronger, emotionally. These women understood people better and were more compassionate because of motherhood. Not only were they more compassionate but many important workplace skills were established or strengthened during their time at home. Multitasking, budgeting, and prioritizing topped the list.

Women who returned after longer periods of time felt some effects of ageism and were bewildered by millennials. Returning was a process of cultural acclimation. The initiation period was a time women felt they needed to prove themselves. However, the overriding feeling for these women was that of excitement. The return to work was a

return to self. The flexibility their new jobs offered increased their happiness, and if there was a loss in salary, it was not a point of contention. The women valued time over money.

There was a sense of fulfillment and pride upon reentry. However, with these feelings came a twinge of guilt. Guilt seemed to be rooted in the idea that a mother shouldn't enjoy something for herself so much, or that she should continue to be happy at home, or that being a mom should just be enough. A good woman shouldn't need a job to feel complete, content, or accomplished. Raising children should do that. Although, this guilt was not so strong that it could dissuade them from enjoying the independence and validation a job provided. The initial reentry was a time in which they had to learn to balance their time, manage stress, and acclimate to a new lifestyle. The women loved returning to work.

The return to work prompted many changes in the home. Two of the women changed places with their husbands and became the sole wage earner. Eight of the women leaned on their husbands for support. Two of the women returned to work because of a divorce. The changes called for adjustment. Adjustment centered around who would be helping with all the tasks and work previously taken care of by mom. Children were required to pitch in and women had to learn to ask for help from others or family members to make it all work. There was a letting go of some things that used to seem important. Those who felt the household had adjusted effectively conveyed that communication was the cornerstone of a successful partnership and home. If a woman's husband was her support system, life was less complicated. For the women who were

single or did not have a supportive husband, the demands of the household and new job were somewhat overwhelming.

The women enjoyed showing their children that they too had a brain and they too could be successful (and had been) in the workforce. They wanted their children, especially their daughters, to know that a woman can be a mom and a professional. A woman does not have to choose one or the other. However, when the women reentered the workforce, letting go of being available all the time was a difficult transition for the woman and their children. But it was only a period of time that passed quickly and then the adjustment period worked itself out and life was rearranged into something that worked for everyone. Moms, dads, and children discovered they could survive without mom at home.

Upon reflecting on the experience as a whole, the women focused on the choice to stay home not the choice to return to work. What mattered was that they had done the right thing for their families. The sacrifice of career was well worth raising their children and being there for them. The women all speak of their time at home, either 5 or 20 years, as a flash in the pan. Children grow up so fast, and there is only one time a woman can choose to be a mom. A woman can choose to work throughout her life. There is only one childhood, one opportunity to raise your children, and that was these women's most important job.

Chapter 5 will summarize the key findings of this chapter, provide an interpretation of the findings, report on the limitations of the study, make

recommendations for future research, describe the potential impact for positive social change, and capture the key essence of the study.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

In this chapter, I summarize the key findings of this study, provide an interpretation of the findings, report on the limitations of the study, make recommendations for future research, and describe the potential impact for positive social change. The research question driving this study was as follows: How do mothers who took time off from their professional work to care for their children perceive and describe their lived experiences of returning to work? The philosophy of Husserl and the methodology of Moustakas guided this transcendental phenomenological study. Through purposive snowball sampling, I recruited 12 women who participated in semistructured, phenomenological interviews. Data analysis followed the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method leading to themes, subthemes, and a synthesis of the participants' lived experiences.

Rich descriptions of this phenomenon conveyed the voices of these women and what it is like to reenter the workforce. Key findings of the essence of the experience included six major themes: deciding to return, changing career path, changes in the workplace, feelings upon return, changes at home, and reflections. Each major theme was broken into subthemes and supported by direct quotations. The essence of the experience was captured in short narrative form.

When deciding to return to work, coresearchers did not feel as needed at home; they needed something for themselves. The women wanted to return to work to start making money again. Supporting the family, gaining independence, and feeling like a contributor all were reasons for seeking a paying job. These mothers were ready to say goodbye to staying at home and hello to using their brains for professional reasons again.

They needed to feel successful and not just as a stay-at-home mother. Communicating to their children, through action, that a woman can do it all was important for every participant.

Feeling lost and without a path, the participants had to reinvent themselves. The reality that their previous jobs were not going to work set each woman on a new course. They assessed their skills, what they had been doing during the years they were at home, their contacts, the networks they could access, and their areas of expertise. Introspection laid the foundation for a new direction.

