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The Motherhood Penalty

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Abstract

Employer discrimination can lead to a wage penalty between mothers and non-mothers in the workplace. Discrimination can also lead to job changes when mothers return from maternity leave. This study examines if mothers' jobs change within one year of returning from maternity leave. Preliminary findings from a pilot study by the researcher indicated that few jobs changed and that jobs that have contracts, such as teachers or nurses, can offer the most job security for mothers. In this additional study, fifty women were surveyed—approximately 30% of their jobs changed, some positively, when returning from maternity leave. The findings of this study coincide with the pilot study by suggesting that returning to work from maternity leave may not result in negative changes in a mother's job.

1. Introduction

In the United States, maternity leave policies have increased significantly the last two decades. Yes, mothers in the United States still tend to have shorter periods of job-protected leave and less access to paid leave than women in other, advanced industrialized countries (Berger 331). While the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 has required some organizations to give women workers 12 weeks of leave without pay, this ruling applies only to approximately 5% of American employers and does not cover part-time and temporary workers, independent contractors, or those on the job for less than one year (Clymer A8). Studies have also shown that women face an average wage penalty of 5% per child in the workplace (Correll et al., 1297), mothers earn lower hourly wages than non-mothers, and that prospective employers are less likely to call back mothers for interviews than non-mothers. "There is, however, considerable evidence that contemporary cultural beliefs include assumptions that employed mothers are less committed to work than non-mothers and, consequently, put less effort into it. While commitment and effort are not synonymous, when evaluating potential employees, employers likely use perceived commitment as a proxy for anticipated future effort." Perceived lack of commitment to the job is one of the most widely used explanations for employer discrimination against mothers in the workplace (Correll et al., 1298).

It is important that organizations respond to the larger number of women in the workplace, the proportionate growth of females in management positions, and the propensity for most women to return to the workforce after only a few months leave. However, so far, these responses have been scarce throughout the United States. (Rynes and Barber 288). Therefore, this research addresses if mothers' jobs change within one year of returning from maternity leave, and, if so, how their jobs may change.

2. Theoretical Foundation

In order to help women who are becoming new mothers and ease the possibility of employer discrimination, organizations can begin by examining the research that has been done to demonstrate the four different stages of maternity leave: announcement, preparation for leave-taking, leave and preparation for return, and re-entry (Miller 4). Discrimination can happen in any of these four stages. The announcement stage includes the time when a woman becomes aware she is pregnant and notifies her employer. Women then decide whether they want to work after they deliver, how they will handle their job, and the type of maternity leave they wish to take. Women in this stage may inquire to see how maternity leave within their organization has been handled in the past. Mature and healthy organizations will have a clear maternity leave policy in place so there is no confusion or fear. The second stage of preparation for leave-taking is the concern of job responsibilities while the employee is on maternity leave. This also includes changes in supervisors' and co-workers' perception of the pregnant woman. According to Miller, "During this stage, managers have three principle duties - Verify the company's maternity leave policy and insure that procedures are being followed, identify potential health hazards to the pregnant woman and her fetus, and coordinate the flow of work in their units and decide if they will compensate for the impending departure of the worker by delegating her responsibilities, training a suitable replacement, or opting for some other method" (Miller 6). The third stage, leave and preparation for return, pregnant workers leave work for childbirth and recovery and then prepare to return to the organization. Research suggests that it is better for leavetakers to keep in touch with others in the workplace (Marzollo 149). Managers can also initiate contact with a leavetaker whose knowledge is critical to a project's success or whose efforts cannot be easily replaced. This can be a sensitive time for the new mother, however, while she is deciding when or if to come back to work; therefore, she does not need added pressure from management or coworkers. Finally, the reentry stage involves adjusting to a new schedule and changes in others' perceptions of the new mother, coping with child-care concerns, and, possibly, receiving new tasks at work (Miller 8). The focus of this paper will be in this stage.