Securing a position that offered flexibility was key. The coresearchers needed to be available for their children. Additionally, job opportunity played a large role in securing a position. Openings or positions presented themselves and the women seized them. No one had a solid plan that came to fruition. Chance intervened for each coresearcher.

Upon returning to work, the women described culture shock. Technology had advanced considerably, millennials were off-putting, and rusty skills had to be brushed up. Playing catch up and pretending were shared behaviors. Raising children taught these women how to prioritize, create sensible budgets, listen attentively, be patient, have empathy, care for people, and improve communication skills. Initially the women experienced a trial period in which they had to pass to be accepted. Overall coworkers were very positive and friendly.

Returning to work was not without stress. Learning how to manage it all, not making the money one used to make, catching up on skills, and changing the daily

schedule were all factors related to an increase in stress. Nevertheless, the return to work was exhilarating and gratifying, even if twinges of guilt crept in occasionally. Juggling work and family and household duties required everyone to make adjustments, and it also required the women to learn to ask for help and accept it when it was offered. Spousal support or a lack thereof was discussed by all the women. Those who had support had a smoother reentry process than those who did not.

The women began to see a separation of their daily lives from their children's daily lives. Children were at school and activities, living lives without mom by their side at all times. Letting go of being the all-knowing, ever-present mom was a progression. Each coresearcher wanted her children to know that their mother was more than a maid, cook, or babysitter. She was a role model for her children, and she was a successful professional.

The women based their personal reflections on the choice to stay home, not the choice to return to work. What mattered was that they had done the right thing for their families. The sacrifice of career was well worth raising their children. The women all spoke of their time at home, either 5 or 20 years, as a flash in the pan. There is only one time a woman can choose to be a full-time mother, the most important job of all. A woman can choose to work at any time throughout her life. Children grow up quickly.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings showed that women would not have traded staying at home for anything. The sacrifice of career was well worth the ability to know and raise their children. Returning to work was secondary in these women's lives. The job was no

longer their identity. The job was now an outlet, a point of independence, and a quest for that long forgotten tangible validation. The process was doable. The lack of qualitative studies on women's experiences of returning to the workforce after a child-rearing hiatus of 2 or more years limited my ability to directly connect this study to prior research. The literature addressed reasons mothers have for leaving and/or returning to the workplace, flexible work arrangements (or lack thereof), the difficulty of transitioning back to work due to a lack of family-friendly policies, and the initial stay-at-home experience. None of the studies focused on the reentry experience after at least 2 years away from the workforce, using a phenomenological lens.

There was limited understanding of what it is like for a mother to leave the workforce, stay at home for at least 2 years to raise a family, and then successfully reenter the workforce. The strength of the literature was the number and depth of studies regarding the penalties women suffer in the workforce once they become mothers. The need for qualitative studies to address the how and what of women's experiences in their transition back to the workforce was met through this study.

Many quantitative studies addressed the motherhood penalty and the career gap (Abendroth et al., 2014; Aranda & Glick, 2014; Budig & Hodges, 2010; Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Carney, 2009; Gatrell, 2013; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Lovejoy & Stone, 2012). A few studies focused on skills gained with motherhood (Cahusac & Kanji, 2014; Currie, 2009; Hirakata & Daniluk; Laney et al., 2014; Ruderman et al., 2002), and even fewer addressed a woman's successful return to the workforce (Gatrell, 2013; Herman & Lewis, 2012). There was a lack of qualitative research related to a woman's experience of

returning to work after multiple years as a stay-at-home mother. Several studies validated the findings from the current study.

In Orgad's (2016) qualitative study, 22 educated women in their late 30s to early 50s who left the workforce after becoming mothers described their experience of feeling invisible, suffering a loss of confidence, feeling socially devalued, needing to stay at home to support their husband's career, and not finding satisfactory childcare. However, Orgad did not describe participants' feelings during reentry. In my study, women discussed these same feelings during reentry. They felt devalued and suffered a loss of confidence. They talked about being a support system for their husband's career. They also were adamant they should be the person raising their children, not a daycare.