One theory that provides some insight into the wage penalty is the human capital theory. According to this theory, "parenthood diminishes the hourly wages of mothers because it impedes the development of human capital" (Huang 3). For example, childbearing and child rearing could detract from the time that could be spent developing job skills, furthering education, or gaining experience in the workforce, especially during the early occupational career. However, this does not explain the research showing that even without missing work, mothers still experience the wage penalty. When returning from a maternity leave, however, Baker found that women returning to work within 12 months of taking maternity leave experience an average wage penalty of more than 7% in the first year back to work. In addition, mothers in the United States do not get as much maternity leave as in other industrialized countries and have a significant wage penalty. Other research has shown the loss of productivity is not the key driver explaining why there is a wage penalty between mothers and non-mothers, but instead that discrimination against motherhood might be to blame (Choi 9).

This is important as the average age of mothers is increasing. In 1990, there were more births to teenagers than to women ages 35 and older. By 2008, that had reversed - 14% of births were to older women and 10% were to teens. Births to women ages 35 and older grew 64% between 1990 and 2008, increasing in all major race and ethnic groups (Livingston 2). Women now account for 47 percent of the labor force, up from 40 percent in 1975 (Department of Labor). A study from Pittsburg State University argues that as much as 58% of the workforce consists of women and this number is steadily increasing (Miller 2). More than 71% of new mothers will return to work within 6 months of giving birth. In the past, most women left the workforce permanently or until their child was in grade school (Miller 3). The influx of new mothers in the workforce raises a variety of economic and social concerns. Organizations face many new costs including insurance for mother and child, as well as temporary replacements, sometimes developing childcare facilities, as well as workgroups accomplishments as team members may be missing during maternity leaves. As the number of women in the workforce grows as well as the age of mothers, employers are going to have to be aware of what this means in terms of maternity leave policies and discrimination. Yet, little research has been done to examine how women in the workforce experience a job change or loss after returning from maternity leave.

This paper contributes to the topic because while the majority of studies either focus on employer discrimination while pregnant or in the hiring process, this study will focus on what happens to mothers after they return from maternity leave, within one year. It began with a pilot study to test the survey instrument, with 12 participants that suggested little change within the first year of maternity leave. This contradicts previous research indicating that there are career punishments for short timeout periods and has discovered that long timeout periods increase the risk of a downward move and reduce the chance of an upward move (Aisenbrey 573-605). This study will examine

women, with many different careers, returning to the workplace after a maternity leave by examining if their jobs change within the first year, and if so, how.

3. Methods and Procedures

3.1 Population and Sample

The research was conducted on a sample of (50) individuals working in various organizations. The subjects were females, from three parts of the United States: North Carolina, Georgia, and Ohio. All were mothers who had returned to work after a maternity leave. The subjects in Ohio were given the survey when leaving their children at various daycare centers. One issue with this method was that the mothers were busy as they were trying to get to work; therefore many said they would take the survey but then forget to bring it back. The advantage in surveying women in daycares was that the mothers had many different occupations and none worked for the same company. The subjects in North Carolina were mostly surveyed personally by the researcher at church. A few of the surveys were solicited by email. Finally, some were collected via snowball sampling. The response rate was slightly less than 25% overall. Most of the surveys (36) were collected at the daycares in Ohio.

3.2 Instrument

Subjects were given the survey that appears in section 7. It asked questions about the individual's experience, including the year of their most recent maternity leave, how long their maternity leave lasted, and what their occupation was. It also inquired if their job changed within the first year of returning from maternity leave. Finally, the subjects were given five options to explain how their job changed. At the end, individuals were asked for more details to explain their experiences after returning to work.

4. Results and Analysis

This survey revealed how/if women's jobs changed after returning to work from maternity leave within one year of giving birth. Subjects held many different jobs. Four of them were nurses, six were teachers, and eight worked with finances (such as a teller/accounting/bank manager/treasurer, etc). Other jobs included social work, quality assurance coordinator, administrator, physical therapist, janitor, pharmacist, product planning analysis, home health aid, treatment coordinator, psychologist, and others. The average number of years since their most recent maternity leave was 4.6. The average number of weeks that maternity leave lasted was 9.58, or a little over two months.

Fifteen out of fifty subjects (30%) reported that their jobs had changed. Of these 15, three of them were promoted (20%), three were demoted (20%), two were fired (13%), two were transferred (13%), and five subjects checked 'other' (about 33%).