In Millward's (2006) study, mothers returning to work grappled internally with what they found to be a conflict between being a mother and being a worker. Their rights and needs as a mother conflicted with their ability to maintain an identity as a thriving and successful member of an organization. For professional women who are able to make a transition in their heads (and publicly) from the good mother to the good working mother, they operate from a similar place. The foundation of their new identity is built on three assertions. They will (a) find excellent childcare, (b) successfully divide up and monitor everyday tasks and responsibilities with a partner, and (c) experience happiness while mothering and working (Buzzanell et al., 2005). Corroborating Buzzanell et al.'s (2005) findings, Woolnough and Redshaw (2016) reported that a mother's satisfaction with her return to work depended on a flexible work schedule, a supportive supervisor and colleagues, an involved spouse or partner, and satisfactory childcare. I found the

same themes of the importance of a flexible work schedule, supportive colleagues, and a supportive spouse as factors affecting the return to work. However, finding childcare was not reported in the current study because the women were out of the workforce long enough for their children to be in school. Additionally, Woolnough and Redshaw found women were inclined to return to work for more than just financial reasons; they also wanted to work. This finding is consistent with the findings in the current study. The mothers looked forward to work for reasons of fulfillment, not just finances.

McIntosh et al. (2012) reported that women who stayed at home for more than two years found that their careers were “detrimentally restricted” (p. 361). Importantly, with a career break of 2 or more years, “the human capital of the woman acquired prior to the break appears to become diminished by the interruption directly infringing upon their ability to accumulate further skills and recognised human capital (while other skills, etc. gained in child rearing may not be as recognised by employers)” (McIntosh et al., 2012, p. 361).

In relation to the McIntosh et al. (2012) study, the women in the current study felt the effects of a loss of skills after 5 or more years out of the workforce. They also recognized they acquired new skills during their child-rearing break. They worried about being compensated for the later stages of their working lives. They also worried about whether they could still be available for their family and have something for themselves. Independence and flexibility were more important than a high-paying job. Corroborating the findings of Wiese and Ritter (2012), the women in the current study reported feeling stressed at work because they had to play catch-up, especially in the area of technology.

Cuddy, et al. (2004) examined women who played the role of mother and professional. The authors found that when a woman became a mother, she was perceived as less competent; however, she was also perceived as warmer. In the current study, women believed motherhood created a warmer and more understanding person, but they had to prove their competence when initially reentering the workforce.

The coresearchers in the current study were concerned with the same issues as outlined by Lovejoy and Stone (2012): ageism, stigma, skill depreciation and employability. Findings from both studies indicated that these concerns weakened a woman's confidence when beginning to make the transition back to the workforce. Strategies used by new mothers to maintain a sense of well-being, as described in a grounded theory study by Currie (2009), were (a) obtaining help (mostly from their mothers and husbands, and somewhat from friends and professionals); (b) being organized, using a routine or flexible schedule, and being self-disciplined; and, (c) taking time for themselves such as exercising or socializing away from the home. The mothers in Currie's study who had a sense of well-being discovered they created courage and confidence through the implementation of successful strategies. These strategies, when implemented in the workplace, supported a more effective employee who was more apt to obtain appropriate support and assistance; be organized, disciplined, and flexible; and take time to focus on her needs such as exercise or socializing. The women in the current study felt like they were more well-rounded as employees due the strategies they created or utilized during motherhood: seeking and accepting help, being organized, having flexibility, and enjoying something for themselves outside of the home.

Laney et al. (2014) added to the acquired skills studies by looking at 30 women who worked as faculty at a university. Laney et al. analyzed identity development through the experience of motherhood. Laney et al. reported that women “expanded the self personally, relationally, generationally, and vocationally” (p. 1245). The authors explained that through the experience of motherhood, women developed “greater capacities within themselves and these capacities were extended to others in relationship and through the women’s careers” (p. 1245). These mothers indicated that becoming a mother positively impacted their careers and cultivated their sense of self. Specific references to a new sense of self were defined as being more empathetic, sensitive, compassionate, nurturing, and practical; more emotionally aware, responsible, accepting, understanding, authentic, effective, influential, and playful; less self-centered; better at defining boundaries; and better at slowing down (Laney et al.). Overall, in the current study and Laney et al.’s study, women touted the benefit of an increased perspective and increased soft skills. Through motherhood, these valuable qualities are manifested and distributed through all aspects of a woman’s life. Both of these studies indicated that motherhood can create a much more effective employee.