Of the five subjects who reported 'other,' three of them decided to make a change to accommodate being a new mother. One said "I chose to be a stay at home mom. After learning I would be transferred to a different department." Another said, "I worked from home a lot, and brought my baby to work two times a week." The last one said, "I took a weekender position in order to spend more time during the week with my baby."

There were, however, a few subjects within the 15 who felt discriminated against as a mother. One subject wrote, "When I returned from maternity leave, I was let go for something they legally had no grounds to let me go for." Another said, "I told my boss that I could only do light lifting because I was a high risk pregnancy. He told me to go on maternity leave. After that, I was never able to come back because every time I called, he claimed that all the positions were full." Another lamented, "While on maternity leave, an employee was trained to fill in for me. When I returned to work that employee remained manager and I was told my position would be given back to me after I became used to working again. Six months went by and I had not returned to manager so I resigned."

Even in a relatively small sample, it was surprising to see that that only 30% of the surveyed women's jobs changed after returning from work following maternity leave, and some of these were promotions. As discussed above, research indicates a stark difference in the workplace, potentially due to employer discrimination. However, in both the pilot study and this study, job changes were seen in only about one-third of the mothers. Many of those job changes were by choice (such as the decision to stay home more or to work part time). Most of the mothers in

the study had no job change and no one mentioned a pay cut. These results seem to be contrary to most research that there is a significant wage penalty which can be rooted in discrimination.

It may even be possible there could be no negative effect on an employee's job from going on a maternity leave, but that it is even possible to be promoted. As one subject stated, "Upon my return from my 2nd maternity leave in 2010, I was promoted to a manger position. I feel supported as a mother of two at my workplace." This suggests that her employer did not practice employer discrimination because she was a mother and possibly even thought higher of her since he promoted her.

In this study, the average maternity leave was 9.58 weeks, or a little over two months. This is interesting because under the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, some organizations must give women workers 12 weeks of leave without pay. It is possible that because maternity leave in the United States does not have to be paid, women are not taking the full 12 weeks because they cannot afford it. A woman's willingness to accept a shortened maternity leave may provide an explanation for why her job does not change after she returns from giving birth. The Human Capital Theory which suggests that the longer the time out of work, the larger the wage penalty, would support this possibility. If a woman is gone from the organization for only 10 weeks, as shown in this study, the organization may be willing to leave her job unchanged.

Finally, this research showed that jobs such as teachers and nurses had no downward change (such as demotion or being fired). As one subject stated, "I was a contracted nurse and I took a full-time position in a hospital after nine weeks of maternity leave." These kinds of jobs seem to offer the most job security even when going on a maternity leave. This could indicate the importance of contracts for mothers. If having job security is very important, this could be the kind of jobs prospects mothers may want to seek.

5. Limitations

This study was a relatively small sample. Therefore, strong patterns are difficult to uncover. In addition, the subjects were from only three geographical areas; Georgia, North Carolina, and Ohio. Further research should include more subjects from wider, diverse areas. Also, the data would have provided richer results if the survey had requested examples of discrimination other than a change in job assignment.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study suggests that returning to work after maternity leave may not result in changes in a mother's job. The results are not consistent with past research that shows a strong motherhood penalty because of employer discrimination. Perhaps this is because women are taking short maternity leaves as shown in this study. Mothers might also not know the negative consequences of their taking maternity leave. For example, they could have been passed up for a promotion or raise without their knowledge.

Further research should be done with a larger number of subjects in order to reveal what happens to women when they return to the workplace after maternity leave. Do they experience discrimination from their employers because they are mothers? It could be possible that the social climate is changing for mothers in the workplace and that the motherhood wage penalty is decreasing. Or, it could be that economic conditions are requiring women to take shorter leave periods that, in turn, do not cause the employer to find a reason to make a change in a new mother's job.