Participants in a study of 10 women who became mothers while working in academia reported benefits to both themselves and their children because of their dual role as mother and educator (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009). The women believed motherhood provided them a base from which they could prioritize their home and work lives (Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009). One of the women expressed that motherhood also made her “a more interesting person – more well-rounded and content” (Hirakata &

Daniluk, 2009, p. 291). The women felt their ability to be both a mother and an academic was a positive influence for their children, especially their daughters. The findings in the current study were consistent with those from Hirakata and Daniluk's (2009) study. Being able to prioritize and being a positive role model for their children were both themes identified in both studies.

Some findings from the current study were not consistent with findings in the literature, such as difficulty finding work or feeling penalized by employers due to their decision to stay at home. The women in the current study were able to find positions quickly, and the motherhood penalty was not mentioned. The women had changed their mind-set and did not expect to return to work in the same positions or at the same pay grade. They searched for positions that were flexible and close to their children without being concerned about whether their earnings would be significantly lower. An earnings penalty due to children was never discussed, even though previous research had focused heavily on per-child penalties (Correll et al., 2007, Budig & England, 2001; Gafni & Siniver, 2015; Glauber, 2012).

In sum, this study captured and supported many of the ideas reported in previous motherhood studies. However, these are only a small piece of this study's overall purpose. Through using a phenomenological lens, the essence of the entire experience of returning to work was captured through direct quotations, distinctive themes, and narrative.

Limitations of the Study

The influences I could not control were the limitations to this study. First was the nature of self-reporting. Self-report bias is a factor in organizational behavior because research participants tend to respond in socially acceptable ways and may under-report undesirable behaviors and over-report desirable behaviors (Donaldson & Grant-Vallone, 2002). The coresearchers in this study may have colored their responses in a manner they assumed was more socially acceptable than truthful. Participants' memories and the possibility of distortion or an inability to accurately describe and explain their feelings and experiences verbally may have affected the data collected for the study.

My analysis and the chance of my own experiences coloring the data was also a possible limitation; however, it is presumed the process of bracketing ameliorated this issue. Because this study was personally significant, I engaged in the epoché process in order to “be completely open, receptive, and naïve in listening to and hearing research participants describe their experience of the phenomenon being investigated” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). Also, my lack of expertise in the qualitative method and creating interview protocols could potentially be a limitation.

Another limitation to this study was that 10 of the 12 interviews were completed via phone. Without having the ability to read body language it is possible I missed opportunities to ask follow-up questions or pick up on areas that may have produced more rich description. Another consideration is the number of participants. The small number of participants allows for in-depth exploration of a topic, but smaller numbers of participants may not produce the same ability to generalize to a larger population.

However, in this study, I reached data and thematic saturation. Yet, the homogeneity of the participants could be a limitation. All women were American, of the middle class, married at the time they left the workforce, and stayed at home with biological children. Those who were interviewed were not asked their ethnicity or geographic location. These are factors that could limit the types of descriptions given. All women were employed full-time; a study including or specific to part-time workers may generate other themes. A more varied group of participants could potentially yield different themes and findings. Moustakas (1994) states that “the essences of any experience are never totally exhausted” (p. 100). Confirmatory studies of this nature are needed to corroborate the themes and findings of this study, as there is a lack of qualitative research describing the lived experience of mothers returning to work after multiple years at home.

Recommendations

The voice of women and their lived experiences of returning to work after a child-rearing hiatus is missing from the research. Replicating this study employing the same methods, with a different researcher and group of coresearchers (more diverse) would be beneficial as it would substantiate or enrich this study’s findings, reveal new understandings, and add to the qualitative data available to other researchers. A more diverse group of participants could take into consideration ethnicity, culture, geographic location, economic status, social class (working class, middle class, upper class), occupation, specific career categories, education level, age, and specific time periods out of the workforce. Conducting interviews in a small group setting may also generate more

rich description as a discussion among mothers may elicit feelings and memories one may not share or think of in a one-on-one interview setting.

Additionally, each of the themes and sub themes may be topics within themselves in which a researcher could flesh out a much more specific area of the return to work experience. Future research would benefit from delving deeper into each of the six major thematic fields presented in this paper: how and when a woman decides to return, changes in career path due to child rearing for multiple years, changes in the workplace as experienced by mothers returning to work, a woman's feelings upon her return to work, the changes experienced at home by all family members, and women's reflections on their decision to stay at home to raise their children.