The questions surrounding this issue are becoming even important as more mothers enter into the workplace. This study is important because it demonstrates that many mothers returning from maternity leave are not having significant job changes or experiencing a wage penalty. This could be due to the fact that the wage penalty does not exist or that mothers are now aware of them. However, previous research indicates the latter may be more unlikely. Mothers should be aware of the research in order to assess their own situation on the job. This study is especially important because it brings awareness to the wage penalty that mothers may not notice in their own situations. Also, when women are considering a career and family, it might be important to know that careers with contracts (such as some teachers or nurses) tend to be more secure for mothers who wish to take a full, 12-week leave.

7. Survey

In the US, maternity leave policies have been significantly expanded over the last two decades; however, mothers still experience a wage penalty at work. Studies have shown that the average wage penalty is 5% per child. Prejudicial treatment by employers is a key driver of the motherhood wage penalty. I am an undergraduate research student at UNC Asheville. The purpose of this survey is to examine if mothers' jobs change within one year of returning from maternity leave, and, if so, how? Thank you in advance for your willingness to participate!

8.1 Consent Form

The following information describes the research study in which you are being asked to participate. Please read the information carefully. At the end, you will be asked to sign if you agree to participate.

Investigator

Taylor Bell, an undergraduate student at UNC Asheville, is conducting this research project. Dr. Mary Lynn Manns, Associate Professor in the Management & Accountancy department at UNC Asheville, is the Principal Investigator of this project and will be advising and guiding Taylor Bell through her research.

Purpose of Study

This research will examine what, if any, job changes occur for women after returning to work from maternity leave within the first year.

What Will Happen During This Study

1. You will be emailed or given a survey and asked to answer the questions to the best of your ability. Feel free to stop the survey at any point. You will be asked a series of close-ended questions. At the end you will have room to answer an open-ended question. This is where you can clarify and/or expound on any of your answers.

2. The interviewer may contact you again to clarify any of your answers from the survey.

Possible Risks or Discomforts

There are no possible risks. Feel free to turn in the survey at any point.

Possible Benefits

The primary benefit of this study is to investigate job changes within a year of a woman returning from maternity leave. This is likely to provide more understanding of how mothers are treated in the workplace.

Privacy

We will make every effort to protect and ensure your privacy. Your responses to the survey will be kept strictly confidential. The transcriptions will contain no identifying information. When the results of this study are published, participants will be referred to by code numbers, not names. Any records containing the names of survey participants will be destroyed.

Your Rights

The decision to participate in this study is completely up to you. You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study, you have the right to stop being in the study at any time.

Contact Information

Dr. Mary Lynn Manns (828/2516858, manns@unca.edu) will gladly answer any questions you may have concerning the purpose, procedures, and outcome of this project. You may also contact the Chair of UNC Asheville's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to discuss any questions or concerns you may have about the rights of study participants. (The IRB is a college committee concerned with the protection of human subjects in research.)

Summary

I have read the information in this consent form and agree to participate in this study. I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study, and they have been answered for me.

Although the investigator will make every effort to maintain confidentiality, I understand that research records must be made available to UNC Asheville's IRB, if they are requested.

Printed name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher obtaining consent

Date

Subject Number: _____

Investigation of Job Changes During the First Year After Returning from Maternity Leave

1. Have you ever been on maternity leave following the birth of a child? Please check **one** of the following:

Yes

No

2. If you checked "no" to question #1 above, please turn in your survey as you do not need to complete the rest of the questions. **If you checked "yes", please continue to question #3.**

3. In what year was your most recent maternity leave? _____

4. Previous to your most recent maternity leave, what was your occupation? _____

5. During your most recent maternity leave, how long were you on maternity leave? _____

6. Within the first year of your most recent maternity leave, did your job change? Please check **one** of the following:

Yes

No

7. If you checked "yes" to questions #5, how did your job change? Please check **one** of the following:

I was fired

I was transferred

I was demoted

I was promoted

Other – If you checked "other", please explain: _____

8. Please explain your response to #6 above by providing more details about how your job changed.

Thank you for participating in my survey!

8. Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Mary Lynn Manns for believing in me and helping me throughout this process. Her guidance and direction has helped me finish this research. I would also like to sincerely thank my aunt, Mary Bell Kushlak, for distributing my surveys in her city. Finally, I would like to thank my family for encouraging and supporting me.

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