Other experiences that warrant greater exploration to expand our knowledge through qualitative methods follow:

- The phenomenon of women returning to work after a child-rearing hiatus from multiple perspectives (the women, their spouses, and their children) would allow for a deeper understanding of the impact that staying at home has on the entire family unit
- The perceptions and experiences of the colleagues of women who are returning to work after a stay at home
- What decisions a woman would make, in retrospect, regarding career investment or training strategies prior to staying at home
- Expanding a study to include the specific career decision and tracts of women returning to work after staying at home

- How women decide on and define the “right” time to return to work
- An exploration of women’s experiences of staying at home with step children (as opposed to biological)
- What women perceive as obstacles when searching for employment
- A specific focus on other transition periods (leaving the workforce) and a woman’s lived experience
- Employer experiences from a qualitative perspective, regarding women who are returning to work after a multi-year hiatus

Additional qualitative research is still needed for women, families, and organizations to understand the experience of returning to work after a child-rearing hiatus in order to gain a deeper understanding of the issues women face. Attracting, cultivating, and retaining female talent following a woman’s stint at home is beneficial information for society. Future studies will inform organizations in methods to meet this need. Rich, detailed accounts deepen understanding and allow for opportunities to enhance, grow, and revolutionize the workplace. Importantly, this study and future studies will continue to inform women as they consider preparing to stay at home and how they will ultimately make their way back to the workforce.

Implications

Primarily, this study enhances our understanding, builds on previous research findings, advances and heightens awareness, and increases insight in the areas of motherhood and work reentry. Academicians, psychologists, organizations, families, and individual women may find the descriptions and insights of this phenomenon relevant to

their own lives. Research speaking to how and what a woman experiences when she reenters the workforce promotes relevant, practical, and applicable understandings and ideas to contribute to current motherhood and work related research.

The women's descriptions led to a narrative synthesis with social change implications such as heightening awareness and informing women and their families about the process of returning to work after leaving a professional job to care for children. Public policy makers can use this information to their benefit to support mothers in their efforts to return to the workforce after a child-rearing hiatus through programs designed to attract and support the reentry of mothers to the professional workplace. Life and career coaches can use this information to prepare women for the reentry process. Future researchers can build upon this study, refer to the literature review, or recreate a similar study through the phenomenological lens.

There is potential for positive social change through the information provided in this qualitative study. The experiences of the women interviewed can transfer to other cases or experiences. Polit and Beck (2010) state that transferability in qualitative research is usually considered a "collaborative enterprise" and the researcher has a duty to provide rich, thick descriptions that "allow readers to make inferences about extrapolating the findings to other settings. The main work of transferability . . . is done by consumers of research" in which the work is to "evaluate the extent to which the findings apply to new situations" (p. 1452). I believe this research will transfer to a wide audience of both women, families, and organizations.

Conclusion

One coresearcher indicated she hoped her story would foster social change: “The older you get, you hope to share your experiences, to help other women. The conversations can be very different today. There isn’t just one way to do this. It’s looking at what’s possible for both men and women.” The findings from this study can guide and inform discussions about leaving work, raising children full-time, and returning to work after those years at home. As this coresearcher said – there is hope. Hope for sharing stories and hope for opening avenues women may not have considered for themselves previously.

Another coresearcher addressed the plight of the young woman today. She used an analogy that effectively captures the dilemma society and women face when it comes to work and motherhood:

- “We train our girls these days to be race horses. We train them to be highly educated, take on student loans, do all this stuff. They’re supposed to be successful with everything. They’re supposed to eat organic and drive the right car and wear the right clothes and be super smart. They’re supposed to have their own business. I mean it’s like all this crap that we put on our girls these days. So, we teach them and raise them up to be super high achievers. And then they have their babies and they go, “Oh God, I have to choose between going to work and staying home.” So, then they decide to stay home because that’s what a “good” mom does, right?”

- “So, they decide to stay home with their kids. The skills that you need to stay home are like a plough horse. It’s like you’re taking these super high achievers and putting them in a house all day long. You see what I mean? To me the hardest part is making that shift that like those women I was with in the PTA How did you take someone who has the education level of a lawyer or a doctor and then tell them, “Well, you get to stay home all day and make no money and clean the house and be in charge of making sure the kids look good, and that you get them to all their sports”? What part of that is fulfilling like being a doctor or a lawyer or a health educator or whatever it is? None of that is fulfilling you. You see what I mean? So, it’s just a completely different skill set. The race horse, the plough horse. Don’t get me wrong, both are important.”
- “We train our girls to get a doctorate and then stay at home. The messages that we’re sending about working and staying at home are crazy. When a career woman stays home, it’s like expecting the race horse to be happy about being a plough horse.”

We need to think about how we should be speaking to our daughters. Our young college educated, high achieving women need an understanding of what it means to leave the workforce to become a stay-at-home mother. There is an assumption that a good woman shouldn’t need a job to feel complete, content, or accomplished. There is another assumption that a career woman shouldn’t sacrifice all she has worked for to raise her children. It is a conversation that is timely, relevant, and in need of more exploration. For

the women in this study, the sacrifice of career for the opportunity to raise their children was well worth the price. A woman can be a mom and a professional. A woman does not have to choose one or the other. Doing what was right was their most selfless act and doing what was right did not leave room for regret. The return to work offered women the opportunity to reinvent themselves after leaving the most important job they would ever have, raising their children.

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Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire

Interview questionnaire

The Lived Experience of Mothers' Return to Work after a Child Rearing Hiatus

Introduction:

The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experiences as you returned to work after taking time off to raise your child or children. With your permission, I would like to record this interview. All that is said here today is completely confidential. I am interested in your description of your experience and there is no right or wrong way to describe what you experienced, only your way. Do you have any questions? Are you ready to begin?

1. Thinking back to when you decided to leave the workforce and stay at home, what was going through your mind?
2. Tell me about the experience of staying home.
3. Did you think about work or of returning to work?
4. Tell me about your decision to return to work.
5. Talk about returning to work and what the experience was like.
6. Tell me about your experience of home life when you returned to work. What incidents stand out?

7. Tell me about your experience of the workplace when you returned. What incidents stand out?
8. How would you describe your relationships with significant others in your life now that you have returned to work?
9. How would you describe your overall experience of being a working professional and a mother?
10. Have you shared all that is significant about the experience of returning to work?

Demographic questions, if answers were not provided during the interview:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your degree area/education level?
3. How many children do you have and what are their ages?
4. How long did you stay at home?
5. What is your current marital status?
6. What was your salary & position prior to opting out and when you returned to work?

Appendix B: Recruitment letter

Volunteers Needed

Research Study on Mothers Returning to the Workforce



If you are a mother who left the workforce to raise a family and returned to work after two or more years at home, and you work in a professional or managerial position, you are invited to participate in a study.

My name is Brenda Yahraes and I am a Ph.D candidate at Walden University. I am completing research for my dissertation: The Lived Experience of Mothers' Return to Work after a Child Rearing Hiatus.

This study will facilitate a deeper understanding of the experiences women have when they return to work after staying at home to raise a family for two or more years.

Study participants will be asked to share their experiences in an interview lasting 60-90 minutes by phone, Skype, or face-to-face based on participant preference and location. I will be asking about your experiences of leaving the workforce, your time at home, and your return to work.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You will receive a \$25.00 Starbucks or Dutch Brothers gift card as a token of my appreciation for your participation in this study. If you are interested in learning more, please contact me via email or phone and we can further discuss your possible participation in this study.

Feel free to pass this letter on to other women you may know who left the workforce to raise a family and then returned to work.

Thank you for your time and consideration,

Brenda Yahraes

Appendix C: Participant Screening Instrument

Potential participant name _____

Date/time of call _____

Thank you for your interest in this study on the experiences mothers have when returning to work. I would love to ask you a few questions to determine if you meet the study's criteria for participation. This will take about 10 minutes.

1. Are you fluent in the English language?
2. Are you currently employed in a professional or managerial position?
3. Did you leave the workforce to care for a child or children?
4. Were you out of the workforce for a period of two or more years?
5. Are you willing to discuss your experiences of leaving the workforce, staying at home, and returning to work?
6. Are you willing to commit to one 60 to 90 minute interview, in a format that you choose (phone, Skype, face-to-face, etc.)?
7. Are you willing to have your in-depth interview audio-recorded?
8. Based on the participant meeting the above criteria: Would you like to schedule an interview?
9. Based on the participant not meeting the above criteria: Thank you so much for your time, but because _____, I am unable to include you as a study participant. However, if you think of anyone who may meet these criteria, please don't hesitate to share my contact information.

Schedule interview if meets inclusion criteria:

Contact _____

Interview date/time/format _____